

Bulgaria Bike Tour September 2013

About the tour

The tour is being organised by Steve Millard who is a committee member of the Woking Cycle Users Group, together with help from Barbara and Norman. Steve is currently enjoying a career break in Bulgaria together with his Bulgarian wife, Bobbi and newborn son, Chris. The tour is being organised for a group of up to 8 people (including Steve) for Sat 14th – Sun 22nd September 2013.

The bike ride will start and end at Sofia Airport and will comprise a loop, first heading west and then south to the most southerly point which is Blagoevgrad. Steve and his family are currently staying in Blagoevgrad with Bobbi's parents. From here the loop heads back north through mountainous terrain towards Sofia and the airport. The entire route will be cycled so all luggage has to be carried on the bike. Most of the route will be on very quiet roads, however there will be some trafficked and some off road sections. It's also very hilly or mountainous. In total over 9 days the ride is 430km long with 58km off road and 5270m of climbing. The 'road' sections will in part be perfectly smooth new tarmac, however there will also be sections where the road surface is coming apart with lots of potholes or where there simply isn't a surface to speak of. The off road sections will likely be unsurfaced dirt roads which are passable with 4 wheel drive vehicles (or for that matter Lada's or Volkswagens....)

Foreign tourism in Bulgaria is very concentrated along the Black Sea coast and in a few ski resorts; we won't be going near those tourist hot spots. The places we'll be staying in are popular only for local tourism. The country is about 40% the size of the UK with a population of about 10%. Much of the population lives in Sofia the capital, so once we get away from Sofia we'll be in rural countryside with mostly small settlements. The country is also very mountainous and very scenic!

Bulgaria is the EU's poorest member state. Don't expect everything to be in a good state of repair or working perfectly. Expect to see traditional farming methods; on my trips I've seen on the roads free range chickens, sheep, goats, domestic and wild pigs, horses and donkeys, deer and cows. I've haven't seen any bears or wolves, I gather they mostly try to avoid humans. Expect to see plenty of dogs, though they're mostly docile, more on dogs below ☺ On the other hand - we'll be the unusual sight for the locals.

Some photos taken from places we'll be cycling through have been uploaded onto Picasa, more photos will be added in due course. The photos can be found here:

https://picasaweb.google.com/103209226997930590257/BGWebShareCycling?authkey=Gv1sRgCM7J5aj_v6C88wE

Disclaimer

This is an informal tour for a group of experienced cyclists from the Woking Cycle Users Group to explore part of Bulgaria, it is not a professionally organised holiday from a tour company. Participants' should be used to independent cycle touring, carrying their own luggage and be able to fix their own bike if things go wrong (although of course we'll help each other out with any

problems). It is to be undertaken at the participants' own risk, no liability can be accepted by the organisers. Individuals should also provide their own insurance.

Details

Dates

Saturday 14th September to Sunday 22nd September 2013.

Flights to Sofia

Flight time is 3 hours and Sofia time is 2 hours ahead of London. Participants should agree amongst themselves which flight to take and book their own tickets. There's a choice of 2 airlines:

British Airways from Heathrow:

Flight times: 08:30 – 13:30

At the time of writing the fare is approx £240 including taxes, luggage etc. The price may go up or down according to when you book it. BA has a 23kg free luggage allowance and if your bike plus checked in luggage doesn't weigh more then you won't have to pay more. They also have a relatively generous hand luggage allowance. I'm not sure if they have any rules on groups bringing bikes.

EasyJet from Gatwick:

Flight times: 05:55 - 11:00

20kg baggage allowance costs extra plus to take a bike a Sports Equipment charge (£27 each way) needs to be paid, this gives an additional 12kg weight allowance making a total of 32kg. At the time of writing EasyJet costs £210 including baggage and sports equipment.

Taking bikes by air

CTC gives advice on taking bikes by plane, see the following links for further info. Note that at the time of writing Wiggle has a 2-4 week delivery time on bike bags, so order early.

<http://www.ctc.org.uk/cyclists-library/bikes-public-transport/bikes-air>

<http://www.ctc.org.uk/blog/anna-cipullo/taking-my-bike-on-plane>

<http://travellingtwo.com/resources/flying-with-a-bicycle-in-a-plastic-ctc-bag>

<http://www.wiggle.co.uk/ctc-plastic-bike-bag/>

Cost

The cost of the trip is £380 per person for all food and 9 nights' accommodation, assuming people don't mind sharing rooms. The price does not include flights.

