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MYSTERIOUS ALBANIA

8 days / 7 nights

Discovering past civilizations with outstanding natural beauty

TOUR HIGHLIGHTS

- Feel a mixture of cultures, landscapes and religions from Albanian Orthodox to Sunni Muslim, and from beautiful beaches to Rocky Mountains
- Explore the narrow cobbled streets of Gjirokaster situated high on a mountain slope
- Look through the window in the city of 1,000 windows
- Visit one of the oldest human settlements in Europe, Macedonian Ohrid
- Enjoy the real highlight of the tour, warm hospitality of each unique village



GENERAL INFORMATION

ALBANIA

In the heart of the Mediterranean, on the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, Albania is fast becoming one of the world's most interesting getaways. Still relatively unspoiled by globalization, tourists will notice an inspiring mixture of civilizations and cultures - making this European country truly unique.

Home of both Mother Theresa, Albania today offers not only beach and mountain holidays, a vibrant city life and a relaxing outdoor cafe culture, but also something increasingly rare in Europe these days, a glance into a culture that is all its own. Raised on a diet of separation and hardship, Albania is distinctly Albanian.

Not just the preserve of the adventurous, Albania is a warm and sincerely hospitable country – with enough rough edges to keep it interesting.

MACEDONIA

Landlocked in the heart of the Balkans, The Republic of Macedonia is one of Europe's youngest, smallest countries, but is simultaneously one of its oldest nations. Mountainous Macedonia still has an air of mystery to it. Simultaneously ancient and brand new, it's struggling to find its place in the post-communist world. Black-clad Orthodox monks are just as much a part of this renewal as the hordes of teenagers, bedecked in the latest Italian fashions, sipping coffee in the stylish bars of the capital.

For outdoors types Macedonia is a paradise. Its extensive wilderness allows ample opportunities for hikers, mountain climbers and skiers. Meanwhile, ancient ruins and monasteries will fascinate anyone with even a smidgen of interest in history. In short, for a little place it's crammed with something for just about everyone.

Quite apart from Macedonia's spectacular peaks, lakes and rivers, it's the hospitality of the people of this most southern of Slavic nations that will make your visit truly memorable.



SUGGESTED ITINERARY

DAY 1

Arrival at Tirana airport
Meet and greet at the airport and drive to Tirana (24km)
A visit of Tirana with free time for lunch
Check-in to a hotel
Free for dinner
Overnight in Tirana

TIRANA – the capital and the largest city of Albania

Tirana is the capital and the largest city of Albania. It is also country's administrative, cultural, economic, and industrial center. The founding and later development of the city of Tirana were made possible by its geographic position on a fertile plain, rich in forest lands and water. The year 1614 is considered the date that Tirana was founded, when Sulejman Pasha Bargjini built a mosque, a hamam (Turkish bath), a bakery, and several shops. Tirana began to develop in the beginning of the sixteenth century, when a bazar was established, and its craftsmen made silk, cotton, and leather fabrics, ceramics, iron, silver, and gold artefacts. On February 8th, 1920, the provisional government formed at the Congress of Lushje moved to Tirana, and at this point Tirana became the capital of the country. This played an important role for the development of the town.



DAY 2

Breakfast in the hotel and check-out
Transfer to the ancient city of Durres (38km) for a visit
Continue to Berat (102km)
Free for lunch and a visit of Berat
Check-in to a hotel
Free for dinner
Overnight in Berat

DURES – one of the oldest cities in Albania

Durrës is the second largest city of Albania located on the central Albanian coast, about 33 km west of the capital Tirana. It is one of the most ancient and economically important cities of Albania. Durres is situated at one of the narrower points of the Adriatic Sea, opposite the Italian ports of Bari and Brindisi. It was founded in the 7th century BC by Greek colonists from Corinth and Corcuvra under the name Epidamnos. It has been continuously inhabited for 27 centuries and is one of the oldest cities in Albania. Durrës served as Albania's national capital from 7 March 1914 until 11 February 1920 during the reign of William of Albania.

BERAT – the city of 1,000 windows

The stunning museum town of Berat is a well-preserved Ottoman city (perhaps the best in the Balkans) with a lively lower town and a beautiful medieval citadel district on top of the hill. The town is also renowned for its scenic beauty and as the "Town of a Thousand Windows", due to the many large windows of the old decorated houses overlooking the town. It is unclear whether it really means "Thousand" or "One over Another" windows. Indeed, the quarter is built in a very steep place and windows seem to be one over another.



DAY 3

Breakfast in the hotel and check-out
Transfer to Ardenica Monastery (46km)
After the visit depart towards Apollonia (20km)
A visit of Apollonia archeological site
Free for lunch
After lunch transfer to Vlora coastal city (50km) for a visit
Check-in to a hotel
Free for dinner
Overnight in Vlora

THE ARDENICA MONASTERY – the only orthodox operating monastery in Albania

The Ardenica monastery is an Eastern Orthodox monastery built in 1282 by a Byzantine Emperor. The monastery became famous after the marriage of Skanderbeg, Albanian national hero that was held there. In the year 1780 the Monastery opened a theological school for future clerics of Greek Orthodox. It had an important library with 32,000 volumes that got completely burned by a fire in 1932. The Church of Saint Mary within the monastery contains important frescoes from local artists.

