

The New York Times

The 52 Places Traveler

Roman Ruins? Sure, but Bulgaria's Second City Offers So Much More

In Plovdiv, the 52 Places Traveler meets the people who are turning the city into a true capital of culture.

By **SEBASTIAN MODAK**

MAY 14, 2019



Plovdiv's Old Town, spread over three hills, is a blend of 19th-century houses, Roman ruins and medieval arches. Sebastian Modak/The New York Times

Our columnist, Sebastian Modak, is visiting each destination on our 52 Places to Go in 2019 list. He went camping and scuba diving in Israel before heading to Plovdiv.

I was getting into bed after a long day of traveling when I heard the bells: two tones clanging out an urgent rhythm that filled the night. I peeked out my window but couldn't see where the sound was coming from. Despite my fatigue, curiosity got the best of me. I grabbed my shoes and jacket and followed the sounds to the nearest church, where scores of people were holding candles and walking solemnly around the building.

The frenetic pace of the 52 Places trip means that I often lose track of the date. Turns out, I had arrived in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, just in time for Orthodox Easter Sunday. With the bells signaling midnight, the faithful — families, couples, older people helped along by young neighbors — were marking the occasion. The glow of candlelight illuminated the faces of those who circled the church three times before dispersing into the night.

The next morning, the city was quiet except for a chorus of birdsong that made me feel like I had stepped into a fairy tale. I walked up steep cobblestone streets into the Old Town, exploring the preserved remnants of those who have passed through it, making Plovdiv one of the longest continuously inhabited settlements in Europe.



Plovdiv's Roman theater, built under the reign of Emperor Trajan, still hosts regular performances. Sebastian Modak/The New York Times

I sat in the Roman amphitheater, which dates from the second century A.D., when the city was known as Philippopolis. I passed under a medieval gate marking one of the entrances into the Old Town, and marveled at the Bulgarian Revival architecture from the dying days of Ottoman rule in the 19th century: pastel facades with second floors supported by wooden beams; intricately painted ceilings; windows that could be thrown open on crisp, spring days like this one. Following the winding stone roads, I came to the crumbled site of a fortress, believed to

have roots in an ancient Thracian settlement, and made my way to Knyaz Alexander I, a pedestrian-only street lined with shops and restaurants and doner kebab stands. Then I passed through a Roman stadium and gate and crossed an underpass paved with ancient flagstones beneath a busy thoroughfare.

Plovdiv was on the 52 Places list because it is one of the 2019 European Capitals of Culture, an annual designation given out by the European Commission that's meant to boost the arts across the continent. As such, there's a lot going on this year: hundreds of events spanning every art form you can think of. More a coincidence of timing than a concerted effort, the Bishop's Basilica, which will house some 21,000 square feet of Roman mosaics, opens this fall.

The energy inspired by the Capital of Culture designation pervades everything. But in Plovdiv, the title is actually more recognition for a longstanding creative vision than it is a jump start to new programs.



Plovdiv is full of public green spaces, including Tsar Simeon Garden, designed by the Swiss architect Lucien Chevalas in 1892. Sebastian Modak/The New York Times

More than a tourist town

It is easy to view towns like Plovdiv — with their quaint streets and carefully preserved, achingly charming architecture — as one-dimensional in their beauty. It took me a few days to realize that Plovdiv is not a place built around tourism, but rather a booming city whose

appeal to travelers can and should extend beyond the historical allure that attracts so many. Bulgaria's second city is a place of layers, where a new breed of artists, entrepreneurs and community leaders are just as concerned with the city's future as they are with its past.

Sariev Contemporary is a gallery just off Plovdiv's main street, past the office of the Open Arts Foundation and the bohemian hangout, Artnewscafe. A 180-square-foot white box, it is easy to miss. But the gallery is the heartbeat of Plovdiv's contemporary art scene, and over the last decade, its proprietors — Katrin Sarieva and her daughter, Vesselina, who also run the cafe and the foundation — have created an ecosystem that combines the arts, community organizing and historical preservation. More than one person I met credited them with bringing contemporary art to the fore, not just in Plovdiv, but in Bulgaria and Eastern Europe as a whole.



