



ised by Tsar  
I v a n  
Alexander  
whose por-  
trait can still be seen in  
the narthex of the bone-  
vault. Like other monas-  
teries in Bulgaria,  
Bachkovo Monastery  
used to have a religious  
school. After the Ottoman  
invasion into Bulgaria in  
the end of the 14th centu-  
ry, the Bulgarian Patriarch  
Evtimii was sent on exile  
in the monastery.  
However, the exile did not  
dishearten the Patriarch  
and he, together with his



**B**achkovo Monastery is the second largest monastery in Bulgaria. It is situated about 30 km to the south of Plovdiv in the valley of the Chepelarska river, also known as river Chaya. The location of the monastery - in the heart of the gorgeous Rhodopi Mountains - together with its impressive size and ancient spirit make it one of the most visited landmarks in Bulgaria.

The monastery and its adjacent area have grown into a picturesque tourist sight where dozens of small shops, stalls, and restaurants border the lane to the monastery gates. Here one can buy practically anything that grows or is manufactured in the Rhodopi Mountains - rare herbs, home-made wild fruit jam, yogurt and white cheese made of goat or buffalo's milk, bright-coloured woolen blankets...

The monastery was set up in 1083 by the Byzantine military commander of Georgian origin, Grigorii Bakuriani and his brother Abazii. Unfortunately the only building still preserved from that time is a two-storey bone-vault, which lies about 300m to the east of the monastery. The bone-vault is a unique must-see historical and architectural monument for its old frescoes, which rank among the most valuable works of Orthodox art of the 11th -12th c.

At the time of the Second Bulgarian State (1185-1396) the monastery was generously patron-



disciples, actively worked on religious and cultural issues behind the thick monastery walls.

Although Bachkovo monastery survived the first invasion of the Ottoman armies in the 14th century, later on it followed the unfortunate destiny of the majority of Christian orthodox monasteries in Bulgaria and was raided and destroyed. It was restored in the end of the 15th century. Its dining hall was reconstructed in 1601 and the present-day church Virgin Mary was finished in 1604. The frescoes in the dining hall, finished in 1605 by an unknown master, are remarkable for their artistic value. What draws the attention of visitors most is the miraculous icon of Virgin Mary-Compassion. A long queue of pilgrims, coming here to pray to the Mother of God, usually meanders far outside the church entrance. The monastery has another church - St Nikola (1834-1837) which rises in the southern part of the yard and impresses with the well-preserved frescoes of the famous artist Zahari Zograf (including a selfportrait) finished in 1841. The monastery also has its own museum which holds rare religious items from different times.