Best of Bulgaria and Romania (12 nights)

Tour Description:

The sweeping traditional cultures of two countries open before you on this exceptional journey. Explore the monuments of the vibrant Bulgarian capital, Sofia, before heading on to Rila Monastery and artistic Plovdiv.

Next, depart for the Black Sea Coast, where the replica of the Kazanlak Thracian Tomb and the exquisite peninsula of Nessebar await. In this 9000-year-old jewel of a village, you’ll find a working fishermen’s settlement, cobblestoned streets, and sweet little restaurants with views of the sea.

In Varna, tour the beautiful Sea Garden and extensive Archaeology museum before driving on to the 8th-century Madara Horseman. Explore Samovodene Street in Veliko Tarnovo, a major center for traditional arts and crafts.

Cross the Romanian border to Bucharest, the largest city between Berlin and Athens. Visit Curtea de Arges, a soaring 14th-century monastery with trompe-l’œil cupolas and harrowing stories of times past. At Sibiu, tour the fascinating Old Town, still surrounded by medieval walls.

At Poienari Fortress, climb 1,480 steps to the high castle and ruined fortress of Vlad the Impaler. In Sighisoara, Europe’s only living citadel, take in the glorious view from the medieval Clock Tower, then ascend to the 14th-century Church on the Hill by way of an evocative wooden staircase built in the 1600s.

Visit the mind-blowing ancient salt mines at Turda and the multicolored painted monasteries in Bucovina before ending your tour with two keynote Transylvanian castles: the magnificent Bran Castle and Peles Castle, filled with every imaginable luxury of the 19th century.

Tour Highlights:

• discover 12 of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Bulgaria and Romania
• explore Maramures in northern Romania - the area where traditions and local culture have scarcely altered over the centuries
• tour the stunning UNESCO painted monasteries of Bucovina and learn about their crucial role in the history of the Romanians
• explore the most famous medieval towns in the two countries: Plovdiv, Veliko Tarnovo and Nessebar in Bulgaria and then Sibiu, Sighisoara and Brasov in Romania
• discover Romania’s most famous castles: Peles and Bran (a.k.a. Dracula’s Castle)
• 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 unpack your suitcase at the Hotel Niky, located at the epicenter of the city. It’s the perfect starting point for exploring the refreshed, revitalized culture of Sofia.

In the afternoon, take a guided walk along Sofia’s yellow-cobblestone streets; visit the massive, domed Aleksandar Nevski Cathedral, the imposing Royal Palace, the Presidency, and the 4th-century Saint 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: Sofia – Boyana church – Rila Monastery – Plovdiv**

Take a short drive to the base of Vitosha Mountain and visit the Boyana Church, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The church was under construction almost continuously between the 10th to the 19th centuries, and it is renowned for an emblematic collection of beautifully-preserved frescoes and iconic art, especially pieces completed in the year 1259.

After your tour, continue on to the Bulgarian Orthodox Rila Monastery, also on the UNESCO World Heritage list and viewed as one of Bulgaria’s holiest sites. Home to priceless frescoes, Rila is awash with color, both inside and out. It functions as a true repository of Bulgarian cultural heritage.

Arrive in Plovdiv in the late afternoon.

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

**Day 3: Plovdiv – Kazanlak – Nessebar**

Today, you’ll discover Plovdiv, one of the most ancient cities in Europe and the second-largest in all of Bulgaria. Plovdiv originated as a Neolithic settlement, was later controlled by the Thracians, and evolved into a key Greek and Roman stronghold. Today, it is characterized by a lively bohemian atmosphere, featuring prominent artists, endless galleries, and cozy bistros. During your walking tour, visit the ancient Roman Theater and the Ethnographic Museum, which stands as one of the finest museums of its kind in Bulgaria.

Later on, you’ll depart 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). You will be visiting the replica, as visits to the 4th-century B.C. original are rarely possible. Discovered in 1944, the tomb dates from the Hellenistic period, and was part of an expansive Thracian necropolis featuring intricately-executed murals. It is Bulgaria’s only collection of perfectly-preserved Hellenistic masterpieces.

Next, move on to the romantic peninsula of Nessebar, where the Old Town (UNESCO World Heritage Site) dates back thousands of years. Only a narrow isthmus connects this former island to the mainland. Nessebar, a jewel-like treasure trove of multi-layered cultural influences, contains an abundance of medieval churches and 19th-century houses in addition to a vital fishing settlement. Narrow cobblestoned streets and adorable little restaurants command a view of the sea, and the smell of salt water is constantly in the air.

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

**Day 4: Nessebar – Varna – Madara Horseman – Veliko Tarnovo**

In the morning, a drive to the seaside resort of Varna is first on the list. You’ll drive by the historic train station, the first in the country to facilitate the crucial economic connection between Europe and Istanbul. Stop at the port to take in the delightful view. Take a walk in the magnificent Sea Garden, and pass by the Maritime Museum, the old Greek neighborhood, and the ruins of the Roman baths. Visit the Archeological Museum to view the priceless Gold of Varna, the world’s oldest known collection. You can also visit the Orthodox cathedral, the Dormition of the Mother of God, a major 19th-century landmark that looks down upon the main square.

In the afternoon, drive to Veliko Tarnovo, the capital during the Second Bulgarian Empire. Along the way, take a short detour to view the incomparable Madara Horseman, an indelible symbol of the Bulgarian state. Dating to 710 A.D., this massive relief, cut into high vertical rock, depicts an ancient horse and rider. Arriving in Veliko Tarnovo, you’ll take a short orientation stroll with your guide; the rest of the evening can be spent at your leisure.

Overnight in Veliko Tarnovo, Hotel Bolyarski**** (located in the Old Town)
Day 5: Veliko Tarnovo – Arbanassi – Bucharest

In the morning, you’ll have the chance to investigate **Veliko Tarnovo** more thoroughly. Take a stroll in the Old Town, where you’ll discover enticing handcraft shops along with traditional icon painting, woodcarving, weaving, coppersmithing, and silversmithing. Enjoy a cup of Turkish coffee prepared in the traditional manner—on a bed of hot sand.

Next, visit the monument of Tsarevets, a medieval fortification and church set high on a majestic hill. It was the seat of kings (and the Bulgarian patriarch) from 1185 to 1393. View the fortress walls and watchtowers, the Patriarch’s church, and Baldwin’s Tower.

Later, take a short drive to **Arbanassi**, a beautiful little village filled with architectural gems of the 17th and 18th centuries. Profiting from Ottoman favor, the town became the residence of rich and powerful merchants. You can glimpse their prosperous and secure lifestyle at the 17th-century Konstantsalieva House, itself a small fortification with stone construction below and timber above. Next, move on to the Nativity Church, built according to restrictions implemented during the Ottoman occupation.

In the afternoon, you’ll begin your journey north, toward the Romanian border and Bucharest. Panoramic city tour upon arrival.

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

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Day 6: Bucharest - Curtea de Arges - Poienari - Transfagarasan Road - Sibiu

You’ll visit the medieval Transylvanian city of **Sibiu** today; you will cross the Carpathians along the spectacular **Transfagarasan Road**. Your first stop will be at **Curtea de Arges**, a soaring, otherworldly cathedral built under intense societal pressure. Its leaning, twisting cupolas trick the eye, and seem to defy the laws of gravity. Built in the early 1500s, the church contains many legends involving attempts at winged flight and tragic human sacrifice.

Next, travel north to the Gothic ruins of **Poienari Castle**, home base and impenetrable medieval fortress of Vlad the Impaler. Built upon the backs of arrested noblemen, the castle claimed many lives, both during Vlad’s restoration of the structure and later, during clashes with the Turks. Vlad’s wife, Jusztina, eventually leapt from the precipitous heights, choosing certain death over capture and imprisonment.

This afternoon, you’ll arrive in **Sibiu** and check into your hotel. Enjoy a guided walking tour of the medieval old town, the most intensely fortified city of the Saxon era. In an era of frequent attacks, Sibiu was guarded by a complex system of multi-layered walls, gates, and secret passageways.

*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 Levoslav**** (located in the Old Town)

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Day 7: Sibiu - Biertan - Sighisoara - Alba Iulia

Today, a day trip to medieval **Sighisoara** is in store; get ready to travel back in time. First, pause for a tour of the **Biertan fortified church** (UNESCO World Heritage Site). Discover how the Saxons employed church strongholds across Transylvania in the 13th and 15th centuries to protect themselves against invasions. Security was intentionally created in “peasant fortified churches,” built and maintained exclusively by local townspeople. In case of attack, villagers could rush inside and bar the doors. The 16th-century Biertan church represents the final edifice to be constructed in this style.

Your Transylvanian journey continues in Sighisoara, a medieval citadel that has been inhabited without interruption since the time of its construction. Enjoy a guided walk through the **Old Town** (UNESCO World Heritage Site) and ascend the 800-year-old clock tower to tour the fascinating History Museum contained within. The citadel’s great height affords an impressive view of the surrounding area. You can also climb the 17th-century wooden-covered staircase to the Church on the Hill, beautifully preserved since medieval times.

Sighisoara is widely known as the birthplace of Vlad the Impaler, who provided a rich source of inspiration for Dracula. Born here in 1431, Vlad arose to become Prince of Wallachia in the 1450s, and was widely
feared by his enemies due to his ruthless tactics in battle. The actual house of his birth still stands; it is now one of Sighisoara’s many restaurants.

In the afternoon, drive to Alba Iulia, seat of the Roman Catholic diocese in Transylvania. 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 feature is its fortress, beautifully restored in recent years.

Overnight in Alba Iulia, Hotel Transilvania**** (located next to the citadel)

Day 8: Sibiu - Turda Salt Mines - Cluj Napoca - Surdesti Church - Vadu Izei

Today, you’ll travel to Maramures, a truly rare and special place where the medieval landscape and traditions have survived; the area is almost untouched by outside influences. On the way, stop in the small town of Turda to visit the salt mines, Salina Turda, one of the oldest mines in the area, presents you with the otherworldly experience of acoustical subterranean caves dominated by colossal pieces of illuminated machinery.

Next, make a stop in Cluj Napoca, one of Transylvania’s most important metropolitan centers. Cluj Napoca is an important university town, and you’ll notice a fresh, energetic ambience in the streets. Join your guide for a stroll in Cluj, the vibrant central district.

After your stroll, you’ll drive north to experience the fabulous wooden houses and intricately-carved gates of Maramures, an area encircled by wild nature and unspoiled forests still heavily populated with bear, wolves, and lynx—carnivores usually associated with past times and fairy tales. Top off the day with a tour of the Surdesti wooden church (UNESCO World Heritage Site), the tallest built before the advent of modern times.

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

Day 9: Full day in Maramures. Folklore show in the evening.

If you’ve ever wanted to immerse yourself in a living medieval landscape, a full day in Maramures may be the closest you’ll ever get. Start off in the idyllic village of Vadu Izei, where you’ll witness firsthand the traditions of times past. Visit a traditional plum brandy maker and shop with the townspeople at the local market, selecting foods and specialties available only here.

A visit to the Merry Cemetery in Sapanta provides a spirited aside. Here, brilliant multicolored markers hand-painted in the naïve style cluster together in a highly individualized remembrance of each person buried here. You’ll have the chance to watch a woodcarver at work and ask questions about this remarkably light-hearted tradition.

The church at Peri is your next stop; you’ll visit the world’s tallest wooden church, a newer structure built in the old manner. Compare it to medieval wooden churches you’ve seen on this trip, and notice how precisely the work follows time-honored techniques of construction.

Next, visit the Memorial to the Victims of Communism in Sighetu Marmatiei. Learn how the Communists succeeded, for a time, in causing citizens to live restricted lives, in constant fear and doubt—even in relation to their own thoughts.

Tonight, you’ll be treated to a folklore show, performed by the villagers exclusively for you. Immerse yourself in traditional song and dance handed down over centuries.

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

Day 10: Vadu Izei - Barsana Monastery - Borgo Pass - Moldovita & Sucevita Monasteries - Gura Humorului

Today, travel to Bucovina, a rural area famous for exquisite treasures: the UNESCO World Heritage Painted Monasteries.

Stop along the way to explore the delightful monastery at Barsana; then cross the eastern Carpathians by way of the spectacular Borgo Pass, making your way into Bucovina and the village of Ciocanesti. The
townspeople here take beautiful care of their remarkable houses, embellished with visually striking designs and motifs.

Arriving in Bucovina, you’ll tour the bright Painted Monasteries of Moldovita, surrounded by exquisite rose gardens; and Sucevita, with its imposing system of walls, towers, and fortifications.

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

Day 11: Voronet & Humor Monasteries - Nicolae Popa museum - Bicaz Gorges - Brasov

In the morning, you’ll visit the UNESCO World Heritage monastery at Humor, with its beautiful garden and medieval watchtower; and Voronet, with exterior walls adorned in a panoramic rainbow of colors. Voronet, once a monastic calligraphy school, is world-renowned for its remarkable frescoes, painted primarily in extraordinary shades of azure. It is perhaps the most celebrated church in all of Romania.

Next, discover a hidden gem: the Nicolae Popa Ethnographic Museum, a landmark stop for the peasant culture in Bucovina. The prominent sculptor documented important folkloric traditions in his own home, and has left behind an astounding collection of visual art.

This afternoon, travel back into Transylvania via the Bicaz Gorges. The view is stupendous, and you may choose to make brief stops along the route at local souvenir shops.

Arrive in Brasov in the late afternoon.

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

Day 12: Brasov - Bran Castle - Peles Castle - Sinaia monastery - Bucharest

Once you’ve awakened for the day and finished breakfast, your guide will lead you on a walk through the old quarter of Brasov. You’ll explore the Black Church (southeastern Europe’s most significant Gothic cathedral) and the Old Town square, surrounded by the sumptuous homes of elite merchants of the past. Next, visit one of the most famous sites in Romania: Bran Castle, which holds a strong link in popular consciousness with the legend of Dracula. Investigate the quaint souvenir shops surrounding the castle; and meet the traditional food vendors, a chance to savor the tastes of the past: cheeses, pálinka (plum and pear brandy), and meats prepared in the old way.

A journey filled with magnificent mountain scenery and astounding views will bring you to Sinaia—the Pearl of the Carpathians. Visit Peles Castle, the astonishing 19th-century home of Romania’s first king. The interior, created of marble, crystal, and rare, exotic woods, features the highest level of luxury obtainable at the time; it was assembled with no obvious limits, financial or otherwise. Nearby, the beautiful Sinaia Monastery beckons.

Arrive in Bucharest in the late afternoon.

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

Day 13 – 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
• Two home cooked dinners
• 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 Trestian  Zoe Trestian

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