INTRODUCTION

During a grand tour through three mountain ranges in southwest Bulgaria, we will hike through breathtaking scenery, visiting historic and cultural sites. Our trip will take us from big cities to little towns and villages, and into remote mountain areas for spectacular views. Lodging accommodations are for double occupancy rooms with shower or bath in comfortable hotels or inns.

Highlights of the hiking include:

• Rhodope Mountains: Trigrad Gorge, Devil’s Throat Cave with underground waterfall, Eagle’s Eye Overlook, and Yagodina Cave.

• Pirin Mountains (UNESCO World Heritage Site): Polezhan Summit; numerous glacier lakes, including largest, Popovo; Banderishki Lakes Cirque; Todorina Porta; Yulen Nature Reserve; Todora’s Eyes Lakes; Demyanitsa River; Mt Vihren (Bulgaria’s 2nd highest); Giant Caldron; and Skakavitsa Waterfall.

• Rila Mountains: Seven Rila Lakes Cirque; Musala summit (Balkans’ highest), views from which include Bulgaria’s six major mountain ranges.

Cultural and historical highlights include a walking tour of Sofia and of old town Plovdiv, Shiroka Laka, the rustic Zhrebevo village, and the Rila Monastery (UNESCO World Heritage Site).
TRIP DIFFICULTY

This trip is rated #3/#4 (moderate to vigorous). The hikes will all be day hikes (no backpacks), ranging from easy to strenuous. We will hike for eight consecutive days, from three to seven hours per day. The terrain may be rugged and steep in places, requiring agility. There may be short sections on narrow trails with exposure (steep drop-offs). We will hike at a moderate pace, which will permit time for photos and rest breaks. We will be hiking at a wide range of elevations, from 4000 to 9500 feet, during a variable season. Consequently, our weather conditions may vary greatly. You will carry daypacks containing all your clothes, gear, food and drink for the hike, but not weighing more than 15 – 20 pounds. Applicants must be experienced hikers who have done multi-day hiking trips and are capable of doing an 11-mile hike at a moderate pace with an elevation change of +2600/-4000 feet in a variety of terrain and weather.

DETAILED ITINERARY

A detailed itinerary is provided below. Of course, you may arrive earlier and depart later if you want to extend your trip. While the itinerary is what the leaders have planned at the time of writing, various factors may require changes for reasons of safety, transportation or lodging availability, and unforeseeable circumstances (such as weather considerations, natural disasters, recommendations of governmental agencies etc.) The leaders reserve the right to make such changes as necessary, both before and during the trip. In all cases the safety of the group is paramount.

Day 1 – Friday, August 23
Participants leave for Sofia.

Day 2 – Saturday, August 24
Participants arrive in Sofia (elev. 2000 ft; 1.5M inhabitants). There will be an optional, free walking tour and a group welcome dinner.
Overnight in Sofia.
**Day 3 – Sunday, August 25**
We will drive to Plovdiv (elev. 550 ft; 0.4M inhabitants) and have a guided tour of the historic old town—ancient fortress walls, the Roman forum and stadium, magnificent churches, museum-houses and colorful 19th-century mansions. Inhabited for about 8000 years, Plovdiv is one of the oldest cities in Europe, older than Athens or Rome. It has been designated as the European Capital of Culture for 2019. We will then drive to the Bachkovo Monastery (second largest in Bulgaria), then to Shiroka Laka (elev. 4000 ft; 600 inhabitants), an architectural and folklore reserve. We will dine with a family in Liaskovo village (elev. 2500 ft; 800 inhabitants), then drive to Trigrad village (elev. 4000 ft; 850 inhabitants), within the famous Trigrad Gorge.

*Driving:* 5.25 hrs.; 312 km/194 mi. Overnight in Trigrad.

**Day 4 – Monday, August 26**
We will have a hiking tour around Trigrad, with such highlights as the rustic village of Zhebevo (elev. 4200 ft; 120 inhabitants), views of Trigradsko Zhdevelo Gorge and surrounding panoramas, Dyavolskoto Gyrlo (Devil’s Throat) Cave with its underground waterfall (42 m/138 ft) that is the highest in the Balkans.

*Hiking:* 5 – 6 hrs.; 11 mi; elev. gain/loss, 2150 ft; moderate. Overnight in Trigrad.

