

# Albania

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Tirana** Albania's capital reveals tantalising glimpses of its communist past (p58)
- **Berat** A living museum of Ottoman houses, mosques and an ancient citadel (p62)
- **Off-the-beaten track** Explore the spectacular ruins of Butrint, hidden in the forest (p63)

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 28,748 sq km
- **ATMs** In most cities and towns
- **Budget** €30 per day
- **Capital** Tirana
- **Country codes** ☎ 355; international access code ☎ 00
- **Famous for** concrete bunkers, Ismail Kadare
- **Head of State** President Alfred Moisiu
- **Language** Albanian
- **Money** lekë; €1 = 123 lekë; US\$1 = 96 lekë; UK£1 = 181 lekë; A\$1 = 72 lekë; ¥100 = 86 lekë; NZ\$1 = 60 lekë
- **Phrases** *Tungjatjeta* (hello), *lamtumirë* (goodbye), *ju lutem* (please), *ju falem nderit* (thank you)
- **Population** 3,582,205
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 1
- **Visas** No visa needed for citizens of the EU, Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada; see p65

## TRAVEL HINTS

Take a torch – it will come in handy when the power fails and for avoiding potholes at night. Always carry tissues as there is often no loo paper in the toilets.

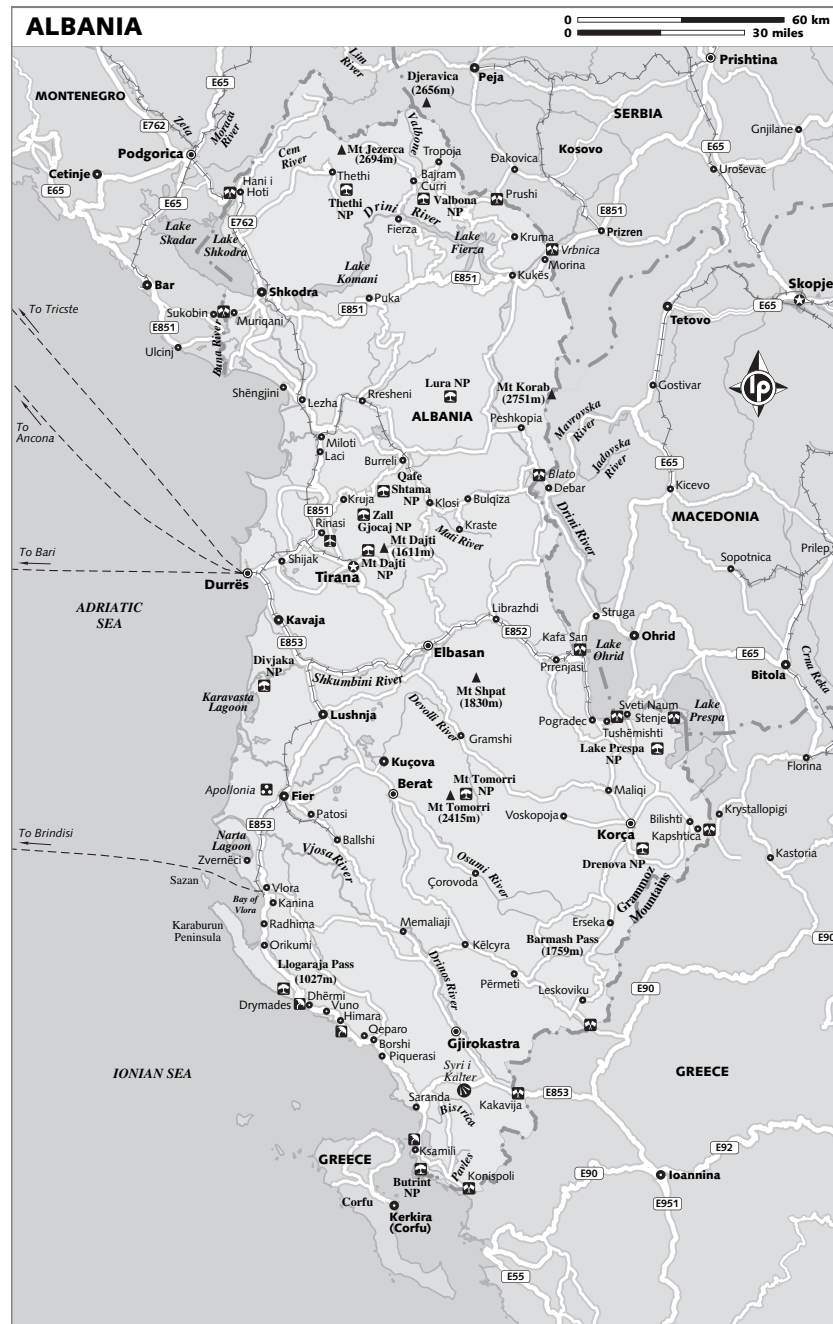
## ROAMING ALBANIA

Start in Tirana, taking a day trip to Kruja, before heading to Apollonia en route to Berat. Head down the Ionian Coast through Dhërmi to Saranda.

Emerging in the 1990s from her hardline communist isolation, Albania was like a stranger from another time. Her cities weren't choked by car fumes, her beaches lay unspoilt by mass tourism, and her long-suffering people were a little dazed and confused. While things have changed a lot since then, this ancient land still offers something increasingly rare in Europe these days – a glance into a culture that is all its own. Albania is distinctly Albanian.

