

Albania

While the rest of Mediterranean Europe was busy laying out beach umbrellas in rows and erecting resorts, Albania languished in near-complete isolation until the 1990s – a decade of anarchy. Now that things have settled down for the long-suffering locals, the rest of us get to see exactly what that long period in the dark had kept hidden – the most unspoiled and undeveloped stretch of coast in the heart of Europe.

Peppered with classical sites, smothered in olive groves and flanked by Albania's harshly beautiful mountains, Albania's Ionian edge remains much as the ancients would have enjoyed it – apart from the numerous communist-era bunkers. Inland, Ottoman houses cling to the side of rugged mountains in Albania's 'museum cities', with ancient citadels towering high above. In contrast, the capital Tirana is a bustling, bright city shrugging off its Stalinist past.

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

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 28,748 sq km
- **Capital** Tirana
- **Currency** lekë; €1 = 123 lekë; US\$1 = 97.04 lekë; UK£1 = 182.15 lekë; A\$1 = 72.94 lekë; ¥100 = 82.59 lekë; NZ\$1 = 63.45 lekë
- **Famous for** international diaspora, concrete bunkers, cool flag
- **Official Language** Albanian
- **Phrases** *tungjatjeta* (hello), *lamtumirë* (goodbye), *ju lutem* (please), *ju falem nderit* (thank you)
- **Population** 3,582,205
- **Telephone Codes** country code ☎ 355; international access code ☎ 00



HIGHLIGHTS

- Visit beautiful **Berat** (p70), a living museum of Ottoman houses, elegant mosques and an ancient citadel.
- Indulge your *Lord of the Rings* fantasies at Shkodra's dramatic **Rozafa Fortress** (p66).
- Touring Albania's colourful capital **Tirana** (p59) reveals tantalising glimpses of its recent communist past.
- Travel down the high mountain pass to the olive groves framing isolated white beaches; the crystalline **Ionian Coast** (p73) is nothing short of spectacular.
- Travel back in time to the ruins of **Butrint** (p74), hidden in the depths of the forest in a serene lakeside setting.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** With two nights in Tirana, spend one day exploring the city and then take a day trip to nearby Kruja. On day three make an early start for Berat, leaving the afternoon free for the sights of this fascinating town.
- **One week** Leaving Berat stop off at Fier to explore the ruins of Apollonia, before heading on to Vlora for the night. Catch the bus over the stunning Llogoraja Pass and spend the rest of the day lazing around Dhërmi beach. The next day continue to Saranda for two nights, making sure you visit the tranquil ruins of Butrint and beautiful Ksamili beach.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Coastal Albania has a pleasant Mediterranean climate. Summer is the peak tourist season, when people from the sweltering interior escape temperatures that can reach the high 30s in July. In Tirana and other inland towns on the plains there is plenty of rainfall during the winter, but temperatures below freezing are rare. The high mountains often experience heavy snow between November and March. The best time to visit Albania is spring or autumn.

HISTORY

Albanians call their country Shqipëria, and trace their roots to the ancient Illyrian tribes. Their language is descended from Illyrian, making it a rare survivor of the Roman and Slavic influxes and a European linguistic oddity on a par with Basque. The Illyrians occupied the western Balkans during the 2nd

HOW MUCH?

- **Bottle of excellent Albanian wine** 650 lekë
- **English translation of an Ismail Kadare novel** 1800 lekë
- **Basic pizza** 300 lekë
- **Cocktail in a swanky bar** 600 lekë
- **Cappuccino** 120 lekë

LONELY PLANET INDEX

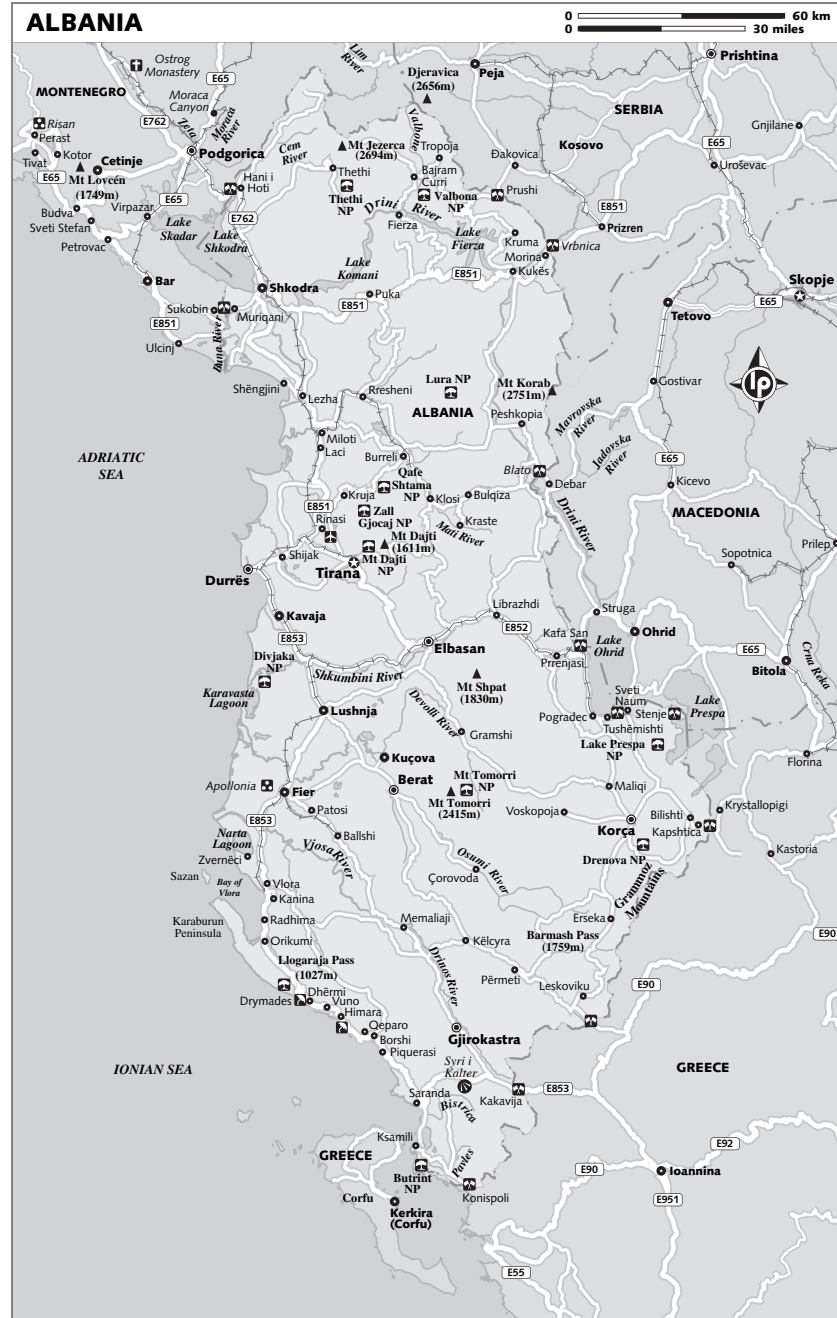
- **Litre of petrol** 130 lekë
- **Litre of bottled water** 50 lekë
- **Tirana beer** 200 lekë
- **Souvenir T-shirt** 1800 lekë
- **Street snack (byrek)** 30 lekë

millennium BC. They built substantial fortified cities, mastered silver and copper mining and became adept at sailing the Mediterranean. The Greeks arrived in the 7th century BC to establish self-governing colonies at Epidamnos (now Durrës), Apollonia and Butrint. They traded peacefully with the Illyrians, who formed tribal states in the 4th century BC.

Inevitably the expanding Illyrian kingdom of the Ardiaei, based at Shkodra, came into conflict with Rome, which sent a fleet of 200 vessels against Queen Teuta in 229 BC. A long war resulted in the extension of Roman control over the entire Balkan area by 167 BC.

Under the Romans, Illyria enjoyed peace and prosperity, though the large agricultural estates were worked by slaves. Like the Greeks, the Illyrians preserved their own language and traditions despite centuries of Roman rule. Over time the populace slowly replaced their old gods with the new Christian faith championed by Emperor Constantine. The main trade route between Rome and Constantinople, the Via Egnatia, ran from the port at Durrës.

When the Roman Empire was divided in AD 395, Illyria fell within the Eastern Empire, later known as the Byzantine Empire. Three early Byzantine emperors (Anastasius I, Justin I and Justinian I) were of Illyrian origin. Invasions by migrating peoples (Visigoths, Huns, Ostrogoths and Slavs) continued through the 5th and 6th centuries.



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. The Venetians occupied some coastal towns, and from 1443 to 1468 the national hero Skanderbeg (Gjergj Kastrioti) led Albanian resistance to the Turks from his castle at Kruja. Skanderbeg won all 25 battles he fought against the Turks, and even Sultan Mehmet-Fatih, the conqueror of Constantinople, could not take Kruja. After Skanderbeg's death it was only a matter of time before the Ottomans overwhelmed Albanian resistance, taking control of the country in 1479, 26 years after Constantinople fell.

For more than 400 years Albania was under Ottoman rule. Muslim citizens were favoured and were exempted from the Janissary system, whereby Christian households had to give up one of their sons to convert to Islam and serve in the army. Consequently many Albanians embraced the new faith.

In 1878 the Albanian League at Prizren (in present-day Kosovo) began a struggle for autonomy that was put down by the Turkish army in 1881. Further uprisings between 1910 and 1912 culminated in a proclamation of independence and the formation of a provisional government led by Ismail Qemali at Vlorë in 1912. These achievements were severely compromised when Kosovo, roughly one-third of Albania, was ceded to Serbia in 1913. The Great Powers tried to install a young German prince, Wilhelm of Wied, as ruler of the rump of Albania, but he was never accepted and returned home after six months. With the outbreak of WWI, Albania was occupied in succession by the armies of Greece, Serbia, France, Italy and Austria-Hungary.

In 1920 the capital city was moved from Durrës to less vulnerable Tirana. A republican government under the Orthodox priest Fan Noli helped to stabilise the country, but in 1924 it was overthrown by the interior minister, Ahmed Bey Zogu. A northern warlord, he declared himself King Zogu I in 1928, but his close collaboration with Italy backfired in April 1939 when Mussolini ordered an invasion of Albania. Zogu fled to Britain with his young wife Geraldine and newborn son Leka, and used gold looted from the Albanian treasury to rent a floor at London's Ritz Hotel.

On 8 November 1941 the Albanian Communist Party was founded with Enver Hoxha as first secretary, a position he held until his

death in April 1985. The communists led the resistance against the Italians and, after 1943, against the Germans, ultimately tying down 15 combined German-Italian divisions.

The Rise of Communism

After the fighting had died down, the communists consolidated power. In January 1946 the People's Republic of Albania was proclaimed, with Hoxha as president and 'Supreme Comrade'.

In September 1948 Albania broke off relations with Yugoslavia, which had hoped to incorporate the country into the Yugoslav Federation. Instead, it allied itself with Stalin's USSR and put into effect a series of Soviet-style economic plans – rising the ire of the USA and Britain, which made an ill-fated attempt to overthrow the government.

Albania collaborated closely with the USSR until 1960, when a heavy-handed Khrushchev demanded that a submarine base be set up at Vlorë. Breaking off diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1961, the country reoriented itself towards the People's Republic of China.

From 1966 to 1967 Albania experienced a Chinese-style cultural revolution. Administrative workers were suddenly transferred to remote areas and younger cadres were placed in leading positions. The collectivisation of agriculture was completed and organised religion banned.

Following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Albania left the Warsaw Pact and embarked on a self-reliant defence policy. Some 700,000 igloo-shaped concrete bunkers (see opposite) serve as a reminder of this policy. The communist authorities made progress in draining the malarial swamps of the central coastal plains, building hydro-electric schemes, raising the literacy level and laying down the country's railway lines.

With the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the changes that followed in China after 1978, Albania's unique relationship with China also came to an end, and the country was left isolated and without allies. The economy was devastated and food shortages became more common.

Post-Hoxha

Hoxha died in April 1985 and his long-time associate Ramiz Alia took over the leadership. Restrictions loosened half a notch, but the whole system was increasingly falling apart.

BUNKER LOVE

On the hillsides, beaches, people's front gardens and generally most surfaces in Albania, you will notice small concrete domes gazing at you through their rectangular slits. Meet the bunkers: Enver Hoxha's concrete legacy, built from 1950 to 1985. Weighing in at five tonnes of concrete and iron, these little mushrooms are almost impossible to destroy, as they were built to repel an invasion and can resist full tank assault – a fact proved by their chief engineer, who had to vouch for his creation's strength by standing inside one while it was bombed by a tank. The shell-shocked engineer emerged unscathed and an estimated 700,000 bunkers were built. Today, apart from being an indestructible reminder of a cruel regime, they serve no real purpose, and as they are impossible to move, the locals sometimes try to decorate them with pot plants or a coat of paint. 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!

People were no longer bothering to work on the collective farms, leading to food shortages in the cities, and industries began to fail as spare parts ran out. The party leadership promised reform, but remained paralysed.

In June 1990, inspired by the changes that were occurring elsewhere in Eastern Europe, around 4500 Albanians took refuge in Western embassies in Tirana. After a brief confrontation with the police and the Sigurimi (secret police) these people were allowed to board ships for Brindisi in Italy, where they were granted political asylum.

