Medieval Bulgaria, Bulgaria

Itinerary

This circular trail starts and finishes at the horse farm near Sevlievo, and takes you to the north side of the Balkans. This is a great introduction to the area and ideal for the hot summer months, or for guests not wanting so many hours in the saddle.

This itinerary is designed to introduce you to Bulgaria and its many faceted history, with castles, towers, monasteries and fortresses from the Middle Ages, together with the old houses and traditional crafts.

Riders should be happy at walk, trot and canter.

Subject to the wishes and capabilities of the group, there will be some long canters on wide open spaces (4 - 5 hours riding each day). Accommodation is in hotels and guesthouses.

Saturday

Arrive at Sofia Airport (before 4pm). If you arrive early in the day then the guide will meet you and take you for lunch before collecting more people from the airport. If there is time when everyone has arrived, you will be taken on a tour in the centre of the capital before being transferred 190kms northeast of Sofia to the town of Sevlievo.

Dinner and overnight at a hotel in Sevlievo. The hotel has a sauna and indoor swimming pool. Ride briefing over dinner.

The following is the proposed itinerary but it is subject to change due to local conditions. Riding times and distances are approximate. Sometimes it is necessary for the horses to overnight a short distance away from where you are staying and then you transfer to and from the horses by vehicle.

Sunday

After breakfast you are transferred to the horse farm to meet the horses, saddle up and prepare for the ride under the guidance of your guides. This introductory ride takes you through an old forest.

Return to the riding centre for lunch and then in the late afternoon return to the hotel and perhaps enjoy a sauna or swim before dinner.

About 21 km / 4 hours riding.

Monday

Having packed your bags for the start of the trail, you leave from the horse farm and ride to the small village of Zhivko. The route takes you along the foot of the famous rocky chain “Vitata Stena” (10km long and more than 120m high) which is also a nature reserve.

Picnic next to the village of Armenite, situated in the middle of the Vitata Stena.
Dinner and overnight at a traditional guesthouse in Zhivko village.

About 25km / 4.5 hours riding.

**Tuesday**

After breakfast you are taken by car to visit the folk museum of Etara which is near to the town of Gabrovo.

Etara is a beautifully rebuilt and restored village from the 19th century illustrating the main crafts of that time. The machines are powered by running water and the craftsmen produce souvenirs for you to buy (take some money with you – there are some interesting things to buy).

After lunch set off riding from Zhivko towards the villages of Sabotkovtsi and Bozhentsi, crossing the Yantra River and riding through the wilderness of the valley.

Dinner and overnight at Sabotkovtsi.

About 21 km / 4 hours riding.

**Wednesday**

Breakfast at the guest house. Visit by car to Bozhentsi where you are able to spend time looking around and there is the opportunity to buy souvenirs.

The village of Bozhentsi nestles in the picturesque valleys of the Balkan Mountains, 13km from the town of Gabrovo. It is almost the only settlement in Bulgaria that has entirely kept its ancient look from the Renaissance. The well-preserved valuable architectural monuments, the authentic stone roads, and the rich ethnographic collections were the reason why the village (with about 100 houses and 7-8 public works buildings) became an architectural-historical reservation in 1964.

One legend, handed down from one generation to another, goes back to a tragic time for the Bulgarian nation in 1393, when the Capital Veliko Tarnovo was taken by the Turks and the Second Bulgarian Kingdom was destroyed for 500 years. The noblewoman Bozhana lost her husband and left the capital with her children to look for shelter. The only possible place was the Balkan mountain. In the heart of the mountain, between the sparkling streams, in the deep forests and hidden from the eyes of the enslaver, she put the first stone of the village, which took her name.

Today, the beautiful houses of Bozhentsi, sheltered between two opposite hills among lush vegetation, meet the sunrises and the sunsets in peace and silence as though the time has really stopped.

You ride today northwest of Sabotkovtsi, through hills and beautiful forests with small creeks and lakes, towards Dryanovo Monastery.

Picnic in a beautiful meadow next to the village of Tsareva Livada, which was the summer residence of the war horses of Bulgarian kings during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, 1185-1396 A.D.
Overnight in a hotel on the shore of the lake in the village of Skalsko.

About 21km / 4.5 hours riding.

**Thursday**

After breakfast at the hotel you visit Dryanovo Monastery and the cave “Bacho Kiro” above it.

The monastery survived the bombardment of the Ottoman Army in one epic battle with the rebels during the biggest Bulgarian uprising against the Turkish occupation in 1876.

After visiting the monastery, you set off riding towards the village of Gostilitsa, stopping for a picnic lunch on the way.

Dinner and overnight at a traditional hotel in Gostilitsa.

About 19 km / 4 hours riding.

**Friday**

After breakfast at the hotel you visit the old Bulgarian capital, Veliko Tarnovo.

*Veliko Tarnovo was the Bulgarian capital during the second Bulgarian Kingdom (1185-1396). A well-fortified hill was the home of the Bulgarian tsar (king) and the aristocracy for two centuries. The castle and Orthodox churches that have survived from the Middle Ages tell stories of an impressive history. The year 1185 began with omen: the winter happened to be so mild that the fruit trees all over Europe blossomed even in January. The Bulgarians believed this to be ‘God’s omen’ for the hope of restoring their state, which had been subdued by the Byzantium empire for 167 years. Brothers, Assen and Peter, who owned a miraculous icon, motivated the people in church on the day of St Dimitar and led them in an armed uprising. Both brothers were kings for 12 years and they succeeded in restoring Bulgaria almost to the size of its First Kingdom (681-1018). Both brothers were killed by traitors.*

On 9th April 1205 the army of the Fourth Crusade took the capital of Byzantium- Constantinople and founded their own Latin Empire, led by the Count of Flanders, Boduen. Tsar Kaloyan (the younger brother of Assen and Peter) attempted to make peace with the Knights, but they refused the offered hand. The eventful clash occurred on 14th April 1205 near to Adrianopolis (present day Edirne). The army of Count Louis was defeated and the Emperor Boduen was captured and taken to the capital Veliko Tarnovo, where he later died.

Return to your horses, and your last ride takes you from Gostilitsa village through open meadows and beautiful forests. After a picnic lunch you arrive back at the horse farm near Sevlievo and say a fond farewell to your horses.

Dinner and overnight at the hotel in Sevlievo.

About 25 km / 4.5 hours riding.

**Saturday**

After breakfast you are transferred to the airport in Sofia for your flight home. Flights should depart after midday.

*Accommodation*

During the rides you stay in good quality hotels or guesthouses. Rooms are mostly twin rooms with en suite loo and shower. Swimming pools and saunas are available on some nights. Please note that during the autumn months of September, October and November, the outdoor pools are likely to be closed.