

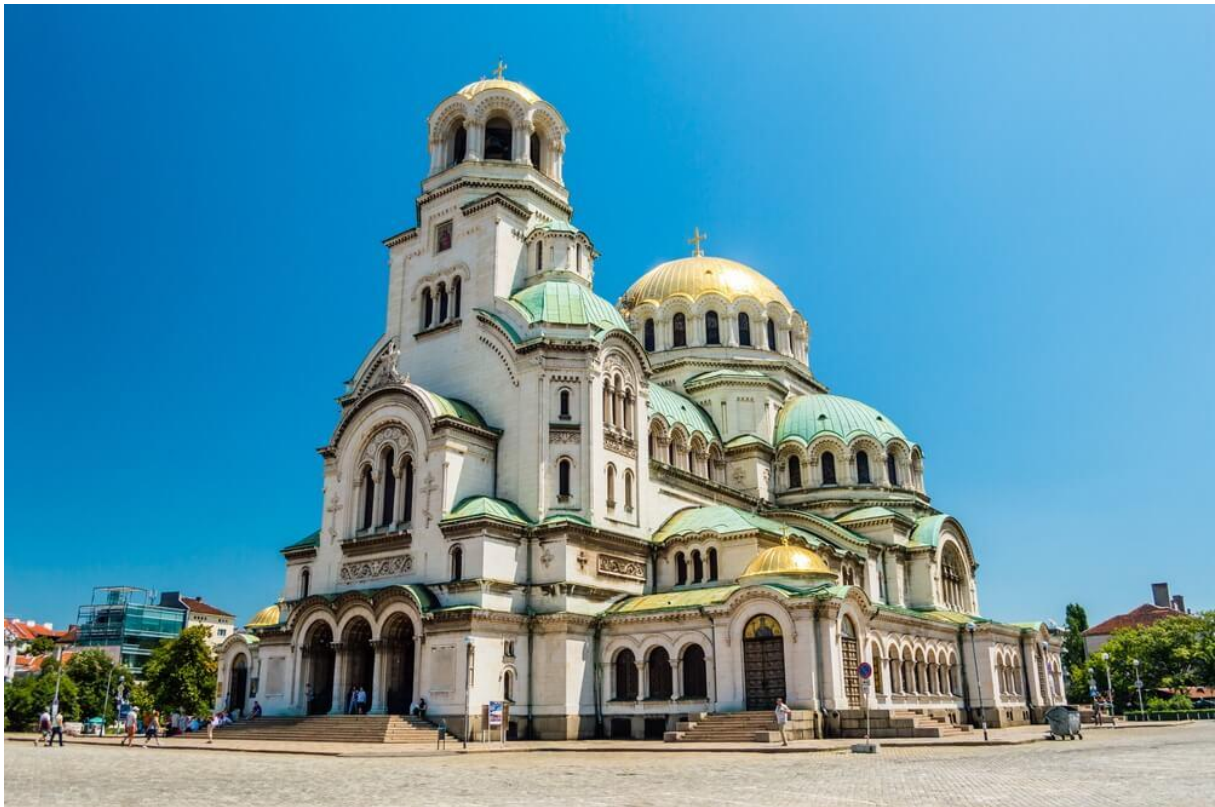
A five-day hiking adventure in Bulgaria

In a previous blog we talked about some of the advantages of preparing for a walking tour as little as possible. It was our walking tour through [Istria](#).

The hike with the highest we-see-well character was a five-day, self-invented route in central Bulgaria. In many ways. Was this trip successful in this way?

Why Bulgaria and why so little preparation?

There was a period in our walking history when the so-called Eastern Bloc countries had a magical attraction for us. In "[Why hiking in the Czech Republic is special!](#)" we have already told you a lot about that magic. In time, Poland, Montenegro, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia and Romania were added and then we have to wait for: Bulgaria! We couldn't really imagine it. We read about the Pirin National Park. Or the Rila Mountains. Or Rhodopi. And the classic superlatives about all the beauty in these areas flowed towards us..... But it didn't make us hot or cold. With Bulgaria, we also had few associations of our own other than those that went towards crime and corruption. Someone mentioned yogurt. To quickly adjust the level of prejudice downwards. It couldn't be that bad, could it? To think of den Doolaard (1901-1994). The great Balkan writer. However, he mainly wrote about Macedonia and [Montenegro](#)..... But Bulgaria? We saw on the internet a train connection between Sofia and the Black Sea (Burgas) and that train ran more or less parallel to the Balkan Mountains. Get off somewhere halfway? And then your blind spot of stubbornness and stupidity wins out over a well-thought-out choice and book your flight to Sofia. With an extremely vague plan in your backpack. And in your head.



