

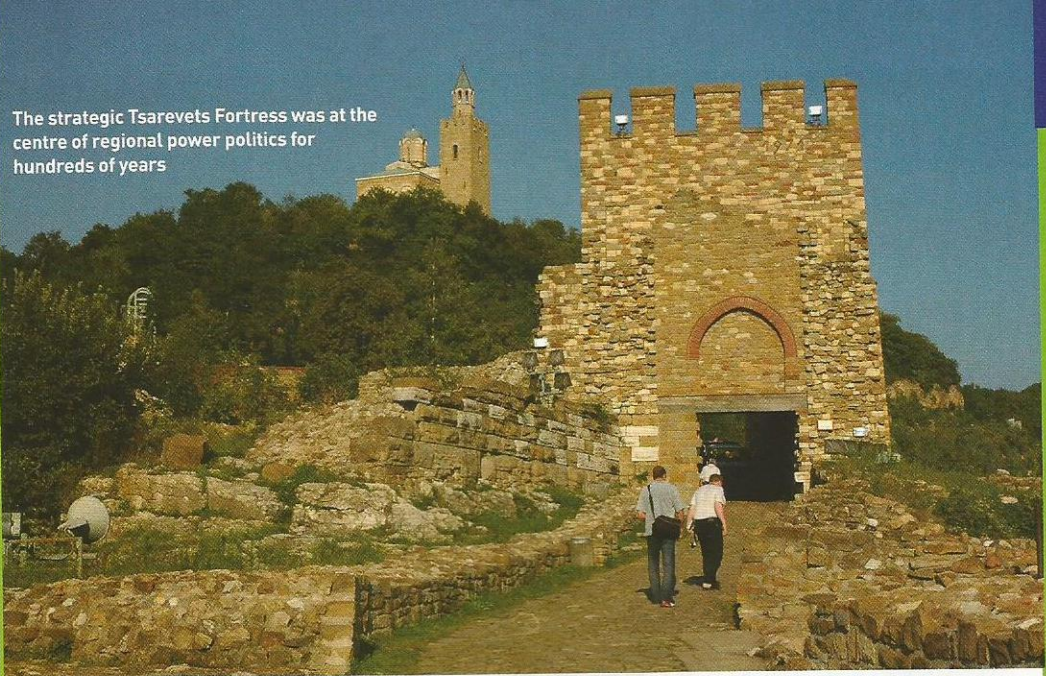
Holy figures adorn San Francisco church in Quito's Old Town

conquistadors' daughters, presidents' widows and heiresses – came only from the most notable families. Nowadays the convent is more diverse, but it is still closed to the public. You can, however, buy ceremonial wine, infusions, and herbs from the nuns through a little revolving door that keeps them hidden. More convents line Old Town's Way of the Crosses, as does the 17th-century Jesuit church known as La Compañía. It contains seven tons of dazzling gold leaf and more cherubs than heaven itself. The 18th-century La Merced church has Quito's highest, although silent, bell tower. Locals say that evil spirits haunt the campanile, which was never consecrated, and only the original

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bell-ringer, who died in 1810, was strong enough to stand up to them. Ever since, the bells have hung in silence. But the bells ring day and night at the Basilica del Voto Nacional, a grey neo-Gothic cathedral whose spires compete with the mountains. The Pope blessed this church on his visit to Ecuador in 1985. Today visitors are allowed to ascend the tower to inspect the great, mechanical clock (but don't be there when the bells clang on the hour) and Ecuadorian-style gargoyles in the form of monkeys and toucans. A spiral staircase climbs even higher to tiny windows that offer a dizzying Quasimodo-eye view of the city. Dozens of steeples and domes rise high over the red-tiled roofs and poke through clouds banking up the volcano. From this quiet perch, Old Town seems to sleep with angels. **H**

Aimée Dowling has contributed to the forthcoming *Lonely Planet* guide to Ecuador



The strategic Tsarevets Fortress was at the centre of regional power politics for hundreds of years

# Bulgaria's city of the tsars

Chris Deliso visits the grand medieval Veliko Tarnovo

**N**O PLACE in Bulgaria has the ambiance of Veliko Tarnovo, famed 'City of the Tsars'. The grandest of Bulgaria's medieval capitals, it has an evocative old quarter, numerous well-frescoed churches, and the enormous Tsarevets Fortress, brought vividly to life at night in the Sound and Light Show.

Encircled by protective hills, Veliko Tarnovo enjoys a spectacular and strategic setting. The Romans built the first substantial fortifications, which Byzantine Emperor Justinian (reigned 527–565) enhanced. However, Bulgarian Slav tribes arrived in the seventh century, and Tarnovgrad (as the city became known) became prominent during the wars between Bulgaria and Byzantium over the next few centuries. It was a hotbed of revolt under brothers Petar and Asen, who established the Second Bulgarian Empire in 1185. Being the capital, Veliko Tarnovo flourished, with Crusaders, Byzantine emperors, and the Khans of the Golden Horde fighting for influence.

Veliko Tarnovo today has a youthful feel, due to its prestigious university. Tourists include backpackers, tour groups and weekend couples. Tarnovo's increasing popularity means a wealth of accommodation

Count Baldwin of Flanders: allegedly executed by the Bulgarians at Tsarevets



#### INFORMATION

**Tourist information**  
<http://www.velikotarnovo.info>

**Best times to go**  
May–September

**Cost of staying**  
£ £ £ £ £

**Recommended reads**  
*A Concise History of Bulgaria* by RJ Crampton (CUP, 2005)



options, ranging from youth hostels and guest houses to boutique hotels. Some enjoy stunning views over the river and fortress.

History is everywhere, as you will see while wandering

Trapezitsa Hill, where archaeologists are excavating ruined churches and royal residences. In town, visit the Church of the Forty Martyrs, Church of Sveti Petar & Pavle, and Church of Sveti Dimitar, all containing medieval wall paintings.

Tsarevets Fortress is clearly the main attraction. Its impressive walls contain ruins of dwellings, churches and shops.

For many the most interesting spots are those associated with violent

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legends, such as Execution Rock, from which traitors were hurled into the Yantra. Count Baldwin of Flanders, leader of the Fourth Crusade, has lent his name to a Tsarevets tower, where he was allegedly killed in 1205.

Having aided the overthrow of Christian Constantinople a year earlier, Baldwin's execution at the hands of the Bulgarians is regarded by some as ironically fitting. **H**

Chris Deliso is a travel writer who co-authored *Bulgaria* (Lonely Planet, 2008)