

The Wild Beauty of
Albania

Returns to the Country of My Heart

Luboš Vránek

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A richly illustrated travelogue about a journey across Albania.

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Lukova, 2025.

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Introduction

Introduction: Albania – A country changing before your eyes

This travelogue was created over almost ten years between 2016 and 2025. Don't expect a classic guidebook with a list of hotels, routes, and mileage. It's a book about journeys that cannot be planned, about a landscape that gets under your skin, and about a country that changes faster than you can understand it.

I supplement some chapters with factual notes. Not to overwhelm you with information, but to give the stories a firmer outline. The rest belongs to experiences, images, and feelings. Photographs don't play a decorative role here. They carry half the narration. Sometimes an image says more than a paragraph of text, and Albania is a country that cannot just be explained; it's good to see it too.

From a forgotten corner to a tourist boom

To this day, Albania carries a reputation as a wild and dangerous country. Partly justified, but mainly due to inertia. The reality has changed faster than the image in people's minds. In 2024, over eleven million tourists came here. In 2016, it was roughly four million. Today, Albania belongs among the fastest-growing tourist destinations in Europe.

But Albania cannot be described in a single sentence. What was a dusty road last year is smooth asphalt today. Where an abandoned beach once was, a hotel stands, and somewhere else, an entire resort disappears, and silence returns. What applied here yesterday may not apply tomorrow.

From hundreds of travelers to millions of visitors

Just ten years ago, only hundreds of adventurers went there from the Czech Republic. Albania was on the fringes of interest, and that's exactly what made it such a powerful experience. Today, the

situation is different. Italians, Poles, Germans, Czechs, and tourists from Kosovo are arriving. Investors are arriving.

In the south of the country, real estate prices have tripled over three years. Durrës, Saranda, Himara, Vlora – towns that were sleepy not long ago now resemble a real estate rush. During Covid, Albania became a haven for digital nomads. No lockdowns, fast internet, cheap rent, and the sea just around the corner. Today, Tirana pulses with young people from all over the world, cafes, co-workings, and nightlife.

The mountains are still wild, but no longer silent

I love the Albanian mountains. They remind me of the Dolomites but without the crowds. But the world is changing here too. On the Valbona-Theth route, we met a few tourists in 2016. In 2023, there were hundreds of them during a single trip. Guesthouses tend to be sold out weeks in advance in high season, and prices have doubled in a few years.

But you just need to cross another ridge, and the silence is back. The trails are often just tracks in the gravel. However, we didn't encounter any eagles. Maybe there aren't many left. They are hunted for a fee. In 2024, the Vjosa River was declared the first wild river national park in Europe. One of nature's few great victories in recent years.

Roads that hurt and then disappear

The worst thing about Albania used to be the roads. Broken, washed out, sometimes more like stream beds than roads. Today, the situation is completely different. A highway connects Tirana with Kukës; asphalt leads to Theth and Valbona. Most of the secondary roads are finished. And with asphalt come the crowds. In 2016, Theth was a mountain village at the end of the world. Today, it is a tourist center. It's still beautiful – but it's no longer the same.

Albania changes fast, and that is one of the main themes of this book

How we travel

We only make general plans. We pick places, drop them on a map, and leave the rest to the road. Weather, fatigue, coincidence. In Albania, it can't be done any other way. We usually don't arrange accommodation in advance, except at the peak of the season. Depending on the situation, we sleep in a tent, under the open sky, or in a guesthouse.



Safety, people, and language

Albania has long ceased to be a country of bun-
kers. And maybe not even a country of eagles. But
it is a country of people. Hospitable, direct, often
unexpectedly warm. In 2016, we communicated



Camping near Orikum (<https://mapy.com/s/karofapoja>), 2022.

with hands and feet. In 2025, almost everyone
speaks English. The Albanian language has no
close relative. Maybe that's why this country feels
so strange, as if it were a little outside Europe, yet
still in it.

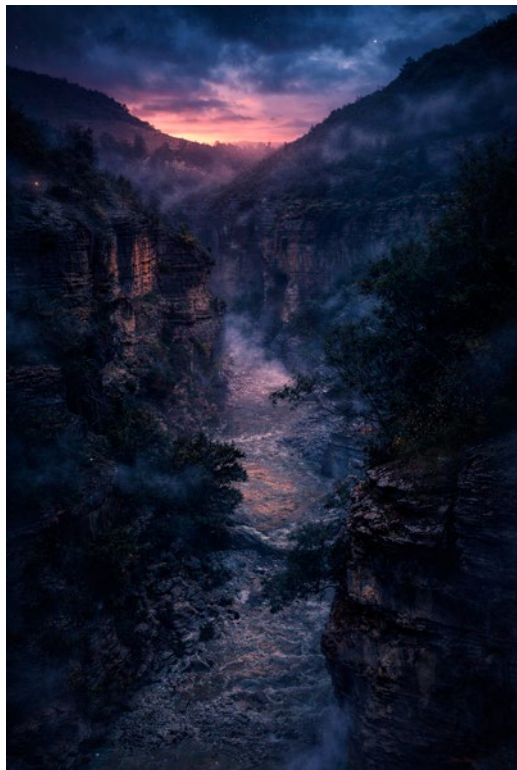
Hanzelka and Zikmund were right

They said that Albania is the most beautiful coun-
try in the world and that one day half the planet
would want to see it. That moment is approaching.
If you want to experience Albania while it is still
a bit raw, now is the time.

After publishing *The Harsh Beauty of Albania* at
the beginning of 2024, I felt that I was done for



Mirror Beach (Plazhi i Pasqyrave) is one of the most beautiful beaches in southern Albania, 2024.



Osum Canyon, 2025.

a while. But the country pulled me back again. In the spring of 2025, I set out for it again, this time for three months, from May to the beginning of August. I wanted to walk the Balkans slowly, without pressure, with time for returns and detours. And for rest. Throughout the entire time, I was troubled by knee pain after surgery and a herniated disc. But the desire to go on was stronger.

My journey was financially bearable and also humanly tolerable because I offered a carpool on social networks. I imagined that people would take turns every two or three weeks – someone would arrive, someone would leave. A kind of traveling crew.

One couple with their own car signed up, and one man from northern Moravia who could go with me for almost the entire time. In the book, I nickname him Fery. He was supposed to stay for two and a half months, then my wife Michaela was supposed to replace him. On paper, it made sense.

From a practical point of view, almost everything worked. We split the costs in half, sometimes he contributed more. He was technically skilled, helped me with the car, and was reliable eyes in difficult terrain. I might not have even tried some crazy mountain roads without him.

But not everything was always ideal. That's why, in the following stories, I tried to find the truly positive moments even in our unpleasant times together, and to look back on our travels with a bit of distance and perspective.

Conclusion

A smile, respect, and humility open more doors in Albania than money. It is a country that is both harsh and gentle at the same time. Sometimes it will exhaust you, other times it will enchant you. You will either fall in love with it or never return. Welcome to Albania. To the country that changes faster than one can write about it. The adventure begins.



New art installations are appearing on the streets of Tirana, 2025.

Albania Has as Many Tastes as It Has Curves



Shushicë River Valley, 2025.

Proud, wild, and at the same time immensely kind. Such is Albania. A young state with a dramatic history that has lived through isolation and a sudden awakening into modern Europe. A country of contrasts, where raw mountain landscapes alternate with turquoise seas, and where the openness of the locals disarms you within the first few minutes. Every curve in the mountains, every bend of the coastal road offers a new view, a new scent, a new experience. In Albania, you never know exactly what's coming, and that's precisely the magic of it. You don't experience Albania superficially. It consumes you.

Why we keep coming back

While the sea's turquoise sparkles on the coast, just a few kilometers away you'll be surprised by wild mountain ranges, azure lakes, or ancient fortresses. And everywhere you look, human openness, smiles, and hospitality await you, along with a morning coffee with a sea view. Albania pulls you in, absorbs you, and makes you see through the eyes of an adventurer who never knows exactly what they will discover around the next corner. Every return is different. Some paths lead to the mountains, others to the sea, others to the people, and all offer experiences that will stay with you long after you leave this country.

First touch of the country: Mother Teresa Airport

The gateway to the country is the Tirana International Airport Nënë Tereza, named after its most famous native, Mother Teresa. The modern terminal, which in recent years has undergone a significant transformation led by the Italian architect Marco Casamonti, symbolizes the direction the country has taken: boldly forward. Albania has made a huge leap in recent years. New roads, hotels, mountain chalets, and family guesthouses are sprouting up with an energy that many countries could envy. And yet, it carefully protects its past.

Old and new in one rhythm

History is present here at every step. One of the most impressive places is the Porto Palermo fortress between the resorts of Saranda and Himara. The fortress, originally begun by the Venetians, was transformed in the early 19th century into an impregnable stronghold by the famous Albanian commander Ali Pasha of Tepelena (1740–1822), also known as Ali Pasha of Ioannina. At that time, Albania was part of the mighty Ottoman Empire, but the rebellious Ali Pasha ruled his Pashalik of Yanina very independently, eccentrically, and cruelly. The fortress in Porto Palermo stands on

A Country Where Time Is Governed by Mood

Albanian time doesn't exist

"I'll be there in five minutes" can mean thirty. Or even tomorrow. The main thing is that they arrive, and with a smile. In Albania, *"we are in a hurry"* simply doesn't exist. What exists is *"wait a moment."* And that moment? Maybe an hour. But the strange thing is, you don't mind at all. It starts raining? Everyone orders another coffee. Something doesn't work? *"No problem!"* – the universal catchphrase for everything. No keys? No problem. Want to pay by card? No problem. Terminal doesn't work? No problem.

And the best part are the old men sitting in a circle: the same people, the same bench, the same positions, every day. Tables on the street, coffee on the sidewalk, benches occupied from morning till night. Living outdoors like this is a way of life, not a coincidence.

Greetings that last longer than a doctor's visit

You arrive, say hello... and suddenly you're in a half hour conversation about life, work, family, and why your dog is in a good mood today. Albanians simply have time. And they have it for you too. You sit in a cafe once... and the next time they're already waving at you, asking where you are from, and bringing your coffee before you can even order it. And it makes you feel unexpectedly good. The first days? You understand nothing. The third day? You start nodding your head as if to say, *"Yeah, that's normal."* And after a week? You start behaving exactly the same way.

Coffee as a religion

Every day starts with a coffee. And then another. Albanians drink more coffee than Czechs drink beer. And when you taste it... you'll understand. Coffee costs 25–50 CZK and tastes great. Whether it's made by a grandmother, a teenager, or a man in flip-flops. Water in restaurants? Free. Not because



it's custom... but because they do it for the people. And in Albania, people are everything.

A smile as currency

Don't know Albanian? Just smile, and half of your problems will vanish. Albanian hospitality is a different universe. What you have, you give. And what you don't have... they'll bring to you. Every meal tastes as if mom cooked it. Even a simple salad. And when they invite you into their home... you leave with a full stomach and new friends. Helping here isn't a gesture of goodwill; it's a way of life. Being a guest in Albania means being protected, sometimes more than one might find comfortable to turn down.

Children with chocolate eyes

When traveling through Albania, you start noticing things that would easily be overlooked elsewhere. Like children's eyes – dark, deep, and calm, as if they held a little more light than one would expect from a country where everything is in short supply. Little work, little money, little glitz. And yet those children shine. On the beaches they jump into the waves, on the streets they ride old motorbikes, in the shops they help their parents with the seriousness of adults. A thirteen year old girl will explain in English with a perfect

cisely what its popularity is destroying. The economic boom is undeniable, but the question is whether the country can implement regulations fast enough before it loses what attracted tourists in the first place.

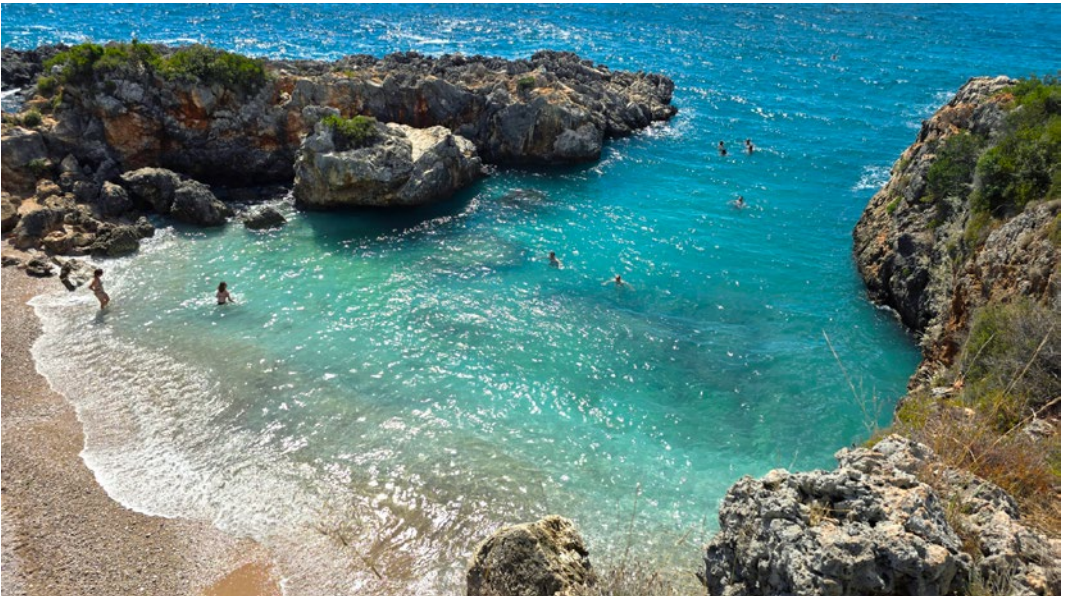
And it is changing faster than one would wish. Places that were quiet and raw until recently are now disappearing under concrete, parking lots, and new terraces. Photos of the Bënja thermal springs, as we knew them from previous years, can no longer be replicated this year. Massive reconstruction has changed their face, and only time will tell whether this was the price of development or the loss of something irreplaceable.



One thing is certain: anyone who wants to experience Albania as it used to be should head out as soon as possible, especially into the mountains. While the coast has already undergone its transformation, places still survive in the mountains where silence, simplicity, and a sense of freedom reign. It is there that one can still find the Albania that might be gone tomorrow.

The next few years will show whether the Albanian tourism miracle will become a story of sustainable success or a warning to others. For now, Albania remains one of the most interesting European destinations. You just won't be alone anymore.

Albania will change you. Not by what you see, but by what you feel. Life here is lived... differently. Peacefully. Genuinely. And that is the magic of Albania – a country where time is governed by mood, where a smile opens doors, and where hospitality is not a word, but a way of being.



Aquarium Beach on the Albanian Riviera, 2025.

The Albanian Riviera



Lukova region, 2025.

The Coast Where the Sea Meets the Mountains and Time Flows Differently

The Albanian Riviera does not reveal itself all at once. It opens up gradually, in curves high above the sea, in brief glimpses over cliffs, and in the reflections of light on the water's surface. Each subsequent stretch of coast is different, yet it builds on the previous one – like chapters of a long story that has been written for thousands of years. From bustling port cities to villages clinging to cliffs, the landscape here never feels definitive. The sea is turquoise, the mountains are steep and close, the villages are old and surprisingly lively. Modern Albania walks closely beside ancient Albania here without getting in each other's way.

From Vlorë southward across cultures and centuries

The journey begins in Vlorë. The city where Albanian independence was born in 1912, and where this moment is still felt in the streets, cafes, and port. History here is not an exhibit but part of everyday life, and the nearby beaches of the turquoise

Ionian Sea offer pleasant swimming, especially for families with children. As soon as we head further south, the hustle and bustle fades. Villages scattered around bays seem to reject haste. Stone houses, monasteries on high ground, or fortresses watching the coast from above preserve their original character. You will find both hitchhikers and gourmets savoring fresh octopus under grapevines in an old generation family tavern. Albania is ready to satisfy travelers longing not only for magnificent views but also for a cultural experience. Some beaches are accessible only via narrow roads or on foot. Others open up suddenly, around the last corner. Everywhere, however, the same thing is felt: the landscape sets the rules here.

Between sea and mountains

The uniqueness of the Riviera lies in its tightness. The sea and mountains are constantly in dialogue here. Cliffs rise directly from the water, while mountain ridges plunge into the interior just a few kilometers from the coast. Bottle-green bays alternate with bare rocks; wetlands and lagoons provide

Ilias and Vuno – postcards brought to life

Ilias, a small mountain village, feels like an artist's retreat with breathtaking views and tranquillity. Nearby lies Vuno, which looks as if it has fallen out of an old postcard. Cobbled paths wind through the village, and whitewashed buildings with wooden accents look like they are straight out of a fairy tale.

Jala (Jalë) – the heart of entertainment

Jala has become synonymous with fun in the sun. The beaches are perfect for volleyball or lounging under a parasol. When the sun goes down, the village transforms, with beach bars and music clubs making it a centre of nightlife.



Livadh – a photogenic paradise

Long beaches and a sea that rivals the most beautiful in the world. The magical glow of the golden hour wraps the beach in warmth and peace, and one can feel a true communion with nature here.



Pilur – a sea of olives

The mountain village offers a cool breeze and olive groves as far as the eye can see. Life flows at a different pace here than on the coast.

