A Tourist Guide of Sofia

19 until 19
The project „19 until '19“ is realised by the Centre for European and International Studies in partnership with Vitosha district of Sofia municipality and is in support of the nomination of Sofia and Southwest Region for European Capital of Culture for 2019.

The guide in your hands is published with the financial support of the Municipality of Sofia, Programme Europe 2013.

The contents of this Guide do not represent an official statement of Sofia Municipality.

special thanks to:

Bulgarian, first edition

Book format A5, number of pages 118, circulation 2500 copies.
Design and prepress: Tzerh 2 OOD, Rositza Bossiatzka, tel./fax: +359 2 4224029, office@tzerh.com, www.tzerh.com

Authors: Kalina Panayotova, Nevena Aleksieva, Miroslava Gateva, Teodor Slavev, Nikolay Martinov, Nikola Mitov, Ivaylo Tzoneff, Kremena Kirilova.

Translation and editing: Nevena Alekieva, Kalina Panayotova.

A Tourist Guide of Sofia

19 reasons to visit Sofia before 2019
Because we wanted to point out 19 reasons, 19 themes and attractions that will make your visit to Sofia worth it. Every guidebook will tell you what the traditional tourist sights are and with a few clicks the internet will drown you with information about them. In turn we wanted to show guests of Sofia that there is something more worth a visit but seem to be left out of the typical guides. These are sights that we walk by every day but rarely notice.

The “19 until ‘19” is a project of the Centre for European and International Studies and its partner Vitosha district with the financial support of Europe 2013 Programme of Sofia Municipality. The goal of this project was to involve more actively the citizens and guests of Sofia in the efforts to transform our city into even more attractive tourist destination, to uncover the true potential of our city and to support the nomination of Sofia for European Capital of Culture in 2019. Also, we wanted to create a modern product to promote to citizens and visitors of Sofia the less popular historic and cultural attractions, reflecting the expectations of visitors and contemporary ways of presentation.

In the framework of the project we analyzed, adapted and suggested best practices for development of tourist products especially in former and future European Capitals of Culture as well as the methods used by such cities in projecting a positive image.

We also studied the feelings and expectations of Sofia citizens and guests as to what they think is needed in terms of tourist information about the city. We did that through interviews in structured focus groups and through public opinion polls. Between the 1st and the 4th of September 2013 at dedicated information points both in the centre and in the suburbs our team interviewed citizens and guests of the city about their views.

The most serious part of our job however was the drafting of the guide you hold in your hands. In it we try to present to you 19 of the less popular attraction in and around Sofia that are not advertised as often but are definitely worth a visit. We hope that you will enjoy those sights as least as much as we enjoyed writing about them.

The results of the “19 until ‘19” – the best practices, the results of the study are uploaded to the project’s Facebook page (http://www.facebook.com/19Do19) and CEIS web page www.cemi-bg.org.

We would like to thank especially to the people who supported us – CEIS volunteers, the teams of Sofia Breathes, Sofia Science Week, the Museum of Socialist Art, the National Polytechnic Museum, the National Museum of Military History, the Parks and Gardens and Tourist Information municipal companies. And of course the team of Europe 2013 Programme of Sofia Municipality for the indispensable support without which this project would not have happened. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts!

CEIS team
Dear citizens and guests of Sofia,

You have before you the “19 until ’19” guide, whose pages feature 19 tourist attractions in our city. The message of the young authors, which I second, is for you to visit these places before 2019. You have in your hands at least 19 reasons to discover the beauty of our capital.

Sofia is a dynamically developing city and a candidate for European Capital of Culture in 2019. Sofia has been working actively to be included in this prestigious cultural initiative on European level. This is an exceptional opportunity for the capital, and even more for its citizens and guests, to develop the cultural, historical and tourist potential of the city and to promote former and current achievements related to Sofia.

This guide is an attractive handbook for possible tours around the many spots of our city. It is exemplary of how culture can be considered and presented in a modern and accessible way.

Jordanka Fandakova
Mayor of Sofia
The Centre for European and International Studies Foundation was established in 2008 by a group of young people united by their common ambition to work together for a better future for Bulgaria.

Our main mission is to contribute for strengthening the European democratic and social values in Bulgaria and to work for the adequate positioning of Bulgaria in Europe and the world. We believe that we can propose some good ideas to support the transformation of our country into a modern European state on today’s international theatre.

In our work we try to promote active citizenship and to support the forming of civic consciousness of the young people and to help spreading the European values among active youth.

The bulk of our activities includes trainings and discussions on important European policies with the participation of prominent experts on these topics, promoting young people’s research and supporting publications of young people in compendiums on these issues distributed freely to universities and state administration; round table discussions and dialogue between youth NGO’s and decision makers.

In our activities we strive to include young people and provoke their civic activity, responsibility and ideas. We do so not only through our own projects but also through supporting their own ideas, projects and European priorities.

In line with its Statues, CEIS aims to help young people to unfold their potential and to form a truly European mind set. For this reason, for six years in a row, we have organized a competition for an annual scholarship awarded to the author of the best essay on a European issue.

Our most successful projects include several research projects with the participation of young experts “Bulgaria in Europe and the World” (2009), “Europe Looks to the East : Eastern Partnership a Year Later” (2010), “Western Balkans’ Accession to the EU: Mission (Im)Possible” (2011), and “Arab Spring: Hopes for Change and Challenges before CFSP” (2012).

In 2011, in partnership with Sredetz and Studentski districts, CEIS completed the “Act Naturally” project with the financial Support of Europe 2011 Programme of Sofia Municipality and published a youth guide with the same name. During this project we developed a methodology for tourist products and gained experience in polling public opinion. We made good use of that during the “19 until ‘19” project.

In the beginning of 2013, CEIS successfully carried out the “Eat. Learn. Europe.” project with the financial support of the Youth in Action Programme. We wanted to help youngsters from seven countries to overcome prejudice formed for many decades and centuries and to help them build skills for multicultural dialogue. We did that through cooking together our national foods. In total 21 youngsters from Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Italy, Poland and Turkey took part in this project in the picturesque town of Devin.

Apart from “19 until ‘19” we are now working on two other projects: the annual research project that in 2013 will be dedicated to an analysis of European Common Foreign Policy in light of the upcoming European Elections; and the “Choose to Participate” project financed by under the NGO Programme under the EEA financial mechanism.

For more information about our activities and our future projects, follow us on our website www.cemi-bg.org.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sofia – a Bird’s Eye View</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Vitosha</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Urvich – the Last Stronghold of Second Bulgarian Kingdom</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Vrana Park with Palace</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The Bells - Kambanite</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. PARK Somewhere Green: Sofia Parks</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Mineral Waters of Sofia</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Sofia’s Holy Mount</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Sofia – A Religious Crossroad</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Deunov</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. The Yellow Cobblestone</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Ancient Sofia</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. The Triangle of Powers</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Communist Sofia; Socialist symbolism</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Military might and glory - National Museum of Military History</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. The Science Class You Wished You Had</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. National Polytechnic Museum</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Sofia breathes</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Street Art</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sofia – a Bird’s Eye View

Have you ever wished to look at the world from above?

You must have, there is no way you haven’t. Inevitably, at least once, you wished to enjoy a bird’s eye view of the city you live in (or visit) like they do in the movies, where most characters have the pleasure of city-gazing from the Beverly Hills.

Well, Sofia may not be Los Angelis and have Beverly Hills, but you can still have the same experience here. You cannot help but notice that the city is surrounded by mountains, which hide amazing views and spots for overlooking the city from above. Whether you would choose Vitosha, Lozen, Plana, Lulin, the Balkan or another mountain, it does not matter. The view is certainly worth it and it might even take your breath away. You don’t believe us? Come for a tour.

Before you leave, make sure you have a car, because many of the sights that we will show you are not to be reached with public transport. If you already have a vehicle, we suggest you take the route from Orlov most, and go south along “Evlogi Georgiev” boulevard towards the National Palace of Culture (eNDeKa) and Boyana district. In fact you don’t have to make a turn anywhere. Just the name of the boulevard changes to Bulgaria Blvd after you pass the pedestrian Lovers’ Bridge behind NDK. The road will take you straight to Boyana where its name changes to Belovodski Pat Str. This street will take you to our first stop – the area around Kopitoto peak. This is the spot which presents probably the best view of the city from 1300 m above the sea level. You will see almost completely Sofia laid out before you and you can even try to test your knowledge on the city’s attractions, districts and geography. The night view is even more inspiring and beautiful. And quite romantic, speaking of it, especially in the eyes of the many couples in love, perched on the slopes in the area, enjoying the city lights while holding hands. Just like in the Hollywood movies and the lovers on the Beverly Hills, right?
Enough with the romance. Go back to the daylight, to the impulse for freedom and to the desire to enjoy Sofia from above. Get back in the car and head for Aleko hostel. From there up is only Cherni Vruh (the Black Peak), which is the summit of Vitosha and around Sofia. It can be reached only on foot so forget about the car for at least several hours. While you climb, a mind-boggling view of Sofia and the Sofia Valley surrounded by mountains will open before you. It might have some drawbacks of course: if there is no wind you might not be able to see the city, covered in smog. On the other hand, be creative. In case of smog you will see the wonderful fluffy cover between the mountains’ peaks, which will make you wish to just lie down. We strongly advice against it, as you might not leave after that.

Going up the slope, and especially if you decide to sit down for a break or a picnic with a bird’s eye view, watch out for a more contemporary and stranger “bird”. Do not be afraid – we are talking about paragliders, whose pilots use the adjacent slopes to dive off into gliding in the air and revere the sight below. If you are a gliding fan, just join in the party and feel for real Sofia from above.

