



Rediscover the
meaning of travel

Tour Notes

Albania Explorer

Tour Duration – 9 Days



Tour Rating

Fitness ●●●○○ | Off the Beaten Track ●●●○○ | Culture ●●●●○ | History ●●●●● | Wildlife ●○○○○

Tour Pace

Busy

Tour Highlights

- ✓ Explore 'undiscovered' Albania, delightfully devoid of mass tourism
- ✓ Experience spectacular natural beauty from mountains to lakes to beaches
- ✓ Uncover a rich ancient Greek, Roman and Ottoman history
- ✓ Visit UNESCO World Heritage Sites such as Berat and Butrint
- ✓ Take in the views on an incredible drive from Korce to Gjirokastra





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Tour Map



Tour Essentials

Accommodation:	Simple but comfortable small hotels
Included Meals:	Daily breakfast (B), plus lunch (L) and dinner (D) as shown in the itinerary
Group Size:	Maximum of 12 travellers
Start Point:	Tirana – you can arrive any time on day 1
End Point:	Tirana or Skopje if doing the extension – you can depart any time on the last day
Transport:	Minibus
Countries Visited:	Albania (and Macedonia if doing the extension)
Optional Extension:	North Macedonia



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Albania Explorer

For years Albania was a closed society, ruled by the iron fist of Communism, but since the end of the Cold War it has been showing curious travellers its many charms. Isolated from the rest of the world for so long, Albania is a country at the crossroads of east and west, with Ottoman bazaars and unique preserved old towns that grace the UNESCO Heritage list. Tucked away in long forgotten corners lie the ancient cities of the Romans, while imposing fortresses bear witness to a history of resistance against foreign occupation. With dramatic coastal scenery, picturesque monasteries and a culture that is beginning to rediscover itself, Albania is blissfully free of foreign visitors but is just starting to open its doors to the outside world now. Travel here is not always easy - it is one of the least developed countries of Europe, but for those looking for something completely new, Albania's rewards justify the visit. After exploring Albania, you may wish to extend your stay and make a foray into North Macedonia on our extension and sample the delights of Lake Ohrid and old Skopje.

Tour itinerary notes

While our intention is to adhere to the day-by-day itinerary as printed below, a degree of flexibility is built in. Overnight stops may vary from those suggested and on occasions alternative accommodation, of a similar standard to that named below, will be used.

Tour Guide

Our guides are a key strength, chosen for their knowledge of and passion for the areas in which they work. All of our guides are carefully hand-picked, and are not just passing through these countries, but are usually locally born. Unlike some companies it should be noted we do not send a guide or tour leader from Undiscovered Destinations in the UK as we have every confidence in our locally appointed representative who is responsible for operating the tour on our behalf. Where possible you will have the same guide throughout your trip but on occasions it may be necessary to change the guide at one or more points during the tour. For small groups of less than 5 clients we will be using a combined driver/guide on this tour

Itinerary

Day 1: Arrival in Tirana (approx. driving time 30 mins)

Arrive in Tirana and transfer to your hotel. Depending on when you arrive there may be time to explore the city. Overnight Boka Hotel or similar. No meals or guided arrangements today.

Tirana

Located on a plain on the site of an old Byzantine fortress, Tirana has been the capital of Albania since 1920, although it was founded much earlier. A mixture of architectural styles it has rather an Italian feel to it – many Italian architects were involved in the modernisation of the city in the early 20th century – and is blessed with many public parks and green spaces where people gather to walk, play board games and share conversations. Tirana has been home to an unusual experiment in which many buildings have been painted in rather bright colours, giving parts of the town a very unique look. Many of the older buildings of the city were demolished during the Communist period but quite a few still remain, notably the Ethem Bey Mosque and the Clock Tower, both of which date back to the early 19th century, and you can still find excellent examples of Ottoman architecture in Tirana's streets.

Day 2: Tirana, Shkoder and Kruje (approx. total driving time 3 hours)

This morning we head to Shkoder. Shkoder is one of the oldest cities in the Balkans and was once a capital of the Illyrian state. We visit the castle then have time to walk in the pedestrian area and visit the cathedral and mosque. We have lunch in Shkoder before travelling to Kruja, one of Albania's most important towns due to the part it played in the resistance against the Ottomans. Visit the Skanderbeg Museum and the castle. There



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may be time to visit the old bazaar, where you can see the local artisans and their handmade souvenirs. We return to Tirana for an overnight stay. Overnight Boka Hotel or similar (BL)

Kruja and Skanderbeg

Kruja occupies a special place in the heart of Albanians – it is the home town of the national hero Skanderbeg from which the Ottoman invasion was resisted for almost 35 years in the 15th century. Skanderbeg was sent as a young boy into the Ottoman army, along with three of his brothers but returned to Albania to spearhead the resistance against the Sultan's forces who were continuing to make devastating inroads into the region. Uniting Albanian forces and building an army he was able to withstand the Ottoman onslaught and inflicted crushing defeats on them until his death in 1468. The army at Kruja managed to hold on for another ten years before finally succumbing to the Sultan and being formally incorporated into the empire.

Shkodra

Perched on the shores of Lake Shkodra, Shkodra is an ancient city with a rich history that many feel is the soul of Albania. It was founded around the 4th century BC and was the capital of the Illyrian state before being conquered by the Roman Empire a couple of hundred years later. Shkodra is imbued with Italian influence - as well as having been captured by Rome it was also part of the Venetian Republic for some time. Its most impressive site is Rozafa castle, a fortress dating back to the town's earliest beginnings with underground stairways, tunnels and vaults.

Day 3: Durres and Berat (approx. total driving time 2 hours)

Drive to the coastal city of Durres, Albania's second largest. Explore its sites including the Roman amphitheatre and Archaeological Museum before continuing to the stunning town of Berat, with its white houses clinging to the hillsides. We visit the citadel which contains numerous churches and an interesting museum, and has been listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. We will have a traditional dinner tonight before staying overnight in Berat. Overnight Hotel Onufri or similar. (BD)

Day 4: Ardenica Monastery, Apollonia, Vlore and Llogara National Park (approx. total driving time 3.5 hours)

Today we visit Ardenice Monastery, a 13th century Byzantine site locally famed for hosting the wedding of the hero Skanderbeg. We continue from here to the ruins of Apollonia, an atmospheric set of Roman remains on a remote hillside and once an important city in the region. Later in the day we travel to the coastal city of Vlore and have a short sightseeing tour of the city, before heading for our overnight stay in the National park of Llogara. At over 1000 metres above sea level and overlooking the turquoise waters of the Ionian Sea and white sandy beaches, we spend the overnight in a traditional style hotel, in the forest area. Overnight Hotel Alpin or similar. (BL)

Day 5: Butrint – Gjirokastra (approx. total driving time 5.5 hours)

After breakfast, we continue to the south of Albania, via some picturesque seaside villages to Saranda and onto the ruins of Butrint, Albania's most important archaeological site, and a UNESCO site. Butrint dates from the 7th century BC, later becoming a Roman colony, then falling under the sway of the Venetians and Turks. Explore numerous buildings including an acropolis, basilica and palace. The location of the site itself is also very attractive surrounded by trees and water. After lunch (paid locally) we depart for Gjirokastra with a short stop in Blue Eye national Park, a fairy tale landscape of mountains and the clear waters of the Bistrica river. On arrival in Gjirokastra we will have a traditional dinner and stay at our hotel for the night. Overnight Vila Sharm or similar. (BD)

Butrint

The site of Butrint has been occupied since at least the 8th century BC, although myths associated with its origins speak of the city's foundation by Trojan exiles. By the 4th century BC, a walled settlement was established and the city became a successful cult site, dedicated to Asclepius. Augustus founded a colony at



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Butrint and the town seems to have remained a relatively small Roman port until the 6th century AD. Little is known of the site between the 7th and 9th centuries. Its later medieval history was turbulent as the town was involved firstly in the power struggles between Byzantium and successive Norman, Angevin and Venetian states and secondly in the conflict between Venice and the Ottoman Turks. By the early 19th century it had dwindled to a small fishing village clustered around a Venetian castle.

Day 6: Gjirokaster and Permet (approx. total driving time 2.5 hours)

This morning we explore Gjirokaster, known for its distinct and traditional architecture. We have time to explore this UNESCO listed site, with its imposing citadel and numerous houses with typical styling. We visit the castle and old bazaar area before transferring to the small town of Permet on an panoramic drive. Later in the day we visit the village of Benja and have a relaxing afternoon at the famous thermal waters which form six beautiful small natural pools. The Ottoman Bridge of Katiu is a wonderful sight as it spans the river Langarica. We have dinner and overnight in Permet. Overnight Hotel Alvero or similar. (BD)

Day 7: Permet and Korce (approx. total driving time 4 hours)

On our winding journey through the mountains towards Korca, we enjoy wonderful panoramic views. This afternoon we arrive in Korca where we should have some time to explore. Overnight Hotel Cathedral or similar. (BD)

Day 8: Voskopoja and Tirana (approx. total driving time 3.5 hours)