You'll continue to find beautiful unspoilt beaches, fascinating classical sites and dramatic mountain citadels, but the mad traffic of Tirana is symptomatic of a bustling, bright city shrugging off its Stalinist grey patina. Squat toilets are no longer the norm and you can even sip cocktails at hip bars, listening to rock bands.

Not just the preserve of the adventurous, Albania is a warm and sincerely hospitable country – with enough rough edges to keep it interesting (and cheap).



## HISTORY

The Illyrians, ancestors of the Albanians, occupied the western Balkans during the 2nd millennium BC. In the 7th century BC, the Greeks set up colonies, before the Romans invaded in 167 BC. After Rome fell, invasions by various groups of migrating peoples forced the Illyrians south.

In 1344 Albania was annexed by Serbia, but after the defeat of Serbia by the Turks in 1389, the whole region was open to Ottoman attack. National hero Skanderbeg (Gjergj Kastrioti) led the Albanian resistance, but in 1479, after his death, the country fell. There followed 400 years of Ottoman rule.

Uprisings in the late 19th century culminated in a proclamation of independence in 1912. This was severely compromised when Kosovo, roughly one-third of Albania, was ceded to Serbia in 1913.

During WWI, Albania was occupied in succession by the armies of Greece, Serbia, France, Italy and finally Austria–Hungary. In 1928 a northern warlord Ahmet Zogu ended the republic, declaring himself to be King Zogu I. His close collaboration with Italy backfired in April 1939 when Mussolini invaded.

On 8 November 1941 the Albanian Communist Party was founded with Enver Hoxha as first secretary. The communists led the resistance against the Italians and then the Germans.

In January 1946 the People's Republic of Albania was proclaimed, with Hoxha as president. At first, Albania allied itself with Stalin's USSR, but in 1961 realigned itself with China. Progress was made in draining the malarial swamps of the central coastal plains, building hydroelectric schemes (with help from China), raising the literacy level and laying down the country's railway lines.

From 1966 Albania experienced a Chinese-style cultural revolution. Agriculture was collectivised and organised religion banned. Albania's relations with China eventually soured, and the country was left isolated. The economy was devastated and food shortages became common.

Following Hoxha's death in 1985, Albania embarked on a programme of liberalisation and, after growing unrest, the government agreed in December 1990 to allow opposition parties. A series of reforms was announced, but they fell short of voters' expectations and elections in March 1992 ended communist rule.

A severe crisis developed in late 1996 when private pyramid investment schemes spectacularly collapsed. Around 70% of Albanians lost their savings, resulting in nationwide violence. In spring 1999 Albania faced a crisis of a different sort – the influx of 465,000 refugees from neighbouring Kosovo. While this put a tremendous strain on resources, the net effect has been positive. A substantial amount of international aid money has poured in, the service sector has grown and inflation has dropped.

Since 2002 the country has found itself in a kind of miniboom, with money being injected into construction projects and infrastructure. The economy and politics have been stable since elections in 2005, although electricity shortages are still widespread.

## THE CULTURE

In July 2003 the population was estimated to be 3,582,205, of which 95% was Albanian, 3% Greek and 2% 'other' – comprising Vlachs, Roma, Serbs and Bulgarians.

The Albanian people are generally kind, warm and unquestioningly generous. If you ask for directions, don't be surprised if

you're guided all the way to your destination. While it's common to see young men walking around arm and arm, don't mistake this for an expression of gay culture – Albanian society is staunchly homophobic.

While communism opened up many roles and educational opportunities to women, it is still unusual to see women in cafés and bars outside the main cities.

Albanians shake their heads sideways to say yes (*po*) and usually nod and 'tsk' to say no (*yo*).

Albania is quite a safe country for women travellers, but outside Tirana you may find yourself the only woman at a bar – it's mainly men who go out. Staring seems to be a national pastime, and both men and women will find themselves on the receiving end.

## ENVIRONMENT

Albania has three main zones: a coastal plain, a mountainous region and an interior plain. The forested mountain spine makes up 75% of the country, peaking at Mt Korab (2751m). Forests, covering an estimated 36%, are home to animals such as bears, deer and wild boar.

Most of Albania's national parks are only protected by their remoteness, and tree cutting and hunting still take place. Mt Dajti, Mt Tomorri and Llogaraja Pass are the most accessible for hikers. Independent camping is not advisable, as help if needed would be impossible to find.

Albania is facing some serious environmental issues. The decrepit oil fields in the central plains around Fier constantly leak black sludge into the rivers and down to the sea. There is a disturbing amount of rubbish littering roadsides, beaches, picnic spots and remote valleys – just about everywhere. The unique *koran* (Lake Ohrid trout) is on the brink of extinction, yet you still see it on restaurant menus.

## READING UP

Ismail Kadare's *The Concert* (1988) and *The Successor* (2005) give great insight into daily life under communism. His Man Booker International Prize-winning *Spring Flowers*, *Spring Frost* (2002) shines a light on the transition period, as does Lloyd Jones' excellent *Biografi* (1993).

# TRANSPORT

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Albania's only international airport is **Nënë Tereza International Airport** (aka Mother Theresa and, more commonly, Rinas), 26km north-west of Tirana. There are direct flights to 16 Italian cities, as well as the main centres in the region. British Airways (BA) has just started flights from Gatwick.

### DEPARTURE TAX

No matter how you enter Albania you will have to pay a €10 charge. On leaving, there's also another €10 fee. There is a €1 daily tariff on vehicles, payable upon crossing the border out of the country.

### Land

From Tirana, buses for Prishtina (€30, 10 hours, 343km, three daily) leave from behind the museum near Sheshi Skënderbej. Buses for Sofia (€40, 17 hours) leave from **Albtransport** (☎ 223 026; Rr Miene Peza, Tirana; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri).

Macedonian-bound buses, going through Struga (€10, six hours, 197km, six per week) and on to Tetovo, leave from the patch of mud in front of the train station. Get your tickets from the nearby **Pollogu travel agency** (☎ 04-23 500; 069-209 4906; Bldg 103, Bul Zogu I), upstairs in an apartment building. The entrance is next to a bright orange café called Pause.

Bringing a car or motorcycle to Albania is a risky business as theft and bad roads can be problems. Additionally, your insurance may not cover Albania.

### Sea

There's a daily boat from Saranda to Corfu (more in summer; €17.50, one hour, 27km) and ferries from Vlora to Brindisi (€40, four to seven hours, 13 weekly).

Boats leave from Durrës for Ancona, Bari and Trieste. In the low season **Adriatica Navigazione** ([www.adriatica.it](http://www.adriatica.it)) has one boat to Bari daily. Other companies (Venturis, Espresso, Marlines) have a couple of boats per week. Adriatica is the biggest and best choice, its boats reach Bari first, avoiding delays on arrival. The journey takes eight hours, but can stretch to 12 in bad weather. The prices change frequently.

## BUNKER LOVE

On the hillsides, beaches, people's front gardens and generally most surfaces in Albania, you will notice small concrete domes seeming to gaze at you through their rectangular slits. Meet the bunkers: Enver Hoxha's concrete legacy, built between 1950 and 1985. Weighing in at 5 tonnes of concrete and iron, these little mushrooms are almost impossible to destroy, as they were built to repel an invasion and can resist a full tank assault – a fact proven by their chief engineer who had to vouch for his creation's strength by standing inside a bunker while it was bombarded by a tank. The shell-shocked engineer emerged unscathed and an estimated 700,000 bunkers were built. They do have one modern use – quite a few Albanians will admit to losing their virginity in the security of a bunker. It puts a whole new spin on practising safe sex!

In the low season Adriatica has three boats per week to Ancona, while **Kad** (☎ 052-25 154; www.agemar.it) has two weekly boats to Trieste.

## GETTING AROUND

### Bus

Most Albanians travel in buses or *furgons* (nine to 12-seater vans). Buses to Tirana depart from towns all around Albania at the crack of dawn. Pay the conductor on board.

Both buses and *furgons* are dirt cheap, privately owned and don't follow a timetable – they leave when they've got enough passengers to make it worth their while.

The *furgon* system can seem daunting at first, but it works really well. There are always more *furgons* running in the mornings and the last departure is usually in plenty of time to arrive before nightfall.

### Car & Motorcycle

Driving in Albania is only for the foolhardy, as roads are often bad and the local drivers kamikazes. For car rental in Tirana try **Sixt** (☎ 259 020; Rr e Kavajës 116) or **Hertz** (☎ 255 028; Hotel Tirana International, Sheshi Skënderbej).

### Train

Train travel is incredibly cheap but the decrepit carriages typically have broken windows, no toilets and are agonisingly slow. That said, they are something of an adventure and some of the routes are quite scenic. There's an informative unofficial website at www.angelfire.com/ak/hekurudha/.

## GETTING INTO TOWN

Hertz operates a shuttle bus service from the airport to the centre of Tirana for 500 lekë (€4). Your other options are taxis (about €20) or the infrequent buses that leave from the car park (€20).

# TIRANA

☎ 04 / pop 700,000

Lively, colourful Tirana has changed beyond belief in the last decade from the dull, grey city it once was. It's amazing what a lick of paint can do – covering one ugly tower block with horizontal orange and red stripes and another with concentric pink and purple circles.

## EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- Ambulance ☎ 127
- Fire ☎ 128
- Police ☎ 129

The neighbourhood of Blloku buzzes with well-dressed kids hanging out of bars or zipping between boutiques. The city's grand boulevards are lined with fascinating relics of its Ottoman, Italian and communist past, guarded by bored-looking soldiers with automatic weapons. The traffic does daily battle with both itself and pedestrians in a constant scene of unmitigated chaos. On any given day half the roads seem to be dug up. It can be hard to tell where the roadwork ends and the potholes begin.

Loud, crazy, colourful, dirty – Tirana is simply fascinating.

## ORIENTATION

Tirana revolves around the busy Sheshi Skënderbej (Skanderbeg Sq). Running south to the University and park-covered hill beyond is shady Bulevardi Dëshmorët e Kombit. Running north, Bulevardi Zogu I leads to the busy train and bus station. The Lana River is like a large culvert, cutting the city in two below Sheshi Skënderbej. Mt Dajti (1611m) rises 25km to the east.

## INFORMATION

Tirana does not have an official tourist office. Useful references include *Tirana in Your Pocket* (www.inyourpocket.com; 400 lekë) and *Tirana: The Practical Guide and Map of Tirana* (200 lekë), available from the main bookshops and hotels.

There are plenty of ATMs connected to international networks in the city. Independent moneychangers operate in front of the main post office. Travellers cheques are near-impossible to exchange outside Tirana, so if you're relying on them try the **American Bank of Albania** (☎ 276 000; Rr Ismail Qemali 27; ☎ 9.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri).

**ABC Family Health Center** (☎ 234 105; Rr Qemal Stafa 360; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) English-speaking doctors offering regular (US\$60) and emergency (US\$72) consultations.

**Albania Travel & Tours** (☎ 232 983; albaniatravelandtours@yahoo.com; Rr Durrësit 102) A central agency that books flights, ferries and private rooms.

**Center Internet** (Rr Brigada e VIII; ☎ 24hr; per hr 100 lekë) Look for the yellow sign down a laneway. New computers and fast internet connections.

**Main post office & telephone centre** (☎ 228 262; Sheshi Çameria; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri)

**Outdoor Albania** (☎ 272 075; www.outdooralbania.com) Trailblazing adventure-tour agency, offering all manner of specialist tours with a strong commitment to ecotourism.

**Post office branch** (Rr Mohamet Gjollësia)

**Telephone centre** (Bul Zogu I; ☎ 7.30am-6.30pm)

There another post office on Rruga Mohamet Gjollësia.

## SIGHTS

**Sheshi Skënderbej** is the bustling heart of the city. The **equestrian statue of Skanderbeg** stands deaf to the cacophony of screeching horns on the battlefield below. Nearby, a delicate minaret marks out a true survivor. The exquisite 18th-century **Et'hem Bey Mosque** escaped destruction during WWII and went on to survive the state's atheism campaign due to its sheer beauty. Take off your shoes and look inside at the beautifully painted dome.

Across the square, bedecked with the wonderful socialist-realist *Albania* mosaic, is the **National Historical Museum** (admission 300 lekë; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-7pm Tue-Sat, 9am-noon & 5-7pm Sun). Inside are archaeological treasures dating back to 100,000 BC and an extensive communist section (unfortunately without English translations).

Running south from the square the spacious, tree-lined, fascist-designed, pothole-covered **Bulevardi Dëshmorët e Kombit** houses most of the government buildings, recognisable by their Italianate columns and heat-packing military guards. Along the boulevard **National Art Gallery** (admission 100 lekë; ☎ 9am-7pm) has a wonderful collection ranging from 13th-century icons to modern art, but most interesting are the large socialist-realist canvases.

Cross the oversized dirty drain that is the Lana River to the sloping white-marble and glass walls of the **Pyramid** (nr Bul Bajram Curri & Dëshmorët e Kombit) – aka the former Enver Hoxha Museum (1988) – designed by Hoxha's daughter and son-in-law. In an hilarious twist of fate, the building that once housed a grandiose statue of the ruler is now home to a disco called *The Mummy*. In front of the Pyramid a touching little memorial to the country's difficult post-communist years is the **Bell of Peace**, forged from bullet cases col-

lected by Albanian schoolchildren during the anarchy of 1997.

Further down the boulevard, the **Council of Ministers building** still has an impressive socialist relief, along with the 2nd-floor balcony where Enver Hoxha would stand and view military parades. In the forecourt of **Tirana University**, which abuts the boulevard, is a **statue of Mother Teresa** – arms outstretched as if to give you a big hug.

Beyond the University the lush **Parku Kombëtar**, with its serene artificial lake, stretches up to the **former palace of King Zogu** (Rr Elbasanit; admission free). Across the road the **Martyrs' Cemetery**, lies under the shadow of the immense, beautiful and strangely androgynous **Mother Albania statue** (1972). Hoxha was buried here, but was exhumed in 1992 and interred in an ordinary graveyard on the other side of town.

Nestled between the park, the boulevard and the river is the once totally forbidden but now totally trendy **Blloku**, the former exclusive Communist Party neighbourhood. Look for the three-storey pastel-coloured house which was the **former residence of Enver Hoxha** (nr Rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit & Ismail Qemali; admission free).