Somewhere along the road after the Kokalyanska Cheshma find a spot to stop. You can freely spread the picnic blanket on the left side of the road to enjoy the beauty of Lozen and Plana mountains. This is not the only thing you will see. Look down and then left and the beauty of the sight will overwhelm you with a feeling of accomplishment beyond words. The breathtaking view of the Iskar River filling the Pancharevo Lake, the lake itself and a small section of the eastern districts of Sofia, will entice you to return here again and again and will leave a lasting imprint in your heart and soul. We have been under its spell for many years, but still not a week passes before we

Do you feel the air getting thin? OK, get back to the car, take the ring road towards Plovdiv. When the road gets narrower, you will reach a crossing with a traffic light and a policeman. Turn right and drive along until you pass Pancharevo and enter Kokalyane. Be careful not to miss the end stop of busses 1 and 4 at the so called Kokalyansko Hanche, which is where you turn right again to reach the meandering road up to the centre of the village. From there you will want to reach Kokalyanska Cheshma (just ask anyone for directions) and then up along the narrow asphalt road towards the old military base.
imagine this wonderful pageant of colors, trees, grass, flowers, waters and ethereal white clouds.

The sun is quite bright here and we may burn easily, so let’s hop back in the car to Lozen monastery. To this end we have to get back to the crossing on the ring road, turn right towards Plovdiv again.

At some point you, just before a left turn, you will see the sign for Lozen. Right after it make a right turn which will take you through the village. At the end, almost up until the final stop of bus No 5, you will have to turn right and follow the main road. It will lead you to the Bulgarian Red Cross base. From there, we go on foot along the Lozen Mountain eco trail and you will reach Lozen monastery. Enter through the monastery gate, light a candle in the chapel, go out and turn back 180 degrees. At the end of the meadow you will have an unobstructed view towards Sofia Valley and the eastern part that you will not be able to see neither from Kopitoto, nor from Chervni Vrah. Everything is so flat; the Balkan is so close; the tranquility is disturbed only by the voices of tourists. You may sit down on a stone and enjoy the view. Well don’t get too carried away, we would not want you to miss the rest of the interesting things. Continue to explore Sofia and the nearby regions. If you wander what to see next, the following pages will offer some interesting options.
Speaking of views we mentioned several times the beautiful Vitosha. With its summit Cherni Vrah (the Black Peak, 2290 m), it is the fourth highest mountain in Bulgaria after Rila, Pirin and the Balkan. Vitosha is unique with its nature, location and vision. First of all, it is the oldest nature park on the Balkan peninsula, established back in 1934. At the same time two nature reserves were created – Bistrishko Branishte and Torfeno Branishte. Later, Bistrishko Branishte was proclaimed a biosphere reserve (one of only 16 in Bulgaria). The borders and size of the Vitosha park have changed numerous times and at present it spreads over 27,000 hectares. From them nearly 24,000 hectares are forests. One of the highlights of the park is the Boyana waterfall – the highest waterfall in the mountain.

What shall we say about the nature itself. Only 4.5 km away from the centre of the Boyana district lays the impressive Boyana waterfall. It is a nature spot that leaves a man speechless. Only the noise of falling water disturbs the mystic silence of the area. Calmness reigns here; one feels as though in trance. The waterfall is exceptionally beautiful in spring, during high water. In 1920, after a trip to the waterfall the most prominent Bulgarian author, Ivan Vazov, wrote in his travel notes: “This waterfall; it seems that it comes not from the peaks of Vitosha, but somewhere from the vaults of heaven, bringing with it the rays of the blue skies and the noise of their storms.”

But it is not the only beautiful place, let us not forget the Samokovisteto waterfall on Bistritsa river. In the southern part of Vitosha, close to Bosnek village, you can also visit the Duhlata area which hosts the cave with same name. Duhlata happens to be the longest cave in Bulgaria. Here too you will find a wonderful spot for recreation.

Going proudly up! To Vitosha, of course! And all of that is just steps away from the capital.

To fully comprehend the mountain, you have to go there not just to show off where you’ve
been, but with a mind open to the different atmosphere. People say that nature in Bulgaria is something mystic, something heavenly, something inexplicable. And people of Sofia can feel it up close and personal. Here, even the air seems to be different. It almost gives you strength to lift the mountain itself and to run faster than Usain Bolt. Unique nature, unique animal and plant species, unique climate and atmosphere. And all of that so close to the capital!

Vitosha is a popular tourist destination. There are over 40 mountain hostels and small hotels and 10 shelters. The Aleko hostel in the area with the same name just below Cherni Vrah is worth a visit. A great place for family trip or party with friends.

Up there, above Sofia, the conditions for winter sports are great: you can try to get down the slopes with ski, snowboard, sleigh, or (as we did in the third grade) just on a piece of nylon bag (and a sturdy helmet). The most famous ski runs are Vetrovala and Konyarnika. Getting there with one of the 14 lifts is easy. Vitosha is also a paradise for adrenaline junkies. And all of that is just steps away from the capital!

Vitosha has it all – beautiful nature, spots for relax, different options for tourism and entertainment, good conditions for winter sports or just walks in the wild. Vitosha has a city and the citizens of Sofia have a great mountain- protector! And all of that so close to the capital! Europe should envy us!
Urvich – the Last Stronghold

It is general knowledge that Bulgaria is among the oldest states in Europe, which has preserved its territories from its establishment up to the present day (or at least most of them). However, not many people know that during those 13 centuries of existence, there were in fact three Bulgarian states (or as we call them kingdoms or empires). The first one was in place since the founding of Bulgaria in 681 A.D. until the country fell under Byzantine rule in 1018. The Second Kingdom existed from 1185 until the state was conquered by the Ottomans in 1396. The Third State has been in place since our Liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878 and continues to the present day.

Now, we would like to tell you more about the Second Bulgarian Kingdom and especially about its last years, as well as about a fortress that has protected Sofia (then known as Sredetz) and its neighbourhood from Ottoman invasion. The name of that stronghold is Urvich and there are two theories about the origin of the name. One says that the fortress is named after a local nobleman and the other argues that the name comes from its location – it is perched on a precipice (in Bulgarian “urva” or “urvishte”).

The historic sources say the fortress was built in the 13th century during the Second Bulgarian State. Today, parts of the 6-m high walls, as well as parts of the wall of the fortress's church “St. Iliya”, still stand. The stronghold was built on a steep rocky ridge along the Iskar River (which used to be a lot deeper than it is now) and the only access to the fort was through a very narrow rocky path or through a rope bridge. Now you cannot feel the thrill of trying to get to the fortress but you can climb to the top and look down the cliffs. We promise, the view of the precipice will instantly transport you back to those times, especially if you have shaky nerves.

Urvich was built at times when firearms were unknown so it was constructed for defence with bows and arrows, swords, spears, flails, and axes. It is kind of different than using modern day weapons, isn’t it? Imagine if a 1980s action hero, instead of shooting...
everything down with M16 or another machine gun and some bazookas, had to besiege the fortress armed only with a sword and a spear. Funny, right? It is unlikely that he would be able to do anything. And he would probably learn something from the brave defenders of the walls, some of whom were famous Bulgarian kings.

For example, King Ivan Alexander led his last battles from this fortress and the areas around it before he fell in battle in 1371 together with the large part of his army of 7 000 men. His son Ivan Shishman was crowned king and Urvich became his stronghold and main camp for his soldiers. For some ten years, the King did everything possible to keep hold of the fortress, alas, it was conquered by the Ottomans and so was the area around Sofia. Can you imagine what would befall on our action hero were he there then?

In the days of its existence the fortress encompassed an irregularly-shaped area spanning 350 m at its longest part and 150-200 m at its widest. Almost at the centre of the fortress lie the ruins of a church. Popular legends still remind us that it was built to honor St. Iliya, and it has been scientifically proven that the first stone in the apse of the church was laid precisely on the holiday of the saint. The way the church was built was similar to the construction of the fortress. The stones are bound by white mortar and the structure is supported by wooden beams.

At first the church had one nave and its interior was divided into a sanctuary and a narthex. At the beginning of the 13th century, the church was a modest simple structure with tiled gabled roof. After renovation, probably needed after a fire or enemy attack or both in the 14th century, the church became cross shaped: the southern and northern walls were partially destroyed and rebuilt. During remodelling the floor was raised by a meter and the building resembled inscribed free cross. A number of renovations followed to convert the church into a domed cross-shaped church.

It is also convenient to take bus No 3 from the Geo Milev bus station (in the district with the same name) and travel along until you reach the bus stop named Trudovak. Now is the time to ask what Trudovak means. It is the byword for a soldier in the so called Construction Forces in Bulgarian army during communist time. These were the people who built the road (as well as many other large-scale infrastructure projects in Bulgaria). So,

To reach the fortress you will need time and patience. You can reach the bottom of the hill with public transport or a car and then climb up on foot. Urvich is perched at 728 m above sea level, 2.14 km south of Kokalyane village (part of Sofia municipality). In case you have GPS just punch the following coordinates 42°33′32″ N.L. and 23°25′29″ E.L.
the bus stop, named after the monument of the Trudovak, is easy to recognize – the Socialist monument stands tall among the bushes, and a small fountain is laid below it. Almost idyllic. This is also the place to park if you decided to drive to the fortress.

Now that you are at the Trudovak stop and if you are prepared for the half an hour walk uphill, take the steep path down to the Iskar river bed, turn left and go along a well defined path. After 800 m you will reach a fork with signs for St. Nikolay Letni monastery to the right and the Urvich fortress to the left. After 10 or so meters you will have to turn left and take an alley which will lead you to the fortress. Climbing up along ruined walls (to the right) and a 8-10 m long tower (left) you will reach another fork on the road. To the right are the ruins of St. Iliya church and the fortress itself. The wide alley will take you to a private medieval-style building with limited access. Be careful, this is not a part of the fortress area, but a private home and the guards (and dogs) are not particularly friendly. As soon as you see it you would wish that it were a preserved part of the stronghold, but that is life. Just walk around it to reach the partially preserved tower and walls. If you continue upwards you will reach the so called Starichina rock, from where, the legend claims, the wife of King Ivan Shishman was thrown.

