

**THE ADRIATIC, ALBANIA & NORTH MACEDONIA****with Slovenia, Croatia, Herzegovina & Montenegro****30 days**

Created on: 16 Aug, 2025

**Day 1 Arrive in Ljubljana, Slovenia**

Arrive in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia.

Overnight Ljubljana.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

**Day 2 Ljubljana: City Tour**

Today we enjoy a walking tour of "Bela Ljubljana". This was the nickname given to this delightful city after it was entirely rebuilt following a major earthquake in 1511. A walk through the streets of this charming city reminds one of Vienna and Prague. However, Ljubljana is tiny in comparison, and easily visited on foot. We go up to the highest point of the city to visit the 16th century castle; the castle today houses a Virtual Museum, which gives a superb overview of the city's history, and a climb up the main tower affords a wonderful panorama of the town and surrounding mountains.

We then visit the old town by foot, stopping along the way to see the Parliament building, university, beautiful squares, and unique bridges. We also see the city's Cathedral, with its modern bronze doors commemorating the history of Slovenia and its struggle towards independence. A tour of Ljubljana would not be complete without a stroll through the great outdoor markets, where locals come to buy fresh mountain herbs and flowers, wild mushrooms, and fresh fruit and vegetables from nearby farms.

Overnight Ljubljana.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 3 Ljubljana - Skofja Loka - Bled**

Today we drive through the countryside, with small hamlets and farms scattered across the green rolling hills. This area has some of this new nation's oldest inhabited settlements, three of which we will visit today. Our first stop today is Skofja Loka, or "Bishop's Meadow," one of the most charming towns in Slovenia with its historic streets, houses and its castle perched high above. We will wander the Mestni Trg, the main street of the town, see the Granary, St. James' Church, Homan house, and visit the 13th century castle, which today houses the finest ethnographic museum in the country.

Our drive continues through small hamlets, with traditional farmhouses and steeped churches, where crops of potatoes, corn, turnips and hay are grown. Our next stop is Radovljica, a medieval town with a moat and views of the Karavanke Alps and the Julian Alps. We will visit the Pharmacy and Alchemy museum where we will embark on solving "alchemist tasks".

We drive through spectacular scenery to Bled, where we will spend two nights. Bled is located on the edge of an emerald green glacial lake. The views upon approach are stupendous, with the town's castle perched above, Bled Otok, the small island with a church in the center of the lake, all set against the spectacular backdrop of the Karavanke Mountains and Julian Alps.

Overnight in Bled.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 4 Bled & Lake Bohinj**

Reflecting the high mountain peaks, Lake Bled has always been considered sacred by the locals. Our first visit is to the 11th century castle

which houses a small museum and provides magnificent views of town, lake and mountains. After our visit we will catch a small traditional boat, or pletna, to visit the country's only island, Bled Otok. On the island we will visit the Church of St. Mary of the Assumption, also known as "Our Lady of the Lake". Legend has it that if you make a wish while ringing the bell your wish will come true.

This afternoon we drive through lush green valleys to Bohinj, one of the gateways to the Julian Alps. The name Bohinj refers to the entire valley and its numerous small settlements. Lake Bohinj is the largest permanent lake in Slovenia, and protected from development. It is fed by the Savica waterfall, which Slovenia's greatest poet, Francis Preseren celebrated in his poem "Baptism at the Savica Waterfall". We will visit the Church of St. John the Baptist, famous for its beautiful frescoes, located on the lake's edge in the charming town of Bohinjska Bistrica.

Further along the lake's shores we will take a cable car which climbs 1537m / 5,072 ft up to Mt Vogel, the only mountain ski resort within Triglav National Park. On a clear day we can view the peaks of the Julian Alps, some of the highest in the country, and see Mt. Triglav, a holy mountain and national symbol of Slovenia. There is also a spectacular panorama of Lake Bohinj and basin.

Upon our return to Bled, you may choose to walk around the shores of Bled, or even swim (!); an excellent path takes you on a 6km (3.75 mi) walk around the lake.

Overnight in Bled.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 5 Bled - Bovec - Kobarid\*

Today the Predil Pass takes us through Slovenia's most dramatic mountain gateway, a historic corridor where ancient trade routes carved passages between the Adriatic and Central Europe. This strategic area has witnessed centuries of history, from Roman legions to modern armies. Our route descends toward Log pod Mangrtom, a community that rebuilt after a devastating 2000 avalanche, a testament to the resilience of Alpine people in a landscape where beauty and danger intertwine.

Bovec emerges in the pristine Soa Valley like a gem set between emerald waters and towering peaks. Nestled beneath Slovenia's highest ski resort, Kanin, this charming town has evolved from a strategic stronghold into a vibrant adventure tourism capital. The impossibly turquoise Soa River, flowing from Triglav's glacial sources, creates landscapes so pristine they seem untouched by time.

