Modern Bulgaria lies in a mountainous area of the Balkans, with Greece and Turkey to the south, Romania to the north and the Black Sea to the east. It was this land that the Bulgars—semi-nomadic Turkic tribes—conquered in the 7th Century, intermarrying with the local Slavic populations to form the seed of the Bulgarian nation. The First and Second Bulgarian Empires were largely defined by their wars with the Byzantine Empire to the south, but also witnessed the adoption of Eastern Orthodoxy. The Cyrillic alphabet was invented in Bulgaria during this early period. From the late 14th Century until the late 19th century, Bulgaria was dominated by the Ottoman Empire. The nationalism of the Fin de Siècle delivered Bulgaria its independence, but also the turmoil of war: victory in the First Balkan War, was followed by defeat in the Second Balkan War, World War I, and World War II. Soviet troops entered Bulgaria in 1944, installing a communist government which monopolized power until 1989.

RELIGION

While there is no official state religion in Bulgaria, the constitution designates Eastern Orthodoxy as the country’s “traditional” religion. Eastern Orthodox Christianity was first adopted in Bulgaria in 864 by Boris I of the First Bulgarian Empire, and it has remained the majority religion ever since (59.4% of the population). The largest minority religion is Islam (7.8%), which established itself during the period of Ottoman rule. Perhaps a legacy of its time under communism, Bulgaria today has a substantial non-religious population.

ETHNICITY

Bulgarians make up 76.9% of the country’s population, with sizable Turkish (8%) and Roma (4.4%) minorities. Government policies in the 1980s designed to assimilate minority groups led to some 300,000 ethnic Turks leaving Bulgaria. The Bulgarian population has been in an overall state of decline since the fall of the communist regime, due, in part, to emigration and low birthrates stemming from economic hardship.

FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & CUSTOMS

Most couples in Bulgaria have only one or two children, and due to housing shortages, three-generation households are common. Unlike most other European countries, a sideways shake of the head expresses “yes,” while an up-down nod means “no.”
FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & CUSTOMS (CONTINUED)
The First of March in Bulgaria is “Baba Marta Day.” People entwine red and white threads into “martenitsi,” and exchange them, symbolizing health and happiness. Other popular holidays include New Year’s Day, Liberation Day (3 March, from the Ottoman Empire), Easter, St. George’s Day (6 May), and Christmas.

CONTEMPORARY BULGARIA
In the first ten years following the fall of the communist regime in Bulgaria, the economy and standards of living sharply declined, as much as 40%. This began to change in the late 1990s, as economic reforms and large loans from the IMF began a remarkable recovery, to the point that today Bulgaria has one of the strongest economies in the region. Bulgaria is a close ally of the United States, joining NATO in 2004, and the EU in 2007. The 2006 US-Bulgarian Defense Cooperation Agreement granted US military access to several Bulgarian military facilities, joint training, and significant US military investment.

Bulgaria has maintained good relations with its neighbors, including Russia, with which it shares important economic (as well as historical and cultural) ties. Today, Bulgaria is a unitary parliamentary republic, currently controlled by the center-right GERB party. Boyko Borisov is the current Bulgarian Prime Minister, and Rosen Plevneliev is the President.

Bulgaria has also played an important role in the transit and resettlement of Syrian refugees. Tens of thousands have moved through Bulgaria, and the government has been cooperative in its resettlement policy. However, Bulgarian police have been accused of mistreatment of refugees, including theft, beatings, and even murder.

BULGARIANS IN THE USA
Large-scale Bulgarian migration to the US began in the early 20th century. From 1903-1910, 50,000 emigrated to the US, due to overcrowding, unemployment, and Turkish repression (especially among Bulgarians living in Macedonia). Today there are as many as 250,000 Bulgarians living in the US. The largest communities are in New York, Los Angeles, and the Midwest.

NAMES
 Bulgarian names consist of a given name, a patronymic, and a family name. Male patronymics end in –ov/-ev, while female patronymics end in –ova/-eva. Common male names include Ivan, Grigory, and Dimitar. Common female names include Maria, Ivanka, and Elena.

FAMOUS BULGARIANS
Freedom fighter and national hero Vasil Levski, wrestler Alexander Rusev, footballer Dimitar Berbatov, Bulgarian-Canadian actress and model Nina Dobrev, Bulgarian-American actress Rita Wilson

BULGARIAN WORDS
Hello ........................................Zdraveĭ
How are you? ......................Kak si?
Welcome! ..........................Dobre doshli!
My name is ..............Moeto ime e...
Excuse me ..................Izvinete me
Yes .................................Da
No ......................................Ne
I understand ..............Razbiram
I don’t understand .......Ne razbiram
Thank you! .................Blagodarya!
Goodbye ..........................Sbogom
Cheers! ..............................Nazdrave!

USEFUL LINKS
http://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html