After student demonstrations in December 1990, the government agreed to allow opposition parties. The Democratic Party, led by heart surgeon Sali Berisha, was formed. Further demonstrations produced new concessions, including the promise of free elections and independent trade unions. The government announced a reform programme and party hardliners were purged.

In early March 1991, as the election date approached, some 20,000 Albanians fled the country's crumbling economy and non-existent infrastructure, seeking a 'better life' abroad. They set out from Vlorë to Brindisi by ship, creating a crisis for the Italian government, which had begun to view them as economic refugees. Most were eventually allowed to stay.

The March 1992 elections ended 47 years of communist rule. After the resignation of Alia, parliament elected Sali Berisha president in April. In September 1992 former president Alia was placed under house arrest after he wrote articles critical of the Democratic government. In August 1993 the leader of the Socialist Party, Fatos Nano, was also arrested on corruption charges.

During this time Albania switched from a tightly controlled communist regime to a rambunctious free-market free-for-all. A huge smuggling racket sprang up, bringing stolen Mercedes-Benzes into the country, and some former collective farms were converted into marijuana plantations. The port of Vlorë became a major crossing point for illegal immigrants from Asia and the Middle East into Italy. A huge population shift took place as collective farms were broken up and reclaimed by former landowners, pushing the peasants off the land. Tirana's population tripled as people, now able to freely move to the city, joined internal exiles driven off the old collective farms.

A severe crisis developed in late 1996 when private pyramid-investment schemes – widely thought to have been supported by the government – inevitably collapsed. Around 70% of Albanians lost their savings (in total more than US\$1 billion), resulting in nationwide disturbances and riots. New elections were called, and the victorious Socialist Party under Nano – who had been freed from prison by the rampaging mob – was able to restore some degree of security and investor confidence. But the new wave of violence destroyed many of the remaining industries still left from the communist era. Towns where the whole working population was employed by one mine or factory were left destitute as the economy collapsed again.

In spring 1999 Albania faced a crisis of a different sort. This time it was the influx of 465,000 refugees from neighbouring Kosovo during the Serbian ethnic-cleansing campaign. While this put a tremendous strain on resources, the net effect has in fact been positive. Substantial amounts of international

aid money have poured in, the service sector has grown and inflation has declined to single digits.

Since 2002 the country has found itself in a kind of miniboom with much money being poured into construction projects and infrastructure renewal.

The general election of 2005 saw a return of Berisha's Democratic Party to government. Albanian politics and the economy have been stable, but work still has to be done to ensure that there is an end to electricity shortages and other infrastructure deficiencies that plague the country. Hopes are high that NATO membership will be achieved by 2008, while an invitation to the EU club remains an elusive goal.

PEOPLE

In July 2003 the population was estimated to be 3,582,205, of which approximately 95% is Albanian, 3% Greek and 2% 'other' – comprising Vlachs, Roma, Serbs and Bulgarians. The Vlach are an old ethnic group in the Balkans, and descendants of a people Romanised during the days of the Empire.

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.

The Shkumbin River forms a boundary between the Gheg cultural region of the north and the Tosk region in the south. The people in these regions vary slightly in dialect, musical culture and traditional dress.

RELIGION

Religion was banned during communism and Albania was the world's only officially atheist state from 1967 to 1990. Despite the fact that the people are now free to practise their faith, Albania remains a very secular society and it is impossible to assess how many followers each faith has, since the 2001 census didn't include a question on religion. Albania's population was traditionally split into 70% Muslim, 20% Orthodox and 10% Catholic, but in most cases this is merely nominal. Many remain fervently atheist, while Protestant fundamentalists (and other groups such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses) have aggressively sought to make inroads into the country.

The majority of Albania's Muslims are Sunni, but there is a substantial minority of adherents to Bektashism. Similar to Sufism, Bektashism has had its world headquarters in Albania since 1925, when this dervish order was expelled during Turkey's attempts at 'modernisation'. The Bektashi followers worship at *teqe* (templelike buildings without a minaret) rather than mosques.

The Albanian Orthodox Church was founded in Boston, USA in 1908 and has been recognised as autocephalous (self-governing) since 1937.

ARTS Literature

When it comes to Albanian writers, all others pale under the shadow of Ismail Kadare (b 1936). His books have been translated into dozens of languages and are widely available in English. A former nominee for the Nobel Prize for Literature, he won the inaugural Man Booker International Prize in 2005 for his wistful look at a nation in transition in *Spring Flowers*, *Spring Frost*. His latest novel is even better. *The Successor* (2005) is an entertaining take on Albanian political machinations under Hoxha – essential reading for anyone visiting Tirana.

Kadare's books are not only enriching literary works, they are also a great source of information on Albanian traditions, history and social events. They exquisitely capture the atmosphere of daily life during difficult times, such as the lyrical descriptions of Kadare's birthplace, Gjirokastra, in *Chronicle in Stone* (1971), where wartime experiences are seen through the eyes of a boy. *Broken April* (1990), set in the northern highlands before the 1939 Italian invasion, follows the doomed footsteps of a young man who is next in line in the desperate cycle of blood vendettas. In *The Concert* (1988) we get an insight into the communist way of life around the time of Albania's break in relations with China.

There is no substantial body of Albanian literature before the 19th century as the Ottomans banned the teaching of Albanian in schools, fearing the spread of anti-Turkish propaganda. The adoption of a standardised orthography in 1908 coincided with the rise of the Albanian nationalist movement.

A group of romantic patriotic writers, such as Migjeni (1911–38) and Martin Çamaj (1925–92), wrote epics and historical novels.

Cinema

During Albania's isolationist years the local film industry had a captive audience, hungry for anything to break the cultural tedium. While much of its output was propagandist, by the 1980s this little country was turning out an extraordinary 14 films a year. Despite a general lack of funds, two recent movies have gone on to win awards at international film festivals. Gjergj Xhuvani's comedy *Slogans* (2001), is a warm and touching account of life during communist times. This was followed in 2002 by *Tirana Year Zero*, Fatmir Koci's bleak look at the pressures on the young to emigrate.

Another film worth seeing is *Lamerica* (1995), a brilliant and stark look at Albanian postcommunist culture. Woven loosely around a plot about a couple of Italian scam artists, and Albanians seeking to escape to Italy, the essence of the film is the unshakable dignity of the ordinary Albanian in the face of adversity.

Music

You can't go anywhere in Albania without hearing the local pop music. Incredibly catchy and melodic, traditional instruments such as clarinets combine with contemporary beats. A particularly popular young star is Mariola. Switch on the TV and you won't escape the accompanying videos, which inevitably involve a hunky lad in traditional costume chasing after some coy village lass. Hilarious. Albanian rap is also surprisingly good.

Polyphony, the blending of several independent vocal or instrumental parts, is a southern Albanian tradition dating from Illyrian times. Peasant choirs perform in a variety of styles, and the songs, usually with an epic-lyrical or historical theme, may be dramatic to the point of yodelling, or slow and sober, with alternate male and female voices combining in harmony. Instrumental polyphonic *kabas* (a sedate style, led by a clarinet or violin alongside accordions and lutes) are played by small Roma ensembles.

Visual Arts

The art scene in Albania is slowly on the rise. One of the first 'signs of art' that will strike you are the multicoloured buildings of Tirana, a project organised by the capital's mayor Edi Rama, himself a painter. One of his paintings can be found in Tirana at the National Art Gallery (p61). An up-and-coming artist is Norway-based Anri Sala,

whose video installations are a modern account of Albanian life.

There are still plenty of remnants of socialist realism, with paintings and sculptures adorning the walls and gardens of galleries and museums, although many were destroyed after the fall of the communist government as a reflex against the old regime. The massive public sculptures honouring the partisans (not including Enver Hoxha) were largely left intact.

One of the most delicious Albanian art treats is to be found in Berat's Muzeu Onufri (p71). Onufri was the most outstanding Albanian icon painter of the 16th and 17th centuries and his work is noted for its unique intensity of colour, using natural dyes that are as fresh now as the day he painted them.

ENVIRONMENT The Land

Albania has three main zones: a coastal plain, a mountainous region and an interior plain. The coastal plain extends approximately 200km from north to south and up to 50km inland. The forested mountain spine takes up three-quarters of the country, stretching its entire length and peaking at Mt Korab (2751m). The interior plain is alluvial, with seasonal precipitation. It is poorly drained and therefore alternately arid or flooded and is often as inhospitable as the mountains.

The longest river in Albania is the Drini (285km), which runs from Lake Ohrid into the Buna River, which connects Lake Shkoder to the sea. Albania has suffered some devastating earthquakes, including the one that struck in 1979, leaving at least 100,000 people homeless.

Wildlife

In the lower regions the flora is rich with beech trees, oak and patches of rare Macedonian pine (*Pinus peuce*). Birch, pine and fir cover the mountain sides to an altitude of 2000m, after which all is barren. Forests cover an estimated 36% of the country, much of it in the isolated northern highlands and close to the Greek border. Bears, deer and wild boar inhabit these isolated forests, but they have been pushed out of regions closer to settlements by widespread summer grazing and by the Albanian penchant for hunting.

The endangered loggerhead turtle nests on isolated beaches on the Ionian Coast and on the Karaburun peninsula, where Mediterranean

monk seals also have colonies. The fauna of World Heritage-listed Lake Ohrid is a relic of an earlier era, including the endangered *koran* trout, the European eel and a genus of snail dating back 30 million years.

There are several wetland sites at the mouths of the Buna, Drini and Mati Rivers in the north and at the Karavasta Lagoon south of Durrës, with many interesting and rare birds (white pelicans and white-headed ducks, among others).

National Parks

Albania has 13 protected areas, covering only 3.9% of the country (34,550 hectares): Thethi, Valbona and Lura in the north; Qafe Shtama and Zall Gjoçaj near Kruja; Mt Dajti (p65) near Tirana; Divjaka near Lushnja; Mt Tomorri near Berat; Llogaraja (p73) on the Ionian Coast; Drenova and Lake Prespa near Korça; and Bredhi i Hotoves and Butrint (p74), also a World Heritage site, in the south.

Most of Albania's national parks are not really protected by anything but their remoteness, and tree cutting and hunting still take place. There are no hiking maps of the parks and very few hotels or camping grounds. Mt Dajti, Mt Tomorri and Llogaraja are the most accessible for hikers. Independent camping is not advisable because the mountains are almost completely uninhabited and have no mobile-phone coverage; help, in case of an injury, would be impossible to find.

Environmental Issues

With the collapse of communism, before which there were only around 2000 cars in the country, the number of roaring automobiles has risen drastically to something around 500,000 – many of which are very old. In March 2004, reports claimed that Tirana was now considered to be the most polluted capital in Europe.

Illegal logging and fishing reached epidemic proportions during the 1990s, but the authorities are clamping down on this problem. This hasn't stopping the fishing of the rare *koran* trout from Lake Ohrid.

The decrepit oil pumps in the central plains around Fier constantly leak black sludge into the rivers and down to the sea, creating health problems for the local populace. Pollution in the water around Durrës resulted in an outbreak of skin infections recently.

There is also a disturbing amount of rubbish littering roadsides, beaches, picnic spots,

remote valleys – just about everywhere. Under communism, plastic wasn't widely used and most refuse was biodegradable or recycled. Now blue plastic bags are as much a feature of the landscape as the bunkers, clogging rivers and getting caught in trees in even the most remote places. Riverbanks appear to be a favourite dumping ground for domestic waste. Even rubbish that does make its way to a designated tip site is burnt, releasing toxins into the air.

In short, Albania is quickly turning into an environmental disaster zone, with little hope for improvement in sight. One organisation trying to make a difference is the **Organic Agriculture Association** (☎ 04-250 575; www.organic.org.al). It successfully campaigned to stop US 'aid' shipments of genetically modified maize and soy, and its members have been involved in a campaign to prevent a US company building an oil pipeline straight through the beautiful Bay of Vlora.

FOOD & DRINK

Albanian cuisine is mainly dominated by roast lamb in the mountains and fresh seafood near the coast. The local ingredients tend to be organic by default – few farmers can afford pesticides. Tomatoes, in particular, are very tasty. A simple slice of bruschetta can be quite extraordinary.

Offal, veal escalopes, *biftek* (beef loin), *qebaps* (kebabs) and *qoftë* (meat balls) are very popular. *Fërgesë Tiranë* is a traditional Tirana dish of offal, eggs and tomatoes cooked in an earthenware pot. Don't order the *koran* trout as it's endangered. You will find *byrek* stands all over the place; it's the Balkan alternative to fast food and a delicious budget option at that. *Byrek* comes in many forms: filled with cheese, tomato, meat, or spinach, layered between thin slices of filo pastry.

If you're taking a journey by *furgon* (mini-bus) or bus, chances are you'll stop at a roadside restaurant. The typical dish on offer is a greasy lamb soup – best viewed as an anthropological rather than culinary treat. This is the basic worker's meal and also serves as breakfast. Breakfasts in hotels are nearly always terrible, consisting of a couple of dry slices of toast and packet jam. Cafés don't generally serve food. If you ask for a croissant, it'll be a stale thing out of a bag. You're better to look for a bakery or *byrek* shop, or buy some fresh fruit.

