

Young Enthusiasts Guide Free Sofia Tours in English

By Iva Toncheva

Sofia

What can get together for an evening two Englishmen, a Brazilian woman, a Dutchman and a Bulgarian woman who have never met before? A tour of Sofia - showing them sights both known and unknown. The idea is of a group of young enthusiasts united by Free Sofia Tour who lecture on the sights in English. It is the only walking tour of Sofia in English available at no charge.



The guides are all multilingual and erudite Bulgarians who have studied or worked abroad. Not all of them are professional guides, but they can surprise even Sofianites with interesting information about the Bulgarian capital. For instance, they can show you where the five-pointed star that surmounted the former Communist Party Headquarters until 1990 is hidden. The volunteer guides have developed an online vade mecum that each one of them can supplement, Boyko Blagoev, one of the organizers, told BTA.

The idea about Free Sofia Tour has been borrowed from the organizers of such tours in Prague and Budapest whom the Free Tour Founder, Kristian Mitov, met before graduating in Germany and returning to Bulgaria in the spring of 2010.

The first tour of Sofia was arranged on August 13, 2010. Kristian guides tours alone every day at 6:00 p.m. In September another three enthusiasts joined him, and thus the Free Sofia Tour Association was established. As from December 1, 2010, a morning tour (starting at 11:00 a.m.) is available on weekends.

So far Free Sofia Tour has provided guiding services to 277 people from more than 35 countries (Bulgaria included) and all continents except Antarctica. The largest number of visitors were from the US, Germany, the UK and France. The visitors using Free Sofia Tour's services learn about them from the Internet, various tourist publications, leaflets at accommodation facilities and other places, as well as from friends recommending it, Blagoev said. "At the moment we are Attraction No. One in Sofia in the most popular tourist portal, TripAdvisor," he said.

Free Sofia Tour is an independent initiative financed and organized entirely by the non-profit association Free Sofia Tour. "Following lengthy negotiations, on December 8 last year we finally signed a free-of-charge agreement with the Tourist Services Municipal Enterprise of Sofia Municipality so that we could be presented at the newly opened information centre in the subway at the [St Kliment Ohridski] University of Sofia," Blagoev said.

Free Sofia Tour has established relations with the organizers of free tours in Budapest ([http://](http://www.triptobudapest.hu)

www.runnerbeantours.com), Rome (<http://www.newromefreetour.com>), Belgrade (<http://www.belgradewalkingtours.com>), New York (<http://www.nycbyfoot.com>) and Washington (<http://www.dcbyfoot.com>).

"Since for most visitors Sofia is 'the gateway' to Bulgaria, our guests ask all kinds of questions, including for advice about their stay," Blagoev said. Many guests say Sofia and Bulgaria have been a pleasant surprise for them, he said. A visitor even said: "Why should I go to Paris for the 13th time when I can visit Bulgaria?" Regrettably, there are often visitors who leave Bulgaria unaware, for instance, that there are cultural and natural landmarks in and around Sofia included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. That is why the young people at Free Sofia Tour are glad when Sofia's guests call them at the beginning of their stay.

Free Sofia Tour is only the first project implemented by the association, which has a lot of other ideas and plans for the future.

"We are open for cooperation with other NGOs, central and local government and legal persons to help along the development of tourism in Bulgaria," Blagoev said. They are now working on the branding of Free Sofia Tour and the design of a new website.

Free Sofia Tour plans to launch regular morning tours (starting at 11:00 a.m.) as from March 27, when the clock changes to summer time, on workdays, too (and not only on weekends as is the case now). Its members are looking for volunteers ready to join the initiative.

"As far as we know, there is a free tour in English only in Plovdiv, organized by the local tourist centre, but it is available once a week and visitors have to join a waiting list," Blagoev told BTA. □



The 12th century St. Todor Church near Boboshevo, which is a national cultural landmark and under the protection of UNESCO, is in a desperate state, Mayor Kroum Marinov said. In the 1960s the church was covered by a protective wooden structure. However, a year ago the structure collapsed. Volunteers covered it with nylon and canvas. The church has unique wall paintings. The local residents hope to receive urgent assistance so that the church could be preserved for the generations

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