

Albania

Albania is now opening up to tourism and a visit here offers a fascinating insight into a country that was closed to the world for much of the twentieth century.

Albania is a beautiful and historic land with a most welcoming people. She has one of the oldest flags and tongues in Europe, and preserves traditions and culture unadulterated by the outside world for centuries. Her long coastline is washed by the Ionian and Adriatic sea and hides some wonderful beaches. The mountain scenery is stunning; not for nothing do the Albanians know their land as Shqipëria - Land of the Eagles. Here was ancient Illyria; and here too that great Roman road, the Via Egnatia, began its long march east to Constantinople.

Some scars of the past remain - notably the many infamous concrete bunkers - but these are insignificant compared to Albania's many treasures and natural beauty. Our cultural tour will show you much of what the south has to offer.

Built on top of a Roman port (which surfaces here and there) Saranda is today a large modern town of some 33,000 inhabitants.

Saranda is set in a beautiful horse-shoe bay, fringed with pebble beaches and has lovely views to northern Corfu. The town has an attractive palm-lined promenade and there are many restaurants, cafes and shops, all of which give a warm welcome. On a hill above the town 16th century Lekursi Castle is worth a visit for the views alone, and you can dine there.

Saranda is a very good base for exploration and has two UNESCO World Heritage sites within striking distance. Ancient Butrint is just a 20 minute to the south and should be seen. The atmospheric and historic small town of Gjirokastra is an hour's drive to the north east, and en route you can pass by the unusual Blue Eye spring.

For some fine beaches not too far from town, go to Ksamili near Butrint. It is a 15-20 minute bus or taxi ride and has a number of pretty small bays and beaches, and several islets just off-shore which you can be taken to by boat.

The Albanian Riviera to the north enables a stunningly scenic drive high above the sea, passing close to a number of traditional villages. The road has been improved and it now takes only an hour to the small beach resort of Himara, where you can have lunch and a swim. This is one of the last significant stretches of undeveloped coastline in the Med.

Albania is still rough around the edges so do not expect the sophistication and service you are used to receiving in countries that have been hosting north Europeans for years. Although on a fast learning curve, Albania is still one of the poorest countries in Europe, so you will need to go with an open mind.

That said, we believe a week here followed by a week at one of our Greece resorts makes for an intriguing and contrasting holiday experience.



Saranda

ALBANIA INFORMATION

Getting to Albania

Sunday flight Gatwick, Birmingham, Bristol or Manchester to Preveza. Then 2½-3 hours by taxi (please note, on arrival will be one taxi from the airport to the Greek/Albanian border and another taxi from the border to Saranda. The return will be one taxi all the way Saranda to airport (or Greek resort if twin centre). An entry visa is not required for UK passport holders. For flight details see page 270.

Multi Centre Options

Albania can combine with Lefkas, Meganissi, Parga, Sivota, Hidden Greece Fly Drive. Transfer times Saranda to Parga or Sivota c 2 hrs. Lefkas and Meganissi transfers will be via the airport. For multi-centre information see page 8.

Representative

We have a local agent in Saranda who can give any information and assistance required.

General

Albania is 1 hour ahead of the UK, so 1 hour behind Greece. Main towns have ATMs and the local currency is the Lek, but there are restrictions on taking Lek out of the country and may be difficult for exchange so we'd recommend taking the bulk of your spending money in the form of low denomination Euros, which are widely accepted, and try not to be left with wads of Lek on the last day. Prices are generally lower than in Greece (we estimate by c 20%).

Recommended Reading

Albania by Gillian Gloyer in the Bradt Travel; Guide series.



Blue Eye Spring, near Saranda

Saranda Hotels

We can arrange stays in Saranda at selected 3 star hotels on a bed and breakfast basis. The Brilant Hotel is set a little back from the seafront road/promenade and an organised pebble beach. It is a modern, comfortable town hotel with good views from its upper floors and just a few minutes walk from the centre.

