



RIDE WORLD WIDE

Bulgaria - Balkan Mountains 2012

Riding Trip Information Sheet

Bulgaria is a small country, located in the eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula with a population of around 8 million. Once inhabited by Thracians, Romans, Slavs and Ottomans, the country of Orpheus and famous for the Bulgarian oil-bearing rose, Bulgaria has a fascinating history. It has also been dealt a generous hand by nature - the countryside is wild and unspoilt with forests, rivers, mineral springs and majestic mountains. In the spring the alpine meadows are full of wild flowers and in autumn the changing leaves add colour to the dramatic scenery.

These rides take place in the Balkan Mountains about an hour and a half drive north east of Sofia, Bulgaria's capital. The area is a little visited part of Bulgaria and you will ride through century-old beech forests which cover the slopes of Mt Vezhen (7250 ft) and Mt Sveshti Plaz (6230 ft). This beautiful landscape is part of the biosphere reserves of Boatin and Tsarichinat, UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programs. Although predominantly forests of beech and fir, there are also stands of spruce and white fir and higher up are the open mountain pastures. There is plenty of wildlife in the area though generally quite shy and difficult to see. Wild boar, red deer, wolves, pine martens, otters and wild cats - and even the occasional brown bear - have been sighted. There are also 60 species of birds recorded here - blue throats, black wood peckers and golden eagles will excite the avid twitcher. There are two 7 night itineraries offered during spring, summer and autumn months - the progressive 'Balkan Mountain Ride' and the one base 'Elen Ride'. Anyone considering a visit to Bulgaria should remember that its borders have only recently opened up after years of communism. It is still very much a developing country in terms of service and infrastructure and as a result, delays and changes to even the most carefully planned itinerary are always possible. Although your local guides will do their utmost to make sure your trip runs smoothly, if you plan to join a ride you must travel with an open mind and with a willingness to accept local standards and local expectations - which will not match those you are used to at home!



The Horses The horses used for these rides are mostly Arab crosses, Anglo Arabs and Hungarian bred Gidran (which is similar to a thoroughbred). They range from around 14.2hh to about 16.2hh and are keen and quite spirited but sensible to handle. There are about 30 horses at the stables with about 14 used for the trail rides and others used for eventing / competition and also breeding. English general purpose and endurance saddles are used, with western saddles available on request. The horses are ridden in snaffle bits.

Riding The 7 night trips include 5 full days riding and, on the progressive ride, another half day. There are generally between 4 and 5 hours in the saddle, with breaks to rest and for lunch. When moving accommodation at night on the circuit outings, luggage is transported for you by back up vehicle. Groups are usually limited to a maximum of 8 riding guests. An English speaking guide rides with you accompanied by a groom. There is a weight limit of 100 kg / 15st on the rides but please advise in advance if you are over 90kg.

Pace The rides are at a moderate pace overall, with routes taking you through forest and up and down mountain tracks, although there are usually good opportunities for trots and canters each day where the terrain allows (you will be asked not to overtake the guide). Most of the riding is on wide dirt roads - there is a little riding on tar roads on some days in the vicinity of the villages you pass through, but roads are generally very quiet with little motorised traffic.

Riding Experience To participate in these rides you should be a confident intermediate rider, comfortable in the saddle at all paces as the horses are forward going and the terrain is varied. The minimum requirement for the progressive ride is that you are in control of a well schooled horse and secure in the saddle at a walk, trot and canter and are used to riding in open country and over different types of terrain. The single base Elen Ride is a bit more flexible so suitable for slightly less experienced riders. You should also be reasonably riding fit to take part, particularly for the Balkan Mountain Ride and we recommend you ride regularly at home before you go to accustom yourself to the hours in the saddle.

Terrain The area you ride through is unspoilt and little touched by tourism. Much of the riding is through forest and up and down mountains and there are one or two places where riders need to dismount to walk over rough ground - a good chance to stretch your legs! However overall the area is excellent for riding, with plenty of space, varied scenery and many wonderful views. There is also much to see of cultural interest with many local people living in conditions that have changed little for hundreds of years and with horses still widely used for ploughing fields, pulling carts and also for transporting logs from the forest.



