



Republic of Bulgaria

Brief Historical Overview

The territory of modern Bulgaria was once part of the Roman empire, falling to the Byzantine half when the empire split in the fourth century AD. Between the fourth and sixth centuries Slavic groups began settling the area. The Bulgars, a Turkic people, followed them in the seventh century and soon began battling the Byzantines for control of the region.

In 870 a separate Bulgarian Orthodox Church was established, affirming Bulgaria's emergence as a separate nation and culture and thus aiding the assimilation of the Bulgars by the Slavic majority they had conquered. But their empire overextended itself, and by 1018 Basil II, the Byzantine emperor, had reconquered the area.

In 1185 two brothers from Turnovo succeeded in throwing off the rule of Constantinople once again. Their empire lasted two hundred years—until the Ottoman empire expanded west, capturing Sofia in 1385 and all of Bulgaria by 1396.

Stirrings of nationalism began in the 18th century and gained strength as the power of the Ottoman empire waned through the 19th century. With Russia's help, Bulgaria won independence in 1878, though Austro-Hungary and Britain intervened to ensure that the new state stayed weak. The break-up of the Turkish estates created a class of small landholders, but an urban elite took control of the government, turning the political system into a grab for raw power.

In the early 20th century two wars, one against the Ottomans and then a second against its former anti-Ottoman allies, left Bulgaria defeated, weakened, and desperate to regain lost territory. After initially declaring neutrality in the first world war, in 1915 Bulgaria allied with the central powers against its neighbors. During the second world war, Bulgaria sided with the Axis, despite the unpopularity of the alliance, once again hoping to gain territory from its neighbors. This was yet another devastating mistake: Soviet troops overran the country and then established a repressive communist government. Bulgaria remained in the Soviet sphere of influence until 1989.

The country held its first democratic elections in 1990 and adopted a new constitution in 1991. In spring 2004, Bulgaria joined NATO. It hopes to enter the European Union by 2007.



Republic of Bulgaria

Major Holidays and Traditions

Major holidays in Bulgaria coincide with the Orthodox Christian calendar. Several of the most interesting traditions and festivities, however, can be traced directly to pre-Christian times. The exchange of ‘martenichki’ and the ‘kukeri’, are rituals related to welcoming the spring. The Day of Culture celebrates the Cyrillic alphabet.



On the 1st of March and the days after people give each other red and white strips or small wool dolls called Pizho and Penda. These are martenitzi, named after an angry old lady – the month of March (Mart in Bulgarian) who changes her mood very rapidly. Her name is Grandma Marta or Baba Marta. The ancient roots of this ritual honor the God Mars, who is the God of the war. Ancient wars usually started in March, and most of the warriors had to leave their homes. The women were so unhappy, and afraid about the lives of their men. That is why they decided to give their husbands red and white tokens, which were either red and white cloth strips for the hand, or small woolen figures of a white girl and a red boy. The colors represent the blood of the warriors, which their wives didn't want spilled, and the white color - the pale faces of their women waiting for the warriors to come back home.

Today we give the **red** and **white** colors to please Baba Marta not to make us cold. In doing so, we hope the spring will come as soon as possible. Once we have those tokens, which we put on our cloths or wrist, we wear them until we see a stork. After seeing this bird, we tie the tokens to a tree, or put them under a stone. Interested to learn more? Go to http://www.geocities.com/Bulgarian_martenitsa/guest_book_archive.html



Republic of Bulgaria

Major Holidays and Traditions



In the rural (farming) villages of Bulgaria, the "**Kukeri**" is an important masked ritual, carried forward from the Thracians. They dance in the last days of the winter, just before nature comes back to life.

This participants in this ritual are male only, dressed in sheepskin garments and wearing scary masks and chanove (copper bells) on their belts, dancing and singing Christmas songs and chants, with the intention to scare away the evil spirits or ghosts which people believed came back to the living ones in winter.

The ritual is a mixture between Christian and pagan traditions and symbols. There is a strong correlation between the event and the peasant life. It is a unique folklore, which can be seen only in Bulgaria. The traditional mask is multi-colored, covered with beads, ribbons and woolen tassels. The dress too, is colorful and florid once again up to the individual imagination. The heavy swaying of the main mummer is meant to represent wheat heavy with grain, and the noisy clanging of the bells is intended to drive away the evil and sickness.

These colorful Spring traditions are also reflected in the multiplicity of national costumes and outfits, displayed here. Each region in Bulgaria, and sometimes each village boasts luxurious dresses, prominent head pieces, and animal-themed male outfits, reflecting the economy or the history of the region. For example, women's dresses from the Turnovo region, the ancient capital of the Bulgaria kingdom, are 'regal' looking, while the rose-picking region of Karlovo features rose baskets as part of the outfit.



