

Sofia Airport (IATA: SOF, ICAO: LBSF) (Bulgarian: Летище София, Letishte Sofiya) is the main international airport of Bulgaria, located 10 km (6.2 mi) east^[2] of the centre of the capital Sofia. In 2019 the airport surpassed 7 million passengers for the first time.^[3] The airport serves as the home base for BH Air, Bulgaria Air, and Bulgarian Air Charter and as a base for both Ryanair and Wizz Air. The Vrazhdebna Air Base of the Bulgarian Air Force is at the airport.

Contents

1 History

1.1 Early years

1.2 Development since the 1990s

1.3 Airport reconstruction

2 Infrastructure

2.1 Runway system

2.2 Control tower

2.3 Lufthansa Technik-Sofia

2.4 Rose Air Technik

2.5 Vrazhdebna Air Base

3 Terminals

3.1 Terminal 1

3.2 Terminal 2

3.3 Terminal 3

3.4 Other facilities

4 Airlines and destinations

4.1 Cargo

5 Statistics

5.1 Traffic

5.2 Busiest destinations

6 Ground transportation

6.1 Metro

6.2 Bus

6.3 Car

6.4 Train

7 Incidents and accidents

8 See also

9 References

10 External links

History[edit]

Early years[edit]

On 16 September 1937, Tsar Boris III signed a decree which declared land within the Village of Vrazhdebna be allocated for the construction of an airport. Construction then began on the site, which was 11 km (6.8 mi) from the city centre. Two years later in 1939, Sofia Airport opened its first passenger waiting room, and after another two years was followed by a fully constructed airfield with a fully paved runway.^[4]^[5]

From June through September 1938, Yugoslav airline Aeroput connected Sofia with Belgrade thrice weekly using Lockheed Model 10 Electra planes.[6]

During the Second World War, the facilities were used by the military. Mail, perishable freight and passenger operations began in 1947 from buildings on the north side of the airport. The passenger terminal (now Terminal 1) on the south side was completed during the Second World War in the manner of a then-modern European railway terminus to designs by the architect Ivan Marangozov. It opened after several years of delay in 1947. The structure comprised a government wing to the west, an international handling area in the middle, and a domestic handling area to the east. At that time, it was planned that the airport would eventually have two intersecting runways at a 30-degree angle to each other.[citation needed]

The terminal had substantially reached its capacity of some 600,000 passengers a year by the later 1960s and was subjected to a number of refurbishments and extensions beginning in the spring of 1968. In 1975, a new international arrivals handling extension was opened to the west of the building, the domestic area to the east was enlarged, the government handling area was removed to a dedicated terminal some distance to the west, a VIP handling area opened in the old terminal, apron area was extended to the east and new taxiways opened. A bonded warehouse opened to the east of the terminal square in 1969 and several new hangars followed to the east of the first maintenance base in the 1970s. A new checked baggage handling system opened to the north of the building in the early 1980s, cosmetic and traffic reorganising refurbishments were carried out in 1990, with a substantial landside extension following in 2000.[7]

By the late 1970s, the terminal was handling in the region of three million passengers a year, a million of them on domestic routes. Passenger numbers fell off sharply after the 1979 CMEA ("Comecon") oil price shock and recovered to just over a million a year by the late 1980s. In the early and mid-1990s, domestic traffic practically ceased, while foreign traffic reduced significantly. The latter began growing apace in the late 1990s and early 2000s to reach its current levels. The terminal was last refurbished partially in 1990. In 2000, it underwent a wholesale update in which the international arrivals area was moved to the east wing where domestic handling had been, the former international arrivals area to the west was closed, and the layout of the central international departures area was changed in line with world developments. Despite the work to the old terminal, the airport was becoming overwhelmed with passenger traffic.[7]

Options for different airport developments began to be examined in the mid-1960s. One option was to relocate the facility to a new site, with some locations up to 70 km (43 mi) from Sofia.[citation needed] Another option involved extending the airport's area radically to the north-east and gradually removing the focus of the airport there. A third option was to develop substantially the same site. By the later 1980s, the authorities had settled on the last option.[citation needed]

Development since the 1990s[edit]

