

## Tundzha Regional Archaeological Project

### Information for Travellers to Bulgaria

Updated September 2009

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#### Before departure

- 1) **Health.** A travel medicine consultation one month before you depart for Bulgaria is strongly recommended. Bring all your vaccines up to date (we work in a rural area with exposure to ticks, mosquitoes, dogs, farm animals, snakes and other wildlife). Bring at least a basic first-aid kit (available at Costco, most drug stores, etc.). Food and water are generally safe, but carry some antibiotics for gastrointestinal problems. Allergy and cold medicine might also prove useful.
- 2) **Insurance.** Get travel and medical insurance (including evacuation); enquire with ISIC or STA.
- 3) **Documents.** Make photocopies of your passport and driver's license and keep these separate from the originals. Leave one copy at home with someone you trust (who will be reachable during your travel).
- 4) **Visa.** Check visa requirements for Bulgaria, especially if you are not from the US or EU (US and EU citizens can stay up to 90 days without a visa).
- 5) **Currency.** Do not exchange money before you come to Bulgaria, you get better rates in country (cash machines are common; exchange agencies are available). Travellers' checks are harder to exchange and may incur additional fees and/or a worse exchange rate. Bring cash (US dollars or Euros) if you must, but an ATM card is best. Unlike some other former eastern-bloc countries, ATM fraud does not seem to be a problem in Bulgaria.
- 6) **Banks and credit cards.** Call customer service at your bank and your credit card company and tell them that you'll be travelling. They will ask for your approximate itinerary. If you fail to do this your credit card may be declined when you try making transactions abroad.
- 7) **Clothing.** Pack for a wide variety of weather. Yambol has a generally mild climate, BUT during the project the temperatures may be as warm as 25 degrees Celsius or go down to 0, and you will be outdoors. It may rain (anytime) or snow (November-April); we will work unless the ground is obscured by snow or standing water. It is often windy. The temperature can vary dramatically during the day. Heat is expensive and Bulgaria is poor; indoor spaces may be under-heated. Bring layered clothing, hat, gloves and comfortable waterproof shoes. Bring sunscreen even in winter, some windproof and waterproof clothes, thermal underwear, and a sleeping bag (your sleeping quarters may not be heated).
- 8) **Guidebooks.** If you plan on doing independent travel get or consult a travel guide (a Rough Guide and a Blue Guide make a good combination, the former for practical data, the latter for cultural information).

#### Upon arrival in Bulgaria

- 1) Sofia airport is about 20 minutes from downtown. There is no convenient mass transit between the airport and the city. **NEVER accept an offer for a ride from someone who approaches you in the airport and asks if you need a taxi. This is ALWAYS a scam and you WILL BE SEVERELY RIPPED OFF.** ALWAYS go to the official taxi booth and have them arrange

your ride. If you come in late and the office is closed, walk outside to the official taxi queue (it will be obvious). Only one taxi company is authorized to provide service from the airport (OK taxi at the time of writing). The price should not exceed 10 leva (*maybe* 15 if you get a particularly large / fancy car). Make sure your taxi is running a meter (it should be ca 0.60 leva per km). If you were charged more than 15 leva, get the ID number, name and car plate of the taxi driver and we will help you file a complaint. *Remember: everyone who approaches you in the airport offering a taxi ride is trying to rip you off; walk past and go to the official office/queue.*

- 2) Do not exchange money at the airport; use the ATM. If you must exchange cash, only change a small amount (enough for the taxi). Do not exchange money on the street. Always exchange money at an official exchange booth. Check several booths for rates to make sure you get a reasonable rate. Using an ATM is the best way to get cash in Bulgaria. Most Bulgarian and American banks have reasonable exchange rates and fees. Check with your bank as to the fees and commissions rates they charge. Always withdraw the maximum amount from the ATM (usually 400 leva) to maximize what you are getting for your fee.
- 3) There are numerous hostels in convenient locations downtown. Check the internet or a recent guidebook to find and reserve a place should you arrive before the start of the project. There is lots to see and do in and around Sofia; a two or three days there will be well spent.

### **News and weather**

- 1) News about Bulgaria can be found on [www.sofiaecho.com](http://www.sofiaecho.com) (in English). You might want to read it for a few weeks before your arrival so that you are up on current events.
- 2) For cultural events, concerts and other entertainment, refer to [www.programata.bg](http://www.programata.bg)
- 3) For weather, see [www.sinoptik.bg](http://www.sinoptik.bg). Bulgaria has variable climate depending on the region and altitude. The temperatures vary dramatically from one part of the country and from one day to the next. Be prepared and bring layers of clothing (see above).