This morning we continue to Voskopoja, once an ancient city rich in history, with interesting Romanesque architecture and Orthodox churches featuring some of the best 18th century frescoes in Southern Europe; today it is a small mountain village around 1300m above sea level. We will continue to Tirana and begin a tour of the city. We visit Skanderbeg Square, dedicated to Albania's national hero, and the Mosque of Ethem Bey, one of the oldest buildings in Tirana. We then visit Bunk Art 2 – an old atomic bunker, now a museum representing the days of the communist regime in the country. There is a farewell dinner with our guide. Overnight Boka Hotel or similar (BD)

Day 9: Departure from Tirana (approx. driving time 30 mins)

Time at leisure until your transfer to the airport for your departure. (B)

North Macedonia Optional Extension

Day 1 (Day 9 of the main tour): Tirana – Ohrid (approx. driving time 3.5 hours)

After breakfast transfer to Ohrid, North Macedonia. This afternoon, enjoy a walking tour of Ohrid including a visit the Church St. Sofia, built between the 11th and 14th century. Observe “St. Clement”, a classic Orthodox Byzantine church, dominating the Old Town, demonstrates the link between Byzantine and Italian Renaissance art. St. John at Kaneo, stands alone on a small peninsula which juts out into the lake at the western end of the Old Town, and provides a spectacular panoramic views of the lake and the surrounding mountains. Overnight Hotel Villa Sofia or similar. (B)

Lake Ohrid

Lake Ohrid is probably the oldest lake in Europe and one of the oldest lakes in the world, as it was formed tectonically between 4 and 10 million years ago. Water is supplied by the unusual means of spring water from numerous surface and underwater springs and the lake is home to a unique aquatic ecosystem with more than 200 endemic species that are of worldwide importance. Known for its beauty, excellent fishing and its several beaches it's located on the border between Macedonia and the Republic of Albania. The Macedonian section of the lake is beautiful, set amid mountains with stunning views of the water from the beach and hills. The town of Ohrid itself is one of Macedonia's most popular tourist destinations; with plenty of cultural monuments to keep you occupied, especially in the old town where amongst other highlights you can see part of a Roman amphitheatre.



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Day 2: Ohrid – Mavrovo National Park – Skopje (approx. driving time 3.5 hrs)

This morning depart Ohrid and continue the journey to Mavrovo National Park where we will have a short stop and visit the Monastery of Saint Jovan Bigorski dedicated to John the Baptist and said to date back 1000 year. Later this afternoon we arrive at Skopje. Overnight Hotel Aristocrat Palace or similar. (B)

Skopje

Skopje is the capital and the largest city of the Republic of Macedonia. Located on a major north south Balkan route between Belgrade and Athens, Skopje has had a tumultuous past; with the Roman's, Serbs and Ottoman Turks all occupying the city before it became part of Yugoslavia in 1918. A devastating earthquake then struck Skopje in 1963 when more than 1000 people died and a huge proportion of the city's buildings were lost, as a result much of Skopje's architecture dates from the 1960's and 1970's. Fortunately Skopje's entire heritage was not lost, as much of the northern half of the city escaped untouched, leaving many architectural reminders of the city's past as an important trading town of the Ottoman Empire. As a monument to the loss the earthquake caused the clock at the Old Train Station, is forever stopped at the moment the earthquake struck. Most of central Skopje is a pedestrianised, with the 15th-century Turkish stone bridge over the Vardar River linking the old and new towns. North from the bridge you will find the Daud Pasha Baths which date back to 1466, once the largest Turkish baths in the Balkans they are now home to the City Art Gallery. Skopje's eclectic past has had an aesthetic impact on the city which is in evidence when visiting the Church of Sveti Spas, which is half buried due to the fact it was constructed in the 17th century (Ottoman Turks' rule), when no church was allowed to be higher than a mosque. Skopje's old Oriental bazaar district is the largest and most colourful of its kind left in Europe, with an abundance of small shops in the narrow streets and numerous cafes serving Turkish-style coffee it is a great place to explore.

