Welcome to Sofia
Brief history of the city

You are a guest of an ancient city, whose history has begun some 9000 years ago. Numerous Neolithic villages have been discovered in the area, while a chalcolithic settlement has been recently discovered in the very centre of modern Sofia. Through the centuries, many people have inhabited it and added to its rich and diverse history. Many times the settlement has flourished and competed with Rome and Constantinople, Venice and Dubrovnik. Then flames and disasters have devastated everything, and again and again the city has risen from the ruins.

Sofia lies in the heart of the Balkan peninsula and has always been a crossing point of main roads from Western Europe to the Bosphorus and from Danube to the Aegean Sea. Vitosha mountain dominates in the cityscape and numerous springs with mineral water have attracted people over the centuries. Sofia had several names in the past – Serdica, Triadica, Sredec. The Thracian tribe Serdi gave their name of the city, first known to the historians. In the beginning of the 2nd century AD the Roman emperor Marc Ulpius Trajanus turned the settlement into a city of strategic importance and gave it the name Ulpia Serdica.
The city flourished especially much by emperor Constantine the Great (306-337). After he left Rome, Constantine initially intended to announce Serdica his capital. He used to say “Serdica mea Roma est” (“Serdica is my Rome”).

After adoption of Christianity, many church buildings began to spring like mushrooms. Sofia became famous for its religiosity. That’s why the famous Serdica oecumenical council took place in the city in 343 with participation of 170 bishops from all parts of the Roman Empire. It is supposed that the council was held in the basilica, whose ruins were excavated near the Southern park of the present city.

In the 4th-7th centuries AD the city has been demolished several times by invaders. It flourished again for the last time during its Roman period by emperor Justinian (527-565).

After the Hun invasion of 441, the Byzantines rebuilt the city. They called it Triadica. In 809 the army of khan Krum put the end of the first Byzantine period of Sofia and the city was included within the Bulgarian state. The Slavs gave it the name Sredec. It played a key role in the First Bulgarian State. Then the Byzantines re-took Sredec and dominated there in 11th-12th centuries. At the end of the 12th century, the Bulgarians returned and Sredec became a major trading centre of the Second Bulgarian State.

The Ottoman Turks captured Sofia in 1382. In the beginning of the 16th century they made it administrative centre of all European territories of the Ottoman Empire. In the middle of the 18th century the city began to decline during the feudal unrest.

After the Liberation (1878), with the establishment of the Third Bulgarian State in 1879, Sofia once again became the capital of Bulgaria. Since then the city is the most important political, economic and cultural centre of the country. Rapidly the city's image changed from Oriental to European. The motto of Sofia on its coat of arms says “It grows but doesn’t age”.

The former royal palace
(today National Art Gallery and National Ethnographic Museum)
Today many streets, buildings, parks, and even whole neighbourhoods have still preserved the architectural style from the turn of the 19th-20th centuries. In spite of the heavy demolitions and irreparable damages from the British-American air-raids during the Second World War, there are still many archaeological sites in Sofia, which display the city's diverse history - the castle gates and towers of Serdica, public buildings and streets thousands of years old. Large part of the ancient city is underneath important modern buildings.

There are numerous museums and galleries worth to be visited in the city, among them the National Museum of History, National Archaeological Museum, National Ethnographic Museum, National Art Gallery, etc.

Since ancient times the city was famous for the abundance of cold and thermal mineral water springs in and around it. The water is still available today and is praised for its numerous qualities. Springs may be found in the city centre, as well as in the neighbourhoods.

Some geographical data about Sofia

Latitude: 42°42’ N
Longitude: 23°23’ E
Average altitude: 550 m a.s.l.
Climate: moderate continental
Average temperature in winter: -2.3°C
Average temperature in summer: 20.1°C
Average annual temperature: 10.2°C
Average annual precipitation: 630 mm
Population: 1.4 million inhabitants
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (established 1869)

Sofia University ‘St. Kliment Ohridski’ (established 1888)
Sveta Nedelya square

National Palace of Culture

Orlov most (Eagle’s bridge) – former gate of the city (late 19th century)
Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd.
Fortissimo Fest Sofia 2012

Sofia – old architecture
National Art Gallery - interior
National Theatre ‘Ivan Vazov’ - interior
Vitosha mountain

Sofia lies at the foot of the Vitosha mountain. The Austrian geologist and traveller Ferdinand von Hochstaetter wrote in 1869 that the city and the mountain are as inseparable as Naples and Vesuvius or Cape town and Table mountain. It takes only about half an hour drive to get from the city centre to the mountain. Vitosha is the cradle (1895) of organised tourism in Bulgaria. On 27 October 1934, a big part of Vitosha Mt. was announced national park - the first one in Bulgaria and the Balkan peninsula. Since 2000 it is nature park.

The park’s territory has been changed several times and today it is almost 27,000 ha. The afforested area covers 60% of the territory.

There are over 1800 invertebrate species, 10 amphibians and 12 reptiles. Over 200 bird species inhabit the territory and more than 160 from them nest there. Mammals are about 50 species.

The flora of Vitosha Mt. is various. About 1500 higher plants grow there, which is the half of Bulgarian flora. Relict, protected and endemic species are of particular interest. The natural dendroflora of Vitosha is represented by 150 tree and shrub species, which is nearly 40% of the Bulgarian dendroflora.

There are two reserves in nature park Vitosha Mt. First of them – “Bistrishko branishte” (1062 ha) – was announced together with the park with the aim to preserve the primary Norway spruce ecosystems, as well as species and ecosystems of the sub-Alpine belt. In 1977 the reserve was included in UNESCO’s world network of biosphere reserves. Forests cover about 50% of the reserve territory. Their average age is 100-120 years. The other reserve – “Torfeno branishte” (783 ha) – preserves peat areas in the high-mountain belt. The depth of peat cover is from 60 cm to 2 m and the age – from 1000 to 1500 years.

The longest cave in Bulgaria – Duhlata (17 km) – is also situated in Vitosha Mt. It is considered one of the most beautiful caves in Bulgaria and is announced natural landmark.