

## NEW AMSTERDAM SINGERS 2019 TOUR



### ***Day One – Arrival in Varna***

We arrived in Varna to meet our tour guide, Ekaterina, and bus driver, Ilyan. We were quickly enchanted with the lilt of Ekaterina's English and her earnestness in attending to our needs. Ilyan proved to be our hero, driving narrow mountain roads, and seamlessly getting our luggage and our group where we needed to be. Our first rehearsal, on the afternoon of our arrival, was on the 13th floor of the Rosslyn Hotel, giving us a distracting view of the Black Sea while we tried to focus on our ensemble.

### ***Day Two – Varna***

Our introduction to with a drive to visit the tour of downtown Varna in nearly every Tchonev Girls' and with the lyrics of welcomed us after the spiced salt and honey for together.



Bulgarian monasteries came on our second day in Varna, stone caves of the nearby Aladzha monastery. A walking followed, with an introduction to the Roman ruins found Bulgarian town. The afternoon rehearsal with Prof. Marin Women's Choir was our first chance to test our Bulgarian *Polegnala e Todora*. It was a success! The choir rehearsal with the traditional loaf of bread, served with dipping – representing the sharing of our experiences

Dinner that night in the ethno restaurant "The Old House" was a traditional Bulgarian dinner with the omnipresent drink, *rakia*, and the traditional *shopska* salad (red tomatoes, green cucumbers, and shredded white cheese garnished with dill) as our first course. (Steve Holtje observed that the colors of the salad are those of the Bulgarian flag.) We were serenaded by a local musician and his band, and watched as a group of women and children on the outdoor patio began dancing to the music. A dozen chorus members got up to join in the traditional folk dancing, which we observed and participated in again at our last night's dinner in Sofia.

### ***Day Three – Varna***

As jet lag began to subside, we had nearly an entire day to relax prior to our first concert. Many headed for the nearby Black Sea beaches, where a beach umbrella could be rented for a very reasonable five leva. Others visited the town's Ethnographic Museum, or wandered back through the town to enjoy a fish lunch at the seaside.

Our evening concert with the Church concluded with the *Polegnala e Todoro* led by Nikitassova, who spoke to us gestures.



Women's Choir in the town's Episcopal Methodist shared singing of *Simple Gifts* led by Clara, and the Bulgarian choir conductor, Zaharina Milkova- in French and Bulgarian, with wonderfully expressive

### ***Day Four – Velika Tarnovo***

Our foray into the middle of Tarnovo, the ancient former

the country began with a four-hour drive to Velika capital. On the drive, we were mesmerized by the fields



of sunflowers, the second largest crop in Bulgaria (roses being the largest). Our driver obliged us with a stop along the road to take pictures of the flowers.

Arriving in the hilly town, we were hit with the heat that had been sizzling the rest of Europe earlier in the week. After a quick lunch, the group split into two for walking tours of the sights, including the fortress and the St. Peter and Paul Church. It was so hot that one of our tour guides, Reuben, was already soaked from his 15-minute walk to meet us. After the walking tour, we were offered the opportunity to ride out to the local excavation of Roman ruins. Reuben had worked

at the site for six years, and provided a personalized walking tour through the site to those of us who had braved the unforgiving heat!

After dinner on our own, many of us met in the hotel restaurant for drinks and desserts, and the evening's treat, a light and sound show on the fortress buildings across the valley, depicting the history of the ancient capital.

### ***Day Five – Plovdiv***



From the hills of Velika Tarnovo, on we drove across the Balkan Mountains to our next destination, Plovdiv. We were again hit with high temperatures, which made the anticipated hotel arrival, with its advertised outdoor pool, even more desirable! But first, lunch, and then a walking tour of the old town in Plovdiv, with its churches, historic homes, Roman theater, and ethnographic museum.

Our now-resident Bulgarian, Rick Hibberd, had provided suggestions for good local restaurants, and David Ortiz, party planner extraordinaire, organized a gathering in the piano bar of our Hotel, complete with music and dancing.

### ***Day Six – Plovdiv***

Our second concert was scheduled for this evening, but the group had most of the day to enjoy the museums and shopping in Plovdiv, or just the relaxing hotel pool. One of the most visited sites was the Tanaka Museum, with its wonderful ancient glass and restored mosaics.

The Gaudeamus Choir hosted our Plovdiv performance, held in the Regional History Museum. The Bulgarian choir performed traditional Orthodox music, led by director Vesela Geleva, including a mesmerizing chant performed by four of the men in the choir. The two choruses joined together for a moving performance of Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus*, led by Clara. The small air conditioner could not compete with the heat of the day and the appreciative and enthusiastic audience that filled the small but colorful performance space.



### ***Day Seven – Sofia***

Our final destination in Bulgaria was its current capital, Sofia. We boarded the bus for the drive through the countryside, first visiting the Boyana Church, a UNESCO Heritage site, outside the city. After a group lunch of moussaka, we met our guides to visit the church nestled on the hill. The small building and the fragility of the paintings inside mandated that only ten people at a time could visit, so we took turns admiring the amazingly vibrant and expressive wall paintings and the mountain gardens outside. A brief rainstorm was a welcome relief..

Arriving in the city later in the afternoon, our guides led separate tours through the downtown to see the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, now-familiar Roman ruins, and other historic locations. The heat continued, in spite of a thunderstorm passing through. After checking into our Downtown Hotel, we headed out for a final group dinner at

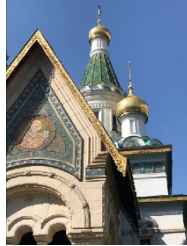
the traditional Bulgarian ethnic restaurant Chevermeto. The entertainment for the evening was provided by young men and women performing Bulgarian folk dances in the center of the restaurant, clad in traditional garb. Our assistant conductor, David Recca, was enlisted to join two of the young men in a traditional dance, which he performed to great acclaim!

### ***Day Eight – Sofia***

On the last day, the group was offered site, the Rila Monastery. Those who

impressive complex of buildings in the Our final concert was hosted by a local Nikleva-Vladeva.

A full house enthusiastically clapped for *Verum Corpus*, *Polegnala e Todora*, and



an opportunity to visit another UNESCO Heritage boarded the bus were rewarded with a visually beautiful mountains 90 minutes outside the city.

choir, Ave Musica, and their conductor, Tania

our combined choir performances of Mozart's *Ave* Ms. Nikleva's arrangement of *Amazing Grace*.



Following a reception graciously provided by our host chorus, we boarded the bus for a special evening overlooking the city of Sofia at the apartment of Rick Hibberd and Gail Buyske. The catered event was also attended by members of the *America for Bulgaria Foundation*, on whose board Gail sits. It was a raucous and thoroughly wonderful close to a musically and culturally

eventful week!

The Bulgarian choral tradition made for a rich musical experience on this tour, and the camaraderie and shared singing with our host choirs was memorable. As always, music director Clara Longstreth led us in a varied program, and we enjoyed the accompaniment of assistant conductor David Recca.

Grateful and exuberant praise to our tour organizers, Donna Zalichin and Nina Reiniger, for working with our tour company, KI Concerts, to create an even-paced and interesting itinerary, and for managing us all with aplomb!

*Narrative by Ari Brose*

*Photos by Ari Brose, Gail Buyske, and Jason Stern*