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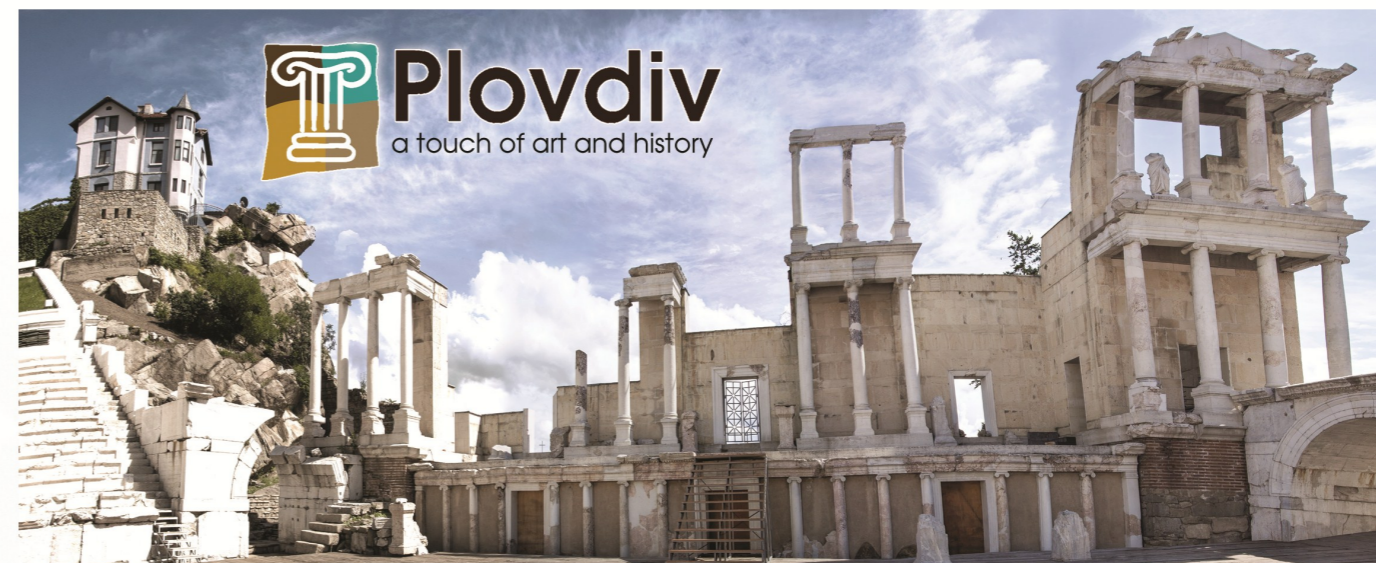
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PLOVDIV - ROMAN GRANDEUR ON THE BALKANS

"This is the biggest and loveliest of all cities. Its beauty shines from faraway", wrote the famous Roman writer Lucian in the second century AD.

2000 years onward, Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second largest city, is still an important cultural centre, boasting layer upon layer of wonderfully preserved ancient remains from several millennia of history.

Conveniently located a 90-minute drive away from the capital Sofia down a major highway, Plovdiv, just like Rome (though much earlier), was built on seven hills. Plovdiv was recently proclaimed by British archaeologists to be the sixth oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, dating back all the way to 6000 BC. The city was originally a Thracian settlement before becoming a major Roman city. It later fell into Byzantine and Ottoman hands, before becoming part of Bulgaria.

The main draw here is the Old Town, which nestles on top of three hills. Thracian and Roman remains lie beneath 400 recently restored Revival-style houses, splendid wooden-frame constructions dating back to early 19th-century built by the emerging class of Bulgarian merchants who eventually saw off the Turks.

Here, too, is the Ancient theatre, originally built in the 1st century AD. It was discovered by accident and excavated in the mid-1980s. Nowadays it is a highlight of the city, with fabulous views of the Rhodopi mountains in the background.

It can seat up to 3500 people and is used from spring till autumn for opera, jazz, and rock concerts.

Plovdiv's Main Street is a charming pedestrian promenade a 3-minute walk away from the Old Town. The houses lining the street display a distinct Viennese influence – they were mostly built at the turn of the 20th century, as the budding Bulgarian state was coming to its own. Curiously, the Main Street was built directly on top of the race track of the enormous Ancient stadium also used as a hippodrome, whose tip is exposed at the Roman Stadium Square, one of Plovdiv's signature sights.

The Dzhumaya Mosque standing next to the square dates back to the 1360s and is the oldest mosque in Bulgaria. A few years back the mosque was superbly restored with help from the city of Istanbul. It is still being used for prayer, but is also open to visitors.



Art thrives in the city, with numerous galleries and studios tucked down countless alcoves and alleyways. Plovdiv is still known to many as the "city of painters" – some of the most prominent Bulgarian painters worked here during the late 20th century.

Just about everything in Plovdiv is a 15-minute drive away. Taxis are ubiquitous and inexpensive. Private hotels have sprung all around town over the last decade. The standard of living in Bulgaria has been steadily improving years before the country joined the European Union in 2007, but the quality/price ratio for food and accommodation here is still among the best in Europe.

Direct Ryanair flights from Stansted Airport are now available that land at Plovdiv Airport, a mere 15 km from the city centre. Flying to Sofia Airport is also an option – all major European airlines fly there.



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