Teams are working to restore more than 20,000 square feet of original Roman mosaics in time for the opening of the Bishop's Basilica later this year.

Sebastian Modak/The New York Times

Vesselina has taken Bulgarian exhibitions to art shows all over the world, and works with young up-and-coming artists and big name collectors alike. The event the Sarievas are best known for, though, is Night/Plovdiv, held every September for the past 10 years, when the city's galleries, museums, bars and historical sites stay open after hours and host events that span the artistic spectrum.

“Before we started the Night, the idea of culture here was very narrow,” Vesselina said. “You had high culture — the museums, the opera — and then everything else was ‘low culture.’ People thought galleries were just shops for art.”

Without the work of the Sarievas, it's hard to say whether the conditions for a "capital of culture" would have been realized at all.

On a sunny day, Vesselina took me for a long walk to hit some of the destinations on the Alternative Map of Plovdiv, a project started by Katrin Sarieva, who doubles as the city's unofficial historian. A concerted effort to show tourists and residents the attractions that exist outside of the usual tourist routes, the map offers a fascinating look at a city with many facets and a story of survival.

We walked through the Hadji Hassan Quarter, tucked next to the Old Town, where many of the city's Romani residents, sometimes referred to as Gypsies, live. There, in hastily built homes with the occasional horse cart parked out front, they've preserved their language and customs even after decades of tradition-crushing communism. One woman smiled at us as she washed clothes using an ibrik, a Turkish pitcher which, as Vesselina described it, is "the kind of thing you usually see in the Ethnographic Museum."

We passed the remnants of Bulgaria's communist years, the Brutalist Central Post Office and National Library. On this part of my tour, too, there were stories of perseverance. One building, the Cosmos Cinema, is an abandoned movie theater built in the 1960s. About 10 years ago, it was almost destroyed to make way for a shopping mall. It was Vesselina and others in the artistic community who rallied around the cause to stop the city from doing it. Its future is still uncertain, but it won't be turned into a pile of rubble.



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Dimitar Genchev, a Plovdivian painter, at his studio in a mostly derelict building by the river that the Orthodox Church owns and rents out to artists for peanuts. Genchev's paintings take inspiration from a rarely seen side of Plovdiv: the abandoned factories and warehouses on its outskirts. [#52places2019](#)
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Vesselina introduced me to Martina Vacheva, 31, one of the most promising young artists she works with. Together, we walked around the neighborhood where Ms. Vacheva was raised. Trakia, a city within a city, is a seemingly never-ending collection of massive Communist-era apartment blocks, 50-year-old paint peeling off soot-stained walls.

Ms. Vacheva was discovered by Vesselina when she was creating fanzines for “Baywatch,” “Twin Peaks” and (seriously) “Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman” — some of the first American TV shows to come to post-Communist Bulgaria. In her work, Ms. Vacheva marries the grandness of history with absurd elements from the present day. In a recent series of ceramics, for

example, she takes inspiration from Thracian works discovered in Plovdiv and, using traditional techniques, imbues them with modern motifs: A beer bottle is included in a scene of ancient revelry, a boombox is placed in the back of a donkey cart.

Other Plovdiv spots I loved:

- There are a few big name hotels in the city, but I chose The Family Hotel at Renaissance Square — a small guesthouse with five rooms in a 19th-century house at the base of the Old Town — and it was a delight. Its owner, Dimitar, speaks fluent English, is full of tips for exploring the city and makes a killer breakfast.
- Pavaj, in the neighborhood of Kapana, is the most sought-after dinner reservation in the city and for good reason. Everything is fresh — I was told the restaurant runs on a no-freezer policy — and its unpretentious, cozy interior belies the sophistication of the dishes. It's also got a wide selection of rakia, the local fruit brandy, that proves the drink isn't just a cheap way to get a buzz.
- Three of Plovdiv's hills are nature reserves, and that means you can take a break from exploring the city and go on an afternoon hike. The farthest hill from the center, DzhenDEM Tepe, or Youth Hill, is also the highest. It's a bit of a trek to get to, but absolutely worth a climb for the views of some of the newer parts of the city, offering another angle to Plovdiv beyond the historical.



