

Ancient Forests of Bulgaria: 10 Day Tour Itinerary

Highlights:

- * “Boatin” Biosphere Reserve (beech, spruce, dwarf mountain pine)
- * “Steneto” Biosphere Reserve (beech, laurel)
- * “Dervisha” Reserve (horse chestnut)
- * “Kamchiya” and “Ropotamo” Reserves (coastal “longoz” flood forests)
- * “Strandzha” Nature Park (oaks, eastern beech, rhododendron, laurel, yew)
- * Eastern Rodopi (sub-Mediterranean oaks)
- * Western Rodopi (oriental plane)

Day 1: Depart Sofia in the early afternoon and transfer to the Stara Planina mountains.

Day 2: Today we will explore the extensive forests of the “**Boatin**” Reserve, a UNESCO biosphere reserve which is renowned as “the realm of the beech” in Bulgaria. The giant old trees are of average age between 150 to 170 years, some even reaching 220 years. Within the boundaries of the reserve, one of the biggest protected beech massifs in Europe, a well-preserved spruce forest can also be found, along with the last surviving natural habitat of the dwarf mountain pine in the Stara Planina.

Day 3: We start the day by meeting a representative of the Directorate of the “Central Balkan” National Park, before exploring another ancient and excellently preserved beech forest above the village of Ribaritsa. Later in the day we then transfer to the tiny village of Skandaloto tucked in at the northern foot of the Stara Planina mountain range. Our small family-run hotel is a beautiful example of the traditional local architecture.

Day 4: A short drive takes us to the village of Cherni Osum, from where we set off into the wild heart of the remote “**Steneto**” Reserve. Due to its unique and virgin nature this reserve is also included in UNESCO’s World Network of Biosphere Reserves. The greatest treasures of the region are the century-old beeches which cover more than half the total area of the reserve. Especially interesting here are the communities of beech and laurel that have been preserved since the Tertiary period. The reserve’s rocky gorges and ancient forests shelter animals such as brown bear, Balkan chamois, and otter. The “Steneto” Reserve also boasts the largest diversity of birds in the “Central Balkan” National Park and is home to rare species such as: booted eagle, golden eagle, hobby, eagle owl, Ural owl, pygmy owl, rock partridge and most of the woodpecker species known in Bulgaria.

Day 5: A long transfer through the rolling northern foothills of the Stara Planina takes us east towards the Black Sea and the city of Varna. En route we will stop off at the “**Dervisha**” Reserve in the Prevlavska mountain massif. This unique reserve represents the only remaining stand of natural horse chestnut forest in Bulgaria.

Day 6: We will spend the day travelling south along the Bulgarian coast visiting the “**Kamchiya**” and “**Ropotamo**” Reserves. These reserves have an almost jungle-like atmosphere, and are fine representative examples of so-called “longoz”, unique flood-forests that are found naturally growing along the lower courses and mouths of rivers entering into the Black Sea. These forests have a large mix of deciduous tree species, including alder, ash, maples etc, and are multi-layered with a dense understorey of different shrubs and bushes. Especially characteristic are the rich variety of central European and southern “lianas” (winding climbers) which give these forests their distinctive jungle-like appearance. Our base for the next three nights will be at the small coastal town of Tsarevo.

Day 7: Today we head inland and start our exploration of the “**Strandzha**” **Nature Park**, which is one of the largest and most important protected territories in Bulgaria. From the village of Kosti we will make our way on foot upstream along the valley of the river Veleka to a small protected site which preserves several ancient oak trees of different species, including some exceptionally rare examples of the so-called Strandzha oak (*Quercus strandjensis*) which is locally endemic to these mountains. After lunch we drive south towards the Turkish border, to visit a wonderfully preserved forest of eastern beech (*Fagus orientalis*) with fascinating Caucasian floristic elements such as *Rhododendron ponticum*, *Ilex colchica*, *Mespilus germanica* and *Laurocerasus officinalis*. This community is unique for Europe and has an exceptionally rich ground flora and fauna.

Day 8: Continuing our exploration of the “**Strandzha**” **Nature Park**, we will spend the day exploring more eastern beech forests, but this time focusing our attention on some protected territories that hold unusual communities containing fine ancient examples of yew. Later in the day we will take a look at some interesting coastal oak woods and discover more about the pressures and conflicts concerning the protection of the forests in the Strandzha region.

Day 9: A long transfer takes us out of the Strandzha Mountains and on through the harsh rocky landscape of the **Eastern Rodopi** with its sub-Mediterranean oak woods. We finally end the day in the **Western Rodopi** where we will have the chance to visit the Bachkovo Monastery and see some fine ancient examples of oriental plane growing along the valley of the Chepelarska River at the northern edge of their natural distribution in Europe.

Day 10: Transfer to Sofia for afternoon flight back to the UK.

Proposed Tour Date:

- * The ideal time for this programme would be at the beginning of **June**
- * A second alternative would be in the autumn at the start of **September**.

Ground Cost (based on group with minimum of 8 people)

- * Price based on sharing twin room: **678 euros** per person
- * Single supplement: **133 euros**

Price Includes:

- * Accommodation: accommodation in comfortable hotels with twin rooms and private WC/shower
- * Food: all meals from supper on day 1 to breakfast on day 10-this would tend to be fairly simple
- * Transport: services of a private bus and driver throughout the tour
- * Guides: 2 English-speaking local expert guides, one a forestry ecologist, the other a botanist
- * Permits & Entrance Fees: all reserve entrances and permits included

Extras Expenses:

The price does not include:

- * Air Ticket
- * Insurance
- * Tips (suggested amounts are entirely voluntary, but my past experience suggests c £10 for the guide and c 10 leva (£3-4) for the driver.)
- * Drinks, except for one small bottle of mineral water per person with evening meals

- All other items & purchases of a personal nature (you would probably struggle to spend more than £5).