Porto Palermo – a fortress above the bay

The landscape is dominated by an old fortress built by Ali Pasha of Tepelena. A magnet for swimmers and divers alike is the sparkling turquoise water of the bay, sheltered by hills.

Himara (Himarë) – a living museum

Every stone has a story to tell. Modern architecture intertwines with historical monuments, such as the *Church of St. Spyridon* or the castle with the *Kala* district; this is considered Himara's main attraction and offers visitors a unique atmosphere and magnificent views of the Ionian Sea and surrounding beaches. It stands out with its cobble streets and Dalmatian–Venetian style windows.



Kudhës – a melting pot of cultures

The houses spread out on the hilltops seem to defy gravity. The village, with its mix of Christian and Muslim residents, is a testament to a rich cultural heritage. Different faiths and traditions come together in harmony here.

Public transport in Albania has its own logic, but the rules of timetables are often more of a rough guide.

Buses

Main routes now have departure boards and fixed stops, but the reality is as follows:

- the bus leaves only when it is full,
- it stops almost anywhere,
- if the driver sees someone on the hard shoulder, they will slow down if the person indicates they want to board,
- locals are willing to advise on where to change buses, and the drivers themselves will tell you where to get off if it's not a designated stop.

Approximate prices:

- Tirana → Saranda (Sarandë): €14–16
- Tirana → Shkodra (Shkodër): €4–5
- Shkodra → Theth: €10–12

Prices and journey times can change, so it is always best to ask locally.

Furgons (minibuses)

The furgon is an iconic part of Albanian transport. A small minibus for 6–20 people runs:

- whenever there is demand,
- wherever there is a road,
- and often even where the road only “slightly resembles” asphalt.

You pay the driver directly, no booking, no fuss. To find out where and when it departs, your most reliable source is your accommodation provider or a local shopkeeper. Services usually run at least once a day, mostly twice, and more frequently to main towns.

Taxis

In cities, you can use apps (Speed Taxi, Ups Taxi), or your hotel can arrange a taxi for you.

Prices:

- Tirana centre → airport: €10–12
- short ride within the city: €3–5
- for longer journeys, it is advisable to agree on a price in advance. Payment is in cash, usually in euros or lek.

Driving a private car

Parking is an art of improvisation

It is an artistic discipline. In smaller towns, you park wherever there is space. And if there is no space, you make one. A bit of pavement, a street corner, a driveway, an exit, bumper to bumper... no? Then maybe a free lane on the road. Fortunately, paid car parks are springing up in larger cities, and they are cheap and practical. In Tirana, Saranda or Durrës, it is better to use them rather than risk parking illegally. In smaller villages and towns, you just have to keep your eyes peeled – and lo and behold, an old man is sitting by a courtyard entrance, visibly waiting for the chance to guide a tourist into a free spot. There are now discussions about introducing heavy fines for the extreme parking that is still common in Albania – such as parking in two or three rows, on roundabouts, in the middle of the road, etc.

Honking

Albanians honk less than they used to; honking has transformed into a communication tool rather than an expression of aggression. Here it means:

- “I’m overtaking, I know you’re there”
- “watch out, I’m taking the corner”
- “greeting friends”

Right of way – the art of the possible

It relies on eye contact, quick negotiation, and natural judgement. Locals perceive everything faster; they read the traffic. The priority-to-the-right rule exists, but in practice, priority often goes to whoever decides to go first – and everyone else respects that. STOP signs do exist on the roads, but they are usually turned in such a way that I feel they don’t apply to my journey. Translated, it means: “Theoretically, you could stop.” Cows have absolute right of way. They are bigger, calmer, and in no hurry.

You won’t see an **indicator** most of the time. It is a mythical creature that might exist and shocks you when it starts flashing. It’s not a light; it’s a legend.

The last trains of Albania

Cistern trains between Fier and Vlora (Vlorë)

Railways in Albania are dying slowly but surely. In November 2025, the operation of the last passenger trains was terminated, and so the entire Albanian railway network – once a symbol of communist industrialisation – shrank to a single regularly operated section. One section, three locomotives, thirty-three cistern wagons. And oil. If you want to see a train in Albania, you have to go to the area between the cities of Fier and Vlora. Here, on thirty-six kilometres (approx. 22.4 miles) of track, the last chapter of Albanian railways is unfolding. And it is no romantic travelogue ride; it is black gold flowing through the rails from the inland to the sea.

Oil, a refinery, and the only living track

Almost daily, up to three pairs of trains run on this section. They transport crude oil, which is extracted in the Patos–Marinëz oil field east of the city of Fier. This oil field is no marginal project; it is one of Albania's most important energy assets. The starting station is the Fier Drizë refinery, a complex full of tanks, pipelines, and the stench of oil, where the cistern wagons are filled under the strict supervision of safety regulations and technological procedures. The destination station is the PIA (La Petrolifera Italo Albanese) terminal near Vlora, where the oil is pumped directly into ships anchored in the port. From there, it travels further out into the world – to refineries in Italy, the Balkans, wherever there is demand. The track measures thirty-six kilometres (approx. 22.4 miles). That is not much; but in Albania, it means the difference between life and death for the entire railway.

ALBRAIL: The only company that still believes in rails

Transport on this section is provided by the Albanian private company ALBRAIL, which is currently the only Albanian private company holding two key licences: an infrastructure manager licence (*i.e.*,

track maintenance) and a railway operator licence (*i.e.*, actual train operation). One company responsible for both the rails and the trains running on them. All transports unfold according to the needs of a single strategic client: Bankers Petroleum. This is a former Canadian, now Chinese, oil company operating in Albania. When Bankers Petroleum says “we need a train”, ALBRAIL sends it. It is a business strictly based on demand. No timetables for the public, no station clocks, no waiting for connections. Just oil, rails, and locomotives.

Three locomotives: Veterans from Poland and Slovakia

ALBRAIL owns three locomotives. All three have a fascinating history that tells you more about the globalisation of railways than entire economics textbooks.

T770.702 (ex 770.254)

This locomotive has travelled halfway across Europe. Originally, it was S-2116, which was delivered in 1988 by the ČKD (Českomoravská Kolben–Daněk) company to the then Vladimir Lenin Steelworks in Krakow – that monumental communist industrial complex that employed tens of thousands of people. The locomotive served in the Polish steelworks for 30 years – until 2018. That is a solid lifespan for a machine that pulled heavy raw materials along industrial sidings. When the steelworks switched to more modern technologies, the locomotive became redundant. Subsequently, it was sold through the ZOS Zvolen company (a Slovak repair firm) to the Loco TRADE, s. r. o. company in Levice, which carried out a general overhaul on the locomotive in the premises of the Cigeľ mine in Slovakia. After the repair, it was registered under the number 770.254 and transported to Albania in July 2019.

T770.701 (ex 770.526)

The second locomotive, which alternates with the T770.702 in hauling cistern trains.

771.601 (ex 711.081)

The third locomotive provides shunting during loading at the Fier Drizë refinery.

ALBRAIL owns thirty-three cistern wagons, which they bought from GATX, one of the world's largest lessors of railway wagons. These cisterns are modern, certified according to European safety standards, and exactly meet the needs of oil transport. Each wagon holds tens of tonnes of black gold. A fully loaded train is an impressive sight: dozens of black cisterns in a row, the monotonous rhythm of wheels on the rails, the smell of oil in the air.

You will only find rails at level crossings now

This is a sentence that perfectly captures the state of Albanian railways. The level crossing works – it has barriers, signalling, and safety measures. But right behind it, on both sides, the rails have been torn up and taken away. As if someone said: *“Civilisation ends here. No further.”* It is a surreal sight. You stand on a functional level crossing, and you see rails leading to the horizon. And then you realise that the horizon is very close. Around the bend, there are no more rails.

The future? Uncertain.

Albanian railways were once the pride of the communist regime. Enver Hoxha, the Albanian dictator, invested in rails as a symbol of progress and industrialisation. After the fall of communism in 1991, the railway began to fall apart – there was no money for maintenance, competition from road transport was huge, and no one had the political will to save something that was a symbol of the old regime. Today, only this one section remains. And it only survives thanks to oil. If Bankers Petroleum stopped extracting, or if they switched to lorry transport, ALBRAIL would go bankrupt. And with it, the last functional rails in Albania would disappear. Is there a plan to restore the railways? Officially, yes. The EU and the Albanian government talk

about reconstructing the Durrës –Tirana connection and establishing a link with North Macedonia. But in practice? In practice, these are just plans on paper. And paper is cheaper than rails.

The last chance to see an Albanian train

If you want to see a train in Albania, you have to head between Fier and Vlora. You have to orientate yourself a bit according to local sources (lorry drivers often know when the train will run), or simply get lucky. I had that luck. The train passed slowly in front of me, wheezing, mindful of the old and age-wearied rails. No romance, but it was still beautiful because I saw the last “living” train in Albania. And who knows how much longer it will run. If you ever set off in the footsteps of Albanian railways, I recommend taking a camera and arming yourself with patience. Trains do not run according to a timetable – they run according to oil. And oil has its own time.



Illustrative photo (oil extraction and storage), 2023



Morning coffee and the typical contents of an Albanian's pocket. Photo: Czechs in Albania, 2026.

Approximate prices (2024–2025)

Food and drink

- espresso: 100–200 ALL
- cappuccino: 150–250 ALL
- byrek / burek: 70–150 ALL
- bread: 60–120 ALL
- water 0.5 l: 50–100 ALL
- local beer in a bar: 150–400 ALL
- regular main course: 500–1000 ALL
- better restaurant: from 3000 ALL
- fish restaurant by the sea: 1200–2500 ALL and more

Transport

- city bus: 40–60 ALL
- intercity bus (e.g., Tirana – Shkodra (*Shkodër*)): 400–600 ALL
- taxi: 300–500 ALL boarding fee, then 80–120 ALL/km

Accommodation

- guesthouse / pension: 2000–4000 ALL / night
- mid-range hotel: 4000–8000 ALL / night
- mountain guesthouses in Theth / Valbona: 2500–4500 ALL incl. breakfast

Car

- rental: €25–45 / day
- petrol: €1.70–1.90 / l

Albania is changing fast – hotels have terminals, supermarkets take cards, cities are modernising. But the heart of the country, all those small villages,

mountain farmsteads, markets, and bakeries, still beats for cash. And that is fine. Because when you pull out a 500 lek banknote (approx. €5) and buy a fresh, warm byrek from an old woman in a bakery who has been cooking since five in the morning, you feel you are part of something authentic. Something that terminals and contactless payments haven't killed yet.

Albanians are among the friendliest people in the Balkans. Most of them will gladly advise you, help you, and welcome every traveller with a smile. If you add a few basic phrases, a friendly tone, and a little cash in your pocket, your journey will be not only easier but also more pleasant.

For carefree travel:

- Always have smaller cash and change.
- Haggling at markets is rather exceptional. Outside tourist centres, do not count on paying by card.
- Take cash to the mountains for accommodation, food, and transport – there is nowhere to withdraw money.
- Spend or exchange your leks before returning home; you won't be able to exchange them abroad.

Quick overview: What to remember

- **Official currency:** Albanian lek (ALL)
- **Euros work:** hotels, taxis, car rentals, larger restaurants
- **Euros DO NOT WORK:** small purchases, local transport, markets
- **Euro coins:** cannot be exchanged, only spent
- **Exchange:** yes in cities, rather NOT at the airport
- **Card:** works in modern establishments, but not everywhere
- **Mountain areas:** no ATMs – bring cash!
- **Reserve:** always 2000–5000 ALL in your pocket
- **Before departure:** spend leks, they cannot be exchanged back

Albania is cheap for food, fruit, pastries, and public transport. Taxis, petrol, and car rentals can be more expensive. But with leks in your pocket and an open heart, doors will open for you not only to bakeries and mountain dwellings but also to stories.



can be contaminated by grazing cattle, wild animals, or simply by the fact that the water flowed through geologically complicated terrain. However, there are sources that locals know well and have used for a long time – often equipped with a sign, a low stone wall, or a small fountain. At these springs, you will usually see Albanians collecting water into bottles or barrels. You can find such places, for example, around Borsh, Theth, and many other mountain villages.

Water as mandatory equipment

In July and August, temperatures on the coast and in the mountains are high. The combination of heat and travel easily leads to dehydration. Always make sure you have plenty of water, especially in the mountains—take more than you think you need. Do not underestimate your supplies in remote areas and on longer hikes. In the mountains, there is not a shop waiting for you around every corner.

Practical tips for your stay

- Upon arrival, I buy several bottles of water to



I often draw water from amusingly designed sources as well, 2023.

stock up and always have at least one bottle in my backpack or in the car.

- I usually carry three 5-litre barrels and refill them at proven springs.

Plastic bottles and ecolog

Recycling in Albania is not yet highly developed. If I can, I buy larger packages; in the mountains, I sometimes use my own filter bottle or system, especially for water from lakes.

With bottled water, caution at unmarked springs, and sufficient hydration, you will have one less thing to worry about and can fully enjoy the beauties of a country that is definitely worth it.

Healthcare | Our experiences

When you are travelling with your family to a country that is still somewhat unknown to many, the question of healthcare comes up very soon. I admit that we dealt with it too on our first trip to Albania. Today, after years of regular returns, I can say calmly: Albania is definitely not a healthcare wasteland. On the contrary – it pleasantly surprised us in many ways.

Pharmacies – more than just selling medicines

You can recognise Albanian pharmacies easily. A green cross and the sign “Farmaci” are omnipresent. And when I say omnipresent, I mean it literally. The density of pharmacies is quite surprising – in every city, in every larger village, often literally every 100 metres (*approx. 330 feet*). This is a huge advantage for family travel. When a child gets a fever or you are struck by a headache after a long mountain hike, help is almost always around the corner. Moreover, an Albanian pharmacy often functions as a small clinic. It’s not just about selling medicines. The pharmacist asks, advises, and recommends. If they are unsure, they call a doctor without hesitation. Willingness

to help on the spot is a matter of course, not an exception. We have repeatedly been surprised by the humanity and pragmatism of the approach.

What you can buy over the counter

You can commonly get medicines over the counter here for:

- pain and fever
- virosis and colds
- allergies
- stomach problems
- disinfectants, bandages, and basic medical supplies

I personally experienced a situation where the pharmacist sold me syringes with an injection against severe back pain and inflammation without any unnecessary complications. That would be practically unthinkable in our country. In Albania, the approach in this regard is significantly more flexible. In most pharmacies, we were able to communicate in English without any problems. And when language fails, a smile and pantomime work. Locals are patient and really try to help.

Prescriptions and regular medications

Our prescription is not valid here. However, the pharmacist will usually recommend a local alternative with the same or a very similar active substance. But if you take medicines regularly, I definitely recommend taking a sufficient amount with you. Not only for certainty, but also so that you have exactly what you are used to.

Clinics and hospitals

In tourist areas, medical assistance is commonly available. Private clinics have a very solid standard, and communication in English is usually a matter of course here. Larger cities like Tirana or Durrës offer modern medical facilities that meet European standards. State hospitals can be administratively more complicated, and the language barrier can play a bigger role here. If the



Typical pharmacy signage. Photo: Czechs in Albania, 2025.



Mountain tea | The miracle herb of the Balkan mountains

Mountain tea (*Latin Sideritis scardica*) is an herb that has been gaining increasing popularity in recent years, not only among herbalists but also among travellers. Its name comes from the Greek “sideros” – iron, and originally referred to a plant capable of “getting the bad out of the body” or healing wounds caused by iron weapons. In Albania, it is called çaj mali, mountain tea, which is somewhat misleading. In the north of the country, this name is used for mountain oregano, while in the south, it refers to this yellow mountain tea. And it is precisely this southern variety that most travellers know and take home with them.

I myself buy a whole carton of it in the Albanian mountains whenever there is an opportunity. And I already have my “court” supplier – an old woman on the Kurvelesh plateau in a mountain hut with the sign *Bimë Medicinale (medicinal plants)*, from whom I usually buy up all the stock. You probably can’t get any better; here I am right at the source.

The herb of old shepherds and Greek gods

Mountain tea originally grew only in Crete, but today it is found all over the Balkans. It thrives in clean mountain meadows from an altitude of about 1,000 metres (approx. 3,280 feet) upwards. It tolerates drought, intense sun, and poor soil – and it is precisely in these conditions that it acquires its unique content of essential oils, flavonoids, and minerals. Sometimes it is also called shepherd’s tea. The Greeks even nickname it the “tea of the gods,” because according to locals, it “cures more or less everything”. Whether it is an exaggeration or ancient experience, mountain tea has long been one of the most valuable herbs of the Mediterranean world. Its healing effects were known to ancient warriors, who used it to clean wounds and heal grazes after battles.

The oldest brewery in Albania has a Czech heart

At the foot of Mount Morava, in the cultural city of Korça (Korçë), stands a brewery that is approaching a hundred years old and remains one of the symbols of Albania to this day. It was founded in 1928 by Italian investors, but the modern form of the brewery bears a distinct Czech footprint – whether in technology or in craft know-how.

Today's operation is small, compact, and surprisingly quiet. Most of the processes are automated; about 50 people work in the main shift. The heart of the whole system is stainless steel tanks with a volume of fifty cubic metres (approx. 1,765 cubic feet). And almost everything around them comes from the Czech Republic – the brewhouses and piping from Hradec Králové, the filling lines from Chotěboř, the filtration equipment from the Vysočina region.

The Korça Brewery, although its annual output is only around 100,000 hectolitres (approx. 2.6 million US gallons), is one of the most important in the country, and its beer is often the first one you taste in Albania. It focuses mainly on the domestic market; exports are minimal. Albanians themselves are more wine drinkers, but beer found its way to Korça earlier, mainly thanks to the local elite who travelled around Europe.

Both the technology and the quality of the beer advanced fundamentally after the Second World War, when Germans and, above all, Czechs came to isolated Albania as part of international cooperation. It was they who set the standard that the brewery continues to build on today.

Under the Birra Korça brand, you will find five beers – a light and a dark lager (*the dark one, by the way, is the only one of its kind in the Balkans*), an Amber Ale, and a Golden Ale. Do not expect non-alcoholic beer here; the brewery only produces a few classic types and also bottles natural mineral water *Kristal*.

Although the hops do not come from Czech hop gardens, the taste of the beer is surprisingly close to the Central European tradition. However, Czechs prefer stronger, more full-bodied beers.



Photo: Czechs in Albania, 2025

Whether Birra Korça is as good as they claim is something every visitor must judge for themselves. *I personally like the Kosovan beer Peja the most; Korça is in second place, followed by Elbar.*



Theth

When someone mentions Albania, most people think of Tirana (Tiranë) or the crowded coast. Few people know about a small village in the Northern Albanian Alps, where time has stood still and the mountains tower so close that you feel as if you could touch them. Theth is the kind of place you go to escape from the world.

The journey into the mountains

From Tirana, it is about a three-hour drive, the last dozens of kilometres of which are on a winding mountain road that will test you more than any adrenaline park. Set off early in the morning so that you have enough time and light for the journey. A bus runs from Tirana to Theth several times a week, but you will be much more flexible with a car. If you are arriving from abroad, you will fly into the international airport in Tirana. From there, you can either rent a car or join one of the organised tours.

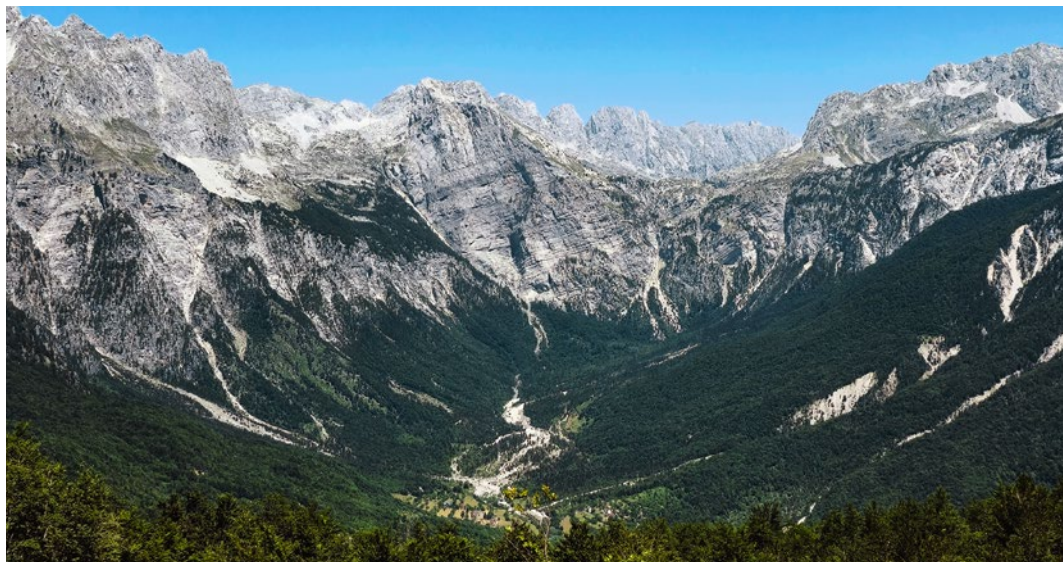
What to do

In the summer, Theth turns into a paradise for hiking and camping. The surrounding moun-

tains and forests offer trails for all fitness levels – from afternoon strolls to the Grunas waterfall to demanding treks to Valbona (Valbonë). Theth National Park protects this area from insensitive development and preserves its wild beauty. Although the intention does not always succeed. For those who prefer a slower pace, there are a few museums documenting the history and culture of the village. And the local cuisine? You definitely shouldn't miss fasolakia, boiled green beans in a tomato sauce, or a type of cheese pie that locals prepare according to centuries-old recipes.

Where to sleep

Accommodation options are limited but charming. You will find several guesthouses in the village where the hosts will welcome you like family. For adventurers who don't mind rougher conditions, Theth offers campsites with views of the surrounding mountains that you would pay a fortune for elsewhere. An alternative is to stay in nearby towns like Bajram Curri or Shkodra (Shkodër) and take a day trip to Theth. By doing



Kulla, 2025.

Selca Waterfall | A hidden gem of the Albanian Alps

This year we finally found the time to climb up to the great Selca Waterfall (*the village of Selca (Selcë), Ujëvara e Shllapit or Ujëvara e Selcës*), hidden high in the Albanian Alps near the border with Montenegro. For a long time, it remained just a spot on the map for us, a place spoken of in whispers. The moment it actually opened up before us was all the more powerful.

The waterfall, about 30 metres (*approx. 98 feet*) high, plunges from a limestone wall into a cold pool of crystal-clear water. The surrounding landscape feels rugged yet unexpectedly gentle – dense forests, rocky thresholds, and a silence broken only by the continuous roar of the water. Nearby stand the ruins of old buildings, a silent reminder of past life in

the mountains. Next to them is a simple, almost improvised trekker's campsite. No electricity, no comfort, but exactly the kind that belongs in this place. For me personally, however, the most delightful part was the pools on the stream below the waterfall. The small turquoise basins carved into the rock by the water became one of the most powerful discoveries of my entire three-month Balkan expedition this year. A place where time slows down and you feel exactly where you are supposed to be.

Selca Gorge

The waterfall is part of the approximately 6-kilometre (*approx. 3.7 miles*) long Selca Gorge, which cuts into the middle section of the Suha Valley. In





Selca Waterfall, 2025.



Selca Waterfall. Photo: Hanka Pralinka, 2025.

damp microclimate favours a variety of flora, and the gorge is home to many bird species – particularly swallows and pigeons that circle above the narrowest passages. This is partly why the area was declared a protected natural monument. Respect for nature here is not a decree, but a matter of course.

The path to the waterfall

The Selca (*Selcë*) waterfall lies near the village of the same name in northern Albania. A marked footpath leads to it, quite breakneck in places, which can be managed in about two and a half to three hours. But it can also take longer, depending on your pace and your desire to stop and admire the views. The terrain is rocky, but technically mostly undemanding. Sturdy shoes and a bit of caution are enough. I take walking poles with me.

For those who do not have the time or inclination to walk all the way up, a beautiful pool offers itself right at the beginning of the gorge, above the church. From there, the water cascades down into the Cem River (*Lumi i Cemit*).

If you stay at the Café & Camping Selca-Cem below the church, the path to the waterfall or the pool will lead you past a small hydroelectric power station with the reservoir that supplies it with water. The campsite has a restaurant and one cabin with two rooms and simple facilities.

The best time to visit is spring and early summer, when the waterfall has the greatest flow and the landscape plays with all shades of green. In the summer, the place offers pleasant refreshment; in



when it is scarce, the waterfall quickly fades. The last pool then becomes overgrown with algae, and the whole place loses its power.

The Selca waterfall and the adjacent gorge belong to those places you remember not just with your eyes, but with your whole body. It is not an attraction for a few minutes. It is a landscape that demands time, silence, and attention.







Mount **Vajusha / Talijanka** (Maja e Vajushës)

A mountain between two worlds

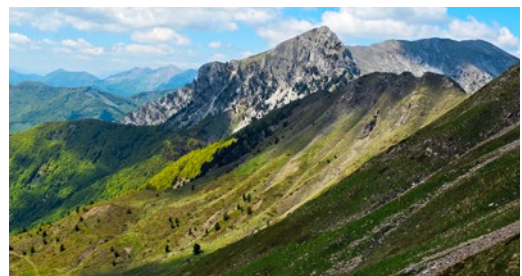
Vajusha (*Maja e Vajushës*, in Montenegrin *Talijanka*) does not only lie on the border of Albania and Montenegro. It also lies on the border of two landscapes, two geologies, and two completely different worlds. The state border runs along the ridge, but another one is even more visible: where smooth green hills rise on one side, the jagged towers of the **Accursed Mountains** (*Prokletije*) – the **Albanian Alps** – begin on the other.

When you look at Talijanka from a distance, it seems inconspicuous. No monumental pyramid, no rocky giant. But the moment you step onto it, you realise that this mountain has a special pow-

er. It is a transition zone, a place where the landscape, the light, and the feeling of the mountains change.

Lëpusha, the last village before the border

The starting point is the mountain village of Lëpusha (*Lëpushë*). It lies in a wide basin in the Kelmend region, an area that for centuries was more Montenegrin than Albanian. The people here were Catholics, spoke their own dialect, and adhered to their own rules. During communism, the area was a closed border zone where entry was forbidden without a permit.





A journey through time along the turquoise river

The Shala River (*Lumi i Shalës*) rises high in the Albanian Alps near the village of Theth. Over 37 km (approx. 23 miles), it gradually transforms from a mountain stream beneath the Radohina massif into a deep turquoise river before finally disappearing into the quiet waters of Lake Koman. This is where the image that is now nicknamed the “*Albanian Thailand*” was born. But Shala is not just an exotic attraction. It is a land of memory.

The turquoise water bites into the limestone walls, the vegetation spills down to the surface, and the world feels untouched. Yet, it is not a wilderness

without people. It is a living valley where tribal culture survived isolation, Ottoman rule, and decades of communist dictatorship.

The Shala tribe - land and identity

The Shala Valley is the historical territory of the Shala tribe (*fis i Shalës*), one of the oldest northern Albanian tribes. The first written mention appears as early as 1634 in Italian sources under the name Sciala.

According to legends, the Shala share a common ancestor with the Shoshi and Mirdita tribes. The story tells of three brothers: one received a saddle (alb. *shalë*), the second a sieve (alb. *shoshë*), and the third received nothing, so he wished his brothers a good day (alb. *mirëdita*). From these gifts, the tribes derived their names, which shape the map of northern Albania to this day.

The tribal territory lies between the Drin and Valbona rivers in the Dukagjin Highlands and is divided into Upper and Lower Shala. Upper Shala is formed by Theth, an isolated mountain village that during the Ottoman Empire formed its own military-administrative unit (*bajrak*). Lower Shala is more open, with gentler slopes and scattered villages where life is governed by the river and the seasons.

The road along the river

The road through the Shala Valley is not a road in the usual sense of the word. It is an old mountain route, broken, narrow, and steep in places. Locals only use it when they have to. For travellers, it is a test of patience and simultaneously one of the most powerful experiences in northern Albania. Dust, fords, stones, and places with nowhere to pull over. The reward is the feeling that you are driving through a landscape that opened up to the world only recently.

Ndërlysj – the gateway to the river

Ndërlysj lies a few kilometres south of Theth and today is the most common entry point into the



Refreshing swim in the Shala River. Photo: Fery, 2025.



Valbona

The valley where the mountains breathe fully

You don't just enter Valbona (*Valbonë*). The valley opens up slowly, as if it first wants to be sure you know where you are going. And then, without a single warning, it lets sharp limestone walls grow before your eyes, which seem almost disproportionate to the quiet villages at the bottom of the valley. This is where northern Albania begins in its purest, most honest form. Every morning in the valley is different. Sometimes it has the colour of cold fog creeping between the pines, other times it reflects the sun in the icy Valbona River so brightly that one stops for a moment. Everything here is bigger, sharper, but at the same time strangely calming. As if the mountains themselves were saying: "There is no place for rushing here."

Where history has not disappeared

Valbona is not just nature. It is a region that for centuries defied empires and ambitions. The local family clans lived according to the *kanun*, an ancient code of law, and neither a pasha nor a tax official ever fully penetrated here. It was impossible; the terrain was stronger. When you walk through the valley, you can still feel it today: a special pride, resilience, and the natural dignity of people who learned to survive in a landscape where winter used to be the only true ruler.

On the trails that connect the two valleys

It is no wonder that the trek between Valbona and Theth has become a symbol of the Albanian Alps. It is more than just 17 kilometres (*approx. 10.6 miles*) between two villages. It is a crossing of passages where the light, temperature, and



Valbona River, 2023



Afrimi Guesthouse, Çerem, 2025.

base became a permanent home. During communism, Çerem functioned year-round, but after its fall, most of the inhabitants moved to the cities. Today, the village is more seasonal, and therein lies its special strength.

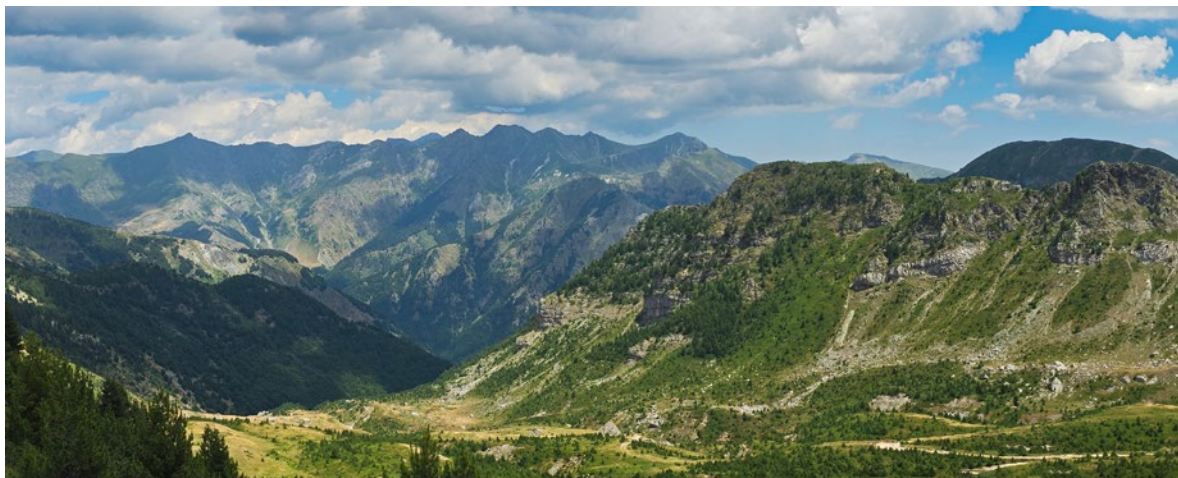
Before we head into the mountains, Fery wants to have a starter coffee. We stop at what seems to be a guesthouse, hoping we chose correctly. It wasn't a good choice. A bed might be found, but refreshments no. A young man points out a path across the meadow to something we cannot see from here. He says a name, probably the name of a family guesthouse, but I'm not entirely convinced. We return to the main road and communicate with the workers using gestures. They point in all directions. It seems there won't be any coffee. So we try the opposite direction, to the left across a muddy section. It turned out to be a good choice. The dirt track ends at a wooden cabin; behind it, more buildings appear. I park, and we go to take a closer look. In the yard in front of the building, there are several tables and chairs, surrounded by an orchard, and between its trunks, tents are pitched. A group of trekkers is preparing for a hike, other people are crawling out of the cabins and ordering breakfast. Maybe we'll meet them somewhere. An interesting place. I tell myself that we will definitely return here after coming back from the mountains. We have coffee and water, sit for a while, and then set off further into the unknown.

Paths from Çerem

For walkers, the arrival from Valbona to Çerem is the natural conclusion to a long day in the moun-



We had coffee at a simple roadside kiosk, 2025.



The summit areas offer wonderful views of, for example, Mount Mullafcit (2,031 m a.s.l.) and Mount Rupa (2,266 m a.s.l.), Valbona, 2025.

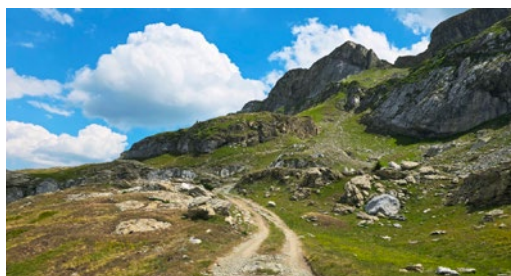
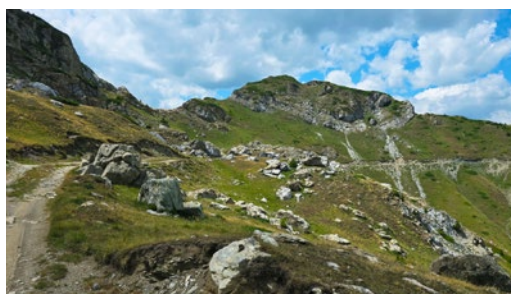
Maja Gjarpërit Çeremit. Whoever sets off further from here feels like they are leaving the inhabited world and entering a space where only the mountains and one's own steps decide.