Yet, even these peaceful valleys are shadowed by history. Just downstream at Kobarid, the horrors of industrial warfare scarred a tranquil landscape. In October 1917, the Battle of Caporetto became one of World War I's most devastating offensives, immortalized by Ernest Hemingway in "A Farewell to Arms." The WWI Museum presents this catastrophe with artifacts and testimonies, helping us understand how over 300,000 casualties fell in just 18 days of fighting. The Italian Charnel House and Church of St. Anthony, crowning the hill above Kobarid, serves as a solemn memorial for the 7,000 Italian soldiers who died far from home.

\* PLEASE NOTE: Due to limited hotel availability, we may accomplish the above listed sightseeing and then return to spend the night in Bovec rather than staying in Kobarid.

Overnight in Kobarid (or Bovec, depending on accommodation availability).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 6 Kobarid - Predjama - Postojna Caves - Piran

Driving the along the banks of the Soca River, we make our way out of Alpine territory to the region and plateau of Primorska. The Soca is a valley of wonderful colours, full of waterfalls, pools, ravines and canyons, with its own distinct flora and fauna. The impossibly blue-green Soca River flows over white gravel and through a fairy-tale landscape with a stunning vista at every turn.

We continue through the limestone plateau, or "karst" region en route to the Postojna Caves where we have a guided visit. This region was once submerged by a deep sea; today the landscape is characterized by subterranean rivers which have carved out magnificent caves, and by the rich red soil deposits in poljes, the depressions left when caverns collapse. The cave is 27 km (17 miles) long and over 2 million years old, and consists of a series of caverns, halls and passages with enormous stalactites and stalagmites. The caves also have their own unique ecosystem, flora and fauna; the most famous creature endemic to the caves is the so called Proteus Anguinus, or "human fish", a small pink, blind type of salamander equipped with both gills and rudimentary lungs.

Our next stop is Predjama Castle, located in the middle of a 123m (403 ft) high, overhanging, limestone cliff, in the entrance of a cave. The cave was utilised by a robber baron from centuries ago to become his stronghold. It's been described as a "masterpiece of medieval ingenuity, courage, cunning and defiance". Its white walls, roofs, turrets and chimneys jutting from the mountainside, built onto solid rock, make it the most unique and picturesque fortress you will ever come across in Europe.

We continue to Piran, Istria, beautifully located on the Adriatic. The town resembles a large open-air museum, with medieval architecture and a rich cultural heritage. Narrow streets and compact houses give the town its special charm.

Overnight in Piran.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 7 Piran, Slovenia - Porec, Croatia - Pula - Opatija

We depart Piran and continue by road across the border into Croatia where our first stop is Porec, a pretty seaside town dating back to the Roman period. We will walk through the ancient narrow lanes, and visit the Euphrasian Basilica. This church houses some of the finest Byzantine mosaics in the world, comparable to those in Ravenna. The Basilica is listed among many other Croatian masterpieces of art and architecture, as a protected UNESCO World Heritage site.

We also stop in Pula, called Pola by the first Illyrian settlers and Polensium by the Romans. We visit one of the most impressive sites in town, the amphitheater, located near the harbour. Built entirely of local limestone, the amphitheater was designed to host gladiatorial contests and could accommodate up to 22,000 spectators. We'll also see the ruins of the Roman Temple of Augustus,

We finish our day in Opatija, the oldest established and still one of the most popular Croatian resorts. A Rijeka businessman built the first villa here in 1844, and after a visit by the trend-setting wife of the Austrian Emperor, the town was promoted as a handy health resort for aristocratic Austrians.

(Depending on hotel availability, we may overnight in Opatija or continue the short distance to Rijeka.)

Overnight in Opatija or Rijeka.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 8 Opatija - Zagreb: City Tour

Today we travel inland to the capital, Zagreb.

From its intriguing architecture to nearby natural havens, this underrated European capital has something for everyone. Unlike most western European capitals, Zagreb's cityscape is a fascinating mixture of classic Austro-Hungarian architecture and gritty socialist structures. Some of the city's most emblematic buildings include the iconic, colourful roof of St Mark's Church and the twin spires of Zagreb Cathedral which tower above. With an electric mix of Italian, Turkish, and Austro-Hungarian influences, even its coffee culture here is steeped in history.

Zagreb is located on the intersection of several important routes between the Adriatic coast and Central Europe. It offers visitors the Baroque feel of the Upper Town, picturesque open-air markets, and various kinds of shops. Perched on two small hills encircled by Renaissance-era walls, Zagreb's oldest district is home to many of the city's main attractions. This picturesque medieval part of the Croatian capital boasts its most impressive architecture and great views over the rest of the city.

