

# ALBANIA

US\$1 = 10.00 leks  
CDN\$1 = 8.55 leks  
UK£1 = 17.40 leks

1 lek = US\$0.10  
1 lek = CDN\$0.12  
1 lek = UK£0.06

The Rip Van Winkle of Europe has stirred at last. Even remote, insulated, enigmatic Albania (Shqipëria) has felt the winds of openness and liberation that swept away much of European totalitarianism in the last year, revealing itself, albeit tentatively, to the world. The vanguard of vagabonds who plunge into the tiny nation at the mouth of the Adriatic will enjoy mountain splendor to rival the Alps, befuddled donkeys leading their carts to market, and a fleeting opportunity to walk through the most primitive society in Europe.

Albanian communism is a different beast than the puppet regimes that once ruled Eastern Europe. It was indigenous communist partisans, not the Red Army, who liberated the country after World War II, giving the people their first stable, sovereign government since the death of national hero Skënderbeg in 1468. The new government banned religion, but has nearly replaced it with a hero-cult of its first communist leader Enver Hoxha, who died in 1985. Hoxha's personal effects are now on display in a giant pyramid in Tiranë, and his name adorns every other mountain-side in letters large enough to distract passing Martians.

However comic the monstrous monuments and omnipresent Stalin statues may be, Albanian communism has scored some successes. The overwhelmingly agricultural populace enjoys pure water and clear air, few lines, and decently-stocked shelves (except for meat). Albania sits on hefty oil reserves and has become the world's third-largest exporter of chromium, a metal that is essential for more than bumpers. Schools, museums, and the Enver Hoxha University in Tiranë now serve what was not long ago an illiterate and even more backward country.

The state obsessively controls the destiny of its citizens by filtering influence from without and dictating daily life within. Abundant natural resources have given the government the courage to denounce first Yugoslav, then Russian and finally Chinese communism as craven revisionism. Western influence is edited out of Albanian life as a threat to pure Albanian Marxism-Leninism. Concrete pillboxes pockmark the hills, primed to repulse foreign invasion. Within Albania's mountainous borders, nary a chicken dies without the government's knowledge. The state rarely grants foreign travel privileges, forbids private automobiles, and must grant permission to people who wish to resettle out of their home district. Wages and living standards remain crushingly low.

Yet the pace of change over the last year has been tremendous, and no one quite knows what will come next. Recently the government has allowed peasants to sell their home-grown produce privately and has made overtures to the United States and the Soviet Union to resume diplomatic relations. Foreign companies will participate in joint development ventures within the next few years. The Albanians who sought refuge in Tiranë's Western embassies in the summer of 1990 vividly illustrate the country's hunger for Western goods and lifestyles.

The curiosity is mutual. Tourism is booming in theory, although the dearth of transportation and communication infrastructure severely limits Albania's capacity to accommodate visitors. There are simply not enough maps, road signs, gas pumps, and hotel rooms to go around. This situation may change dramatically in the near future, so move quickly to glimpse the land and people as they have lived in their 40-year isolation.

## Planning Your Trip

Joining a group tour is still the only affordable way to see Albania. Quail not, for many of your companions will also be frustrated solo travelers. All arrangements within Albania are in the hands of **Albturist**, the state travel authority; an Albturist bus and guide will join you at the border and Albturist may change your daily program capriciously. All tours include transportation, accommodation at Albturist hotels, and full board. The tour will make all visa arrangements. In July and August, afternoons can be quite roasty, even in the air-conditioned bus. Going off-season may be considerably more pleasant and slightly cheaper as well.

Dozens of tour operators go to Albania, but the only ones in the English-speaking world are based in Great Britain. You can get slightly more bang for your buck with **Voyages Jules Verne**, 10 Glentworth St., London NW1 5PG (tel. (071) 486 80 80). They schedule fifteen departure dates from March to October 1991; the basic price for a nine-day trip is expected to be £385 plus £28 for a visa, £15 for airport taxes, and a £29 matching fee if you are traveling alone but wish to share a double room. These trips fly on JAT from London Heathrow to Titograd in Yugoslavia, then bus across the Albanian border; if you're already planning to be in Yugoslavia, you may be able to join or leave the tour in Titograd and save a bundle. Jules Verne also offers five-day trips in October and March, with direct flights from London Gatwick to Tiranë (£295-329). The other British operator is **Regent Holidays**, 13 Small St., Bristol BS1 1DE (tel. (272) 21 17 11), a smaller but well-established outfit that has been doing tours to Albania since 1970. They will offer five- to 12-day tours of Albania from March to October 1991. Although 1991 charges are not yet set, 1990 prices ranged from £378-666, plus £10-14 for visa costs. The extra expense may be worth it, since Regent flies from London Heathrow to Tiranë and usually sends in-house staff or academic experts as tour escorts. All these tours are popular, and it can take some time to get visas approved; book no less than six weeks ahead, preferably several months. In London, don't miss the **Albanian Shop**, 3 Betterton St. (tube: Covent Garden; tel. (071) 836 09 76; open Tues., and Thurs.-Fri. 10am-1pm and 2-6pm, Sat. 10am-1pm; may move, so call ahead). The manager, Liam McDowell, knows Albania inside out and stocks more Albanian music and literature than any other store inside or outside the country.