Maja Isuf Demës and Maja Gjarpërit Çeremit

Our goal was the area east above Çerem. Originally, I had planned a heavy-pack trek up to the border with Montenegro, from there heading towards Dobërdol and then to the Isuf Demës peak. However, at the guesthouse, they advised us that we could manage part of the journey along the border by car. Thanks to this, we can complete the trip in one day and do without heavy backpacks. The forest road marked as *Rruga Isufaj* continues higher, transitioning at a simple “people’s kiosk” into *Rruga Çerem-Dobërdol*. A few serpentine



Mount Isuf Demës, 2025.



Qafa e Lopëve Pass, 2025.



In the right background is Mount Gjarpërit Çeremit, Valbona, 2025.

has to rely on oneself. Beyond the saddle, the path turns and reveals a view of **Maja Gjarpërit Çeremit**. The mountain, interwoven with caves and sinkholes, looks raw, almost technical. I would compare it to a pile of concrete poured from a mixer. Personally, it attracts me less than Isuf Demës, but that is precisely the beauty of this

Photo: Fery, 2025.





Tradita Camp, Valbona, 2025

Tradita Campsite

I like to return to the Tradita campsite every time I camp in Valbona. This time they welcomed me as an old acquaintance, which is always pleasing. This year, however, the stay was a bit complicated, because a children's camp was currently staying on the premises. All the cabins were occupied, even the

new row on the right side. Meanwhile, the owner had built a larger covered hall from the original shelter, which the children used as a dining room and a space for evening programmes, discos, and similar fun. The campsite continued to develop at the same time: toilets were added, even doubling in number, and the newer ones also had showers. Al-



Tropoja

A beauty with a bad reputation

Tropoja (Tropojë). A name that for many years evoked respect, fear, and silence in Albania. A mountain valley on the northeastern edge of the country, squeezed by the Albanian Alps, separated from the rest of Albania by mountains and the waters of the Drin. A region you didn't travel to without a reason, and certainly not by chance. It used to be that whoever headed to Tropoja knew why. Today, people travel here for the mountains, the silence, and the beauty. But the past still lingers in the air, like a shadow that doesn't disappear just because the sun has come out.

A region avoided even by gangsters

The pop-culture shorthand came with the film *Taken* (96 hodin). In one sentence, it says that “*even the Russians avoid this place*”. Exaggerated? Perhaps. But it perfectly captures the feel of Tropoja in the 1990 s. Tropoja carries the reputation of being the centre of the Albanian mafia. It's not a myth sucked out of a finger. For decades, it was a region where the state ended on paper and real power took place elsewhere, in family ties, weapons, and silent agreements. After the fall of communism, Albania collapsed faster than any-

one could put it back together. The north of the country, including Tropoja, found itself outside the control of the central power. The smuggling of weapons, people, and drugs to Kosovo and further into Europe became a daily reality. Bajram Curri functioned as a node, a crossroads of routes, interests, and weapons. The law here was often just a suggestion.

History on the edge

Tropoja's strategic location was both an advantage and a curse. Already under the Ottomans, trade routes connecting Shkodra (*Shkodër*), Kosovo, and the Balkan interior ran through here. Salt, livestock, agricultural products, everything flowed through the mountain passes. But the turning point came after the First World War. The new borders cut Tropoja off from its natural centre, the town of *Gjakova*, which remained on the Kosovan side. Families were divided, trade ties severed. A place that lived from movement became trapped between the mountains. The communist regime deepened the isolation even further. Tropoja turned into a heavily guarded border region. Crossing the border was forbidden. And whoever was labelled an enemy of the state



slippery. In places with vertical walls without vegetation, I therefore preferred to climb down into the canal itself and walk directly in the cold water. Overcoming its icy chill from the mountain springs was excellently aided by neoprene socks, which managed to keep my feet warm even in extreme conditions. For me, it was at times a true

trail of terror, even though the panoramas were absolutely fantastic.

The Begaj Canal definitely does not belong among ordinary tourist walks. It is a demanding and adventurous route that is worth considering according to your level of experience. It represents a unique combination of natural beauty and







Kukës

On the map, Kukës looks inconspicuous. A small town at the confluence of the White and Black Drin, a short distance from the border with Kosovo. But it is precisely here that the rivers join into the Drin, Albania's longest river. And it is precisely here that history, tragedy, and unexpected human greatness also joined together. Kukës is a young town. Almost artificial, in fact. And yet it has a story that would make a novel. A town that was flooded. A town that was rebuilt. And a town that once opened its doors to half a million people fleeing from war.

The Atlantis of Albania

The original Kukës today lies beneath the surface of Lake Fierza. The old town, founded as early as the time of the Illyrian Dardanians, stood for centuries on an important trade route between the Adriatic and Kosovo. It was here in Roman times, survived Byzantium and the Ottomans, and then communism came. In 1976, Enver Hoxha decided that a dam would be built on the Drin. Electricity for industry was more important than a millennia-old town. The people received a notice: Kukës will disappear. And it disappeared. The water gradually flooded the houses, mosques, streets, and cemeteries. When the lake level is low

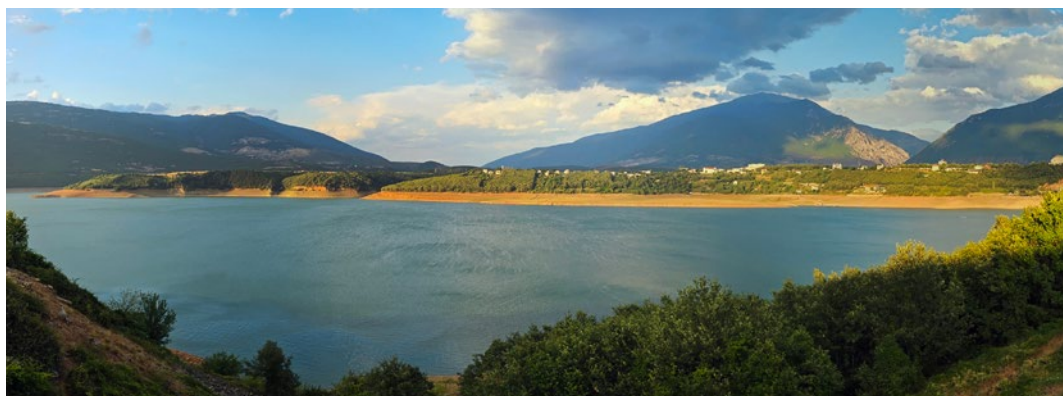
today, the top of a wall or a church tower sometimes peeks out of the water – as a reminder that the entire town still lies beneath the surface. The Albanian Atlantis.

The new Kukës, a town of concrete

On the plateau above the lake, a new Kukës sprang up. A typical socialist town: wide boulevards, right-angled streets, residential blocks, monuments, and a lot of concrete. Everything functional, nothing extra. No romance, just a plan. It is one of the youngest towns in Europe. And also one of the strangest. It stands in a beautiful location surrounded on three sides by the lake, with mountains in the background, but it feels as if someone had accidentally placed it here. But beneath the surface awaits yet another layer.

The year the war came

In the spring of 1999, Kukës found itself at the epicentre of the Balkan hell. NATO began bombing Yugoslavia, and hundreds of thousands of Kosovan Albanians took flight. Across mined mountains, bombed roads, and chaotic borders. The first safe place was Kukës. Within a few weeks, 450,000 people arrived in the town of few-



er than 16,000 inhabitants. Families opened their homes, and tents sprang up on the squares. People slept by the river, in the fields, anywhere there was space. *“We had almost nothing,”* locals recall. *“But when someone is fleeing from war, you simply open your door to them.”* Kukës managed it only thanks to ordinary people. No grand infrastructure, just hospitality.

The first town in the world nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize

In 2000, something unprecedented happened: Kukës was nominated for the **Nobel Peace Prize**. For the first time in history, not an individual or

an organisation, but an entire town. The prize ultimately did not arrive. But the nomination itself remained. Today, a memorial tower built by Kosovan Albanians as a gesture of gratitude stands on the main square. A small town that achieved more in a crisis than entire states.

And then silence

When the refugees returned home, another departure came. This time, of the locals. Half of Kukës’s inhabitants emigrated for work, for a life of plenty. Today, Kukës is quiet, a bit sad, a bit forgotten. But it stands at the crossroads of routes to Kosovo, to the Albanian Alps, to the moun-





Lake Zemra, a place where the body speaks up

The Belega Pass – a beginning with no end

I am standing by the car at the Belega Pass on the border of Montenegro and Kosovo. The heavy backpack next to me. Tent, sleeping bag, mat, three litres of water, stove, two gas cartridges, tins, instant meals. Every gram has its reason, but all together they have one characteristic – they are damn heavy. “Ready?” I ask my wife. She nods.

Her eyes are calm; she doesn’t know what’s coming yet. I don’t really know either. We lock the car. We throw our backpacks on our backs and descend to the Bogičes Pass.

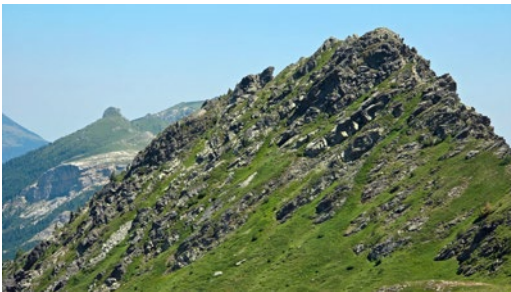
The first step is always the easiest. Only the hundredth, thousandth, ten thousandth, that’s when it hurts.



Belega Pass, in the middle is Bogičes Pass, 2025.



Lake Tropoja, 2025.



He smiles. He points the direction to Lake Tropoja. And lets us know: *“Good luck. You’ll need it.”*

Beauty without shelter

Lake Tropoja (*Liqeni i Tropojës*) lies in the middle of scree slopes and steep ridges. When I first see that turquoise surface shining like a cut stone, I forget the pain in my legs for a moment.

“This is beautiful,” says my wife.

I nod. “Yeah. But unfortunately, we can’t stay here.” “Why not?”

I point to the large grassy area around the lake. *“No shelter from the wind. And the wind is quite strong here.”* Still, I hesitate and look for a place to spend the night. It’s howling. Apart from a rock by the lake, there is nowhere to sit. I completely can’t

imagine a pleasant evening here. Not tonight. The wind blows across the lake, cold, sharp.

“We have to go on,” I say.

My wife sighs. *“To Zemra?”*

“To Zemra.” And we continue.

When the body screams no, but the head says go on

The path to **Lake Zemra** (*Liqeni i Zembrës*) is called a path only out of politeness. It’s more a series of boulder blocks that you have to overcome one by one.

It climbs steeply through scree and grassy gullies. And with a full backpack, you feel every kilogram of equipment here.

My legs hurt. My shoulders hurt. My back hurt. I breathe heavily, sweat runs down my face, and I want to give up.

To go back to Lake Tropoja after all. But it’s impossible. We can’t go back – it’s already late afternoon. We can’t sleep here – there’s nowhere to pitch a tent. We have to go up.

And then it happens.

I step on a loose stone, it turns, I lose my balance, and the backpack pulls me to the ground.



Lake Zemra, 2025.



photos yet can capture that feeling of relief after a day of marching, the reverence for the beauty of the place, the pride that we made it.

The dimensions of the lake – 150 × 120 metres – were perfect. Big enough to feel majestic, small enough for one to feel the intimacy of the place.

I set up camp next to a large boulder that created a natural wind shield.

Water, a bath, and silence

The water in the lake had a temperature of about 8–10 °C (*approx. 46–50 °F*). First, I filtered water from it into bottles – we have to replenish sup-



Berat | The white city of a thousand windows

This year (2025) I took a group of tourists with me to Berat to show them one of the most picturesque cities in Albania. For more than two thousand years, it has clung to the slopes above the Osum River and to this day it acts like a living chronicle, whose pages you turn directly with your eyes. Its historical core, inscribed on the UNESCO list, tells stories of ancient Illyrian tribes as well as the Ottoman era, which gave the city the shape that has survived to our days.

The city beneath the fortress

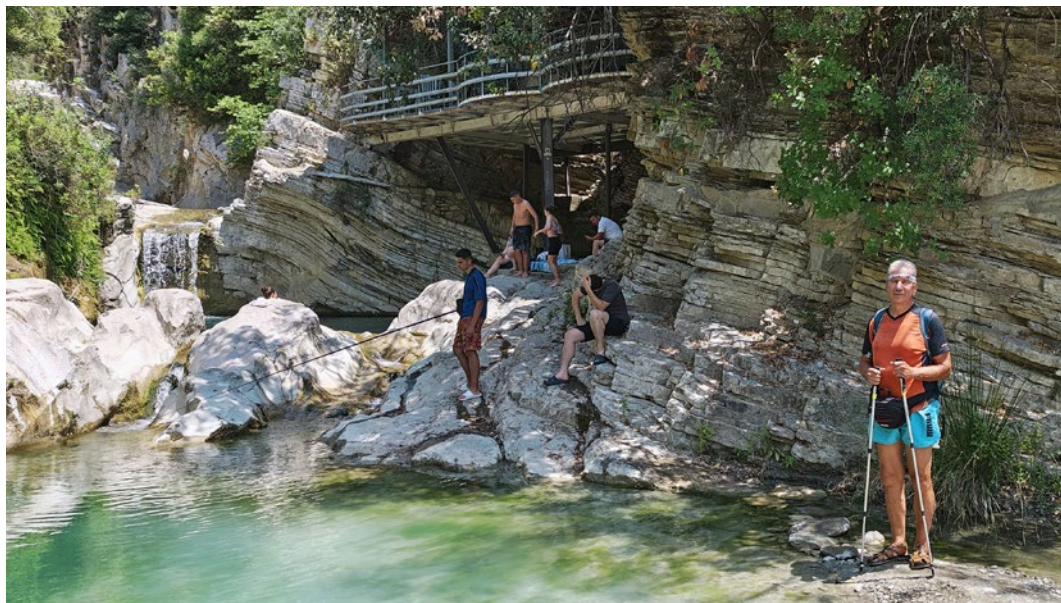
What stands out from the whole of Berat is primarily its fortress – a massive stronghold spread out on the top of the hill above a bend in the river. It is not just a monument, but a distinctive city district where people still live. The walls offer an enchanting panorama: the old town of Mangalem beneath our feet, the new districts spread out in the valley, and the monumental silhouette of the Tomorr mountains in the distance. We only stopped in Berat for the afternoon and evening on our way to the Osum Canyon. Yet it proved to be full of experiences. After days on the road, we appreciate a bed and a hot shower in a guesthouse.

Mangalem, the district of a thousand windows

From our accommodation near the stadium, we head along the river along the Bulevardi Republika pedestrian zone. Modern shops and restaurants were a pleasant surprise; there were also a number of ATMs. We stop at one of them and withdraw leks. The withdrawal fee of 500 leks there was the lowest during our entire stay in Albania. At the end of the promenade, we view the 16th-century Lead Mosque. The simple, noble building is named after its lead dome. The very peculiar architecture is also impressive due to its later extension with a vestibule. The mosque stands opposite the Orthodox ca-



Pedestrian zone Bulevardi Republika, Berat 2025.



Entrance to the pools and restaurant. Photo: Fery, 2025.

suitable even for families with children. No special equipment is needed, just suitable footwear and the desire to discover hidden corners.

Practical Information and Personal Experience

Sinec Canyon offers a peaceful alternative to the

busier tourist spots around Berat. While it might not be the most spectacular place in Albania, it makes for a pleasant day trip with opportunities for swimming, light canyoning, and relaxing at a restaurant with a great atmosphere. It is ideal for those seeking authentic Albanian nature without the large crowds.





I will be honest with you. I was really looking forward to visiting the canyon, perhaps a bit too much. The place is undeniably beautiful, but it didn't quite meet my expectations. You can find dozens of similar locations in Albania that are often much prettier and more interesting. Right upon arrival, I was taken aback by a young man on a motorbike who drove straight into the stream and left his bike parked by a rock, half-submerged in the water – not exactly my idea of pristine wilderness.

If you visit the restaurant around lunchtime or in the evening, it can get quite busy. It turns out that, amidst this apparent wilderness, the wealthier local Albanian community gathers here, so be prepared that you probably won't have the place to yourself.

How to Get There and Where to Park

Sinec Canyon is relatively accessible. A narrow asphalt road leads to the village of Lumas, locat-



Where the Osum Wept

Osum Canyon, the Grand Canyon of Albania

The road from Berat winds through the hills like a snake that can't decide where it actually wants to go. Vineyards on the left, olive groves on the right, and then suddenly, as if someone took a knife and sliced the earth open, the Osum Canyon opens up before you.

I stopped my car at the Blazëncka (*Blazënckë*) bridge not because I wanted to, but because I had to. When you see that gorge for the first time—walls over a hundred meters high, a huge narrowing of the canyon, and the river flowing deep below—you simply stop. And stare.

I wasn't alone. An old Mercedes with Albanian plates was parked next to me. A man of about sixty was smoking a cigarette, looking down into the canyon as if searching for something he had lost many years ago. “*E bukur, po?*” he said. “*Beautiful, isn't it?*” I nodded. Words would have been inadequate.

When the Rock Speaks

The Osum Canyon isn't just big. It's majestic. Albanians call it the “*Grand Canyon of Albania*,” and it's no empty boast; it is the largest canyon in the country, 26 km long, carved by the river over two to three million years. That's a number the human brain can't even fathom. But the result? You can see that clearly.