From there up you will pass through a beautiful forest and pleasant areas, some of which are used during the weekend for picnic spots by many. So, grab the baskets, a bottle of fine wine and a camera, and up we go. If the weather is good, you will not regret this trip even for a second.
Not far from Sofia, right beside the international route between Sofia and Istanbul, spread over 100 hectares, lies Vrana park and palace complex.

Before the Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule, the place sported the „Chardakliata“ manor, owned by the Ottoman governor of Sofia - Osman Pasha. In 1879, Hadji Bone Petrov, who took part in Bulgarian Liberation movement alongside our national hero Vasil Levski, first rented the place from the governor’s heirs and then bought it for 500 Turkish Lira. At the end of the 19th century, Mr. Petrov had some financial troubles and was forced to mortgage the lot to the Bulgarian National Bank. After his death, the Bank offered the place on public sale. Nikola Stranski, MD, a court pharmacist for King Ferdinand I, was the highest bidder. Only a week later, the King himself bought the plot from his doctor.

Smaller plots have been bought at the beginning of the 20th century to be added to the manor and the unique park commissioned by King Ferdinand. Tens of bills of sale are still kept at the State Archives and are accessible to everyone.

Rumour has it that King Ferdinand was a keen ornithologist (or simply a bird lover) and that had decided to name the manor after the first bird that lands on the roof of the palace. In a short while the whole palace was perched by a whole flight of crows, typical for the area we call Sofia valley. So, both the palace and the park were named „Vrana“ (the Bulgarian word for crow). Since 1912 the manor was officially renamed Vrana Palace. A foreigner, Anton Kraus, started the spatial design of the park and skilfully directed the composition using the classic methods of the landscaping art of the 19th century. The most valuable asset of the park, which now spreads over 1000 decares, is the diversity of plant species - a whopping 800 of them. Wisterias, giant redwoods, witch hazels, tulip trees. Plants from all over the world. There are some representatives of
the floras of the Amazon jungle and Japan unique for the Balkans. The park even featured a giant Victoria water lily which used to be quite a hit at that time.

The Vrana park and its palace at their artistic unity are a masterpiece of Bulgarian landscaping art and architecture. The jewel in the crown is without a doubt the palace itself. Its facade is an impressive sight since it matches elements of Bulgarian Revival architecture, the Secession, and the French Classicism. The balconies resemble those of the Rila monastery.

The palace has two main buildings. The first was built in 1906 as a modern two-story hunting lodge. Its architecture combines refined Secessionist interpretation of Plovdiv Baroque with the Vienna decorative system. The lodge is considered a masterpiece of early 20th century architecture.

The second building was built between 1909 and 1914 to be a palace. The construction of both buildings was financed by the state budget.

The lily pond was built in 1909. The lilies for the pond are grown in the Vrana greenhouse. They still have some of the giant water lilies which can grow up to 2 meters in diameter.

Next stop is the bungalow of Georgi Dimitrov. The wooden house was especially built for Bulgaria’s first Communist leader, who moved into the palace after the royal family was evicted in 1946. Unfortunately, the cabin has not been restored and is not open for visits.

Right next to the house is the Daalem rock garden created after Ferdinand’s idea. To bring the stones for the garden, a narrow gauge line from Kazichene to the palace had to be built. The rock garden was designed by the Austrian Johann Kelerer. It has two ridges - mount Ferdinand (the former name of the summit of Balkan mountain range, now called Botev) and mount Pirin.

Nearby is a memorial stone to mark the place where King Boris III was buried. In the past, there used to be a chapel there, but it has been demolished by the communist government in 1946. The legends say that in 1993 at this spot a soldier found a vial with the King’s heart.
The tour ends with a walk along the majestic platanus lane. It is totally worth it to sit down on a bench and contemplate the clearings, shaped like pieces of art, between the trees. You can even see the Balkan from there. Here also stands the king's oak, planted by Ferdinand himself.

In 2001, the Palace was returned to Simeon Saxe Cobourg Gotha, who gifted the manor to the Municipality of Sofia that same year on the condition that the park becomes an open-air museum. At first, Mr. Saxe Cobourg Gotha planned to gift 882 421 sq. m of the park but when the contract was drafted the area expanded to 968 097 sq. m.

Since the 8th of June 2013 the Vrana Park has been open for visits. Only guided tours are allowed along a specially designated path. The park is open for visits every weekend between 10 and 16 o'clock. A direct line runs between the park and the city centre during the weekend. The line is 505 and starts from Orlov Bridge. Regular bus fare applies; public transportation cards are valid along the route.

The entrance for the Vrana park is 5 leva for adults and 2 leva for children. Seniors and children younger than seven are admitted for free. Groups of 15 to 20 people pay reduced ticket for 4 leva.

Reservations for organised visits during the week days can be made at www.parkvrana.com.
The Bells - Kambanite

„Do not ring the bells too loudly. Only children are allowed to ring the bells”

A sign like that will not suit any of the churches in Sofia. However this one is conveniently located in the outskirts of Vitosha, within the administrative borders of the Bistritsa village, 14 km southeast from the centre of the city.

The picturesque area known to locals as Kambanite (the Bells) is a favourite place for picnic to many because of the incredible view of alternating hills and meadows. This is only part of the experience. If you have ever wandered what do the daughter of former leader of a socialist state, the United Nations, the philosophical system of Roerich, Leonard Bernstein, Herbert von Karajan and Gianni Rodari have in common. Their point of intersection is ... the Bells.

Breathtaking history lies behind the 37 m tall monument, composed of four pillars of reinforced concrete, surrounded by a steel rim with rings at its base where you can find 95 bells gifted by children from all over the world. The monument is the centrepiece of the Kambanite park. If you look up to the top of the pillars you will notice that their upper ends are cut to form an imaginary ball among them. The ball is the globe and the pillars symbolize the four cardinal points. The sculptors and architect decided to fit seven bells with combined weight of 12 tons in this space to symbolize the seven continents. The most interesting part: at the bottom of the rising part of the monument, there are 18 bells which resonate with the seven ones on top to serve as accompaniment during concerts. Even if you are not a kid and you dare to ring the bells, violating the teasing notice, you will feel for sure the unique composition of sounds and the surrounding echo. There is something magic in the way the whole mountain holds its breath and pricks its ears to listen. It is said that each bell has gathered the laughter of children of the country from which it comes from.

Why are we talking about kids? The United Nations proclaimed the year 1979 as the Year of Children. Gradually, an idea for gathering kids from all over the world started to take shape and later grew to an international movement. So, Lyudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of the communist leader who ruled Bulgaria for 35 years, launched the idea of having an International Children Assembly „Banner of peace“. At first, the convention was supposed to be a one time event; however the huge response led to the
decision that the assembly will be held every three years under the auspices of UNESCO.

During the first convention on the 25th of August, 1979, when the monument was built, 68 bells were placed and the builders inserted into the monument a metal capsule with a message for the future generations. It reads „Children of the future please accept the indestructible fiery appeal of immortality - Unity, Creativity, Beauty“. And what is more impressive is that the monument was built for a really short time - only 30 days and nights. For her active role, a bas-relief at the bottom of the monument contains a sculpture of Lyudmila Zhivkova. The communist leader's daughter was strongly influenced by the ideas of Nicholas Roerich for preservation of the world's cultural heritage, hence the motto of the project - „Unity. Creativity. Beauty“. There were a total of four world meetings of children, during which Bulgaria hosted 3900 kids from 138 countries. World famous personalities such as Leonard Bernstein, Herbert von Karajan and Gianni Rodari visit Bulgaria on the occasion of the Assembly.

Today the bells are quiet as there are no more meetings of children of the world. The place however still possesses magnetic beauty; it has collected a lot of philosophy and idealism into a single holistic spirit, it calls for respect with the head-spinning monument, and if you close your eyes it is quite likely you will hear the laughter of these thousands, thousands of children who used to gather around the park.

Whether to look around or to have a picnic, you will have no trouble reaching the park, you just have to get to the ring road. As the area is close to Mladost 4 district, just across the Business Park - Sofia every bus line that connects you to either of these locations will be convenient.
The cheapest and most amusing way to spend your free time in Sofia is a walk in the park. It sounds simple, but in Sofia it might be a bit difficult. Just because there are so many parks in the city.

In reality, Sofia is among the greenest European capitals. Here you will find huge parks with almost wild (in the most beautiful sense of the word) spots and tiny lovely gardens, snuggled between the blocks.

As soon as the spring sun rises over the horizon, all these green places are swarmed with people (quite a new phenomenon in fact). They would lie on the grass reading a book, or have picnic, or play ball (or badminton, or even lacrosse), or just walk. Regardless of the activity, in the summer the parks become a beehives buzzing with life.

The most central park „Borisova Gradina“ with its emblematic lake „Ariana“ (which welcomes rowing boats and water wheels the summer and becomes an ice skating ring in the winter) has been a park ever since 1882. The municipal council of Sofia (then a young capital city of the newly liberated Bulgaria) decided to turn the Turkish military range into a European park. They commissioned a Swiss gardener and started planting trees. However the locals (known as Shops and famous for their stubbornness) met the idea of converting their land into a park with fierce resistance (and armed one at that). Shootings did not stop the intentions of the municipality and today there is no reminder of this grim story.

The park is well serviced, lights have been installed, and the municipal police, riding horses
(an attraction in itself), is making regular rounds. This means that you can walk without fear, even later in the evenings, to the famous lily pond or the Common Grave monument. Or you might try to beat a friend at table tennis at the tables in front of cashiers of Bulgarian Army Stadium. Or stay for a free concert at the summer stage. Or have a drink in one of the many famous pubs. Just a note - should you decide to walk along the whole length of the park, wear comfortable shoes. The park starts at Orlov Bridge and ends as far as the Maria Louisa pool in Darvenitsa district.

As strange as it may sound, Borisova is not the largest park in Sofia. That would be Zapaden (West) Park. As all parks in Sofia, it has alleys, benches, playgrounds, but (and there is always a but) it also hides a pleasant surprise - a mountain bike trail. Well, it lacks the incline and the length of a real trail but still it offers the same challenges - roots, curves, and jumps.
Find it hard to believe? Well, it is a place where already MINI-DH tournaments take place.