The money should be transferred to Steve's bank account by the end of July, he will then transfer the money to Bulgaria so he can start booking hotels.

Bike Requirements

You'll need to bring your own bike on the aircraft. It needs to be tough to withstand off road stony tracks in addition to potholes in tarmac. An expedition touring bike or mountain bike would be ideal, otherwise a tough hybrid or tough tourer. Luggage should be securely attached to the bike.

We'll be ascending and descending more than 5000m over the 9 days, so the bike should have a wide range of gears, especially including very low gears for climbing. On checking out the route so far I've been in the granny gear a lot and that's without heavy panniers!

Bike repairs: the bike should be in a good state of maintenance to avoid any problems. In particular make sure your brakes are in perfect working order as you'll be relying on them a lot! Also bring spares and tools, particularly spare tyres and spokes. Bike shops in BG are few and far between, they can do basic maintenance but they aren't used to anything too up to date so we have to be largely self sufficient.

Tyres

Tyres should be fat to cope with off road as well as on. I use the Schwalbe Extreme which isn't produced any more, it's been superseded by the Marathon Mondial which looks very similar:

http://schwalbe.de/gbl/en/produkte/tour_city/produkt/?ID_Produktgruppe=36&ID_Produkt=278

I have the 26 x 2" size and it's perfect for the kind of riding we'll be doing. These tyres have the following characteristics which are what's needed for the ride:

On road:

- About 85% of the ride is on road
- can be pumped up to 70psi for speed when they're fast on tarmac unlike normal knobblies
- corner like a road tyre on fast hairpin descents, mountain bike knobblies tend to 'wander' which really isn't what you want when going round a hairpin in the mountains!
- Cope well and retain control when (not if) you hit dust, sand, grit or stones on the tarmac, a slick road tyre would lose control much quicker
- Cope with the numerous potholes we'll come across

Off road:

- About 15% of the ride is off road in terms of distance, but it'll be more in terms of time taken! Some of the road sections are also likely to resemble off road sections.
- pressure can be reduced to 30psi for off road
- grip well on off road tracks allowing them to be taken at speed with confidence
- have a large air cushion for comfort and to protect rims

I don't know any other tyres which perform anything like as well as these under such a range of conditions (and I've got a shed full of discarded tyres to show that I've tried)! I strongly suggest you consider getting a pair unless you know of anything else with similar properties. I suggest an absolute minimum tyre width of 37mm but 2" (50mm) is better.

Accommodation

We'll be staying in hotels and guest houses, some with additional facilities such as swimming pools, jacuzzis and saunas. It's assumed that people will be sharing rooms, however once the details of who's coming are sorted out this can be discussed.

Food

We'll be mostly eating out in restaurants, though we'll also pick up rations such as bananas from shops en-route which we'll eat when we can't find anywhere to stop and eat. Dietary requirements can probably be dealt with but check with Steve first.

Luggage transfer:

We'll be carrying our own luggage in panniers. As we'll be staying in hotels and eating en-route we shouldn't need to carry too much, 2 large rear panniers should do.

Weather

The weather should be, and hopefully will be, sunny and in the low 20's °C, although it could also be hotter than that. There could be a day or two when it's much cooler (down to the low teens) and very wet. There could also be heavy rain showers. It'll also be a few degrees cooler when we're up in the mountains, especially the mornings could be cool.

Insurance and health

Bring a European Health Identity Card (EHIC). If you haven't got one you can order one free from the link below (avoid the dodgy websites which try to charge you):

<http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcareabroad/EHIC/Pages/about-the-ehic.aspx>

The EHIC entitles you to the same level of treatment (emergency only) which a local would receive. I strongly recommend you also get travel insurance for additional cover!