If you are a vegetarian, your best bet will be Italian restaurants, of which there are plenty. There are also some delicious Turkish-style vegetable dishes to be had, such as roast peppers and aubergines.

Albanians do not eat dessert after their meal, but they do drink a shot of raki before they tuck into their food. There are two main types of raki to be had in Albania: grape raki (the most common one) and *mani* raki (mulberry, an Albanian type). If raki is not your cup of tea, try Rilindja wine – either a sweet white (Tokai) or a medium-bodied red (Merlot). Wine aficionados should seek out the native red varietal Kallmet. Skënderbeu *Konjak* (Cognac) is the national aperitif, and it's very good indeed, even though fancy bars will try to serve you a French brand.

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, another with concentric pink and purple circles and planting perspective-fooling cubes on its neighbour.

Trendy Blloku buzzes with the well-dressed nouvelle bourgeoisie hanging out in bars or zipping between boutiques. Quite where their money comes from is the subject of much speculation in this economically deprived nation, but thankfully you don't need much of it to have a fun night out in the city's many bars and clubs.

The city's grand central boulevards are lined with fascinating relics of its Ottoman, Italian and communist past – from delicate minarets to socialist murals – guarded by bored-looking soldiers with serious automatic weaponry. 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, although 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), from where various streets and boulevards radiate like the spokes

TIRANA IN TWO DAYS

Check out the **National Art Gallery** (p61), the **National Museum of History** (p62) and the **Et'hem Bey Mosque** (p62). Walk back the length of Bulevardi Dëshmorët e Kombit, stopping to take in the view at **Sky Club Panoramic Bar** (p64). Head to **Efendy** (p63) for an Ottoman banquet, then party in trendy **Blloku** (p61).

On day two take the **Postcommunist Walking Tour** (p62) through the centre of the city. Catch a cab to the **Martyrs' Cemetery** (p61) before heading to **Prince Park** (p64) for a fine Italian meal.

of a wheel. 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 (1612m) rises to the east.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Adrian International Bookshop (☎ 235 242; Palace of Culture, Sheshi Skënderbej; ☎ 8.30am-9.30pm) Stocks magazines and newspapers from around the world and a selection of English-language books with a great Albanian section.

Internet Access

Both the following have new computers, fast connections and charge 100 lekë per hour.

Center Internet (Rr Brigada e VIII; ☎ 24hr) Look for the yellow sign down a laneway.

Internet: Point (Rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit 7; ☎ 24hr)

Laundry

Drycleaner & Laundry (☎ 068-216-8268; Rr Hoxha Tahsim; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) Laundering of trousers/shirts costs 200 lekë.

Medical Services

ABC Family Health Center (☎ 234 105; Rr Qemal Stafa 360; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Run by the Baptists, with English-speaking doctors, ABC offers a range of services including regular (US\$60) and emergency (US\$72) consultations (discounts for missionaries!). This is the best place to go for consultations but there are no trauma facilities. If you're in an accident, the ambulance will take you to the Military Hospital where treatment is rudimentary.

TIRANA

Scale: 0 to 0.3 miles (0 to 0.5 km)

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Money

Tirana has plenty of ATMs connected to international networks. The main chains are Tirana Bank, Pro Credit Bank, Raiffeisen Bank and American Bank of Albania. Independent moneychangers operate directly in front of the main post office and on Sheshi Skënderbej, offering the same rates as the banks. Changing money is not illegal or dangerous, but do count the money you receive before handing yours over. It's nearly impossible to exchange travellers cheques outside Tirana, so if you're relying on them (our advice is, don't) try one of the following banks:

American Bank of Albania (☎ 276 000; Rr Ismail Qemali 27; ☎ 9.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) A reliable, secure place to cash your travellers cheques (2% commission). Also an Amex representative.

National Savings Bank (☎ 235 035; Blvd Dëshmorët e Kombit; ☎ 10.30am-5pm Mon-Fri) Located in the Rogner Hotel Europapark Tirana, it offers MasterCard advances, cashes US dollar, euro and sterling travellers cheques for 1% commission and exchanges cash.

Post

Main post office & telephone centre (☎ 228 262; Sheshi Çameria; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri) There is an additional post office branch on Rruga Mohamet Gjollësia. **Telephone centre** (Bul Zogu I; ☎ 7.30am-6.30pm)

Tourist 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.

Travel Agencies

Albania Travel & Tours (☎ 232 983; albaniatraveland-tours@yahoo.com; Rr Durrësit 102; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat & Sun) A central agency that books flights, ferries and private rooms.

Outdoor Albania (☎ 272 075; www.outdooralbania.com) Excellent trailblazing adventure-tour agency offering all manner of specialist tours, including hiking, mountain biking and village stays – with a strong commitment to ecotourism.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Tirana is a very safe city with little petty crime. The streets are badly lit and full of cavernous potholes, so mind your step and arm yourself with a pocket torch at night to light your way. There are occasional power cuts in the city so

the torch idea stretches further. Crossing the street is not for the faint-hearted and you need to adopt a love for adrenaline-fuelled high-risk activities before you attempt this.

SIGHTS

Running south from **Sheshi Skënderbej** 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. Further along the street the **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. Note the central role of women in this work – from the breastfeeding mother with a shotgun slung over her lap in *Lokja* (1983), to the manager giving instructions in *Giant of Metallurgy*.

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

Beyond the university, the lush **Parku Kom-bëtar**, with its serene artificial lake, stretches up to the **former palace of King Zogu** (Rr Elbasanit). At the top of the hill, on the other side of the road, lies the **Martyrs' Cemetery**, where some 900 partisans who died in WWII are buried. The views over the city and surrounding mountains are excellent. Many still come here, clutching laurel sprigs to pay their respects under the shadow of the immense, beautiful and strangely androgynous **Mother Albania statue** (1972). Hoxha was buried here in 1985, 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 **Biloku**, the former exclusive Communist Party neighbourhood. When the area was opened to the general public in 1991, Albanians flocked to see the style in which their proletarian leaders lived. Judging by the three-storey pastel-coloured house that was the **former residence of Enver Hoxha** (nr Rr Dëshmorët e Shkurtit & Ismail Qemali), they lived a

much simpler life than their comrades in Romania, for example.

Along Rruga Murat Toptani are the 6m-high walls of the **Fortress of Justinian**, the last remnants of a Byzantine-era castle.

WALKING TOUR: POSTCOMMUNIST TIRANA

The rapid pace of change in Albania is nowhere more pronounced than in its capital. The most obvious symbol of this is the wackily painted tower blocks throughout the city – a surprisingly effective means of shaking off its recent grey past.

Start your walk at the Orthodox **Church of the Holy Evangelist** (☎ 235 095; Rr e Kavajës 151), set back from Rruga e Kavajës in a laneway nearly opposite the Macedonian embassy. In the mid-1960s the infamous atheism campaign resulted in many churches and mosques being bulldozed or converted into public buildings. On this church's steeple you can clearly see where the cross-shaped holes in the brickwork were once covered over. While the reinstatement of this church has been accomplished quite tastefully, the same can't be said of the Catholic **Church of St Marie** (Rr e Kavajës) just along the road. The hilariously garish photo-realistic images painted over the communist whitewash have to be seen to be believed – particularly the scenes to the left of the altar, with the Magdalene in billowing scarlet robes.

Continue along the road until you reach **Sheshi Skënderbej**, the bustling heart of the city. Until it was pulled down by the angry mob on 20 February 1991 a 10m-high gold-leaf-covered statue of Enver Hoxha stood here, watching over a mainly carless square. Now only the **equestrian statue of Skanderbeg** remains, deaf to the cacophony of screeching horns, as cars four lanes deep try to shove their way through the battlefield below.

Follow the lead of the locals and walk blindly into the mass of traffic to one of the central islands to get a good view of the wonderful socialist-realist **Albania** mosaic on the front of the **National Museum of History** (admission 300 lekë; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-7pm Tue-Sat, 9am-noon & 5-7pm Sun). It still shows proud Albanians marching through history, only now the flag is missing its communist star. Inside are many of this ancient land's archaeological treasures, dating back as far as 100,000 BC. The extensive partisan-communist section has been retained (unfortunately without English translations),

but it now ends with a large memorial exhibit to victims of Hoxha's regime.

As you leave the museum the white stone building to your left is the **Palace of Culture**. Construction began as a gift from the Soviets in 1960 although it was delayed by the 1961 Soviet-Albanian split. Past this monolith, a delicate minaret marks out a true survivor. The exquisite 18th-century **Et'hem Bey Mosque** escaped destruction during the battle for the liberation of the city near the end of 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 of this once-again functioning mosque.

When you exit, turn right. At the next intersection the socialist-realist **Statue of the Unknown Partisan** seems to be aiming his weapons at the **Parliament** building (1924) down the road. At the foot of the statue day-labourers wait for work, some with their own jackhammers – a fitting image of the precarious position of the postcommunist Albanian worker.

Veer right and follow the road to the oversized dirty drain that is the **Lana River**. Under the old regime, Tirana was rated as one of the cleanest cities in Europe. Turn right and you'll soon come to another example of religious revival, **St Paul's Catholic Cathedral** (Bul Zhan D'Ark). This massive edifice looks a bit like a hotel from the outside, while inside it has all the ambience of a hotel lobby. There are some interesting stained-glass windows, particularly the one featuring John Paul II and Mother Teresa to the left of the front door.

Continue to the bridge and cross to the sloping white-marble and glass walls of the **Pyramid** (cnr Bul Bajram Curri & Dëshmorët e Kombit) – also known as the former Enver Hoxha Museum (1988) – designed by Hoxha's daughter and son-in-law. In a hilarious twist of fate the building, which once housed a grandiose statue of the ruler, is now home to a disco called the Mummy. In front of the Pyramid the **Bell of Peace** is a touching little memorial to the country's difficult postcommunist years, forged from bullet cases collected by Albanian schoolchildren during the anarchy of 1997.

SLEEPING

Budget

Tirana Backpacker Hostel (☎ 272 075, 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. It has big balconies, a garden, a kitchen and a laundry for guests to use. 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 really a hotel at all, the Endri consists of seven sparkling-clean rooms housed in two communist-era housing blocks next door to the owner's apartment. 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; ☎) Only 300m from the main square on a less-frantic side street, Hotel Kruja has a relaxed vibe. 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 in a quiet side street, a few minutes from the main square, has pleasant, light-flooded rooms with small balconies and some kitsch fake marble bathrooms.

Midrange

Vila Tafaj (☎ 227 581; www.tafaj.com; Rr Mine Peza 86; s €40-50, d €60-70; ☎) This fine-looking boutique hotel, in an ornate 1930s villa, has a lovely large garden where you can enjoy breakfast under a canopy of wisteria, while canaries twitter in cages.

Firenze Hotel (☎ 249 099; firenzehotel@albbmail.com; Bul Zogu 172; s/d €50/70; ☎) Sporting king-sized beds and new bathrooms, this cheerfully coloured little hotel is conveniently located between the railway station and the main square.

Hotel Nirvana (☎ /fax 235 270; Rr e Kavajës 96/2; s/d €60/80; ☎) With its ostentatious marble

staircase and walls dripping in art, this hotel may have delusions of grandeur but thankfully the price remains reasonably humble and the staff friendly and helpful.

Diplomat Fashion Hotel (☎ 235 090; www.diplomatfashion.com; Bul Bajram Curri; s €85-110, d €130-160) While its name is a misnomer (fashionable diplomats?), this zany boutique hotel has the most stylish interiors in town, with each level themed around the world's great centres of fashion. You can even work on that fashionable waistline in the exercise room in the basement, complete with Jacuzzi, steam room and sauna.

Hotel Mondial (☎ 232 372; www.hotelmondial.com.al; Rr Muhamet Gjollës; s/d/ste €90/110/130; ☎) It's quite a hike from the centre of town but the Mondial has a reputation for good service, along with an attractive rooftop pool that has views over the city.

Top End

Sheraton Tirana Hotel & Towers (☎ 274 707; www.sheraton.com; Sheshi Italia; r €180, ste €273-384; ☎) This is hands-down the most impressive hotel in town, offering a choice of indoor or outdoor swimming pools, an extensive gym and several good restaurants.

EATING

Tirana has no shortage of restaurants – some fantastic and some absolutely dire, but most perfectly acceptable. Cafés don't tend to serve food, and breakfast options are sadly lacking.

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

Plan B (Rr Sami Frasherit; mains 500 lekë; ☎ noon-4.30pm & 7-11.30pm) This fantastic pasta place is tucked

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Efendy (☎ 274 949; Rr Sami Frasherit; mains 1000-1500 lekë; ☎ midday-midnight) Foodies 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 studied at one of the world's finest Ottoman restaurants, extracting recipes from the old chefs and researching their collection of documents. He ended up in Albania 12 years ago (as an opera singer – it's a long story), and he's since travelled throughout the Balkans ('from Croatia to Bulgaria') collecting dishes along the way. Let him lead you through his seasonal delicacies and you won't be disappointed. He'll even regale you with stories about the origins of the dishes if you're so inclined.

underneath the equally great bar (open 7am to 4am) of the same name. It's a good option for vegetarians as it doesn't operate by a set menu and the staff are happy to cook to your request with deliciously fresh ingredients.

