Bulgaria and Romania revealed (17 nights)

Tour Description:

Take the journey of a lifetime and experience true immersion in the history and splendor of southeastern Europe. Begin your tour in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, and continue on to the gorgeous village of Koprivshitsa. At Starosel, visit the recently-discovered Thracian Royal Mausoleum. Arrive in Plovdiv, a beautiful artistic haven, and Kazanlak, where you’ll tour the celebrated Thracian Tomb.

The exquisite peninsula of Nessebar awaits. Here, you’ll find picturesque cobblestoned streets and lovely little restaurants overlooking the sea. In Varna, explore its collection of ancient gold. Explore Tsarevets Fortress in Veliko Tarnovo, a mecca for traditional Bulgarian crafts.

Drive into the wild Transylvanian landscape to Poienari Fortress, where you’ll climb 1480 steps to the throne of Vlad the Impaler. At Sibiu, tour the most fortified of all Saxon cities. Explore the fortresses of Alba Iulia and the astounding salt mines at Turda, then cross the Carpathians toward Maramures; visit a traditional market, attend an exclusive folkloric show, and absorb the old-world atmosphere.

In Bucovina, visit the painted monasteries, then learn about the art of egg-painting during a home-hosted lunch at the artist’s home. Drive through the breathtaking Bicaz Gorges to Sighisoara, the only inhabited citadel in Europe. Visit the home of a family of Gypsies — a rare opportunity. In rural Viscri, meet traditional craftsmen and take a horse-cart ride to the outskirts of the forest. Finally, tour Bran Castle and the extravagant Peles Castle. Wind up your journey in style at the Azuga Rhein Wine Cellars.

Tour Highlights:

• explore 14 of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Bulgaria and Romania
• visit the Boyana church and the Rila monastery, the most famous churches in Bulgaria
• explore the charming medieval towns of Plovdiv, Veliko Tarnovo and Nessebar in Bulgaria
• tour Romania’s most famous castles: Peles, Bran (a.k.a. Dracula’s Castle) and Hunyad
• visit some of the most important cities in Transylvania: Sibiu, Sighisoara, Brasov and Alba Iulia
• explore Maramures in northern Romania - the area where traditions and local culture have scarcely altered over the centuries
• discover the world famous painted monasteries of Bucovina and learn of their crucial role in the history of the Romanians
• get behind the scenes: plenty of chances to interact with local families over home cooked meals and home visits
• enjoy the services of a private, licensed tour guide, who will uncover the best sights along your route
• overnight in centrally located, quaint, locally-owned 3 and 4 star hotels, perfect for exploring on own

Day-by-Day Itinerary

Day 1: arrival in Sofia, city tour

Arrive in Sofia, meet your guide and settle into the centrally-located Hotel Niky, the perfect starting point for experiencing the fresh, renewed culture of the city.

In the afternoon, enjoy a guided walk along Sofia’s yellow-paved streets, visiting the spectacular domed Aleksandar Nevski Cathedral, the Parliament, the Presidency and the 4th-century St. George’s Rotunda.
*Please note that if you experience a delayed arrival in Sofia for any reason, the city tour can be broken into two parts: the afternoon of your arrival day and the following morning.

Overnight in Sofia, Hotel Niky*** (centrally located)

**Day 2: Boyana church & day trip to the Rila monastery**

Start the day with a visit of the breathtaking Boyana church (UNESCO World Heritage Site), located on the outskirts of Sofia. Built over more than 6 centuries, the church is famous for its well-preserved, realistic Byzantine style frescoes.

Then take a day trip from Sofia to Rila monastery, another UNESCO World Heritage Site. Founded by the 10th-century patron saint of the Bulgarians, it is considered one of Bulgaria's holiest sites. This architectural masterpiece played an essential role in Bulgarian cultural preservation throughout the Middle Ages and well into the 19th century, when exquisite restoration work produced frescoes and icons by prominent masters.