Dogs

There are lots of dogs in Bulgaria, domestic dogs, strays and sheep/goat herders' dogs. In the majority of cases they're docile or friendly, though we will be barked at a lot. Occasionally, however, we're likely to be chased by a dog, my experience is about once every 2 or 3 days. For this reason I suggest everyone gets a dog dazer, if a dog chases you all you have to do is point it and press the button. It also gives peace of mind when cycling past dogs as you don't know how they're going to react, otherwise you'll be nervous each time you pass one which is a lot of the time! I've tried 2 types and this is the type I found works best:

<http://www.dogdazer.co.uk/>

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Dog-Dazer-II-Ultrasonic-Deterrent/dp/B001E0L5YA>

Route Description

Distances, ascent and distances on unpaved roads estimates are from GPS mapping, when trying out the routes so far I've found them to be underestimates if anything. I've yet to ride most of the route and may make changes according to what I find. These are the minimum distances, it can always be

made longer if people wish, or after getting to the accommodation at the end of the day there are always additional routes we can ride.

The distances aren't very great but the climbs and off road sections make it a lot harder than the distances suggest.

Day 1:

Arrive in Sofia around midday, early afternoon. Bike bags and stuff you don't need for the duration of the ride will be taken off you for storage until the day we leave.

Distance: 40km

Total ascent: 350m

Unpaved road: 3km

Elevation of accommodation: 640m

We ride across Sofia to a spa town just outside the capital. On this day we'll see a lot of traffic, although the route chosen aims to avoid most of it. The route will be mostly on minor streets, through parks, along segregated cycle ways and an off road track. We'll make a tour through the centre of Sofia to visit the cathedral, unless delays mean we don't have time in which case we can cut it short.

Day 2:

Distance: 63km

Unpaved road: 8km

Total ascent: 900m

Elevation of accommodation: 640m

We spend the day in the hills west of Sofia, there's a 300m and a 200m climb today together with some smaller ones. We skirt a couple of small industrial towns but mostly it's villages we pass through. Then it's past a reservoir to the hotel with outdoor and indoor swimming pools, sauna etc.

Day 3:

Distance: 48km

Unpaved road: 4km (maybe more)

Total ascent: 650m

Elevation of accommodation: 450m

We'll be winding our way up and down through some more hills today and finishing in a small town by the river Struma. The guest house has a small outdoor pool (in case it's warm enough) and if we want they can order and cook us a roast pig.

Day 4:

Distance: 53km

Unpaved road: 5km

Total ascent: 300m

Elevation of accommodation: 400m

Today we'll follow the river Struma downstream, the valley starts off narrow but then opens up later. Uphills will only be gentle until one final very steep off road climb near the end. We'll finish the day in Blagoevgrad which is where I'm currently staying with my wife, child and in-laws. Blagoevgrad will be the largest town we stay in, it's about the same size as Woking with 90 000 people. It's the largest town and administrative centre for the south-west region of Bulgaria. It's the most southerly part of the ride and at 400m above sea level also the lowest.

Day 5:

Distance: 40km

Unpaved road: 2km

Total ascent: 900m

Elevation of accommodation: 1200m

The ride is short today, but it's (almost) all uphill to a monastery which is the largest on the Balkans and a UNESCO world heritage site. If we've still got the energy once we get there we can continue uphill for another 7km on tarmac plus 7km on a stony track (carrying the bikes over a rock fall on the way) up to a maximum height of 2000m, though that's optional!

Day 6:

Distance: 53km

Unpaved road: 21km

Total ascent: 800m

Elevation of accommodation: 760m

After a long descent we have quite a lot of hilly off road tracks to cover today. We finish the day in another Spa town with, it says, the hottest natural mineral springs in Europe at 103°C; it even has a geyser.

Day 7:

Distance: 30km

Unpaved road: 4 km

Total ascent: 900m

Elevation of accommodation: 1150m

A long climb starts the day and we reach the highest point of the tour at 1600m today. We may be able to take a chair lift up to 2100m (if it's running) and have a little walk up there, for those that wish. There might even be the possibility of taking bikes up and cycling back down for any hardcore mountainbikers. In the evening we may have a roast lamb and a jacuzzi and sauna.

Day 8:

Distance: 77km

Unpaved road: 9 km

Total ascent: 450m

Elevation of accommodation: 540m

Longer ride today though most of it is downhill. Uphill sections add up to about 450m. We finish the day in a small town within striking distance of the airport.

Day 9:

Distance: 25km

Unpaved road: 2.5km

Total ascent: 20m

Elevation of airport: 530m

We have to get to the airport fairly early today so it's just a short ride with very little climbing. Once at the airport you'll be reunited with your bike bag so you can pack the bike ready for check-in.

Anything Else?

Please let Steve know if anything has been missed out or if you have questions. The email address for question is:

steve@millard.ch