Today's city tour\* features Governor Jelacic Square, undoubtedly the very heart of the capital. Located in Zagreb's center, the square is dominated by the statue of Josip Jelacic who became the governor of the triple Kingdom of Dalmatia, Croatia, and Slavonia on the 23rd of March, 1848.

In the District of Gradec, we take a funicular from the Lower Town to the Upper, which for centuries has connected the old part of town with Ilica Street, the main shopping area. We will then stroll back down to Kaptol, St Catherine's Cathedral, Church of St Mark, St. Stephen's Church, and Lotrscak Tower.

After our tour you will have time at leisure to explore, shop, relax, visit museums etc.

\* PLEASE NOTE: In 2000 the region experienced an earthquake which damaged 2,000 buildings in Zagreb, many of which are still closed off for repairs. This means that many/most of the buildings, including museums have been closed without a clear sense of when they may re-open. This, in part, is why we have included a trip to the nearby town of Samobor during our stay in Zagreb.

Overnight in Zagreb.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 9 Zagreb: Day Trip to Somobor

This morning we depart the capital and travel by bus to Samobor, a charming small village is located just a short drive from Zagreb.

A famous writer, Antun Gustav Matoš, once said that Samobor was the most Croatian of all Croatian towns. This charming little town near the border has officially been a town since 1242 when the King Bela IV awarded it with a charter giving it the status of a free royal market town. A special spirit and atmosphere nurtured in Samobor to his day is largely the result of the efforts made by a number of local people and settlers who felt at home in. After an informal orientation, you will be free to explore on your own and find some lunch before we head back to Zagreb mid-afternoon.

A good place to start is King Tomislav Square, a true highlight of the town. The square dates back to the 19th century, and today this historic square is filled with cafes, boutique shops, and restaurants. Standing tall in the center of town is the beautiful yellow-coloured Parish Church of Saint Anastazija. This church is one of the earliest Baroque style churches in Croatia, and was built in 1675, upon the site of an earlier wooden church that was built in the 14th century. The church is known for its lovely Baroque style, stained glass, and for its famous wounded Christ sculpture. The church is also adjacent to the park Domovinske Zahvalnosti, a nice green space in the town.

Sitting atop Tepec Hill is the ruins of the Samobor Castle. The castle was first built between 1260-1264 by supporters of the Czech King, Ottokar II of Bohemia who was at war with the Hungarian empire. The last residents of the castle left in the 18th century, which has left it to the current state it is in today as castle ruins. To get up to the castle, you will need to hike around 20-30 minutes. The hike is steep and it is necessary to wear sturdy shoes. At the top, you'll have a chance to explore the historic castle ruins, which is a really unique experience.

Samobor Museum is located in the town center and is a small museum with artifacts about Samobor's history. It doesn't take very long to visit this museum, but is a nice stop to learn more about the area.

One of the big draws of Samobor is food! The region offers a variety of dishes, including local trout, sausages, salami, special mustard, mushrooms, pork chops, kotlovina (meat prepared outdoors in a cast iron pot), and local miners' cake - greblica. The town is most famous for its kremsnita cream cake. Although you can sample this delicious custard cream cake all over Croatia, the Samobor version is fluffy and airy, and you eat it while its still slightly warm.

Return to Zagreb.

Overnight in Zagreb.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 10 Zagreb - Plitvice Lakes

This morning we depart for Plitvice, a UNESCO World Heritage site and a breathtaking natural wonder, renowned for its stunning cascade of 16 terraced lakes, each more mesmerizing than the last.

As we delve deeper into the park, we'll be surrounded by lush, verdant forests, where towering pines, beeches, and firs create a serene and awe-inspiring ambiance. The lakes, formed over millennia by the gradual deposition of calcium carbonate, shimmer in various shades of blue and green, creating a truly magical spectacle.

Our leisurely walk will take us along well-maintained wooden pathways, offering panoramic views of the cascading waterfalls and crystal-clear lakes. We'll explore both the Upper and Lower Lakes, each with its own unique charm. The Upper Lakes are characterized by their smaller size and numerous waterfalls, while the Lower Lakes are larger and more tranquil, perfect for a peaceful boat ride across the largest lake.

As we wander through this natural wonderland, we'll have the opportunity to encounter a diverse array of flora and fauna. Keep an eye out for the park's 120 bird species, including majestic eagles and elusive owls. The lakes are also home to a variety of fish species, such as trout and carp, as well as various mammals like deer and wild boar.

\* Good walkers will have no trouble with the well-maintained trails. If you have concerns about your suitability, please have a word with your Tour Leader.