Day 3: Skopje and the Matka Valley (approx. driving time 1 hour)

This morning we explore the old part of Skopje including, the memorial house of Mother Teresa, The Stone Bridge, church St. Spas (17th Century), and Skopje Fortress. We will also take a walk through the Bazaar. Later, visit Matka Valley – A gorge in which a rich complex of medieval buildings survives, including churches, monasteries and remnants of a fortress (the medieval town of Matka). There are dozens of caves and a large number of endemic plants and animals. Take a boat ride to appreciate the views of the canyon. Later this afternoon we return to Skopje. Overnight Hotel Aristocrat Palace or similar. (B)

Day 4: Skopje - Depart North Macedonia

Time at leisure until transfer to the airport for your onward flight. (B)

Tour Inclusions/Exclusions

Inclusions:

Arrival and departure transfers
Transport throughout
All accommodation
Daily breakfast (B), plus lunch (L) and dinner (D) as shown in the itinerary
Services of English-speaking guide
Entrance fees for sites listed as part of the itinerary

Excluded:

International flights
Any airport taxes
Travel Insurance
Visas



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Drinks
Items of a personal nature
Tips (discretionary)

Important Information

Foreign Travel Advice Warnings

We constantly monitor the advice posted by the British Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). In particular we will always advise clients of any travel warnings. At present there are no warnings against travel to Albania. Please feel free to contact us should you have any specific concerns or would like to know in detail what measures are being taken to ensure visits remain trouble free and without incident.

It should be noted that this information applies to British citizens. Other nationals are asked to check the current position of their respective government

Accommodation and Meals

Hotel Check-in Times

As a general rule most hotels will allow guests to check-in from 2pm. Please note that the price of your tour does not include guaranteed early check-in. Therefore please advise us if you would like to ensure that your room is available for an earlier arrival. This is particularly relevant on the first day of the tour and for early morning arrivals. One option is to pre-book and pay for an extra night at the beginning of your tour which will guarantee your accommodation is available irrespective of what time you arrive. Please contact us for information and costs.

It should also be noted that on many of our tours we have set-aside Day 1 of the itinerary as an 'arrival day'. For this reason and because tour participants are likely to be arriving at different times, and often from different countries, guided sightseeing or other activities are not included. If you are arriving early or before the start date of the tour and would like to organise some extra arrangements on a private basis please contact us.

Accommodation Rating

On this tour we use comfortable mid-range small hotels with private bathrooms. Air Conditioning will be provided when necessary. In general you will find your hotel has a restaurant and/or bar.

We welcome solo travellers and single rooms will be allocated subject to the applicable tour supplement. Please note that on occasions you may not always be allocated a double or twin room, as some hotels have designated single rooms. These may be smaller in size. However, the supplement payable takes this into consideration.

Food & Drink

The daily meal basis is shown in the tour itinerary; breakfast (B), lunch (L) and dinner (D). Please note that lunch may be a picnic. Water is included with the meals advised in the itinerary. All other drinks are not included and will be payable locally in cash.

Dietary Requirements

If you have any special dietary requirements you must notify us at the time of booking. While we will make every effort to cater for you, we cannot guarantee that this will be possible.



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Budgeting for your Tour

You will need some extra money to cover meals and drinks not included in the tour price, any optional sightseeing, souvenirs and items of a personal nature such as laundry.

Food

The costs for meals may vary depending upon location, type of restaurant and number of courses eaten and so the prices given are an average guide. Local restaurants located off the beaten track may be less expensive, whereas an upmarket restaurant located in the centre of a major city may charge more.

Lunch £8 - £12 / Dinner £8 - £12

Drink

The prices for drinks can vary greatly depending upon location and the prices detailed below are an average guide. In general you would expect that drinks purchased in a supermarket or local bar to be less expensive, whilst drinks in an upmarket bar or restaurant may be more expensive.

Bottle of Water £0.50 / Bottle of local beer £2

Tipping – Guide and Drivers

Tipping is commonly recognised as a way of rewarding guides and drivers for good service. If you are happy with your guide and driver, please consider leaving a tip for them. For this group tour, a reasonable amount would be between EUR 3-5 per person per day for the guide, and EUR 1-2 for the driver. If you are travelling privately, then a reasonable amount would be around EUR 7-10 per day for the guide and EUR 3-5 per day for the driver. Waiters and bar staff in the region are generally low paid and it is common practice to leave a small tip – around 10% of the bill.

Foreign Exchange

ATM Availability: Most towns have ATM's

Credit and Debit Card Acceptance: Cards are not widely accepted in the region although can be used to draw cash at ATM's

Local Currency: Lek

Recommended Currency for Exchange: Euro or US Dollars

Where to Exchange: Your tour guide will advise you

Joining your Tour

Flight Information

You are able to book this tour on a 'land only' basis or as a 'flight inclusive' package. Your flight inclusive package will be fully protected by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) ATOL protection scheme.