Era (☎ 274 949; Rr Ismail Qemali; mains 600 lekë; ☎ 10am-11pm) Traditional Albanian fare in the heart of Blloku. There are some vegetarian choices on the menu, but check first – there may well be mince lurking in your stuffed vegetables.

Prince Park (Rr e Elbasanit; mains 300-1000 lekë; ☎ 11am-midnight) Tucked into the top of the city park, this upmarket restaurant is like a hunting lodge with an open fire in winter, and wooden interiors and antlers on the walls. The cuisine is Italian, with some vegetarian pasta options.

Piazza (☎ 247 706; Rr Ded Gjon Luli; mains 550-1500 lekë; ☎ noon-6pm & 7-11pm) Sit back and enjoy the stylish interior of the large dining room, while impeccably dressed waiters buzz about serving fine Italian cuisine (including some vegetarian pasta options).

DRINKING

Sky Club Panoramic Bar & Restaurant (☎ 221 666; Sky Tower, Rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit; ☎ 8am-midnight) It may seem wrong to make a bar your first stop in Tirana, but a visit to this rotating tower is the best way to orient yourself, offering spectacular views over the entire city. Not recommended for a night on the turps – the rotation is a bit jerky and may leave you slightly seasick.

Living Room (☎ 274 837; Rr Punetoret e Rilindjes 16; ☎ 7.30pm til late) This is the hippest place to drink and dance in Tirana – with eclectic DJs, a good crowd, cool lampshades and '70s sofas for you to lounge on when you're danced (or drunk) off your feet.

Tirana's vibrant and fast-changing bar scene is easily accessed by strolling the streets of fashionable Blloku:

Buda-bar (Rr Ismail Qemali; ☎ 4.30pm-late) This place has subdued lighting, with the supreme being smiling serenely over the super-groovy crowd.

Charl's (Rr Pjeter Bogdani 5; ☎ 8am-late) At the opposite extreme, this rocking student pub has a great beer garden and a constant roster of bands playing live on the weekends.

ENTERTAINMENT

There is a good range of entertainment options in Tirana, in the form of bars, clubs,

cinema, performances and exhibitions. For the lowdown check out the monthly leaflet *ARTirana* (a free supplement to *Gazeta Shqiptare*), which contains English summaries of current cultural events.

Theatre of Opera and Ballet (☎ 224 753; Palace of Culture, Sheshi Skënderbej; tickets around 500 lekë) Check the posters outside for performances ranging from folk-dancing to the state ballet, opera and orchestras.

Academy of Arts (☎ 257 237; Sheshi Nënë Tereza) Classical music and other performances take place throughout the year in either the large indoor theatre or the small open-air faux-classical amphitheatre; both are part of the university. Prices vary according to the programme.

Kinema Millenium 2 (☎ 253 654; Rr Murat Toptani; tickets 200-500 lekë) Screens recent box-office hits (usually in English with Albanian subtitles) and boasts a lovely garden bar.

Next to the university, Qemal Stafa Stadium often hosts pop concerts and other musical events (look out for street advertising). Football matches are held here every Saturday and Sunday afternoon.

SHOPPING

Blloku is a boutique-shopper's paradise.

Natyrall & Organik (☎ 250 575; Rr Vaso Pasha) This wonderful store in Blloku not only supports small village producers by stocking organic olive oil, honey, herbs, tea, eggs, spices, raki and cognac (they make great gifts, but be aware of customs regulations in the countries you're travelling through), it's also a centre for environmental activism.

There are a few good souvenir shops on Rruga Durrësit, Bulevardi Zogu I and around Sheshi Skënderbej. Most of them sell the same things: Albanian flags, carved wooden plates, T-shirts and traditional textiles.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Nënë Tereza International Airport is at Rinas, 26km from the city. For a list of airlines flying from here to other parts of Mediterranean Europe, see p80.

Bus

Getting out of Tirana can be extremely confusing, as much for locals as anybody else. You have the option of buses or *furgons* (see p81), which leave from several hubs

on the outskirts of the city that 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 north leave from the chaotic Zogu i Zi roundabout – Kruja to the right (150 lekë, 45 minutes, 32km) and Shkodra to the left (300 lekë, two hours, 116km). Keep asking until someone points you in the right direction.

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 Rruga 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. Macedonia-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. *Furgons* and buses for Durrës (bus 100 lekë, *furgon* 150 lekë, 45 minutes, 38km) also leave from here.

Buses for Prishtina (€30, 10 hours, 343km, three daily) leave from behind the museum near Sheshi Skënderbej.

If all else fails, get in a taxi and say '*furgon per* [destination], *ju falem nderit*'. It may not be great Albanian, but your taxi driver should understand and they should know the latest departure points.

Train

The run-down train station is at the northern end of Bulevardi Zogu I. Albania's trains range from sort-of OK to very decrepit. Trains go to Durrës (55 lekë, one hour, eight daily), Elbasan (160 lekë, four hours, three daily), Pogradec (245 lekë, seven hours, twice daily), Shkodra (120 lekë, 3½ hours, twice daily) and Vlora (210 lekë, 5½ hours, twice daily).

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Hertz operates a shuttle bus service that will take you from the airport to Sheshi Skënderbej for 500 lekë. Your other options are taxis (agree on a price before you travel – about €20) or the infrequent buses that leave from the carpark (€20). Given the state of Tirana's traffic, allow plenty of time to get to the airport.

Car & Motorcycle

Our advice would be DON'T DO IT. Tirana's roads, and drivers, are insane. For the foolhardy, here are some car-hire agencies in Tirana:

Avis (☎ 235 011; Rogner Hotel Europapark Tirana, Bul Dëshmorët e Kombit)

Hertz (☎ 255 028; Tirana International Hotel, Sheshi Skënderbej)

Sixt (☎ 259 020; Rr e Kavajës 116)

Some of the major hotels offer guarded parking; others have parking available out the front.

Taxi

Taxi stands dot the city and charge 400 lekë for a ride inside Tirana (600 lekë at night). Make sure you reach an agreement with the driver before setting off. **Radio Taxi** (☎ 377 777), with 24-hour service, is particularly reliable.

AROUND TIRANA Mt Dajti National Park

Mt Dajti (1612m) is visible from Tirana, 25km to the east. It is the most accessible mountain in the country and many Tiranans go there on the weekends to escape the city rush and have a spit-roast lamb lunch. There is a checkpoint about 15km from Tirana that levies an admission fee into the national park of 100 lekë for cars with up to three passengers, or 200 lekë for four or more passengers. Put your sturdy shoes on for a gentle hike in the lovely, shady beech and pine forests and have a coffee and enjoy the spectacular views from the wide terrace of the **Panoramic Restaurant** (☎ 361 124; meals 800 lekë; ☎ 9am-11pm), the most popular spot on Dajti.

There is no public transport. A cab from the city takes about 45 minutes, whereupon you can arrange to phone the driver to pick you up when you want to go back. It shouldn't set you back more than 600 to 700 lekë each way. If you're driving, the road to Dajti starts on Rruga Qemal Stafa past the Chateau Linza Hotel.

NORTHERN ALBANIA

Notions of Albania as a wild frontier of bleak mountains and villages that time forgot have their roots in the north. The northern Albanian landscape is a mixture of rich wildlife, swamps and lagoons around Shkodra and the Adriatic Coast, and high, unforgiving mountains, Bjeshkët e Namuna (Accursed

Mountains), in the northeast. Visits to these mountainous regions still involve some element of risk due to the revival of traditional blood feuds and the rise of organised crime. Tourists are unlikely to get caught up in this, but incidents, such as the shoot-out on a bus in early 2006, occasionally happen. The lowlands, including Shkodra and the main road corridor from Tirana to Montenegro, are perfectly safe.

SHKODRA

☎ 022 / pop 91,300

With its dramatic setting by the shores of the Balkan's largest lake and backed by imposing mountains, Shkodra was once the most powerful city in the region and is still the centre of Gheg culture and Albanian Catholicism. It's now a little down-at-heel and suffers from terrible power blackouts in winter. Still, its smattering of fascinating sights makes for a good half-day introduction to Albania for those entering from Montenegro.

By 500 BC an Illyrian fortress already guarded the strategic crossing just west of the city where the rivers meet, through which all traffic moving up the coast from Greece to Italy must pass. Queen Teuta's Illyrian kingdom was based here in the 3rd-century BC, until the last Illyrian king was taken by the Romans in Rozafa fortress in 168 BC. Later the region passed through the hands of the Byzantines, Slavs and Venetians, who held Rozafa against Suleiman Pasha in 1473, only to lose it to Mehmet Pasha in 1479. The Ottomans lost 14,000 men in the first siege and 30,000 in the second.

As the Ottoman Empire declined in the late 18th century, Shkodra became the centre of a semi-independent pashalik – a region governed by a pasha (an Ottoman high official) – which led to a blossoming of commerce and crafts. In 1913 Montenegro attempted to annex Shkodra (it succeeded in taking Ulcinj), and the town changed hands often during WWI. Badly damaged by the 1979 earthquake, Shkodra was subsequently repaired and now is Albania's fourth-largest town.

The centre has some atmospheric laneways with great old buildings in varying states of decay. The massive Catholic cathedral is gradually recovering from its tenure as a volleyball court during the state ban on religion. Its side altar displays the photos of 40 local clerics martyred at this time.

Sights

Two kilometres southwest of Shkodra, near the southern end of Lake Shkodra, is **Rozafa Fortress** (admission 200 lekë), founded by the Illyrians in antiquity and rebuilt much later by the Venetians and Ottomans. The fortress derives its name from a woman named Rozafa, who was allegedly walled into the ramparts as an offering to the gods so that the construction would stand. The story goes that Rozafa asked for two holes to be left in the stonework so that she could continue to suckle her baby. Nursing women still come to the fortress to smear their breasts with milky water taken from a spring here. Bring a torch and indulge your Dungeons & Dragons fantasies, poking around the entryways to

tunnels leading to subterranean chambers. There are marvellous views from the highest point.

In the roundabout in the centre of town stands **5 Heroes**, one of Albania's best examples of socialist-realist sculpture. Fans of the work of gay artist Tom of Finland will see similarities with this superbly homoerotic bronze of five ruggedly handsome men, some holding hands, gazing steely-eyed and square-jawed down the five streets that make up this intersection.

Hidden inside a building that looks like a block of flats, the **Fototeke Marubi** (Muhamet Gjollësia; admission €1; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) boasts fantastic photography by the Marubi 'dynasty', Albania's first and foremost photographers. The first-ever photograph taken in Albania is here, and dates from 1858. The exhibition shows fascinating portraits, places and events, including that of a young Enver Hoxha giving a speech while still in local government in Gjirokastra. To get there, from *5 Heroes* take the next street to the left after the one leading to Rozafa. Turn right at the first street. On the left you will see a metal grille gate about 10m past a jeweller. Enter and follow the path around and you will eventually find the sign. Knock if the door isn't open.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Mondial (☎ 40 194; www.freewebs.com/mondialshkodra; cnr Rr Vasil Shanto & 13 Dhjetori; s/d €50/60, ste €80-110; ☎) This new hotel above a popular restaurant has clean, comfortable rooms with balconies and a large suite with two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room and a spa!

Getting There & Away

Frequent *furgons* depart from the main road near Rozafa Castle for Tirana (300 lekë, two hours, 116km) and three daily buses leave from the *5 Heroes* roundabout. The train is the cheapest but slowest option (120 lekë, 3½ hours).

There are regular minibuses between Shkodra and Ulcinj ('Ulqini' in Albanian) in Montenegro (€8, 40 minutes), crossing the border at Muriqani. By taxi it's €10 to the border and US\$10 from there to Ulcinj. The road to Han i Hotit on the way to Podgorica is in poorer shape. A taxi to this border costs about €15.

CENTRAL ALBANIA

KRUJA

☎ 0511 / pop 17,400

Kruja's impressive beauty starts from the journey itself, up the winding road into the grey, rocky mountains. The fields stretch around you, and soon you can start making out the houses seated in the lap of the mountain, and the ancient castle jutting out on one side. Kruja is a magnificent day trip from Tirana and the best place for souvenir shopping in the country. The bazaar hides antique coins and medals along with quality traditional ware, such as beautifully embroidered tablecloths, copper coffee pots and handwoven rugs.

As you get off the *furgon* a statue of Skanderbeg (George Kastrioti; 1405–68) wielding his mighty sword greets you, with the sharp mountain edges as his backdrop. The hilltop town attained its greatest fame between 1443 and 1468 when this national hero made Kruja his seat of government. At a young age, Kastrioti, son of an Albanian prince, was handed over as a hostage to the Turks, who converted him to Islam and gave him a military education. There he became known as Iskander (after Alexander the Great) and Sultan Murat II promoted him to the rank of *bey* (governor), thus the name Skanderbeg.

In 1443 the Turks suffered a defeat at the hands of the Hungarians at Niš in present-day Serbia, which gave Skanderbeg the opportunity he had been waiting for to abandon the Ottoman army and Islam, and rally his fellow Albanians against the Turks. Among the 13 Turkish invasions he subsequently repulsed was that led by his former commander Murat II in 1450. Pope Calixtus III named Skanderbeg the 'captain general of the Holy See' and Venice formed an alliance with him. The Turks besieged Kruja four times, finally taking it in 1478 (after Skanderbeg's death) and Albanian resistance was suppressed.