Overnight in Plitvice.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 11 Plitvice Lakes - Zadar - Split

Today we travel to the coast via Zadar, the ancient capital of Byzantine Dalmatia.

This large city has its historic center crowded on a small piece of land jutting into the Adriatic. When it was occupied by the Germans in 1943, Allied bombings destroyed about 60% of the city. Zadar was rebuilt one more time, as it had been many times over its tumultuous history; it is for this reason that one can find a variety of architectural styles, from Roman Corinthian columns to Romanesque churches. We enter the city through one of the Venetian gates and proceed to the Roman Forum, the Church of St. Donatus and Cathedral of Anastasius, and visit the Archaeological Museum, with a fine collection of artifacts dating from Roman and medieval times. NOTE: In the event that the Archaeological Museum is closed, due to erratic opening hours, the Museum will be replaced with a visit of the Treasury, a collection of relics attended to by the order of Benedictine nuns in the Church and Nunnery of St. Mary.

We continue on to the 13th century Saint Lawrence Gothic cathedral in Trogir, esteemed as a masterpiece. Then it's on to Split (ancient Spalato), the second largest city of Croatia. The historic city center actually lies in the walls of the enormous retirement Palace of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, built between 295-305 AD. The palace served as a palace, military fortress, and later, a fortified town. The city is enclosed by huge walls, pierced by 4 main gates, one on each side of the rectangular plan. Later you may wish to walk the promenade along the harbour when it comes alive with locals taking an evening stroll or relaxing in the seaside cafes outside the ancient palace walls.

Overnight in Split.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 12 Split - Hvar

This morning we have a walking tour through the heart of ancient Split. We will visit the cryptoporticus (underground vaults) of the Palace, the Mausoleum and Church of St. Domnius, the Peristyle court, and explore the ancient narrow streets still paved with the lustrous white stone of Brac Island. We will also exit the Golden Gate of the palace to see the huge bronze statue of St. Gregory of Nin made by Ivan Mestrovic, the most celebrated sculptor of modern Croatia.

Later we take a short ferry ride to the island of Hvar. En route we will pass the island of Brac, which provided the lustrous white stone for the construction of the Cathedral of Sibenik, Diocletian's Palace at Split, the Cathedral of Liverpool, and the White House in Washington, DC.

The island of Hvar receives 2,724 hours of sunshine per year, more than anywhere else in Croatia, and is thus called the "Island of the Sun". Greeks from Paros first settled on the island in the 4th century BC in Pharos, the modern town of Stari Grad. In the 13th century, the capital of the island was transferred to the town of Hvar (a mutation of Pharos in Slavic) and prospered during the 3.5 centuries of Venetian rule. This picturesque town and marina is alive with the constant hum of activity.

Overnight in Hvar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 13 Hvar: Walking Tour

Hvar, often called the "Croatian Riviera," is a stunning island in the Adriatic Sea, renowned for its sun-kissed beaches, picturesque towns, and rich history. The island's capital, also named Hvar, is a charming coastal town with a vibrant atmosphere.

Our morning tour offers a glimpse into Hvar's historical and cultural heritage. The 15th-century Franciscan Monastery is a particularly fascinating site, housing a Renaissance cloister and a collection of rare manuscripts and books. The church within the monastery boasts an impressive collection of paintings. St. Stephen's Cathedral is another highlight, showcasing the island's architectural and religious significance.

The afternoon is yours to explore Hvar at your own pace. You could wander through the town's narrow, winding streets, admiring the Venetian-style architecture and boutique shops. Or, for the more adventurous, a hike up to the Venetian castle offers breathtaking panoramic views of the town and the surrounding islands.

Overnight in Hvar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 14 Hvar, Croatia - Pocitelj, Bosnia-Herzegovina - Mostar

Today we embark on a scenic route from the sun-kissed island of Hvar to the enchanting city of Mostar. Our adventure begins with a ferry ride to the charming coastal town of Drvenik. From there, we'll wind our way along the picturesque Dalmatian coast, taking in breathtaking views of the Adriatic Sea.

As we approach the border crossing at Metkovic, we'll turn inland and enter the captivating region of Herzegovina. Our first stop will be the historic town of Pocitelj, a true gem nestled along the Neretva River. This picturesque town is a fascinating blend of Mediterranean and Oriental influences, evident in its stunning architecture, including the iconic Ottoman-era fortress and the charming old bazaar.

After exploring the timeless beauty of Pocitelj, we'll continue our journey to Mostar, a city that has captivated visitors for centuries. Despite the significant damage it suffered during the recent wars, Mostar has undergone remarkable restoration efforts and has reclaimed its position as one of Bosnia and Herzegovina's most iconic destinations.

