

VELIKO TARNOVO

Situated in the outermost reaches of the Central Fore Balkan, Veliko Turnovo was formerly the medieval capital of Bulgaria. Located amphitheatrically on four hills - Tsarevets, Trapezitsa, Momina Krepost and Sveta Gora - the ridges of which were once the steep banks of the Yantra River, this unusual city is famous for its stone houses perched one above the other in layer upon layer of terraces.

Tsarevets is the oldest of the four and today the object of much historical interest. This impregnable citadel was the scene of many important historical events in the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, and the power of the city (it was known as the "Second Rome") can still be seen in the foundations of the Royal Palace. The Church of the Blessed Saviour, also known as the Patriarchate, was the only building permitted to surpass the palace in height and splendour - a sign of the kings' religiousness; situated on the highest point the Patriarchate is still fully functioning and plays an important part in the amazing "Sound and Light" audio-visual performances which portray Tsarevets in all its former glory, with scenes of battle, divine services and every day life.

Latin Emperor Baldwin of Flanders ended his days, having been captured by the Bulgarian King Kaloyan; the Lobna Skala or Execution Rock; the Assenova quarter - formerly the craft and merchant quarter; the Church of St Dimitar - where rebellion against Byzantine rule was instigated in 1185; the church of the Forty Holy Martyrs - host to three mighty columns bearing ancient inscriptions; the Church of Saints Peter and Paul; the Church of St. George, and many more.



Residences of the boyars (counts) and leading clergy of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom used to be located on Trapezitsa Hill together with about 40 private churches thought to have been family chapels; 16 of these are in the process of being excavated and preserved. Throughout the 12th to 14th centuries Trapezitsa and Tsarevets comprised the Inner Town of the Bulgarian capital. The hill is plateau-like with steep slopes, fortified by a fortress wall which follows the rock's circumference.

The Old Town Hall or former Ottoman Court Building is of greatest importance; a museum today, in 1879 the first session of the Constituent National Assembly of newly liberated Bulgaria (which adopted the Constitution of Turnovo) was held here.

Sveta Gora or Holly Hill is the third hilltop of the medieval capital today and is home to the beautiful buildings of St. Cyril and St. Methodius University.

Momina Krepost Hill was once heavily fortified in order to guard the main road leading to Constantinople. Nowadays the remains of the mighty fortress reveal secret passages and many artefacts from our ancestors' everyday life.

Arbanassi is only 4 km from the town of Veliko Tarnovo and was once the residence of boyars who controlled various provinces. The wealth and power of these people can still be seen in the unusual architecture of houses in the district which all resemble small fortresses with high walls and watch towers, external staircases, inner gardens, window shutters and whitewashed first floors. Today Arbanassi is an open air museum town where you can soak up the atmosphere and experience Bulgarian life as it was in olden times.

Veliko Tarnovo today is a key administrative, economic and cultural centre and has retained many signs of its former glory. Several of its Old Town quarters are still in existence, preserved as in medieval times. Bulgarian Renaissance houses with fine interiors are scattered over terraces alongside workshops and cafés; you can walk along narrow, steep Samovodska Charshia (the old market) and Gurko Street, admiring the genius of self-taught craftsman and architect Kolio Ficheto, who

created his masterpieces during the Bulgarian Revival period. Amazing in both architecture and location is the Nikoli Hann (Inn), where the tiny space and differences between ground and higher levels are very well utilised.

The Varosha district is also worth visiting for its 19th century atmosphere; here you can see craftsmen at work, visit the old café and pastry shop, buy handmade jewellery and enjoy the particular beauty of the wrought-iron garnished facades and cobbled slopes. House Museums of particular note include Konstantsaliev - the Town History Museum in Hadzhiiliev House - and Nikolcho Kostov's, and a powerful symbol worth seeing in the town is that fine monument dedicated to the brothers Assen and Peter - founders of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom - situated on one of the hills and connected to the rest of the city by huge bridges.

Many of the artefacts excavated at historical sights in Veliko Tarnovo are exhibited in the Archaeological and Ethnographic and National Revival Museums, as well as the Constituent Assembly building, the Second Bulgarian Kingdom Museum - a one time Turkish prison - and the National and Revolutionary Resistance Museum, amongst others.



Other significant historical sights in the fortress of Tsarevets are: the Baldwin Tower - where the

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