Sights

The main sight in Kruja is the still-inhabited **castle** (admission 100 lekë) and its rather retro-modernist **Skanderbeg Museum** (admission 200 lekë; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-6pm, Tue-Sun). Designed by Enver Hoxha's daughter and son-in-law, it displays mainly replicas of armour and paintings depicting Skanderbeg's struggle against

FAMILY FEUD WITH BLOOD AS THE PRIZE

The *Kanun* (Code) was formalised in the 15th century by powerful northern chieftain Lekë Dukagjinn. It consists of 1262 articles covering every aspect of daily life: work, marriage, family, property, hospitality, economy and so on. Although the *Kanun* was suppressed by the communists, there has been a disturbing revival of its strict precepts in northern Albania. How much so is uncertain, as dramatic incidents may have been overplayed by the media.

According to the *Kanun*, the most important things in life are honour and hospitality. If a member of a family (or one of their guests) is murdered, it becomes the duty of the male members of that clan to claim their blood debt by murdering a male member of the murderer's clan. This sparks an endless cycle of killing that doesn't end until either all the male members of one of the families are dead, or reconciliation is brokered through respected village elders.

Hospitality is so important in these parts of Albania that the guest takes on a godlike status. There are 38 articles giving instructions on how to treat a guest – an abundance of food, drink and comfort is at his or her disposal, and it is also the host's duty to avenge the murder of his guest, should this happen during their visit.

the Ottomans – along with a socialist-themed stained-glass window at the end.

The **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 22 225; admission 300 lekë; ☎ 8am–1pm & 3–8pm) is certainly one of the most interesting experiences in Kruja. Set in an original 19th-century house (opposite the Skanderbeg Museum) that once belonged to an affluent Albanian family, the museum shows the level of luxury and self-sufficiency maintained in the household with the production of food, drink, leather, weapons etc, including its very own steam bath. The English-speaking guide hardly stops for breath and will explain everything in minute detail; it's polite to give him a tip of 100 to 200 lekë.

Wander around the old streets, with kids racing around and turkeys being walked like dogs, but beware that you'll probably be set upon by old women trying to sell you some of their craft. Near the lowest part of the walls you will find the remains of a small **hamam** (Turkish bathhouse). Take a torch to look around inside. Nearby sits the **Dollma Teqe**, a small place of worship for the Bektashi branch of Islam (see p56), maintained by successive generations of the Dollma family since 1789. It was resurrected after the fall of the Hoxha regime and is now functioning again. Just to the left of the Teqe complex is a **tunnel** that leads through the walls to a terrace on the side of the cliff, where you can sit among the olive trees and enjoy the panorama.

Kruja is 10km off the main road between Tirana and Lezha. A return journey from Tirana by cab with two hours' waiting time will cost around 4000 lekë, but your best option is to take a *furgon* (150 lekë, 45 minutes, 32km). *Furgons* also run the 45km route from Durrës.

DURRËS

☎ 052 / pop 112,000

With miles of coast and its proximity to Tirana, Durrës should be a seaside resort par excellence. In reality it's dirty and polluted, and you can't swim without risking skin infections. It's a sad reminder of how far the country has slipped since the beach resorts were built here in communist times.

However, the city has an ancient history, the remnants of which make for a fascinating visit. If you believe the sign in the museum it was founded by 'Greek colons' in 627 BC and named Epidamnos. Local political unrest

played a part in sparking the Peloponnesian war that pitted the Greek states against each other from 431 to 404 BC. For a brief period it became part of an Illyrian kingdom before being taken by the Romans in 228 BC and renamed Dyrrachium. War once again touched it in 48 BC when Julius Caesar and Pompey did battle nearby during the Roman Civil War.

Despite all the bloodshed, the town itself was sacred to Aphrodite (Venus), the goddess of love, whose images fill the museum. Since Aphrodite's decline, Durrës has changed hands between the Bulgarians, Byzantines, Argevins, Serbs, Venetians, Ottomans and German Prince Wilhelm of Weld, before briefly becoming the capital of an independent Albania between 1918 and 1920.

Orientation

The town is easily covered on foot. In the centre, the Great Mosque on Sheshi i Lirisë serves as a point of orientation; the archaeological attractions are immediately around it, the city beach to the south. The harbour, immediately to the east, cuts the town off from the Plazhi i Durrësit stretch of beach and hotels.

Information

There are plenty of ATMs around town.

American Bank of Albania (Sheshi Mujo Ulqinaku) Has an ATM.

Dea Lines (☎ 30 386; www.dealines.com; Rr Tregtare 102; ☎ 9am–8pm) A trustworthy travel agency in the middle of town with staff who speak excellent English and can help you with hotel, air and boat bookings, as well as give bus information.

Galaxy Internet (Rr Taulantia; per hr 200 lekë)

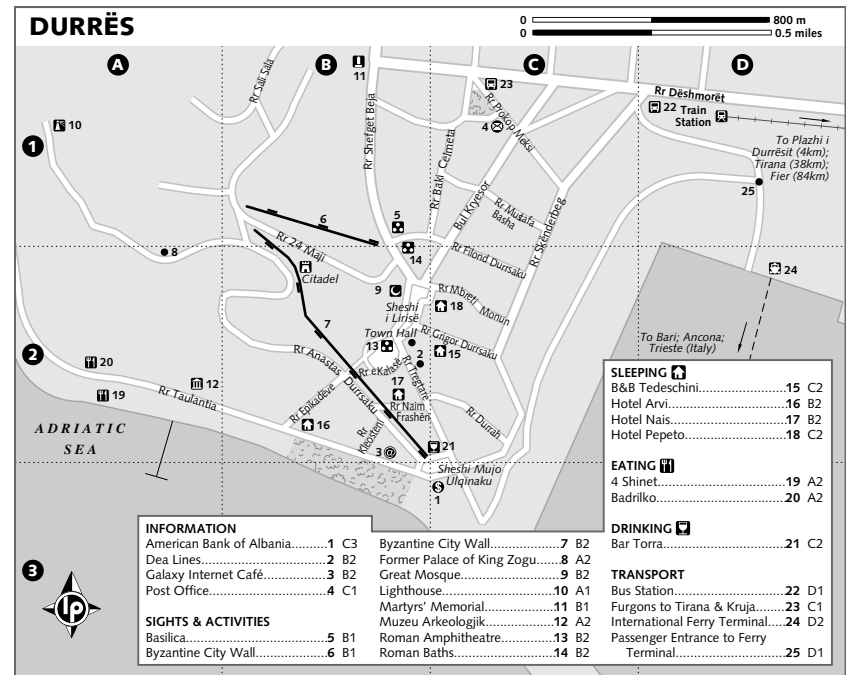
Post office (☎ 35 522; Rr Prokop Meksi)

Sights

The **Muzeu Arkeologjik** (Rr Taulantia; admission 200 lekë; ☎ 8am–4pm Tue–Sun) has an impressive collection of artefacts from the city's Greek, Illyrian and Roman periods, as well as a statue-graveyard (including some fallen communists) scattered around the grounds.

Beyond the museum are the 6th-century **Byzantine city walls**, begun after the Visigoth invasion of AD 481 and supplemented by round Venetian towers in the 14th century.

The impressive **Roman amphitheatre** (admission 200 lekë; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat) was built on the hill side just inside the city walls between the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. In its prime



it had the capacity to seat 15,000 spectators. While poking around in the well-preserved vaults, keep an eye out for the mosaics belonging to a small Byzantine chapel, built into the structure after bloodsports fell out of fashion. There's also a massive tunnel, which originally ran for 500m towards the current town centre to enable the aristocracy to arrive in their carriages. Beware the savage dog chained in one of the pits at the far side of the complex.

Dating from the same period, the ruins of the **Roman baths** can be found just off the main square at the back of the Alexandër Moisiu Theatre. Just across the road a large circular **basilica** still has some columns standing.

Durrës' attractions are not all ancient. There are some fine socialist-realist monuments, including the **Martyrs' Memorial** (Rr Shefqet Beja) and a couple of dramatic statues down by the waterfront.

On the hill top west of the amphitheatre stands the **former palace of King Zogu**. A **lighthouse** stands on the next hill, where you can enjoy the royal views and check out the bunker constellation (see p55). It's a 1.5km walk,

but the views of the bay make it well worth the climb.

Sleeping

These establishments are in the city itself, but many more line the Plazhi i Durrësit.

B&B Tedeschini (☎ 24 343, 068-224 6303; ipmcrsp@cc.al.eu.org; Dom Nikoll Kaçori 5; r per person €15) This homely B&B, occupying the former 19th-century Italian then Austrian consulate, has airy rooms with antique furniture, watched over by portraits of former consuls. From the square fronting the mosque, walk down the alley to the left of the town hall; take the first left then a quick right.

Hotel Nais (☎ 30 375; hotel_nais@yahoo.it; Rr Naim Frashëri 46; s €25, d €30–40, tr €60; ☎) Perched by the city walls, this 1930s building has been smartly refurbished although the rooms are tiny.

Hotel Pepeto (☎ /fax 24 190; Rr Mbreti Monun 3; s €25–30, d €40; ☎) A well-run guesthouse, just off the square fronting the mosque. The rooms are decent and quiet, with good showers, minibars and balconies. One is like a suite and has an exercise bike.

Hotel Arvi (☎ 30 403; www.hotelarvi.com; Rr Taulantia; d €60, ste €80-100; 🍷) This new multistorey block is fairly drab, but many of the rooms have amazing sea views. The large open-plan suites have bathtubs and small balconies.

Eating & Drinking

Bar Torra (Sheshi Mujo Ulqinaku; paninis 100 lekë; 🍷 8am-11pm) This wonderful place is housed inside the fortified Venetian tower at the base of the city walls. The antique brick interior forms a gentle dome that echoes the curves of Hoxha's omnipresent bunkers, and there's a roof terrace for cheap alfresco eating, or drinking coffee, cocktails or beer under the stars.

Badriklo (☎ 25 650; Rr Taulantia; mains 250-600 lekë; 🍷 9am-11pm) This restaurant on the landward side of Rruga Taulantia may lack sea views but it has the best pizzas in Durrës, good service and a lively terrace bar.

4 Shinet (☎ 35 389; Rr Taulantia; mains 350-1250 lekë; 🍷 9am-11pm) The large terrace reaches right to the sea at this popular upmarket eatery. Seafood predictably dominates the menu, which also contains the usual mix of grilled meat, pasta and pizza.

Getting There & Away

Albania's 720km railway network centres on Durrës, with trains heading to Tirana (55 lekë, 1½ hours, eight daily), Shkodra (150 lekë, 3½ hours, two daily), Pogradec (245 lekë, 6½ hours, two daily) and Vlora (210 lekë, five hours, two daily) via Fier.

Buses to Tirana (100 lekë, 38km, 45 minutes) leave from the bus station whenever they're full. There are also two daily buses to Berat. In summer, buses from Tirana to Fier, Vlora, Gjirokastra and Saranda (two daily) stop here as well, but off-season they bypass the town and stop at the intersection at the end of Plazhi i Durrësit, to the far east of the harbour. You'll need to get a taxi to the bus stop (500 lekë).

Furgons to Berat (400 lekë, 93km, two hours) also leave from this intersection. For Tirana (150 lekë, 38km, 45 minutes) and Kruja they leave from Rruga e Dëshmorët, between the bus station and the Martyrs' Memorial.

Numerous travel agencies handle ferry bookings for Bari, Ancona and Trieste. All offer much the same service (see p882). International ferries leave from the terminal south of the bus station.

APOLLONIA

The ruined city of ancient **Apollonia** (Pojan; admission 700 lekë; 🕒 9am-5pm) is 12km west of Fier, itself 89km south of Durrës. Set on rolling hills among olive groves, Apollonia has views that expand for miles across the plains below. Enjoy the panoramas from one of the cafés on the site or bring a picnic.

Apollonia was founded by Corinthian Greeks in 588 BC and quickly grew into an important city-state, minting its own currency. Under the Romans the city became a great cultural centre with a famous school of philosophy. Julius Caesar rewarded Apollonia with the title 'free city' for supporting him against Pompey the Great during the civil war in the 1st century BC, and sent his nephew Octavius, the future Emperor Augustus, to complete his studies there. After a series of military disasters, the population moved southward into present-day Vlora, and by the 5th century only a small village with its own bishop remained at the site.

The picturesque ruins include a small theatre and the elegant pillars on the restored façade of the city's 2nd-century AD administrative centre. Much of the site remains to be excavated. The Byzantine monastery of St Mary has fascinating gargoyles on the outside pillars. Since the restoration of religion, seats have been raided from a cinema to serve as pews. Ancient statues are displayed in the church garden.