Upon arrival in Mostar, we'll be greeted by the enchanting sight of the iconic Stari Most (Old Bridge), a magnificent Ottoman-era bridge that spans the emerald-green Neretva River. This historic bridge, along with the charming old town, is a testament to the city's rich cultural heritage and resilience.

Overnight in Mostar.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 15 Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina: Walking Tour - Dubrovnik, Croatia

We begin our day with a walking tour of Mostar.

Our tour will include a visit to the ancient city dating to the 16th/17th centuries, a visit inside a traditional house dating to this period, and a visit to the recently rebuilt Mostar Bridge, the emblem of the city. We also include the Museum of War and Genocide Victims, a poignant memorial dedicated to the victims of the Bosnian War (1992-1995). Through harrowing exhibits, personal accounts, and multimedia displays, the museum sheds light on the atrocities committed during the conflict.

After our tour of Mostar, we will begin our journey to Dubrovnik with a stop in the fortified town of Ston en route. We arrive into Dubrovnik in the late afternoon.

The history of Dubrovnik, or ancient Ragusa, begins in the 7th century, when it was under the protection of the Byzantine Empire. In the 12th century Ragusa, formerly an island, merged with mainland settlements and the channel between was filled in with carted-in material. Today this area is the main street of the old city named the Placa or Stradun. After shaking off the yoke of Venice in 1385, Ragusa became an independent republic. It remained one of the most powerful maritime powers in the Mediterranean for over four centuries (until 1808). Ragusa was the link between the Mediterranean and the Balkans and hence developed into an important centre of trade and shipping. Dairy products, wax, honey, timber, coals, salt, silver, lead, copper, wine, oil, fish and slaves were all traded. During the "Golden Age" of Ragusa in the 16th century, she had the 3rd largest merchant fleet in the world and consulates in over 50 countries. After changing hands a number of

times, the city was finally ceded to Croatia (former Yugoslavia) and in 1918 the Slavic name of Dubrovnik was officially adopted.

Overnight in Dubrovnik (just outside Old Town).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 16 Dubrovnik: Walking Tour

This morning features a walking tour of Dubrovnik's historic center. Dubrovnik has been called "Croatian Athens" and the "Pearl of the Mediterranean" for its astounding beauty, sophisticated history and culture, and prosperity.

Over the course of its tumultuous history, the city had to be extensively reconstructed; the earthquake of 1667 destroyed much of the city; and in recent memory, the town was bombarded by over 2,000 shells in 1991-2. After great international efforts, the city has been restored to its former glory, with its towering fortifications, magnificent medieval architecture, red tiled roofs, winding paved streets and picturesque harbours.

Today we visit the Cathedral and Sponza Palace; en route we will see many famous landmarks including Onofrio's fountain, the Clock Tower, Roland's Column and the Church of St. Blaise, the patron saint of Dubrovnik.

We also walk the walls of Dubrovnik, considered by many to be a highlight of our visit. The total circuit is nearly 2km / 1.25 mi, and from the bastions you will have magnificent views of the city's monuments, including the Minceta Tower, Revelin Tower, and the mighty fortress of St. Lawrence, with walls 12m / 40 feet thick!

Your afternoon is free to enjoy this memorable place.

Overnight in Dubrovnik.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 17 Dubrovnik, Croatia - Montenegro - Tirana, Albania

A morning drive takes us along beautiful Adriatic coast. We cross the border into Montenegro just before Boka Kotorska Bay. Our route also takes us near the tourist resort of Becici, then the little town of Milocer with its beautiful beach and the palace of one of the last Yugoslavian queen before WWII. We pass Petrovac, another lovely coastal resort, the main harbour of Bar and the old town of Ulcinj before crossing the border into Albania.

NOTE: You will likely say farewell to your Adriatic Tour Leader in Dubrovnik and meet your Albania Tour Leader on arrival in Tirana. Today's journey is scenic and comfortable, but it will likely be a full day of travel without a leader or guide.

Overnight in Tirana.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 18 Tirana & Kruja

Our morning takes us to Kruja, a town dramatically situated on a hillside, a place that once stood as the heart of Albanian resistance against the Ottoman Empire, led by their national hero, Scanderbeg. Here, we will explore the historic fortress of Kruja, offering views that sweep across the landscape. Within its walls, we'll visit the Scanderbeg Museum, dedicated to his legacy, and the Ethnographic Museum, providing insights into local traditions. Time will also be allocated to wander through the old bazaar, a trove of souvenirs including unique, handcrafted items.

