BIKING AND HIKING
BEYOND THE IRON GATE

BULGARIA, SERBIA, ROMANIA

TRIP DOSSIER
**FOCUS:** Moderate cycling in hilly terrain  
**DURATION:** 13 days  
**PERIOD:** May – June, September – October  
**TRIP HIGHLIGHTS:**

- Sofia – the Bulgarian capital  
- Vratchanski Balkan Nature Park  
- Western Balkan Mountains and Belogradchik rocks  
- EuroVelo13 – Former Iron Curtain Trail  
- Iron Gate region and the Djerdap National Park  
- EuroVelo6 – Danube Cycling Trail  
- Banat – the Southwestern Carpathian Mountains  
- Timisoara – the Secessionist “Little Vienna”  
- Three countries, three cultures, one region, one river

**DIFFICULTY: MODERATE (60 km a day)/ PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE REQUIRED**

**TRIP SUMMARY:**

Starting from Sofia (the Bulgarian capital) we reveal the Western Balkan Mountains – one of the less populated and wild corners Bulgaria – one of the less populated and wild countries in Europe. Here the strong ridge of the Balkan Mountains turns its directions into north – south, with peaks still rising above 2000 m. Here is one of the nominees for the New7Wonders of Nature campaign, Belogradchik Rocks – a group of bizarre sandstone and limestone formations, reaching up to 150m in height on our way. These rock formations, which vary in colour from red through yellow to grey, are a product of erosion. Before reaching Belogradchik we visit Tchirprovtsi – a lovely mountain town at the foot of the great Balkan Range, still preserving its unique carpet weaving traditions. The Vratchanski Balkan Nature Park is offers lovely sceneries, rocky valleys, gorges and lots of caves.

The Iron Gate, located approximately in the middle of the Danube river course, with its length of 100 km carved through the Carpathian Mountains, is the largest river gorge in Europe. It offers spectacular landscapes, unspoilt nature and abundant evidences of a long a turbulent history. Djerdap National Park and Portile de Fier Nature Park on the Serbian and Romanian banks of the Danube will delight any visitor with their outstanding and abundant flora and fauna, important archeological sites from the Neolithic and Roman period, impressive medieval fortresses. Here we experience the hospitality on both banks of the Danube, and immerse ourselves in the unique atmosphere, colored by the region’s landscape, nature, culture, music and local cuisine.
The Southwestern Carpathian Mountains in Romania are still wild and undiscovered. Enormous rivers form deep gorges; everything is covered with green carpets of beech forests and from time to time – the endemic Banat Pine. Here lots of ethnic minorities – Germans, Hungarians, Serbians, Czechs, Bulgarians meet and live together... The actual poorness and the former socialist industrial sceneries, together with the wild nature and small colorful in different ethnic groups villages, give an outstanding flavor to this region. The tour ends at Timisoara, the "Little Vienna" of Romania.

**Cycling grade:** moderate/ with some strenuous sections; 4 – 6 hours  
**Hiking grade:** easy to moderate; 2 – 4 hours  
**Type of tour:** Hilly asphalt cycling in mountainous regions

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**DAY BY DAY ITINERARY:**

**Day 1: Welcome to Bulgaria!**

Arrival in Sofia, Bulgaria and direct transfer to the hotel in the centre of the Bulgarian capital. Sofia walking city tour – we see the main attractions – the roman ruins, the thermal springs in the centre of the capital, the National Theatre Ivan Vazov, the Alexander Nevski Cathedral, the Sofia University, the Mosque and the Round church St. George from the 4-th century. Afterwards we have dinner in a traditional Bulgarian restaurant.

**Transfers:** 0.30 hours  
**Night stop:** Sofia  
**Accommodation:** Hotel  
**Included meals:** dinner

**Day 2: Vratchanski Balkan Nature Park**

The Vratchanski Balkan Nature Park with its high up to 400 meters limestone cliffs is a great place for sports. After a drive through the river Iskar gorge – the only river crossing the Balkan range, we start from the village of Ochin Dol (630 m). We follow forestry roads hiking trails and ascend to the highest part of the park, where we climb the highest peak Beglichka mogila (1482). Afterwards we descent with the bikes to the village of Zgorigrad, beautifully set among the unique and highest in the country climbing rocks. Possibility to see the Ledenika cave.

