

Our first 6 months in SOFIA

Wim & Sophie Stevens-Lemaigre



We are adapting

We are now settled since the beginning of 2019 in Sofia, Bulgaria. We are fortunate to live in a *maisonnette* which is located at the top of a building. From the terrace which is at the level of our bedroom, we can contemplate all the city of Sofia but also the Vitosha mountain, which is very close to us, and further, the Balkans mountains.

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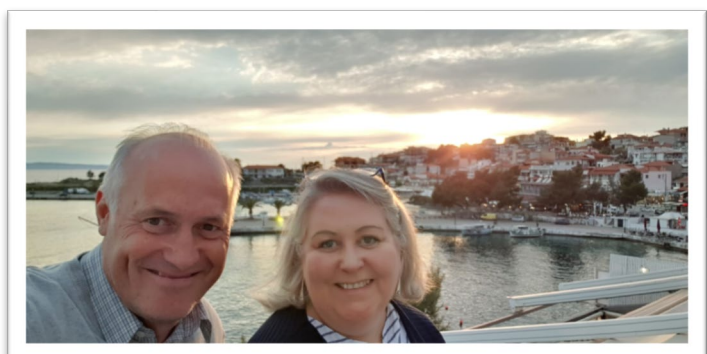


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The city of Sofia lies at the foot of the Vitosha mountain, which makes the landscape really surprising and different but which also means that the weather in Sofia is a bit like the weather in the mountains.

During the winter, and it seems that this winter was a mild one, the temperature went down to -16°C in January / February. It is also snowing in Sofia and the main roads are clear but still snowy and icy in the small streets. Fortunately, the cars are all equipped with winter tires and finally, this is not too much of a problem.

In spring, the weather is variable, sometimes quite hot but also rainy. It is not uncommon to have a thunderstorm per day and cloudy skies..



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Finding our landmarks

Our first discoveries were more practical: how to find food and where to go? We took the time, during the month of January, to discover new places, to test different stores, to find the food we needed. Imagine: everything is written in Bulgarian! And it is absolutely impossible to understand without knowing the Cyrillic alphabet.

So we found 2 supermarkets where we regularly get supplies. Slowly, we learn to appreciate the Bulgarian specialties and we suffice ourselves with what is available.

For example, we do not find certain foods, which can be quite disturbing, especially when we used to consume it regularly, such as green beans

(Bulgarians do not like this vegetable 😊) but also vegetables that do not are available only in season, we do not find meat such as beef, veal or lamb. In the shops, we find mostly pork and chicken. In the winter, we do not find a lot of choice of fruits but it is true that as soon as spring arrives, the choice improves a lot.

Of course, there are many stores similar to those we had in Belgium. And much to the delight of Wim, who takes great pleasure in strolling through all the wings of the store, there are several Decathlon in Sofia. It's true that having a few landmarks helps you feel a little less lost.

For me who used to order a lot of things online (I really do not like to shop!) I do not have any Amazon available in Bulgaria. Everything comes from Germany and so, you have to be very careful about shipping costs which are sometimes really too high.

Even finding books is complicated. As far as we know, there is no good foreign languages books library in Sofia. Even finding books in English is not easy at the moment. We will have to deepen our research but it is probably one of the elements we miss the most. We did not take a lot of books with us and we are aware of it.

We have always been used to having plain book libraries and this is gradually starting to be missed. In one way or another, we will have to find new ways to get it, not just electronically.

Gradually, I try to adapt and find local suppliers. I can happily count on the help of our few acquaintances, especially Milen

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and Rossitsa, who have been really adorable with us since our arrival:

- ✓ we participated in January in the Milen birthday party, in the National Museum of history of Bulgaria;
- ✓ we attended a concert of folk music;
- ✓ we were invited for the concert of the group that plays music composed and produced by Milen and
- ✓ we shared a summer evening in their garden around a superb table filled with delicious Bulgarian specialties.

When it's necessary, Milen and Rossitsa make sure we always have a translator on our side so that we can understand a little bit about what is being said. In short, we were really spoiled.

Discovering Sofia's surroundings and further away

When the roads were a little clearer, in early February, we began to wander around the city and the Vitosha mountain.

We started our discoveries first around Sofia, going to walk to Borovets, a ski resort located 1h30 from Sofia.

Then we spent a wonderful day exploring north of Sofia in Vratsa National Park.

To know more about this beautiful day, will you walk on the site which takes again all our adventures : stevens-lemaigre.com.



Our website subdivision [Aventures – Adventures](#) takes all our walks and trips around Sofia, Bulgaria and beyond. I will continue to supply this page and give you an idea of our discoveries. When I find the right solution I will also try to post some nice videos.

We also took the time to visit the 3 most important Monasteries of Bulgaria. In the order of importance,

1. The [Rila Monastery](#)
2. The [Bachkovo Monastery](#)
3. The [Trojan Monastery](#)

Personally, the place that inspired me most was the Trojan Monastery.

François Ghislain who was with us when we visited it told me that "if one offered him a week of retirement in this place, he would accept immediately". I understood and felt the same.

There was in this place a sense of peace and tranquility really noticeable. The charm that emanated from it was undeniable and perhaps the fact that there were not too many visitors benefited this feeling of tranquility.



Monastère de Trojan

In contrast, the Monastery I found the least interesting and which is really one of the few tourist attractions is that of Bachkovo. But this is of course a very subjective opinion.

The most famous monastery in Bulgaria and the most important tourist attraction is Rila. It is a monastery that was built to accommodate 300 people but there are only 30 monks who live there today.



