

BULGARIA: BELOGRADCHIK

Myths, legends, even traces of ancient Thrace are waiting to be discovered by visitors to Belogradchik, or small white town, situated in the foothills of the Balkan mountains in north west Bulgaria. The territory of the municipality of Belogradchik was placed under the Trybals tribe and its rich history gives the region its many myths and traditions and even, nowadays significant days in the ancient Thracian calendar are celebrated as festivals.

Natural heritage

The place has an abundance of intriguing and natural features due to its geology to which it owes a network of interesting rock formations including what is described as the jewel in the crown, the Magura cave. Situated near Rabisha village, 25 km away from Belogradchik, this is Bulgaria's biggest cave and home to galleries and halls that will appeal to the most experienced speleologist or caver.

The triumphal hall, the bat gallery, the stalactites' hall, the drawings gallery, the fallen pine hall, the poplar hall, the throne hall, the ceremonial hall, the fjords corridor – all evocative names that call the visitor under ground. These caves of the paleolithic era are important, having unique stone drawings painted with bat manure dating from the epipaleolithic age (10 000 B.C.) to the early bronze age, and fossils of wild prehistoric animals. Open all year round, the caves are well lit and the paths that meander through the underground world are well maintained and fitted with safety rails. The paths are open to both walkers and cyclists.

If claustrophobia looms, then an escape is offered in the form of star-gazing at the astronomical observatory, situated among the Belogradchik rocks. It serves as a romantic getaway where the Moon, the rings of Saturn, the satellites of Jupiter, Venus' sickle, comets, stars, and galaxies can all be clearly observed.

For those preferring life sciences to geology and astronomy, Belogradchik also houses the only museum of natural science in north west Bulgaria. Over 3 000 exhibits cover the most attractive part of the rich biological variety of this part of Bulgaria. Interesting lectures present fascinating and curious facts about the living world to visitors.

Folklore

An important highlight of the year is the folklore festival "From Tymok to Iskar – along the steps of the Thracians" which lasts for three days in September.

The festival kicks off with the Thracian procession which takes place at the famous Belogradchik fortress to the sound of shepherd's pipes and other musical instruments, as participants dressed in traditional Thracian clothing walk through the town. The scene takes on an eerie quality with participants dressed in costume, wearing masks and bearing torches. People wishing to join in can do so as masks, costumes and torches are handed out freely.



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Thracian goddess Bendyda is feted as her story is celebrated in rock, fire and torch light and historical reenactments staged in Panairishte square, with titles like “Orpheus and the stone wedding” or “Tamirius and the muses”.

Competitive tribal battles are reproduced using improvised arms like javelins, swords, bows, shields and staves. The festival involves other sporting competitions – the throwing of the javelin and the disk, archery, horse racing and fire jumping. The winners are crowned by a young woman in the role of the goddess Bendyda. In the Panairishte square, special areas are set aside for the molding clay where craftsmen reveal their skills and the secrets of this art.

Art and culture

Belogradchik fortress was built among impenetrable rock before the Bulgarian nation existed and was used as a fortress right up to the Serbian Bulgarian war of 1885. Visitors today will find it easy to see why the spot was chosen for fortification, if they climb up the highest part of the fortress – the first plate. Bulgaria appears spread out before them, from the ridge of Stara Planina in the south to the copper Carpathian mountains in the west. Directly below lie the rock formations which, from this perspective, seem even more dramatic.

Panov’s house/Museum of History, built around 1810, is a typical model of western Balkan architecture which was opened as a museum following its restoration in 1970. An exhibition of 8 000 artifacts reflects the life, occupation and the battles of the people.

Historical architecture and the reflection of the lives of those that lived in the dwellings of a past epoch can also be explored in the Anishte grounds – excavated ruins of an ancient village, artifacts collected from which include pottery fragments, ornaments and coins from the 3rd century.

The Hadji Hjusein mosque is also a site worth visiting, boasting the best of Bulgarian woodcarving and is the only mosque with a Bulgarian fretwork ceiling.

Wine

The region is celebrated for its wine and local inhabitants involve wine tasting as an important part of their traditions. The Thracians believed that wine could lift people out of the earth and up to heaven and local residents and tourists to the areas are willing to put the theory to the test.

Interesting fact

One of the most interesting formations to be found in the Magura cave is the “cave milk”. ■

