

Bulgaria – Flowers of the Balkans

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Sofia and transfer Vitosha Mountain National Park.
Day 2	Vitosha Mountain National Park.
Day 3/5	Bansko, Pirin Mountains National Park.
Day 6/7	Pamporovo, Rhodope Mountains.
Day 8	Fly London.

Departs

June

Focus

Plants, plus other wildlife

Grading

Grade A/B. Easy to moderate day walks

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code BGR01) or see the current Naturetrek brochure.

Highlights:

- Beautiful mountain scenery
- Abundant & diverse flora
- Balkan endemics including *Haberlea rhodopensis*
- Birds, butterflies & other wildlife
- Visit the beautiful Rila Monastery
- Explore the Vitosha Mountain National Park
- Wander through the spectacular Trigrad Gorge
- See the Baikusheva Mura, the oldest tree in Bulgaria (1,350 years old)
- Expert guidance by Naturetrek & local botanical guides



From top: Pirin Mountains from Bansko, *Iris reichenbachii*, & Rhodope Mountains. Photos courtesy of Paul Stanbury & Maureen Ponting.



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Introduction

Bulgaria is one of the least visited corners of Europe yet it is a diverse and very scenic country whose geographic position and range of habitats and altitudes ensure a quite exceptional range of exciting plants and animals. This botanical holiday, designed to complement our Spring and Autumn birdwatching tours, is sure to introduce you a wealth of beautiful alpine and lowland plants amidst Bulgaria's dramatic landscapes and rich culture.

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Vitosha Mountain National Park

We depart London Heathrow around 0830 hours on the scheduled service of British Airways to Sofia. Upon our arrival in Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, we will transfer by road for 1-hour to the Vitosha Mountain National Park, the very first national park to be designated in the Balkans. The pine forest-clad hillsides of the Vitosha Mountain still hold a viable population of both Wolves and Brown Bears as well as a wealth of other wildlife. Over 1,500 species of higher plant have been recorded here, 31 species of which are Balkan endemics! Over 109 species of birds have been recorded, 90 of which remain to breed, including Hoopoe, Red-backed Shrike, Goshawk, Grey-headed Woodpecker and Ortolan Bunting and these share the mountain with numerous butterflies and other insects. For the first of our 2-nights here we will be based in a comfortable hotel set high in the pine forests and commanding views out over the neighbouring mountains and Sofia in the far distance.

Day 2

Vitosha Mountain National Park

Following breakfast we will drive the short distance to the Bistrishko Branishte Nature Reserve, one of only 16 UNESCO Biosphere reserves in Bulgaria. Located on the eastern slope of the Vitosha Mountain at an altitude of approximately 2,000 metres, the Bistrishko Branishte lies in the sub-alpine vegetation zone bordering the tree-line and is a mix of ancient spruce forests (150 years old +) and alpine meadows. It will take half an hour or so to walk to the reserve but once there we can enjoy a wealth of plantlife that includes some 453 species of higher plant such as *Gentianella bulgarica*, *Lilium jankae*, Narcissus-flowered Anemone (*Anemone narcissiflora*), Lesser Twayblade (*Listera cordata*), Globe Flower (*Trollius europaeus*), *Senecio pancicii*, Lesser Bladderwort (*Utricularia minor*), Great Yellow Gentian (*Gentiana lutea*), Hungarian Snowbell (*Soldanella hungarica*) and Common Sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*) amongst many others.

Forest covers just over half of the reserve and is dominated by Spruce (*Picea alba*) along with Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), Mountain Ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*) and more rarely Silver Fir (*Abies alba*) and Macedonian Pine (*Pinus peuce*). These forests hold their own flora including orchids such as Green-winged Orchid (*Orchis Morio*) and Military Orchid (*Orchis militaris*) along with birds including Nutcracker, Crossbill, Willow Tit and, on their edges, Ring Ouzel.

Day 3

Bansko, Pirin Mountains National Park

After breakfast, we begin the 180 kilometre drive to our next destination, the town of Bansko at the foot of the Pirin Mountains. En route we will stop at the world famous Rila Monastery, an architecturally impressive building originally founded in the 10th Century and set amongst the forests of the Rila Mountains.