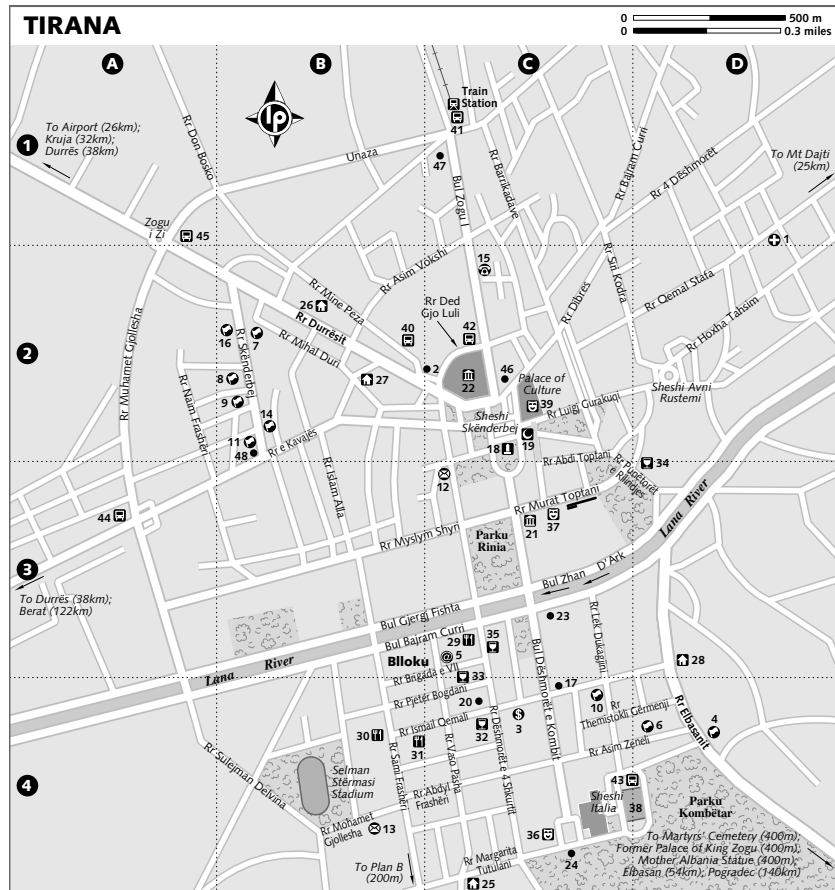
## SLEEPING

**Curpick Tirana Backpacker Hostel** (☎ 272075, 069-218 8845; tiranabackpacker@hotmail.com; Rr Elbasanit 85; dm €12) The young crew that runs this place is your ticket to a good time in Tirana. This large villa has 13 beds in three rooms and two shared bathrooms, although at the time of research the downstairs floor was being converted into more rooms and a bar. Guests are free to use the balconies, garden, kitchen and laundry. Winter power cuts are usually brief, but they do tend to affect the water supply.

**Hotel Endri** (☎ 244 168, 069-227 2522; Rr Vaso Pasha 27, entrance 3, apt 30; s/d €20/30; ☎) Not a hotel at all, the Endri consists of seven sparkling-clean rooms housed in two communist-era blocks. It's great value and located where all the action is. Call in advance, as you'll never find this place on your own.

**Hotel Kruja** (☎ 238 106; fax 238 108; Rr Mine Peza; s/d/tr €35/50/75; ☎) While the exterior looks like a 1960s motel, the rooms are bright, airy and clean.

**Hotel Lugano** (☎ /fax 222 023; Rr Mihal Duri 34; s/d €40/50; ☎) This handsome little hotel has light-flooded rooms with small balconies.



## EATING

Tirana has no shortage of restaurants, fresh-produce stalls and fast-food joints selling cheap *qebaps* (kebabs), *byrek* (meat, cheese or vegetable filled pastries) and pizza slices.

**Buke dhe Embelsira Franceze** (Rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit 1; breakfast 210 lekë; ☎ 7.30am-10.30pm) One of the few good breakfast spots in Tirana; stop for a coffee and croissant or take away a delicious pastry.

**Plan B** (Rr Sami Frashëri; mains 500 lekë; ☎ noon-4.30pm & 7-11.30pm) This fantastic pasta place, south of the Stelman Stërmasi Stadium, cooks to your request with deliciously fresh ingredients – a great option for vegetarians.

**Era** (☎ 274 949; Rr Ismail Qemali; mains 600 lekë) Traditional Albanian fare in the heart of Blloku.

## DRINKING & CLUBBING

**Sky Club Panoramic Bar** (☎ 221 666; Sky Tower, Rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit) This rotating tower offers amazing views but we wouldn't recommend it for a heavy night – the rotation is a bit jerky and may leave you slightly seasick.

**Living Room** (☎ 274 837; Rr Punetoret e Rilindjes 16; ☎ 7.30pm-late) The hippest place to drink and dance in Tirana.

Tirana's vibrant and fast-changing bar scene is easily accessed by strolling the streets of Blloku. **Buda-bar** (Rr Ismail Qemali; ☎ 4.30pm-late) has subdued lighting and a groovy crowd. **Charl's** (Rr Pjeter Bogdani 5; ☎ 8am-late) is a rocking student pub, with a great beer garden and a constant roster of bands playing live on the weekends.

INFORMATION		Equestrian Statue of Skanderbeg		DRINKING ☎	
ABC Family Health Centre	1 D1	Skanderbeg	18 C2	Buda-bar	32 C4
Albania Travel & Tours	2 C2	Former Residence of Enver Hoxha	20 C4	Charl's	33 C3
American Bank of Albania	3 C4	National Art Gallery	21 C3	Living Room	34 D3
American Embassy	4 D4	National Historical Museum	22 C2	Sky Club Panoramic Bar	35 C3
Center Internet	5 C3	Pyramid	23 C3	ENTERTAINMENT ☎	
Dutch Embassy	6 D4	Statue of Mother Teresa	(see 24)	Academy of Arts	36 C4
French Embassy	7 B2	Tirana University	24 C4	Kinema Millenium 2	37 C3
German Embassy	8 B2	SLEEPING ☎		Qemal Stafa Stadium	38 C4
Greek Embassy	9 B2	Hotel Endri	25 C4	Theatre of Opera & Ballet	39 C2
Italian Embassy	10 C4	Hotel Kruja	26 B2	TRANSPORT	
Macedonian Embassy	11 B2	Hotel Lugano	27 B2	Albtransport	40 B2
Main Post Office	12 C3	Tirana Backpacker Hostel	28 D3	Bus Station & Furgons to Durrës & Macedonia	41 C1
Post Office Branch	13 B4	EATING ☎		Buses to Prishtina	42 C2
Serbia Embassy	14 B2	Buke dhe Embelsira	44 A3	Furgons to Elbasan & Pogradec	43 C4
Telephone Centre	15 C2	Franceze	29 C3	Furgons to Fier, Vlora & Gjirokastra	44 A3
Telephone Centre (see 12)	16 B2	Efendy	30 B4	Furgons to Kruja	45 A1
UK Embassy	16 B2	Era	31 B4	Furgons to Prishtina & Pogradec	46 C2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		Council of Ministers Building	17 C4	Pollogu Travel Agency	47 C1
(see 23)		Sixt	48 B2		

## ENTERTAINMENT

**Kinema Millenium 2** (☎ 253 654; Rr Murat Toptani; admission 200-500 lekë) Screens recent English-language movies.

For classical music check out the **Theatre of Opera and Ballet** (☎ 224 753; Palace of Culture, Sheshi Skënderbej; admission around 500 lekë) and the **Academy of Arts** (☎ 257 237; Sheshi Nënë Tereza). **Qemal Stafa Stadium** hosts football matches and rock concerts.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Nënë Tereza International Airport is at Rinas, 26km from the city (see p57).