An unique solar clock can be found in Severen (North) Park. It is unique because it is the only one of its size in Sofia. The park is currently waiting for its renovation but until then you still have a chance to see a real Communist time playground complete with Katyusha rocket launcher model for kids.

In terms of biodiversity, Yuzhen (South) Park has no competition. It has 65 species of birds, of which 29 are protected species, and 2 are in the Red Book of Bulgaria for being on the verge of extinction. And while environmental groups are trying to put a stop of building construction creeping towards the park, ducks and their offspring are calmly swimming in the pond in the park. They are used to people and will not mind some breadcrumbs. There are only few less than
crowded areas. Almost everywhere there are playgrounds. Beware of the rickshaws on the alleys.

If you are in to find some calmness in the park, try Loven (Hunting) Park, located between Borisova Gradina and Sofia Zoo. The asphalt there is not as much and for a second you might be even fooled to think that you are in the forest. Well, it won’t last long; sooner or later you will stumble upon the remnants of what used to be the only amusement park in Sofia. The Park is often the host of dog shows.

A bit to the east, there are two gardens almost touching. Right behind the central building of the Sofia University is the Doctors' garden. It is a common place for students in between classes. Behind it is Zaimov Park, where just like that there are a bunch of huge white stones. And it was also the first place to have free public Wi-Fi.

Phew, while enumerating the parks with names known to everyone, we ran out of space for the rest of the green areas. And almost every district has one: Druzhba has a lake and a park around it, Knyazhevo has a mineral water fountain and a park around it, Studentski Grad has a chapel and a park around it. Mladost has nothing of these but it still has a park with a stage.

So, grab the roller skates and badminton racquets and enjoy an afternoon in the nature... in the city.
Mineral Waters of Sofia

Not too long ago, at fairs around the country, vendors would advertise their candy canes as cure-alls. A less than melodious translation of their chants would go „For stomach ailments, for heart aches, for yearnings, for spleen troubles“. Well, this chant can be applicable even now to Sofia’s immense source of health - its mineral waters.

Seriously, the Thracian city of Serdonopolis (Serdika) was founded north of the warm mineral spring around the Vladaya river. Even the Romans could not resist some spa in the healing waters. The water which springs in front of the Central Bath in Sofia had been caught as early the 2nd century BC and had been in use until 1912 (after a number of repairs) of course. Quite few notable Roman emperors admired the healing properties of the springs in Serdika. Galerius, who was terminally ill, sought last relief in his last days in his birthplace (yep, he was born here). Constantine the Great even thought about moving his capital in ancient Sofia. He was even attributed the exclamation „Sofia is my Rome“, and speculations imply spa had something to do with it. Not only did the Romans have a mineral bath near the centre of the ancient city, but the rich ones also built some villas in the vicinity of the hot spring in Pancharevo.

And they were right to enjoy it - Sofia has 31 mineral water deposits with temperature ranging between 20 and 81 degrees Centigrade. Vitosha is literally surrounded by two rings of mineral water - a hot and a cold one. The springs are over 75. The water is suitable not only for washing and drinking but it is also truly healing. Studies show that it is favourable for different ailments- from tooth cavities to diseases of the bone system, stomach aches, allergies, etc.

Today there are only a few reminders of the spa-capital of Europe. Even the well known sight of people riding the public transport with several plastic containers meant to be filled at some mineral water fountain has been slowly disappearing. In turn, some Sofia waters are now sold in bottles, while others are still used for laundry and car washing.

There was a time when the mineral water was used for the most practical purposes - to ensure the hygiene of the population. Going
to the bath (once a week) was almost a ritual - one would queue, buy a ticket and the necessary toiletries (including a small bar of soap), tip the bath attendant and take a swim in the mineral pool - and all of that to be congratulated on the occasion of having a bath (and that we still occasionally do).

Little remains of the splendour of the mineral baths although they are remarkable monuments of architecture. The Central Bath is now completely restored and despite the fact that it does not offer the traditional spa services any more, it takes us back to the years where locals queued for a shower. In 1911 the largest public bath on the Balkans was opened in Bankya. It cost over a million golden leva. It is hardly a coincidence that the royal family had separate bathrooms there. Today the bath is waiting for investors to restore its glory.

While waiting for the promised investments for new homes of Sofia’s healing waters, you can still plop in the mineral pool in Pancharevo - the only one working today. Be careful though as the water is 49 degrees Centigrade.

And instead of spending money on expensive bottled water, take the bus to Gorna Banya or Knyazhevo, or if you are short on time hop on the metro to downtown mineral fountain and just pour yourself a bottle. You will be sure that the water is pure and you will be healthier for a while.
What do Dragalevski Monastery “St. Mary of Vitosha”, Kokalyane Monastery “St. Archangel Michael”, Pancharevo (Urvich) Monastery “St. Nicolay Lenti”, Kremikovtsi Monastery “St. George”, Pasarel Monastery “St. Apostles Peter and Paul” have in common? Apart from the word “monastery” of course. They are all parts from a religious and church complex called the Holy Mount of Sofia or Little Athos.

It is named after Mount Athos, but unlike the original which has only 20 monasteries, the one in Sofia has 44 of them and they are all functioning. Its history traces back to the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (1185-1396), when it was quite trendy for Bulgarian king to build, sponsor and support of monasteries and churches.

With the huge diversity of still functioning monasteries, the farthest being only half an hour away from the city, Sofia offers a good start for pilgrimage and the possibility to immerse yourself into the times when having your name proudly inscribed as a church-donor was a huge expression of esteem, honour and respect.

For a starting point, do choose the Dragalevski Monastery “St. Mary of Vitosha” in the skirts of the mountain, 2 km away from the Dragalevski district. It was built by King Ivan Alexander during the 14th century and was supported by his son King Ivan Shishman. It used to provide refuge and a meeting place for our national hero Vasil Levski and his comrades from the Bulgarian Revolutionary Committee. Today, the monastery and the adjacent bishop residence form a picturesque complex.

Then proceed east to Kokalyane Monastery “St. Archangel Michael”, built by King Samuil in the 11th century at the base of Manasteriste peak. It is famous for the Kokalyane Gospel by John of Kratova and the Urvich collection of veneration speeches about archangels Michael and Gabriel (including a veneration speech by Kliment Ohridski, one of the first teachers in Cyrillic alphabet) as well as 26 pages with donors’ certificates from the 16th, 17th and the 18th century. Together with the Pancharevo (Urvich) Monastery “St.
Nicolay Lenti”, and the fortress’s church “St. Iliya” form the Urvich fortress complex.

If you continue along the high ridges of Plana you will reach the Pasarel Monastery “St. Apostles Peter and Paul”. It was established in the 15th century, probably as a chapel. On the outside it seems modest – no antechamber, no dome. But it is ornately decorated with murals – valuable for their scenes and flavour.

The final point of your pilgrimage might be the 13th century Kremikovtsi Monastery “St. George”, which as many Sofia monasteries dates back to the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. Most probably, it was funded by King Ivan Alexander. One of the donors was Sofia noble Radivoy, who built the monastery in memory of his children – Todor and Dragana. The preserved Kremikotsi gospel is still an example of calligraphy and hints that the monastery was probably literary centre at the time. Probably, it has provided support for the nearby monasteries in Seslav and Eleshnitsa.

When you cross the threshold of any of these places, do not forget to light a candle for those before us, for us, and for those that will follow. That is how tradition goes.
A crossroad of religions?! Yes, this is the unique cohabitation of major world religions in just half a square km. In the heart of Sofia you can find the “St. Nedelya” Eastern Orthodox church, the “Banya Bashi” mosque, the “St. Joseph” Catholic church and the Sofia Synagogue. A few blocks contain the places of worship for eastern and western Christians, Muslims and Jews. If we go deeper into the etymology of Sofia, we see that the name itself means “Holy wisdom of God” in Greek, as a host of wisdom of religious tolerance.

We could try to find the roots of this religious tolerance in the thousands of years of history of the city. A settlement of the Thracians, a town in the empire of Alexander the Great, one of the centres of medieval times, part of the Ottoman empire and after 1878 — the capital of Bulgaria. If you look from the bell tower of St. Nedelya, the church at the square before the Sheraton hotel and Serdika Metro Station, you will see Banya Bashi at the opposite corner. Both temples have a long history.

St. Nedelya church is the cathedral of Sofia Bishopric. During the 19th and in the first decades of the 20th century, the church was called “St. King” since it was the resting place of the relics of Serbian king Stefan Uros II (1282-1321). On the verge of the 20th century the church was renovated and it preserves its appearance to this day. In 1915, Bulgarian exarch Joseph I was buried near the side altar door.

Banya Bashi Mosque is built in 1545-1557 on the initiative and with the financial support of the benefactor mullah Effendi Kada Seifdullah. That is why some sources refer to the temple as Mullah Effendi or Kada Seifdullah mosque. The architect was Mimar Sinan, famous for building the so called sultan style mosques — the most beautiful and representative ones.
Just a block away, on Exarch Joseph Str. stands the Jewish temple – Sofia Synagogue. It is the third largest synagogue in Europe after those in Budapest and Amsterdam (and the largest one on the Balkans). The idea for its construction came around in 1903 to replace the existing smaller temple. The project was drafted by the Austrian architect Friedrich Gruenager who modelled the Synagogue after the Viennese one.

On Knyaz Boris I Str., there is the Catholic cathedral St. Joseph, which is happens to be the biggest in Bulgaria. The idea for the construction emerged in 1975 and the building started in 1978. It now hosts a church, a college and a concert hall. In 2002, in the presence of Pope John-Paul II, a stone was laid for a new temple. The newer, bigger cathedral opened its doors for worshippers in 2006.