**Hiking time:** 3 hours, (ascent: 850m)  
**Cycling time:** 6-7 hours, 25 km (descent: 900m)  
**Transfers:** 2.00 hours  
**Night stop:** Zgorigrad village  
**Accommodation:** family-run guesthouse  
**Included meals:** breakfast and dinner
Day 3: **Kopilovtsi and Chiprovtsi – the Western Balkan**

In the morning we can undertake a short walk in the town of Vratsa and afterward head to the west, transferred by bus. Our hiking and biking today start at the village of Kopilovtsi, where we discover a cascade of several small but very beautiful waterfalls of the so called Kopren Ecotrail. Then after a short ascent we reach the valley of Ogosta, where Chiprivtsi is situated. We descent in the valley and have the opportunity the visit the remnants of a medieval monastery with its old stone cross and interesting story before we arrive in the small Balkan town of Chiprovtsi, famous for its old carpet/weaving traditions.

**Hiking time:** 2 hours, (ascent: 300m, descent: 250m)
**Cycling time:** 4-5 hours, 25km (ascent: 150m; descent: 400m)
**Transfers:** 1.00 hour
**Night stop:** Chiprovtsi town
**Accommodation:** family-run guesthouse
**Included meals:** breakfast and dinner

Day 4: **To the Belogradchik Rocks**

Today’s adventure includes cycling from the town of Chiprovtsi, passing by the Chiprovski monastery, following the secondary and very scenic asphalt roads, we reach small village one after another and finally, after around 55 km of cycling we reach the extremely beautiful part of the mountains – the Belogradchik Rocks and reach the town on foot. We can enjoy the wonders of Mother Nature – huge red stone pillars in various shapes watering our imagination feel in a fairy-tale.

**Hiking time:** 2 hours, (ascent: 100m)
**Cycling time:** 3 hours, 45 km (ascent: 250m; descent: 500m)
**Transfers:** 1.00 hours
**Night stop:** Belogradchik town
**Accommodation:** family-run hotel
**Included meals:** breakfast and dinner
**Day 5: Magura Cave and the entry in Serbia**

Today we cross the border to Serbia, but before that we visit the Magura Cave with its huge halls and plenty of cave formations. It is quite famous for its prehistoric paintings. It is also a place where we can taste the local production of the wine cellar Magura – also in the cave, having the perfect temperature for the wine making processes. Then we continue along tiny asphalt roads to the state border between Bulgaria and Serbia. We say “Dovischdane” to Bulgaria. Around 10 km afterwards, we arrive in the town of Zajchar, situated on the river Timok. Here we have our first contact to the Serbian culture, cuisine and town’s atmosphere. Visit of Felix Romuliana – fortified palace of Emperor Caius Valerius Galerius Maximianus, in the late 3rd and early 4th centuries – UNESCO.

**Cycling time:** 5-6 hours, 65 km (ascent: 250m; descent: 620m)
**Transfers:** 0.00 hours
**Night stop:** Zajchar town
**Accommodation:** Hotel
**Included meals:** breakfast and dinner

**Day 6: Iron Curtain Trail – EvroVelo 13**

Today we enjoy the soft cycling at the very border between Serbia and Bulgaria, along the hilly scenery above the Timok valley. We pass by remote villages with socialist monuments. We come so close to the borderline, that we can see some of the watchtowers that guarded strictly the border in the past times. The whole stretch today is along asphalt roads. Before we reach the town of Negotin, we visit the ethnographic wine villages of Rajac and Roglevo, all consisting of local wine cellars. Some of the houses and their gardens are real pieces of art, putting the villages on the waiting list of UNESCO world cultural heritage.
**Day 7: Vratna Rock Bridges and Donji Milanovac**

