



Veer off through the little square on your right and clam-ber up the cobblestones of ul **Mitropolit Paisii** past the magnificent **Danov House**, where gorgeous gar-dens offer magnificent views: inside are various exhibi-tions relating to Hristo Danov, nicknamed the ‘Bulgarian Gutenberg’ for his pioneering work in book publishing. Across is the **Church of Sveta Bogoroditsa**; local students often sit outside to sketch street scenes along ul **Saborna**, but for the ultimate artistic inspiration, head inside and admire the lush, colourful frescoes.

Continue your ascent and you’ll pass scores of stunning **Bulgarian Revival houses**, some restored, oth-ers flaking gloriously; turn right at **Lamartine House** (dating from 1829, it honours French poet Alphonse de Lamartine, who stayed for three days during his ‘travels in the Orient’), loop down ul **Hemus** and follow the crowds to Plovdiv’s showstopper, the breathtaking **2nd-century-AD Roman amphitheatre**. Built during the reign of Emperor Trajan, this remarkably renovated **coliseum** once held 6000 spectators: to-day, visitors can scarper around on-stage, take a guided tour, or, if the timing’s right, make like a Philippop-ollian and catch a concert from its marble seats. Soak up the surrounds at the cafes overlooking the amphi-theatre, or totter downhill to the leafy **Citizens Club**, a welcoming courtyard restaurant attached to the endearing **Vazrazdane Gallery**, which showcases modern Bulgarian artworks from the whimsical to the way-out.

From here, art aficionados are spoiled for choice: all within stumbling distance of each other are the **State Gallery of Fine Arts** (featuring 19th- and 20th-century Bulgarian masters), **Encho Pironkov City Gal-ery of Fine Arts** (displaying modern Bulgarian works), **Zlatyu Boyadjiev House** (full of gigantic paint-ings in which old Plovdiv and the Bulgarian peasantry play starring roles) and the **Permanent Exhibition of Dimitar Kirov** (chock-a-block with colourful creations by ‘DiKi’, Plovdiv’s artiste provocateur). Can’t choose? Head directly to the **Icon Gallery** on the antique-shop-lined ul **Saborna**: it’s small but the collec-tion of icons – some dating as far back as the 15th century – is heavenly. It sits next to the **Church of Sveti Konstantin and Elena**, Plovdiv’s oldest and one of its most beloved: the riotous frescoes and gilded iconos-tasis within belie its broody exterior. The original church – dedicated to Emperor Constantine the Great and his mother, Helena – was built in AD 337. Next door is the unmissable **Ethnographical Museum**, housed within a gorgeous baroque mansion; if you can drag yourself from its equally glorious garden and make it in-side, you’ll find more than 40,000 displays covering life and culture in Plovdiv across the ages. Just outside is the looming stone **Hisar Kapiya**, the eastern gate to the **Old Town**; it was originally erected by the Romans, but the formidable fortress walls in front of which you’ll be taking photos today date back to the 11th century.

Wrap up your rubbernecking with an energetic climb (the last for the day, promise) up to **Nebet Tepe** (Prayer Hill), a 200m-high hill boasting the rubble of Plovdiv’s earliest settlement – Eumolpias, circa 5000 BC – and Plovdiv’s prime panorama. Yes, there’s a bar up the top: praise Dionysus!

Make it happen

Plovdiv is an easy hour-and-a-half drive from So-fia (even quicker if you have the nerve for Bulgaria’s highway speed limit of 140km/h).. Buses and trains run frequently between here and Sofia, Burgas and other popular Bulgarian destinations (see avtogari.info and bdz.bg for timetables). Right in the mid-dle of the antediluvian action is Hostel Old Plovdiv, a charming, boutique inn run by the charismatic Hris-to Giulev that was recently awarded fourth place on Lonely Planet’s Top 10 Best Value Stays for 2014 list.