APOLLONIA – Albania's archaeological heritage

Apollonia was an ancient Greek city in Illyria, located on the right bank of the Aous river. Its ruins are situated in the Fier region, near the village of Pojani, in modern-day Albania. Apollonia was founded in 588 BCE by Greek colonists from Corfu and Corinth on a site initially occupied by Illyrian tribes and was perhaps the most important of the several classical towns known as Apollonia. Apollonia flourished in the Roman period and was home to a renowned school of philosophy, but began to decline in the 3rd century AD when its harbour started silting up as a result of an earthquake. It was abandoned by the end of Late Antiquity.

VLORA – independence town

Vlora is one of the biggest and oldest towns and the second largest port city of Albania, after Durres. The city was for a short time the capital of Albania. Founded as an ancient Greek colony in the 6th century BC by the name of Aulon and continuously inhabited for about 26 centuries, Vlora is home to the Port of Vlora and University of Vlora as the most important economic and cultural city of south western Albania. It is situated on the Bay of Vlora, an inlet on the Adriatic Sea, almost surrounded by mountains. Vlora was created in antiquity as Greek colony. Its first name, still used today in Greece, was Aulón, meaning "valley".



DAY 4

Breakfast in the hotel and check-out
Drive to Saranda (114km) with some stops on the way
for a visit of the castle of Ali Pasha and panoramic views
Visit of Saranda and free time for lunch
Continue to Butrint (20km)
A visit of the archaeological site and return to Saranda
(20km)
Check-in to a hotel
Free for dinner
Overnight in Saranda



ALI PASHA CASTLE

Ali Pasha Castle is situated in Porto Palermo. Most probably it was built by the Venetians as it could be relieved by sea and it has the same triangular plan with round towers found in the Venetian fort at Butrint. The castle is named after Ali Pasha of Tepelena as it was his second residence until 1820. The current fortress was rebuilt in 1819 from its surface with 3 towers.

SARANDA – one of the most important tourist attractions of the Albanian riviera

Saranda is the ancient, charming fishing village and a popular tourist resort. With its excellent climate and stunning location overlooking the Ionian Sea it is definitely one of the loveliest settings in Albania. The town of Saranda is built in amphitheatre style rising up a hill, with stone steps linking the top of the hill, right down to the sea promenade.

Saranda is also an ideal base for exploring many attractions of the southwest of the country, especially the amazing archaeological site of Butrint. No trip to Albania would be complete without a visit to the ancient town of Butrint, one of Albania's and the Balkans' major archaeological centres, protected under UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

BUTRINT – the changing settlement

Ancient Buthrotum, a port from Hellenistic to Ottoman times, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site in south-west Albania. Situated on the Straits of Corfu, and surrounded by a picturesque lagoon, it is one of the most remarkable archaeological sites in the Adriatic Sea region. Following twelve years of archaeological excavations and major investment in site management, the site and its museum make it an exceptionally attractive place to visit. Walking through the ruins of Butrint, it is hard to imagine the different forms the town has taken, and the differing fortunes of its inhabitants through the generations.

According to one legend, the city was founded by fleeing Trojans after the burning of Troy by the victorious Greeks, in the 12th Century B.C. 'Butrint' provides a glimpse of Mediterranean civilization from the Bronze Age through the Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Venetian and Ottoman periods - all a top a cliff overlooking Corfu.



DAY 5

Breakfast in the hotel and check-out
Drive to Gjirokaster (56km) for a visit
Continue to Korce (187km) with a stop for lunch on the way
Visit of Korce
Check-in to a hotel
Free for dinner
Overnight in Korce

GJIROKASTER – an outstanding example of an Ottoman merchant town

Situated in southern Albania, Gjirokaster perches on the steep side of the Drino valley overlooking an historic landscape framed by snow-capped mountains. This 'city of a thousand steps' comprises hundreds of Ottoman-style tower houses with distinctive stone roofs, wooden balconies and whitewashed stone walls. Dominated by the sheer flanks of its vast castle, Gjirokaster is a magical city with a tumultuous past. From feudal stronghold to Ottoman jewel to Italian colony, the city has known many rulers and has inspired poets, authors and artists. Known by many as the *City of Stone*, Gjirokaster is a developing centre for cultural heritage tourism. A walk around the network of cobbled streets that climb steeply out of the bazaar will transport you back in time. A visit to the vast



13th-century castle brings the adventurous tales of medieval rulers and communist atrocities alive. The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Gjirokaaster is one of the few Ottoman merchant towns still surviving in the Balkans.