Project design, involving a new terminal to the east of the old facility, a new runway to the north of (and parallel to) the existing runway, and taxiways, was completed by the mid-1990s. A finance package involving very significant European and Kuwaiti investment was

initially agreed in 1998 and was in place by 2000. Work began in 2001. The new runway and some taxiways were completed in mid-2006. Terminal 2 was formally inaugurated on 27 December 2006.[7]

Design and construction of a new control tower was discussed in 2006 but this project appeared to be in abeyance by 2008. Over the years, Sofia Airport has been criticised for its lack of world class air freight facilities and for some access problems. Passengers to and from the Bulgarian interior have to access or egress the airport through crowded rail and coach facilities in central Sofia. A rail link has been discussed on several occasions since the 1960s. The next best thing, perhaps, was the extension of Sofia Metro Line 1 some 5 km from Blvd Tsarigradsko shose. This was opened on 2 April 2015 under the name Sofia Airport Metro Station.[8] The airport metro station is adjacent to Terminal 2. Connection with terminal 1 is by free shuttle bus.

The airport is occasionally criticised as a source of environmental noise and pollution and strict noise abatement procedures have been enforced for departing traffic since the mid-1970s, while arriving traffic is generally routed to approach the field from the east, clear of Sofia.[7]

A significant and recurring operational criticism of Sofia Airport has concerned its historical lack of all-weather operations capability. Though the new runway was designed for ICAO Category 3 operations, in 2007 it emerged that radio interference from security fencing, and most significantly from a large newly built lorry park, prevented certification (and hence use) of the associated radio navigational aids. During the winter months, the airport, located on a high alluvial plain surrounded by mountains, suffers from very significant and frequent fog precipitation. In such circumstances, flights are redirected to diversion airports in Bulgaria or neighbouring countries, lengthening journeys by many hours.[7]

On 3 June 2016, the Bulgarian government launched a tender for the operation of Sofia Airport.[9] Expected to bring in 1.2 billion lev (600 million euro) to the state over 35 years, the tender has reportedly attracted interest from the operators of airports in Munich, Frankfurt, Zurich, Lyon, Dublin and London-Heathrow and as well as other operators.[10]

As of 22 July 2020, the concessionaire of Sofia Airport is the Sof Connect consortium, consisting of the French investment fund Meridiam (99% stake) and Austria's Strabag (1% stake). The concession period runs for 35 years. The airport's operator for the first 12 years of the concession period will be Munich Airport International.[11] On 20 April 2021 SOF Connect AD officially have become the concessionaire of the airport.[12]

Airport reconstruction[edit]

As a result of growing air traffic and passenger numbers, the airport facilities struggled to cope despite several expansions in the years prior. Planning began in the 1990s for a new terminal to be constructed at the airport. The new runway was offset from the old by 210 m (690 ft) with the eastern end crossing the Iskar River bed on a specially constructed bridge. New taxiways were also constructed, allowing for 22 aircraft movements per hour. The old runway was then to be used as a taxiway only.[13] The new runway and taxiways were opened in mid-2006, and Terminal 2 formally opened in late 2006.[7]

Total cost of the project was planned at 200 million euros. Finance was secured in 1997–98 from the European Investment Bank (60 million euro), Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic

Development (12.3 million Kuwaiti dinars, approximately 41.5 million euro), and the European Union PHARE Programme (7.6 million euro). In August 2000, an ISPA grant of 50 million euro was allocated and in December the financing memorandum was signed.[7]

The construction works were in two lots: the new terminal with its surrounding infrastructure and the new runway. The first lot was allocated to the German branch of Austrian company Strabag,[14] while the second was won by a consortium of Kuwaiti company Mohamed Abdulmohsin al-Kharafi & Sons and UAE-based Admak General Contracting Company.[15]

The initial completion deadline for the new terminal was 15 December 2004 to a total budget of 112.2 million euro. Immediately after work started, Strabag contested the geological surveys by Dutch consultants NACO B.V. and demanded additional funding for unexpected additional works. The delay was ten months, and construction resumed after the Bulgarian government agreed to augment the project's value by 4.8 million euro and extend the deadline to 31 August 2005.[16]

