

## Lifestyle | Features



Projectors light the sky during the European Capital of Culture 2019 opening ceremony in the south-central Bulgarian town of Plovdiv. — AFP photos



Fireworks light the sky during the European Capital of Culture 2019 opening ceremony in the south-central Bulgarian town of Plovdiv.



A man takes a picture of 'David Bowie and Iggy Pop's Portraits' (2016) by French artist Jef Aerosol painted on a section of the Berlin Wall, as part of the exhibition 'Art Liberty - From the Berlin Wall to the Street Art', in the south-central Bulgarian town of Plovdiv.



People look at a Trabant, a former East German car, painted by French artist Thierry Noir, as part of the exhibition 'Art Liberty - From the Berlin Wall to the Street Art'.



A picture shows through an opening in a wall the building of the Ethnographical museum in the old town of the Bulgarian southern central city of Plovdiv.



A photo shows the 2nd century AD amphitheater, built during the reign of Emperor Trajan in south-central Bulgarian town of Plovdiv. — AFP photos

## Bulgaria's Plovdiv launches capital of culture festivities



People walk in the city center of the Bulgarian southern central town of Plovdiv.



A man walks in the streets of the old town of Bulgarian southern central city of Plovdiv.



A picture shows the building of the Ethnographical museum in the old town of the Bulgarian southern central city of Plovdiv.

The Bulgarian city of Plovdiv was on Saturday inaugurated as one of two ancient cities to share the honor of being a European capital of culture for 2019. Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second city, whose origins date back to the 12th century BC, is known for its Thracian, Roman, Medieval, Ottoman and communist heritage. In a nod to this latest period of history, an exhibition featuring fragments of the Berlin Wall painted by international artists opened on Saturday, kicking off a year of cultural events. Thirty years after the fall of the wall "presenting this new collection in Plovdiv makes a lot of sense", in particular against the backdrop of fresh divisions in Europe, curator Sylvestre Verger said.



People walk in the streets of the old town of Bulgarian southern central city of Plovdiv.

Hundreds of visitors were able to see around 30 fragments of the wall covered in "street art" or portraits of singers such as David Bowie, Iggy Pop and Lou Reed. Others featured images of the Trabant car, considered a symbol of former East Germany, painted by artists Thierry Noir, Christophe-Emmanuel Bouchet and Kiddy City. A city of 350,000, the southern Bulgarian city will



The 2nd century AD amphitheater, built during the reign of Emperor Trajan in the Bulgarian southern central town of Plovdiv.

host dozens of other exhibitions and shows during the year, including a concert in June in which local Roma artists will take part.

The city will also invite artists from other Balkan countries to showcase the cultures of southeastern Europe. Plovdiv shares this year's title of European Capital of Culture with another ancient city in southern Italy, Matera, which is known for its cave dwellings. While the Bulgarian Black Sea coast attracts most of the

tourists to the country, Plovdiv hopes to double the number of visitors this year. In the old town, renovated in recent years, visitors will find cobbled streets featuring many traditional 18th and 19th century houses, elaborately decorated by traders who prospered in the city. And the city also boasts a number of fine mosaics. — AFP

## Finns with fins make a splash at 'mermaiding' classes

At a pool in Espoo, near Finland's capital Helsinki, Maija Mottonen is teaching adults to swim like mermaids in a class that combines fantasy with fitness. Since August, more than 200 women and men have attended the classes run by Mottonen, a former kindergarten teacher who is Finland's first professional mermaid instructor. "It's my childhood dream-come-true," the 28-year-old told Reuters. "When I was a kid, I always wanted to be a mermaid or a dolphin. But I think it's easier to become a mermaid because it's half-human."

Would-be mermaids and mermen wear "tails" that combine a monofin flipper with fabric from the waist down. "It's kind of magical," said construction worker

Markus Parviainen, 29, describing the feeling of diving with the green tail he bought online for 170 euros (\$195). Parviainen, who also enjoys cheerleading, said his new hobby was a good way of keeping fit, but acknowledged it had raised some eyebrows among his co-workers. "People think, or mostly men, are thinking that this is only for girls or women. But I disagree, this is for everyone ... as long as you love swimming," he added.

Mottonen, whose own tail is bright pink, teaches her pupils how to undulate their entire body from head to toe, "like a snake" as she describes it, followed by a dolphin kick with the monofin flipper to move forward. More experienced students like Parviainen practice tricks such

as flapping their tail on the surface while hanging with their head down underwater. "When I had tried this once, I was hooked. I feel real powerful in water," said Annika Ihatsu, who had driven for 40 minutes on icy roads from her home in Hyvinkaa to attend the class.

While few people would want to make a splash during the cold Finnish winter, instructor Mottonen said the country's roughly 180,000 lakes were better for mermaiding in summertime than beaches with salty seawater that would make her tail float. "We have a lot of lakes so it's easy in summer," she said. — Reuters