Republic of Bulgaria

Major Holidays and Traditions



Bulgarians honor the 24th of May as the day of Day of Slavic Alphabet and Culture. The day may also be called "Methodius Day", "Sts. Cyril & Methodius Day", "Day of Culture and Literacy" or "Alphabet Day". All over the country schools are decorated with flowers and portraits of the brothers St. Cyril and St. Methodius in gratitude for the treasure of letters so suitable for the pronunciation of the Bulgarian language.

The occasion is closely related to the lives and deeds of the two missionary brothers, Sts. Cyril and Methodius, who developed the first Bulgarian alphabet (Glagolic) to accurately reflect the sounds of the Bulgarian language. Introduced at about the year 866 A.D., the new letters were destined to assist in unifying the young Bulgarian nation and thus lay the grounds of Bulgarian literature, education and culture, as celebrated today



Republic of Bulgaria

National Dishes

Bulgarian cuisine shares many similarities with its Balkan neighbors, with lots of fresh vegetables, and is also influenced by Middle Eastern culture with baklava and other syrup-ed deserts. Some traditional dishes include shopska salata, banitza, tarator and ljuteniza. Pictures and recipes follow below.



Shopska salata (Shoppe –style salad)- 3-4 red tomatoes, 1 fresh cucumber, 1 small onion, 1 green pepper, 10-15 olives, olive oil , small amount of feta cheese. Chop onion and pepper, cut tomatoes and cucumber in small pieces, add olives, mix with oil, sprinkle crumbled feta cheese on top.



Banitza - 2 packets of phyllo dough, ½ pound yellow cheese a mixture of cheddar and mozzarella, 1 pound feta cheese, 7 eggs, 1 stick butter, 1/2 cup of soda water, 1 cup yogurt. Mix six of the eggs, the grated butter, the crumbled white cheese, the yellow cheese cut in small pieces, and the yogurt. In a buttered pan, lay a layer of the phyllo dough, spread a layer of the mixture, and continue alternating layers so that the phyllo and the mixture are finished about the same time. Finish with a layer of phyllo dough. Then cut the banitsa into serving pieces. Mix the last egg with the soda water and stir. Pour the mixture over the banitsa and make sure there are no pieces of the phyllo dough left dry.

Bake in a preheated oven at 400F for 40 minutes, or till golden. Enjoy!



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Tarator (cold yoghurt-based soup) - 1 pound yogurt, 1 cup water, 1 or 2 diced cucumbers , a couple of spoonfuls chopped dill, salt, vinegar and oil to taste, optional: a couple of spoonfuls chopped walnuts. Mix all the ingredients and serve cold in a soup dish. Use enough water so the soup is about the consistency of milk. Add a couple ice cubes if it's not cold.



Ljutenica (spicy pepper spread) – 4-5 large red bell peppers, 1 small onion diced, 2 serrano chilies, 4-5 tbsp tomato paste, ¼ cup sunflower oil, 1 tsp salt to taste. Roast peppers, destem and deseed. Destem and deseed chills. Place peppers, onions, chiles, tomato paste, oil and salt in blender and puree until smooth. Serve with good, crusty bread. Makes about 2 cups.



Republic of Bulgaria

Language

The major language is Bulgarian, written in the Cyrillic script. Here are some useful phrases.

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| • Good morning | Dobro utro | Добро утро |
| • Good afternoon | Dobar den | Добър ден |
| • Hello | Zdravei | Здравей |
| • Thank you | Blagodaria | Благодаря |
| • Goodbye | Dovijdane | Довиждане |
| • Excuse me/I'm sorry | Izvinete | Извинете |
| • Yes | Da | Да |
| • No | Ne | Не |



Republic of Bulgaria

Travel Tips

Climate

The climate in Northern Bulgaria is moderate continental, while the climate in Southern Bulgaria is intermediate continental tending to Mediterranean. The climate in the regions with an altitude of 1900-2000 m above sea level is mountainous and along the Black Sea coast it is maritime. The climate of the seaside regions is milder in the winter and cooler in the summer than the climate of the interior of the country. The average annual temperature is 10,5°C, in winter about 0°C. The lowest temperature - 38,3°C - was measured in 1947.

Marked by four distinct seasons, Bulgaria enjoys a generally favorable climate that is one of the country's best features. Although located at the same latitude as southern New England, Bulgaria's climate is noticeably more temperate. Summers are typically hot and dry, but rarely oppressive, with moderate relative humidity. Winters are cold but not bitterly so. In the south and Black Sea coastal regions, Mediterranean influences temper the harsher continental climate of the interior. The country's half-dozen mountain groups also play a significant part in determining regional variances.

Sometimes Yes can mean No

If you travel to Bulgaria you will quickly be confronted with a most confusing custom. In most cultures, you nod your head up and down to say 'yes' and shake it side-to-side to indicate 'no'. But in Bulgaria, it is the opposite. A quick upward movement of the head means 'no' while a rocking of the head from side-to-side means 'yes'.