Apollonia is best visited on a day trip from Tirana, Durrës, Vlora or Berat, as there's nothing of interest in nearby Fier. The lack of public transport to the site means that you will have to get a bus, *furgon* or train to Fier. The bus from Durrës will cost 200 lekë (1½ hours), and it's 300 lekë from Tirana (two hours). A *furgon* will take about an hour from Berat (200 lekë, 50km) or Vlora (150 lekë, 39km). The train from Tirana (175 lekë, 4½ hours) comes via Durrës. Once in Fier, find a taxi. You should expect to be charged around 2500 lekë for a return journey (30 minutes each way) and an hour's waiting time.

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, and particularly evocative when the clouds swirl around the tops of the minarets and battlements.

In the 3rd century BC an Illyrian fortress called Antipatria was built here on the site of an earlier settlement. The Byzantines strengthened the hilltop fortifications in the 5th and 6th centuries, as did the Bulgarians 400 years later. The Serbs, who occupied the citadel in 1345, renamed it Beligrad (White City) and there is speculation that this is where the town's name comes from. In 1450 the Ottomans took Berat, and after a period of decline it began to thrive in the 18th and 19th centuries as a crafts centre, specialising in woodcarving. For a brief time in 1944 Berat was the capital of liberated Albania.

Berat suffers terribly from power cuts in the winter, and generators are not widely used. While the Osum River that divides the town is fairly dirty, the streets are mostly free of the rubbish that blankets the country. We even saw a team of street cleaners on our last visit! 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 place to start is to take the hard slog up to the impressive 14th-century **Kala** (admission 100 lekë; 🕒 24hr), built on ancient Illyrian foundations along a ridge high above the gorge. Built in a traditionally Christian neighbourhood, the citadel 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 these, displaying artistically important icons, some rare tapestries and a beautiful gilded iconostasis. A torch will come in handy to peer into the Tolkienesque depths of the **Inner Fortress**; ruined stairs lead to a vast cavernous water reservoir.

The houses below the castle form the traditionally Muslim **Mangalem** quarter. 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. Check out the *mafil*, a kind of mezzanine looking into the lounge, where the women could watch the male guests being entertained.

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 Helveti, like the Bektashi, are a Dervish order of Muslim mystics. Next door is the office of the **Institute of Cultural Monuments** (☎ 32 300; www.beratmonument.org.al; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Fri), which can arrange guides and help with keys to locked sites. The big mosque on the town square is the 16th-century **Leaden Mosque** (Xhamië e Plumbit), so named because of the lead coating its domes. The 19th-century **Bachelors' Mosque** (Xhamië e Beqarëvet) is by the river, with enchanting paintings on the external walls.

A new footbridge and a seven-arched stone bridge (1780) lead to **Gorica**, another Christian quarter, where you can visit the old **Monastery of St Spyridon** and the little church of **St Thomas** (Shen Tomi). If you feel energetic you can climb up to the remains of another old **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) Situated in a sprawling Ottoman house, this is the best budget B&B in Albania. Run by the affable Tomi Mio and his family, the hotel has a great bar and restaurant on the ground floor and a clutch of warm, cosy rooms upstairs, plus a terrace with great views across Berat over to Mt Tomorri. Mangalemi even provides the rarest of Albanian services – a decent breakfast. The dinner menu is an offal-lovers paradise (order by the organ).

Hotel Berati (☎ 36 953; Rr Veli Zaloshnja; s/d €18/30) This traditional-style building is just off the main strip, not far from the post office. The hotel offers 10 tidy rooms and a cosy restaurant (mains 250 to 660 lekë) with a fantastic carved wooden ceiling.

Getting There & Away

Buses depart from the station 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), Fier (six daily), Vlora (250 lekë, two hours, 89km, nine daily) and Gjirokastra (one daily at 7am).

Furgons leave across the square from the buses and travel frequently to Tirana. For

Vlorë you'll need to head first to Fier (200 lekë, one hour, 50km) and change *furgons* (150 lekë, one hour, 39km).

SOUTHERN ALBANIA

With snow-capped mountains squeezing up against sparkling white beaches and the azure water of the Ionian, southern Albania is the most visually arresting part of the country. It's also the least populated and therefore the least spoiled – perhaps the last pristine stretch of Europe's Mediterranean coastline.

VLORË

☎ 033 / pop 71,200

Nestled in the broad bay where the Adriatic meets the Ionian, the port city of Vlorë is a much more attractive summer destination than its dirty northern sister Durrës. You can actually swim here in the crystal waters of the beaches, which stretch south from the harbour. Many see this beautiful bay as Albania's best hope for developing tourism. It's no wonder that the locals are fighting so hard to sink the plans of a US company to run an oil pipeline straight through it.

A grand palm-tree-lined avenue stretches through town, although the poverty is palpable just a block away on either side. Daily winter blackouts bring everything to a standstill. This was one of the most lawless towns at the end of the 1990s and, owing to its proximity to Italy, has been a hub of mafia activity, including the trafficking of drugs and slaves.

Vlorë's main claim to fame is that it was the place where Albanian independence was proclaimed in 1912.

Information

Everything you'll need in Vlorë is on the broad main avenue, Sadik Zotaj, including several ATMs, the post office and telephone centre. By far the best place to get online is "Café Studenti" (☎ 33 250; 2 Kullat Skele; per hr 200 lekë; ☎ 8am-10pm), at the bottom of a new white tower complex just past the turnoff to Plazhi i Ri. **Colombo Travel & Tours** (☎ 27 659; www.colomboalb.com; Hotel Sazani, Sheshi i Flamurit; ☎ 8am-noon & 4-10pm Mon-Sat) is a helpful travel agency on the ground floor of the Hotel Sazani, which sells ferry tickets for Brindisi.

Sights

Start at **Sheshi i Flamurit** (Flag Square), near the top of Sadik Zotaj. The magnificently socialist-realist **Independence Monument** stands proud against the sky, representing the key figures in the movement for Albania's sovereignty, as the flag bearer hoists the double-headed eagle into the blue. Near the base of the monument lies the **grave of Ismail Qemali**, the country's first prime minister.

On the other side of the avenue is the **Muzeu Historik** (admission 100 lekë; ☎ 8am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Sat), and opposite, behind an inconspicuous grey metal gate, is the **Ethnographic Museum** (admission 100 lekë; ☎ 9am-2pm Mon-Sat).

Walk down towards the 16th-century **Muradi Mosque**, a small elegant structure made of red and white stone and with a modest minaret; its exquisite design is attributed to one of the greatest Ottoman architects, Albanian-born Sinan Pasha. Further down by the harbour, the **Museum of Independence** (admission 100 lekë; ☎ 9am-noon & 5-8pm) is housed in the lovely little villa that became the headquarters of Albania's first government in 1912. All of the signs are in Albanian, but the preserved offices and historic photographs make it an interesting place for a short visit.

Vlorë's **main beaches** stretch south from the harbour and the further you go, the better they get. Turn left before the harbour to reach **Plazhi i Ri**, a long sandy space that can get quite crowded. A good 2km walk away, **Uji i Ftohtë** is the best beach by far, with open-air bars and discos during summer. Municipal buses run from Sadik Zotaj to the Uji i Ftohtë post office (20 lekë, 10 minutes, every 20 minutes from 8am to 6pm).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Tozo (☎ 23 819; Rr Sadik Zotaj; s/d 2500/3500 lekë; ☎) You can forgive broken showerheads and ill-fitting drapes when your hotel is the only place for blocks with electricity during Vlorë's frequent winter power cuts. This midsized hotel is set back from the main strip behind a cute little park, about halfway between the bus station and the port.

Hotel New York (☎ 24 648; fax 24 649; Uji i Ftohtë beach; s/d €30/50, ste €60-120; ☎ ☎ ☎) With a gravity-defying terrace jutting clear across the road, this hotel has great views across the Bay of Vlorë to Sazan Island. The tiled rooms are airy and tidy and there's a bright, modern restaurant with Italian meals for around 1300

lekë. It's situated at Uji i Ftohtë beach, 500m past where the bus terminates.

Hotel Primavera (☎ /fax 29 664; Plazhi i Ri; s/d/tr €40/40/45; ☎) Looking more like a cheap 1990s apartment block than a hotel, the three-storey Primavera has 18 rooms with balconies and is located just across from the town's main beach.

Xhokla (Plazhi i Ri; mains 200-1000 lekë) With a sunny terrace facing the beach, this wonderful Italian seafood restaurant and bar is the best in town.

Getting There & Away

In Vlorë the bus and *furgon* terminus is easily spotted by the Muradi Mosque. Getting to Vlorë from Tirana and Durrës is easy, with buses (300 lekë, three hours, 161km) and *furgons* (400 lekë) whizzing back and forth in the morning hours. There are also buses to Berat (250 lekë, two hours, 89km, nine daily), or you can catch a *furgon* to Fier (150 lekë, one hour, 39km) and change there (200 lekë, one hour, 50km). Buses to Gjirokastra (700 lekë, 5½ hours) and on to Saranda leave at 6am, 7am, 1pm and 2pm.

The bus to Qeparo will get you to Dhërmi and Himara. It stops on the main road near the terminus before continuing through Plazhi i Ri and Uji i Ftohtë. It takes 90 minutes to climb the Llogaraja Pass, where it often stops for a breather before commencing the 40-minute trip down to Dhërmi (300 lekë).

Trains head from Tirana (210 lekë, 5½ hours, twice daily) via Durrës (210 lekë, five hours). There are also ferries from Vlorë to Brindisi, Italy (€40, four to seven hours depending on the boat, 13 weekly).

IONIAN COAST Llogaraja Pass

The road going south from Vlorë climbs up to the Llogaraja Pass, more than 1000m high, for some of Albania's most spectacular scenery. After the road passes shepherds on the plains guiding their herds, and thick forests where deer, wild boar and wolves roam, the view opens out onto the intense blue of the Ionian, looking out to the Greek island of Corfu. In winter, when snow blankets the ground, it's particularly dazzling. The road winds down a number of hairpin turns before reaching Dhërmi, although the views continue to be breathtaking all the way to Himara.

Dhërmi & Drymades Beaches

Surely there are no more deserted shores in Mediterranean Europe than this wonderfully isolated stretch of coast. Apart from the ever-present bunkers, this landscape is largely unchanged since the ancient Greeks wandered these shores. If you're arriving by bus (from Vlorë 300 lekë, 2½ hours, 55km) ask to be let off by the turnoff for the *plazhi* (beach), just past the town. 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.

In Dhërmi the best place to stay and eat at is the little **Hotel Luçiano** (☎ 069-209 1431; per person 1000 lekë; ☎), consisting of an assortment of rooms 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. The restaurant quickly fills up with people sitting out the surrounding darkness over a drink or a meal.

Even more deserted is Drymades. Leave the road going down into Dhërmi at the sign pointing right, indicating 1200m to the beach. 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. This little slice of paradise is disturbed only by more bunkers and a character-filled beach bar with a straw roof. **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.

Himara

This sleepy town has tremendous potential as a holiday spot, with fine beaches, a couple of Greek tavernas and an attractive newly built seaside promenade. Unfortunately, the standard of accommodation is pretty dismal and half the beach is marred by half-demolished concrete buildings and a disturbing amount of litter. Strolling past rusting car wrecks and a tidal line of plastic isn't quite what you'd hope for in a beach. If you're still keen to stay here, your best bet is to find one of the friendly locals with a private room to rent.

Buses and ferries run between Saranda, Himara and Vlorë daily and there are some *furgons*, but you'll probably have to get up early. Ask a local for the times. The trip from Dhërmi is stunning and takes 75 minutes

by bus (100 lekë). It's a further two hours to Saranda.

SARANDA

☎ 0852 / pop 32,000

With the most attractive waterfront in Albania, Saranda is a charming little town. Its houses fan over the hillsides, small boats bob on the blue sea and people stroll up and down the waterfront promenade, enjoying the 290 sunny days per year. Ayii Saranda, an early Christian monastery dedicated to 40 saints gave the town its name. Saranda is a stone's throw from the Greek island of Corfu (12.5 km) and a good point to cross between the two countries.

Most of Saranda's attractions are a little outside of the town itself. Nearby is the mesmerising ancient archaeological site of Butrint, the hypnotic Syri i Katterc (Blue Eye Spring), and some lovely beaches at Ksamili village, where you can dip and refresh after a day of exploring.

Information

There are plenty of ATMs, cardphones and a **post office** (☎ 23 45; Rr Skënderbeu) in the centre of town. The incredibly helpful **Tourist Information Office** (☎ 23 80; bashkiasarande@yahoo.com; Rr Skënderbeu; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri) on the 1st floor of the town hall can assist you with transport or information about sights.

Sleeping & Eating

Kaonia (☎ 26 00; fax 26 08; Rr 1 Maji; s/d €20/40; 🍴) A lovely midsized hotel positioned on Saranda's seafont boasting great beds, power showers and fabulously kitsch 1950s-style patterned awnings on the balconies looking over the sea.

Hotel Delfini (☎ 60 72; Rr Sarandë–Butrint; r €40; 🍴) There's something of the spaceship about the large round bar anchoring one corner of this new construction, with the water beckoning at the bottom of the stairs.

Hotel Butrinti (☎ 55 92; www.butrintihotel.com; Rr Sarandë–Butrint; s €70–110, d €80–125, ste €120–270; 🍴 🍷 🍷) This hotel is the swankiest place on the entire coast, even if it doesn't quite live up to its five-star delusions.

