Tour Code
AL1

ADVENTURESABROAD

ALBANIA & NORTH MACEDONIA

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Tirana

Today we arrive in Tirana, capital of Albania. Tirana is located on a plain on the site of a Byzantine fortress and has been the capital since 1920.

Once infamous for its isolation, Albania is one of the smallest as well as the poorest countries of Europe. Today this is a country that is slowly making the transition to open-market economy and moving on the road to progress. In the heart of the Mediterranean, on the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, Albania is soon to become one of Europe's most interesting getaways. Still relatively unspoiled by globalization, you will notice an inspiring mixture of civilizations and cultures, making this country truly unique.

Overnight in Tirana.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 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, Skanderbeg. Here we explore the historic fortress of Kruja, offering views that sweep across the landscape. Within its walls, we visit the Ethnographic Museum, providing insights into local traditions housed in a fine example of Ottoman-era architecture. 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 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). Our exploration of Tirana's recent past takes us to the House of Leaves, a fascinating museum occupying a former residence of the Sigurimi, Albania's Cold War-era secret police. Its walls once witnessed the surveillance apparatus that monitored citizens during the communist period, and today house exhibitions detailing political persecution and espionage operations between 1944 and 1991.

We continue through the Blloku district, once forbidden to ordinary Albanians and reserved for the communist elite. Here we view the former villa of dictator Enver Hoxha, a modest structure that stands in stark contrast to the vibrant cafés and shops that now fill this once-restricted quarter.

Our evening will be spent in Tirana.

Overnight in Tirana.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 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 explore 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 continues 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 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 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 4 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 5 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 6 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 7 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 8 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 Turkiye, 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 9 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 route continues to Bitola, where we 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.

From Bitola, we travel north along Lake Ohrid's western shore toward the town of Ohrid. En route, we stop at the Monastery of Saint Naum, perched dramatically at the lake's southern tip on the border with Albania. Founded in the 10th century by Saint Naum, a disciple of Saints Cyril and Methodius, this monastery occupies a stunning position overlooking the turquoise waters where underground springs from Lake Prespa emerge into Lake Ohrid. The monastery church contains beautiful frescoes and the tomb of its founder, and the surrounding grounds offer peaceful gardens and views across the water.

Our final destination is the city of Ohrid, an attractive town on the Balkan Peninsula and the pride of North Macedonia. With its historic town centre and stunning lake vistas, this place 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 10 Ohrid: Area Tour

This morning we explore Ohrid's old town on foot. The ancient Greeks called this place Lychnidos, "City of Light." When Slavs arrived in the 10th century they renamed it Arida, and it became a major cultural centre. The Cyrillic alphabet originated here through the work of Saints Cyril and Methodius, establishing Ohrid as the cradle of Slavic written language.

Ohrid earned its nickname "City of 365 Churches" through centuries of religious construction. We visit St. Panteleimon Monastery, dating to the 9th century and recognized as the world's oldest Slav monastery. The town contains numerous archaeological sites, including a Roman amphitheatre and fortress ruins. We walk through the local bazaar where traditional crafts continue.

As the day draws to a close, we board a boat for a panoramic sunset cruise on Lake Ohrid. One of Europe's oldest and deepest lakes, Ohrid supports unique endemic species found nowhere else. From the water, we watch the sun descend behind the mountains, casting golden light across the ancient town's churches and fortress walls.

We've spent a week crossing borders, navigating spaces between empires and faiths. Here on this lake, as the light shifts from gold to blue, the borders feel less important. Ohrid has outlasted every empire that claimed it by refusing to be claimed—by remaining, simply, itself. Tomorrow we cross into Albania, a country that tried isolation and is only now rejoining the conversation.

Overnight in Ohrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Galcica National Park & Bitola

Today we 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 Ataturk and the Bitola Museums instead.

Overnight in Ohrid.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 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 13 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 Bulgarion 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 14 Departure

Departure from Skopje.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast