

The best MARCO POLO Insider Tips

Our top 15 Insider Tips



INSIDER TIP Jesus in a space ship

How bizarre! Two icons in the 17th-century St Theodor church in the village of Dobarsko show Jesus Christ taking off in a rocket. For many years, locals and scientists have been seeking an explanation for this unusual image → p. 38

INSIDER TIP History in stone and wood

The houses look as if they've been made for a film set. And in fact several films have actually been shot in the museum villages of Kovachevitsa and Leshten in the western Rhodopes → p. 63

INSIDER TIP Orpheus and Eurydice

Legend has it that Orpheus, the most famous singer in antiquity, descended from the Trigradsko Zhdrelo Gorge into the underworld in search of his beloved Eurydice. He set off on his dangerous journey from the Devil's Throat cave in the Rhodopes → p. 64

INSIDER TIP Fortified overview

Enjoying a unique location and view, the Asenova Krepost fortress protected the road through the Rhodopes during the Middle Ages → p. 62

INSIDER TIP Art treasures in the labyrinth

In the Magura dripstone cave, Bronze Age artists depicted wild animals and fertility symbols, using bat droppings for paint → p. 55

INSIDER TIP Stylish dining in a traditional setting

Dine in one of the finest houses in Veliko Tarnovo, the Hadji Nikoli Tavern, the former home of a wealthy 19th-century merchant → p. 68

INSIDER TIP A kaleidoscope of flashing lights

Bulgaria's history is symbolically portrayed in Veliko Tarnovo through a powerful son et lumière show. A treat for the senses → p. 68

INSIDER TIP Picturesque museum villages

Time has stood still in Bozhentsi. Wells, houses and artisans' shops look now just as they did 150 years ago → p. 70

INSIDER TIP Al fresco weddings

You may catch sight of a Christian Orthodox wedding ceremony in Lovers' Alley in the grounds of the former royal summer residence (photo below) in Balchik → p. 92

INSIDER TIP Rocky coastline

Thracian tombs, breathtaking cliff landscapes, an abandoned cave town – in antiquity people lived in what is now the Jailata Nature Reserve near Kamen Bryag → p. 93

INSIDER TIP Monastery walk

Sveta Troitsa near Veliko Tarnovo is situated on a rocky slope in the Jantra Gorge and is only accessible on foot → p. 103

INSIDER TIP Casks that pack a punch

The wine cellar for Kordopulov House in Melnik, formerly owned by a wine merchant, was built directly into the cliffs (photo left) → p. 42

INSIDER TIP A romantic seaside setting

The stunningly beautiful Irakli beach, with its sparkling, crystal clear water, forms part of a nature reserve → p. 99

INSIDER TIP From the sea straight into the pot

The Dalboka restaurant near Cape Kaliakra serves every conceivable type of mussel. The shellfish are farmed in the offshore beds opposite → p. 93

INSIDER TIP Dancing on glowing coals

This ancient, mystical rite is performed on St Constantine and St Elena's Day. How the dancers never burn their feet remains a mystery → p. 107



BEST OF ...

GREAT PLACES FOR FREE

Discover new places and save money

FOR FREE

● **Natural spectacle by Lake Durankulak**

Save yourself a visit to the zoo and go to Lake *Durankulak*, an important over-wintering area for migratory birds, and in particular thousands of red-breasted geese. Also ferruginous ducks, marsh harriers, cormorants and white pelicans – and not only in winter (photo) → p. 92

● **Barbecue overlooking the Black Sea**

You have to bring your own meat with you, but the fire and the view of the Black Sea are free. A natural gas fire has been burning on the edge of *Kamen Bryag* since the end of the 1950s; locals and visitors love to come and picnic here → p. 93

● **Acoustic delights in the cathedral**

On Sundays and religious holidays go and listen to the choir during the church service in the *Sŭt Alexander Nevski Cathedral in Sofia*. It's one of the finest 20th-century buildings in the Balkans and you don't have to pay a penny to see it → p. 49

● **Archaeological treasures in the subway**

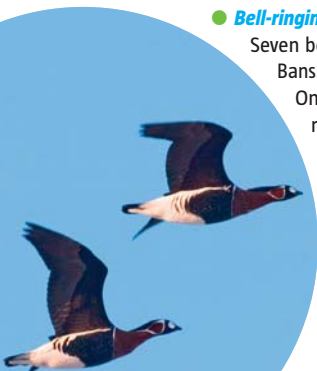
You can inspect and admire ancient artefacts in a museum – or for free in the *Serdika* pedestrian subway in Sofia. View also the remains of the *Serdika* fortress, which was built in the 2nd century by the Roman emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus → p. 44

● **Bell-ringing concert in Bansko**

Seven bells ring out from the *Sveta Troitsa* church tower in Bansko. Stand outside and hear the concert free of charge. On Saturdays, Sundays and religious holidays, the bell ringers play tunes only ever heard in Bansko → p. 36

● **International Jazz Festival**

The International Jazz Festival is held in Bansko every year from 8 to 13 August. You can listen to outstanding musicians and meet fans from all over the world. And the best thing about it is that admission to the concerts on the central square is free → p. 107



● ● ● Dots in guidebook refer to 'Best of ...' tips

ONLY IN BULGARIA

Unique experiences

● **The sounds of Pirin**

Melodies, passionate singers, traditional instruments – in the *Mehana Vodenitsata* in Bansko you can listen to members of *Banski Starcheta*, a male voice choir, performing music from the Pirin Mountains and watch locals dance the *horo* → p. 37

● **Cheverme – lamb kebab**

To make a *cheverme*, the lamb roast has to be turned above the fire for at least seven hours. Sample the dish at traditional festivals and also in certain restaurants such as *Chevermeta* in Nessebar where the *cheverme* is spit roasted in the dining room before the customers' very own eyes → p. 84

● **Sozopol – it could be by the Mediterranean**

Soak up the Mediterranean atmosphere in *Sozopol*, a picturesque little town on the Black Sea coast, and enjoy a walk through its labyrinth of delightful narrow streets. Fig trees flourish in the inner courtyards, there's a whiff of dried fish and the sea is visible from all over the town (photo) → p. 85

● **Rila monastery can boast some splendid architecture**

From the outside it's a medieval fortress, from the inside it's richly decorated with attractive architectural features and colourful ornamentation. If you want to find out about Bulgarian culture and architecture, do not miss *Rila Monastery*, an important Orthodox monastery and Unesco World Heritage Site → p. 41

● **The high peaks of Bulgaria**

Rocky mountains, green slopes, blue lakes – the quintessential Bulgarian countryside in the *Rila Mountains* is for everyone to enjoy. The quickest way to get there is via Borovec and then on the chairlift to the *Jastrebec* mountain hut. Admire the view of *Musala*, the highest peak on the Balkan peninsula → p. 40

● **The source of perfume**

Give your senses a real treat: *rose oil* is Bulgaria's top export. It's extracted in *Rose Valley* where the air is heavy with fragrance when the flowers bloom and the petals are harvested. You can also buy rose oil as a souvenir throughout the country, in Sofia, from the *TSUM* department store → p. 50



ONLY IN

THE PERFECT ROUTE

BIG CITY AMBIENCE IN BULGARIA'S CAPITAL

The capital **1 Sofia** → p. 44 is the starting point for a perfect day's trip through Bulgaria. Culture and nightlife, history and modernity – Sofia has it all (photo left). And do make sure you allow yourself time for a stop in one of the countless street cafés, so you can strike up a conversation with the locals. The Sofians meet up at all times of the day over an espresso. They are friendly and happy to talk.

MOUNTAINS AND A WORLD-FAMOUS MONASTERY

Highway no. 1 heading south goes past the Vitosha Mountains through the narrow Vladaja Gorge. As soon as you turn off towards **2 Rila Monastery** → p. 41, if not before, you'll find yourself in another world: the air is crisp, the mountain backdrop impressive, the villages simple. This world-famous monastery is the starting point for tours in the Rila Mountains. Then return to Highway no. 1 and continue along the River Struma, a paradise for anglers and white-water enthusiasts, until Highway no. 19 turns off to the east through the Rila and Pirin Mountains to **3 Bansko** → p. 35. This city is not only the starting point for mountain hikes and a popular winter sport centre, but is also well-known for its many taverns serving excellent Bulgarian food.

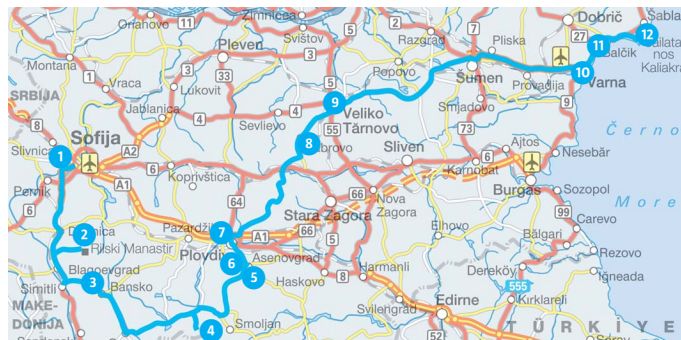
ON THE WAY TO THE UNDERWORLD

The route then heads eastwards through the Rhodopes. According to legend, Orpheus descended via a cave in the gorge **4 Trigradsko Zhdrelo** → p. 64 into the underworld as he searched for his beloved wife. You'll come across tobacco farmers, bagpipe players and cave climbers in the Rhodopes. Take the road to Pamporovo and then Highway no. 86 heading north past **5 Bachkovo Monastery** → p. 62 (photo right). The ruined castle **6 Asenova Krepost** → p. 62 towers up over the road and then from here cast a final look back towards the Rhodopes.

BULGARIA WITH ALL ITS TRADITIONS

Not far to the north you come to **7 Plovdiv** → p. 56. Stroll through the narrow streets of Bulgaria's finest Old Town and enjoy a typical

Journey from west to east and experience the many and varied sides of Bulgaria, plus a detour to the mouth of the underworld



Latin atmosphere. Thracians, Romans, Ottomans and Bulgars have all left their traces in the architecture. From here Highway no. 56 runs through Rose Valley to the Shipka Pass. Situated to the north of the pass are the fascinating museum villages of **8 Etara** and **Bozhentsi** → p. 70, with their traditional houses and artisans' streets, and here you can admire the old arts and crafts as well as take part in a handicraft course.

OLD CAPITAL AND BATHING BEACHES

The road to the Black Sea coast goes via the old capital city of **9 Veliko Tarnovo** → p. 66 which is a must-see for all those with an interest in history and church frescoes. The houses hang from the steep cliffs like swallows' nests. In the Black Sea city of **10 Varna** → p. 85 the beach is only a stone's throw from the city centre, so a pair of swimming trunks or a bikini might come in useful. The atmosphere in the city is easy-going, the climate mild and in the summer there's a gentle, cooling breeze.

WILD COAST AND GENTLE BEACHES

The further north follow Highway no. 9, the bleaker the landscape becomes. Between Varna and **11 Balchik** → p. 92 there are countless beaches, and the steep coast at **12 Cape Kaliakra** and **Kamen Bryag** → p. 93 is very impressive with its high cliffs and rare flora and fauna. The stretch between Kamen Bryag and Tyulenovo (8km/5mi) is ideally suited for a walking tour and with a little bit of luck you'll be able to watch dolphins at play.



975 km (600 mi). Driving time: 17 hours.
Recommended length of trip: one week
Detailed map of the route on the back cover, in the road atlas and the pull-out map