Joining Tour Abroad

Customers booked on the 'Land Only' arrangements will receive an airport transfer, both on arrival and departure include in the tour price. In order that the transfer can be arranged please ensure that you advise us of your flight information once available. Please advise the date, time and flight number for your arrival/departure. If we have not been advised of this information at least 2 weeks before travel, then you will be required to make your own way to the hotel on Day 1 of your tour.

Travel Insurance

It is a condition of booking with Undiscovered Destinations that you have adequate valid travel insurance. It is your responsibility to arrange appropriate travel insurance and ensure you have read and understood the full terms and conditions of your travel insurance policy to ensure that you are covered for all activities you intend



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to undertake whilst on the tour, including all optional activities. Your Insurance Policy must fully cover you for medical expenses and emergency repatriation to your home country and be valid for the entire duration of your holiday.

Visa Information

At the time of writing British, US and Australian nationals do not require a visa for a short-term tourist visit to Albania.

As it is the travellers' responsibility to ensure that they meet all entry requirements it is essential that you check the rules and any other conditions at the time of booking and again when making your balance payment. In addition, we would strongly advise that you make a final check around two weeks before your arrival. This is important as requirements can change at short notice. Undiscovered Destinations, when possible, will provide guidance about entry rules, but in the first instance please contact the relevant authorities, including the applicable embassy or consulate for assistance. Contact details can be found by visiting the following websites

British Nationals - www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice

US Nationals - <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel.html>

Australian Nationals - www.smartraveller.gov.au/

Other nationals should check the latest requirements with the authorities in their home country, or with the destination's nearest embassy or consulate.

Passports

It is your responsibility to ensure that you are in possession of a full passport, valid for at least six months after the date of return to the UK.

We strongly advise that your passport contains a minimum of two blank pages for each country visited, as this may be a requirement of the local immigration authorities. In addition certain countries will stipulate that the two blank pages are opposite each other. If you are unable to meet these requirements you may be refused boarding by your airline or denied entry by the immigration authorities.

For specific information about the requirements for your destination please check with the country's embassy or consulate. Alternatively UK citizens can visit www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice.

Vaccinations & Protection

There are no compulsory vaccinations required for travel to these countries. However, we recommend that you speak with your doctor or travel clinic for the most up to date advice regarding any vaccinations that may be recommended.

The legal status and regulation of some medicines prescribed or purchased in your home country can be different in other countries. If you're travelling with prescription or over-the-counter medicine, read this guidance from NaTHNaC on best practice when travelling with medicines. For further information on the legal status of a specific medicine, you'll need to contact the embassy, high commission or consulate of the country or territory you're travelling to.



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Preparing for your tour

Climate

Albania can be visited year-round. However the best times to visit are generally considered to be spring to early summer and early to mid-autumn. In the high summer months of July and August it can get very hot – temperatures of 40°C are not uncommon, while in the winter snow is common and it can be very cold, although the mountains are beautiful around this time. In spring you can expect occasional rain showers or longer periods of rain but at the same time many days without rain is also common. Autumn tends to be slightly drier and temperatures are usually most pleasant. Note that in spring and autumn early mornings and at night it can be quite cool especially at higher elevations. In short unless you are travelling in mid-summer you should expect a range of conditions and temperatures.

Clothing

When it comes to clothing it is usually recommended that lighter clothes are worn through the day, and warmer ones at night. A hat is also advised to be worn through the day to protect from the sun, along with at least one piece of waterproof/windproof clothing for any days that the weather may be wet or windy. Please note that it can get quite cool in the mountains in the evening so some warm clothes are advised even in the summer. There will be some opportunities for swimming on our Hidden Europe tour so you may wish to take a costume and towel.

Equipment

The first thing on your list should be a first aid kit. Whilst there is no undue cause for alarm, travellers are best advised to travel well-prepared: adequately immunized, with sufficient supplies of prescription drugs, along with a medical kit. Suncream/sunblock is a must. Insect repellent, including a bite spray will also be useful to have. A torch or head torch is useful for any unexpected electricity outages or to assist in dimly lit areas.

Footwear

Footwear is a main priority on this tour. Comfortable walking shoes are recommended. When travelling something comfortable like sandals would be sensible.

Luggage on tour

Your luggage should not exceed 20kgs (44lbs). One large suitcase/rucksack, and one small hand luggage rucksack is acceptable.

Electric Supply & Plugs

Electrical supply is 220V/50 Hz and plugs have two round pins.

Tour Itinerary Versions

Please ensure that you have an up-to-date copy of these tour notes immediately before you travel, as from time to time our itineraries may be amended, either for operational reasons or in response to feedback from customers. You will be informed of any major changes to your tour but small changes may just be added to these tour notes. These tour notes were updated 4 July 2023.