The Sea Side Hotel is a little further out, again with fine views from the upper floors and, especially, the stylish roof terrace bar. It is a 3 minute walk down to the pebble beach and you will find a good choice of restaurants within a short walk of the hotel. Based on flights to Prevesa with taxi transfers we can book 7 or 14 night stays, twin centres with Greece, or short stays in conjunction with a main Greece holiday.



Gjirokaster



Ancient Butrint



Berat

Private Cultural Tours Of Southern Albania

We offer an in-depth 6-day tour with your own guide and driver. The tour includes an overnight in Saranda at either end, covering the highlights of this fascinating region – three places on the tour are UNESCO World Heritage sites. The tour can be combined as a two-centre with Greece, with a week based at any of our accommodation in Lefkas, Meganissi, Parga or Sivota. We can also offer a shortened 4-day tour by missing out Tirana on days 4 and 5.

Itinerary

Day 1: Flight to Prevesa (Sunday). Transfer to Saranda and overnight.

Day 2: Guided tour to ancient Butrint. Visit to Blue Eye spring en route to Gjirokaster for overnight.

Day 3: Walking tour of Gjirokaster, including the castle and museum. Drive to Berat. Walking tour and visit to icon museum. Overnight Berat.

Day 4: To Tirana via Durres. Sightseeing tour of Tirana including the National Museum. Overnight Tirana.

Day 5: Drive to historic Kruja and explore the town, castle and old bazaar. Overnight Tirana.

Day 6: Turn west towards the sea. Visit Ardenica Monastery and the famous site of Apollonia. Then head south for the attractive small seaside resort of Himara for overnight.

Day 7: Enjoy a well earned morning's R & R – perhaps a swim from Himara's splendid beach. After lunch a scenic coastal drive along the Albanian Riviera to Saranda for overnight.

Day 8: Transfer to Prevesa Airport or to a Greek resort for your second week.

Notes on towns and main sites

Butrint. Ancient Buthrotum. Important and impressive Greco-Roman city, now a UNESCO World Heritage site, south of Saranda on a bluff of land half-circled by a large lake. Inhabited continuously from the 7th C BC until abandoned in 18th C. Impressive cyclopean walls and deep well within the gate, reminiscent of Mycenae – but most excavated remains are Roman.

Gjirokaster. This fascinating and historic small town is also on UNESCO's World Heritage list. Largely medieval, with some lovely architecture to admire reflecting the town's wealthy past, it is built on a hill overlooking valley and mountains. Excellent

views from the large castle above, which houses a weapons museum! Some good restaurants in the narrow cobbled lanes of the old town.

Berat. Another member of the UNESCO club, Berat is called 'the town of a thousand eyes' because of the many-windowed old houses that crowd above the river Osrum and up the hill. High along the ridge is a 14th C citadel, its walls enclosing no fewer than fourteen small painted churches (hence the presence of the famous Onufri icon museum). The Turkish influence may be seen in the town's three mosques and tekke, also worth visiting.

Ardenica. 12th C monastery converted into an inn, it occupies the whole of a rocky outcrop amid pine and cypress trees and is a landmark visible for miles across the plain. The church, dedicated to the Virgin, is characteristically Greek, and has a magnificent iconostasis and high-quality wall-paintings.

Apollonia. Another most important archaeological site. Founded in 588 BC by Greeks from Corinth, it rose to become a renowned cultural centre in the Roman period. Memorable are the elegant façade of the Bouleuterion and the great Stoa. Below stands the beautiful 13th C church of Shenmari, built out of the antique stone.

Price Guide

Prices are per person and include flights from LGW (supplement for MAN, BRS and BHX), transfers, 3 star BB hotel accommodation for 7 nights, 6 lunches (days 2-7), entrance fees. It is a private tour with your own guide and driver. Single room supplement will be quoted on request.

| | |
|----------------|---|
| 2-3 persons | Low Season from £1587 July/August from £1710 |
| 4 plus persons | Low Season from £1453 July/August from £1587 |

We can also offer a shortened **4-day tour**, as above but taking replacing Days 4-5 (Tirana) with an extra 2 nights in Saranda on BB at the start or end of the week. Prices on application.