If you plan to be in Greece or Yugoslavia, it will be cheaper, simpler, and faster to book a short tour from there, but remember that your guides may not speak English. Contact any of the following companies as far in advance as possible. From April to October, **Kalami Turist Service**, Gimari-Kalami, Corfu (tel. (663) 913 69), runs one- and two-day boat tours across the Corfu straits to Albania, landing at Sarandë and also visiting Butrint and Gjirokastër (US\$53 plus 12000dr in cash). Trips leave every Friday, subject to frequent cancellation. Numerous travel agents in Yugoslavia will also arrange Albanian tours; ask around in any town near the border. In Dubrovnik, **Atlas Tours**, Pile 1 (tel. (50) 273 33), does seven-day tours of Albania every two weeks from June to September (US\$499; can often accommodate English speakers). In Titograd, **Suntours**, ul. Oktobarske Revolucije 52 (tel. (81) 323 33 or 335 35) offer one-day tours to Shkoder, Durrës, and Tiranë (200dm). Other tours may be leaving from Tuzi near Titograd, Pec in Kosovo, and Ohrid in Macedonia, among others. Keep calling the tour operator and verify every detail of your trip at every step of the way.

Independent travel to Albania is now possible, but it's difficult and expensive. Whether you bring your own car across the border or pick up an Albturist car at the airport, an Albturist guide will join you and accompany you for your entire (prebooked) stay. The cost is approximately US\$100 per person per day, and includes accommodations, full board, and the guide's services. All itineraries are individually approved directly through Albturist in Tiranë; if you are interested, contact Ruhi Sheqi, chief of Albturist, directly by fax at (42) 279 56 or (42) 254 06.

It is not yet possible to structure an individual tour of Albania around public transport. Internal trains and buses are crowded, fascinating, dirt cheap, and forbid-

den to foreigners. Restrictions may atrophy; train schedules are listed in the *Thomas Cook European Timetable*.

### **Practical Information**

Gone are the days of legendary disinfectant baths at the border. Albanian border officials frown on pornography, religious literature, and sometimes even tame tourist publications treating the country. Try your luck with Andrea Dawson's *Albania: A Guide and Illustrated Journal*, William B. Bland's *A Short Guide to Albania* (published by the Albanian society, 26 Cambridge Road, Ilford, Essex IG3 8LU), or, for historical interest, try Edith Durham's *High Albania*, an entertaining account of turn-of-the-century Albanian highland customs.

Like Greek, the Albanian language is an isolated descendant of Indo-European. Buy a textbook or phrasebook before you go; just learning a few dozen words will flatter every Albanian you meet and open up enormous possibilities. Place names change slightly in the language's many cases. Many Albanians know a little English or sometimes French. As in Bulgaria, Albanian head movements for yes (*po*) and no (*jo*) are the reverse of Western European ones.

The Albanian monetary unit is the lek, divided into 100 qindarkas. Many Albanians still quote prices in old leks (phased out in 1964): 10 old leks to one new lek. Bring foreign cash in small bills, and coins for unround prices in hard currency shops. Any major Western currency will do. If you're going on a group tour, changing US\$3 a day into leks should be plenty. The going rate on the growing black market is 2¼ times the official exchange rate and, as usual, swindlers abound. Mail from Albania is slow but usually successful; postcards to Europe cost 1 lek, to North America and Australia 2 leks.

Albania's country telephone code is 355.

### **Accommodations and Food**

Unless you have a visa to visit relatives, you will stay in official Albturist hotels. Most rooms have twin beds; singles are scarce and expensive. Hot water is sporadic, except perhaps in Tiranë. Most hotels are not appropriate for disabled travelers. Toilet paper is generally available, although taking an extra roll wouldn't hurt.

All your meals will be on Albturist. You'll never starve, and some will be first-rate, but you may see a little more than you'd like of whatever's in season. Restaurant service can be extremely slow, especially when you're itching to run off and meet real Albanians, which you can do eating from food shops in town. Albanian tap water tastes surprisingly good—it's straight from the high mountains—but *Glina* mineral water is often available for fussier stomachs. The red table wines supplied with every meal are a little rough, but generally cheap and cheerful. The local firewater is *raki*, made from grapes; it stars in some of Albania's most powerful folk songs. Every hotel has a hard currency shop, which often sells Western soft drinks and alcohol as well as inexpensive souvenirs.

### **Sights**

Since all group itineraries are ultimately in Albturist's hands, you will have little choice in destinations. Take off on your own whenever possible (skip meals and guided walks if necessary) and talk to Albanians, who may invite you into their homes, offer you sweets and strong Turkish coffee, and exchange addresses. Most tourist itineraries include mountain-ringed Tiranë (pop. 300,000); those familiar with other East European capitals will feel right at home in its wide boulevards, spacious squares, and commodious museums. The provincial centers are much sleepier and poorer. Durrës, on the Adriatic an hour from Tiranë, sports a gigantic Roman amphitheater and a long sandy beach. Shkodër, in the north, is a dusty city partly rebuilt after the 1979 earthquake. South of Tiranë, the "museum cities" of Gjirokastër and Berat preserve beautiful old houses along narrow, dusty streets. You will certainly be taken to visit Enver Hoxha's reconstructed boyhood home

in Gjirokastër, while the Muzeu Onufri in the fortress at Berat has an unforgettable collection of Greek Orthodox icons by medieval Albanian painters. The road along the so-called "Albanian Riviera" from **Sarandë** to **Vlorë** is actually Albania's highest pass, with the Adriatic far below. Most tours visit Albania's two major classical sites, **Butrint** (near Fier) and **Apollonia** (near Sarandë); although Apollonia suffers from too much reconstruction and not enough excavation, Butrint is agreeably explorable and unmolested. Because of its isolation, many tours bypass the rugged, rural northeast of Albania, where the old system of blood feuds only expired in the 1950s (one phrasebook still lists the Albanian for "I wanted you to explain to me your customs concerning blood vengeance.") But if you're lucky, your Albturist bus will get a flat tire in the middle of nowhere, allowing you an unplanned stop among the donkey-carts, fig trees, and hillside villages of the stunning Albanian countryside, where two-thirds of the population still lives.