For centuries, Sofia has been a point of intersection of many ethnicities, peoples and religions. A place where you can submerge in the calmness of religious tolerance. St. Nedelya, Banya Bashi, St. Joseph, and the Sofia Synagogue are not just places of worship, but they encompass diverse cultures, beliefs, and ideologies just 5 minutes away from each other.
Izgrev district, named after the settlement Izgrev, founded by Deunov in 1927. Then the place was the highest point of Sofia valley. The garden sits just in front the Russian embassy, and the metro (Joliot Curie station), busses 120 and 413, and tram 18 will easily bring you nearby.

Close to the garden, called by his followers The Master’s Place, is the White House (6 Shteryu Atanasov Str) – a centre for prayer and assembly of the white brothers.

Deunov was born in 1864, when Bulgaria was under the Ottoman rule. He studied theology in the Boston University, USA. When he returned to Bulgaria he started his famous lectures in which he preached Christian virtues like love, wisdom, truth, justice and patience. In 1922, the first School of Universal White Brotherhood in Sofia. And a large part of his life is related to the capital.

If you are into the transcendent or just interested where the place where the person considered by many to be Christ Reborn, you must visit the Garden of Deunov. The place is specially selected and built. The garden is a round area and during the spring and autumn equinox the rays entwine in such way that they form a shaft of light pointing at the centre of the space. The place is full of cute wooden benches and is often visited by white doves, who eat from special feeding racks; white stones are used to pave the alleys and the garden is the home of many rose species and fruit laden trees, brought from all over Bulgaria. The meditation fans, the people seeking a sip of peace in the noisy city, diplomats, foreigners, mothers, people young and old frequent the place. It is easy to reach. The garden is located in the
with energy, and the whole “dance” is experienced more like a trance – a separation from the flesh and material and unity with the spiritual. Every day from the 22nd of September and the 22nd of March, Sofia is a floor for Paneurhythmy. Yuzhen park and the garden below the Broadcast Tower (last stop of tram 18) are the places where the white brothers convene to dance the century old exercises.

The only museum of Peter Deunov is in Marchaevo village, 16 km southwest from Sofia on the way to Pernik. Here, everything is preserved the way it was when the Master stayed in the house, which became a museum in 1943. While hiding from the bombing of Sofia by the Allied air force, Deunov lectured in the village. Just next to the village Deunov discovered a spring he called The Spring of Good. Many believe that the water from the mountain stream is healing and come to it with hope.

Deunov is one of the most mystic figures in Bulgarian history. He was persecuted for his original ideas, but many of his followers believe he was Christ Reborn, although he rejected the suggestion. King Boris III regularly sought the Master’s advice on societal and political issues, while Bulgarian Church considers him a heretic. If you would like to get in touch with something mystic and deeply philosophical, if you would like to see the occult dance of the White Brotherhood or just sip from the Spring of Good, Sofia can surely offer a part of the heritage of Beinsà Dunò.
Sofia is unique and it can proudly show a lot of symbols. But the one that characterizes its core is the street paved with yellow cobblestone. It is the contemporary symbol of a place, which has soaked thousands of years of history, wisdom and memories. How could they survive wars, calamities, earthquakes, sieges, bombings and even the occasional souvenir collectors?

According to the legends, the yellow cobble stones were a gift from the royal family of Austro-Hungary on the occasion of the wedding between Bulgarian King Ferdinand I with Eleonore Reuss of Koestritz, cousin of the great Russian queen Maria Pavlovna. They were cast in Budapest and laid at the beginning of the 20th century. Facts tell a different story. The cobble stones were indeed imported from Austria-Hungary, but not on the occasion of VIP event but rather after the initiative of the then mayor of Sofia Martin Todorov.

The cobble stones pave the heart of Sofia. We see them before the Alexander Nevsky cathedral, then around the Parliament and the former Royal Palace, close to the National Theater. The yellow cobble stones are like scattered pieces of history. Everyone who steps a foot on them sets a memory for the generations. Many famous people and remarkable events have imprinted them. Leafing through these stones we can see parades, funerals, concerts, sports events, demonstrations, joy and sadness.

Few locals know that the building of the National Assembly was initially located in the Gradska Gradina (City Garden) where the Sofia City Gallery now resides. Later, it was temporarily moved to Moskovska Street (now a restaurant). The most valued possession in the current beautiful and quite symbolic building are the wooden benches for the members of parliament (then 120, now 240).
The present ones are crafted from boiled beech in the 1960s using unique methods. They have been assembled in whole rows in quite a complex way. However, the most impressive part is the northern foyer with its white staircases and two rows of columns. If you can get in, look at the enormous crystal Austrian chandelier, weighing more than a ton. The library is too a hidden treasure. Only here all stenographic diaries documenting every session of the parliament since its founding in 1879 can be found. Few people know that the famous national motto inscribed on the building “Unity makes strength” has been removed only once: in 1938 when it was changed to “In unity is strength). The change was less than welcome and the old inscription was restored.

The Bulgarian legislative neighbours the biggest temple on the Balkans – the Patriarch’s Cathedral “St. Alexander Nevsky”. It was built in honour of the 200 000 soldiers who have fell for the Liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule during the Russo-Turkish war (1877-1878). That is why it is also a memorial church. It was named after St. Alexander Nevsky, the patron of Russian army during the war in question. The solemn ring of the biggest church bell filled with sound the air of Sofia for the first time in 1913 to celebrate the Bulgarian army victory in Edirne. The official consecration of the temple took place in 1924. In size, decoration, architecture and grandeur, the St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral rivals any tourist attraction worldwide. Over the main arched entrance with three doors rises the bell tower, finished with a golden dome. The dome is supported by three columns with wide openings displaying a view of the 12 bells cast in and imported from Moscow. In total the bells weigh 25 tons. If the weather is
and the proclamation of Sofia for capital (1879). After 9th of September 1944 (when Communists came into power) the building became the seat of the Council of Ministers and doubled as a residence for the new statesmen. Since 1953, the building was granted (with a Council of Ministers decree) for the exhibition and administration of the National Gallery of Art which keeps over 50 000 works of art of famous Bulgarian artists, 3 000 of which are on display even now. The building also hosts the Ethnographic Museum. The Palace was proclaimed a monument of culture in 1978.

The most attractive building for generals, actors, and even pop-folk starlets is undoubtedly the Central Military Club. It was one of the first grand public buildings after the Liberation. It now welcomes people of all ages and interests – it hosts everything from fashion shows to celebrations of Astronauts’ Day and on a busy day there are 7 to 11 events in the club. During prom or Christmas season, events go up to 150-200 per month. Ever since it opened its doors for the first time the Central Military Club has been an entertainment centre for the elite.

The biggest bell can be heard 30 km outside Sofia. The bigger bells fancy reliefs of Jesus Christ, St. Mary, St. Alexander Nevsky, St. Sofia, St. Cyril and St. Methodius, as well as memorial inscriptions with old-style interlaced design. The cathedral owns over 400 exhibits of Christian art.

Let us not forget the Monument to the Tsar the Liberator, known to locals as Konya (the Horse). It has been erected to represent the gratitude of Bulgarian people to Alexander II of Russia and in honour of the Liberation. The figure of the Tsar on a horse is made of bronze. The middle part of the pedestal features Nike (the ancient Greek goddess of victory) leading the people to battle. In memory of the Romanian soldiers who participated in the Russo-Turkish Liberation War, Romanian king Carol I donated a bronze wreath placed on the front of the monument. The inscription reads “Tsar the Liberator, grateful Bulgaria”. The construction was funded through donations of Bulgarian members of parliament and King Ferdinand, as well as through the sale of a special postal stamp featuring a portrait of Alexander II.

Another imposing building bound to catch your eye along the golden street is the former King palace, built immediately after the Liberation (1878)
The building impresses not only with the imposing facade, reminding us of times long gone, but also with the remarkable interior. The stairway is tiled with black Italian marble with silver wire inserts. Even the parquet is symbolic – the figures of the King’s St. George cross are still preserved. The Baroque concert hall is one of its kind in Sofia. It can hold 500 people. On the ceiling a heavy chandelier with 48,000 Swarovski crystals shines 4.5 m above the seated public. Acoustic pots built in the walls ensure the unique sound.

Our next stop on this exciting trip along the golden street is one of the most beautiful churches in Sofia – St. Nicholas the Miracle-Maker. It is called the Russian church since it is built on a lot owned by the Russian embassy at the end of the 19th century to serve the needs of Russian immigrants in Bulgaria. The crypt is the resting place of the relics of Archbishop Seraphim, who is still not canonised as a saint by the Russian Orthodox Church, but is revered by many Bulgarians and Russians. Many come to Sofia to bow before his relics attracted probably by the belief that they are miraculous. There is a special urn for prayers and notes addressing the relics expressing the worshippers most cherished wishes, their pains and sufferings and requests for help.

Bulgarian National Bank further along provides a reading of the our economy from the Liberation to the present day. This is one of the oldest institutions established more than 135 years ago. It now occupies a grandiose place on the yellow cobblestone street. An interesting fact is that the Printing Works (the place where actual money is printed) was opened only in 1998 almost 120 years after the foundations of the first state bank were laid.

Some 13 years ago we wanted our capital to go into the new millennium with something new, something unseen and rarely done. So in the year 2000 the 8 m high statue of St. Sofia, which has now become a symbol of our ancient capital, was installed. The 4 ton figure made of bronze and galvanized copper stands on a 14 m high pillar above Serdika metro station. The author of the monumental piece, which evoked much public debate and some discontent, is famous Bulgarian sculptor Georgi Chapkanov. The blessing hand of St. Sofia holds a wreath, and the other holds an owl, symbol of wisdom.

Yellow cobblestones … Over them beats today the living rhythm of the city.
A true time machine is working at the heart of Sofia – the museum under St. Sofia basilica. Just across the St. Alexander Nevsky cathedral, to the right of the Monument to the Unknown Soldier and the eternal flame, rises the three nave temple, build in the necropolis of ancient Sofia, over remnants of older churches from the 4th century. In the beginning of the 20th century, a Czech, Vaclav Dobruski began digging under the St. Sofia basilica and discovered that the place has been a centre of historical events since Roman times. The entrance to this centre is inside the church itself, to the right of the candle and religious paraphernalia kiosk. Just few steps below the ground take the visitor in another era.