The view from the aforementioned Blazëncka bridge looks like something out of another world. The canyon walls aren't just gray—they are layered like a giant cake, where each layer represents a different geological era. Red, white, gray, brown; these are the colors of time. And between those walls, deep below, flows the Osum River—the same river that runs through the beautiful city of Berat, but here it's wild, fast, and loud.

“*See over there?*” the man pointed his cigarette at a place where the canyon narrows so much it al-

Vrima e Nuses (Bride's Hole) viewpoint, 2025. >

In April and May, when the snow melts, there are dozens of waterfalls. They fall from all sides; the canyon is filled with the sound of water—roaring, splashing, dripping. It's a symphony.

I stood under one of the waterfalls and let the water hit my head; it felt like a baptism. Ice-cold water that cleanses not only the body but also the mind. When you stand in a place where water falls hundreds of meters simply because gravity exists, you realize just how small you really are.

The Story That Created the Canyon

Many years ago, there lived two brothers, Tomorr and Shpirag. They were as strong as bulls, as handsome as eagles, and as brave as lions. Everyone loved them. But then came Osum, a woman so beautiful that when she walked through the village, men forgot how to speak.

Tomorr fell in love first. But when Shpirag saw Osum, he fell in love too. He didn't know his brother already loved her. And when Tomorr found out, they say his scream was heard all the way up in heaven. The brothers fought. Not out of hate, but out of love. And they both died. Side by side. Brothers to the very end.

Osum cried, and cried, and cried—for years, for centuries. Her tears created the river. And that river still flows today between the mountains of Tomorr and Shpirag (*Tomorr and Shpiragut*). The canyon isn't just stone. It's a story of love and loss, carved into the earth.

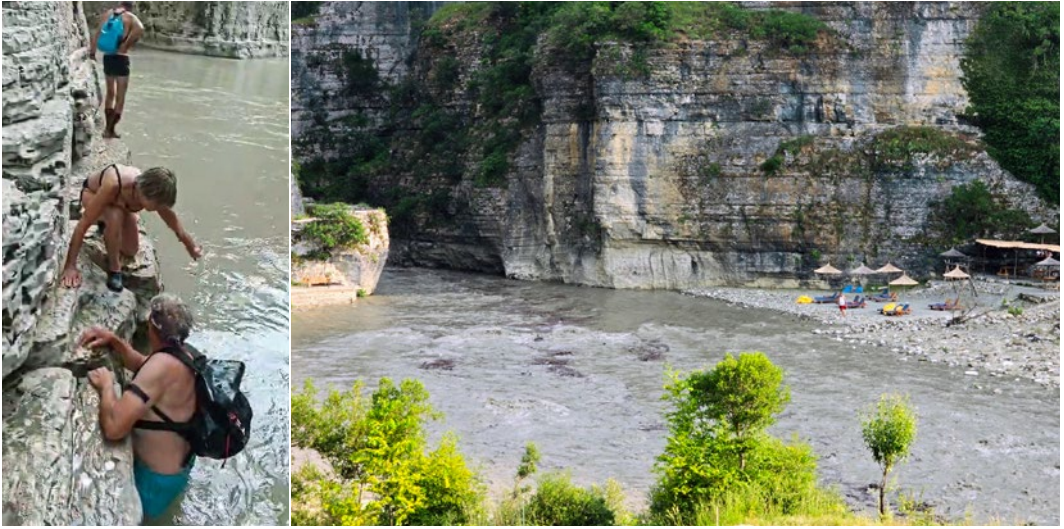
The legend is true. Not literally; the brothers and the woman are just a story. But the emotions? Those are real. The canyon isn't just geology. It's a place where you feel love, loss, and the power of time. That's why people come here. Not for the rafting. But for the feeling.

Floating Through Osum's Tears

They say there's nothing to be afraid of. The rapids are Class II. That means getting a bit wet,



a lot of fun, and no dying. Rafting through the Osum Canyon takes three to four hours, depending on the water levels and how often you stop for photos. The river carries you between walls that

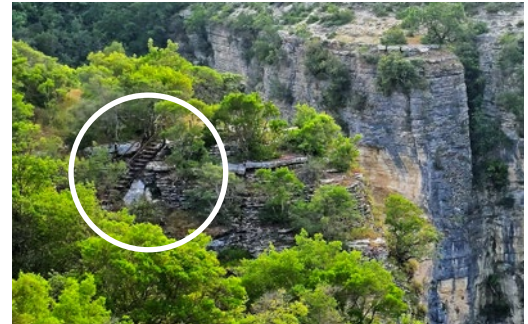


a spot for vans and RVs, and below that, the riverbank and the spot for my tent. On the riverbank above the road, there used to be a small cabin on the left; they tore it down and built a restaurant in its place. It gets busy here during the season. Most people hike a bit of the canyon upstream and then leave. Some inflate their kayaks and paddle downstream into the depths of the canyon. But some stay until morning and enjoy a captivating evening among the high rocks in the little riverside pub.

The river in the canyon can also be full of surprises. Thunderstorms high in the mountains brought torrential rain, and within a few minutes, the Osum River turned into a raging mass of water. A wall of water over a meter high surged out of the depths of the canyon, carrying branches and entire tree trunks with it.

I called it the “*Osum Tsunami*,” even though it wasn’t a real ocean one, of course. But that moment of shock, the roar, and then instinctively reaching for the camera... I’ll remember that forever.

I grew fond of the viewpoints not only by the Blazëncka bridge but also the ones from the





Baths near Elbasan | Llixhat e Elbasanit

Sulphur baths with a Czechoslovak footprint

Twelve kilometres (*approx. 7.5 miles*) south of Elbasan, on the road towards Gramsh, lies a village you could easily overlook on a map. It is called Tregan. When you say that name in front of an Albanian, they often just shrug their shoulders, but you only need to say one word – *llixhat, baths*. And everyone immediately knows. “*Ah. Those baths near Elbasan. Where it smells of sulphur.*” Llixhat e Elbasanit is not just a place. It is a concept. For Albanians, a synonym for treatment,

joint pain, convalescence, but also hope. A place you don’t go to for a weekend wellness break, but “*to put yourself together*”. And above all, it is one of the few places in Albania where Czechoslovakia left a visible footprint.

Water older than the empire

The healing springs in Tregan are nothing new. The Romans knew about them in ancient times and used them similarly to other thermal springs across the empire. Archaeological finds suggest the existence of baths even at a time when Al-





A flower meadow | Livadhet e Ketit

A floral paradise near Tirana

Just 25 km (approx. 15.5 miles) from the Albanian capital, a quiet natural spectacle unfolds every spring that most travellers have no idea about. The meadows of Livadhet e Ketit, spread out near the village of **Xibër-Hane**, turn into a continuous white carpet of blooming daffodils at the turn of April and May. A place that doesn't appear in guidebooks and where one doesn't go „for a selfie“, but for a feeling.

A flower with a millennial history

The main role here is played by the poet's daffodil (*Narcissus poeticus*). A flower that people admired already in antiquity and which earned its name not only by its appearance but also by the stories that were told about it for centuries. When the great naturalist Carl Linnaeus compiled the Latin names of

plants, he called it „*poeticus*“ precisely because of its association with poets and their stories about Narcissus. Snow-white petals surround a tiny yellow corona with a red rim. But the true power of the daffodil is only revealed the moment you take a breath. The scent is intense, sweet, and intoxicating; it carries across the meadows and creates an atmosphere that is hard to describe and easy to remember.

May is a time of miracles

You can visit the meadows at any time of year, but the first weeks of May are that brief window when the place makes perfect sense. The daffodils are in full bloom, and the landscape feels as though it has changed color overnight. Walking among thousands of blossoming flowers, their scent carrying into the distance, is an experience you won't soon forget.

The journey from Tirana is surprisingly easy. Take the SH61 (*Rruga e Arbërit*) towards Klos; after the tunnel, simply turn onto the **Vanar** dirt road. After less than two kilometers, a landscape opens up that feels much more remote than the map suggests. It is best to set out early in the morning, when the light is soft and the silence still belongs entirely to the meadows.





A car park of Mercedes cars instead of wilderness

Instead of a quiet riverbank, there was a large parking area filled with Mercedes cars of various ages and quality. About thirty cars. I got out and looked around. Where is the peace? Where is the silence? Where is the bridge by which I sat alone?

I stopped by the cable car over the river. They had built it over those two years. On the opposite bank, I saw crates of drinks being unloaded – Birra Korça, Tirana, Coca-Cola. Supplies for the restaurant. A restaurant?

When a kiosk grows into a large establishment

I walked across the same bridge where I had sat alone and silent two years ago. Now people were walking over it with bags, with children, and with a beer in hand. A traffic artery.

On the other bank, the small stone kiosk had transformed into a rather large modern restaurant. A concrete terrace, clad in stone, wooden and iron tables, parasols with beer advertisements. A kitchen with a large grill where a lamb was roasting. Modern toilets, a bar with fridges full of drinks.

The rocky riverbank had turned into a small beach with sunbeds and parasols. They had dammed a part of the riverbed with stones to create a pool deep enough for jumping. And people were jumping. Teenagers, children, adults, with shouting and laughter. There were quite a lot of people on the beach. Families, groups of young people, couples. Others sat in the restaurant at tables laden with food, usually roast meat and salads.

The romance was gone.

When invisibility hurts

We decided to at least get something to drink. We sat at a small table on the edge of the terrace where there was space. We waited. Waiters walked past. They saw us, but no one paid us any attention. The restaurant wasn't full; five or six waiters were quite a lot for a half-empty pub. But no one came. We moved closer to the bar to be "in sight". We thought the problem was that we were sitting too far to the side. Now we were right next to the bar. Visible. Waiting. Nothing.

The waiters were serving other tables – Albanian families, groups of friends. They were laughing, joking, being pleasant. But they didn't come to us. "Do we look like poor relatives?" I asked Fery. He



Hydroelectric power plant (Martanesh), 2025.



bridge over the river began a stony road leading up to the canal.

The canal was impressive, a concrete trough several metres wide, through which fast, ice-cold water flowed from a small dam towards the power station.

And then came the tunnels. Yes, tunnels. Passages punched directly through the rocks, through which the water flowed in troughs. But you could drive a car through them; the concrete canal ran

along the edge. Dark, damp, drops of water falling from the ceiling. Alright, let's go. The sound of the engine bounced off the walls. A bit claustrophobic, but fascinating. "This is intense," Fery said. "Yeah," I nodded.

It was obvious that he was fascinated here. Everywhere and on everything, I usually only hear "I don't care". Finally, I perceive his interest, downright enthusiasm!



The Hole Mountain | Mali me Gropa

Two and a half hours from stone to stone

“Look, I wouldn’t drive any further here.” Fery looked at me over the edge of the map, then looked at the road ahead of us – if it could even be called a road – and then looked back at me. “Will we get there?”

“Yeah. The question is, in what condition.”

We were somewhere in the middle of nowhere, on the SH54 mountain road towards Qafinollë, and stretching out before us was a path that looked more like the dried-up bed of a mountain stream than something meant to lead to a destination. Stones the size of footballs, potholes thirty centimetres (approx. 12 inches) deep, occasional rocky outcrops protruding like teeth. And at that moment, I realised that the **Hole Mountain (Mali me Gropa)** would not surrender easily.

The choice of route is decisive

We made a fundamental mistake. We hadn’t studied the route properly. We relied on the idea that “it

will work out somehow”, that “GPS will guide us”, that “we can definitely handle it”. And now here we are. We still have ten kilometres (approx. 6.2 miles) to the destination. It took us two and a half hours to drive them. That is not a walking pace. That is the pace of a snail with arthritis.

Fery proved to be a great partner in that moment. He was excellent at “reading” the terrain – he saw where the left wheel would pass, where the right one would, where we had to drive diagonally, where to go slower, and where not to go at all. He navigated me almost from stone to stone, calling out: “Left! No, more! Now right! Slowly! STOP!”, and I tried





Saint George Waterfall | Ujëvara e Shën Gjergj

A hidden gem near Tirana

Ten years ago, it was known mainly to the locals. Today, the **Saint George Waterfall** (*Ujëvara e Shën Gjergjit*) is a popular destination for tourists, both Albanians and international visitors alike. And it's no wonder. This place is simply fascinating. It's not a monumental giant like the Plitvice Lakes, nor is it a polished tourist attraction with benches and refreshment stalls. It is quite simply a beautiful spot that is easy to reach by car, followed by a twenty-minute walk, where you can let yourself be swallowed by nature that plays with every shade of green, red, and blue.

How the waterfall is formed

Ujëvara e Shën Gjergjit is not fed by a river or a stream that you can see flowing from somewhere higher up. The water springs directly from

the Hole Mountain (*Mali me Gropa*). That name is no coincidence. The mountain is full of karst caves and underground channels through which water from higher altitudes flows before bursting out in the form of springs and waterfalls.

After the impact, the icy water forms a stream that winds through a rocky bed further down into the valley, where it eventually flows into the Erzen River, one of the main rivers of the Albanian interior.

How high it is and what you can see

The entire waterfall measures around 30 metres (approx. 98 feet). But there's a catch: the upper part is not visible from below. Nature simply likes to play hide-and-seek sometimes. The waterfall plunges from the upper tier, disappears for a moment behind a rocky overhang, and only then breaks into the final drop that you see from the bottom.

However, if you scramble up the opposite slope—and you can, there is a trail there—the view is much more generous. From the height, you can see the entire cascade, the flow of water from top to bottom, and especially the contrast of colours: the green vegetation, the red rocks, the white water foam, and the blue pool below.

Colours that will stop you

The surrounding rocks play with vivid colours, with red being the most prominent. It's not artificial dye; it's natural iron oxide in the rock. When the sun shines, the rocks look like they are from another planet, as if you weren't in the Balkans but somewhere in the Arizona canyons.

Green moss-covered vegetation, red rock, crystal-clear white water—this place is a photographic bombshell. Instagrammers know it. Albanians know it. And now you know it too.

Spring, summer, autumn?

The best time to visit is spring or autumn, when the waterfall is at its full strength. In spring, after





Rruga e Rrjollit

The adrenaline road to the sky

In the spring of 2025, a new road opened between **Shëngjin** and **Velipoja** (*Velipojë*). Fifteen kilometres (*approx. 9.3 miles*) of asphalt that wiped out a long detour and shortened the journey by more than an hour. However, the true value of this road does not lie in time-saving. It lies in the landscape it opens up. Technically speaking, it is a success; practically, it is further proof that Albania is changing faster than we can get used to.

From Shëngjin, the road rises above the sea, climbing up the slope to a height of around one hundred metres (*approx. 330 feet*). The **Ballkoni Panoramik** viewpoint hangs over **Rana e Hedhun** beach

like a balcony over an abyss. The beautiful view is wide and open in its entire breadth from **Cape Rodon** (*Kepi i Rodonit*) to the Montenegrin border. The sea, lagoons, strips of sand, and greenery assemble into a panorama that feels calm and clear, yet retains the rawness of northern Albania.

Along the route, views of the **Viluni Lagoon**, the **Rrjoll** area, the Rana e Hedhun sand dunes, and Shëngjin beach itself alternate. It is a road that tempts one to stop frequently, not because it is demanding, but because the landscape demands attention of its own accord.



The Ballkoni Panoramik viewpoint hangs over Rana e Hedhun beach like a balcony over an abyss, 2025.



The kiosk structures are spreading closer to the dune, provoking drivers into reckless entry, and they then successfully get stuck in the deep sand. A group of local „rescuers“ has built quite a good business pulling out adventurers, 2025.

There is nothing worth staying for, so we go for a coffee and a beer at the first bar and disappear.

Sand as a trap

One car after another passes us. Not only off-road vehicles but also regular passenger cars – Mercedes, VW, etc. They get surprisingly far, but at a certain point, they realise it won't go any further. The passengers want to get out, the driver wants to turn around. And that's where it begins.

I see it again and again. The wheels dig into the sand, the car bottoms out, and it's over. The drivers make the same mistake I once made. They roll down the window, lean out, and step on the gas. At that moment, a spray of sand from the spinning wheel

rushes into the interior. On the second attempt, they open the door as well – another dose of sand. I laugh, recognising myself. Only they have got stuck further in, and their chances of rescue are smaller.

Fortunately, not for everyone. Those closer to solid ground are lucky; off-roaders with winches and knobby tyres arrive. One vehicle after another is towed back. Albanian entrepreneurs have found a solid source of livelihood here. It works quickly. The Albanian model of survival in practice, without unnecessary talk. Exactly how I like it in Albania. The only thing I don't understand is the need for more people to try the same thing when they see clear evidence of failure all around them. Curiosity? The feeling that “*I can handle it*”?



The Cyclops' Eye | Syri i Cikllopit

A turquoise pearl in the Murdhar Gorge

When the asphalt, concrete, and dust of scorching Tirana cease to entertain you, there is an escape that has nothing to do with the sea or beaches. Simply head into the mountains above the village of **Krraba**. There, in a tucked-away gorge, hides the **Cyclops' Eye** (*Syri i Cikllopit*). It is a natural pool that looks as if someone cut it out of a fairy tale and forgot to put it back.