Plovdiv's hills — three of which are nature reserves — offer stunning views of the city.

Sebastian Modak/The New York Times

Seven hills, or six?

Plovdiv, like Rome, is known as the “City of Seven Hills.” But, in fact, there are only six. One was torn apart decades ago to make pavement — in its place is a shopping mall and parking lot. But there, too, artists reacted. Eight years ago, Atanas Hranov, one of Plovdiv's most prominent artists, took stones from the torn down hill, inscribed them with quotes from the city's poets and, in the shadow of the city's 14th-century Dzhumaya Mosque, built a seventh “hill,” a mound that serves as a tribute to the resilience of art.

“We have seven hills in our city's coat of arms,” Mr. Hranov told me. “Now, it's true again.”

The people shaping Plovdiv into a center for unbridled creativity aren't limited to its artists. The neighborhood of Kapana (“The Trap”) is named for its confusing layout, but it would be just as appropriate a name for the way its residents and small business owners draw you in. A short walk from the main street, the neighborhood's stone streets are lined with bars, cafes and boutiques. It's familiar by now — the hip, gentrified neighborhood where young people smoke hand-rolled cigarettes and trade stories over craft beers or overpriced coffee — but there's something different about Kapana, something that makes it feel unlike all the Williamsburg carbon copies. I found an overwhelming sense of calm here — no one was out to impress; you could nurse a beer for a full hour at a neighborhood bar without getting dirty looks.

The Kapana spot I frequented most, Cat and Mouse, was one of the first bars in the neighborhood. While acknowledging that the story of Kapana is a familiar one of gentrification, its owners, Dimitar Semkov, 37, and Ivailo Dernev, 40, said the buildings in the area were largely abandoned when they moved in.

“It was basically a parking lot for people working in the city,” Dimitar said as the three of us sipped the house dark ale. “We decided to stay here because we saw potential.”

It was another example of innovative thinking. Ivailo and Dimitar are journalists and their online publication, Pod Tepeto (“Under the Hill”), is still, according to others I talked to, one of the only independent media outlets in the country. The bar was a way to finance their journalism so they wouldn’t be beholden to advertisers. The enterprise has progressed — into a co-working space, a guesthouse and an online guide for tourists. But they’ve never had ambitions beyond Plovdiv.

“Our mission is to show the passion of the people in this city,” Ivailo said. “When something good happens, we want to be a part of it,” Dimitar chimed in.



Street musicians play traditional Bulgarian songs on a corner in the Old Town.
Sebastian Modak/The New York Times

A dose of motivation

“Aylyak” is one of those untranslatable concepts you find in many languages: a distillation of a way of life, which, in Plovdiv’s case, is a carefree attitude characterized by an easygoing approach to daily routine and a sense of hospitality that dates back to the city as a crossroads of cultures.

Spending an afternoon climbing one of Plovdiv's hills, Sahat Tepe, and marveling at how a nature reserve like this could exist in the middle of the second largest city in Bulgaria, I got it. At the top, I sat on a rock for a full 45 minutes. Birdsong was everywhere. The call to prayer rang out from the mosque, whose minaret I could see towering over Kapana.

But I also thought about how the city was selling itself short. Aylyak? Sure. Alongside that sense of tranquillity, though, I felt an urge to create that I haven't felt anywhere else on this trip so far. After the hangover of Georgia and the exhaustion of Israel during Passover, it was just the dose of motivation I needed. I walked down Sahat Tepe, across the city and up another of Plovdiv's seven — no, six — hills.

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A version of this article appears in print on May 19, 2019, on Page TR8 of the New York edition with the headline: So Much More Than Roman Ruins

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