After a short drive to the Vratna Monastery and hike to the Vratna Rock Bridges (2 huge, up to 70 m high natural bridges, we start our cycling in the wild area of the Djerdap Mountains. We may see wild animals on the first couple of kilometers on our way. After some 20 km on a secondary road, we reach the road between Negotin and Donji Milanovac and after a short ascent we start a beautiful and long descent until we reach the waters of the Danube dam. We cross one of the tributaries of the Danube, where we hit the European Danube Cycling Trail – EvroVelo6. After 6 kilometers we reach the resort town of Donji Milanovac, where we stay for two nights.

**Hiking time:** 2 hours (+/- 200m)
**Cycling time:** 4-5 hours, 60 km (ascent: 300 m; descent: 400 m)
**Transfers:** 0.45 hours
**Night stop:** Donji Milanovac
**Accommodation:** Family-run guesthouse
**Included meals:** breakfast and dinner

**Day 8: Discover the beauty of Lower Danube**

Today is a day for relaxing. However an optional tour can be made – to the archeological complex Lepenski Vir (20 km away from the town) – a huge excavation of prehistoric dwellings at the age of about 8000 years, directly at the river bank. Today the dinner is free.

**Transfers:** 0.00 hours
**Night stop:** Donji Milanovac
**Accommodation:** Family-run guesthouse
**Included meals:** breakfast
Day 9: Iron Gate and EvroVelo6

Today is a great day for cycling. We follow the Danube cycling route and pass by the narrowest places of the Iron Gate river gorge – down to 160 m wide is the river here and 90 m deep. Here the scenery is magnificent! Here is also the famous Trayan Table. Short hike to beautiful viewpoints. After some 50 km we reach the town of Kladovo, where we take on the bus and head to the border – 9 km away. After crossing we have an hour drive to the region of the Domogled-Valea Cernei National park.

Hiking time: 2 hours (ascent: 300m; descent: 300m)
Cycling time: 5 hours (ascent: 300m; descent: 300m)
Transfers: 1.00 hours
Night stop: Baile Herculane
Accommodation: Hotel
Included meals: breakfast and dinner

Day 10: Domogled-Valea Cernei NP – Sasca Montana

We start today with a 2 hours hike in the National park Domogled-Valea Cernei, where we penetrate into a deep gorge with limestone walls, covered by the endemic species Black Banat Pine (Pinus Nigra Banatica), which is to be seen only here. After the hike we take a drive to our today’s cycling region – the southwestern part of Carpathian Mountains called Muntii Almajului. We start just after we leave the main road and hit the small secondary roads. We follow the river Nera and after the village of Şopotu Now we start an ascent into the forest to the panoramic pastures of Carbunari – in all direction all one can see is green forests. Afterwards we enjoy a wonderful descent along the asphalt road to the resort village of Sasca Monatana.

Hiking time: 3 hours (ascent: 400m; descent: 400m)
Cycling time: 4-5 hours, 45 km (ascent: 400 m; descent: 450 m)
Transfers: 1.15 hours
Night stop: Sasca Montana
Accommodation: Family-run guesthouse
Included meals: breakfast and dinner
Day 11: **Cheile Nerei – Beuşniţa NP**

We wake up today at the border of the National park Cheile Nerei – Beuşniţa and after a short hike from the village of Sasca Romana to the Nera Gorge and the Turkish tunnels, built for military purposes beside the river Nera, we continue the tour on the bikes, along a right tributary of Nera deep into the national park. In about 2 hours we arrive at the emerald-green lake Ochiul Bei, and further to the Beusinta waterfalls. This area resembles a cave in the open – lots of small waterfalls, lakes and cave formations, due to the type of soft rocks, where usually rivers flow underground, but not here... After that we bike backwards and have a drive in the afternoon to the village of Valiug and Gozna lake, where we overnight in a very nice Gasthof, in a small German community.

