



# VILLAGELLA

UNESCO HERITAGE SITES  
(within easy reach)

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Gela  
Rhodope Mountains

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Bulgaria has nine sites included in the UNESCO heritage list, of which four can be easily accessed from the villa, namely:

### **Boyana Church in the suburbs of the capital city of Sofia (1979) (three-and-a-half-hour drive)**

The Boyana Church is a two-storey medieval Bulgarian Orthodox, whose East wing was originally constructed in the late 10th or early 11th c AD, then the central wing was added in the 13th century during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, the whole building being finished with a further expansion to the west in the middle of the 19th century. The church owes its world fame mainly to its fresco dating back to 1259 and to their realism pre-dating by decades if not centuries the European Renaissance. These frescos form a second layer over the paintings from earlier centuries and represent one of the most complete and well-preserved monuments of East European mediaeval art. A total of 89 scenes with 240 human images are depicted on the walls of the church. The name of the painter is recently discovered during restoration work - the inscription reads: "zograph Vassilii from the village Subonosha, Sersko and his apprentice Dimitar". By this inscription the 13th-century 'Boyana master' identified himself in a stealth way, given that the Christian Orthodox religion forbids such acts. The portraits of the patrons of the church — Sebastocrator Kaloyan and his wife Desislava, as well as those of Bulgarian Tsar Konstantin Tikh and Tsaritzta Irina, are thought to be among the most impressive and life-like frescoes in the church.

### **Rila Monastery in Mountain Rila (1983) (three-hour drive)**

The Monastery of Saint Ivan of Rila, named after its founder, the hermit Ivan of Rila (876 - 946 AD) and better known as the Rila Monastery is the largest and most famous Eastern orthodox monastery in the country. It is situated in the Rila Monastery, South of the capital Sofia at an elevation of 1,147 m (3,763 ft.) above sea level. Founded in the 10thc., the Rila Monastery is regarded as one of Bulgaria's most important cultural, historical and architectural monuments. It is traditionally thought that the monastery was founded during the rule of Tsar Peter I (927-968) by the hermit St. Ivan of Rila, whose name it bears. The hermit actually lived in a cave without any material possessions not far from the monastery's location, while his students, who came to the mountains to receive their education, built the complex. Ever since its creation, the Rila Monastery has been in the centre of Bulgarian religious life and political power and maintained contacts with the Russian and Greek Orthodox churches and monasteries on Mount Athos. The complex acted as a depository of Bulgarian language and culture in the ages of foreign rule. During the Bulgarian National Revival (18th-19th century), it was destroyed by fire in 1833 and then reconstructed between 1834 and 1862 with the help of the population and wealthy individuals. On 25 May 2002, Pope John Paul II visited Rila monastery during his pilgrimage to Bulgaria.

### **Pirin National Park in Pirin Mountain (1983) (one-and-a-half-hour drive)**

Pirin National Park is a UNESCO World Heritage List national park that encompasses the larger part of the Pirin Mountains in the South West of Bulgaria. It has an area of about 400 sq. km. (150 sq. m.) and lies at an altitude between 1,008–2,914 m. (3,307–9,560 ft.). Two nature reserves are located within the boundaries of the park. The huge relief diversity of the park is the reason for the variety of plant (forest, subalpine and alpine) species on its territory, making it one of the most botanically interesting areas in Bulgaria. About 1300 species of higher plant species about 300 moss species and many types of algae can be observed within the park, as well as 2090 species and subspecies of invertebrate, including many on the endangered species lists, and many bird species. Among the 45 different terrestrial mammals (including 12 bat species), it is worth noting the wild goat, a Balkan endemite, and the brown bear.

### **The Thracian Tomb near the city of Kazanlak (1979) (three-hour drive)**

The tomb dates back to the 3rd c. BC, comprises three chambers, the third of which has a frescoed dome – one of the most thoroughly preserved and intriguing testimonies to the building skills and cultural advancement of the ancient Thracian kingdom. The murals are memorable for the splendid horses and especially for the gesture of farewell, in which the seated couple grasp each other's wrists in a moment of tenderness and equality. The paintings are Bulgaria's best-preserved artistic masterpieces from the Hellenistic period. The tomb is situated near the ancient Thracian capital of Seuthopolis. Near Kazanlak, there are many other Thracian tombs, some of them discovered and opened to the public only recently.

### **Tomb of Seuthes III in the Valley of the Thracian Kings (three-and-a-half-hour drive)**

The tomb is located not far from the Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak described above, near the village of Shipka (which has a beautiful Russian church from 19th century) and consists of three chambers, one of which is dug into a huge granite block (weighing more than 60 tons). The bronze head found in the tomb has been identified as that of the powerful Thracian king Sevt (Seuthes III) who ruled in the 3rd c. BC and tomb is considered his resting place, with multiple intricately shaped gold objects providing further evidence in that respect. Near the tomb of Seuthes (in a mound known as Golyamata Kosmatka) there are many other recently discovered Thracian tombs, of which four others are open to visitors.