Accommodation Accommodation on the rides is very varied. Three nights of the progressive 'Balkan Mountain Ride' and all nights of the one base 'Elen Ride' are spent in Elen Lodge, a newly built hunting lodge on the outskirts of the town of Etropole. The lodge is very comfortable (almost overdone!) and has 4 suites and 4 double rooms, each with their own private bathroom. There is also a large drawing room / dining room area with an open fire. Rooms have televisions / heating etc and waiters are on hand at breakfast and dinner to look after you. Other nights on the progressive ride are spent in mountain guesthouses / retreats and small hotels. Some are very simple, bathrooms are often shared and rooms are dormitory style / beds can be uncomfortable! Bathrooms in Bulgaria have showers rather than bath tubs and generally the whole room is the shower (no curtain / separate compartment - so don't leave your clothes on the floor!) Some loos at one or two hotels are old fashioned European style (ie hole in the floor). One night of the 'Balkan Mountain Ride' is spent in Etropole Monastery. Here a few rooms have recently been renovated for guests but with 3 beds to each room and rooms are either for ladies or gentleman (couples will be asked to sleep apart on this night). If you would like a single room then this usually possible for most nights, though not at the monastery, and there will be a supplement payable.



Meals Food in rural Bulgaria is generally full of flavour and the rides are accompanied by a cook, Rocco, who looks after you throughout with great panache. You will have the chance to sample some traditional dishes although the choice can be limited by what vegetables, etc are in season. Breakfast is eaten at your guesthouse or inn and there is usually muesli, bread, butter and jam, cheese and ham spreads and sometimes either bacon and eggs, or locally made pastries (filo pastry stuffed with cheese is a favourite) with tea or coffee to drink. Tea is often green or herbal so it is worth taking your own black tea if you prefer this, and instant coffee is a good idea too if you prefer coffee. Lunch usually a very simple picnic out riding, carried in the saddle bags (ham & cheese sandwiches, a piece of fruit and some biscuits). Dinner, which is eaten at about 7pm at your guesthouse or hotel, often starts with a 'welcome' drink of 'rakia' - a grape spirit rather like grappa. The first course generally consists of salads - tomatoes and cucumbers with parsley and other herbs, perhaps stuffed vine leaves or bean and herb salad. Bread, salami and some kind of dip (tsatsiki or similar) are also usually on the table. There is often another starter, chicken fritters or a meatball soup, then a main course which may be barbecued chicken, the Bulgarian 'mousaka' or a beef stew. Local wines, beer, mineral water and some soft drinks are supplied with dinner and also at lunch when meeting the back up vehicle. When picnics are carried in saddle bags then mineral water is taken but soft drinks and alcohol are not usually available. Vegetarians can of course be catered for, but please let us know in advance by filling in the dietary requirements on the booking form.



Weather Most rides are run from set dates between April and September when the weather in the area is best. In spring and early summer the ground is scattered with wild flowers; in August and September the hay fields are harvested and the countryside is busy with horse drawn carts; later in September the forests are full of colour with the changing leaves. Average daytime temperatures between April and September are roughly as follows - April 11°C; May 16°C; June 19°C; July 21°C; August 21°C; September 18°C - though it may be about 5 degrees hotter at midday and about 5 degrees colder at nightfall. Rain is possible at any time so you need to be prepared for this.

What to bring We will send you a list of things to bring when you make your booking.

Dates 2012

Balkan Mountain Ride

26th May to 2nd June

16th to 23rd June*

14th to 21st July**

11th to 18th August**

Elen Ride

On request

Rates 2012

Please note that due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, ride rates are now quoted in euros. The sterling price will be the equivalent sterling rate using the euro/sterling exchange rate in force when you book/pay.