The exhibits in the newly opened museum collect 18 centuries of history in one place. The visitors may get to know the past of the main necropolis of Ancient Serdika and the earlier churches under the basilica. In the dim light, you may view restored graves, holograms of objects unearthed here, replicas of ancient mosaics, etc. Information signs tell about famous personalities and emperors who visited the city, helped it, loved it. One is Constantine the Great, who is famous for his line “Serdika is my Rome”. More than 50 tombs have been discovered under the basilica. One of the most interesting is a 4th century tomb with preserved floral motifs symbolizing the Garden of Eden. Displays also include two rings belonging to Bulgarian kings and a reliquary of a Christian saint who died defending his faith. Other treasures are the exquisite mosaics with geometrical figures, flowers, peacocks and crosses; they show that the interior of the holy site was decorated only by the best craftsmen. Computers generate images of how the centre of ancient Serdika looked with its amphitheatre, main streets and churches build on the same spot. The worshippers in the church can see what is happening in the museum from special windowed openings on the floor of the basilica. Today St. Sofia and the museum below tell the story of the city and interweave the charm of the cultural heritage with the human connection to God.

The entrance fee is 6 leva, a 2 leva discount fee applies to seniors and students.

Only a kilometre away, in the direction of Serdika metro station, we already walk along the main street of the ancient city. We pass through houses on our right and our left, a bit farther
along is the public bath. We reach the forum – the central square. It is precisely on the spot of the underground passage of the Sheraton hotel. Did we transport you at least for a moment to the city that existed 1700 years ago? Who did really thread along these streets? The fact is that Sofia today has largely inherited the planning of ancient Serdika. It is truly unique that the two main streets of the old city Cardo and Decumanus Maximus intersected at the underground passage where St. Petka church still stands. Nowadays these two streets are Todor Alexandrov and Maria Louisa (and its continuation Vitosha) respectively.

One of their kind archaeological artefacts dating from ancient to medieval times were dug up during the enlargement of Serdika metro station three years ago. Now, the construction of antiquity cultural and information complex is under way on this spot. It will put Sofia along cities rich in history like Athens and Rome. It will enable every citizen and guest of the capital to walk around ancient Serdika starting from the eastern gate of the city (now on display in the underground passage between the Presidency and the Council of Ministers, along via principalis (a fancy Roman name for main street), stepping on original pavement, surrounded by the bases of the columns which used to stand there. Then pass along the exhibition complex and enter the underground museum, the glass workshop and the public bath. Above the ground these steps will be traced with colorful paints along the streets. While arriving to work
glass dome that will provide panoramic view over the ruins while letting daylight underground at the same time. The idea is to recreate a “second” antique centre of the city in the form of unique underground museum.

At the same time, archaeologist who research the space under St. Nedelya square have discovered three large public buildings where the governance of ancient Serdika apparently sat. The scientists are not completely sure about the exact function of these buildings but their digging for truth will continue. One hypothesis claims the area contains the residence of Constantine the Great (used while the emperor was in town). Another theory suggests that there laid the praetorium (the seat of the military governor – the strategist – of the town).

It is also likely that one of this buildings will turn out to be the ancient mint. This would be a huge discovery not only because we may discover some money, but also because it might reveal what instruments were used. It seems those are a particularly rare and valuable find.

Usually the residence and the praetorium formed the forum (or downtown) of the city. It is believed that the present square mimics the borders of the ancient forum. According to theories, the old one was surrounded by statues.

It is all to be uncovered...
The Triangle of Powers: sounds a bit pompous, a bit heavy, a bit old-fashioned. But we cannot get around that – after all we speak about power and governance; associations are too many and too diverse. Massive buildings with long history and many traditions; the places where order and law are forged and so is our face to the world: the Presidency, the Council of Ministers, the National Assembly.

They are part of the impressive architectural complex in the ideal centre of the capital, called the Largo. The complex also includes the buildings of the Central Department Store (TZUM) and Sheraton Hotel Balkan. The new architectural plan of Sofia, which redesigned the centre including the Largo, was adopted in 1951. The end result was the fruit of the efforts of a big team influenced by the then domineering Soviet aesthetics. The style was then defined as “late Socialist eclectics”, which seems to mean lack of unity of styles of the facades of the different buildings.

The Presidency building is the home of the Bulgarian head of state and his administration. The edifice was built between 1954 and 1956. Its architect was Ivan Danchov. The facade follows the socialist eclectic style. The front
is tiled with limestone from Ruse, and the interior is dominated by a large selection of works of art, mainly oil paintings by Bulgarian artists.

The most impressive from all Presidency halls is the so called Coat of Arms Hall where most contracts, agreements and treaties are signed and where the state insignia are awarded. In reality, the President’s administration occupies only the first three floors of the seven story building. The rest of the place is for the Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Justice and other institutions. Apart from being and important state institution by itself, the Presidency started attracting even more visitors after the new main entrance was constructed in 1999 to open a view of the St. George the Dragon Slayer rotunda. At the parade entrance, National Guard stands sentry making rounds every hour.

Since the Liberation from the Ottoman rule and the adoption of the Turnovo Constitution, the Council of Ministers (the government) has been the supreme executive organ throughout the newest history of Bulgaria. Since 1879, a total of 86 governments have ruled over Bulgaria. The building at the Triangle of Power is the office of the Prime Minister, his deputies and occasionally other ministers.

Everyone who has entered the building at least once has felt a strange tingling on their back. Interior design specialists say this is not by mere chance. The building is designed in the so called Stalinist vampire style, which uses architecture to convey just how powerful the rule is and how insignificant the person is without this rule. That is also why the edifice is build like a citadel: with huge heavy columns, thick walls and little windows, looking like arrow slits. Together with TZUM, the Party Headquarters and the Presidency forms an ensemble that is believed to be
one of the safest points during earthquake.

The Party Headquarters used to be the main building of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party during the times of People’s Republic of Bulgaria. Today it is the part of the Parliament offices. The edifice spreads over 40 000 sq m and is finished in neoclassical style with distinct overtones implying triumph, celebration and grandeur to mark (and glorify) the victory of the Bulgarian Communist Party on the 9th of September, 1944. The pompousness of the outside is achieved with strictly symmetrical façades and the large scale Corinthian order forms. On the inside, the corridors are almost 3 km long. There are two big halls – St Sofia with 900 seats and the Coat of Arms Hall, which is 18 by 11 m. At the top of the front wall, on the pillar now nesting the Bulgarian flag, between 1954 and 1990, there used to be a red star similar to the ones that the Bolsheviks erected over the Kremlin in Moscow in the 1930s. Today the original Star No 1 can be seen in the Socialist Art Museum.
They have been often accused for lacking art value, for being unaesthetic or plain ugly, and for ruining the city landscape. They were considered too big, having too much concrete, too protruding just to be seen from any point of the city. But they are symbols of time long gone and they seem to have captured its spirit – they are solid, massive and almost indestructible. We are talking about socialist monuments in Bulgaria. Many former socialist countries keep these communist symbols not to be reminded of their painful past, but rather to instill romantic attitude towards the past as a whole. The rejection of these monuments in Bulgaria started right after the Communist regime and Todor Zhivkov, the Chairman of the State Council (de facto head of state) and Chairman of the Bulgarian Communist Party, were overthrown. Under the pressure of some right-wing politicians at the beginning of the 1990s, some of the Communist monuments have been removed, while others remain but were left unattended by the municipal authorities. It seems that we have neglected something that might be of interest of tourists.

Let us start our tour back in times not so long ago with the Museum of Socialist Art. The idea for opening the museum has stirred controversy – not because it is depicting socialism but rather because it just presents only one aspect of the spirit of that time – the art. There is no space for, say, propaganda or political songs like the museum in East Germany, which is showing the lives of citizens of the GDR. To be fair, our museum has not set on a mission to make a deep and comprehensive analysis of the period between 1944 and 1989; it aims to remind the older generations and to acquaint the newer ones with what we call socialist art: paintings and monuments influenced by Socialist Realism, propaganda and ideology, and depicting communist guerrillas (partizani), leaders of work teams (brigadiri) and party leaders.

The museum is a branch of the National Gallery of Art. It opened on the 19th of September 2011 and although many locals were not particularly happy, the museum became an attraction for foreign tourists.

The first thing you see when you enter the Museum is the red star that used to adorn the
former Party HQ and later spent quite a while in the yard of the Central Bath. The museum has exhibits on the outside and on the inside. The yard is dedicated to sculptures. Over 7500 sq. m, along nice green alleys stand 77 sculptures. A 5-m tall statue of Georgi Dimitrov (leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Secretary General of the Communist International 1935-1943, and Prime Minister of Bulgaria 1946-1949) rises in the centre of the park. Tens of other statues and bas-reliefs, predominantly of Communist chiefs like Lenin, but also of workers, soldiers and others, collected from all over Bulgaria, are spread through the park.

Paintings are exhibited inside. You can see depictions of historical events as well as pictures of life like the people greeting of the Soviet Liberation Army, institution of local Communist party branch, bombings over Sofia. The inside exhibition is accessible to people in wheelchairs via elevator.

The museum has a video hall running documentaries about the Socialist times, and sometimes more recent pictures telling us about the events after 1989.

Let us not forget the Monument to the Soviet Army. You can find it easily as it lies in the perfect centre of the city on Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd between Orlov Bridge and the Sofia University. The sculptural group includes a triumphant Soviet soldier with raised submachine gun, with two people on his sides – a peasant woman and a working man from Bulgaria.

Interested to see more? The museum is in Iztok district, on 7 Lachezar Stanchev Str (close to the Traffic Police). You can easily reach it with Metro to G.M. Dimitrov Station, or with busses 280 and 88. It is open Tuesday to Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. Closed on Monday. Tickets cost 6 leva for adults and 3 leva for students and seniors. You can also book a guided tour by calling +359 2 9021802. Guided tours cost 20 leva for groups under five and 30 leva for groups over five people.
For over 30 years already the place is a central meeting point for youths with more rebellious views of life. Since the beginning of the Transition to democracy, the monument has been an object of heated discussions regarding its meaning and future.

It might be interesting for you to know that the Monument is often painted with graffiti usually with anti-communist and anti-Soviet messages. One of the most popular design (dating from the 17th of June 2011) when the reliefs on the pedestal were painted like American pop and comic book characters: The Mask, Wolverine, the Joker, Santa Claus, Supermen, Captain America, etc. On the 21st of August 2013, the front of the monument was covered again, this time in pink, and inscribed in Czech and Bulgarian “Bulharsko se omlouva!!!” and “Bulgaria apologizes!!!“. The rest of the sides featured writings “Apologize!” and “Prague ’68”. It turned out to be an apology to the Czech Republic on the occasion of defeat of the Prague Spring rebellion.

The monument to fighters against fascism called Bratskata Mogila (the Common Grave) is located in Borisova Garden. Under it rest
the remains of 17 prominent activists of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the Worker’s Youth Union, who lived and worked in Sofia, and died fighting against fascism. The central part of the monument is a 41-m tall obelisk, symbol of the rise of the communist party. It is made from granite from Rila. Under the obelisk, there are two bronze guerrilla warriors (a man and a woman) who herald freedom for the people. Wreaths are placed on both sides of the monument to symbolize the victory from the 9th of September 1944.

Speaking of symbols from communist times we cannot fail to mention the biggest convention centre for conferences, exhibitions and special events in South East Europe – the National Palace of Culture (eNDeKa). The idea came from the Sofia branch of the Communist Party and in particular from Lyudmila Zhivkova, daughter of the former First Man Todor Zhivkov).

NDK was built in less than 4 years despite that the plans required 12 years for its construction. It was opened in March 1981 in honour of the 1300 birthday of the Bulgarian State.

The Palace has about 10 000 tons of metal structures, just as much as the Eiffel Tower in Paris. NDK was built on 18 300 sq m and its all-out area is 123 300 sq m. It has eight floors and three more underground with 13 halls for 100 to 4000 people, and 55 conference rooms. The Palace offers 15 000 sq m exhibition area. In 2005 NDK was awarded the annual prize AIPC Apex Award which distinguishes the world’s best convention centres.
You have heard about communism, right? There is hardly a person who hasn’t. Then you probably know about its military power which instilled fear throughout the whole Western world for more than four decades. The two blocs competed fiercely when it came to armament and what is more they exported many of their weapons to other countries. So, at some point, many countries had at their disposal a formidable arsenal including tanks, jets, rockets, light firearms and so on. Surely, you must want to learn more about that and see these notorious arms. Well at least we do.

If that is the case, we have good news. If you want to know more about the military prowess of Bulgaria and the Socialist Bloc, or you just wander just how big these weapons are, come to the National Museum of Military History. Here, at over 40 decares, you can see 241 examples of arms used in artillery, anti tank weapons, the air forces, the navy, rocket and engineering equipment.

Just imagine how you step behind the fence, take a walk up the alley, turn right and there just before you stand formidable fighter jets MiG 21 or MiG 23. You look to the side and a bit further you see the holy terror - the military chopper MI 24. And do you remember or have you heard about the missiles SS-23 OKA, Scud and Frog? They are here too, you just have to walk a little more along the alleys of this wonderful courtyard with well groomed grass and alleys.

Before you know you might even find other interesting metal birds used in different conflicts around the world like the MiG15 and MiG17. But did you know that MiG15 was one of the most produced and used military fighter jets in history with its first flight was made in 1948? Nearby, you can see an example of modern weaponry of NATO.
forces – Tornado variable jet.

You are not that much into flying? Just pass the aircraft and you will end up near pieces of military equipment which have already been a bit forgotten – tanks. If you are a fan, you will be tempted. You can look at the Soviet T72, T55, T34, the light tanks Hotchkiss, Skoda, Maybach, or enjoy diverse armoured vehicles.

You would like to touch something different, something big and dangerous? We can understand, and your wish is easy. After a short walk in the courtyard you will find yourself among so many artillery, howitzers and cannons that your head will start spinning. Maybach T-3, Maybach T-4, SAU-76, SAU-100, 152 mm self propelled artillery Akatsiya and 122 mm self propelled howitzer Gvozdika stand proud and wait for fans. The displays include different system of guns - Krupp, Schneider, dome cannon Gruson, anti-tank guns Skoda,
Reinmetal, ZIS-2, ZIS-3, MT-12, mountain and field cannons as well as the only preserved air defence gun KS-30 in Bulgaria.

It seems that you had enough walking around outside and being startled by the big guns. Come and take a look inside. The indoor exhibition is just as interesting. For its almost a century-long existence, the museum treasures over one million cultural valuables that had witnessed the Bulgarian and European military history. It is the only museum in Bulgaria that shows three expositions with almost 27,000 exhibits. The most important battles in the Bulgarian history, the ideas and heroes of the national freedom fights, the 130-year long history of the Bulgarian army with a special focus on their battles and wars are shown in thematic-chronologic order. The richest state collections of weapons, uniforms, and insignia of honour attract visitors to the collection exhibition. You can find a great deal of cold and firearms in one of the exhibitions. Now is the time to discover what weapons did Bulgarian heads of state owned in their private collections.
It is also interesting to see what orders decorated our statesmen so far. In fact, the National Museum of Military History is the only place you can see these things. Only there you can browse through the biggest collection of military and state insignia in Bulgaria - not only from our country but also from 35 states from Europe, 6 from Asia and 3 from America.

The museum also shows the development of Bulgarian military uniform, accessories and gear in the years of our country’s existence. It also hosts Bulgarian relics such as Samara banner, Levski’s locks of hair, the weapon and clothing of Rakovski, the only preserved uniforms of Bulgarian guerrillas during the Ottoman rule, the triumph weapons, the military banners and the uniforms of the Bulgarian army.

Make sure you don’t miss the Corinthian helmet (one of the only three preserved worldwide), the real cuirass, the sword-revolver, the gun with triangular bullet, the firing halberd, and the cane.

If you have been intrigued to see more, you can try to see the museum’s website www.militarymuseum.bg first, or call 00359 2 9 461805 to book a guided tour. The museum is easily accessible - take tram 20 or 22 to „Embassy of Romania“ or Mall Serdika bus stop. You can also reach it with bus lines 9, 72, 120, 305, 413.

The address is Sofia, 92, Cherkovna Street. The museum is open Wednesday to Sunday from 10 a.m to 6 p.m. Tickets cost 8 leva for adults and 2 leva for students, seniors and disabled. Children up to 7 years of age enter free of charge. And if you happen to be in Sofia at the end of the month and you would like to visit this museum, you can even enter for free every last Wednesday of the month. Isn’t that cool?
The Science Class You Wished You Had

Do you remember the tedious task of balancing equations in Chemistry class? Can you still calculate the length of a wave like you did in Physics class? Well, Sofia Science week has nothing to do with that. Or rather it has, but without the boring parts.

Science surrounds us. The ice-cream tastes amazing due to the unbelievable mix of droplets, crystals and bubbles. Rock music counts on specific string vibrations (with a touch of Jimmy Hendrix’s genius). The attraction between people can be explained with the „molecule of love“ (a colourless liquid, with assertive smell of bad fish, composed of molecules of eight carbon atoms and weight of 121 g per mole). These and many other questions about “life, the universe and everything” are answered during Sofia Science Week.

For the third year in a row, every May, for a week, the centre of the capital becomes a giant scientific lab for unique experience of science around us. You may attempt to build a robot and use it to compete against others in the robotics workshop. Try to prepare caviar from honey, which will make even Heston Blumenthal smile, in the molecular gastronomy workshops. Attempt to uncover the biodiversity in the Doctor’s garden.

Do these activities seem childish? Why don’t you stop by the lectures on super heroes and learn if Hollywood has stumbled upon top secret research in top secret labs or if it has inspired a new experiment. Maybe you will like to hear why Tom and Jerry can’t be friends in real life. Elementary, or is it.

At Sofia Science Week you may see and hear in person some of the biggest names in contemporary science. It kind of makes a difference when you hear about the particle of God (a.k.a the Higgs boson) from one of the creators of the Large Hadron Collider. Supposedly, he knows what he is talking about. Professor Jim Al-Khalili, who apart from being a theoretical physicist and officer of the Order of British Empire, is also a TV star of sorts, tells us about some of the greatest paradoxes in physics - how can Shroedinger cat can be both dead and alive at the same time, or can a demon decrease the entropy of a container full of gas.

The Festival is not only the place to meet the science hot shots. Many young scientists shine for the first time in the
Fame Lab competition - after all, there are so many reality shows for singers, actors, designers and even chefs, why shouldn’t there be a place where the most promising young scientists can demonstrate their knowledge in a queer way. They can make you think about chemistry while you clean or about the relation between the evil witch Baba Yaga, the chicken leg and the extraterrestrials. Speaking of aliens in all editions of the festival there has always been someone to talk about “the truth out there”.

Still sounds too scientific? Skip that part and go to the fashion tent to learn about design of clothes from „smart fabrics“. Or sneak into the love and sex workshop. Well, do not hope for Kama Sutra practice, but the science of pheromones can still give you a few pointers. If you are an artist you can learn how science finds its place in paintings. Or discover if we can calculate happiness with a mathematical formula.

Sofia Science Week is not the only point of contact between the locals and guests of Sofia with the peak of contemporary science. For example, during the Ratio festival you could hear a lecture on vampires. And no, they do no tell you how much gel Edward Cullen uses. Instead you will learn why we believe in the blood sucking creatures of the night and what the science is behind some more popular ways to kill a vampire. In another lecture, you could hear about psychics and fortune tellers and how they manipulate human consciousness. What is strange is that these lectures are just as exciting as the presentation of the geometry treasures.

