



IN SOFIA

Jeannine Williamson spent a day in Sofia experiencing the best of the Bulgarian capital



Each year the majority of Bulgaria's 289,000 UK visitors head to the Black Sea in the summertime or slope off to the mountains in the winter.

But beyond the sand and snow there are other attractions waiting to be discovered and, in common with the country's coast and mountain products, they are easy on the purse.

Sofia is the least well known Balkan capital but is full of potential as a city-break destination. Set against the picturesque backdrop of the Vitosha Mountain and national park, it's compact and walkable. Sofia boasts plenty of cultural treasures but also lives up to its motto "ever growing, never ageing" with a dynamic vibe reflected in modern galleries and a lively bar and restaurant scene.

It's now on the short break radar of several operators and can be sold as a standalone product or, with direct flights with easyJet, dynamically packaged with a few days staying further afield.

Here's an idea of what clients could pack into one day in Sofia.

09.30: After a typical breakfast of Bulgarian banitsa – a layered pastry – or fritters served with local honey and yoghurt, start the day on the outskirts of town at the National History Museum, one of the largest in the Balkans. It's easy to reach using the capital's cheap public transport or yellow metered taxis. When time is limited, or to avoid getting overwhelmed by the vast collection of artefacts, head straight to the room that showcases the world's oldest golden treasures. Intricate wine goblets and jewellery dating back to 5,000BC that were uncovered by workmen on the Black Sea coast in 1972 are among the dazzling exhibits. It costs £4 to go into the museum and with information panels in English it's an inexpensive and informative way to get an overview of Bulgarian history.

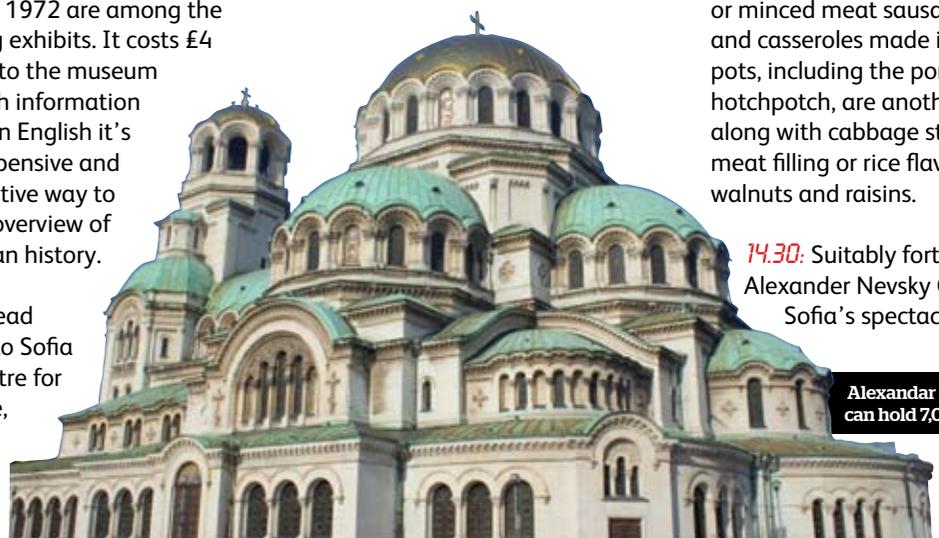
11.00: Head back into Sofia city centre for a coffee,

FAST FACT
Bulgaria is the world's oldest documented wine-producing county and the only place that grows mavrud and pamid grapes

traditionally served strong and black, at one of the many restaurants around Alexander Nevsky Square. Afterwards wander around the colourful daily flea market held there where Russian-style hats, badges, flags and other curiosities from the communist period are sold alongside local crafts, which make good souvenirs and gifts to take home.

13.00: When it's time for lunch succulent lamb, slow roasted on a spit, is a classic dish. Carnivores will be happy with other Bulgarian specials – meatballs, meat and vegetable skewers and kebapche, or minced meat sausages. Stews and casseroles made in clay pots, including the pork-based hotchpotch, are another staple along with cabbage stuffed with meat filling or rice flavoured with walnuts and raisins.

14.30: Suitably fortified, visit Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, Sofia's spectacular



Alexandar Nevsky Cathedral can hold 7,000 worshippers

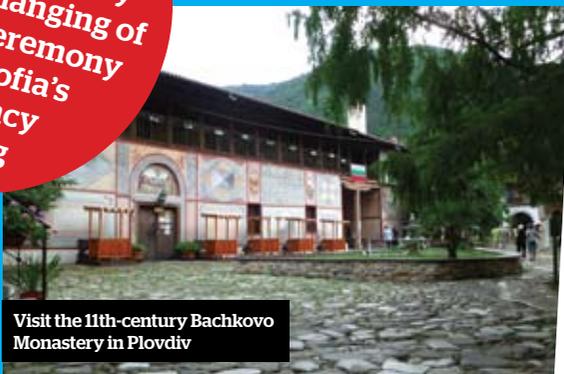


landmark building and one of the world's largest Eastern Orthodox cathedrals with a capacity for more than 7,000 worshippers. Built between 1882 and 1912, some of the best Russian and Bulgarian artists and craftsmen of the time worked on its ornate interior. Close by is St Sofia Church, the second-oldest in the city and built on the site of several earlier churches. Archaeologists have uncovered more than 50 tombs beneath the church and an underground museum showing tombs and the timeline of the churches is due to open in September. From here you can walk past Sofia's grand Opera House, on the corner of Rakovski and Vrabcha streets, to see if there is an opera or ballet performance you fancy seeing in the evening.