KORÇE – city of festivals

The historical town of Korçë (pronounced Core-cha) has a well-preserved historical centre with cobblestone streets and many surviving villas that were built in the early 20th century. From 1916 - 1920 the town was under French control and eventually it was declared an autonomous region with French support. The continental influence resulted in the construction of neoclassical villas, two famous cinemas and a tradition of photography and art appreciation. Korçë was known at one point as the "Paris of Albania." The town is also famous for its Orthodox churches, including the oldest surviving Orthodox Church in Albania, the Church of St. Mary in the village of Mborja 1km away. Korçë is home to many museums, including National museum of medieval art, National museum of archaeology, Albanian museum of education, Bratko Museum and Oriental Museum. Korçë is also known as the city of festivals, with the Beer Fest being one of the best known events.



DAY 6

Breakfast in the hotel and check-out
Transfer to Ohrid (102km) via St. Naum monastery for a visit
A sightseeing tour around Ohrid with free time for lunch
Check-in to a hotel
Free for dinner
Overnight in Ohrid

ST. NAUM MONASTERY – the baroque-styled icons and frescoes holder

The Monastery of Saint Naum is an Eastern Orthodox monastery, named after the medieval Saint Naum who founded it. Saint Naum, also known as Naum of Ohrid was a medieval Bulgarian scholar and missionary among the Slavs. He is venerated as a saint in the Orthodox Church and was buried in the Church at the Monastery. The monastery is located only 1km from the Albanian border and sits on the Southern shores of Lake Ohrid.

OHRID – the jewel in the crown of Macedonia

The city of the immortal Ohrid is the sublime lakeside point that for many represents the culmination of the Macedonian experience, a kingdom of light and water, a repository of ancient ruins from Macedonia's earlier kingdoms. Ohrid's major attractions are all located within a remarkably concentrated and eminently walkable area, among and above the narrow streets of the Old Town lined with restaurants and cafés perfectly suited for relaxing in the cool summer evenings. Ohrid's many café bars and nightclubs also make for a vibrant nightlife. As for the lake itself, it is so large and so deep that one might mistake it for a small sea. Full range of water sports, fishing and boating is available, and numerous churches alongside Ohrid's lake shores make for fascinating side trips and walks. The wooded ridge above the lake's eastern shore is largely taken up by the National Park of Galichica, an unspoiled wilderness ideally suitable for nature enthusiasts. The uniqueness of Lake Ohrid and the city's historical architecture has been attested by UNESCO, honouring it with an official designation as one of the few places on the cultural institution's list "World Inheritance".



DAY 7

Breakfast in the hotel and check-out
Departure towards Tirana (139km)
On the way a stop in Elbasan (97km) for a visit and free
time for lunch
Continue to Tirana
Check-in to a hotel
Free for dinner
Overnight in Tirana

ELBASAN – mixture of eastern and medieval architecture

Elbasan is a city in central Albania located on the Shkumbin river. It is one of the largest cities in Albania. It was called Neokastron (new castle) in Greek, Novigrad (new city) in Slavic and Terra Nuova in Italian. Before the Second World War Elbasan was a city with a mixture of eastern and medieval buildings, narrow cobbled streets and a large bazaar. There was a clearly defined Christian settlement within the castle walls, a Vlach district on the outskirts of the city and several fine mosques and Islamic buildings. Elbasan had been occupied by several different groups, including the Serbs, Bulgarians, Austrians and Italians. It remained a centre of Islam in Albania even after the Ottoman occupation.



DAY 8

Breakfast in the hotel and check-out
Transfer to Kruja (36km) for a visit
Free for lunch
Continue to the airport of Tirana (19km) for your
departure flight

KRUJA – centre of Albanian resistance

Kruja is a medieval town in north central Albania built 560 meters above sea level, on the slopes of Sari - Salltiku mountain. The name of Kruja derives from the Albanian word krua, meaning 'water spring'. The citadel has become the main Illyrian fortress in the area in the 4th century AD. In the year 879, Kruja was mentioned for the first time as a Christian religious center. The first Albanian feudal state was created here circa 1190. It is touted as a good daytrip from the capital, not only for sightseeing but also for souvenir-hunting.



SERVICES

SERVICES INCLUDED:

TRANSFERS:

Air conditioned comfortable vehicle through the whole tour

ACCOMMODATION (in DBL or SGL room, breakfast included):

1 night in 4*/5* hotel in Tirana, 1 night in 3* hotel in Berat, 1 night in 4* hotel in Vlora, 1 night in 4* hotel in Saranda, 1 night in 3* hotel in Korce, 1 night in 4* hotel in Ohrid, 1 night in 4*/5* hotel in Tirana

GUIDES:

English speaking guide through the whole tour, local guides for visits in Berat and Tirana

ENTRANCE FEES:

National historical museum of Tirana, Roman amphitheatre in Durres, "Onufri" museum and visit the Ethnographic museum in Berat, Apollonia archaeological site, Independence museum, Murad mosque and Kuzum baba sacred place in Vlora, Ali Pasha castle, Butrint archaeological site, castle and the Arms' museum in Gjirokaster, St. Naum monastery in Ohrid, Elbasan castle

OTHER:

Organization of the tour and VAT

SERVICES EXCLUDED:

- Services not mentioned in the program
- Meals unless where specified
- Porterage
- Tips