So, without pretences of being the European capital of science, Sofia offers a surprising set of events which turn several days of the year in triumph of thought and science. Who knows? Maybe some of the next editions of these festivals will feature Stephen Hawking or Michio Kaku.

Just in case you’d better check their webpage often at www.sofiasciencefestival.bg
A shortcut between the abacus and space exploration.

Tucked just outside the perfect centre of Sofia lies a real treasure for science fans and lovers of weird inventions.

Have you ever wandered what astronauts eat? Bulgaria is the world’s third largest producer of foods to go into space. And the only place where you can see spaghetti with ham, yoghurt with muesli and local speciality lyutenitsa, packed for use beyond earth’s orbit, is the National Polytechnic Museum. The museum also displays the only contraption successfully used for growing wheat in space. Yes, the first space greenhouse is “Made in Bulgaria”. And not only made but actually sent to serve its purpose on MIR orbital station.

Wait, it seems that we started from the end. Here is the beginning of the story. The National Polytechnic Museum is the only museum in Bulgaria dedicated to the technical knowledge from various areas - from household items, through mining, the progress in photography and reproduction of sounds, to cars, computers and space exploration.

The exhibits display only a small part of the incredible collection of the museum, but while you browse you will stumble upon some truly amazing things. For example, a washing machine from the beginning of the 20th century (and the brand still operates today) that looks like a modern day hand mixer. Only you stir the clothes until every single stain is gone.

Speaking of strange, there is a car that looks more like a plane and seems terribly uncomfortable to drive. Well, there is a logical explanation - after World War Two Germany was prohibited to build planes. One of the aircraft producing companies, Messerschmitt, had too many left over parts, which could not be used for planes, so the management decided it will apply those parts to cars. By the way, in the very centre of the first hall, there stands a unique old Ford model A. It is said that the reconstructed car is fully operational, but it is unlikely you will be allowed a test drive.

Right beside the Ford is the enormous clock collection, including the clock with unmovable arms. How do you know the time then? Elementary, it is the dial that rotates. Speaking of collections we cannot skip the unique set of lamps... for mining. Try to find the lamp designed especially for working in mines with risk of firedamp gas build-up.

The next hall takes us to the times before the digital era. You may even see the irony of taking pictures with your phone camera of the first photographic equipment with dimensions amounting to a small cupboard and the incredible capacity to take up to 100 pictures. Well, not all cameras are that big. Look in the corner where the spy gear hides - the cameras that use micro film and are easy to fit into a pocket or a telescope. And while today we enjoy our flat screen TVs, we might be startled by the sight of first television sets. We would not even think that the invention of a single television-radio set was close to a revolution.
Do you think your grandmothers spent the parties in virtuous talks over a cup of tea while cross stitching elaborate gobelins. Think again while you look at the phonographs. You can just imagine how noisy these things get. What if your virtuous grandmother is approached by a young male with a stereoscope - strange glasses or rather a mask which renders spatial perspective to pictures. Your grandma’s heart would have jumped with intrigue.

By the way, while perusing the gramophone section, pay attention to a record featuring a dog listening to a phonograph. This is the logo of one of the most famous record labels at the time - „His Master’s Voice“. This gave the birth of a famous saying in Bulgaria: the „dog brand“ went from meaning that something was of high quality to become a common name of something with unclear origin.

You cannot have a technical museum without computers, even if we did not mention the fact that the father of contemporary computer John Atanasov is of Bulgarian descent. But let us start with the calculating contraptions - from quipu and abacus (the ancient calculating tools) through accounting machines modestly called „Millionaire“ and cash registers typical for every Western movie and stopping at the Elka. The Bulgarian calculators Elka were famous worldwide for being small (by the standards then) and at the same time able to add, subtract, multiply and divide 16-digit numbers, exponentiate and extract roots and perform another 22 operations like that.

The museum is the home of the first Bulgarian personal computer. The Individual Micro Computer (IMCO-2) is modelled after Apple. Before you start comparing it to the i-gadgets, let me tell you it looks more like a TV (the monitor is in fact a modification of a commercially available TV set) placed over an electronic typewriter. IMCO-2 boasts 1 MHz processor and 48 KB of RAM! It even has a port for cassette tape!!!

The National Polytechnic Museum is on 66, Opalchenska Street and is open Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Adult tickets cost 5 leva and kids can go in for 1 or 2 leva. If you find it expensive, the entrance is free every last Monday of the month. However, if you are not prepared to pay 10 leva, leave your camera at home. More information about the museum can be found at www.polytechnicmuseum.org.
August is traditionally one of the more unpleasant months to stay in Sofia. Everyone is at the seaside and is posting pictures of paradise beaches and chilled cocktails, while you sweat in the dusty capital and sigh silently with longing and melancholy. Exactly at this oppressive atmosphere, for four years already, the locals and the visitors can at least for a while enjoy the multi-genre festival „Sofia Breathes“.

Standing for environmental culture is one of the main goals of the festival. Four years ago the festival was launched with the sole idea to close Ivan Shishman street for cars and free the space at least for a day for the people and in this way to promote healthy lifestyle, active life, a walk outdoors to enjoy the sun without being constantly startled by honking cars or breathing car vapours. The festival was born to provide little entertainment for the people who were stuck in Sofia in the holiday month. After a very successful start, the project grew to offer cultural events in other times of the year: Folk Colour Sofia in April, Recyclator Sofia Breathes in June, Summer Sofia Breathes in August, Quart Fest Sofia Breathes in September, Winter Sofia Breathes in December.

With only four years of history, Sofia Breathes has become in one of the most prestigious and popular cultural events on Sofia’s agenda. The festival’s ambition is to provide opportunities to hundreds of authors, organizations and initiatives to present their art and establish themselves on the cultural and social scene in Bulgaria. The festival offers an unique, creative and intriguing way for each and every visitor to get acquainted with the rich

Sofia breathes... The closed and empty Shishman street, a favourite to all locals for its old houses and small shops, a piano on the street and improvised small tables with gifts for sale. I walked both ways and really breathed.
cultural life in Sofia, which is waiting to be rediscovered. Every year, the fest puts us in positive mood with its exciting and attractive program, different initiatives, diverse music and theatre, fine arts and crafts, cinema, architecture, design and educational projects. And the most important part is that you are both a spectator and a participant in all of this. Events like this undoubtedly add value to what our city has to offer.

Imagine a Sunday when you can stroll along your favourite street in Sofia without worrying about cars and at the same time browsing stalls full of handmade gifts, books and toys. You stop and
learn something or leave your kid to draw or just enjoy the acrobatic tricks of a guy in a funny costume. Crowds of people, kids, balloons, cookies, clowns fill the pedestrian street. The air is full of swing and rock rhythms, so many dancers swirl around and make you dizzy, guitars strum everywhere.

As a part of the Cultural Calendar of Sofia since 2011 and the initiatives supporting the city’s candidacy for European Capital of Culture, the cultural festival „Sofia Breathes“ to make full use of the enormous cultural, social and economic potential of Sofia. The festival gives an opportunity to our capital, but also Bulgaria, to showcase all the young and extremely gifted artists and to assert itself on the European cultural map as a serious cultural centre and in this way establish a more positive image in Europe and the world.

I depart with a smile and full of positive emotions. I am thinking of staying in Sofia on purpose next August and enjoy the next edition of „breathing“.
Can you define “street art”? Art loses its meaning the minute someone tries to define it with several sentences. Art is a message, an idea, a moment. Plain, simple, beautiful. An image can invoke different emotions – joy, sadness, madness, irritation or just indifference. Art never leaves you indifferent.

How can we spice up life in a city? And not a mere city but a European capital? Easily – with colour, magic, idea and some ambitious and capable young people who can let their imagination free.

One of these youths did a mural depicting Old Dobri on the 25-m tall wall of Block No 57 in Hadzhi Dimitar district. The artist is known as Nasimo. The graffiti painter represents the Saint from Baylovo (as people call Dobri). The old man is in fact a beggar at Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, who also is the temple’s biggest donor. For years, the old man was donating to the church every lev tossed in his cup. Through spontaneous provocation the street artist shows in a striking and unique way his reverence to the old man of many virtues: simplicity, modesty, nobleness and determination. The masterpiece is part of the Souls in Walls project which also involved artists like Etam Cru and Bozko. Their works are exhibited on blocks 54 and 57A in the same neighbourhood.

Other people “guilty” of changing Sofia’s appearance are the people from the “Transformers”
crew. Their works can be seen in the “nontypical” district with the “nontypical” name Fakulteta (the Faculty – a district with predominantly Roma denizens). There these artists take part in the renovation of a children’s centre and its environment. The Transformers paint small comic strips and pictures on wooden discs and decorative stones and then paint the newly build fences, benches and playgrounds. Wooden planks and crates, car tyres and other junk have been transformed in playground’s furniture. The area itself becomes a protected children’s corner for art, play and entertainment. To put it in other words it is an example how a touch of street art can make our surroundings a better, more welcoming and more beautiful place.

On the 16th of September 2013 the first bells rang to announce the start of the school year. Three months earlier however, on the 16th and the 17th of June 68th School “Acad.
Nikola Obreshkov” hosted the events from the global Let’s Colour Project for the first time in Bulgaria. Yet again we witnessed the same provocation – colour, change, skill and good mood. And a small celebration for people of the Druzhba 2 district.

We paid attention to only a few of the impressive graffiti in the farther parts of Sofia. If these are your type of art, do not miss a tour around the centre of the city and admire the paintings on Rakovski, Ivan Vazov and Ivan Shishman Street. There are some on the back of the Sofia Region Administration. Bears appear on the façade of “F. J. Curie” school in Poduyane district.

We respect these young people and their talent. They show us each day how a seemingly grey existence can be replaced with the colour and charge of the artist. Come and see for yourselves!