Return to Sofia in the afternoon, and spend the rest of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Sofia, Hotel Niky*** (centrally located)

**Day 3: Sofia – Koprivshtitsa – Starosel – Plovdiv**

Bid farewell to Sofia and head east to the picturesque town of Plovdiv. First stop along the way: the quaint little town of Koprivshtitsa. Narrow cobbled streets wind through the village famous for architecture dating to the 19th-century Bulgarian National Revival period. Join your guide on a leisurely stroll; 400 of Bulgaria's most well-preserved traditional houses are all within range.

Continue on through the beautiful countryside to Starosel, your first encounter with the Thracians of antiquity. Visit the largest Thracian Royal Mausoleum complex ever found in Bulgaria, dating back to the 6th century B.C. Discovered only recently, its expansive range covers six underground temples. You are free to explore the Chetinyova Mogila temple, the only one currently open to the public.

Arrive in Plovdiv later that afternoon.

Overnight in Plovdiv, Hotel Alafrangite*** (located in the Old Town)

**Day 4: Plovdiv – Asenovgrad – Bachkovo Monastery – Plovdiv**

Explore Plovdiv, one of the oldest cities in Europe. Originally a Thracian settlement, Plovdiv later evolved into a key Greek and Roman stronghold. It features a vibrant artistic, bohemian atmosphere with prominent artists, galleries and cozy bistros. During your guided walk, visit the ancient Roman theater of Philippopolis and the Ethnographical Museum, located in one of the oldest houses in Plovdiv and one of the best museums of its kind in Bulgaria.

In the afternoon, explore the surrounding area: an hour’s drive to the south brings you to Asenova fortress, perched on a vertiginous rocky ridge in the Rhodopi Mountains. Initially a Thracian settlement, it was employed strategically during the Middle Ages to guard the road from Plovdiv to the Aegean Sea. Further south, visit Bachkovo Monastery, a unique amalgamation of Byzantine, Georgian and Bulgarian architecture. The church keeps several Orthodox frescoes, and is known for the miraculous healing icon of the Virgin Mary which attracts thousands of pilgrims each year.

In the evening, enjoy a dinner with a folklore show, a great opportunity to discover Bulgaria's traditional music and dances.

Overnight in Plovdiv, Hotel Alafrangite*** (located in the Old Town)

**Day 5: Plovdiv – Kazanlak Thracian Tomb – Nessebar**

Today, take off for the Black Sea coast. On the way, stop at Kazanlak in the Valley of Roses to visit the Thracian Tomb (UNESCO World Heritage Site). Please note: you will visit the replica, as visits to the original are rarely possible. Discovered in 1944, the tomb dates from the Hellenistic period, and was part of a large
Continue on to **Nessebar**, where the old town (UNESCO World Heritage Site) is more than 3000 years old. Only a narrow strip of land connects this jewel to the mainland. Nessebar contains beautiful old churches and houses along with an active fishing settlement. Its narrow cobbled streets and lovely little restaurants overlook the sea, and the smell of the salt water is constantly in the air.

*Overnight in Nessebar, Hotel Sveti Stefan*** (located in the Old Town)

**Day 6: Nessebar – Varna – Madara Horsemman – Veliko Tarnovo**

Morning brings a drive to **Varna**. As you arrive in the summer capital of Bulgaria, pass by the historic train station – the first in the country to provide the essential commercial link between Europe and Istanbul. Enjoy a short stop at the port to enjoy the delightful view. Along the beautiful Sea Garden, pass by the Maritime Museum, the old Greek neighborhood, and ruins of the Roman baths. Tour the Archeological Museum to witness the ancient **Gold of Varna**, the world’s oldest and most priceless gold treasure.

In the afternoon, continue on to Veliko Tarnovo, the medieval capital of Bulgaria. Along the way, take a short detour to another monument from UNESCO’s World Heritage list: the **Madara Horseman**, an important symbol of the Bulgarian state. Dating to 710 A.D., this massive relief cut into high vertical rock depicts a horse and rider, possibly representing a military victory or Thracian god.