### **Getting around**

- 1) **Bus travel.** Intercity busses are modern and offer drinks on the long hauls. Schedules can be found at: [www.transportbg.info](http://www.transportbg.info).
- 2) **Train travel.** Slower but cheaper. Express trains (e.g., Sofia-Varna) aren't bad; regional trains are excruciatingly slow. In our experience, sleepers are safe and reasonably comfortable. Schedules can be found at: <http://bdz.creato.biz/>
- 3) **Car rental.** Renting a car in Bulgaria is fairly expensive. Check online for current rates; international companies are reliable, but very expensive; Bulgarian companies are cheaper but can be dodgy. Every rental car that the project supervisors have rented over the last four years has suffered some mechanical problem when driven for more than three days. We've had good luck with [www.europcar.bg](http://www.europcar.bg) and [www.autorentbg.com](http://www.autorentbg.com). Even with a Bulgarian company expect to pay EUR250 / week for a (very small) compact car. All rental cars are manual transmission. **We can't really recommend driving in Bulgaria.** If you choose to drive, be aware that Bulgarians drive in the Mediterranean fashion, i.e. aggressively and with little

regard to the rules of the road. Road quality beyond the highways leaves a lot to be desired (and don't trust Google Maps about it). Driving can be a nerve-racking experience with BMW passing you at 160 km/h in the left lane and horse carts going 10 km/h on the right shoulder with a line of large trucks down the middle. Passing into oncoming traffic (i.e., lining up three abreast at high speed on a two-lane road) happens regularly. Bulgaria has recently been undergoing a lot of road construction, which complicates and renders online navigation tools such as Google Maps useless. Be wary of their instructions and check frequently against local news and maps. Important warning signs may appear only in Bulgarian (e.g., road closed ahead). Police officers may demand large fines (bribes) on the spot before they return your documents. Overall, driving is for the daring.

- 4) **Mass transit:** most Bulgarian cities have a good public transport. You will need to consult a guidebook or enquire locally about them.
- 5) **Taxis.** Taxis are cheap; use them. Outside of Sofia, taxi fraud is rare (and in Sofia mostly limited to the airport run).

### **Food and drink**

- 1) **Water.** It is safe to drink tap water in Bulgaria (although it can be high in minerals or heavily chlorinated, depending where you are – the locals recommend beer to clear the kidneys; bottled water is also cheap).
- 2) **Food safety.** Bulgarian food is usually hygienic. You do not need to avoid salads, “street food”, or uncooked food, it is safe in Bulgaria. Traveller's diarrhoea and other problems are, if anything, less common than in, say, Italy.
- 3) **Food variety.** All food and drink is local, most food is seasonal, and as a result there is often little variety. You will be eating lots of cucumbers, tomatoes, potatoes, onions, and Balkan cheese.
- 4) **Special diets.** It is easy to eat a low-meat diet, but difficult to consistently obtain completely vegetarian (or especially vegan) food. If you are strictly vegetarian, expect a very monotonous diet.
- 5) **Recommendations.** When you arrive, try *banitsas* for breakfast, *doner* for lunch, and *shopska salata* and *kavarma* (meat) or *syrene po shopska* (egg and cheese) for dinner. Beer and wine are cheap and generally good (for beer, any variety of Shumensko is good – try the red if you can find it; for a dark beer available year-round try Stolichno; mavrud and gamza are the local varieties of red wine and are usually good).
- 6) **Alcohol.** Many Bulgarians tend to drink heavily, especially *rakia* (un-aged, clear brandy similar to Italian grappa). Enjoy your new friends but be ready to say “NO” firmly and repeatedly when you have had enough (all your new friends will show up the next morning to administer the traditional next-day cure for over-indulgence, which you may find, well, counterproductive).

### **Miscellaneous information**

- 1) **Medical care.** For routine issues is fine. Conditions of medical facilities may be poor but doctors are well trained. More serious medical problems will require evacuation.

- 2) **Internet.** Finding wireless internet access in a pleasant environment is very difficult. Internet / gaming cafes, on the other hand, are common but tend to be dank smoke filled bunkers. Prepaid mobile internet is available at reasonable rates, but connection speed drops precipitously as you leave urban areas.
- 3) **Language.** Bulgarians in Sofia often speak English or another western language, while in small cities the knowledge of foreign languages is often very limited. The rule of thumb is that older generations often speak German, while English is the language of the young. Russian is not that popular or known among the young any longer (and older generations don't seem to speak it as well as they think they do).
- 4) **Smoking.** Our project is non-smoking project; you will only be allowed to smoke outside the lodging. On the other hand, be aware that 80% of Bulgarians smoke. All indoor spaces will be smoke filled to an extent unseen in western countries. In all our travels we have encountered perhaps two non-smoking places.
- 5) **Courtesy.** Remember that you are representing the project and your home country in the eyes of Bulgarians. Be kind courteous and under control at all times. Bulgarians are warm and friendly people and you should enjoy that to the fullest.
- 6) **Crime and safety.** Bulgaria is a low crime country. You can travel alone safely in most of the country. Petty theft and pickpocketing, however, are problems in Sofia and some other parts of country that are frequented by tourists. Be alert, keep your eyes on your possessions; trust but verify.

***We will be happy if you help us keep this list updated. Please, send us any comments, observations and experiences from your travels in Bulgaria!***