2012 Prices - Prices are seasonal

High Season = ** (July and August)

Mid Season = * (June)

Balkan Mountain Ride: Low season 820 euros; Mid season 860 euros; High season 890 euros

Elen Ride: Low season 825 euros; Mid season 865 euros; High season 895 euros

Rates assumes a minimum of 4 riders but can be confirmed for 2 or 3 people at a supplement.

Rates INCLUDE 7 nights shared accommodation, transfers from / to Sofia airport with sightseeing en-route, all riding, guiding and equipment, meals (from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 8), wine, beer and soft drinks with dinner.

Rates EXCLUDE international flights / travel to Bulgaria, any visa fees, personal medical / travel insurance (which you must have), extra drinks / bar bill, lunch day 1 and day 8, personal extras, telephone calls etc, and any tips you may wish to leave.

Accommodation is generally in twin rooms and single rooms cannot always be guaranteed. If you are travelling alone and prefer a single room let us know and we will do our best to book one - there is a charge of 25 euros per night for single accommodation.

Travel arrangements The meeting point for the rides is Sofia airport. British Airways fly daily direct from London Heathrow to Sofia with fares from around £150 - 250 per person return including tax. KLM offer services between UK regional airports and Sofia via Amsterdam. Easyjet fly from London Gatwick and Wizz fly from London Luton to Sofia. We can book British Airways flights and would be very happy to advise further on, and to book flights for you (our ATOL number for flight bookings is 6213). Please ask if you would like a quote.

Example Itinerary Balkan Mountain Ride Please note that the following is only an example of what is planned and your guide may change the day by day programme at his discretion if local conditions, the weather etc. require.

Day 1 - Your own arrangements for a flight to Sofia (eg British Airways arriving at 13.40). You will be met on arrival at Sofia airport and driven about 1 ½ hours to the small town of Etropole and to the comfortable Elen Hunting Lodge. If there is time you may have the opportunity to go to the stables nearby to meet the horses and have a short introductory ride. Dinner and the night at Elen Hunting Lodge. (D)



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Day 2 - Breakfast and transfer to the stables to meet the horses. Today's ride takes you up through forests of beech. Stop for a picnic lunch and then in the afternoon ride on up along forest tracks to Kokalskoto Guest House, a tiny ski resort at an altitude of around 4000ft. Rooms are quite small but bathrooms are en-suite. Dinner and night at Kokalskoto. (B,L,D)

Day 3 - Breakfast and a 2 hour ride through the forest, stopping for a picnic. In the afternoon ride on for another two hours or so, over a high ridge and then through ancient beech forest to a small mountain lodge set high (about 4600 ft) on a ridge in the Zlatishki prohod region with commanding views to the valley below. Rooms are dormitory in style (school beds!) and bathrooms are shared and along the corridor. Dinner and the night. (B,L,D)



Day 4 - Set off riding, firstly following the same route back to the ridge, then over open grassland with juniper bushes through the beautiful 'Stara Planina' area of the Balkan Mountains. You will stop for a picnic lunch, carried in the saddle bags, and weather permitting you will stop on one of the high open pastures. Continue riding, descending through the forest to reach Elen Hunting Lodge where your first night was spent. Dinner and the night at Elen Hunting Lodge. (B,L,D)

Day 5 - Breakfast and set off riding through the mountains, stopping on high open pasture, weather permitting, for a picnic. The afternoon ride is a further hour and a half to the village of Boikovetz where the night is spent in a newly built but soviet style hotel. Rooms have their own bathrooms. Dinner and the night in Boikovetz. (B,L,D)



Day 6 - Breakfast and ride for about two and a half hours - you have descended to an area of more habitation and you ride past farmhouses of stone and slate and through a patchwork of small fields and forest. Stop for a picnic lunch with views back towards the high ridges which you crossed yesterday. In the afternoon ride on for another 2 hours to the Monastery of Etropole - there is some road work this afternoon, first through the outskirts of Etropole and then up the hill to the monastery. The night will be spent in the monastery (ladies and gentlemen have to sleep in separate rooms - there are 3 beds in each room) but each room has its own bathroom and they are clean and comfortable. The monastery is one of the oldest in Bulgaria, built in 1152, and was a refuge for one of Bulgaria's great heroes (Vasil Levski) who initiated the rebellion against the Ottoman Empire. There is a mineral water spring close by which comes straight out of the hillside and after a few hundred yards on cascades over the rocks - a wonderful sight. Dinner and night at Etropole Monastery. (B,L,D)