In 2004 Strabag demanded an additional 6 million euro due to rising steel prices.[17] The Ministry of Transportation rejected the claim, backed by a report from NACO. In May 2005, the contractor threatened to take the case to international arbitration.[18] In August 2005, it became clear that Strabag would not be able to meet the changed deadline, slippage being put at six to eight weeks.[19] In November 2005, Strabag asked for eight months' further extension.[20]

Infrastructure[edit]

Runway system[edit]

On 31 August 2006, Sofia Airport put its new runway system into operation, replacing the old and out-of-date facilities. The new runway is offset 210 m (690 ft) to the north of the old runway, with the eastern end of its 3,600 m (11,811 ft) long strip crossing over the Iskar river bed on a specially constructed bridge. New rapid and connecting taxiways were built to open way for 20 aircraft movements per hour at a high level of safety. The navigational aids installed on the new runway enable landing operations under low visibility conditions at category IIIB of the ICAO standards.[21]

Two de-icing platforms were constructed to allow centralised de-icing procedures in winter. They are one element in the overall strategy of Sofia Airport for environmental protection and reduction of the harmful effects resulting from the airport operations. At the moment there is another de-icing platform under construction.[when?][22]

Control tower[edit]

A new 50 m (160 ft)[13] control tower was inaugurated officially on 5 December 2012 by the PM Boyko Borisov and the minister of transport Ivaylo Moskovski.[23]

The tower was built by Glavbolgarstroy AD. The contract for building the tower was signed on 19 August 2011 in the presence of Ivaylo Moskovski, minister of transport, information technology and communications, the BULATSA director general Diyan Dinev, Glavbolgarstroy AD chief executive director Pavel Kalistratov and Glavbolgarstroy AD executive director and management board member Nina Stoyanova signed the design execution and construction contract between BULATSA and Glavbolgarstroy AD for the new control tower at Sofia Airport (Sofia tower).[24] Glavbolgartroy AD were selected as

contractor, as they were awarded the highest technical rating during the public procurement procedure having proposed the shortest construction timeframe. This project was financed entirely by BULATSA.

Lufthansa Technik-Sofia[edit]

Lufthansa Technik Sofia was founded in late 2007 as a joint venture between Lufthansa Technik (75.1%) and the Bulgarian Aviation Group (24.9%).[25] With the foundation of Lufthansa Technik Sofia, the Lufthansa Technik Group has created a fifth platform for the overhaul and maintenance of narrowbody aircraft in Europe. The Bulgarian facility serves customers in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. The facility has undergone a major reconstruction and an upgrade and now can handle the heaviest stage of aircraft maintenance checks, D-Check, that is now being carried out in Bulgaria. The company have started with more than 350 staff trained in Bulgaria and at Lufthansa Technik facilities in Shannon Base Maintenance operations in the fourth quarter of 2008 with one Airbus A321 from Lufthansa as the first customer.[26] At the moment the facility in Sofia has more than 1100 employees and plans by the 2018 to hire another 200 employees to reach a total of 1300 employees. The company have completed the building of a new facility in October 2017 which will be used for the maintenance of wide-bodied aircraft and is able to handle Airbus A380.[27] With the completion of the new hangar now Lufthansa Technik Sofia has 8 production lines which is turning the Bulgarian unit into the biggest unit of Lufthansa Technik.

Rose Air Technik[edit]

On 4 July 2018, Rose Air in cooperation with Wizz Air opened a new maintenance base at Sofia Airport.[28] It is located at the northern part of the airport. The hangar lays on 5000 square meters and has three production lines with overall capacity of 300 planes per year and it can handle C-Check. The base started with more than 100 staff. This will be the first maintenance base for Wizz Air in the Balkans and the fourth in Europe.[29]

Vrazhdebna Air Base[edit]

The Vrazhdebna Air Base (also Vrajdebna Air Base) is located at the airport. Operated by the Bulgarian Air Force, it is home to the 16th Transport Squadron.[30]

Terminals[edit]

Terminal 1[edit]

This terminal was built in the 1930s and opened on 16 September 1937. It has been extended many times, and had a renovation in 2000. Terminal 1 serves low-cost and charter carriers.