Later, our journey returns us to Tirana, where we will discover the capital's highlights. We plan to see the Ethem Bey Mosque (please note that restoration work may lead us to visit the World Bektashi Headquarters just outside Tirana instead). We will also experience Bunk Art 2, a fascinating museum housed within a former nuclear bunker. Its robust concrete walls now enclose an exhibition detailing the period of



political persecution in Albania from 1945 to 1991, presenting a poignant look at a significant chapter of the nation's history within this repurposed 'Pillar' of the past.

Our evening will be spent in Tirana.

Overnight in Tirana.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 19 Tirana - Durres - Berat

Our day begins with a drive towards Berat, a journey that first takes us through Durres (once known as Durrazzo), Albania's second city and a place with ancient roots. Legend tells us it was founded by the Illyrian King Epidamnos, who lent it his name, while the port was named after his grandson, Dyrrah. For centuries, this was the Adriatic's principal port, later marking a moment in history in 1939 when Italian forces met a brief but determined resistance, those lost becoming remembered as early figures of the National Liberation War.

In Durres, we will explore the archaeological museum and the impressive Roman amphitheatre, one of the largest in the Balkans, situated near the harbour and currently considered for UNESCO World Heritage status. Our exploration will continue with a walk to the remnants of the Roman Baths, located near the central square.

Our final destination for the day is Berat, often called the "city of a thousand windows," a UNESCO-protected "museum city" and a true highlight of Albania. Once known as Antipatrea, it rises along the slopes of Mount Tomorri, with its commanding castle. Within the castle walls, we'll find dwellings and the Onufri Museum, showcasing the works of the renowned 16th-century painter and his son.

Much of our time in Berat will be spent in its old quarter, perhaps one of the best-preserved Ottoman-era cities in the Balkans, featuring a vibrant lower town and a beautiful medieval citadel perched atop the hill. A key experience here is visiting the still-inhabited citadel, where we can see the remains of mosques and several medieval Orthodox churches, complete with restored frescoes and icons. The notable Onufri museum, with its exceptional collection of Albanian icons, resides within a beautiful church here. In the lower town, we will view the Leaded Mosque, the Bachelor's Mosque (please note potential renovations), the Sultan's Mosque, and an Ottoman-era inn.

Overnight in Berat.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 20 Berat - Ardenica Monastery - Apollonia - Saranda

Today we travel to the rarely-visited yet magnificent Ardenica Monastery, remotely located on a hilltop between the towns of Lushjë and Fier. In the fantastic interiors of the 18th century Church of St Mary, the iconostasis dominates the nave, but equally impressive is the golden pulpit, which positively heaves with adornments, not to mention the frescoes of the Zografi brothers that can be seen on display upstairs.

We continue to Apollonia, founded in 558 BC by settlers from Corfu and Corinth. After a tour of the Roman site's library and beautiful Odeon, we proceed to the town of Saranda, the southernmost town on the Albanian coast. It became important in Roman times as a strategic point along the sea route between Italy and Greece.

Overnight in Saranda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 21 Saranda & Butrint

This morning, we set out to explore Butrint, a site that holds a special place as Albania's most significant archaeological treasure, where the echoes of Greek and Roman civilizations resonate through the ancient stones.

The story of Butrint unfolds from the 7th century BC, a time when it emerged as a Greek settlement. Its strategic importance grew, leading to



its later establishment as a Roman colony, and subsequently, it experienced periods under the influence of both the Venetian Republic and the Ottoman Empire. Interestingly, the ancient poet Virgil wove a tale suggesting that the legendary Trojans once settled here, a romantic notion that continues to intrigue, though archaeological findings have yet to substantiate it.

Within a hundred years of the Greeks' arrival, Butrint had developed into a formidable fortified trading city, crowned by its own acropolis, the ruins of which offer us a tangible connection to this distant past. As we explore the rediscovered city, we'll find ourselves immersed in a microcosm spanning nearly three millennia of Mediterranean history. The impressive 6th-century BC fortification still stands, a testament to the city's ancient military power and a poignant symbol of the rich and dynamic culture that once flourished within its boundaries. Walking through these ruins, one can almost envision the lives and times of those who walked these paths centuries ago.

Overnight in Saranda.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 22 Saranda - Gjirokastra

Today's journey takes us towards Gjirokastra, a town of striking beauty nestled on a mountainside overlooking the Drino River, and also the birthplace of Albania's former long-time leader, Enver Hoxha. En route, we'll pause to experience the natural wonder of the "Blue Eye," a captivating freshwater spring formed in the shape of an eye, surrounded by lush greenery.