*Upon arrival in Veliko Tarnovo, your guide will take you on a short orientation stroll, and then you will have the rest of the day at leisure.*

*Overnight in Veliko Tarnovo, Hotel Bolyarski**** (located in the Old Town)*

**Day 7: Veliko Tarnovo – Arbanassi – Bucharest**

In the morning, discover **Veliko Tarnovo**. Take a stroll in the Old Town, where you will find charming handcraft shops and discover icon painting, woodcarving, weaving, coppersmithing and silversmithing. Enjoy a cup of Turkish coffee made on hot sand, just as it was prepared over a century ago. Next, discover Tsarevets, a fortification and church high on a majestic hill, seat of kings and the Bulgarian patriarch during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. View the fortress walls and watchtowers, the Patriarch’s church, and Baldwin Tower.

Later, take a short drive to the village of **Arbanassi**, a small architectural gem of the 17th and 18th centuries. The village enjoyed the favor of an Ottoman sultan, and became the residence of rich and powerful merchants. You will visit Konstantzalieva house and learn about the everyday life of a wealthy 17th-century family and also the Nativity church, built at a time when religious architecture was restricted by the Ottoman rule.

In the afternoon, begin driving north, bound for the Romanian border and **Bucharest**. Enjoy a city tour of the Romanian capital upon arrival.

With a population of just over 2 million, Bucharest is the largest city between Berlin and Athens. Nicknamed “the little Paris” after World War I, Bucharest today is a city of immense contrasts. Traces of bohemian times can still be found, especially in the French residential architecture and surviving churches scattered throughout the capital.

*Overnight in Bucharest, Hotel Berthelot**** (centrally located)*

**Day 8: Bucharest – Curtea de Arges – Poienari fortress - Transfagarasan road – Sibiu**

The medieval Transylvanian city of **Sibiu** is your destination today. Along the way, stop at the **Curtea de Arges cathedral**, an architectural tour de force featuring cupolas that seem to lean, twist and float into the sky. Built in the early 1500s, it the resting place of the Romanian royal family and one of the most spectacular churches in all of Romania.

Head north to visit the ruins of **Poienari fortress**, home and castle of Vlad the Impaler. Legend has it that he built it by enslaving nobility arrested under charges of treason. Few survived to see the castle completed; the almost total inaccessibility of the location prevented their rescue.
Continue your journey along the breathtaking Transfagarasan road. Dubbed “the best road in the world” by the BBC Top Gear team, the Transfagarasan crosses the Carpathians at an altitude over 2000 meters (6000 ft).

Arrive in Sibiu in the afternoon, and check into your hotel. Your guide will take you on a walking tour of the medieval old town, the most developed of all seven Saxon cities. As a crucial trading post, Sibiu was often attacked, and had no less than seven concentric walls around the city.

*please note the Transfagarasan road is open only between June and September. If your tour takes place outside this period, you will travel on the road going along the Olt river valley

Overnight in Sibiu, Hotel Casa Levoșlav**** (located in the Old Town)

Day 9: Sibiu – Hunyad Castle – Densus Church – Alba Iulia

Today, stray off the beaten track and head further into Transylvania, traveling west toward the Hunedoara region.

Explore the fabulous Hunyad Castle, built in Gothic style in the 15th century by a prominent Transylvanian nobleman and Regent of Hungary. According to legend, Vlad the Impaler, or Dracula, spent a few years here as a prisoner after he was overthrown in 1462.

Continue on to the Densus Church, built atop a Roman Temple, believed to be the oldest church in Romania.

In the afternoon, drive to Alba Iulia, capital of Transylvania between 1541 and 1690. The union of Transylvania with the rest of the country was proclaimed here on December 1, 1918 (Romania’s National Holiday). The town’s most impressive highlight is its Vauban-style fortress, beautifully restored in recent years.