### Bus

Getting out of Tirana can be extremely confusing. You have the option of buses or *furgons* (see p58 for more information), which leave from hubs on the outskirts of the city which are prone to move from time to time. Travelling times are totally dependent on what degree of 'crazy' the traffic out of town is currently operating at.

At the time of writing, *furgons* going to Kruja (150 lekë, 45 minutes, 32km) leave from the chaotic Zogu i Zi roundabout. You can catch a *furgon* to Fier (400 lekë, 2½ hours, 122km), Vlora (400 lekë, three hours, 161km) and Gjirokastra (1000 lekë, five hours, 244km) from Rrugë e Kavajës, and there are also buses to Fier (300 lekë).

*Furgons* towards Macedonia (Elbasan and Pogradec) leave from a stand by Qemal Stafa

Stadium. For information about buses to Prishtina in Kosovo and to Macedonia via Struga, see p57.

If all else fails, ask a taxi driver to take you to the right spot.

### Train

The run-down train station is located at the northern end of Bulevardi Zogu I. Destinations include Durrës (55 lekë, one hour, 36km, eight daily), Fier (175 lekë, 4¼ hours) and Pogradec (245 lekë, seven hours, twice daily).

## GETTING AROUND

The central city is easily traversable on foot. Taxi stands dot the city and charge 400 lekë for a ride inside Tirana (600 lekë at night).

### SPLURGE

**Efendy** (☎ 274 949; Rr Sami Frashëri; mains 1000-1500 lekë) Foodie alert! Housed in an inconspicuous building in Blloku is an authentic Ottoman dining experience that is as much a history lesson as a sublime culinary one. Chef Ahmet Dursun hails from Turkey where he learnt recipes from the old Ottoman chefs. He landed in Albania 12 years ago (as an opera singer – it's a long story), and he's since travelled throughout the Balkans collecting dishes along the way. Let him lead you through his seasonal delicacies and you won't be disappointed.

## CENTRAL ALBANIA

### KRUJA

☎ 0511 / pop 17,400

You begin to appreciate Kruja's impressive beauty during the journey to reach it – up the winding road through the grey mountains to Skanderbeg's citadel. It's a magnificent day trip from Tirana and the bazaar is the best place for souvenir shopping in the whole of Albania.

Wander around the old streets of the still-inhabited **castle** (admission 100 lekë) with children and teenagers running around, and make sure you check out the **Skanderbeg Museum** (admission 200 lekë; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-6pm, Tue-Sun), **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 22 225; admission 300 lekë; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3-8pm), the remains of a small **Hammam** (Turkish bathhouse) and the **Dollma Teqe** (Dervish prayer-house).

To get to Kruja catch a *furgon* from Tirana (150 lekë, 45 minutes, 32km).

### APOLLONIA

The ancient ruined city of **Apollonia** (Pojan; admission 700 lekë; ☎ 9am-5pm) is located 12km west of Fier and is set on rolling hills among olive groves. The picturesque site includes a small theatre, the restored façade of a 2nd-century building and a Byzantine monastery (note the gargoyles!).

Apollonia is best visited on a day trip from Tirana or Berat. Catch a bus/*furgon*/train to Fier and then find a cab (about 2500 lekë including an hour's waiting time) to take you the rest of the way.

### BERAT

☎ 062 / pop 47,700

A highlight of any trip to Albania, Berat is one of the country's most beautiful towns, having been preserved as a museum city by the communist government. Its most striking feature is the collection of white Ottoman houses climbing up the hill to the castle, earning it the title 'town of a thousand windows'. Its rugged mountain setting is archetypically Albanian – particularly evocative when the clouds swirl around the tops of the minarets and battlements.

Berat suffers terribly from power cuts in the winter and generators are not widely used. There are several ATMs and an internet café on the main strip.

### Sights

There is plenty to see in this small town and the best way to start is to take the hard slog up to the impressive 14th-century **Kala** (citadel; admission 100 lekë; ☎ 24hr), built on ancient Illyrian foundations along a ridge high above the gorge. The Kala is still inhabited and has a dozen surviving churches within its 10 hectares. The **Muzeu Onufri** (☎ 32 258; admission 200 lekë; ☎ 9am-2pm Mon-Fri) is housed in one of the churches, displaying artistically important icons. A torch will come in handy to peer into the Tolkienesque depths of the **Inner Fortress**.

The **Muzeu Etnografik** (☎ 32 224; admission 200 lekë; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) is based in a fine 18th-century Ottoman villa just off the road up to the citadel. At the foot of the hill the 14th-century **Sultan's Mosque** (Xhamië e Mbretit) is one of the oldest in Albania. There is a **Helveti teqe** next to the mosque with a richly decorated prayer hall. The 16th-century **Leaden Mosque** (Xhamië e Plumbit) dominates the town square. The 19th-century **Bachelors' Mosque** (Xhamië e Beqarëvet) is by the river, with enchanting paintings on its external walls.

A new footbridge and a seven-arched stone bridge (1780) lead to **Gorica**, where you can visit the **Monastery of St Spyridon**. If you feel energetic you can climb up to the remains of another **Illyrian fortress** in the woods above.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Mangalemi** (☎ 32 093; hotelmangalemi\_tomi@yahoo.it; Rr e Kalasë; s/d/tr 1500/2500/3000 lekë) In a sprawling Ottoman house, this is the best budget B&B in Albania. There's a great bar and restaurant on the ground floor and a clutch of cosy rooms upstairs. The dinner menu is an offal-lover's paradise (order by the organ).