**Day 5 – Tuesday, August 27**
From Trigrad, we will hike along the upper edge of the Trigradsko Zhdevelo Gorge toward Yagodina village, surrounded by lands still cultivated with traditional methods. We will detour to the Eagle's Eye viewpoint, providing beautiful panoramas over the neighbouring mountain ridges. Time permitting, we will also visit the Yagodina Cave, one of the prettiest in the Balkans. We will then drive to the town of Bansko (elev. 3000 ft; 9000 inhabitants), at the foot of the Pirin Mountains, and our base for four nights.

*Hiking:* 5.5 hrs.; 9 mi; elev. gain/loss, 1650/3300 ft; moderate.

*Driving:* 2.5 hrs.; 135 km/84 mi. Overnight in Bansko

**Day 6 – Wednesday, August 28**
We will take a chair lift to the Bezbog Hut. This is the start for our trek to the Polezhan Summit (2851 m/9354 ft) which offers one of the most beautiful panoramas in the Pirins, with over 17 stunning glacier lakes, including the largest, Popovo Lake (30 m/100 ft deep). Polezhan is the 5th highest summit in the Pirins. It is surrounded by three cirques with three groups of lakes: Disilishki in the north, Polezhanski in the south, and Strazhishki in the west. We will use the classic route through the northeast ridge, which is not difficult or too steep, but for a 20-minute leg to the summit.

*Hiking:* 5 hrs.; 5 mi; elev. gain/loss, 2100 ft; moderate.

Overnight in Bansko.

**Day 7 – Thursday, August 29**
We will visit one of the most picturesque parts of the Pirins, the Banderishki Lakes Cirque—a beautiful area crisscrossed by many hiking routes. We will pass by some of the 16 glacial lakes, each one revealing itself as we climb the terraces. The hiking route through the Todorina Porta takes us directly to the Yulen Nature Reserve, from where we descend into the virgin fir groves to the Demyanitsa Hut, by way of the
Todorini Ochi (Todora's Eyes) Lakes. From there, we will follow a shady path along the Demyanitsa River.

**Hiking:** 6 – 7 hrs.; 10 mi; elev. gain/loss, 2300/3650 ft; difficult; moderate option available. Overnight in Bansko.

**Day 8 – Friday, August 30**
We will climb to the top of Mount Vihren, Bulgaria’s second-highest summit and the Pirins’ highest. The climb through the Golem Kazan (Giant Cauldron) area, bounded by the tall (400 m/1300 ft) northern face of Vihren, offers breathtaking views. This part of the Pirins has unusual Karst landscape, and is also home to the endangered Edelweiss, the elusive Wallcreeper, and the shy Balkan Chamois (wild goats).

**Hiking:** 6 – 7 hrs.; 5.5 mi; elev. gain/loss, 3300 ft; difficult/challenging. Overnight in Bansko.

**Day 9 – Saturday, August 31**
We will leave the Pirins and drive to the Rila Mountains to visit the spectacular Rila Monastery, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This is the most famous and largest Christian monastery in Bulgaria. The exceptional frescoes in the central church form a gallery of masterpieces of Renaissance art and could be considered a Bulgarian analogue of the frescoes of the Sistine chapel. From there, we will proceed to spa/ski resort village of Panichishte (4439 ft), where we will hike to the Skakavitsa Waterfall (70 m/230 ft) before dinner, or simply ramble in the shady woods near our mountain lodge. For a more relaxed day, you may skip the hike to Skakavitsa Waterfalls and spend the afternoon in a hot thermal pool at the spa/ski resort village of Sapareva Banya (elev. 3225 ft; 4400 inhabitants).

**Driving:** 3 hrs.; 175 km/109 mi.

**Hiking:** 3 – 4 hrs.; 4.5 mi; elev. gain/loss 950 ft; easy. Overnight in Panichishte or Sapareva Banya.

**Day 10 – Sunday, September 1**
We will take a cable car to the foot of the Seven Rila Lakes Cirque. Hiking past the lakes (each named after a characteristic feature: Kidney Lake, Twin Lake, Trefoil Lake, etc.), we will continue along the crest for more stunning views toward the Urdini and Elenski Lakes and the Rila Monastery in its deep valley below us. Passing the Malyovitsa Summit (2729 m/9088 ft), the cradle of Bulgarian rock climbing and mountaineering, we will descend into the valley of the same name and settle into a family hotel at the village of Govedartsi (elev. 3300ft, 1300 inhabitants) for two nights.