Turquoise water, vertical limestone walls, a waterfall plunging from above, and a silence broken only by the sound of water and the shouts of those who have dared to jump. A place where the cold water takes your breath away and your head completely empties for a moment.

A legend carved in stone

The name "*Cyclops' Eye*" did not come about by chance. Locals still tell the story of a one-eyed monster that once ravaged the surrounding villages. The Cyclops supposedly took people's livestock, destroyed crops, and instilled fear until

the inhabitants of Krraba and the surrounding settlements united. They drove him higher into the mountains, across ravines and cliffs, until he finally stumbled and plummeted into the gorge. There he breathed his last. And in the place of his fall, a lake was formed—deep, dark, and perfectly shaped. It is said that the scars in the surrounding rocks are the final traces of his claws.

Whether you believe the legends or not, one thing is certain: this place has power. And it feels exactly as a good legend should. A bit haunting, beautiful, and unforgettable.





One of the main chambers still bears the name “*The Hall of Bears*”. After them came humans.

Archaeological research has confirmed that the cave was inhabited as far back as 30,000 years ago. Hunter-gatherers left behind stone tools, scrapers, points, traces of hearths, and layers of ash. The cave was not just a shelter from bad weather; it offered a home where people cooked, slept, and waited for the dawn.

The strategic location above the river provided water, food, and natural protection. Crucially, the cave did not disappear from the human map even after the Stone Age ended. It served people for millennia, right up until the Middle Ages. During war years, local inhabitants hid here when the world above turned wild once again.

A journey that makes sense

The path to the cave is not long, but demanding in places. From the village of Pëllumbas, you set off on foot along a marked trail that first passes farms and olive groves before turning into a steeper slope above the canyon. The higher you climb, the more the landscape opens up. The Erzen River glistens far below you, and the mountains around





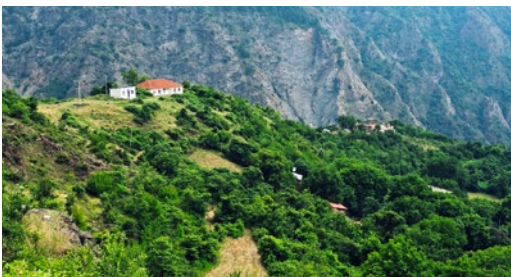
Upper Grabova | Grabovë e Sipërme

A village left alone with its own time

Upper Grabova (*Grabovë e Sipërme*) lies high in the mountains of southern Albania, at an altitude of over 1,200 m (*approx. 3,937 feet*). It is 44 km (*approx. 27 miles*) from Gramsh—yet worlds away from everything we call “*the world*” today. It is a place where time did not stop suddenly, but slowly, almost considerately. As if the 21st century simply never arrived here. This stone village is spread across a mountain saddle and gives the impression that it is waiting. Not for tourists. Rather, for someone to ask again what it once actually was.

The people who stayed

Grabova is home to the *Aromanians*—*Vlachs*, a pastoral people who for centuries preserved their language, faith, and way of life. Those from Grabova belong to those who refused to abandon Orthodoxy and were therefore pushed high into the mountains. It was here that they created a community that survived empires, wars, and regimes. The village was established as early as the 10th century. During its greatest flourish in the 17th century, Grabova had the status of a city with thousands of inhabitants, crafts, trade, and direct links to the Ottoman court. After *Moskopolje* (*Voskopoja*), it was the second most impor-





St. Nicholas Church, 2025.



a small stable—we probably won't be sleeping here. We walk down a hill along an unmaintained path, hopefully in the right direction towards the village. The muddy path turned into a cobbled one at the next building; we descend to a small square or village green. On the left stands a school, on the right a new stone bar. Closed. Fortunately, a young man arrives and opens with a smile. We order coffee and something to warm us up. I go back up for the car and park in front of the school, where there is a lee that isn't rained on so much. We will use it for the night if we don't find anything else. Gradually, locals gather here for coffee and raki; they say there's going to be a party tonight. In the corner of the hall is a stage with speakers. There is no heating; we are cold, but at least we have a place to charge our phones.



In the evening, the rain stopped, so we went to make our beds on the pavement in the shelter of



Mount **Valamara** (2,373 m / approx. 7,785 feet)

Eight lakes beneath the sky of central Albania

Valamara belongs to the most remote mountain areas of Albania. Not because it is inaccessible in terms of height, but because the mountains do

not let in anyone who is not patient and willing to endure discomfort. Tourist crowds do not appear here because they cannot reach it at all. And that is precisely where its strength lies.





When the clouds broke for a moment, Valamara offered amazing views, 2025.

without them. And I am running out of strength. My leg hurts. Not so much that I couldn't walk, but enough that I'm aware of it with every step. Stones are everywhere. I trip over them, slow down, trip again. The idea runs through my head to turn back—that this is not the beauty for which I should suffer. Today, it just isn't going well for me. Fery cheers me on: "Just a bit more."



The peak of Valamara, 2025.



The end of the journey went literally through a stone field. Photo: Fery, 2025.

Upper? Yes, a good choice. But then it winds down, back to the water. Heaps of stones are everywhere. In my fatigue, I trip over almost every one. At a small cabin, the trail reappears and is marked further on. As if someone had run out of paint here and never returned for it. We arrive at a small fenced reservoir or dam. In a moment, we come out at the hotel, recognise the waiter from

the bar in the village, wave to him, and go inside to order a coffee.

Today's climb did not captivate me as I expected. Perhaps because of the pain, the weather, or the endless stones. I'm not sure if I'll want to return here. But I know that in (semi-)clear weather, it would be different. And Valamara remembers even those who doubt her. It is a mountain that one doesn't take away in the head, but in the legs.







And the sound? The sound is the rustling of water, dripping from the rocks, occasionally the cry of a bird high above. Nothing more. No cars, no noise of civilisation.

"This is like another world," I said. *"That's why I come here."*

We went on. The water reached our knees sometimes, our chests other times, sometimes our necks. Occasionally we had to climb over boulders, sometimes squeeze through a narrow slit between rocks. And then we encountered the first turquoise pool.

A colour that doesn't exist

The turquoise pools in Holta Canyon look like they're from another planet. The water is so clear that you can see stones on the bottom even at

a depth of three metres (approx. 10 feet). And the colour? The colour is turquoise, that shade of blue and green that looks unreal, as if someone had added dye to the water. It's not a filter. It's a combination of minerals in the water, the reflection of light, and the depth. And it is beautiful.

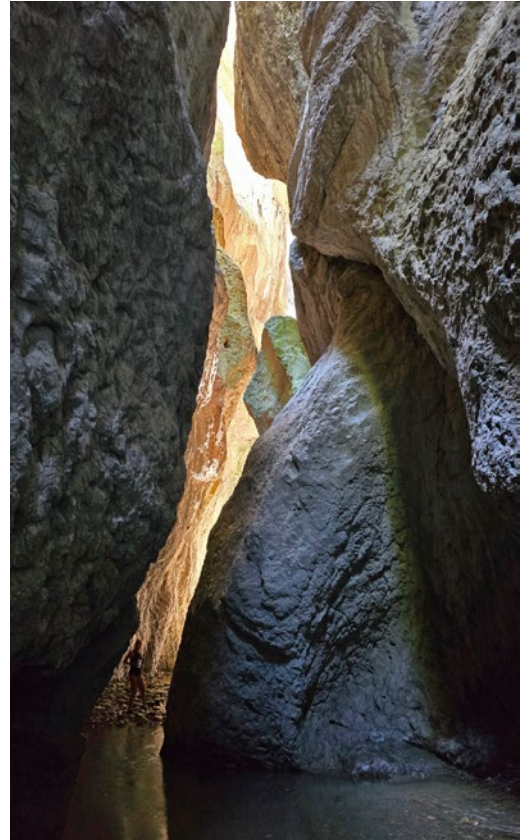
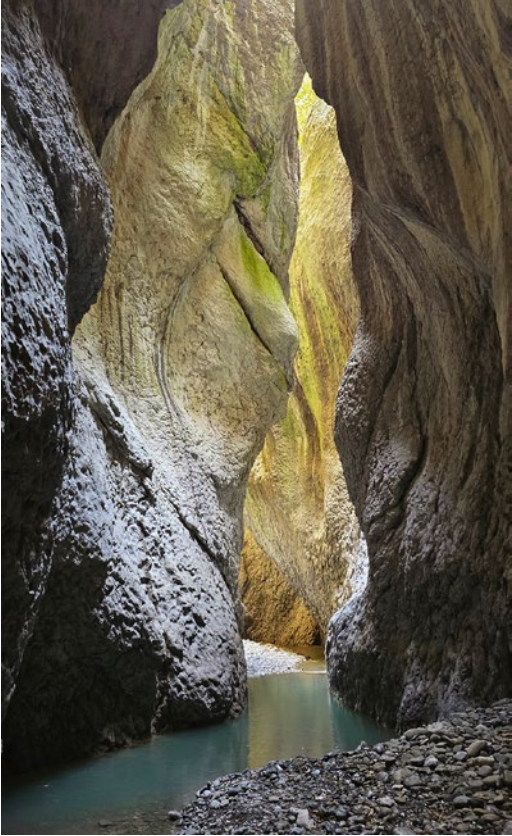
We stood by one pool and just looked. Then I said: *"We have to pass through here; I'm going in."*

"It's cold," they warned me.

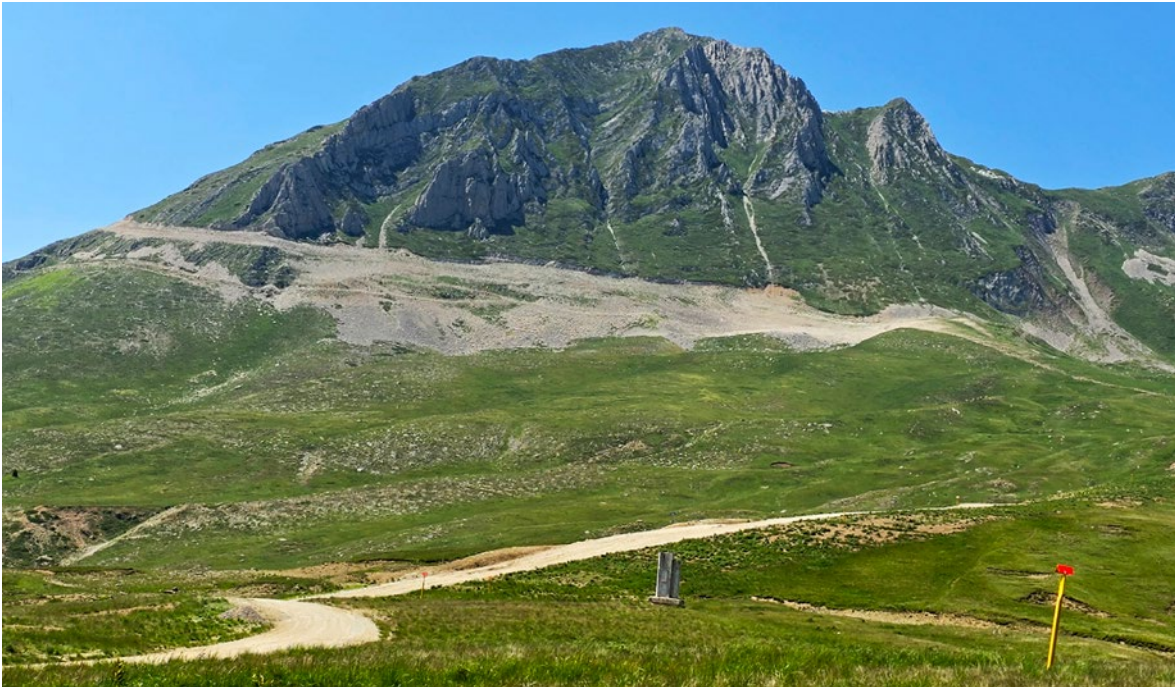
"I know."

I jumped. The water swallowed me like an icy embrace. For a second, I stopped breathing, muscles stiffened, my brain shouted *"OUT! OUT! OUT!"* But then I breathed in, started moving, and felt alive. I emerged from the water, shivering with cold, but smiling. *"Come on."*

"Yeah," they laughed and nodded. It was worth it.



A large boulder that blocks the canyon, 2025.



The **Ostrovica** Mountains

The highest asphalt road in Albania

Ostrovica (*alb. Mali i Ostrovicës*) belongs to those mountains that look inconspicuous on a map, but in the field, they immediately sit you down on the ground. An isolated, rocky ridge rises between the *Korça* (*Korçë*) and *Skrapar* regions like a stone dam between two worlds. For centuries, only shepherds, pilgrims, and people seeking refuge from the world below headed here. Today, it can be reached by asphalt, a paradox that hasn't weakened Ostrovica, but on the contrary, has further highlighted its rawness.

The journey here is an experience in itself. From Korça, the road climbs through the mountain village of **Vithkuq**, where time is measured differently than in the lowlands. You discover stone houses, old churches, and a peace that isn't a pose for tourists, but a natural state. From here on, the landscape thins out, the forests open up, and the asphalt bites into the mountains higher than one would expect in Albania.

A picturesque ridge between worlds

Ostrovica forms a single ridge, impossible to miss from a distance, approximately 14 km (approx. 8.7 miles) long. It stretches in a north-south direction, and its silhouette resembles a hook or the letter J—sharp, dramatic, unmistakable. The highest point, **Mali i Ostrovicës**, lies approximately in the middle of the ridge at an altitude of 2,383 m (*approx. 7,818 feet*) above sea level.

The ridge is not monolithic. In some sections, it breaks into jagged rock towers; elsewhere, it narrows into sharp edges with steep drops on both sides. Without climbing equipment, it is practically impossible to traverse it all at once. The limestone walls and karst formations bear clear traces of the Ice Age—Ostrovica is a geological chronicle opened wide.

To the east, the valley of the *Çemerica River*, a tributary of the Devoll, cuts below the ridge. To the west, the landscape falls towards the Osum

Lengarica Canyon | The blessed river of southern Albania

In southern Albania, near the town of *Përmet* and in the quiet heart of the *Bredhi i Hotovës National Park*, hides one of the most impressive landscapes of the entire region – **the Lengarica Canyon** (*Kanioni i Lengaricës*). The over 6-kilometre (*approx. 3.7 miles*) long gorge with clamped limestone walls, which rise to a height of up to 150 m (*approx. 492 feet*) in places, forms a natural amphitheatre where the power of the elements, ancient rocks, and the untamed beauty of the Albanian interior meet.

The Lengarica River, respectfully called the “blessed river” by locals, rises high in the *Dangelli* and *Shqeri mountains*. Its journey through narrow forest valleys ends only in the wide bed of the *Vjosa*, one of the last free-flowing European rivers. It is precisely here, amidst forests and mountain ridges, that the Lengarica has carved out a canyon over the centuries that today belongs to the most striking natural beauties of southern Albania.

Although the Lengarica is smaller than the more famous *Osum Canyon*, it more than equals it in atmosphere and intimacy. It starts at a new dam

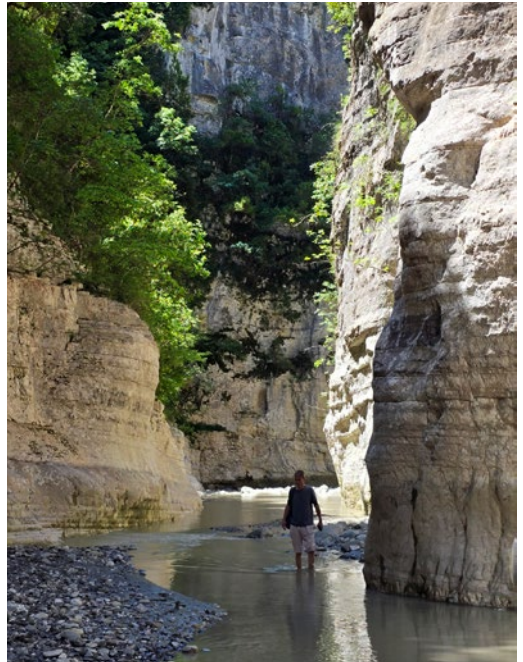
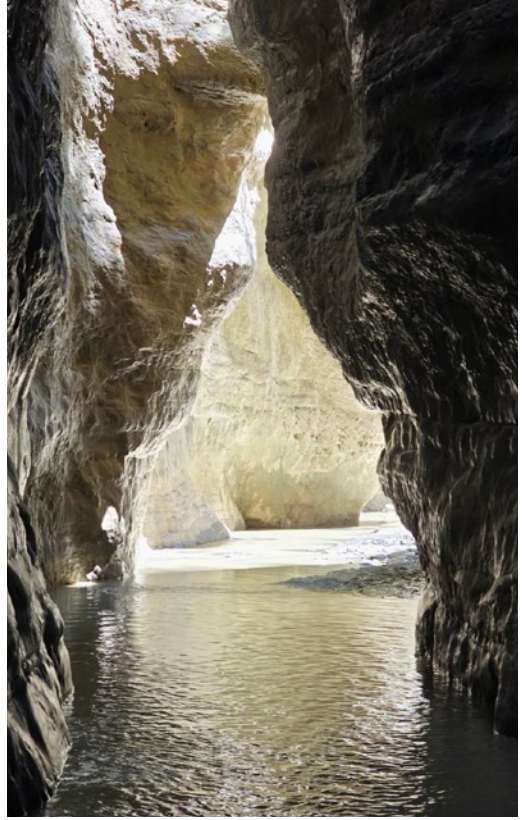
and ends at the old *Ottoman Kadiu bridge* and the *Bënja thermal springs*. In some sections, the gorge narrows to a mere three metres (*approx. 10 feet*), creating an almost temple-like silence between the high walls, disrupted only by the rustle of flowing water.