**Hotel Berati** (☎ 36 953; Rr Veli Zaloshnja; s/d €18/30) The hotel offers ten tidy rooms and a cosy restaurant (mains 250-660 lekë) with a fantastic carved wooden ceiling.

### Getting There & Away

Buses depart from next to the big new Orthodox church for Tirana (250 lekë, three hours, 131km, every half-hour from 4.30am to 3pm), Durrës (two daily) and Fier (six daily).

*Furgons* to Fier (200 lekë, one hour, 50km) leave from across the square from the buses.

## SOUTHERN ALBANIA

### DHËRMI & DRYMADES BEACHES

Surely there are no more deserted shores in Mediterranean Europe than this wonderfully isolated stretch of Ionian coast. Apart from the ever-present bunkers, the landscape is largely unchanged since the ancient Greeks wandered these shores. If you're arriving by bus (from Vlora 300 lekë, 2½ hours, 55km) ask to be let off by the turnoff for the Plazhi (beach), just past Dhërmi. From here it's an easy 15-minute walk downhill through the olive groves to the beautiful long beach at the foot of the snow-capped mountains.

The best place to stay in Dhërmi is the little **Hotel Luçiano** (☎ 069-209 1431; r per person 1000 lekë; ☎), above a popular seafood restaurant. The water's only metres away and the views are sublime. During winter blackouts the hotel's generator makes it a beacon for locals and visitors alike.

Even more deserted is Drymades. Leave the road going down into Dhërmi at the sign pointing right. After a good 45-minute walk along a dirt road winding through the olive groves, the path opens out onto a long, wide, sandy beach with a straw-roofed bar. **Drymades Hotel** (☎ 068-228 5637; bungalows 4000 lekë) is a constellation of bungalows under the shade of the pine trees, each housing two or three people in fairly basic conditions.

### SARANDA

☎ 0852 / pop 32,000

With the most attractive waterfront in Albania, Saranda is a charming little town just a stone's throw from the Greek island of Corfu (12½ km). Its houses fan out over the hillsides, small boats bob on the blue sea, and people stroll the waterfront promenade, enjoying the 290 sunny days per year.

### Sights & Activities

Saranda is a great base for exploring the sights around it. The ancient ruins of **Butrint** (☎ 0732-46 00; admission 700 lekë; ☎ 8am-7.30pm), 24km south of Saranda, are a truly remarkable experience. Overlooking a lagoon in a 29-sq-km national park, the ruins of antiquity gradually reveal themselves. You will need at least three hours to lose yourself among the lovely forest paths. There are regular buses between Butrint and Saranda (100 lekë, 45

minutes, seven daily), or a one-way cab will cost around 800 lekë.

The same bus will take you to sandy **Ksamili beach**, 17km south of Saranda, with four small, dreamy islands within swimming distance.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Kaonia** (☎ 2600; fax 2608; Rr 1 Maji; s/d €20/40; ☎) A lovely midsize hotel on the seafont with fabulously kitsch 1950s-style patterned awnings on the balconies looking over the sea.

**Kalaja e Lëkurësit** (☎ 5532; Lëkurës; mains 250-1200 lekë) Perched high above the town in an old castle, this excellent eatery boasts breathtaking views.

### Getting There & Away

Buses to Tirana (1000 lekë, eight hours, 314km) leave from Saranda's bus station each hour from 5.30 up to 1pm. There are also *furgons* and some smaller buses that take the coastal route to Vlora via Dhërmi.

There's a daily boat to Corfu (see p57).

## ALBANIA DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

Albania's budget accommodation is usually decent and clean, with TVs and their own bathrooms. Camping is possible in the southern area and sometimes on deserted beaches.

### ACTIVITIES

Swimming is great along the Adriatic and Ionian coasts, except for the polluted section from Durrës to Fier. Adventure tourism is in its infancy in Albania, and the national leaders are the enthusiastic young team at Outdoor Albania (p59).

### BUSINESS HOURS

Usual business hours in Albania:

**Banks** ☎ 9am-2.30pm

**Bars** ☎ 8.30am-midnight, or later

**Restaurants** ☎ 8.30am-11pm

**Shops** ☎ 8am-7pm, some close for a siesta at noon

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

While the level of petty crime is less than most Western countries, mafia groups are active in Vlora and the mountainous north. Tourists are unlikely to get caught up in trouble, but incidents occasionally happen.

Inexperienced drivers, combined with the terrible state of the roads make for a high accident rate. Pedestrians should watch for gaping holes in pavements, missing manhole covers and treacherous black ice in winter.

As Albania was isolated for so long, most foreigners, but especially Black and Asian travellers, will encounter curious stares.

Don't drink the tap water; locals refer to it as Hoxha's revenge.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Albanian Embassies & Consulates

For a full list, visit [www.mfa.gov.al](http://www.mfa.gov.al).

