



This is the most impressive monastery compound in the country, whose architectural and artistic magnificence has earned it a due place in the List of the world cultural and natural heritage, under UNESCO protection. Founded during the 10th century, the monastery underwent different stages of construction. Its founder is believed to have been Ivan Riski [John of Rila], the outstanding Bulgarian hermit and healer, a patron saint of the Bulgarian people. Together with his disciples and followers, he established a community of monks, the core of the Rila Monastery. Rebuilt, deserted, reduced to ashes by Turks and built anew, the monastery has been a witness and the symbol of the rich Bulgarian history. From the outside, the monastery has a harsh and inaccessible appearance of an emphatically defensive character. In the inside, however, the architecture of courtyard facades is attractive, varied and enlivened by the multitude of staircases, arcades and roofed balconies. The total area of the Rila Monastery is about 8,800 sq m, 4,500 sq m of which are occupied by the wings of the monastery, 1,000 sq m - by the church, 80 sq m - by Hrelyo's Tower, while the remaining around 3,200 sq m are the monastery courtyard. A specific artistic emphasis in the architectural ensemble of the monastery is Hrelyo's Tower – the only structure preserved from the old buildings. It was put up in 1335 by Sebastocrator Hrelyo in the monastery courtyard, with the purpose to serve as a defense tower. The fortification style of its architecture is softened by the decorations made out of bricks. It is 23 m high, its walls being 1.80 m thick. In the inside, the space of the tower is distributed into a ground floor with a suspended vault and five stories with wooden floors. On the top story of the tower there is a chapel, elaborately decorated by mural paintings. Access to the stories is by stone stairs built into the walls. Later the monks built a small annex to the tower, serving as a belfry. In the early 19th century the monks decided to renovate the old monastery by new solid monastery wings. The building work was started and partially completed by master-builder Aleksi from the village of Rila, who completed in 1816-1819 the north, east and west wing. A big fire destroyed most of the new structures in 1833. During the following year, donations arrived from all over the country for the rebuilding of the monastery and in 1834 the monastery wings were restored and completed in the appearance we can see them today. In 1847 master builder Milenko from Radomir completed the south wing. The wings have more than 300 monk cells, four chapels and numerous guest rooms, warehouses, etc. Murals and woodcarvings decorate the facades and the walls in the interior. In some of the rooms, known as the Koprivshtitsa, Chiprovtsi and others, there are strikingly beautiful wood-carved ceilings. Of special interest is the magernitsa (the big monastery kitchen), located in the underground floor of the north wing. It is a solidly built pyramidal 22 m tower, rising up and passing through all the floors, ending with a dome over the roof. By its construction, layout and architectural impact, the magernitsa of the Rila Monastery is a rare architectural achievement. One of the most original structures of the Bulgarian National Revival Period is the monastery church of the Holy Virgin (1834). It was built by master builder Pavel Ivanovich from the village of Krimin, Kostur region. It rises on the site of the old church from the time of

Sebastocrator Hrelyo, which had been pulled down by the monks after the big fire of 1833. What has survived from that church includes the altar gates and the ruler's throne of Hrelyo – extremely valuable monuments of the Bulgarian art of woodcarving. Two icons have also been preserved. They are considered to be masterpieces of medieval Bulgarian painting – that of St Ivan Rilski from the 14th century and of St Arseni. The construction of the present-day five-domed church was completed in 1838 and during the following 23 years it was decorated by woodcarvings and mural paintings. The plan and the interior of the church are extremely rich. The architectural diversity, the natural materials used in making the columns, arches, parapets, the coloured cornices and the lavish external mural paintings in the gallery are particularly powerful. The mural paintings, made on the outer and inner walls of the church, combine the rigid adherence to the canon with the realistic presentation of the images. Taking part in the painting were zographs [mural painters] of the Bansko and Samokov schools of art. Zahari Zograph was the only one to have left his signature and to have dated his murals (1844). A true work of art is the iconostasis, with its big size and indentation in the centre, its architectural elements, used in making up the overall composition and its elaborate woodcarvings. The monastery has a museum exhibition, an art gallery, a library and an ethnographic exhibition, housing icons, manuscripts, certificates and old-time weapons, belonging to the monastery sentries, numerous pieces of jewelry, coins, and church plate. Of great interest is Rafail's cross, an undisputed masterpiece of the art of woodcarving. Monk Rafail continued his work on it in the course of 12 years. He lost his sight on completion of his unique piece of art. It is made of once piece of wood, sized 81 by 43 cm, and features 650 small figurines and 104 biblical scenes. The Rila Monastery is one of the most frequented places in Bulgaria. Sleeping accommodations are provided in the monastery itself, in a tourist dormitory and in the nearby hotels. There is a first-class asphalted road to the monastery.