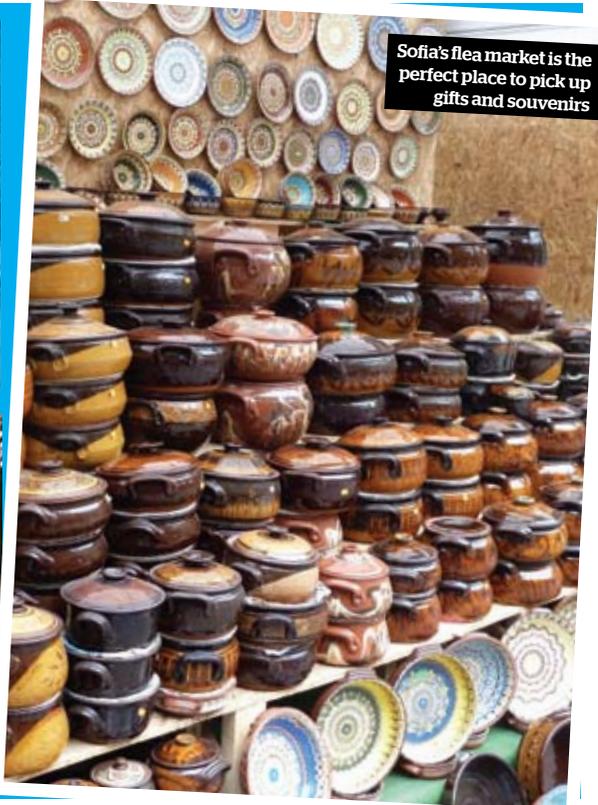
TOP TIP
On the hour throughout the day watch the changing of the guard ceremony outside Sofia's Presidency building



Throw a coin into one of the city's many water fountains



Visit the 11th-century Bachkovo Monastery in Plovdiv



Sofia's flea market is the perfect place to pick up gifts and souvenirs

15.00: While it's easy to dwell on Sofia's historic attractions, the city isn't buried in the past. A short stroll away is the Museum Gallery of Modern Art in Oborishte Street with its striking collection of works by artists such as Picasso, Andy Warhol and Damien Hirst.

20.00: A trendy area for night owls is the 'students town' in the southeast close to the universities. Closer to the city centre there are plenty of bars, restaurants and clubs lining Vitosha Boulevard. Toba & Co is a popular haunt behind the former royal palace, now the National Art Gallery and Ethnographic Museum. For live music Backstage in Vasil Levski Boulevard hosts nightly performances by Bulgarian and international artists.

Sample: Regent Holidays has three nights' B&B at the central four-star Best Western Premier Thracia Hotel, close to the main Slaveikov Square and attractions such as the National Archaeological Museum and Ivan Vazov National Theatre, from £355 including flights from Heathrow.

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STAYING LONGER?

PLOVDIV

Bulgaria's second-largest city is a two-hour drive from Sofia and also accessible by train. It's divided by the River Maritza and, like Rome, built on seven hills. The main attraction is the amphitheatre, Bulgaria's most complete Roman building. From here take a walk through the maze of narrow streets in the old town, which are lined with churches, pretty coloured buildings with decorative facades and small cafes. Plovdiv Ethnographic Museum is housed in a beautiful 19th-century house and different rooms are dedicated to the city's history with exhibits including musical instruments, clothing and household items.



The Plovdiv amphitheatre is a popular attraction

PAMPOROVO

Head for the hills in Pamporovo in the Rhodope Mountains. The area is famous as a ski resort and is the sunniest place in Bulgaria, so there's plenty to do outside the winter sports season with walking trails, outdoor pursuits and pretty little villages such as Shiroka Luka with its attractive craft shops and tiny church. An unusual attraction is the TV tower on top of the Snezhanka peak where a viewing platform provides spectacular views. A short drive away is the town of Smolian where a really authentic place to sample Bulgarian cuisine is the Charshiata taverna. Meals in the cosy dining room are often accompanied by music and singing.



Enjoy authentic Bulgarian cuisine at Charshiata with musical accompaniment

BRESTOVITSA

Wine tourism is a very enjoyable way to get a real taste of the country. Independent travellers on a dynamically packaged fly-drive can immerse themselves in this aspect of Bulgaria at the Todoroff Hotel, an attractive four-star boutique property in the quiet village of Brestovitsa, 90 miles from Sofia. The 15-room hotel with an excellent restaurant also includes a winery producing about 500,000 bottles a year and the country's first spa featuring wine-based therapies such as the Wine Mascarpone treatment, a scrub, moisturising treatment and wine bath (with a glass of wine on the side) lasting 75 minutes and costing less than £30.



Todoroff Hotel offers wine-based spa treatments