**Cycling time:** 4-5 hours, 45 km (ascent: 350 m; descent: 300 m)  
**Transfers:** 2.15 hours  
**Night stop:** Valiug  
**Accommodation:** Family-run guesthouse  
**Included meals:** breakfast and dinner

Day 12: **Semenic mountains plateau – long descent**

Short drive from Valiug to Semenic mountains plateau at 1400 m altitude. Here we can see the high Carpathian Chain to the east. Passing by the Semenic ski resort we descend to Garana village, which is an ethnic German village and then down to the long Trei Ape Lake. We continue our descent down to Slatina Timis, where we hit the main road to Timisoara. In the afternoon – drive to the biggest historical and culture centre in the region of Banat – Timisoara. If there is time left, we can make a walk in the centre.

**Cycling time:** 3 hours, 30 km (ascent: 50 m; descent: 1150 m)  
**Transfers:** 2.30 hours  
**Night stop:** Timisoara  
**Accommodation:** Hotel  
**Included meals:** breakfast and dinner
Day 13: **Timisoara city tour and “Drum bun”**

In many respects, it is the abundance of Secessionist architecture that has provided Timisoara with its rather appropriate moniker, "Little Vienna" of Romania. Secessionism developed in two distinct architectural phases here. Sinuous lines and floral decorations characterized the first phase which lasted until 1908. The second phase, which continued until the First World War, saw simpler, larger buildings with geometrical designs. Secessionism in Romania was an important link between the Byzantine style and later modernist architecture. We visit the Victory Square with the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan Cathedral and the Memorial Museum of the 1989 Revolution, the Union Square, The Roman Catholic Cathedral, the Baroque Palace and the Freedom Square. After that we transfer to the airport and have our flight back.

**Transfers:** 0.45 hours  
**Included meals:** breakfast

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**Price per person:**

- **1190 EUR** (valid for a group of 6-7 people)  
- **1070 EUR** (valid for a group of 8-9 people)  
- **970 EUR** (valid for a group of 10-12 people)  
- **930 EUR** (valid for a group of 13-14 people)

*All indicated prices are per person accommodated in a double room*  
Single supplement – **165 Euro**

**Prices Include:**
- Accommodation in family-run guesthouses and hotels;  
- 12 breakfasts and 11 dinners;  
- Professional English-speaking cycling and mountain guides;  
- Transfers and drives according to itinerary  
- Bikes and Helmets rental, other special equipment  
- Local Folklore presentations in Bulgaria, Serbia and Romania

**Prices Exclude:**
- Flight and taxes;  
- Failing meals  
- Alcoholic and soft drinks;  
- Insurance;  
- Museum entry fees
**ESSENTIAL INFO**

**ACCOMMODATION**

5 NIGHTS IN FAMILY-RUN GUESTHOUSES  
2 NIGHTS IN FAMILY-RUN HOTELS  
4 NIGHTS IN 3 STAR HOTELS  
1 NIGHT IN 2 STAR HOTELS  

DOUBLE OR TWIN ROOMS WITH ENSUITE WC/SHOWER.

**TRANSPORT**

DEPENDING ON GROUP SIZE – EITHER A MINI VAN OR MINI BUS WITH A TRAILER FOR THE BIKES

**MEALS** 12 BREAKFASTS AND 11 DINNERS;

**STAFF** ENGLISH-SPEAKING GUIDE AND DRIVER IS INCLUDED.

**AGE RESTRICTION** THIS TRIP IS SUITABLE FOR ADULTS WITH EXPERIENCE IN LONG CYCLING ON ASPHALT AND FORESTRY ROADS

**GROUP SIZE** 6 PERSONS AND ABOVE

**OPERATOR REMARKS** THIS TOUR CAN BE EASILY TAILORED DEPENDING ON YOUR PREFERENCES. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE A LONGER OR SHORTER TRIP THIS CAN BE EASILY ARRANGED. IF YOUR GROUP HAS A TOUR LEADER – WE CAN OFFER A FREE PLACE.