The healing thermal springs of Bënja

Right at the entrance to the canyon, sulphurous thermal springs with a temperature of approx. 26 °C (*approx. 79 °F*) well up from the depths of the earth, which locals have associated with healing effects for generations. The rising vapours give the place an almost mystical touch – on cold mornings, a white haze lazily rises between the rock walls and cypresses, sparkling in the sun like a translucent veil. Several natural pools with warm water are scattered around the area. One of the most famous lies directly under the *Kadiu bridge* and is accessible all year round. A visit to these places is unforgettable in winter, when the cold mountain air here mixes with the pungent smell of sulphur and the pleasant warmth of the springs.



Ottoman Kadiu Bridge and Bënja thermal springs. Photo: Ivan Vacke, 2026.



water reaches the waist, but otherwise, the route is without technical difficulties. Water shoes, a waterproof bag, and caution when carrying equipment are recommended.

You will be accompanied only by the cold rock walls, light reflections, and the quiet echo of the water.

Surrounding attractions

The Kadiu Bridge

The historic stone Kadiu Bridge (*Ura e Kadiut*), about 14 km (*approx. 8.7 miles*) from Përmet, is a classic example of Ottoman architecture. Ali Pasha of Tepelena had it built, and its single arch elegantly spans the river. Today, the bridge stands as a silent gateway to the world of the canyon and is often the first place where travellers stop.

The village of Bënja

About 3 km (*approx. 1.9 miles*) from the bridge lies the picturesque village of Bënja (*Bënjë*), known for its traditional stone houses and the

recently restored Church of St. Mary (*Kisha e Shën Mërisë*). Cypresses and pastures surround it, and the whole place feels like a hidden corner of Albania where time moves more slowly.

A circular hike above the canyon

If you want to get to know the Lengarica from a different perspective, there is a circular route approximately 11 km (*approx. 6.8 miles*) long (*roughly 4 hours*). The trail leads along both sides of the gorge and offers breathtaking views into the main



Bënja thermal springs in a new coat after reconstruction in 2025/2026. Photo: Ivan Vacke, 2026.







Alipostivan | A Bektashi shrine above the Vjosa valley

Above the green valley of the Vjosa River, high above the village of Alipostivan, stands a place where you slow down. White buildings with subtle green details, domes gleaming in the sun, and a silence that does not feel empty, but peaceful.

The **Bektashi tekke** (*shrine*) of **Alipostivan**, also known as **Teqeja e Baba Aliut**, is one of the most important spiritual places in southern Albania. It is not a place that shouts at you. It is a place that waits.

Baba Ali and the spiritual axis of the south

The original tekke was founded here by the local saint and leader **Baba Ali** in 1857. At a time when Bektashism in Albania was not only a religion but also a bearer of education, tolerance, and humanism. Together with *Frashër*, the tekke in Alipostivan formed the spiritual axis of southern Albania, places from which ideas of freedom, equality, and coexistence spread.

But its fate mirrored the history of the country. In 1870, it was burned down by Ottoman troops; it rose again, only to be destroyed by Greek extremists in 1914. The communist era dealt it the final

blow. Enver Hoxha considered religion an enemy of the state, and *Alipostivan*—just like hundreds of churches, mosques, and tekkes across the country—was razed to the ground.

Today, it stands again. Not as a replica for tourists, but as a living spiritual centre.

Bektashism: Islam with a human face

Bektashism is a mystical branch of Islam that emphasises the inner path, tolerance, and humanism. In Albania, it became a natural part of the local culture—open, syncretic, and close to the people. Bektashi tekkes were always more than prayer houses: they were places of education, gathering, refuges for pilgrims, and centres of culture.

Alipostivan is one of the largest Bektashi complexes in the region. The grounds consist of the main tekke building and two tyrbes (*mausoleums*), connected by paths and stairs between terraces with fruit trees. The new building has two floors and seven rooms; next to the entrance stands a small hotel for pilgrims and visitors. Everything is simple, clean, without ostentation. Spirituality here is not an exhibition. It is a state.



Mausoleum (tombs from the right: Baba Avdulla Dule /1870-1917/, Baba Meleq Pasho, Baba Hajdar Hodo, Baba Hysen Bode, Baba Nazif Bega); 2025.



me. I wouldn't want to spend my holiday here. Perhaps I missed a bit more drama, maybe more wildness. For families with children, however, it is a very good choice. Compared to the beaches around Durrës, the General's Beach feels calmer, more intimate, and more manageable.

Below the surface is a relatively lively world. Snorkelling is fun, especially for children – shoals of tiny fish linger by the rocks, and the water is usually clean. A special feature of the location is the presence of sea turtles, which allegedly choose this part of the coast for breeding. If you are lucky, you might catch a glimpse of their tracks in the

sand. It is an inconspicuous reminder that the beach is not just a backdrop for our towels.

The place currently retains a relatively authentic atmosphere. You won't find a promenade or large resorts here. Just a few smaller beach bars and restaurants where you can have fresh seafood, coffee, or a cold drink in the shade.

The General's Beach lies off the main road. The route winds between villages and settlements; the last section can be worse in places, but it is manageable even with a campervan. Parking is possible relatively close to the beach. Going here for just a few hours doesn't make much sense. It is more



Qeparo

A village between the sea and the silence of the mountains

Qeparo belongs to those places on the Albanian Riviera that one doesn't just remember with the



eyes, but mainly with a feeling. A village divided into two worlds – the modern coastal Qeparo down by the sea and the old stone Qeparo high in the hills, offers a contrast that is so typical for Albania. Between swimming and silence, between the present and the past.

Old Qeparo – the village that stayed up top

The original village, known as **Upper** or **Old Qeparo** (*Lower is Qeparo Fushë / Upper is Qeparo i Sipërme*), lies about 2–3 km (*approx. 1.2–1.9 miles*) above the sea on the slopes of *Mount Gjivlash*. The stone houses here climb upwards in terraces, surrounded by old olive trees, and the whole place feels more like a fortress than a village. It's no coincidence; the position high above the coast offered protection against raids and harsh winter weather.

A walk through old Qeparo is quiet and slow. Narrow cobble streets wind between crumbling stone houses, many of which are abandoned and swallowed by vegetation, while others are sensi-



Mirror Beach & Shpella e Pëllumbave

Manastir

Between Saranda (Sarandë) and Ksamil lies a pair of beaches that often pretend to be two different places on the maps, but in reality, they function as one interconnected world. **Mirror Beach** (*Plazhi*

i Pasqyrave) and the immediately adjoining **Shpella e Pëllumbave** offer two atmospheres between which you can seamlessly transition by land and sea in a single day.



Mirror Beach (*Plazhi i Pasqyrave*), 2025.

The Church of Saint Paraskevi

In the lower part of the village stands the Church of Saint Paraskevi (*Kisha e Shën Premtes*), one of the prettiest sacral buildings on the Riviera. It dates back to the 17th century, and until recently it was almost a ruin. Following a reconstruction in 2021, it shines again with a simple dignity. Its bell, a gift from the King of Naples, was destroyed during the cultural revolution of 1967, when the communist regime systematically eradicated religious monuments. Today, the church stands as a quiet reminder of a time when Albania tried to erase its own memory. Just a few steps from here hides a small waterfall, an ideal place to refresh yourself after a walk through the village.

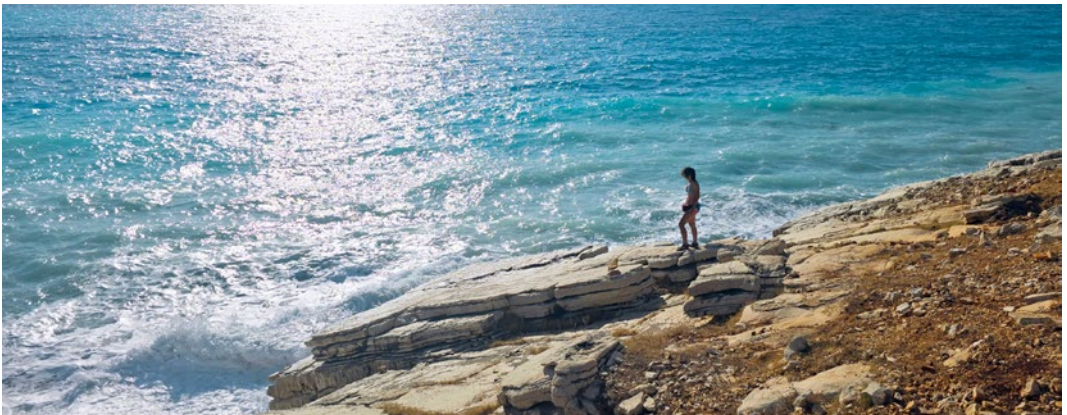
The Lukova-Krorëz Coastline

Between Lukova and Krorëz beach stretches one of

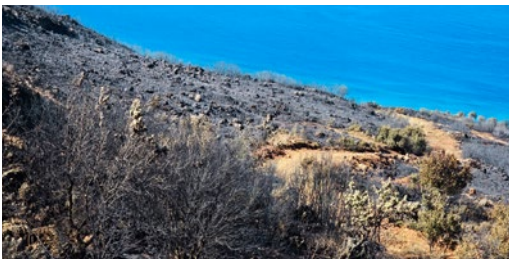
the last truly wild sections of the Albanian coast. No hotels, no roads, just a trail above the sea, rocks, and shrubs. Krorëz is accessible only on foot or by boat, and perhaps that is exactly why it is considered one of the most beautiful beaches in Albania.

Why specifically Lukova

Lukova is not for everyone. You won't find clubs, all-inclusive resorts, or night-time noise here. But you will find space, light, silence, and proof that even the Riviera has its forgotten, still wild corners. For now. You sit on the beach in the evening, your feet in the water, a beer or wine in your hand. The sea slowly settles down to sleep, and the sky burns orange and purple. A person falls in love with some places because it is beautiful there. And it is beautiful there also because there aren't many people there yet.



Between Lukova and Krorëz Beach stretches one of the last truly wild sections of the Albanian coast, 2025.



In the extremely hot and dry summer, fires broke out like on a conveyor belt. It was burning all over the Western Balkans; firefighters only dealt with fires approaching buildings, leaving the hills and slopes to the fire, 2025.





Gate to Horizon a The Old Anchor Campsites

A caress of wilderness

The Albanian coast can be loud and overcrowded. Yet, places can still be found where nature holds the land firmly in its hands and where camping

becomes a true experience. You just need to turn off the main road, leave the asphalt behind, accept a few kilometres of broken road, and the landscape quiets down. Right here, beneath the village of Luk-





Krorëz Beach

A paradise of the Ionian Sea accessible only to those who do not fear the journey

Krorëz is one of those places that people don't talk about loudly. Not because it isn't beautiful, but because one would prefer to keep it all to oneself. A hidden bay on the southern Albanian coast, it is squeezed by steep slopes and rocky cliffs, without a road, without hotels, and without a signal. Just sea, stone, sky, and scrub.

Krorëz Beach (*alb. Plazhi i Krorëzës*) is often referred to as the “paradise of the Ionian Sea”. Depends on who you ask. Certainly for those who arrive by boat. For us on foot, it wasn't such a hit parade.

The turquoise water is so clear that you can see the bottom even several metres below the surface. White sand mixes here with pebbles and giant boulders that lie scattered across the beach and in the water like remnants of ancient chaos.

The beach is naturally divided by rocks into two parts. The north-ern one is photogenic, wild, with stones ideal for watching the sea. The southern one lies beneath an almost vertical cliff and feels

more enclosed, more dramatic. Each has a different atmosphere; both are worth it.

A place where no road leads

Krorëz lies between Himara (*Himarë*) and Saranda (*Sarandë*), near the village of Lukova. Although it is only a few kilometres as the crow flies from the main road, no road leads here. That is precisely what has protected it from construction and the mass tourism that has transformed so many other beaches in Albania. Getting here is not a given. And that is a good thing.

How to get to Krorëz

By boat from Saranda

The easiest option is by boat. During the summer season, they set sail from Saranda for full-day trips along the coast. They stop at sea caves, in Kakome bay, and at Krorëz there is usually about an hour to two of free time. Comfortable, beautiful, but limited in time. Sunbeds and parasols await the trippers there. So no wilderness, as it is said.



Saranda

A place you will miss

In photos, **Saranda** (*Sarandë*) looks simple. The sea, the promenade, Corfu opposite... But reality? It is much more colourful.

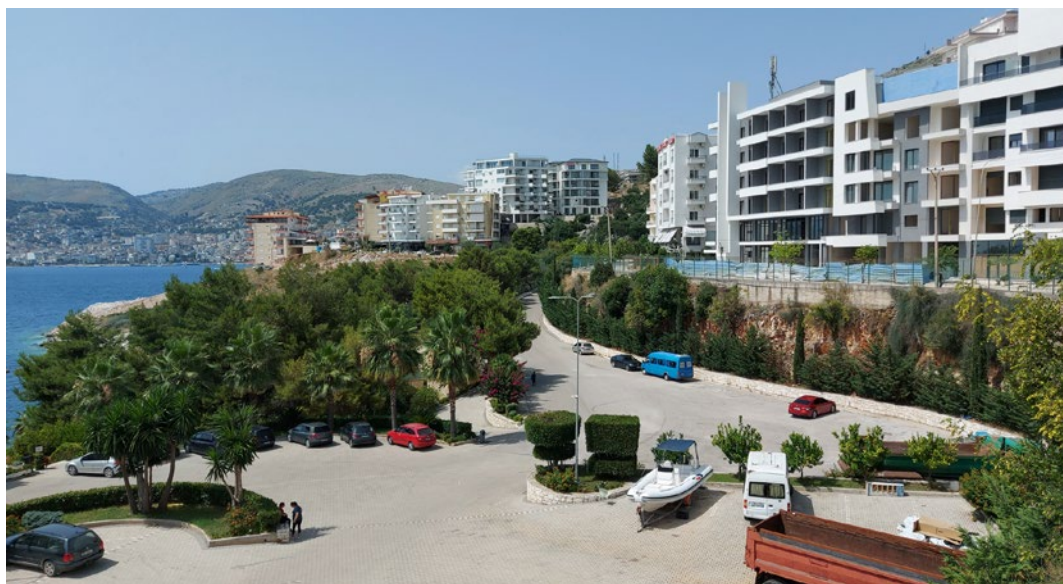
Saranda is a city that first charms you... and then quietly keeps you. It is not love at first sight. It is a relationship built sometimes even despite initial resistance. The city doesn't force you to love it. It just lets you get used to it. And one day you find out that you miss it when you've been away for just a few days.

The city that has seen it all

This place has seen more empires than the number of coffee mugs we have at home. The Romans came. Left. The Byzantines came. Left. The Ottoman Empire came. Also left. Saranda remained.

And took a break. It used to be called *Onchesmos* here, which was an important port on the route from Italy to Greece. Rome sent ships here, Byzantium built churches here, the Ottomans brought their minarets here. Every empire left a mark here - in the architecture, in street names, and in the face of a city that is still searching for itself. The





modern name Saranda comes from the Greek “*Agioi Saranda*” – *forty saints*, after a Byzantine monastery dedicated to forty martyrs. Even today you can find remnants of this Byzantine beauty here, hidden among modern concrete blocks. There were times when there were no hotels, resorts, or tourists here. Just the sea, fishermen, and a life that didn’t ask if it was comfortable. During communism, Saranda was a closed coastal town where foreigners could not get in. The sea was the same, but freedom was missing. And perhaps that is exactly why Saranda is what it is today.

A bit noisy. A bit chaotic. It pisses you off a little sometimes... and then in the evening it offers you a sunset after which you forgive it everything. The promenade, Lungomare, is the heart of the

city. It stretches along the bay from the port to the beaches, lined with palm trees, restaurants, and an endless stream of people. In the evening, it turns into a catwalk where locals stroll in their best clothes, families sip granita, children chase each other between stalls, and older gentlemen play backgammon on improvised tables.

The city is full of contrasts. Luxury hotels stand next to dilapidated houses from the communist era. A Mercedes parks next to a donkey and a cart. A modern restaurant with a sea view neighbours a small bakery where a grandmother wraps a warm byrek in paper for you as if it were a treasure. The architecture of Saranda is... complicated. Concrete blocks from the socialist era mix with new, often pompous buildings





A village suspended over an abyss

The village of **Nivica** (*Nivicë*), which clings to the edge of a canyon several hundred metres deep, presents itself as an ideal base. Just a few steps from the houses, a view opens up before you that never gets old – rock walls plunging into the depths and light gliding over the stone. The most famous guesthouse stands right by the viewpoint; a path leads around its wall to one of the most beautiful panoramas in the region. It was right here that one of those small stories took place that make Albania what it is. When I didn't have enough cash during my first visit and arranged only an overnight stay without food, the landlady

brought me a plate of warm dinner in the evening anyway, saying that I couldn't possibly go to sleep hungry. Such kindness is not repaid with a single „thank you“, and so every time I returned to *Nivica*, I stopped right at their place. Her husband, with whom I had once tasted grapes hanging over the yard and bought raki from, had died in the meantime. And so this place carries its small joys as well as shadows.