Overnight in Alba Iulia, La Maison de Caroline*** (located next to the Citadel)

Day 10: Alba Iulia – Turda salt mines – Cluj Napoca – Surdesti church – Maramures

Today, drive toward Maramures, where local traditions and culture have changed almost imperceptibly over time. On the way, stop in the small town of Turda to visit the salt mines. Salina Turda, one of the oldest in the area, features soaring, cavernous chambers with fabulous acoustics, underground lakes, and giant, illuminated machinery.

Your next stop is the city of Cluj Napoca, one of Transylvania’s major urban centers. It boasts one of the best universities in Romania, hence the youthful, lively atmosphere in the streets. Join your guide for a stroll in the central area of Cluj.

Afterwards, head north to view the famous wooden architecture and carved gates of Maramures, surrounded by vast forest and woodlands. Visit the 1766 church in Surdesti (UNESCO World Heritage Site), until recently the tallest wooden church in the world.

Overnight in Vadu Izei, in a family run guesthouse***, home cooked dinner included.

Day 11: Full day in Maramures. Folklore show in the evening.

Spend a full day exploring Maramures, beginning in the village of Vadu Izei, where you will learn about traditional culture and visit a plum brandy distillery along with a “vâltoare”, a man-made whirlpool still used by locals for washing their wool carpets.

Mingle with the locals and sample delicacies at a colorful local market before visiting Merry Cemetery in Sapanta. Since 1935, colorful wooden crosses painted in naïve style have encrusted this landmark. Hand-painted imagery and truthful epitaphs describing the life of the deceased convey a lighter view of death that may well trace its lineage back to the Dacians. Visit the woodcarver still working his trade to learn all about this unique, generational art form.

Next, stop at the tallest wooden structure in the world: the church at Peri. Recently built in the old style, it stands as testimony to the extraordinary level of local traditional craftsmanship.
Drive on to the nearby city of Sighetu Marmatiei and visit the **Memorial to the Victims of Communism**. Learn how the Communists, in the late 1940s, established a reign of terror over citizens punished for “thought crime.”

Tonight, a rare opportunity awaits: an exclusive **folklore show**! The performers are actual villagers, singing and dancing to songs passed down through generations.

Overnight in Vadu Izei, in a **family run guesthouse***, home cooked dinner included.

**Day 12: Vadu Izei – Barsana – Ieud – Borgo Pass - Gura Humorului**

Take a northeasterly drive to Bucovina, famous for its painted monasteries. Along the way, discover the lovely monastic complex at **Barsana**. Stop for a visit at the workshop of the most famous woodcarver in Maramures. His gates, featuring intricate patterns, are the pride of the area. His art is well-known abroad, and examples of his work can be found as far away as the United States.

Next, stop at the **leud wooden church** (UNESCO World Heritage Site), the oldest of its kind in Romania.

In the afternoon, cross the eastern Carpathians and over the Borgo Pass (home of Bram Stoker’s Count Dracula) and start your descent into Bucovina. Your first stop will be the village of **Ciocanesti**. The locals take great pride in their beautiful houses, heavily ornate with floral and geometric motifs.

Arrival in Gura Humorului in the late afternoon.

Overnight in Gura Humorului, **Hotel Casa Humor****

**Day 13: Tour of the painted monasteries, home hosted lunch**

After breakfast, set out to discover Romania’s famous **painted monasteries**, each famous for a specific fresco and color.

Start the day by visiting the monasteries of Humor and Voronet. **Humor** is famous for its vivid frescoes, with red as the predominant color, while **Voronet**, the “Sistine of the East,” is known for its Last Judgement.

Stop off for a delicious **home-hosted lunch** at the home of a world-renowned **egg-painting artist**. Egg painting is one of the traditional art forms in Bucovina, and it is one of the most expressive mixtures of secular art with religious symbolism and tradition.

In the afternoon, visit the remaining two monasteries at Moldovita and Sucevita. At **Moldovita**, the predominant color is yellow, and the most famous fresco depicts the Siege of Constantinople. The monastery at **Sucevita**, dating to 17th century, is the largest, and boasts an impressive fortification system.

Return to Gura Humorului in the afternoon.

