

SOFIA – NOT ONLY A LOW-COST DESTINATION



Since the start of low-cost airlines in Sofia, the number of foreign visitors in the Bulgarian capital has exploded. However, the city still struggles to find its place between the low-cost booze nights and the aspiration to become a cultural hub.

In recent years, the tourism numbers have exploded in Sofia, and this is largely due to the arrival of low-cost airlines. In 2016, Ryanair opened here routes with 18 European cities. Wizz Air, the Hungarian airline already established in Bulgaria, has responded to competition by opening new routes as well.

Result: 6.5 million people landed at Sofia airport in 2017, 30.3 per cent more than in 2016, when the increase was already 15 per cent. This year, when Sofia is the European capital of sport and hosts the rotating presidency of the European Union until July, the numbers should be even better.

"Thanks to low-cost flights, Sofia is now on the map of fashionable destinations," says Victor Trenev, whose agency, Bachelor Party Sofia, has been organizing bachelor parties since 2015. "Long ignored by tourists, even though Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007, Sofia is the new capital of the East to explore, in the tradition of Prague or Budapest. And it transforms the city," says Victor Trenev.

Today's Sofia, with 1.3 million inhabitants, has little to do with the Sofia of 1992, when Paromita Sanatani, author of the quarterly Sofia in Your Pocket guides, arrived. "Foreign visitors did not come, the streets were empty: no restaurants, no cafés, only a few shops, where you couldn't even find baby nappies," says the German. Fallen in love with a Bulgarian, she settles in the country and observes the gradual arrival of tourists. First in groups, through organized tours in the Valley of Roses or on the coast. Then, more and more young people, backpack on their back, in the capital. Mainly British, Germans, Greeks and Italians, looking for a low-cost weekend getaway. And the city's economy benefits: every week, new services are offered and businesses open.

Gradually, the capital has become aware of the richness of its heritage, far from being reduced to the neobyzantine Alexander Nevsky cathedral or the Bania-Bashi mosque, heritage of Ottoman domination. While digging the ground to build a new subway line in 2010, the excavators fell on a treasure trove of Roman ruins, now exposed in the open air around the subway station called "Serdika", named after the city in ancient times.

The municipality is now increasing investments to renovate its museums. "Our mission is as much to help Bulgarians reclaim their history as to develop cultural tourism," says Todor Chobanov.

These efforts sometimes run up against the appetite of property developers, for whom the areas devoted to ruins are so many square meters lost. As well as the dysfunctions of justice and the weakness of public investment. **Indeed, there is still much to be done to improve the infrastructure essential for tourism development in the capital.** Outside the historic center, street names are not always translated into the Latin alphabet. The connections between trams and metros are difficult for foreigners to understand, as is the SMS payment system for public car parks. And the few tourist information kiosks leave much to be desired. But still, modern travelers with adventurous soul can get ready for unique experience exploring this remarkable country.

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