By far Bulgaria's biggest city, Sofia (So-fia) is one of Europe's most compact and walkable capital cities, although it’s still one of the least known by foreign travellers. It’s usually bypassed by tourists heading to the coast or the ski resorts, but they’re missing out on something special. Sofia has a young and dynamic vibe, like a city waking up after decades of slumber, and is becoming a confident and cosmopolitan European capital. The old east-meets-west feel is still here, with a scattering of onion-domed churches, Ottoman mosques and Red Army monuments topped with air-punching Soviet soldiers, but these days they share the skyline with glitzy shopping malls, five-star hotels and the best bars and clubs the country has to offer.

Although no grand metropolis, Sofia is nevertheless an attractive and cultured city with plenty to keep you busy for several days or more. Museums, art galleries, theatres, fine restaurants, they’re all here. Sofia is also a surprisingly green city, with huge swaths of parkland within the city boundaries and the ski slopes and hiking trails of mighty Mt Vitosha right within the city limits.

The city has certainly developed quickly over recent years and a new affluence is apparent in the trendy international boutiques, upmarket hotels and less savoury casinos and flashy cars with blacked-out windows, but there are also great inequalities. Hard-up pensioners and disabled people begging on the street are, sadly, not an uncommon sight, but most Sofians share the skyline with glitzy shopping malls, five-star hotels and the best bars and clubs the country has to offer.

The city declined during the feudal unrest of the mid-19th century, and it was in Sofia that the celebrated anti-Turkish rebel Vasil Levski was hanged in 1873, after first being interrogated and tortured in the building that later became the Royal Palace. After the liberation of the city from the Turks in early 1878, Sofia officially became the capital of Bulgaria on 4 April 1879. The new roads and railway lines linking Sofia with the rest of Europe and the Balkans soon boosted the city’s fortunes. However, Bulgaria picked the wrong side during WWII so, tragically, much of the city’s heritage was destroyed during bombing raids.

The Red Army ‘liberated’ Sofia in 1944 – the monument (p92) to their arrival still soars near Borisova Gradina – and a People’s Republic was set up after the war. Socialist architects set to work in the following years, rebuilding the heavily damaged city on the Soviet model, complete with high-rise housing blocks in the suburbs and monstrous monuments in the city centre, such as the old Party House which dominates pl Nezavisimost. Some of the more distasteful reminders of the communist era, such as the mausoleum of postwar leader Georgi Dimitrov, have been swept away, while others have been allowed to slowly decay since the fall of the communist government in 1989.

High unemployment and declining living standards blighted the 1990s, but while serious problems still exist, EU membership in 2007 does seem to have brought a new dynamism and sense of stability to the city, which is experiencing something of a building boom. As more international companies set up offices, and more foreign citizens choose to settle here, it’s a trend that looks set to continue.

> **ORIENTATION**

At the heart of Sofia is pl Sveta Nedelya, dominated by the great cathedral of the same name. To the north, bul Maria Luisa runs past the Central Hali Shopping Centre and the Banya Bashi Mosque towards the central train and bus stations. To the south, bul Vitosha, Sofia’s partly pedestrianised main shopping street, heads towards the National Palace of Culture (NDK) and on to Yuzhen Park.

East of pl Sveta Nedelya you’ll come upon pl Nezavisimost (also known as The Largo) and bul Tsar Osloboditel, watched over by the former Royal Palace. Continuing down bul Tsar Osloboditel, you’ll pass pl Narodno Sabranie and the parliament building on the way to the huge park of Borisova Gradina.

See p107 for details on getting to and from the airport.

> **Maps**

The Sofia City Map (1:19,000), published by Domino, and Datamap’s Sofia City Plan (1:20,000), both printed in English, are widely available. The Sofia City Info Guide (see p85) also includes a good tourist map of the city centre. All bookshops listed in the next section sell maps of Sofia and other places in Bulgaria, as do stalls at pl Slaveikov. One of the best sources of maps, especially for hiking, is Odyssea-In (Map p88; 989 0538; www.odyssea-in.com; 1st fl, bul Stambolijski 20-V); also see p86.
**INFORMATION**

**Books**

**Booktrading** (Map p88; ul Graf Ignatiev 15; 8.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-8pm Sun) Stocks a fair selection of English-language novels as well as books on Bulgarian history, cuisine and topics of general interest.

**Helikon** (Map p88; 987 1919; bul Patriarh Evtimii 68; 9.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-8.30pm Sun) Welcoming modern bookshop selling a good range of English-language fiction plus books on Bulgaria in various languages.

**Knigomaniya** (Map p84; 980 5214; 3rd fl, Mall of Sofia, bul Stamboliyski 101) Has a good stock of English-language fiction and nonfiction, plus maps, guidebooks and tourist-oriented books on Bulgaria. It also sells magazines and Bulgarian pop-music CDs.

**Open-Air Bookmarket** (Map p88; pl Slaveykov) Dozens of bookstalls crowd this square daily, selling mostly Bulgarian novels and technical manuals, but plenty of books on Bulgarian history, culture and cuisine are available in foreign languages, as well as some second-hand English novels.

**Cultural Centres**

**American Cultural Center** (Map p84; 937 5306; ul Kozyak 16; 9-2.5pm Tue-Fri)

**British Council** (Map p88; 942 4344; www.britishcouncil.org/bulgaria; ul Krakata 7; 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)

**French Cultural Institute** (Map p88; 937 7922; www.institutfrance.bg; ul Dyakon Ignatii 2; 11am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat)

**Goethe Institute** (Map p88; 939 0100; ul Budapeshta 1; 9am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri)

**Emergency**


**Fire** (91 160)

**Mountain Rescue** (Aleko 967 455; Cherveni Vrah 967 1128)

**Police** (91 160)

**Traffic Police** (966 5060)

**Internet Access**

**BTC Centre** (Map p88; ul General Gurov; per hr 0.80 lv; 24hr) Offers several computers in a modern, office-style environment.

**Bulgaria-Korea Internet Plaza** (Map p88; NDK Underpass; per hr 0.30 lv, per hr thereafter 1.60 lv; 9am-8pm Mon-Fri) Probably the cheapest internet centre in Sofia, with a dozen or so computers.

**Site Internet Cafe** (Map p88; 986 0896; bul Vitosha 45; per hr 3 lv; 24hr) One of the more central and more reliable internet centres, with a nonsmoking room. Internet cafés can take advantage of the all-night rate (from 10.30pm to 8.30am) of 10 lv, which includes a soft drink and a coffee.

**Internet Resources**

**www.easysofia.com** Information about hotels, restaurants, clubs, bars and more.

**www.programata.bg** Comprehensive eating, drinking and clubbing information.

**www.sofia.bg** Official municipal website, with business information.

**www.sofiacityguide.com** Website of the invaluable Sofia City Info Guide (right).

**www.sofia-life.com** Bar and restaurant reviews, plus details of some shops and attractions.

**Media**

**Programata** (www.programata.bg; free) A useful, widely available weekly listings magazine, with details of cinemas, restaurants and clubs. It’s only in Bulgarian, but the website is in English.

**Sofia City Info Guide** (free) An excellent source of information, published monthly. It includes basic practical information and reviews of hotels, restaurants, clubs and shops. It’s available at hotel reception desks and some travel agencies.

**Sofia Echo** (www.sofiaecho.com; 2.40 lv) An English-language newspaper published each Friday and available at some central newsstands. Mainly aimed at the expat business community, it also has restaurant and entertainment reviews useful for visitors.

**Sofia In Your Pocket** (free) Another handy quarterly magazine, with eating, sleeping and sightseeing reviews and practical information on the city.

**Sofia – The Insider’s Guide** (free) A pleasingly opinionated quarterly publication featuring background information and advice for visitors, as well as restaurant and entertainment reviews. Available at some hotels and travel agencies.

**Medical Services**

**Apteka Sveta Nedelya** (Map p88; 987 5089; pl Sveta Nedelya 5; 24hr) Pharmacy.

**Dento** (Map p88; 958 4841; www.dento-bg.com; ul Atanasov 11) English-, French- and Italian-speaking dentists.

**International Medical Centre** (Map p84; 944 9326; ul Gogol 28) The IMC has English- and French-speaking doctors who will make house calls at any time. It also deals with paediatrics and dental care.

**Pirogov Hospital** (Map p84; 915 4411; bul Gen Totleben 21) Sofia’s main public hospital for emergencies.

**Poliklinika Torax** (Map p84; 91 285; www.torax.bg; bul Stamboliyski 57) A competent, privately run clinic with English-speaking staff.

**Money**

The Foreign Exchange Office has numerous outlets on bul Vitosha, bul Maria Luisa and bul Stamboliyski.