



The Church of St. Sophia

It is amazing how on the small peninsula on which the old Nessebar is located, there were about 50 churches during the different eras, fortress walls and even an ancient theater! It is true, that in the ancient times its territory was almost three times larger, but it gradually shrunk and was swallowed by the sea during earthquakes. According to archaeologists, the sea of Nessebar hides many secrets that await their revealing. To date, 44 temples have been registered from the period between the 5th and 19th centuries, more or less preserved. Some churches were built as small family temples of aristocratic families, others are quite respectful with their size. Their richly decorated facades with multi-colored friezes, rosettes, red and limestone bricks, arches and marble columns are a real cultural, architectural and historical wealth, the reason for the inclusion of the city of Nessebar in the list of UNESCO as part of the world cultural heritage, in 1983.

The church "St. Sofia" was built in the 5th century as a three-nave basilica. It still looks impressive with its majestic ruins, after devastating earthquakes and historical upheavals. Mesembria was the archdiocese of the Black Sea, where the important issues of the Black Sea cities were discussed, and the Church of St. Sophia was the cathedral of the diocese. Almost throughout all of its history, Nessebar has been the residence of a metropolitan. Two of the Nessebar churches - "St. Sofia" and "St. Stefan" - are better known as the Old and the New Metropolis.

The inhabitants of Nessebar perceive "Saint Sophia" as a symbol of the city and regularly organize celebrations among the remains. They feel this place as the spiritual center, where they should be in important moments of the city. One of the attractive events for many visitors is the interactive performance "Mystery of the Thracian Heroes".

One of the medieval stories related to the Church of St. Sofia is about the Byzantine princess Mataisa Kantakuzina Palaiologos, born in 1330 under the name of Maria, the daughter of the Byzantine emperor Andronicus III Palaeologos and the Italian princess Anna of Savoy, buried after death you are in the temple. The story of Mataisa excites visitors to the city with its romance. In the Battle of Rusokastro in 1332 between the troops of the Second Bulgarian State, led by Tsar Ivan Alexander, and those of Byzantium, led by Emperor Andronicus III Palaeologus, who wanted to take advantage of a struggle for the royal throne in Bulgaria and conquer the lands south of the Balkan Mountain, Byzantium was defeated. In order to secure peace, Princess Mataisa was

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betrothed to the son of the Bulgarian ruler, Mikhail Asen, but the marriage was postponed for several years due to the tender age of the future Bulgarian king and queen. When the time came, the marriage, cementing the peace between Bulgarians and Byzantines, took place. During the marriage ceremony, Maria took the name of Irina. Unfortunately, the Bulgarian heir to the throne died in a battle with the Ottomans in 1355 near today's Sofia. Irina was left a young widow and returned to Byzantium, but later she and part of the Palaeologos family moved to Nessebar to escape from the Ottomans. The princess became a nun under the name Mataisa and spent the rest of her life in a monastery complex in Nessebar. After her death in 1441, Mataisa was buried in a beautiful burial chamber in the Church of Saint Sophia, where only prominent citizens of Nessebar were buried.



Archaeological studies prove that the temple was built at the end of the 5th century, and got its present form at the beginning of the 9th century. The floor of the basilica was covered with a very beautiful multicolored mosaic. The sanctity of the temple was desecrated and robbed at the beginning of the XIII century by a Venetian fleet led by Giacomo Doro.

The Venetian army robbed valuable icons and the holy relics of St. Theodore, St. Andrew the Apostle and St. Bartholomew and took them to the church "St. Salvador" in Venice, where they can still be seen today.

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