Gjirokastra itself is a designated UNESCO World Heritage site, a "museum city" that graces the eastern slopes of "Mali i Gjerë." The city's origins can be traced back to its castle, erected in the fourth century AD. In 1417, the Ottoman army's arrival marked a new chapter, with the city reaching its zenith between 1800 and 1830, a period that saw the construction of grand assembly houses. The Bazaar and Hazmurate were among its earliest neighbourhoods. A defining characteristic of Gjirokastra is the extensive use of stone in its architecture, giving the houses the appearance of miniature fortresses, connected by cobblestone streets that all converge at the vibrant bazaar. This unique feature has also earned Gjirokastra the evocative name, "The Stone City."

During our time here, we will visit the Skenduli house, a remarkable illustration of the harmonious blend between Albanian and Ottoman architectural styles. We will also explore the pre-Ottoman citadel, which houses a weapons museum and a former political prison, offering a glimpse into different facets of the city's past.

Overnight in Gjirokastra.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 23 Gjirokastra - Kamenica - Korca

This will be a rewarding day of travel (approximately 200km) through the captivating southeastern part of Albania. The journey itself offers a delightful panorama of mountains, rivers, forests, national parks, gorges, and the quaint charm of isolated villages. We will likely make a few stops in Leskovik and nearby villages, where former communist military bunkers, now often serving as animal shelters, offer an intriguing glimpse into the past.

En route to Korca, we will also pause to visit the Tumulus of Kamenica after a break for lunch in Rehova. This tumulus stands as the largest burial monument of its kind among the numerous tumuli discovered in Albania and neighbouring Balkan countries. The site also features a museum dedicated to the prehistory of Albania and the surrounding region.

Our route to Korca (pronounced 'Korchah') continues through Kelcyra and the spectacular Vjosa canyons extending to Permet, the mountains around Leskovik, and the colourful landscapes of Erseka. Korca is a historic city with rich cultural traditions and interesting architecture from the Ottoman era, including one of Albania's most significant mosques.

Overnight in Korca.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 24 Korca: City Touring & Voskopoja

Korça is one of the largest and most important cultural and economic centers of Albania. The city is known for its typical quarters composed of low houses and villas, which are paved with cobblestone. Because of its beauty, French-style villas and coffee culture, Korca is often called the 'little Paris of Albania'.

This morning we visit the Bazaar of Korca and National Museum of Medieval Art. This must-see museum houses 7,000 items of cultural significance and even a few pieces by Onufri, the most famous icon painter in the country. The old Bazaar has great early historical, cultural and artistic value for the city. It is characterized by one and two story buildings in classic Korça style, separated by narrow cobbled streets that open onto a central square. In past centuries, the bazaar has functioned as a market for trade not just within Albania, but also from Turkey, Greece, Trieste, and Venice. It has been noted for the row of inns, including the Old Elbasan and Old Monastery Inn, which served to host travellers visiting the market from outside the city. The market reached its apex during the late 19th and early 20th centuries with more than 1,000 stores; with so many shops, the bazaar was like a city within a city.

This afternoon we visit the nearby town of Voskopoja, which became one of the most developed and prosperous cities in the European part of the Ottoman Empire between the 17 and 18th centuries. Testament to this are the first Printing House in the Balkans in 1720, the Academia of Voskopoja founded in 1744, the famous Basilicas, the painted house walls by the famous Albanian painters including David Selenica and the Zeografi brothers.

Overnight in Korca.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 25 Korca - Pogradec, Albania - Ohrid, North Macedonia

Today we travel to Lake Ohrid, the deepest in the Balkans. We stop at Tushemisht village for a visit of the villa of the former Albanian dictator, Enver Hoxha.

We cross into North Macedonia (known before 2018 as just 'Macedonia'), a landlocked and mostly mountainous country in southeastern Europe. North Macedonia proclaimed independence from Yugoslavia in September 1991. Its mountainous landscape is right at the heart of the Balkans, sprinkled with beautiful valleys and lakes, with a rich Hellenic heritage. Its churches and mosques contain many fine examples of art and architecture from the Byzantine and Ottoman periods.

Our final destination today is the city of Ohrid, an attractive little town on the Balkan Peninsula and is the pride of North Macedonia. With its historic town centre and stunning Lake vistas, this place really is a gem. For Orthodox Macedonians it is the spiritual heart of their country and a focus of national pride. It was here that Sts Clement and Naum in the 9th century founded the first Slavic university. Time-permitting, we may accomplish some of our Ohrid sightseeing today upon arrival.

Overnight in Ohrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 26 Ohrid: Area Tour

Today we have a walking tour around the old 'town-museum' of Ohrid, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The old part of the town was known in ancient times as Lychnidus, the City of Lights. Slavs gave it the name of Arida in the 10th century, and it became a major center of culture and art for this area. It is the cradle of Slavic written language and literature, from where the alphabet called Cyrillic was created by the two brothers Cyril and Methody.