Terminal 2[edit]

Terminal 2 was officially opened on 27 December 2006 with the symbolic arrival of Bulgaria Air flight FB 408 from Brussels. It was one of the biggest projects in Bulgaria to receive funds from the EU ISPA programme. The price included the new terminal, new aircraft parking aprons, upgrading the existing aircraft parking aprons and the construction of connecting taxiways. The terminal has seven air-bridges (gates A1, B5–9 and C1), 38 check-in desks and covers an area of 50,000 m² (540,000 sq ft) and has a car park for 820 vehicles. It is located to the east of Terminal 1 and is significantly bigger than the old one which continues to serve low-cost and charter airlines. From 16 January 2017 on Terminal

2 currently serves only one low-cost airline - Ryanair.[31]

For the first time in Bulgaria, a terminal has airbridge-equipped gates instead of relying on airside buses. At the eastern end of the Terminal, an end station for Line 1 of the Sofia Metro has been built under the name Sofia Airport Metro Station. It was brought into service on 2 April 2015. The journey between airport and central Sofia takes about 20 minutes with service provided 05.30-24.00 hrs.[8]

The infrastructure surrounding the building was expected to be completed in 2007. It includes a new dual carriageway road connecting the terminal to the existing airport road, and landscaping including an artificial lake and a fountain. Terminal 2 is designed with special attention to disabled passengers. Their access to the different terminal levels and the multi-storey car park is facilitated via lifts and escalators.[32]

Terminal 3[edit]

Terminal 1 and Terminal 2 will be redesigned so that passengers feel "immersed in Bulgarian culture". Sofia Airport's Terminal 3 should be ready in 10 years. This is the development plan of the SOF Connect consortium, which won the concession at Sofia Airport.

The new Terminal 3 will be built by 2030. This will be the main focus for this period and will be implemented along with the decommissioning of Terminal 1, according to the Consortium. [33]

Other facilities[edit]

The VIP terminal is located in the western wing of Terminal 1 and has an entrance of its own, providing an access to four separate rooms – one main room and two separated rooms with about 20 seats each.[34]

The Government terminal is located in the western side of Sofia Airport. The terminal is operated by the 28th Air Detachment which operates government aircraft and operations involving the President, Prime Minister and other high-ranking government officials.

Airlines and destinations[edit]

In 1937 Sofia was used on a route from Berlin to Athens.[35] and by 1938 regular direct flights linked Sofia to Belgrade[6] Just before the end of the one-party socialist state at the end of the 1980s BALKAN (Bulgarian Airlines) were operating both domestic, and mainly European international routes, to numerous destinations, carrying 2.8m passengers.[36]

The airport is used for scheduled, charter and seasonal operations on many European routes and on several further afield.[37]

Airlines Destinations

Aegean Airlines Athens

Aeroflot Moscow–Sheremetyevo

Air France Seasonal: Paris–Charles de Gaulle

Air Serbia Belgrade

ALK Airlines Seasonal charter: Cairo,[38] Hurghada[38]

AnadoluJet Seasonal: Antalya[39]

Arkia Seasonal: Tel Aviv[40]

Austrian Airlines Vienna

BH Air[41] Seasonal: Belfast–International, Bristol, East Midlands, London–Gatwick,

Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne
Seasonal charter: Enfidha,[38] Hurghada, Palma de Mallorca,[38] Sharm El Sheikh[38]
British Airways London–Heathrow
Bulgaria Air Amsterdam, Athens, Berlin, Brussels, Dubai–International, Frankfurt, Larnaca,
London–Heathrow, Madrid, Milan–Linate,[42] Moscow–Sheremetyevo, Paris–Charles de
Gaulle, Prague, Rome–Fiumicino, Tel Aviv, Varna, Vienna, Zürich
Seasonal: Barcelona, Burgas, Corfu,[43] Heraklion, Lisbon, Málaga, Palma de Mallorca,
Rhodes,[43] Saint Petersburg,[43] Thessaloniki
Seasonal charter: Tenerife–North
Corendon Airlines Seasonal charter: Antalya[38]
easyJet London–Gatwick, Manchester
Seasonal: Bristol[44]
El Al Tel Aviv
Eurowings Düsseldorf, Stuttgart
flydubai Dubai–International
GullivAir Burgas[45]
Seasonal: Tirana[46]
Seasonal charter: Antalya,[38] Malé,[47] Mombasa ,[48] Punta Cana
LOT Polish Airlines Warsaw–Chopin
Lufthansa Frankfurt, Munich
Qatar Airways Doha
Ryanair[49] Barcelona, Bari, Beauvais, Bergamo, Berlin, Birmingham (resumes 2 November
2021),[50] Bologna, Budapest, Catania, Charleroi, Cologne/Bonn, Dublin, Edinburgh,
Eindhoven, Kyiv–Boryspil, Liverpool, London–Stansted, Madrid, Naples (begins 1 November
2021),[51] Paphos, Rome–Ciampino, Tel Aviv, Treviso, Vienna, Zagreb[52]
Seasonal: Aqaba (resumes 31 October 2021),[53] Bristol, Bucharest,[54] Chania,
Karlsruhe/Baden-Baden (resumes 27 March 2022),[55] Memmingen, Málaga, Malta,[56]
Varna[57]
SkyUp Seasonal: Kyiv–Boryspil[58]
SunExpress Seasonal: Antalya[59]
TAROM Bucharest
TUI Airways[60] Seasonal: Birmingham, London–Gatwick, Manchester
Turkish Airlines Istanbul
Windrose Airlines Kyiv–Boryspil[61]
Wizz Air[62] Abu Dhabi, Alicante, Barcelona, Bari, Basel/Mulhouse, Beauvais, Bergamo,
Billund, Bologna, Bratislava, Budapest, Catania, Charleroi, Copenhagen, Dortmund,
Eindhoven, Geneva, Hahn, Larnaca, London–Gatwick, London–Luton, Madrid, Malta,
Memmingen, Naples, Nice, Rome–Fiumicino,[63] Saint Petersburg, Tel Aviv, Valencia
Seasonal: Chania,[64] Corfu,[65] Dubai–International, Lisbon, Málaga,[66] Mykonos,
Rhodes,[67] Santorini,[68] Zakynthos[69]
Cargo[edit]
Airlines Destinations
DHL Aviation Leipzig/Halle[70]

Swiftair Cologne/Bonn[71]

Statistics[edit]

Traffic[edit]

See source Wikidata query and sources.

Traffic at Sofia Airport

Year Passengers Change Cargo (tonnes) Change Aircraft movements Change

1998 1,250,700 10,180 24,726

1999 1,236,610 1.1% 12,378 21.6% 25,178 1.8%

2000 1,127,866 8.8% 11,036 10.8% 24,785 1.6%

2001 1,107,682 1.8% 10,381 5.9% 21,860 11.8%

2002 1,214,198 9.6% 12,482 20.2% 24,211 10.8%

2003 1,356,469 11.7% 13,461 7.8% 25,517 5.4%

2004 1,614,304 19.0% 14,472 7.5% 28,700 12.5%

2005 1,874,000 16.1% 14,725 1.7% 32,188 12.2%

2006 2,209,350 17.9% 15,241 3.5% 38,119 18.4%

2007 2,745,880 24.3% 17,392 14.1% 43,005 12.8%

2008 3,230,696 17.7% 18,294 5.2% 48,626 13.1%

2009 3,134,657 3.0% 15,093 17.5% 45,698 6.0%

2010 3,296,936 5.2% 15,322 1.5% 47,061 3.0%

2011 3,474,933 5.4% 15,887 3.7% 47,153 0.2%

2012 3,467,455 0.2% 16,249 2.3% 40,806 9.0%

2013 3,504,326 1.1% 17,039 4.9% 40,526 0.7%

2014 3,815,158 8.9% 17,741 4.1% 42,120 4.0%

2015 4,088,943 7.2% 18,727 5.6% 44,416 5.5%

2016 4,979,760 21.8% 20,886 11.5% 51,829 16.7%

2017 6,490,096 30.3% 20,818 0.3% 57,673 11.3%

2018 6,962,040 7.3% 22,251 6.6% 60,771 5.4%

2019 7,107,096 2.1% 23,987 7.8% 61,371 1%

2020 2,937,846[72] 58.7% 23,042[73] 3.9% 35,954[74] 41.4%

2021 (August) 1,936,213[75] 10.6% 13,998[76] 6.5% 24,513[77] 0.9%

Busiest destinations[edit]