**Hiking:** 7 hrs.; 11 mi; elev. gain/loss, 2600/3960 ft; difficult/challenging. Overnight in Govedartsi.

**Day 11 – Monday, September 2**
A cable car will take us from the Borovets Resort to the start of our hike. From there, we will climb the Balkans’ highest summit, Musala (2925 m/9596 ft), its serrated wall always in sight as we ascend through stone rivers and past glacier lakes and alpine huts. The genuinely impressive view from the peak to the surrounding mountains offers a fitting end to our long adventure. We will celebrate with a cup of fragrant...
herbal tea, as we enjoy the summits of all major mountain ranges in Bulgaria: Balkan, Sredna Gora, Vitosha, Rhodope, Pirin, and Rila.

**Hiking:** 6 hrs.; 8 mi; elev. gain/loss 2460 ft; difficult. Overnight in Govedartsi.

**Day 12** – **Tuesday, September 3**
Participants will depart from Sofia Airport.

**Driving:** 1.3 hrs.; 70 km/43 mi.

**ACCOMODATIONS/MEALS/TRANSPORTATION**
Lodging accommodations are for double occupancy rooms with shower or bath in comfortable hotels or inns. We will have breakfast at the hotels; dinners will be at the hotels or restaurants; and lunches will be bag lunches or at restaurants. Transportation will be by van with professional driver. Overnight luggage will be transported by van on days we hike to our next lodging.

**TRIP PRICE**
The land price of this trip is $2150, which includes lodging, all meals from the first dinner to the last breakfast, chair lifts/cable cars, and ground transportation. The price does not include airfare, drinks, entry fees (museums, caves, thermal pools), or fees for optional activities. The price for the trip is based on quotes or estimates obtained at the time the trip was planned. The final price will be adjusted in accordance with the best final arrangements we can make and exchange rates at time of expenses. Any savings we achieve, as well as any cost increases we incur will be shared by trip participants. Our cost estimates are conservative, and so a refund is more likely than a price increase. All Adventure Travel trips are run on a non-profit basis and refunds, if any, are issued after the trip’s financial accounting is complete.

In accordance with AMC policy, you are subsidizing the leaders' costs. Beyond this, the leaders are not allowed to realize any profit from this excursion. The trip price includes an AMC overhead fee to cover the administrative expenses of offering Adventure Travel excursions.

**Insurance**
The basic policy that is included with your trip fee is through MedEvac 200. It covers up to $5,000 for accident and sickness expenses, and up to $200,000 for emergency medical evacuation and repatriation. Coverage includes only the dates of travel of the official AMC trip so additional days before and/or after are not included. Participants should have their own medical insurance. If you are accepted on this trip, we will provide information about purchasing optional travel insurance that could cover cancellation, lost luggage, etc.
APPLICATION PROCESS

If you would like to apply for this trip, contact the leaders by email or phone. We will email you an application, a health form, and a liability waiver. A reservation deposit of $750 per person is due with your application. Please make your check payable to the Appalachian Mountain Club and mail it with the completed forms to the address shown on the application. After we receive your material, we may talk to you about your hiking experience to ascertain your ability to participate successfully in this trip. We may also request references to confirm your fitness level and suitability for participating in trip activities. Providing information to us about a medical issue or injury will not necessarily disqualify you from participation, but we may need to ask you some follow-up questions. We want to be sure that we can adequately provide for your needs during the trip.

DEPOSIT AND PAYMENTS

Upon acceptance on the trip, we will notify you by email. When you confirm acceptance, we will deposit your check into the trip account and use the money to cover trip expenses incurred on your behalf. A second payment of $750 per person is due by February 1, 2019, and the balance is due by May 1, 2019.

CANCELLATIONS

Our cancellation policy is based on several considerations. Cancellation that result in increased costs to the other participants or to the leaders will not be permitted. Published minimum penalty schedule is $0 before February 1, 2017, $300 between February 1 and June 30, 2019, and no refund after that. If actual costs (expenses already incurred on your behalf and any unavoidable future expenses that will be incurred as a result of your registration and cancellation) are higher, they will be assessed instead, unless they can be applied toward another acceptable participant. For example, if you cancel after an expense has been made for you and we cannot find a qualified replacement, then that part of the fee cannot be refunded.

Cancellation refunds will probably not be returned until after the trip has been completed. Cancellations are considered effective when a leader receives written notification. When a canceling participant cannot be replaced, he/she may forfeit as much as the entire trip fee.

EXPERIENCE AND RISKS

People wishing to participate on this trip must have previous hiking experience at the intermediate level or higher. This area is known for its rugged landscape and variable weather. This trip is not for beginners or people who do not hike on a regular basis. You should already be in good physical condition by the time you arrive. When you participate in this activity you should be both physically and mentally prepared and equipped with the appropriate gear. You should always be aware of the risks involved and conduct yourself accordingly. We are not responsible for your safety–you are. Prior to being accepted for this trip,
you may be asked to discuss your capabilities with the leader. Please do not be offended by any questions as they are the best tools we have to get to know you and your abilities.

