



**The Golden Treasure Trail, Bulgaria.
8 days, 7 nights. 6 days riding.**

Introduction

Bulgaria is a member of the European Community but its standard of living is different from the UK. You will see oxen ploughing fields and crops being moved by horse and cart. Simultaneously you'll see the odd Maserati, plenty of i-phones and almost every house has a satellite dish attached. It's a curious blend of ancient and modern. Riding through the countryside you are raised above hedge-height so you have a good view into the surrounding countryside and a glimpse of life that is little-changed from centuries ago.

The ride begins with a couple of days spent on 'ground work' getting to know your horse and taking short rides around the ranch and Makotzevo village. Once bonded, we set off on a 5 day forest trail with the opportunity to use all paces. The horses are well trained and enjoy their work. Accommodation is in comfy farmhouses and small hotels; all meals are included.



Riding in the hills near Makotzevo

Getting there

There are flights to Sophia, the capital of Bulgaria, from many UK airports. Call us and we can advise. Venture Co is ATOL bonded and able to deal with all the world's airlines. The airport in Sophia is about one hour's drive away from the ranch.

Bulgaria today

Bulgaria's survival as an independent democratic country is little short of miraculous, sandwiched as it is between countries that have had such troubled times. Bulgaria traces its national history back to before the Roman Empire, to the kingdom of Thrace. The Greeks and Romans were resident in Bulgaria and more recently it was part of the Ottoman Empire of Turkey.

More recently, in December 1949 three brothers made an amazing discovery near the remote Bulgarian village with a tongue-twister name, Panagyurishte. What they found was a golden horde of regal objects from the ancient kingdom of Thrace, dating from around 400 BC. It is thought that the cultured kingdom of Thrace buried the treasure to keep it out of the hands of invading, barbaric Celts; the truth may never be known. Our

ride takes you from the stable near Sophia, along peaceful forest trails to the pretty little town of Panagyurishte, the cradle of Renaissance Bulgaria.



Setting off on the trail

THE RIDE

Day 1. Sunday.

Fly from the UK to Sophia. Met upon arrival and transferred to the ranch (45 mins) just outside Makotzevo village.

Originally the village was home to cattle herders who kept their stock in the surrounding mountains for most of the year. One aspect of local life that you will notice riding through Bulgaria is that even the smallest village has a church. Christianity here is very different from the version we have in the UK: this is the Eastern Orthodox Church which has more in common with Russian Christianity than it does with the Anglican Church. Churches here are incredibly ornate and there are no pews inside! The congregation is expected to stand for the entire service.

There is a short walk around the village to orientate yourself and to help you get your bearings. Adjourn to the stable where you'll meet your horse for the

first time and we'll begin some ground work basics (2 hrs in the arena).

Return to the guesthouse for a ride briefing and dinner.

Day 2. Monday

Ground-work and ranch ride.

If you've never experienced working with a horse without sitting on it, then you're in for a treat! You can get to know so much about a horse (and the horse can get to know you) before you swing your leg over; it can be an extremely rewarding experience. It's all about tuning in to one another and building a partnership based on mutual respect.

After lunch we'll ride out from the ranch into the surrounding countryside. We'll ride along quiet country lanes, cross field headlands and ford a couple of streams to reach an old lime pit, deep in the forest. Return to the ranch in time to try your hand at preparing home-made traditional Bulgarian yogurt and enjoy a performance of folklore dancing with local villagers.

3 hrs ground work; 3 hrs riding.

Day 3. Tuesday

Ride to Belopaski Monastery.

After breakfast we set off across neighbouring fields and along forest trails that link small villages and remote communities together. We'll stop for lunch in Bajlovo tavern and sample rural Bulgarian food at its finest: locally produced, traditionally prepared and served fresh – perfect!



Monastery and guard dog (awake for a change!)

There is a guided walk around this beautiful Bulgarian village and in the afternoon ride on to the monastery at Belopaski. Bulgaria has a wealth of monasteries: in the UK monasteries have all but ceased to exist, but here they are numerous. Some are famous, such as the one at Rila, but this one is

small and discretely tucked away. Each one is dedicated to a particular saint, and I must admit, many of these saints are obscure! Who were saints Kosma, St Ivan or St Damyan? But that's not really the point; these monasteries open their doors to riders, much as they did a thousand years ago when they were first built, and it's a peaceful experience to visit one.