Kalaja e Lëkurësit (☎ 55 32; Lëkurësi; mains 250–1200 lekë) Perched high above the town in an old castle, this excellent eatery boasts breathtaking views over the town, Corfu and the Butrint lagoon.

Getting There & Away

There are regular buses to Butrint (100 lekë, 45 minutes, seven daily) via Ksamili (35 minutes), which leave from the street just below the **bus station** (Rr 8 Nëntori).

Buses to Gjirokastra (300 lekë, 1½ hours, 70km) leave from Saranda's bus station each hour from 5.30am up to 1pm. Some go on to Tirana (1000 lekë, eight hours, 314km) and Durrës (900 lekë, seven hours, 276km). There are also *furgons* to Gjirokastra, Tirana and Vlora (via Himara), usually leaving between 7am and 9.30am. Some smaller buses also take the coastal route to Vlora via Himara and Dhërmi.

There's a daily boat (more in summer) from Saranda to Corfu (€17.50, one hour, 27km). A taxi to the Greek border at Kakavija will cost 3500 lekë, while a cab to the border near Konispoli will cost around 3000 lekë (30 minutes).

AROUND SARANDA

Butrint

The ancient ruins of **Butrint** (☎ 0732-46 00; admission 700 lekë; ☎ 8am–7.30pm), 24km south of Saranda, are a truly remarkable experience. Set at the foot of a lagoon in a 29-sq-km national park, the ruins of antiquity reveal themselves gradually. You will need at least three hours to lose yourself among the lovely forest paths. Bring water and snacks with you, as there are no eating and drinking facilities.

The poet Virgil (70–19 BC) claimed that the Trojans founded Buthrotum (Butrint), but no evidence of this has been found. Although the site had been inhabited long before, Greeks from Corfu settled on the hill in Butrint in the 6th century BC. Within a century Butrint had become a fortified trading city with an acropolis. The lower town began to develop in the 3rd century BC and many large stone buildings had already been built by the time the Romans took over in 167 BC. Butrint's prosperity continued throughout the Roman period and the Byzantines made it an ecclesiastical centre. The city subsequently went into decline, and it was almost abandoned by 1927 when Italian archaeologists arrived.

As you enter the site the path leads to the right to the 3rd-century BC **Greek theatre**, secluded in the forest below the acropolis. It could seat about 2500 people and was sacred to Asclepius, the god of healing, whose **temple** can be seen on the slopes slightly to the left. Close by are the small **public baths**, with geometric mosaics that are unfortunately buried

WORTH A TRIP

Like something from a vampire movie, it's hard to imagine a creepier setting than the stone city of **Gjirokastra**, shrouded in cloud on its rocky perch, and surrounded by savage mountains. Above it all a gloomy, dark castle with a blood-chilling history watches over everything, perpetually guarded by black crows. It's the sort of place where dictators are raised (Enver Hoxha) and young boys dream up dramatic stories and become famous writers (Ismail Kadare, whose *Chronicle in Stone* is set here). In short, it's a thrilling place to spend a day absorbing the life of its steep cobbled streets, where the pace is slow and suspended in the past.

For an authentic experience of Ottoman Albania, stay at the **Hotel Kalemi** (☎ 63724; draguak@yahoo.com; Lagjia Palorto; r 4000 lekë), a cross between a hotel and an ethnographic museum, with original carved wooden ceilings and stone fireplaces.

Located 70km northeast of Saranda, the bus takes 90 minutes and costs 300 lekë.

under the sand and cannot be seen. You are allowed to make a small hole to peek at the mosaics, but don't touch them, and do cover it up again.

Deeper in the forest is a wall covered with crisp Greek inscriptions, and a 6th-century palaeo-Christian **baptistry** decorated with colourful mosaics of animals and birds, again under the sand. Beyond are the impressive arches of the 6th-century **basilica** built over many years. A massive **Cyclopean wall**, dating back to the 4th century BC, is further on. Over one gate is a splendid relief of a lion killing a bull, plundered from an earlier temple to reduce the height of the gate and make it easier to defend. Just inside the gate is a perfectly preserved **well** with its endearing Greek inscription, 'Junia Rufina, friend of nymphs'.

The top of the hill is where the **acropolis** once was; there's now a castle here with a museum displaying artefacts found at the site. From the courtyard you can enjoy the views over the site and the lagoon.

There are regular buses between Butrint and Saranda (100 lekë, 45 minutes, seven daily), or a one-way cab will cost around 800 lekë.

Ksamill Beach

A better bathing alternative to Saranda's beaches is this sandy spot 17km south, with four small dreamy islands within swimming distance. The village was only founded in 1973 as a model communist collective. Enjoy its relative seclusion now, as developers have big plans for Ksamili. A couple of hotels were being built at the time of writing.

It's easy to get here on the bus from Saranda to Butrint. A cab will cost about 700 lekë.

Syri i Kalter

The Blue Eye Spring, about 15km east of Saranda, is a hypnotic spring of deep blue water surrounded by electric blue edges like the iris of an eye. It feeds the Bistrica River and its depth is still unknown. This is the perfect picnic spot, under the shade of the oak trees.

There is no public transport, so unless you are driving you will have to get a taxi. A return journey to Syri i Kalter will cost around 2000 lekë, with half an hour's waiting time. You get a tantalising glimpse of it en route to Gjirokastra.

ALBANIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Albania's budget accommodation (singles €12 to €40) is usually decent and clean with TVs and private bathrooms. Most of the available options fall into the midrange category, with prices ranging widely (singles €40 to €100) and the most expensive being in Tirana. Rooms usually have direct-dial telephones, minibars and air-conditioning. Top-end establishments on a par with leading European hotels are to be found in mainly in Tirana. Room prices start at €150 and head up to the ridiculous.

Accommodation has undergone a rapid transformation in Albania, with many custom-built private hotels replacing the run-down state ones (usually named Hotel Tourism or Hotel Grand). Breakfast is often included in the price but it's usually absolutely awful. Don't take it for granted that credit cards will be accepted.

Most of the country suffers from lengthy blackouts during winter, so it pays to check

if your hotel has a generator. Tirana is the exception, as power cuts don't tend to last long. When the power goes out the water doesn't pump, unless a gravity-driven tank system has been installed.

You can often find unofficial accommodation in private homes by asking around. Camping is possible in the southern region and sometimes on deserted beaches.

ACTIVITIES

Swimming is great along the Adriatic and Ionian Coasts, except for the polluted section from Durrës to Fier. You can go bird-watching around Lezha and hiking in the national parks (p58). Adventure tourism is in its infancy in Albania, and the national leaders are the enthusiastic young team at **Outdoor Albania** (☎ 04 272 075; www.outdooralbania.com; Tirana).

BOOKS

For a helpful list of Albanian words and phrases check out the *Eastern Europe Phrase-book* from Lonely Planet.

Biografi (1993), by New Zealander Lloyd Jones, is an arresting semifictional account of the writer's quest in the early 1990s for the alleged double of former dictator Enver Hoxha.

The Albanians: A Modern History (1999), by Miranda Vickers, is a comprehensive and very readable history of Albania from the time of Ottoman rule to the restoration of democracy after 1990.

Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity (1999), by Miranda Vickers and James Pettifer, covers the tumultuous 1990s in great detail.

The Best of Albanian Cooking (1999), by Klementina Hysa and R John Hysa, is one of scant few books on the subject of Albanian cuisine and contains a wide range of family recipes.

High Albania (published in 1909 and reprinted in 2000), by Albania's 'honorary citizen' Edith Durham, recounts the author's travels in northern Albania in the early 20th century.

Rumpalla: Rummaging through Albania (2002), by Peter Lucas, is a personal account by an Albanian-American journalist detailing several visits to Albania before and after the revolution.

Albania: The Bradt Travel Guide (2004), by Gillian Gloyer, is a thorough guide to the whole country.

James Pettifer's *Albania and Kosovo Blue Guide* (2001) is an informed source for answering any questions on Albanian history and a good guide to sights.

BUSINESS HOURS

Most offices open at 8am and close around 5pm. Shops usually open at 8am and close around 7pm, though some close for a siesta from noon to 4pm, opening again from 4pm to 8pm. Banking hours are shorter (generally 9am to 2.30pm). Restaurants are normally open from 8.30am to 11pm, and bars from 8.30am to midnight or later.

COURSES

The **University of Tirana** (☎ 04-228 402; pages.albaniaonline.net/ut/unitirana_en/default_en.htm; Sheshi Nënë Tereza) runs a summer-school programme in Albanian language and culture.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Many prejudices surround Albania, but the country is now safe for travel. In fact, despite poor street lighting, the level of petty crime is much less than in most Western countries. You should not feel unduly concerned passing groups of young men on the streets at night. There isn't a hardcore drinking culture, so it's almost unheard of to be attacked by drunks after dark.

That said, the mountainous regions of the north still involve some element of risk due to the revival of ancient blood feuds and the rise of organised crime – the latter is also a problem in Vlora. Tourists are unlikely to get caught up in this, but incidents occasionally happen. There are reports of people being held up at gunpoint in isolated corners of northern Albania, though these events are becoming rare. There may still be landmines near the northern border with Kosovo around Bajram Curri.

Take the usual precautions about avoiding rowdy political demonstrations, not flashing money around and being aware of pickpockets in crowded places.

The most serious risk to safety is on the roads. Most people have been driving for less than 10 years, and this inexperience, combined with the terrible state of the roads and a typically Balkan disregard for traffic laws and a typically Balkan disregard for traffic laws, make for a high accident rate. Other dangers to pedestrians include gaping holes in pavements, missing manhole covers and treacherous black ice in winter.

As Albania was closed for so long, black and Asian travellers may encounter some curious stares; in fact most visitors to Albania, male or female, can expect to encounter such stares! Studiously ignoring the man sitting next to you on a *furgon*, as he bores holes into the side of your head, will have no effect, so you may as well get used to it.

Do not drink the tap water; locals jokingly refer to it as Hoxha's revenge. Plenty of bottled water is available. Also, don't swim in the water at Durrës – you may end up with a nasty skin infection. The standard of health care in Albania is quite poor. Local hospitals and clinics are under-resourced.

DISABLED TRAVELLERS

There are few special facilities for travellers in wheelchairs. Public transport and access to sights, shops and hotels will all prove to be extremely problematic. Only the very top hotels in Tirana have properly designed wheelchair-accessible rooms.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Albanian Embassies & Consulates

Following are some of the main addresses for Albanian embassies. There's a full list on the website of the **Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (www.mfa.gov.al).

Canada (☎ 613-2363 0953; embassyrepublicofalbania@on.albn.com; 130 Albert St, Ste 302, ON K1P 5G4, Ottawa)

France (☎ 01 47 23 31 00; ambassade.albanie@wanadoo.fr; 57 avenue Marceau, Paris 75116)

Germany (☎ 030-259 30 40; kanzlei@botschaft-albanien.de; Friedrichstrasse 231, D-10 969, Berlin)

Greece Athens (☎ 2106 876 200; albem@ath.forthner.gr; Vekiareli 7, Filothei); Ioannina (☎ 2651 021 330; algefeer@panafonet.gr; Str Foti Zavella 2); Thessaloniki (☎ 31 547 4494; fax 31 546 656; Odysseos Str 6)

Italy Rome (☎ 686 22 41 20; fax 686 21 60 05; Via Asmara 5); Bari (☎ 805 72 76 47; fax 805 28 33 35; Via Cafelati 7)

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

Macedonia (☎ 022-614 636; ambshqip@mt.net.mk; ul HT Karpoš 94a)

Netherlands (☎ 0704 27 21 01; 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; 2nd fl, 24 Buckingham Gate, London SW1 E6LB)

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

Embassies & Consulates in Albania

Following are some embassies in Tirana:

France (☎ 04-234 250; ambcrtir@mail.adanet.com.al; Rr Skënderbej 14)

Germany (☎ 04-232 048; www.tirana.diplo.de; Rr Skënderbej 8)

Greece (☎ 04-223 959; grembtir@albnet.net; Rr Frederik Shiroka 3)

Italy (☎ 04-234 045; www.ambitalia-tirana.com; Rr Lek Dukagjini)

Macedonia (☎ 04-233 036; makambas@albnet.net; cnr Rr Skënderbej & Rr e Kavajës)

Netherlands (☎ 04-240 828; www.netherlandsembassytirana.com; Rr Asim Zeneli 10)

Serbia (☎ 04-223 042; ambatira@icc-al.org; Rr Skënderbej Pall. 8/3 Shk. 2)

UK (☎ 04-234 973; www.uk.al; Rr Skënderbej 12)

USA (☎ 04-247 285; www.usemb-tirana.rpo.at; Rr Elbasanit 103)

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Early in 1995 homosexuality in Albania was decriminalised, with the age of consent set at 18 for sex between women or between men, four years higher than for male-female sexual acts.

Like many Eastern European nations, this change came about not through a transformation of societal attitudes, but more from a desire to comply with the EU and fall into step with the West. Unfortunately, prejudice against gays and lesbians in Albania is as strong as ever. There are no venues and the community that exists is so far underground it's inaccessible to travellers.

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day 1-2 January

Orthodox Christmas 7 January (not a public holiday, but shops may shut in Orthodox areas)

Summer Day 14 March

Nevruz 22 March (Bektashi feast day)

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 around October (end of Ramadan)

Bajram i Vogël Currently around December

LANGUAGE

Albanian (Shqip) is a descendant of ancient Illyrian, with a number of Turkish, Latin, Slavonic and (modern) Greek words, although it constitutes a linguistic branch of its own. It has 36 characters (including nine diagraphs or double letters, eg dh and ll). It shares certain grammatical features with Romance languages (particularly Romanian), but it's fair to say the Albanian language is a world unto itself.

Most Albanian place names have two forms as the definite article is a suffix. An example of this is *bulevardi* (the boulevard), as opposed to *bulevard* (a boulevard). The capital city's name is Tirana, which is the definite form of the name, meaning 'the Tirana', as opposed to *Tiranë*, which can mean 'to Tirana', in its indefinite form. In this chapter, for place names we have used the spelling most commonly used in English ie Tirana, Durrës.

Many Albanians speak Italian, thanks to Italian TV broadcasts, which can be picked up along the coast. Quite a few people in the south also speak Greek, and younger people are learning English.

See the Language chapter, p895, for pronunciation guidelines and useful words and phrases.

MEDIA

Newspapers

A diverse range of newspapers is printed in Tirana and the independent daily *Koha Jonë* is the paper with the widest readership. Newspapers are often directly owned by political organisations and sensationalism is often the norm in the print media. Dependence on external funding tends to limit objectivity.

The *Albanian Daily News* is a fairly dry English-language publication that has useful information on happenings around Albania. It's generally available from major hotels for 300 lekë, or you can read it online at www.albaniannews.com.

Foreign newspapers and magazines are sold at most major hotels, and at some central street kiosks, though they tend to be a few days old.

Radio

The BBC World Service can be picked up in and around Tirana on 103.9FM, while the Voice of America's mainly music programme is on 107.4FM. Some of the most popular Albanian radio stations are: Albanian Radio

and TV (RTSh), a public broadcaster; Radio Tirana, an external service run by RTSh, with programmes in eight languages including English. The private station Top Radio is the hippest in the country, pumping out a colourful mix of hip-hop, Turkish pop, techno and rock.

TV

There are many TV channels available in Albania including the state TV service TVSH, the private station TVA and, among others, Eurosport, several Italian channels and even a couple of French ones.

MONEY ATMs

In just the last year or so ATMs connected to the major international networks have appeared in towns and cities everywhere, which makes travel here much easier. The main networks are Raiffeisen Bank, American Bank of Albania, Pro Credit Bank and Tirana Bank.

Credit Cards

Only the larger hotels and travel agencies accept credit cards, and in only a handful of establishments outside Tirana. Major banks can offer credit-card advances.

Currency

Albanian notes come in denominations of 100, 200, 500 and 1000 lekë. There are five, 10, 20 and 50 lekë coins. Since 1997, all notes issued are smaller and contain a sophisticated watermark to prevent forgery. In 1964 the currency was revalued; prices on occasion may still be quoted at the old rate (3000 lekë instead of 300).

Everything in Albania can be paid for with lekë but most hotel prices are quoted in euro, which is readily accepted as an alternative currency.

Moneychangers

Every town has its currency market, which usually operates on the street in front of the main post office or state bank. Such transactions are not dangerous or illegal and it all takes place quite openly, but do make sure you count the money twice before tendering yours. The advantages are that you get a good rate and avoid the 1% bank commission. There are currency exchange businesses in

major towns, usually open 8am to 6pm, and closed on Sundays.

The euro and the US dollars are the favourite foreign currencies. You will not be able to change Albanian lekë outside the country, so exchange them or spend them before you leave.

Travellers' Cheques

These are about as practical here as a dead albatross, though you can change them at the National Savings Bank (p61) and at major banks in Tirana. Travellers cheques (euro and US dollar) can be used at a few top-end hotels, but cash is preferred everywhere.

POST

Outside main towns there are few public mail boxes but there is an increasing number of post offices springing up. Sending an international postcard costs around 40 lekë, while a letter costs 80 lekë to 160 lekë. The postal system does not enjoy a reputation for efficiency. Don't rely on sending or receiving parcels through Albapost.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Ohrid Lake trout is almost extinct and in 2004 the Macedonian government issued a seven-year ban on catching it. No such ban exists on the Albanian side, and you'll see people selling it on the roadside around the lake, and on menus from Korça through to Tirana under the name *koran*. Resist the urge to order it.

Plastic wasn't widely used during the old regime and most refuse was biodegradable or recycled. Now blue plastic bags are everywhere. An interesting game is to see how long you can go refusing bags from shopkeepers. If you fail, the penalty is to fill it up with rubbish and dispose of it properly. The disappointing thing is that most of the rubbish collected will be burnt anyway, causing further damage to the environment. If you're really hardcore, take your recyclables with you when you leave the country.

TELEPHONE & FAX

Long-distance telephone calls made from main post offices are cheap, costing about 90 lekë a minute to Italy. Calls to the USA cost 230 lekë per minute. Calls from private phone offices are horribly expensive – 800 lekë per minute to Australia. Unfortunately there aren't any cheap internet phone centres, or at least none

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

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

where you can hear the person at the other end of the line. Hopefully this will change soon. Faxing can be done from the main post office in Tirana for the same cost as phone calls, or from major hotels, though they will charge more. Several important local numbers are Domestic directory enquiries ☎ 124 and International directory assistance ☎ 12.

Mobile Phone

There are two established mobile-phone providers (Vodafone and AMC); a third company, Eagle Mobile, has been granted a licence. Nearly all areas of the country are covered, though the networks can become congested and, after all, it is a mountainous nation. The tariffs are quite high. Check that a roaming agreement exists with your home service provider. Mobile numbers begin with ☎ 068 or ☎ 069 (Eagle Mobile's prefix is not yet known).

TOILETS

Squat toilets were the norm until very recently, and you'll still find them in some hotels, restaurants and private homes. This is especially true in more remote areas, making a toilet stop en route something of an adventure. Where there is no running water a large jar or bucket will usually take the place of the flush. It's not a bad idea to carry some toilet paper with you, and a packet of premoistened wipes for cleaning your hands. None of the hotels listed in this chapter have squat toilets.

VISAS

No visa is required by citizens of EU countries, Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland or the USA. South Africans will need to apply for a visa from the Albanian embassy in Rome or London (€25). Travellers from other countries can check visa requirements at www.mfa.gov.al. Citizens of all countries – even those entering visa-free – will be required to pay an 'entry tax' at the border. The entry tax for all visitors (apart from Czechs and Poles; they get in for free) is €10.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Albania is quite a safe country for women travellers, but it is important to be aware of the fact that outside Tirana it is mainly men who go out and sit in bars and cafés, whereas the women generally stay at home. It may feel strange to be the only woman in a bar, so it is advisable to travel in pairs if possible, and dress conservatively. Staring seems to be a national pastime, and both men and women will find themselves on the receiving end. It's usually not intended to be threatening. While Albania has developed a reputation as a centre for people trafficking, the unfortunate victims are mostly ensnared in poverty-stricken Eastern European countries, and tourists don't seem to be targets.

TRANSPORT IN ALBANIA

This section covers transport connections between Albania and the other countries in this book. For information on getting to Albania from further afield, see p877.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Albania's only international airport is **Nënë Tereza International Airport** (also known as Mother Theresa and, more commonly, Rinas airport), which is located 26km northwest of Tirana. There are no domestic flights within Albania.

AIRLINES

Adria Airways (code JP; ☎ 04-228 483; www.adria.si, Ljubljana)

Albanian Airlines (code LV; ☎ 04-235 162; www.albanianairlines.com.al; Prishtina)

Hemus Air (code DU; ☎ 04-230 410; www.hemusair.bg; Sofia)

JAT Airways (code JU; ☎ 04-251 033; www.jat.com; Belgrade)

Malév Hungarian Airlines (code MA; ☎ 04-234 163; www.malev.hu; Budapest)

DEPARTURE TAX

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

Land BUS

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 Miine Peza, Tirana; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri).

Macedonia-bound buses, going via Struga (€10, six hours, 197km, six per week) and on to Tetovo, leave from the muddy patch in front of the train station. Get tickets from the nearby **Pollogu travel agency** (☎ 04-23 500; 069-209 4906; Pall. 103, Bul Zogu I). It's a little hard to find, upstairs in a modern apartment building; the entrance is next to a bright orange café, Pause.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

You will need a Green Card endorsed for Albania to bring a car into the country. You'll find that many insurers and hire companies will not cover you. For further information on driving around Albania see opposite.

BORDER CROSSINGS

Albania has land borders with Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro and the UN-monitored territory of Kosovo. Access to/from all neighbouring states is generally trouble-free and unrestricted.

Greece

There are border crossings between Korça and Florina at Kapshtica/Krystallopigi, between Ioannina and Gjirokastra at Kakavija/Kakavia, between Ioannina and Përmeti, and north of the Greek port of Igoumenitsa at Konispoli/Sagiada.

Macedonia

There are four border crossings with Macedonia. The two main ones are on either side of Lake Ohrid: Qafa e Thanës–Kafa San, 65km east of Elbasan; and Tushëmishti–Sveti Naum, 5km east of Pogradec. The latter is normally crossed on foot, as taxis from Pogradec will drop you off just before the Macedonian border. You can then wait for the bus to Ohrid (80MKD, 50 minutes, 29km, four daily) on the Macedonian side. There are two smaller crossings at Blato, 5km northwest of Debar, and at Stenje on the western shore of Lake Prespa.

Montenegro

There are currently two border crossings. There are regular minibuses between Shkodra

and Ulcinj (€8, 40 minutes), crossing the border at Muriqani. By taxi it's €10 to the border and US\$10 from there to Ulcinj. The road to Han i Hotit on the way to Podgorica is in poorer shape. A taxi to this border crossing costs about €15.

Kosovo

The best crossing for travellers is at Morina/Vrbnica between Kukës and Prizren, though there is another rather isolated one at Prushi. There are still occasional reports of trouble in the border area, though nothing like as bad it as once was. Travellers on buses through to Prishtina should have no problems.

GETTING AROUND

Bicycle

Although many Albanians cycle short distances, cycling through the country is not recommended, especially if you are not familiar with the abysmal driving on Albanian roads. Furthermore, many roads are not paved and there are no cycling paths anywhere in the country.

Bus

Most Albanians travel around their country in buses or *furgons*, which are nine- to 12-seater vans. Buses to Tirana depart from towns all around Albania at the crack of dawn. Pay the conductor on board; the fares are low (eg Tirana–Durrës is 100 lekë). Tickets are rarely issued.

Both buses and *furgons* are privately owned and don't follow a timetable – they leave when they've got enough passengers to make it worth their while. The *furgon* and bus drivers seem to take it in turns to strike, each looking for some concession from the government to restrict the activities of the other. At the time of writing it was the bus drivers' turn, some of whom were on hunger strike. Clearly neither group make much money from the meagre fares charged.

The *furgon* system can seem daunting at first, but it actually works really well. There are always more *furgons* running in the mornings and the last departure is usually in plenty of time to enable the driver (they're always men) to reach his destination before nightfall.

Car & Motorcycle

Albania has only recently acquired an official road traffic code and most motorists have only learned to drive in the last 10 years. Dur-

ing the communist era car ownership required a permit from the government, which in 45 years issued only two to nonparty members. As a result, the government found it unnecessary to invest in new roads. Nowadays the road infrastructure is improving but it's still more akin to India than Europe. There are decent roads from the Macedonian border to Tirana and Durrës, and north from these cities to Shkodra, but the main roads leading south are still being expanded. The coastal road from Vlora to Saranda is particularly treacherous. Highway signage is bad and there are a lot of road works going on to accommodate the explosive growth in vehicle numbers. In short, it's a really, really hard place to drive, and local driving habits are best described as free-spirited. Off the main routes a 4WD is a necessity. Driving at night is particularly hazardous and driving on mountain 'roads' in winter is an extreme sport. There is no national automobile association in Albania as yet.

DRIVING LICENCE

Foreign driving licences are permitted but it is recommended to have an International Driving Permit as well. Car-hire agencies usually require that you have held a full licence for one year.

FUEL & SPARE PARTS

There are plenty of petrol stations in the cities and increasing numbers in the country. Unleaded fuel is widely available along all major highways, but fill up before driving into the mountainous regions. A litre of unleaded petrol costs 130 lekë. There isn't yet a highly developed network of mechanics and repair shops capable of sourcing parts for all types of vehicles.

HIRE

Car hire is fairly new to Albania, but given the driving conditions we wouldn't recommend it unless you have a lot of experience of similar conditions.

ROAD RULES

Drinking and driving is forbidden, and there is zero tolerance for blood-alcohol readings. Both motorcyclists and their passengers must wear helmets. Speed limits are as low as 30km/h to 35km/h in built-up areas and 35km/h to 40km/h on the edges of built-up areas.

Train

Before 1948 Albania had no passenger railways, but the communists built up a limited north–south rail network. Today, however, nobody who can afford other types of transport takes the train, even though fares are seriously cheap. The reason will be obvious once you board: 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.

For timetable and fare information, refer to the official website of Hekurudha e Shqipërise (Hsh; Albanian Railways) at www.hsh.com.al.