

Here comes the sun

Look beyond Sunny Beach's lively character and there's more to the resort than meets the eye, finds **Natalie Marsh**

Ihere's something charming about wandering around the cobbled streets of a historical town overseas. There's ancient architecture seemingly everywhere I turn, and ruins of churches hidden down some of the backstreets, sitting side by side with local shops and tourists enjoying a drink alfresco.

I'm in Nessebar, on the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria. Named a Unesco World Heritage Site back in 1983, the small town was once home to 40 churches, and the ruins of many can still be seen today. Some are small, with intricately beautiful architecture, while others have structures large enough to explore, imagining how majestic they must have looked centuries ago.

Looking north along the coast, I can see my home for my few days' stay – the vibrant resort of Sunny Beach. I'm with tour operator Balkan Holidays, on a mega-fam trip with travel agents from across the UK, ready to see what Sunny Beach and the nearby towns have to offer.

Sun and sea

It's early June, but summer is well under way in Sunny Beach. Staying true to its name, the resort welcomes warm temperatures between May and September, sitting comfortably in the low to mid-20s by June.

Stretching for five miles along the coastline of the Black Sea, Sunny Beach is best known for its nightlife. The resort is home to more than 200 hotels, and ➤

WHERE TO stay

Hotel Laguna Park

This four-star all-inclusive property boasts great facilities, making it popular with families. Its outdoor area has a water park, poolside bar and five pools. The hotel's proximity to the beach, a short walk from the promenade and next to local shops, is a great selling point.

Hotel Trakia Garden

As the name suggests, this family-run property is situated in a beautiful garden, among hundreds of flowers and plants, along with the owner's rabbits and tortoises. With only 140 rooms, Trakia Garden is on the smaller side, but about 60% of customers are repeat visitors. Although it's only 250m from the beach, the property is a peaceful respite from the bustle of Sunny Beach.

Hotel Globus

This beachfront hotel is a convenient place to stay if your customers want to be near the centre of the resort. The rooms are spacious and guests can stay on a half-board or bed-and-breakfast basis. The hotel has three restaurants, and a spa and health centre.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Church of Christ Pantocrator; Nessebar; Sozopol; the fam group PICTURES: Shutterstock

the variety of restaurants, shops and attractions make it a popular destination for those looking for a great-value break.

But look beyond the main strip and Sunny Beach is in an ideal location for those who want to leave the bars behind and explore some authentic Bulgarian towns and villages, enjoy the glistening sea, or take a trip into the country's fourth-largest city, Bourgas.

Nessebar is the next town along from Sunny Beach. Only a 10-minute drive or a short boat ride away, you don't have to venture far to experience one of the most picturesque towns on the Bulgarian coastline. Along with the church ruins, visitors can also pop into quirky shops or head to one of the beautiful beaches just outside the old city.

"Always recommend that if someone stays in Sunny Beach, they have a day out in Nessebar," says Chris Rand, head of trade sales at Balkan Holidays. "It's a truly

"Look beyond the main strip and Sunny Beach is ideal for those who want to explore some authentic towns and villages

beautiful town with cobbled streets, gabled houses and restaurants that look out to sea."

History and heritage

It's not just Nessebar that showcases Bulgarian heritage at its finest. I'm wandering through the historical town of Sozopol, an hour south of Sunny Beach. Either side of me are traditional, partly wooden houses, while the cobbled streets also double up as beds for the local cats, which snooze under the

morning sun. On my right, there's an occasional gap in the buildings, and I steal quick glimpses of the bright-blue sea.

Sozopol is one of the oldest settlements on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast, dating from as far back as the seventh century BC. It has an old town, home to ancient ruins and beautiful churches, as well as a more modern area offering shops, restaurants and hotels. On my walk through the town, I was struck by how many front doors of houses have posters stuck to them – one way Bulgarians acknowledge loved ones who have died.

The town is ideal for experiencing Bulgarian life, and there are many hotels here if visitors want to stay on a quieter part of the coast. Between Sozopol and Sunny Beach is the city of Bourgas. It's home to the Sea Garden, which is the perfect place for an afternoon stroll while enjoying sweeping coastal views. We walked down a set of steps on to the beach

and strolled along a pier-like structure stretching far out into the Black Sea, to take in the vista of the towering cliffs.

Beaches and bars

Walking down Flower Street, one of Sunny Beach's main roads leading to the shore, it's hard not to be enticed by the restaurants, bars and shops. It's no secret that this resort is well known for its nightlife – the bright lights, drinks deals and lively music along the beachside promenade attract tourists and locals.

There's a huge variety of places to eat in Sunny Beach, starting with Mexican restaurant Mamacita's in the centre of the resort, which serves up great nachos and tacos at reasonable prices. Meanwhile, up in the hills overlooking the beach and beautiful countryside as far as the eye can see, is Khan's Tent. Here, visitors are treated to a Las Vegas-style experience, featuring gymnasts and cabaret acts, alongside a generous meal with wine.

Sunny Beach has topped the Post Office's Holiday Costs Barometer for the past two years, thanks to its great value

for money. Its array of hotels, attractions and water parks also make it popular among families.

"The cost of living in Sunny Beach is unbeatable," adds Rand. "You can enjoy a delicious three-course meal in a restaurant for about £10 and a pint of the local beer is just 50p."

On my last night, we ventured 10 minutes from the main strip to the recently opened Djanny's Beach Club. Set right on the beach, it was the perfect location to sit and relax after the sun set. We'd learned that there is more to Sunny Beach than vibrant nightlife, with quiet neighbourhoods and historical towns hidden in plain sight. **TW**

BOOK IT

Balkan Holidays offers seven nights' all-inclusive at the four-star Hotel Laguna Park, Sunny Beach, from £595 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes return flights from Gatwick on May 31 and transfers. balkanholidays.co.uk

ASK THE agents

"My highlight was seeing how traditional and pretty Nessebar was, with its beautiful cobbled streets and cafes. And I have learnt what a fantastic-value destination Sunny Beach is."

Stacey Collis, Hays Travel, Consett

"I loved visiting old Nessebar, which has fabulous architecture and wonderful history. Bulgaria has something for everyone – it's not just for those who like to party. There's fabulous scenery, wonderful beaches and, most of all, value for money."

Jacqueline McFarlane, Bonny Travel, Falkirk

"My highlight was Khan's Tent. The view is great from the top and the show was fantastic. The food was amazing – the best I had in Sunny Beach. For the price, it is definitely worth it."

Chantelle Caulfield, Barrhead Travel, Belfast

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