



## The New Costa Blanca

*Vratsa Climbing Guide*, 2014 by Nikolay Petkov (£23.50, available in the UK from [climb-europe.com](http://climb-europe.com))

Bulgaria's Vratsata Gorge offers both single pitch sport climbs and 350m trad routes, as well as everything in-between, all within 8km of Vratsa's town centre.

Nikolay Petkov's new guide to climbing in this protected part of the Vrachanski Balkan Natural Park is detailed, comprehensive and inspiring.

Written in Bulgarian and English, it is clear that Petkov has used his considerable international experience in producing a guide that provides the maximum of information in the simplest and clearest way with the text augmented by photo-topos and icons. The English text is in blue, making scanning through the guide very straightforward, and it reads very naturally, despite the use of some American terms such as rappel and dihedral.

Each area is introduced with the standard information set you would expect, how to get there, GPS co-ordinates, summary table of routes and grades, brief history, campsites, you get the picture. But there is much more in these short introductions, in addition to highlighting the locations of water fountains and giving you an idea of what gear to take there are also photo-topos, maps and descriptions of the approach routes, descent routes and abseil points. It is difficult to see what more could be done in such a topographically complex area to ensure you find the route and get off again safely. One of the more unusual features of this guide is the way in which the star system is used, which is not simply a comment on the quality or beauty of a route. These stars, by contrast, are pretty clear indicators of which routes to get on and which to avoid.

The photo-topos for the sport routes are simple, clear and supported by a table giving route names, French sport grades, stars, length, number of quick draws required, and the first ascent details. The trad descriptions also have summary tables, photo-topos, sometimes from two angles, and written descriptions of what gear to take and Yosemite-style drawn topos that show features and pitch lengths. The grading system used for trad' routes is the UIAA system, but don't worry if you're not familiar with these grades as there is a grade converter in the back of the guide. In fact, such is the level of detail in this guide that a cam size converter is also included just in case you're not sure how your yellow Dragon compares to a yellow Camelot. This is a very nicely produced guide that is well constructed and robust; unlike some other recent guides, it does not feel as though it will fall apart on its first outing.

Airlines are tripping over themselves to offer cheap fares to eastern Europe, so with a budget flight to Sofia followed by a 110km drive or train ride you could be in a little known part of Europe, mixing sport and adventure at your leisure.

- Ian Wyatt