Ohrid is also known as the "City of 365 Churches" and we visit a few of the most important ones. St. Panteleimon Monastery from the 9th century is the oldest Slav monastery in the world. Ohrid abounds with ancient archaeological sites, including an amphitheatre and fortress. During our tour of Ohrid we will also walk through the local bazaar. While in Ohrid we'll also visit the Roman Amphitheater.

This afternoon we embark on a boat tour on the lake. Our journey will take us along the eastern shores of the lake and down to the southern tip. We will disembark for a tour of the 10th century Monastery of Saint Naum before returning to the town of Ohrid on the northern shores.

Overnight in Ohrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 27 Galcica National Park & Bitola

Today we proceed to Prespa Lake for a drive through the National Park of Galcica, bordered on two sides by lakes Prespa and Ohrid. The views the park afforded of both lakes is impressive, punctuated with villages of whitewashed houses with red tiled roofs.

We'll stop at Heraclea Lyncestis, among Macedonia's best archaeological sites. We see the Roman baths, portico and amphitheatre, and the striking Early Christian basilica and episcopal palace ruins, with beautiful, well-preserved floor mosaics – they're unique in depicting endemic trees and animals.

Afterwards we proceed to Bitola for a walk along the old and well known Sirok Sokak (Broad Street), where the Consulates of European countries were located at the time of the Ottoman Empire.

After free time for lunch and refreshment, we continue to Gazi Haydar Kadi Mosque,\* dating from 1561. This mosque, with perfect proportions and two minarets, is one of the most beautiful examples of classical Turkish style of architecture. We also include Yeni Mosque, built in 1558 and well-known for its exquisite decorative ornaments and stalactites. Finally, St. Dimitrija, built in 1830, is a cathedral well-known for its wood carved iconostasis and ecclesiastical furniture.

\* Please note that both mosques have been periodically closed for renovation, which seems to occur on an unpredictable schedule. Should this be the case for our visit, we may visit Kemal Atatürk and the Bitola Museums instead.

Overnight in Ohrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 28 Lake Ohrid - Tetovo - Skopje

Today's route will take us across the National Park of Mavrovo with its majestic lake, river, gorges, and waterfalls. En route we stop at the amazing monastery of Sveti Jovan Bigorski. In Tetovo we will stop to visit the Painted Mosque located by the Pena River, constructed in 1459 on the foundation of an older edifice. An example of early Constantinople style, this mosque is adorned with an elaborate painted facade and interior, making it unique in Macedonia. In the turbe next to the mosque is the body of the two women who provided money for the mosque to be built in 1459. We also include the Arabati Baba Teqe, a blending of mosque, church and shrine for Sufi Muslims.

We finish in Skopje, once located at the far north reaches of the Byzantine Empire. The name of the city itself reflects its geographic location and role within the empire, as the word Skopia translates to watch-tower / lookout / observation point.

Overnight in Skopje.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 29 Skopje: City Tour

Skopje is not only the capital but also the largest city in North Macedonia.

Located in a valley on both sides of River Vardar, Skopje traces its ancient history back over 2,000 years to when it was known as Skupi. This region has been ruled at various times by ancient Rome, Byzantium, the First Bulgarian Empire and the Ottoman Turks. The Skopje Old Bazaar emerged and developed in an area between the Stone Bridge and the Bazaar, and between the Kale fortress and the Serava River. As early as in late middle age, all economic activity of the town took place here. In the period between the 16th and 17th century, the Old Bazaar reached its urban and economic zenith, developing into one of the largest and most significant oriental old bazaars in the Balkans.

Today the Old Bazaar abounds in cultural and historic monuments. During our walk we will be sure to visit the Museum of the Old Skopje

Bazaar. Located on the 1st floor of a 15th century inn, this small museum is an essential stop for insight into Skopje's historical importance. We'll also include the new new Archeology Museum, where more than 6,000 artifacts from all historical periods, from prehistory until the Middle Ages are presented.

A walk through the old part of the town allows us to explore this historical city. We will see the Stone Bridge -- a symbol of Skopje built by Turks in 15th century. This is a landmark of the city and an important link between the bazaar area and the modern part of town. The Kale Fortress, with walls dating back from the 6th century, is where a town was first started. This was the great town of Justinia Prima, founded by emperor Justinian, and later used as military barracks by the Ottomans from the 14th to 20th centuries.

Other notable Ottoman monuments we will see today include the Mustapha Pasha Mosque, a marvel of Ottoman architecture towering above the old bazaar area, and the Daut Pasha Hamam (bath), considered a masterpiece of 15th century Islamic civil architecture.

Overnight in Skopje.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 30 Departure

Departure from Skopje.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast