

Visit to Sofia, Razgrad and Veliko Turnovo courtesy of AEDE Bulgaria 20 – 27 August 2011 - Rod Holmes AEDE UK Section

Sofia, during the Neolithic period some 5000 yrs ago, began as 2 settlements around numerous hot and cold mineral springs, which still run today. Previously called Serdica and Sredets, Sofia is ancient, some 1700 yrs older than Brussels and older than Rome.

Terry Randall's enthusiasm for the city is infectious. (see: Sofia – the History of Europe, <http://sofia.fivestarmedia.eu>) 'I am a Sofian. Sofia is my city. This city's European atmosphere, its Mediterranean spirit makes me feel Celtic, Roman, Thracian, Hellenic, but above all I feel cosmopolitan. Sofia is ancient, but it hasn't grown old, it has grown extremely wise, like the translation of its name from the Greek, *God's wisdom*.'



Constantine the Great chose to live in Serdica and would certainly have enjoyed Sofia's many unpretentious cafes and restaurants you find today which provide excellent relaxing venues for eating and drinking. One particularly memorable 'book-cafe' allowed us to browse and read (in Bulgarian) the likes of Sartre and Camus while drinking excellent Colombian coffee. The cafe owner did not object when no purchase was made!

In Bankya, during my first evening in Sofia, a concert by Iliya Lukov was an inspirational experience. Young and old joined in spontaneous, joyful dancing. Thanks to my hosts for introducing me to the popular 'Banitsa,' and other traditional Bulgarian cuisine. Thanks also for showing this inexperienced traveller how to navigate Sofia's inexpensive train and bus system to find lovely parks, cosy cafe's and relaxing restaurants. (one Lev buys a bus ticket from any of the numerous street vendors)



A statue to two brothers, Saints Cyril and Methodius, stands in front of the National Library. The story of how they created the Cyrillic alphabet was explained during a (free) 3 hour walking tour conducted by Misha, one of the many enthusiastic interested local student guides. <http://www.freesofiatour.com/> Amongst other things discovered during the tour was the St. George Roman Rotunda dating from the 4th century and St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, one of Sofia's primary symbols and a major tourist attraction. The Square of Tolerance is a unique place in Sofia - within less than 300 meters, you can see temples from the world's four major religions: a mosque, a synagogue, a Catholic cathedral, and an orthodox church.

More contemporarily, we found the popularly named 'suicide balcony,' for the unfortunate Finance Minister who gets things wrong - Misha did not say whether or not it had actually been used! She begins studying for a PhD at the London School of Economics in September. Thank you, Misha, for your fascinating, informative tour of Sofia, and good luck!



Heading northward from Sofia to visit Razgrad for the annual [Yoghurt Festival](#), we travelled by comfortable coach, passing industrial enterprises abandoned after the fall of socialism, and seemingly endless forests and eye-catching sunflower farms and small towns. For 20 Leva we travelled for 5 hours with stops, across what seemed the entire country to arrive in Razgrad, built upon the ruins of the ancient Roman town of Abritus in North East Bulgaria with its substantial Turkish population.

Surrounding Razgrad's town square one finds many pleasant cafes and restaurants where one can sit, eat, drink and watch whatever is going on – in our case, traditional international folk singing and dancing.

Blissful indeed! It was during the display that the intrepid traveller had his first lesson in the intricate foot work involved in Bulgarian traditional dancing. http://www.visitbulgaria.net/en/razgrad/news/yogurt_fair.html



Then, on to Veliko Turnovo, an educational centre and the original capital city of Bulgaria. The old part of the city is situated on three hills, Tsarevets, Trapezitsa and Sveta Gora above the winding Yantra river. We stayed two nights at the pleasant multilingual guest house, Stambolov, (www.hotelstambolov.com/EN/index.php), a

short walk from the impressive remains of the medieval fortress, Tsarevets. The fortress is illuminated nightly by a spectacular light show, best viewed from a nearby cafe. Hint: arrive early to ensure an outside table! (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsarevets>) The castle served as Bulgaria's primary fortress from 1185 to 1393 and housed the royal and the patriarchal palaces. Turnovo is home to a burgeoning migrant population, some from the UK.



We returned to Sofia to attend the final session of the International Folklore Festival in the National Palace of Culture. The following day, 27 August, I departed by bus (1 Lev), for Sofia Airport and, regrettably, for London.

Thanks to Stefka (AEDE Bg), Sasho and Aneta for making the trip to Bulgaria possible and so enjoyable.