**GROUP INFORMATION**

We will limit the group size to twelve to fourteen participants and two AMC leaders and a guide. We find this size makes for a good balance between camaraderie and pragmatism.

This trip is designed so that everyone may experience our adventure in Bulgaria through shared participation in activities in an organized group environment. AMC travelers are known for their cooperative efforts, and expectations are that all participants will be considerate of others sharing this AMC Adventure Travel experience. You should enjoy traveling and be comfortable traveling in areas that are unfamiliar to you. You should recognize that you might find yourself in close quarters or be less comfortable than you are used to at home. You should make it a priority to help others on the trip and contribute to their having a good time. If you do that, we guarantee that you will have a great time.

It may happen on any trip that a trip member is or becomes unable to participate in one or more of the planned activities. Leaders in their sole judgment have the right and obligation to refuse participation in any activity to any group member for reasons of safety, whether it be of the group or of the individual. Illness, injury or lack of proper gear or fitness for a particular activity are examples of some conditions that might result in a participant’s being unable to perform one or more activity. Leaders may try to find a substitute activity or travel arrangements for the trip member, but this may not always be possible.

**AMC Mission**

AMC Adventure Travel trips are run in a manner supportive of and consistent with the conservation, recreational and educational principles and mission of the Club. Trip leaders encourage participant conduct consistent with Leave No Trace environmental and conservation principles and local regulations.

**TRIP LEADERS**

**Mike Darzi, Leader:** Mike Darzi has been leading outings (mostly day-hikes, some paddling and backpacking) for the Appalachian Mountain Club and the Sierra Club for over 15 years. He has served as the Chair of the AMC Potomac Chapter, 2015-2016. He has led numerous multi-day trips in the northeast and mid-Atlantic U.S., including the Berkshires, Acadia National Park, the White Mountains, Pine Creek Gorge, the lower Hudson River Valley, the High Peaks of the Adirondacks, and Shenandoah National Park. He recently co-led trek trip in Morocco.
Annemarie Langhan, Co-Leader: Annemarie is a world traveler and lover of outdoor activities and adventures. She is a Worcester, MA hiking and backpack leader and an AMC Program Volunteer at both the Highland Center and Pinkham Notch. She has led and co-led hiking and backpacking trips in the White Mountains, the Grand Canyon, Zion National Park, and day hikes around Mount Rainer National Park. She has traveled the world as an international retail buyer, navigating numerous airports, including those in developing countries. She has traveled internationally to Italy, Spain, France, Romania, Hungary, China, Japan, India, and Russia.

Questions
If you have any questions or concerns, please contact one of the leaders to discuss.

Mike Darzi: Mike.Darzi@Gmail.com, 301-580-9387
Annemarie Langhan: AMLHikeAMC@Gmail.com, 508-932-1796

WHAT TO BRING
Below is a list of the required and recommended items for the trip, as well as a list of items which some people will bring and share. If your personal equipment philosophy is different in significant ways, please consult with the leaders.

Required/Essential

- passport
- soft pack or duffle big enough all your personal clothing and gear
- daypack large enough to carry the clothes, gear, food, and water you will need for each hike
- broken-in hiking boots (preferably above ankle)
- rain and wind protection gear
- synthetic pile/fleece jacket, or wool sweater
- non-cotton shorts (or long pants if you prefer) and shirt for hiking
- at least 2-3 sets of hiking socks with liners
- long underwear top and bottom
- polypropylene, Coolmax, Bergelene or other synthetic extra layer clothing
- hat for warmth, and gloves or mittens
- comfortable clothing for evenings and in town
- at least 2 quart/liter water bottles or equivalent hydration system
- waterproof pack cover, or garbage bags for pack liner
- a lightweight flashlight or headlamp with extra batteries
- toilet paper and extra Ziplock bags to pack out waste
- personal toiletries and prescription medications (extra pair of prescription glasses)
- hat, visor, sunscreen, and/or bandana for sun protection
- sunglasses
- liquid hand gel
Recommended or Optional Gear

- hiking poles
- personal first aid kit with moleskin, personal meds, etc. (leaders will have group first aid kit)
- medications such as Imodium for digestive problems
- whistle
- small knife
- high-energy trail snacks
- long thermal underwear
- sandals and/or sneakers for towns and time off the trail
- earplugs
- binoculars or spotting scope
- insect repellent
- moisturizing eye drops
- camera, batteries, recharger
- field guides, reading material