Top 10 of Busiest destinations at Sofia Airport by departures passengers to final destination (2019)[78][79][80]

Rank City Airlines Passengers Rank Change

1. London

British Airways, Bulgaria Air, easyJet, Ryanair, Wizz Air

464,381

2. Frankfurt

Bulgaria Air, Lufthansa, Wizz Air

235,178

7

3. Munich

Lufthansa, Ryanair, Wizz Air

177,904

New

4. Vienna

Bulgaria Air, Austrian Airlines, Laudamotion

173,238

New

5. Amsterdam

Bulgaria Air, Transavia

140,638

1

6. Milan

Bulgaria Air, Ryanair, Wizz Air

140,361

3

7. Tel Aviv

Arkia, Bulgaria Air, El Al, Israir Airlines, Ryanair, Wizz Air

136,370

2

8. Varna

Bulgaria Air, Wizz Air

132,371

6

9. Athens

Aegean Airlines, Bulgaria Air, Ryanair, Wizz Air

116,965

1

10. Rome

Alitalia, Bulgaria Air, Ryanair, Wizz Air

113,105

6

Ground transportation[edit]

Metro[edit]

Sofia Airport Metro Station on the M4 line is situated next to Terminal 2 and provides connections to the city centre.[81]

A free shuttle bus service between Terminal 1 and Terminal 2 runs from 05:00 until 23:00, connecting arriving and departing passengers from Terminal 1 to metro services.

Sofia Metro also provides a fast connection between the airport and Business Park Sofia, through interchange at Mladost 1 Metro Station to the M1 line.[82]

Bus[edit]

Three bus routes serve the airport. E84 and E184 connect both terminals to Sofia

University, with E84 departing from Terminal 2 and calling at Terminal 1 on the way, and

E184 doing the loop in reverse, departing Terminal 1 and calling at Terminal 2 on its way to

the centre. Bus 384 only serves Terminal 2, connecting it to Tsarigradsko shose Metro Station.[83]

Car[edit]

Brussels Boulevard is the main thoroughfare to Sofia Airport. There is a new, faster road connection built from Terminal 2 to Brussels Boulevard.[84]

Via Brussels Boulevard and Tsarigradsko shose, Sofia Airport is connected to both the city centre and eastbound destinations via Trakia motorway (A1)

From the northern parts of Sofia, Sofia Airport is conveniently accessible via the East Tangent route. Its junction with Botevgradsko Shose provides access to northbound destinations via Hemus motorway (A2) [85]

Connecting to the southern parts of Sofia and Southwestern Bulgaria is the route via Brussels Boulevard and Boulevard Aleksandar Malinov to Sofia ring road which has an interchange with southbound Struma motorway (A3)

Train[edit]

A railway station at Iskarsko shose was inaugurated in April 2015, providing faster interchange from the airport to southbound services on the Bulgarian national railway system. Situated about 2.5 km (2 mi) from Terminal 2, the train station is accessible via a short trip to Iskarsko shose Metro Station which is two stops away from Sofia Airport Metro Station on the M4 line.[86]

Incidents and accidents[edit]

On 22 December 1971, a Balkan Airlines Il-18 crashed en route to Algeria. 28 people on board died.

On 22 November 1975, a Balkan Bulgarian airlines An-24 crashed short of the runway after take-off in icy conditions. Of the 48 people on board, three were killed.

On 10 January 1984, a Balkan Bulgarian Airlines Tupolev Tu-134 crashed on approach in bad weather. All 50 people on board died.

On 2 August 1988, a Balkan Airlines Yak-40 crashed in the Iskar river. There were 28 fatalities among the 37 passengers on board.[87]

See also[edit]

List of airports in Bulgaria

List of airlines of Bulgaria

List of the busiest airports in Europe by passenger traffic

List of the busiest airports in the Balkans