Alexander Nevsky Cathedral Sofia

Sofia.

And so you land in Sofia after two hours of flying with Bulgaria air from Schiphol. From the airport take the bus to the main bus station (6 km) and from here the bus to the main train station. Immediately after boarding the last bus there was "the control". Two men with a rather worn jacket and a dingy white band over it with the text "Inspector". They had found that we had passed the cards horizontally through the slot instead of vertically. *"5 euro fine per person, bitte"*. The rest of the bus looked embarrassed and embarrassed but said nothing. If we wanted to object: the police station was an hour away, we could get in the car with them. There were "extra costs" involved. And the commissioner was *"not very well-liked"*. Something like that, we understood. Anyway, paid the fine and on to the Sofia CS. According to the timetable, the train to Burgas would leave at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. At the station, we have learned to never complain again when the NS is a little late. Or something. We joined a group of people waiting on the platform and after repeated *"Burgas? Burgas?"* and *"si, si, yes"* nothing could go wrong. Or so we thought. We soon noticed that the group of people waiting ran away as if on undetectable commands, stayed away for a while and came back again. *"Все още няма влак?"*, after which they wandered around and left again. At 6 o'clock we jumped a hole in the air when a locomotive with a freight car arrived. After which the group came back. And disappeared again. As well as the locomotive and wagon. At 7 o'clock a new passenger car, at half past eight another and a quarter of an hour later the diesel locomotive. After 5 hours of waiting for Burgas, four hours to go! By train, this time. Ever sat on a train with four chickens in a basket next to you and already quite tired for hours?



Beklemeto pass Bulgaria 1520m

The trail

From Karlovo the next morning by bus to Troyan (65 km), a reference to the Roman emperor Trajan. Cross the Balkan mountains via, among other things, the Beklemeto pass (1520m). Looking for a map and a hotel. The only map to be found, the КАРТОГРАФИЯ ЕООД map, scale 1:60,000 was neither bad nor good. There are now better ones. The route we mapped out on this map would always offer a view of the Balkan Mountains, the Stara Planina, the Old Mountains to the south. And it worked! Along the way the necessary villages were visited and the stage towns of Šhipkovo, Ribarica, Teteven, Pravec and Etropole. Via old connecting roads, sandy paths, grass paths, along rivers and if not otherwise along the paved larger roads. No spectacular climbs. Lovers of small-scale farming, an autarkic agricultural culture and improvisational talent can get their money's worth here. I like to interrupt a walk to be able to watch the farmer grafting his plum trees for a long time (Rakija, 75%!!). Here the description "time has stood still" does not mean a quasi-romantic designation of a Western travel agency, but perfectly typifies a way of life that we hardly know anymore. But the reality is also that many young people have moved away. Hundreds of thousands of Bulgarians live and work in Spain. It is mainly old people that you meet along the way.

"Nature is beautiful here, but we need people" and *"It used to be very lively, you had a bakery, clothing stores, there were weddings"*, it is often heard. And to read.



Meeting along the way

Nature

For the more spectacular nature you have to go south, into the mountains. Up to 800 meters altitude, most of the mountain range consists of forest with deciduous trees, such as hornbeam, oak, and beech. There are brown bears, wild goats, wild boars, deer, wolves and foxes. There are also numerous natural caves and waterfalls. The views are *breath-taking*... From our stage places there are several marked routes, mostly two-day, with an overnight stay in a mountain hut. As already mentioned, we had set our sights on the region at the foot of the mountains.

The Glozhene Monastery The Glozhene Monastery is an Eastern Orthodox monastery located on the slopes of Stara Planina near the village of Glozhene and the river Cherni Vit. The monastery was built in the 13th century (1224). It is almost 800 years old and houses some centuries-old frescoes and icons.