From here we will complete our journey to the Pirin Mountains. The Pirin Mountains National Park straddles the highest peaks in the Pirin Range. Climbing to over 2,900 metres, the park covers an area of 40,000 hectares, the largest national park in all of Bulgaria. This is a landscape of exceptional natural beauty with 100 high peaks over 2,000 metres, alpine meadows dotted with over 80 glacial lakes, forested hillsides and valleys, spectacular rocky gorges and sheer precipitous cliff faces. With such a variety of habitats and rock types (both limestone and acidic rocks are exposed here) it is not surprising to learn that this region holds a wealth of plant and animal life. Although only seen by the very fortunate, both Wolf and Brown Bear still roam the forests, whilst animals you are more likely to encounter include Pine Martin and Wild Boar. Bird life is also diverse and includes Three-toed and Black Woodpeckers, Golden Eagle and Hazel Grouse. The forests are mainly coniferous in nature (spruce and pine) with the endemic Macedonian Pine (*Pinus peuce*) being widespread especially along the tree-line in the more granitic areas. Plant life is extremely rich and is a mixture of central European, Alpine, Balkan-mountain and Sub-Mediterranean species, 10% of which are Balkan endemics; indeed 20% of all the plants outlined in the Bulgarian Red Data Book are found in the Pirin Mountains National Park!

On entering the National Park we will spend the rest of the day botanising on the high alpine meadows of Kirilova Poliana. Here we will search for flowers such as *Tozzia alpina*, *Aconitum lamarckii*, *Centaurea kotschiana*, Bird's-nest Orchid (*Neottia nidus avis*), Heart-shaped Orchid (*Dactylorhiza cordigera*), *Rheum raponticum*, *Campanula lanata*, and *Symphandra wanneri* amongst many others.

At the end of the afternoon we will make our way to the town of Bansko and transfer to a comfortable hotel, our base for the next 3-nights of the tour.

Days 4 - 5

Bansko, Pirin Mountains National Park

We will spend the next two days fully exploring the botanical riches of the Pirin Mountains National Park. We start with the short journey to the Banderitsa Mountain Chalet at 1,800 metres above sea level from where we walk to the Vikhren Mountain Chalet at 2,200 metres. The walk is not difficult and follows the road out above the tree-line and into the sub-alpine zone. The rock here is dominated by a white marble, on top of which a thin poor and patchy soil has developed over the years. Here we will visit the 'Baikusheva Mura' a Macedonian Pine (*Pinus peuce*) thought to be the oldest tree in Bulgaria at 1,350 years old. Backed by a myriad mountainous peaks and ridges we will continue to search the hillsides for such plants as *Saxifraga ferdinandii-coburgii*, *Saxifraga androsacea*, *Potentilla apenina*, *Pedicularis orthantha*, *Papaver degenii*, *Daphne oleoides*, Alpine Aster (*Aster alpinus*), *Brassica jordanofii*, *Centaurea triumphetti*, ssp. *Achtarovii*, *Galium stoyanovii*, *Veronica kellereri* and *Jovibarba heuffelii*.

On another day we will drive direct to the Vikhren Mountain Chalet so we can maximise our time exploring the high alpine zone above 2,200 metres hopefully reaching some of the high mountain lakes that dot the hillsides. Here we will be on the lookout for such species as Long-flowered Primrose (*Primula longiflora*), *Jovibarba heuffelii*, *Saxifraga sempervivum* and many other rare and interesting species. Birds such as Golden Eagle, Alpine Accentor,

Raven and Ring Ouzel all breed on these high alpine meadows and we will also be on the lookout for a variety of butterflies, mammals and other wildlife. After each full day in the field we will return to our comfortable hotel close to Bansko.

Day 6

Pamporovo, Rhodope Mountains

This morning we must leave the Pirin Mountains and drive for 160 kilometres to the beautiful Rhodope Mountains. This is a very pleasant drive through a landscape of rolling farmland and forests. Our journey is sure to be enlivened by numerous roadside birds such as White Stork, Hoopoe, Crested Lark, Red-backed Shrike, Corn Bunting and the colourful Bee-eater and there should also be time for a few botanical stops; indeed, orchids can be particularly plentiful along this route.