The trail today is circular and brings us back to Makotzevo ranch via a spring from where the Baylovskata River emerges. We reach the ranch in time for supper.

6 hrs riding.

Day 4. Wednesday

Ride to Smolsko.

Today we set off in earnest following a challenging trail that leads to the village of Smolsko: rough forest paths lead up to higher ground and eventually to Alpine meadows on the higher parts of Mount Voynyag (950 m). We'll cross several rivers and some tricky, uneven ground where all the ground work you did on day one will come to the fore. Some of the route is too rough to ride and we'll need to dismount and lead for about 25 to 30 mins. By mid-day we'll reach a stunning meadow called Shindarska Polyana where we'll have our picnic. The afternoon is quite short and it won't be long before we pass the vines and gateway of a traditional farmhouse, complete with gorgeous veranda, perfect for a sundowner!

Overnight traditional village house; D, B&B.

6 hrs riding

Day 5. Thursday 1

Ride to Panagyurishte.

Return to forest trails and ascend into the Ihtiman Forest. During the 1870's a guerrilla war raged between the Turks (Ottoman Empire) who had invaded Bulgaria and local residents who resented their presence. These remote mountain villages have a long heritage of freedom fighters who led the resistance. We continue on to the village of Panagyurishte.

Overnight farmhouse;

7 hrs riding.

Day 6. Friday

Ride on to Koprivstica

The day begins with a visit to the town's museum to see the ancient horde of gold. The quality of workmanship is simply amazing



The treasure at Panagyurishte

The museum is housed in “The house of Princess Raina” – who wasn’t actually a princess at all! During the “April Uprising” against the Turkish Ottoman Empire in 1876 she was the village school teacher and was called upon to embroider the guerilla’s flag with the slogan, “Liberty or death”. The early efforts of the resistance were unsuccessful and Raina went into exile in Russia. Eventually the resistance was successful, Bulgaria was re-established as an independent country in 1878 and Raina returned to her post as village school teacher where she was highly respected for the remainder of her life.



Saddles at the mid-day picnic stop.

After an early lunch we ride on to the market town of Koprivstica, which is like riding into a living museum! It’s famous for its authentic Bulgarian architecture and all the houses have been sympathetically restored. The town hosts a national music festival once every five years with a main focus of keeping traditional music and folk dance alive. As you ride through the meadows and forests today you’ll notice frequent mounds which resemble the round barrows we see in England. These are Thracian burial mounds and it was inside one of these that the Panagyurishte golden treasure was found. We overnight in a small family run hotel and it’s here that we say goodbye to the horses.

Dinner and overnight in hotel. 6 hrs riding.

Day 7. Saturday Explore Koprivstica

You simply can’t come to Koprivstica without taking time out to explore the passageways and quiet “time warp” streets of this charming place. There are also a few good little shops to pick up some souvenirs and last-minute gifts. How can you resist a town that has more than 40 fountains! Also found here is a bridge over the River Topolnitsa that is known as “First Shot”: the spot where the first shot was fired in the April Uprising of 1878. Return by car to the ranch at Makotzevo.

Dinner and overnight in ranch house.

Day 8. Sunday Return to UK

We will drive you back to the airport after breakfast for the flight back to the UK.



Water stop: for horses and riders (horses don’t use the water-dish!)

Accommodation and meals - summary

- Ranch house – 2 nights
- Family-run hotel – 2 nights
- Guesthouse – 1 night

All meals from supper on day 1 to breakfast day 8.

At a glance

The grade of the ride: [7/10]



novice intermediate
advanced

Accommodation grading: [8/10]



camping...lodges & hotels...glamping...loads of
character

Rider fitness required: [7/10]



Cultural immersion: [9/10]



just like home surprises ... lots new
completely different

More about "At a glance"

We grade this ride particularly highly for the cultural interaction you can expect. Leaving all other aspects aside, the relationship you build with your horse and the head guide is such that you know you are in a completely different culture: the language, meals, horsemanship and customs are completely different from Britain. The "cultural immersion" is a strong motivation to join this ride.

