Although small in area—about the size of the state of Virginia—Bulgaria has some of the most diverse, and often untamed, terrain in all of Europe. High mountain ranges, ancient forests, deep river valleys, vast plateaus, fertile farmlands, waterfalls, a rugged coastline, and even a desert of uncanny stone formations are all found within its borders.

Bulgaria sits in the eastern portion of the Balkan Peninsula surrounded by Greece, Turkey, Macedonia, Serbia, Romania and the Black Sea. Historically, the area has been a crucial crossroad between Western Europe and Istanbul. Bulgaria dates from at least 8000 years back in time and the long tracks of history are etched deeply on the land and the people. Thracian tribes, Romans, Turks, and dozens of others have all left their mark on the architecture, culture, traditions and cuisine.

The faith and spirit of the Bulgarian people has persevered throughout history and through turbulent times of war and occupation. Hundreds of picturesque monasteries—often built on high rocky exposures with stunning views—and over a thousand Orthodox churches dot the land. Medieval stone fortresses overlook steep river valleys, and farmlands—especially the Rose Valley stretching below the Balkan Mountain chain that crosses the country—where the renowned Damask rose is grown.

The Damask rose (Rosa damascena) is known for its celebrated aroma and high quality oil. From its introduction by a
Discover some of the most photographically rewarding and culturally-rich regions of Bulgaria, from raw mountain landscapes of the interior to photogenic small seaside towns hugging the land on the edge of the Black Sea. Photograph the diverse architecture spanning the centuries. Roman ruins, medieval fortresses and monasteries perched on remote lofty crags, traditional wooden houses that offer tales of life in rural communities of past centuries, a bizarre saucer-shaped communist-era structure of concrete and steel, and modern cities of glass towers all attest to the long arc of history on this small country. Like the petals of a Damask rose, Bulgaria will charm and delight with its photogenic landscapes and rich cultural blend of a storied past upon the land and the people.

Tour Itinerary

Day 1
Fly to Sofia, Bulgaria.

Day 2 (May 24)
Arrive at Sofia Airport. You are met at the airport for the transfer to our hotel. Meet with the group for dinner a local restaurant. (D)

Day 3
We are up early to capture the morning’s “blue hour” in Sofia’s city center. Dating back to 7000 BCE, the city is a historical record encapsulating structures from ancient Roman ruins, to Byzantine and medieval Bulgarian fortresses, to communist-era architecture, and to modern glass towers.
Following our morning photo session, we drive eastward to Pavel Banya, a small town in Bulgaria’s renowned Rose Valley. The town is a perfect location from which to photograph the extensive fields of roses in the valley and explore the surrounding mountains. (BLD)

**Days 4 & 5**
These two days are devoted to photographing in the Rose Valley. Our focus is an ancient symbol of Bulgaria, the Damask rose. Our photo sessions capture the collection by hand of the delicate deep pink rose flowers in the early dawn hours—before the precious oils fade later in the day—by sometimes hundreds of pickers in the midst of the rose fields. The fragrant petals are transported to Bulgaria’s oldest rose oil distillery, established in 1909, where they are quickly poured into large barrels of steaming hot water to extract the precious oil. (BLD)

**Day 6**
We travel further east toward the Balkan Mountain village of Zheravna, an architectural-historical reserve of restored traditional 18th and 19th-century houses. (BLD)

**Day 7**
The village of Zheravna dates from the 12th century, becoming a wealthy cultural and handicraft center in the 18th century due to its location on the main route through the mountains. A rich architectural unity emerged as wooden houses with carved ceilings, exquisite decorations on doors and windows, and religious icons were built during the Bulgarian Revival. Around 200 restored 1- to 2-story houses are picturesquely sited amidst narrow cobblestone alleyways, stone walls and fountains. (BLD)

**Day 8**
Heading northeastward we drive to the small seaside town of Balchik on the Black Sea coast. En route, we
explore the ship-like stone fortress of Ovech, built by the Byzantines high on a rocky hill with panoramic views of the town of Provadia and craggy outcrops emerging amidst lush green vegetation. We also stop to photograph the Stone Desert, the only desert in Bulgaria, where limestone pillars up to 20 feet high seem to grow out of the surrounding white sand. Descending a plateau, we stop in Varna, the largest city on the Black Sea, before continuing to the small fishing port of Balchik. (BLD)

Day 9
In Balchik, our focus is on the landmark Balchik Palace, the summer residence of Queen Marie of Romania built in the early 20th century, surrounded by a luxuriant botanical garden. In nearby Karvuna, at the tip of a nearly 5-mile-long cape jutting into the Black Sea, a 13th-century medieval fortress sits dramatically atop 200-foot-high red rock cliffs punctured with sea caves. (BLD)

Day 10
Turning away from the coast, we drive to Veliko Tarnovo. The former Bulgarian capital, known as the City of the Tsars, is situated in a strategic location connecting Eastern Europe with the Middle East. In the city’s still-operating craft shops set along cobblestone streets, we can photograph—or even take part in—the making of pottery, silver jewelry, wood carvings, woven carpets and knives. (BLD)

Days 11 & 12
The area surrounding Veliko Tarnovo abounds with superb photo subjects. This old city is built on three hills rising above the winding Yantra River. On one of the hills, Tsarevets, a magnificent medieval fortress dating back to the 12th century, is positioned high on one of the hills, guarded by thick 12-foot-
high walls and three stone gates. We stop to photograph Preobrazhene and Dryanovo monasteries en route to a communist-era relic—built like a massive gray concrete saucer-shaped UFO—looming over this remote mountainous region. Constructed with 3,000 tons of steel and 40 tons of glass, the ruins of the abandoned assembly hall rise over 200 feet atop a nearly 5,000-foot peak with a 360-degrees view. After dark, in Veliko Tarnovos, we photograph Tsarevets illuminated by a phenomenal lightshow washing the fortress walls with color. (BLD)

Day 13
We make our way back to Sofia, but not before we visit one of the most picturesquely-sited monasteries in Bulgaria—Glozhene Monastery. Perched on an exposed rocky hill in the Balkan Mountains, the small monastery was originally founded in the 13th century and remains the stuff of legends. The riveting setting and panoramic views from the steep hilltop offer superb photo opportunities. Once in Sofia, we have an early dinner and time to prepare for our departure the following day. (BLD)

Day 14 (June 5)
Transfer to Sofia Airport for flights home. (B)

Trip Details

May 23 - Jun 05, 2020

Fee: $6,195 from Sofia, Bulgaria
Deposit: $800
Limit: 12 participants
Activity Level: Easy
Leader: TBA