Overnight in Gura Humorului, **Hotel Casa Humor****

**Day 14: Gura Humorului – Nicolae Popa Museum - Bicaz Gorges – Gipsy home visit – Sighisoara**

Today, head back to southern Transylvania by way of a spectacular route tracing through the **Bicaz gorges**. The view is utterly breathtaking, and you will have the chance to do some souvenir shopping at local shops.

Take in the cultural riches of the **Nicolae Popa Ethnographic Museum**, where the naïve sculptor accumulated a vast legacy of Romanian folkloric art. You’ll also see original works by the sculptor.

Stop along the way for an intriguing experience in a **Roma (Gypsy) village**. Learn more about these fascinating, often misunderstood people by visiting the home of the Gabor family. It is very rare for Gypsies to open their homes to strangers, but you will be able to discover their culture, history and traditional attire (you can even try it on!). Interesting conversations occur over a glass of homemade brandy as you get the answers to all of your questions about the Gypsies.

Upon your arrival in **Sighisoara**, your guide will take you on a short orientation walk.

Overnight in Sighisoara, **Hotel Sighisoara*** (located inside the Sighisoara citadel)
Day 15: Sighisoara – Biertan fortified church – Viscri

In Sighisoara, the fortification system of the upper town is still largely intact, making it one of the few inhabited citadels in Europe. Upon arrival, you will enjoy a guided walk through the Old Town (UNESCO World Heritage Site) and visit the History Museum inside the 800-year-old clock tower. From the top, enjoy a magnificent view of the Old Town and Arms Museum, then ascend the covered wooden staircase, built in the 1600s, to the Church on the Hill, a beautiful example of 14th-century Gothic architecture.

Continue on to the Biertan fortified church (UNESCO World Heritage Site). The Saxons used this style of architecture extensively in Transylvanian villages in the 13th and 15th centuries to protect themselves against invasions. These churches are known as “peasant fortified churches” because they were constructed and maintained by locals. The Biertan church was the last to be built according to this pattern in the early 16th century. For the next 200 years, it served as the seat of the Transylvanian Archbishop, thus becoming one of the most important churches in the region.

Before noon, depart for Viscri, a traditional Transylvanian village filled with colorful old houses -- the perfect stop for travelers wishing to truly escape the beaten track and experience Transylvania’s incomparable rural charm.

Upon arrival in Viscri, explore the famous 12th-century Gothic fortified church in the village (UNESCO World Heritage Site). Lunch will be served at the lovely B&B where you’ll be spending the night and then, during the afternoon, step back in time to discover a very special, rare and diverse range of traditional crafts passed down through the generations. Watch a village blacksmith famous for his iron chandeliers work at his forge, then enjoy a horse-cart drive to the outskirts of the village, where you will meet brick-makers living close to the forest in the old way.

The afternoon is yours to spend as you wish. For the adventurous, a longer horse-cart ride can be arranged, allowing you to meet shepherds living in the hills overlooking the village, and perhaps even tasting some of their freshly-made cheese.

Overnight in Viscri, Viscri 125 B&B****, home cooked lunch and dinner included

Day 16: Viscri – Bran Castle – Brasov

Depart Viscri, heading for Brasov. On way, visit one of the most famous sights in Romania, Bran Castle (also known as Dracula’s Castle). Spend some time exploring the offerings of souvenir vendors around the castle, and taste some of the traditional cheese and palinkas (plum or pear brandy) sold by the locals.

In the afternoon, join your guide for a walk in Brasov’s Old Town. Discover the Black Church (the largest Gothic cathedral in southeastern Europe) and the Old Town square, surrounded by the beautiful houses of wealthy merchants of the past. Visit the ancient city walls, the bastions, and the first Romanian school, a site of national importance for all Romanians.

Spend the afternoon at leisure. You may choose to do some exploring on your own, or your guide can suggest additional sights.