The monastery church was built after the founding of the monastery in the 14th century, but was destroyed by another earthquake in 1913, along with its frescoes. The modern church was built in 1951 on the site of the old one.

From the river, after some searching in the village, you can find a path to the top. An hour later you are in the monastery garden and enjoy a fantastic view!

An asphalt road down takes you to Malak Izvor.

And then there you are. No hotel, no B&B, nothing. Until a somewhat older gentleman walked in.



Glozhene Monastery Stara Planina

Improvise

"Търсиш ли пътя?" (Looking for directions?). We did. And a hotel too. "което е на 35 километра". But the man was also a taxi, he pointed to his Lada Niva. It could easily accommodate 7 people. "If you say so" and so "we got in". The train journey with four chickens in the basket next to you was a paradise compared to this 35-kilometer trip. But after an hour and a half we found ourselves in a deserted and deserted square in an unknown city. хотел!, the taxi said and turned left three times. (Later we understood that his action was strictly forbidden, but if you parked behind the hotel instead of at the front door there was no rooster crowing at it.....). We felt it: were almost back in Sofia.

Was it successful?

For a country like Bulgaria, the lack of preparation was a nuisance. The disadvantages outweighed the advantages. Despite the high level of adventure, the fascinating introduction to a way of life that we no longer know and the visit to the monastery, we have left too much behind.

General route tips

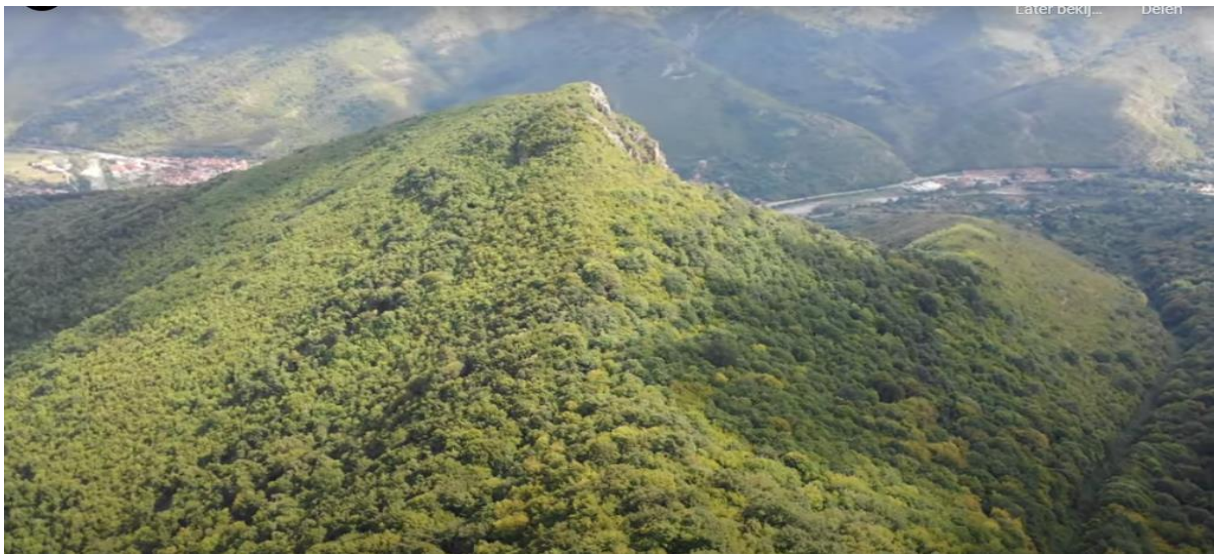
1. On our website you can see a [nice video](#) of the Glozhene monastery.
2. Wild camping is officially not allowed. But yes, so much is officially not allowed and many local authorities seem to allow it.
3. Bulgarian cuisine has many Turkish and Greek influences.
4. Gypsies are widely regarded as second-class citizens in Bulgaria. 5% of the population is Roma (Tsigani).
5. A good hiking map seems to us: Hiking map 4 Stara Planina mountains, ed. Domino (9789546512581)



Descent to Shipkovo



En route



view from Glozhene Monastery



Roma om horse