**Canada** (☎ 613-2363 0953; [embassyrepublicofalbania@on.albn.com](mailto:embassyrepublicofalbania@on.albn.com); Suite 302, 130 Albert St, Ottawa ON K1P 5G4)

**France** (☎ 01 47 23 31 00; [ambasade.albanie@wanadoo.fr](mailto:ambasade.albanie@wanadoo.fr); 57 av Marceau, Paris 75116)

**Germany** (☎ 030-259 3040; [kanzlei@botschaft-albanien.de](mailto:kanzlei@botschaft-albanien.de); Friedrichstrasse 231, D-10 969, Berlin)

**Greece** Athens (☎ 21-0687 6200; [albem@ath.forthner.gr](mailto:albem@ath.forthner.gr); Vekiareli 7, Filothei); Ioannina (☎ 26-5102 1330;

[algefeer@panafonet.gr](mailto:algefeer@panafonet.gr); Str Foti Tzavella 2); Thessaloniki (☎ 31-547 4494; fax 31-546656; Odysseos Str 6)

**Italy** Rome (☎ 6 8622 4120; fax 6 8621 6005; Via Asmara 5); Bari (☎ 80 572 7647; fax 80 528 3335; Via Cafelati 7)

**Kosovo** (☎ 038-548 3689; fax 038-548 209; Lagjja Pejton, Rr Hekurudha, Nr 1 Prishtina)

**Macedonia** (☎ 02-2614 636; [ambshqip@mt.net.mk](mailto:ambshqip@mt.net.mk); ul HT Karpoš 94a, Skopje)

**Netherlands** (☎ 70 427 2101; [embalba@xs4all.nl](mailto:embalba@xs4all.nl); Anna Paulownastraat 109b, 2518 BD, The Hague)

**Serbia** (☎ 11-306 5350; fax 11-665 439; Bulevar Mira 25A, Belgrade)

**UK** (☎ 020-7828 8897; [amblonder@hotmail.com](mailto:amblonder@hotmail.com); 2nd fl, 24 Buckingham Gate, London SW1 E6LB)

**USA** (☎ 202-223 4942; [albaniaemb@aol.com](mailto:albaniaemb@aol.com); 2100 S St NW, Washington DC 20008)

### Embassies & Consulates in Albania

**France** (☎ 04-234 250; [ambcrtir@mail.adanet.com.al](mailto:ambcrtir@mail.adanet.com.al); Rr Skënderbej 14)

**Germany** (☎ 04-232 048; [www.tirana.diplo.de](http://www.tirana.diplo.de); Rr Skënderbej 8)

**Greece** (☎ 04-223 959; [grembtir@albn.net](mailto:grembtir@albn.net); Rr Frederik Shiroka 3)

**Italy** (☎ 04-234 045; Rr Lek Dukagjini)

**Macedonia** (☎ 04-233 036; [makambas@albn.net](mailto:makambas@albn.net); cnr Rr Skënderbej & Rr e Kavajës)

**Netherlands** (☎ 04-240 828; [www.netherlandsembassytirana.com](http://www.netherlandsembassytirana.com); Rr Asim Zeneli 10)

**Serbia** (☎ 04-223 042; [ambatira@icc-al.org](mailto:ambatira@icc-al.org); Rr Skënderbej, Bldg 8/3, Entrance 2)

**UK** (☎ 04-234 973; [www.uk.al](http://www.uk.al); Rr Skënderbej 12)

**USA** (☎ 04-247 285; [www.usemb-tirana.rpo.at](http://www.usemb-tirana.rpo.at); Rr Elbasanit 103)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Gjirokastra is host to the **National Folk Festival** every four years. The next one is due in September 2009.

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality was decriminalised in 1995, with the age of consent being set at 18. Prejudice against gays and lesbians in Albania is entrenched and there is no accessible scene.

## HOLIDAYS

**New Year's Day** 1-2 January

**Orthodox Christmas** 7 January (shops may be shut)

**Summer Day** 14 March

**Nevruz** 22 March

**May Day** 1 May

**Mother Teresa Day** 19 October

**Independence Day** 28 November

**Liberation Day** 29 November

**Catholic Christmas** 25 December

The following movable religious feast days are also public holidays:

**Catholic Easter** March/April/May

**Orthodox Easter** March/April/May

**Bajram i Madh** currently near October (end of Ramadan)

**Bajram i Vogël** currently around December

## INTERNET RESOURCES

Good sources of information about Albania and current events are [www.albanian.com](http://www.albanian.com) and [www.frosina.org](http://www.frosina.org).

## MONEY

Albanian banknotes come in denominations of 100, 200, 500 and 1000 lekë. There are five, 10, 20 and 50 lekë coins. Everything can be paid for with lekë but most of the hotel prices are quoted in euro, which is readily accepted as an alternative currency. Credit cards are accepted only in the larger hotels and travellers cheques hardly anywhere (even Tirana).

Every town has its currency market, which usually operates on the street in front of the post office. Such transactions are not dangerous or illegal, but make sure you count the money. The advantages are that you get a good rate and avoid the 1% bank commission. There are currency-exchange businesses in major towns.

Tipping is not expected but it is usual to round up the bill.

## POST

Outside of main towns there are few public mail boxes but several new post offices have sprung up. The postal system does not enjoy a great reputation for efficiency. Sending an international postcard costs around 40 lekë, while a letter costs 80 to 160 lekë.

## TELEPHONE

Albania's international access code is ☎ 00 and the country code is ☎ 355. Dial ☎ 124

for domestic directory assistance and ☎ 122 for international directory assistance. The post office is the cheapest option for long-distance calls.

## VISAS

No visa is required by citizens of EU countries, Australia, Canada, New Zealand or the USA. Travellers from other countries can check their visa requirements at [www.mfa.gov.al/english/info2.asp](http://www.mfa.gov.al/english/info2.asp). Citizens of most countries – even those who are entering visa-free – are required to pay an entry tax of €10 at the border.

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