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Day 7 - Breakfast and set off on a 2 hour ride from Etropole Monastery exploring the environs before meeting the back up vehicle for a tasty traditional Bulgarian barbecue. In the afternoon ride a further 2 hours back to the stables. Transfer to the Elen Hunting Lodge for a farewell dinner and the night. (B,L,D)

Day 8 - Breakfast and transfer about an hour and a half to Sofia airport in time for your flight home (eg British Airways, departing Sofia at 14.40). (B)



Example Itinerary Elen Ride - Please note that the following is only an example of what is planned. The itinerary is a little flexible, days may be changed around and your guide may change the programme in his discretion if local conditions, the weather etc. require.

Day 1 - Your own arrangements for a flight to Sofia (eg British Airways arriving at 13.40). You will be met on arrival at Sofia airport and driven about 1 ½ hours to the small town of Etropole and to the comfortable Elen Hunting Lodge. There may be time for a short afternoon to adjust tack and allocate horses. Dinner and the night at Elen Hunting Lodge. (D)

Day 2 - Breakfast and transfer to the stables to meet the horses. Today's ride is to the Jamna village. There will be chances for trots and canters and you stop for a picnic lunch with beautiful views over the Balkan Mountains. In the afternoon ride back to the stable. There will be time to relax and explore the area before dinner and night at Elen Lodge. (B,L,D)

Day 3 - Breakfast and a full day ride to visit to the Monastery of Etropole - there is some road work up the hill to the monastery. The monastery is one of the oldest in Bulgaria, built in 1152, and was a refuge for one of Bulgaria's great heroes (Vasil Levski) who initiated the rebellion against the ottoman Empire. There is a mineral water spring close by which comes straight out of the hillside and after a few hundred yards on cascades over the rocks - a wonderful sight. Lunch next to the monastery and in the afternoon ride back to Elen Lodge for dinner and the night. (B,L,D)

Day 4 - Breakfast and rest from riding today. Set off by car for some sightseeing, perhaps to the town of Koprivshitzta. This is a lovely town with traditional architecture and a number of museums. Lunch in a local restaurant and then time to explore the town on foot with a local guide. In the late afternoon drive back to Elen Lodge for dinner and the night. (B,L,D)

Day 5 - A full day ride up mountain tracks to the area Goronaka, a small mountain village. Stop here for picnic lunch. In the afternoon you ride back through the forests, often encountering shepherds with their flocks of sheep and woodmen with their strings of pack ponies. Dinner and night at Elen Lodge. (B,L,D)

Day 6 - Another day riding - you may have a morning ride from the stables, returning to the lodge for lunch and then ride or relax in the afternoon, or perhaps another full day ride packing sandwiches in the saddle bags. Dinner and night at Elen Lodge. (B,L,D)

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Day 7 - Breakfast and a final days riding in the Balkan Mountains. There are some lovely beech forests, home to deer and wild boar, and you will ride through these to reach the open pastures above the tree line. A picnic lunch before riding back to the stables. Say goodbye to the horses and a short drive back to Elen lodge for a farewell dinner and the night. (B,L,D)

Day 8 - Breakfast and transfer about an hour and a half to Sofia airport in time for your flight home (eg British Airways, departing Sofia at 14.40). (B)

General visa and health information (NB this is a brief outline - further information will be sent to you if you make a confirmed booking)

Visas If you hold a full British Passport and are visiting Bulgaria for a holiday only and staying less than a month you do not need to arrange a visa in advance.

Health No inoculations are legally required for Bulgaria but Polio, Tetanus, Typhoid and Hepatitis A are recommended.

(update 27/09/11)