Overnight in Brasov, Hotel Armatti*** (located in the Old Town)

Day 17: Brasov – Peles Castle – Sinaia monastery - lunch with wine tasting – Bucharest

Depart Brasov and strike out for the mountains of Transylvania, arriving in Sinaia. Visit Peles Castle, the astounding 19th-century residence of Carol I, Romania’s first king. The interior is exquisite, with Carrara marble, Murano chandeliers, Venetian mirrors and exquisite walls carved in forty types of wood.

Stop for a visit of the Sinaia monastery, the building around which the town later developed. Over a hearty lunch, discover some of the best wines Romania has to offer at Azuga Rhein Wine Cellars. At the beginning of the 20th century, the cellars were one of the official wine suppliers of the Romanian Royal Family, a privilege they regained in 2006.

After lunch, drive to Bucharest, arriving in the late afternoon.

Overnight in Bucharest, Hotel Berthelot**** (centrally located)
Day 18 – Bucharest, departure

Today marks the end of your adventure in Bulgaria and Romania. You will be transferred to the airport for the flight home.

Included services and features

- The possibility of having your itinerary customised in any way you desire, at no extra charge
- Great flexibility regarding changes to the daily itinerary even after the start of the tour
- The services of a private, licensed English speaking guide/driver, available throughout the tour
- All guide's expenses (meals, accommodations, etc.)
- Private transportation in air conditioned car or minivan (depending on the number of travellers joining)
- Complimentary wireless internet access in the car/minivan, so that you can stay in touch with your loved ones even while traveling
- All car/minivan expenses, such as gasoline, parking and road tolls
- Entrance fees as per the itinerary, with guided visits. If you wish to add any sight on the go, the guide will always be available with information during the visit
- Accommodation as per the hotel list above (we can also offer a different selection of hotels)
- Breakfast every day
- One lunch with wine tasting, an opportunity to sample some of the best wines in Romania
- Dinner with folklore show, a great opportunity to learn about the Bulgarian traditional music and dances
- Six home cooked meals (three dinners and two lunches)
- Exclusive folklore show in Maramures
- Airport transfers
- All taxes

Not included

- Airfare to and from Romania and/or Bulgaria
- Meals or beverages, other than the included ones
- Photo fees (some sights require the payment of a fee for allowing you to take pictures - they are mostly inexpensive, around 2 or 3 euro/sight)
- Gratuities for your guide (entirely up to your discretion)

Additional information

You can further explore the route of this tour by having a look at the tour map we created, with the cities the tour overnights in and all sights (Google Maps).

Click here to browse this tour on our website and send us your inquiry, and here to read our FAQ.

To read what past travellers think of their travel experience with us, check out our Testimonials page. Additionally, you might be interested in reviews from past travellers, posted on websites like Trustpilot or Tripadvisor.

About us

We are Vlad and Zoe Trestian - the owners and managers of Balkan Trails. Vlad is Romanian, Zoe is Bulgarian - we have first hand, local knowledge of the countries our tours explore.

We have been working in the travel industry in Eastern Europe since the late 1990’s. In 2009, we decided to set up Balkan Trails as a family-owned and managed tour operator business. When trusting us with your travel experience, you will be dealing directly with one of us. Zoe or Vlad will be your single point of contact, so you’re always talking to an expert who has an overview of all details related to your tour.

We understand traveling is personal and individual, and no two travellers are alike. That is why the majority of our tours are based on customised itineraries. Your tour is exactly that: YOURS. Just let us know when you’d
like to arrive and depart, what your interests are, the type of hotels you prefer, and we'll take care of the rest.

We work with a small number of hand-picked, licensed guides. They are all have solid experience as tour guides and speak excellent English. During your time with them, you will get an insider's perspective on the country, its people and culture. They are also the ones who will help you interact with locals - meeting locals is key to truly understanding a country.

Being a small, family-run business and working with a small number of carefully selected guides also means we can only manage so many tours each year. And that’s OK. Our focus is not organising lots of “just OK” tours. We are here to create memorable travel experiences. And those do come in limited numbers. Looking forward to showing you our part of the world.

Vlad & Zoe Trestian

Contact Information

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