The Rhodope Mountains lie in the southern part of Bulgaria, close to the border with northern Greece. They are the principal mountain chain within the Rila-Rhodope massif and climb to 2,191 metres, the highest peak being 'Golyam Perelik'. This is another scenically beautiful area of forested hillsides bisected by dramatic river gorges and dotted with high rocky outcrops and deep caves. Although the Rhodope Mountains have yet to be designated a National Park, much of the area is protected within a network of nature reserves. These contain a wealth of wildlife but are of particular importance for plants with over 2,000 species recorded, 90 of which are Balkan endemics.

With only 160 kilometres to travel today we will be able to take a leisurely journey, stopping where necessary and then spending some time exploring the forests and meadows around our hotel on the outskirts of the small ski resort of Pamporovo. Our hotel is once again surrounded by beautiful pine forests and commands beautiful views out over the surrounding hills. We will be based here for the final 2-nights of the tour.

Day 7

Pamporovo, Rhodope Mountains

We will use our last full day to explore the Rhodope Mountains. After breakfast and an early morning stroll in the vicinity of the hotel, where we can expect to find Pallid Swifts, Black Redstarts, twittering Serins and perhaps a few new plants, we will drive for approximately an hour to the magnificent Trigrad Gorge. Here, the massive limestone cliffs cut by the winding Trigrad River provide a dramatic contrast to the rounded, pine-clad hills around Pamporovo. This spectacular gorge, which was until recently out of bounds for both visitors and local Bulgarians, narrows into a steep-walled chasm off of which twisted Black Pines cling (a local subspecies of *Pinus nigra*) and the beautiful crimson-winged Wallcreeper forages.

We will spend much of the day here exploring this dramatic area in search of numerous plants such as the endemic *Haberlea rhodopensis*, *Arenaria rhodopaea* and *Minuartia rhodopaea* plus *Campanula orphanidea*, *Sideritis scardica*, Serbian Stock (*Malcolmia serbica*), Prickly Whorlflower (*Morina persica*), *Trachelium rumelianum*, Macedonian Ragwort (*Senecio macedonicus*), *Iris reichenbachii* and Martagon Lily (*Lilium martagon*). This is also an excellent area for orchids. Species to look out for include Red Helleborine (*Cephalanthera rubra*), Large White Helleborine (*Cephalanthera damasonium*), Greater Butterfly Orchid (*Platanthera chlorantha*), Bug Orchid (*Orchis coriophora*), Elegant Lax-flowered Orchid (*Orchis laxiflora* ssp. *elegans*), Coralroot Orchid (*Corallorhiza trifida*) and Bird's-nest Orchid (*Neottia nidus-avis*) amongst many others. If we can tear our eyes away from the ground for a few minutes, the odd glance skyward may also reveal a passing raptor, such as a Short-toed Eagle, perhaps a flock of Crag Martins or a Dipper

whizzing past low over the river. After a full day exploring this exciting area we will return to our hotel for our final night in Bulgaria.

Day 8

London

We may have time for some final botanising close to our hotel, before we must sadly begin the long (250 kilometre) journey back to Sofia in time to catch our early afternoon return flight to London. We are due to arrive back into London's Heathrow airport around 1600 hours.

Tour grading

Grade A/B - Easy to moderately strenuous. Whilst we will not be covering long distances on foot, and much of the botanising can be enjoyed within a short distance of the vehicle or hotel, some of the trails we will be taking are steep and rocky in places. This tour therefore demands an average fitness.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. Hotels in Bulgaria are fairly simple so you should not expect 5-star accommodation on this tour! We will be using fairly basic, but nevertheless comfortable, accommodation throughout. Each room will have private facilities.

Optional extensions

For those of you wishing to see more of the city of Sofia we would be happy to arrange a couple of nights accommodation in the Bulgarian capital at the end of the tour. Please call us for more details.

Plant, bird and mammal lists

Where available these are automatically provided on booking, and will gladly be sent to you before, if you wish for a more detailed preview.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read our main Naturetrek brochure and complete and return the enclosed booking form together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us now on 01962 733051. Alternatively, if you have access to the internet you are very welcome to book on-line at www.naturetrek.co.uk

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