

## Bulgaria } Coming in From the Cold, Slowly

Much has changed in Bulgaria since it shook off Soviet domination in 1989. Free elections have been held, and its economic and political capital, Sofia, is thriving. But as it emerges as a tourist destination, mostly in the beach resorts along the Black Sea, Bulgaria is also showing that it is a nation that can celebrate a refreshing lack of progress.

Hidden throughout this big and fertile land in remote gorges and on craggy hill-tops are dozens of astonishingly intact painted monasteries that are centuries old. They offer visitors a rare chance to see Europe as it once was — before the euro, before World War II, before electricity.

It is a bit like castle-hopping in Tuscany, but without the postcard kiosks and hordes of foreigners who block your photo opportunities. Of the former nations of the Soviet bloc, Bulgaria has been among the slowest to come in from the cold, which

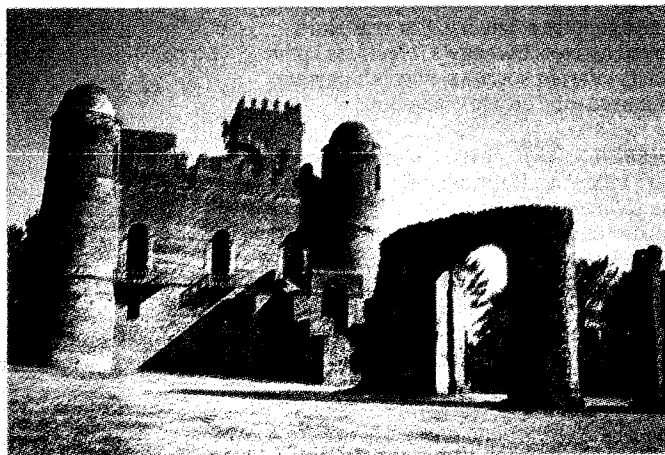
means that much of the country remains off the tourist map.

But some luxury tour operators like Abercrombie & Kent have added Bulgaria to their list of 2006 tours. Highlights include a guided trip to the flamingo-pink Rila Monastery, some 70 miles south of Sofia, as well as a private dinner in the SS. Peter and Paul Monastery, near the university town of Veliko Turnovo. There are also some 600 mineral springs in the country, and a few luxury spa resorts are in the works.

Bulgaria has nine Unesco World Heritage sites, including the Srebarna Nature Reserve, a marshy breeding ground for birds. In fact, much of the countryside remains wild. You can explore caves in the Balkan Range, ski at Borovets or hunt for red stags and brown bears from rustic camps throughout the country.

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The Royal Palace in the Royal Enclosure in Gonder, the former capital.



David Elise/Lonely Planet Images