A place where one feels small

The Nivica Canyon, up to a kilometre (*approx. 0.6 miles*) wide in places, was formed by water over centuries. It carved rocky grooves, cascades,





Rasal Waterfall | Ujëvara e Rasalit

Rasal Waterfall (*Ujëvara e Rasalit*) belongs to those places that Albania is still keeping somewhat to itself for now. It has only recently come to the attention of the wider public and still retains a feeling of discovery. It is an ideal destination for a day trip from Vlora (*Vlorë*), or a pleasant stop when driving through the wild *Shushica River* valley towards the sea.

It is located near the village of **Velça**. From the main road through the *Shushica* valley, a gravel

road leads here, climbing into the hills in several serpentines. It looks innocent on the map, but in reality, it is far from perfect—potholes and a broken surface make the approximately six kilometres (*approx. 3.7 miles*) a slow and sometimes uncomfortable drive.

Yet, it is worth persevering. The end of May had a special charm here. The slopes around the road shone with the yellow of blooming brooms, and the landscape felt idyllic.





Zagoria, the region behind the mountains

The **Zagoria Valley** (*alb. Lugina e Zagorisë*) is one of the wildest and simultaneously most impressive corners of southern Albania. The almost 30 km (approx. 18.6 miles) long valley is squeezed between parallel mountain ridges and perfectly fulfils the meaning of its original Slavic name – the region “*behind the mountains*”. Remoteness here is not just a geographical term, but a true state of being.

The landscape of Zagoria consists of deep valleys, rocky gorges, plateaus, and ridges that separate individual villages like islands in a sea of mountains. Traditional stone houses, small Orthodox churches, and old connecting trails give the landscape a quiet, almost archaic character. It is no coincidence that the entire valley was declared a nature park. Remoteness is both a blessing and a curse for Zagoria. The lack of job opportunities and in-





Skore village, 2025.



Jeep, we had to improvise, and in places, it was easier to drive across a meadow than in the rutted tracks. Had it not been for the steep, broken, and muddy climb back, we probably would have turned around. The differences between the villages are truly abysmal. Poliçan looked tidy, with a functioning restaurant. An even sharper contrast was offered by the Greek village of Skore, with new houses, a re-





Peshkopia

The city of sulphurous springs and Dibra folklore

Peshkopia does not lie on any tourist route. No one wanders here by chance. It lies in the mountains of northeastern Albania at an altitude of 640 m (approx. 2,100 feet), just 20 km (approx. 12.4 miles) from the border with North Macedonia. A city that doesn't sell itself on beauty, but on purpose. It heals, preserves traditions, and opens the way to the mountains.

It is the administrative centre of the **Dibra** (*Dibër*) region, an area where there are more mountains than plains, more past than future, and where folklore is not a prop, but an everyday reality. Approximately 20,000 inhabitants live here slowly, unpretentiously, without the need to prove anything to anyone. Peshkopia is not a city where one goes on holiday. It is a city where one goes for something.

From bishopric to province

The name Peshkopia comes from the Greek *episkopos* – bishop. In 1020, the seat of the episcopate was indeed located here, which proves that this place had significance long before today's borders began

to be drawn in the Balkans. Its religious significance faded over time, but the name remained.

During Ottoman rule, the city appears in records as *Debre-i Zir* – *Little Debar*. The “great” one today lies across the border in North Macedonia. It was precisely the borders, drawn after the Balkan Wars, that changed the fate of the entire region. Albanian Dibra lost its natural centre, and Peshkopia had to replace it. Without ambition, without glamour, simply because there was nothing else left.

The city went through all the storms of the 20th century: Ottoman administration, the uprising of 1912, Serbian occupation, World War II, communist reconstruction, and the painful collapse of industry after 1990. Today, you will no longer find factories or large enterprises here. People returned to what they always knew: the land, craftsmanship, the market.

The city today

Contemporary Peshkopia is a typical post-socialist provincial town. The wide *Elez Isufi boulevard* in-



tersects the centre, and everything important is concentrated around it—offices, cafés, the Palace of Culture, the market. It is not a pretty city in the classical sense, it is simply functional.

At the eastern end of the pedestrian zone lies the Treg district, a small window into the past. Cob-

bled streets, low Ottoman houses, silence. The only place where socialist reconstruction did not cover up the old layers of the city. A bit further on you will find the Dibra Museum, inconspicuous, but valuable. Folk costumes, textiles, everyday objects. Not a museum of the nation, but of a region that stubbornly holds onto its own identity.



Through the Black Drin Valley

Gradec Canyon and the last undiscovered frontier of northern Albania

The **Black Drin** is not a river for postcards. It is a river that doesn't show off, it just takes space. It flows from south to north through Dibra, deep below the mountains, hidden in gorges that sometimes open up for only a few dozen metres. It flows from Lake Ohrid in North Macedonia and joins the White Drin in Kukës. There the **Drin** is formed, the artery of northern Albania. But up here it is not yet a river. It is an element.

The Black Drin slices the landscape like a knife. Turquoise dark water, cold even in summer. In spring it roars, in summer it glides between stones. Two large canyons, **Skavica** and **Gradec**, are its true home. And Gradec is the deeper one.

Gradec Canyon

From the new SH6 asphalt road from Bulqizë to Peshkopia, we turn off at Grazhdan onto a dusty road down to the river. The ruts are deep, the stones sharp, and somewhere deep below us we can already hear the water. The tension grows with every metre. And then suddenly a small clearing, a huge tree, a closed kiosk, and chairs scattered around it. As

if someone had forgotten a piece of civilisation here. Laughter echoes from around the bend. Families sitting on blankets, feet in the water, children shouting, mosquitoes securing the perimeter. Here the road ends right in the river. Ah. This is where rafting starts from.

When the river lets you

The Black Drin is not technically difficult, but it is never the weaker one. Rafting here is not an attraction, but a way to be part of the river for a while. The current carries you between rocks you would otherwise only see from above. Shadows, water, cold air. In spring it roars, in summer it glides. And it always has more strength than you.

As we return to the car, a convoy of old off-roaders with boats on trailers arrives. A group of young men disappears into the kiosk. I immediately order a beer, Fery a Fanta, we sit by the water and discuss the next plan.

Sofra Dibrane – lunch on the edge of the wilderness

Where the courage of most cars ends, stands a simple restaurant.



tance we caught sight of something like a bridge over the river, that will be it.

Hell began for Fery. The final floodplain flat with thicket and reeds was full of broken bottles. Shards lay everywhere. I had to search for a path for Fery where there were as few as possible so he could pass safely. Finally we climbed out of that mess; in front

of us was a rock and below it the access to the bridge or rather a footbridge. It still held together, but it truly did not offer a sense of safety. But the scenery, the scenery. We have to see this whole thing and photograph it, possibly film it.

Lightweight Fery carefully stepped onto the footbridge, walked to the end and back. Throughout



offer. We drove the entire road along the Black Drin to Arras without signs of enthusiasm. Before Arras, a new asphalt road began, on which we drove comfortably to Brest i Poshtëm, where

we joined the main road and reached Peshkopia without further issues.

The Black Drin from the bridge near the village of Lower Gjorica, 2025. >



Seta Gorge | Where the landscape quiets down

For a long time, only fragments reached me about the Seta gorge. The name appeared in conversations with locals always with that special voice people use when talking about places that surprised them. “*Kanioni i Setës*,” they said.

“*Gjallica*.” And then they shook their heads, as if they didn’t have the right words.

“*It’s... different*,” a shepherd near Peshkopia once told me.

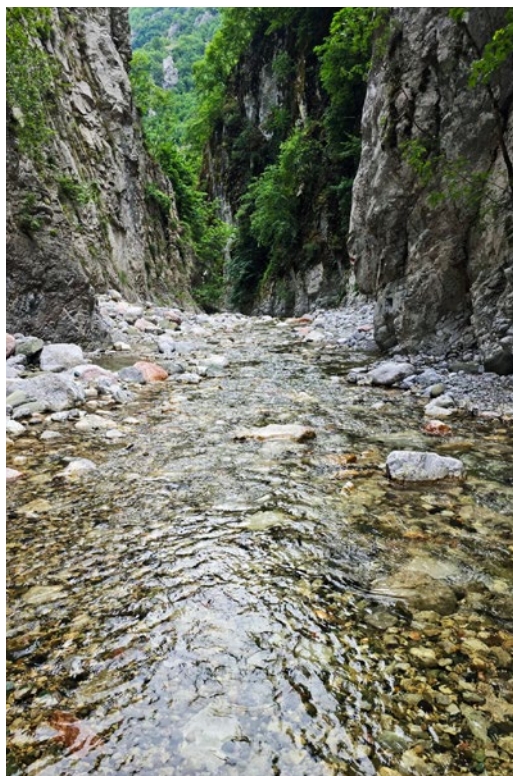
“*It’s not like Valbona or Theth. It’s... quieter.*”

Quieter. A strange word for a gorge. But when I stood there later, I understood. Seta is not loud. It is a place that “*whispers*”.

Morning in Çidhën

The sun hadn’t yet penetrated behind the mountain ridges; the air was sharp, fresh, and smelled of moss and water. The village was quiet; only occasionally did a dog bark or a rooster crow.

We drive down to the power plant, a concrete colossus from the communist era that stands here like a guard at the gate to another world. We leave the car at the power plant and the first steps lead straight





The beginning of the trail along the Seta Canal. Photo: Fery, 2025.

The canal leads up to 300 m (approx. 984 feet) above the river for a length of roughly three kilometres (approx. 1.9 miles). It is an impressive display of engineering and courage.

It rained yesterday and water is still pouring from the soaked meadows and fields. Mud everywhere I look. “Shall we go?” Fery asks. “Alright, let’s go.”

Every step counts

The first section is comfortable. The trail leads along the wall of the canal, water rustles quietly on our right, and one thinks that maybe it won’t be that demanding. But then the canal disappears into a series of tunnels and the path separates and narrows. Suddenly you are walking on a footpath carved into the rock, often secured by steel cables. On one side is the rock, on the other a precipice hundreds of metres down to the river. I hold onto the cable, pay attention to where I step, try not to look down. But occasionally I have to look, and then I feel dizzy. Out of fear and out of respect.

“Is it safe?” I ask Fery.

“If you’re careful,” he replies calmly.

“The cable holds. But don’t slip.”

Views that take your breath away

The reward for the effort are stunning views of the



canyon. From this perspective, everything suddenly seems larger, more distant, and calmer, as if the gorge had spread out in all its majesty. I see the whole canyon, the narrow slit between rocks, the river far below, walls covered in greenery. It is like a bird’s-eye view – you see the place you were

A window into the past | King Zog I. of Albania

The monarch who survived 50 assassinations

King Zog I of Albania (1895-1961) – a monarch, who ruled in turbulent times and became famous for surviving dozens of assassination attempts. A symbol of a hard and ambiguous era of Albanian history.

The life of King Zog I of Albania sounds more like a pulp novel than a chapter from European history. On paper, he ruled a small Balkan country in one of the most turbulent periods of the 20th century. In reality, however, he spent most of his reign dodging bullets, surviving assassinations, and chain-smoking to a degree unparalleled in the world of monarchs. Outside Albania and narrow circles of historians, his story remains surprisingly little known. Yet it has all the attributes of a political thriller that a reader might put down saying it's "too improbable". But Zog's life was real.

He was born in 1895 as Ahmet Muhtar Zogolli into an influential Muslim landowning family. Albania at that time was a young, fragile state. It declared independence from the Ottoman Empire only in 1912, and in the 1920s it was torn by clan rivalries, foreign pressures, and an unclear idea of what Albanian statehood should actually look like. Zog managed to navigate this chaos thanks to a combination of political cunning, hard power, and an extraordinary survival instinct. In 1925, he became the President of the Republic. Three years later, he transformed Albania into a monarchy and crowned himself King Zog I – the only Muslim king in modern European history.

Ruling Albania, however, meant wearing a target on one's back. Clans reproached him for the concentration of power, the opposition labelled him a dictator, foreign powers – primarily Italy and Yugoslavia – sought to control the strategic country. Communists, nationalists, monarchists,



and republicans rejecting the kingdom were against him – everyone had a reason to wish for his death. And they indeed attempted it.

Contemporary sources, diplomatic cables, and memoirs of Zog's associates speak of more than fifty separate assassination attempts. The exact number remains a subject of dispute – some sources state 55, others even more – but what is certain is that no other European statesman of his time survived so many attempts on his life. Poisoned food. Ambushes on mountain roads. Bombs in residences. Shootings in public. Attacks on the palace. The imagination of the assassins was matched only by their constant failure.

Zog adapted his whole life to this. He never followed a routine, constantly changed routes, slept with a weapon within reach, and surrounded

The Communist Era of Albania | A Brief Overview

Fifty years of communist rule left a deep mark on Albania. It was a time of harsh isolation, but also of a surprising social shift. The concrete bunkers scattered across the landscape are to this day a visible symbol of a regime that gradually broke ties with all its allies. It then made Albania the most closed state in Europe.

The path to isolation

When Enver Hoxha took power in 1944, Albania was a predominantly feudal country with high illiteracy and minimal infrastructure. A radical effort to build a perfectly self-sufficient state followed. After rifts with Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and finally China, the country found itself completely alone politically, economically, and culturally. Isolation destroyed the economy, and Albania remained the poorest country on the continent for decades.

The paradox of progress

Despite widespread shortages, a significant social transformation took place. The state invested in education; literacy rose over a few decades to more than 90%, and schools became centres of fierce intellectual competition. Healthcare expanded even into remote regions, infant mortality dropped, and many villages received electricity for the first time in history.

Life behind the wall

The country functioned as a carefully managed world. The community held tightly together, crime was minimal, and the family represented the main social support. Behind this image, however, lay a harsh reality: the ubiquitous surveillance of the secret police Sigurimi, the suppression of freedom of speech and religion, and the constant fear of political accusations. In 1967, Albania even became the world's first officially atheistic state.

The fall of the regime

After Enver Hoxha's death (1985), the country slowly began to open up to changes, but the real turning point came only with the wave of student protests in 1990. In March 1992, elections took place in which the communist party lost crushingly, and Albania entered the democratic era. The transition, however, was accompanied by unrest, mass migration, and the renewal of old blood feuds.

The legacy of the communist era

Modern Albania bears a dual heritage. On the one hand, strong family ties, an emphasis on education, and the remarkable resilience of the population. On the other hand, problems associated with the sudden transition to a market economy: corruption, economic inequality, and the effort to cope with the burden of the past.

The past of the dictatorship in today's Tirana

Visitors can learn about this epoch in several places:

House of Leaves – the former headquarters of the Sigurimi with an exhibition of surveillance and interrogation methods.

Bunk'Art 1 and 2 – giant underground bunkers transformed into museums dedicated to totalitarianism, the army, and everyday life in isolation.

Pyramid of Tirana – once a monumental museum of Enver Hoxha, today a symbol of transformation and the new direction of the country.

A country looking forward

Today's Albania has managed to accept its painful history without letting itself be defined by it. The concrete bunkers are no longer a reminder of fear, but silent witnesses to resilience. The nation that was once hermetically sealed is today rapidly connecting with the world, and its young generation looks forward with the ambition to catch up on lost decades.

Luboš Vránek (* 1957)

Graphic designer, photographer and traveler

Luboš Vránek has long been dedicated to exploratory expeditions to lesser-known but distinctive countries and regions. Traveling is not only a hobby for him, but also a creative source—he connects it with photography, original writing, and public screenings. Professionally, he works in the field of graphics and visual creation, while simultaneously developing travel documentation and book adaptations of his journeys. He is the author of the travel books *A Small Guide to Tunisia*, *Transformations of Persia / Iran Yesterday and Today*, and *The Rugged Beauty of Albania*. He regularly publishes photographs and travel reports on social networks and organizes travel lectures with visual projections. His books combine personal stories, field experience, and a verified factual basis; in a readable way, they introduce countries that are often overlooked or burdened by prejudices.

His travel philosophy is based on a simple principle: a smile, politeness, and respect for local customs open doors to people, powerful experiences, and safe movement in a foreign environment. During his expeditions, he tries to understand the local culture or at least accept it, because a journey with an open mind is, according to him, richer, more natural, and humanly deeper. He seeks personal contact, conversations, and the sharing of everyday life, often becoming more of a guest than a tourist.

Albania and Montenegro hold an exceptional place in his work, and he returns there repeatedly. It was precisely the interest of readers and listeners in practical experiences from these journeys that led to the creation of the standalone travelogue *The Rugged Beauty of Albania*, which is now followed by another book, *The Wild Beauty of Albania*. In this richly illustrated book, he shares stories and insights from the expeditions he undertakes together with his wife, offering readers inspiration as well as concrete orientation in an environment that is sometimes unjustly considered difficult to access.

His goal is to awaken curiosity, break down fears of unknown places, and show that even seemingly harsh countries can be very welcoming to those who enter them with respect. He is pleased that many attendees of his lectures have eventually decided to embark on their own journeys and discovered their true face.





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