Ride rating: we rate this riding experience 7 out of 10 because the horses are well-mannered and forward-going. They are fit and love "making progress". The tack is specifically designed for this type of horse on this type of trip. Some canters are several minutes long and a half-a-dozen horses cantering together is exhilarating for competent riders.

Accommodation: we grade this at 8 out of 10, which may seem incongruous because the hotels and farmhouses don't have a "star rating" in the conventional sense. However, they have bags of character and style.

Meals are served around a large farmhouse table and are very social events. The level of pollution in this area (noise pollution, light pollution and more environmental pollution) is very low, so do take the opportunity to stroll onto the verandah in the evening and watch the stars.

Food is all locally sourced and veggies are locally grown.

The horses

The horses are bred on the ranch and the main bloodline is the USA Paint; this has been crossed with local Bulgarian horses called "Shagya" which can trace their ancestry back to the Arab. They are calm and well-mannered and go equally well under Western or English tack.

The tack

Snaffle and Pelham bits; western saddles. English saddles are also available.

Rider's involvement

Riders are expected to be responsible for the horse – saddling, unsaddling, grooming and care during the breaks; the guides are always around to assist and advise.

The Ride Guide and safety

An experienced guide accompanies the group. Our guides are chosen for their interpersonal and riding skills; they are proficient First Aiders. We also employ local wranglers, not so much to show us the way as to add authenticity to the trek. The insight from local people makes the mountain communities come to life. All local guides are English-speaking and qualified in their area of expertise.

Suggested flight schedule

The flights we recommend leave London (or regional airports) in the morning and arrive in Sophia in the afternoon. Please speak to us about alternative flight routes. The return flight leaves in the afternoon and arrives home 3 hrs later. There are daily flights. All flights booked through Venture Co are financially protected via Venture Co's ATOL licence number 5306.

Included in the 'land only' price

The ride as detailed with horse, tack and groom.
Services of ride leader who is English-speaking.
Meals: full board from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 8.
Airport transfers in Bulgaria (return)
Road transport is in a private vehicle.

Not included

International flights
Visa for Bulgaria (Brits don't need one)
Personal travel insurance
Alcoholic drinks and soft drinks
Tips
[There is no local payment]

Travel insurance

Please speak to Campbell Irvine Direct:
http://www.campbellirvinedirect.com/ventureco_home.htm

What's the weather going to be like?

The best time to visit is spring or autumn. At this time of year Bulgaria is snow-free and not as baking hot as it can get in the summer months. Mountain weather is generally warm and sunny during the day although night-time temperatures can drop to single figures.

Sophia Climate Chart (Monthly Averages)												
Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
High Temperature (C)	2	4	10	16	21	24	27	26	22	17	9	4
Low Temperature (C)	-4	-3	1	5	10	14	16	15	11	8	3	-2
Precipitation (mm)	36	28	41	61	87	73	68	64	41	65	48	49

Date and Price:

Please see the website for current dates and prices.

Please note there are monthly departures and all Venture Co's rides can be tailor-made to your exact requirements for groups of 4 or more riders.

Included in the price

Comprehensive information in "The Field Manual".
Fully supported 8-day ride
All baggage carriage
All food and accommodation.
All transport in Bulgaria
Ride guide
Support from resident in-country stable owner

Not included

Vaccinations (nothing is compulsory)
Insurance: Not included, but mandatory.

Payment Schedule.

When you decide to join this trek a deposit payment of £100 is due; the Booking Form is available in the page footer www.ventureco-worldwide.com

Eight weeks before you set off the balance is due to be paid to Venture Co.

The Field Manual.

A detailed guide will be mailed to each participant. This booklet is packed full of relevant, up-to-date information including clothing lists, vaccination advice, money matters, suggestions about the level of fitness and emergency procedures that are in place.



Financial Security

VentureCo Worldwide Ltd holds an Air Travel Organisers Licence granted by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), our ATOL number is 5306. All Ventures and expeditions organised by VentureCo are ATOL protected by the CAA which means that your financial security is assured when you join us.

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