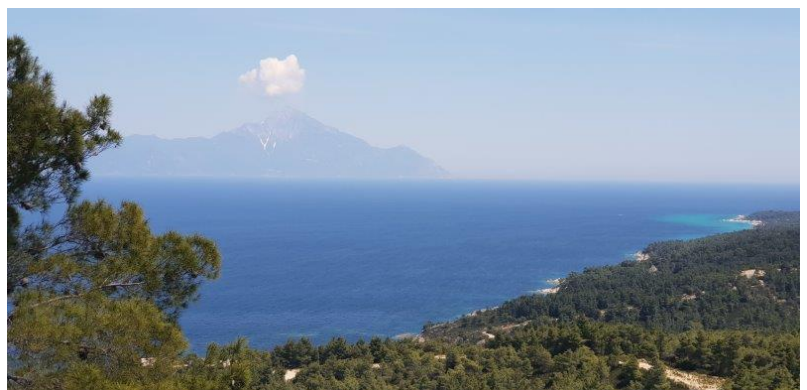
Monastère de Bachkovo

This monastery is hidden in a beautiful valley that we had the chance to visit in winter, with Catherine, Etienne, Bernard and Dourou and also in the spring with Lena and Mariska. This place is also very peaceful but very cold in winter. On the other hand, from the spring, we could notice that the Chinese tourist coaches jostled there ... I will thus avoid to go there during the months of affluence preferring by far the calm and the serenity that emerge there , especially in non-tourist season.



And then, we took a few days, just the 2 of us to discover the north of Greece. It was the first time that I went to Greece and I had fun in the car while I drove towards the border, to tell myself that it was very funny for a Belgian to be able to say that she was going to Greece by car ... it's true that from Belgium, rare are the ones who drove by car, but from Sofia it takes us about 3 hours to get to the border between Bulgaria and Greece..

We stayed on the peninsula of [Sithonia](#), a place with really beautiful nature and very relaxing. While touring the peninsula, we discovered surprising views of Mount Atos. High place of the Orthodox religion, it is a peninsula which is completely closed and can be accessible only by men and with a special visa. This place includes a number of monasteries and therefore, women are not admitted!



Oh yes ... the borders! After so many years in which we have all lost the habit of stopping at the borders (Hurray for Schengen!), Here we are again in a country that is not member of this agreement and therefore that has borders. How boring! We must wait, sometimes for hours if we do not choose the right day and / or the right time, but in addition, the customs officers are at the exit of Bulgaria and the entrance of the neighboring country. In short, one of the disadvantages of living in a country that is not part of Schengen 😊

Tourism is still only partially existent in Bulgaria. During the winter, there are 3 ski resorts which are also the cheapest resorts in Europe. In summer there are also the shores of the Black Sea. Some seaside resorts like Sunny Beach are resorts that host tourist charters that come there to drink and flirt, according to the Bulgarians. It is certainly not a place that attracts us. But the north of the coast seems to be full of more typical villages and much more attractive than we will certainly discover soon.

Otherwise, we have also discovered some surprising places, like the *gate of freedom*, located above the passage of Trojan and which makes it possible to cross a mountain to arrive in the valley of the roses.

Bulgaria is also known for rose water and all by-products. The valley in which the flowers are mainly grown is therefore the Valley of Roses and it is a place with a lot of charm.

At the heart of this valley is the town of Veliko Turnovo, the former capital of Bulgaria, which we will visit shortly. It is a small town that is, it seems, very charming and I hope that we will be able to go to see it during the month of September, when it is still nice.



During the visit of Bernard and Catherine (and of course Dourou and Etienne), we went to visit the Rila Monastery, a place considered as the most touristy of Bulgaria as well as the city of Plovdiv, another tourist city of Bulgaria.

In June, with Sabrina and Lena, we had a weekend in southern Bulgaria in a region called the [Rodope](#), which is really beautiful.

And with Gabriella, we took one of the cable cars that took us over the mountain Vitosha to discover a pleasant space, much cooler than the city and from which there are many walking ways. We will return there, that's for sure!

Here, I hope that this report gives you a better idea of our discoveries in Bulgaria. There is still a lot to discover but we will have time and especially, as Wim repeats so often, we will also certainly learn more about Greece, the neighboring country that also seems to be full of great places to discover.

Follow our next adventures on the site stevens-lemaigre.com and see you soon 😊

Our visitors



In the early days of January, we received our very first visitor: Lucie Wetchoko. It was cold and we worked for a few days but enjoyed a little bit of the city we were discovering. It was a very nice beginning .

Later that month, Alexane and Julines came together for a few days.



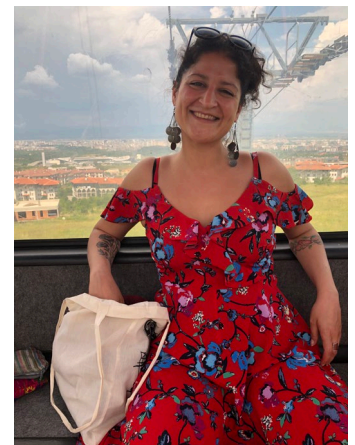
In February: Bernard, Dourou, Catherine et Etienne



From mid-May till end of July : Lena Johnson, an American who stayed with us during her internship in our company (eldest daughter of our friends Christine and Will who live in North Carolina, USA).



In June, François Ghislain spent about a week with us and we also had the visit of Sabrina Benoit et Gabriella Matton during the other weekends.





In July, Juline & Kirsten Johnson, Lena 'sister who lives in Belgium also came for a few days.