

Albania



RAFAEL ESTEFANIA

Albania

The mountainous Mediterranean nation of Albania is taking off into a well-earned era of confidence, vitality and decent plumbing. Once known as a shadowy communist prison state, Shqipëria, as the locals call it, is emerging from a hugely difficult transition period. Travel here still has a few rough edges, but enduring bumpy bus rides and scratchy phone lines will be amply repaid with generous hospitality, gorgeous mountain scenery and sights you can savour without any tourist bustle and hustle.

The capital Tirana, once a byword for torpid communism, has reinvented itself into a buzzing young city, which artists have literally redecorated. The old grey Stalinist apartment buildings are vibrant canvases for pastels and primary colours. Tirana's evening *xhiro* (stroll) is becoming the beginning of a night out, rather than the end of the day. In the mountains of the north, castles guard the valleys and proud old tribesmen and women still wear traditional dress, while the south has a wonderful mix of Muslim and Christian shrines, a spectacular coastline along the Ionian Sea and several classical cities hidden in the countryside.

Albania's economy has been booming since the start of the new century, and the country has officially shrugged off its tag as Europe's poorest country (sorry, Moldova). Few visitors find that the challenges of rapid development (ripped-up footpaths and roads being relaid) impede their enjoyment of a country beginning to appreciate a period of hard-won prosperity and freedom.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 28,748 sq km
- **Capital** Tirana
- **Currency** lek; €1 = 122 lek; US\$1 = 101 lek; UK£1 = 178 lek; A\$1 = 77 lek; ¥100 = 91 lek; NZ\$1 = 71 lek
- **Famous for** being 'mysterious', concrete bunkers, unique language
- **Key phrases** *tungjatjeta/allo* (hello), *lamtumirë* (goodbye)
- **Official language** Albanian
- **Population** 3.56 million
- **Telephone codes** country code ☎ 355; international access code ☎ 00
- **Visas** no visa needed for citizens of the EU, Australia, New Zealand, the US and Canada; see p82 for details



HIGHLIGHTS

- The wild colour schemes and all-hours café culture of **Tirana** (p52)
- Skanderbeg's spectacular **castle** (p63) at Kruja; perched against a mountain wall of rock with views over the Adriatic Sea
- The sunny 'museum city' of **Berati** (p64) and its gorgeous citadel
- The south's dramatic Ionian Coast, from the beaches of **Dhërmiu** (p70) to the jungly ruins of **Butrinti** (p72)
- The city-turned-village of **Voskopoja** (p76), deep in the southern highlands

ITINERARIES

- **One week** Spend two days in Tirana, checking out museums, markets and the burgeoning dining and nightlife scenes. Take a day trip out to Kruja for magnificent views out over the Adriatic Sea, as well as some intriguing museums and a cute little bazaar. Then hop on a bus or *furgon* (minibus) to Berati, Albania's loveliest Ottoman-era town, for two days of tramping around the town's old quarters. Next, make your way to Saranda by the sea and do a day trip to the wonderful jungly ruins of Butrinti.
- **Two weeks** Spend three days in Tirana with a day trip to Kruja, then head to Durrësi for the excellent Archaeological Museum and seaside bar-restaurants. From Durrësi take a trip to the ruins of Apollonia near Fieri. After this, spend two days at Berati, maybe with a day trip up to Mt Tomorri. Catch a bus down to Vlora, and head on to Llogaraja Pass if you like mountain scenery, or to the beaches at Dhërmiu, Vuno or Himara on the Ionian Coast if the sea is more your thing. Check

HOW MUCH?

- **Shot of mulberry raki (a local spirit)** 100 lek
- **Bunker-shaped ashtrays (great souvenirs!)** 500 lek
- **Short taxi ride** 300 lek
- **Loaf of bread** 50 lek
- **Fërgesë Tiranë (traditional Tirana dish)** 300 lek

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **Litre of petrol** 100 lek
- **Litre of bottled water** 50 lek
- **Tirana beer** 150 lek
- **Souvenir T-shirt** 800 lek
- **Street snack (byrek)** 30 lek

out Saranda and Butrinti, then cruise up to Gjirokastra to explore another Ottoman-era town. Next comes adventure on the stunning road to Korça – not an easy ride but an unforgettable one. Korça has a lovely museum and the old village of Voskopoja is a wonderful day trip. At the end of it all, head back to Tirana for some R and R.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Coastal Albania has a pleasant Mediterranean climate. 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

A SHORT LESSON ON ALBANIAN GRAMMAR

One of the more complicated things about Albania is that there are two common ways of spelling place names. The 'proper' name of Albania's most beautiful Ottoman town is Berati, but road signs and many maps show 'Berat'. The difference is because in Albanian grammar, the definite form is 'Berati', meaning 'the Berati', while the indefinite form, eg 'to Berati', changes the spelling to 'Berat'. So when a road sign reads 'Berat – 25km', it means 'to Berati – 25km'. Make sense? We hope so. In this book, we have used the definite form for place names, even when it goes against the usual foreign usage. 'Durrës' is nearly always used on maps printed outside the country rather than 'Durrësi'. Names ending in 'i' and 'u' lose that letter in the indefinite form, eg Durrësi becomes Durrës and Dhërmiu – Dhërmi; names ending in 'a' change to ë, eg Tirana – Tiranë and Saranda – Sarandë, and names ending in 'ra' change to 'ër', eg Shkodra – Shkodër and Gjirokastra – Gjirokastër. Apologies for any confusion, we're just trying to be consistent.



November and March, and towns such as Korça become icy. Roads and tracks to mountain villages can be blocked by snow for months.

In the summer Tirana swelters, especially in August when temperatures reach the high 30s, and even in the mountain towns the mercury frequently rises to 40°C. The temperatures on the coast are milder. See Climate Charts, p388.

The best time to visit Albania is spring or autumn, particularly May and September, when you can sightsee in the mild sunshine.

HISTORY

Albanians call their country Shqipëria (pronounced something like *ship-ree-ya*), and trace their roots to the ancient tribal Illyrians. The Albanian language is descended from Illyrian, making it a rare survivor of the Slavic and Roman influx and a European linguistic oddity on a par with Basque. The Illyrians occupied the Western Balkans during the 2nd 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 Epidamnus (now Durrësi), Apollonia and Butrinti.

In the second half of the 3rd century BC, an expanding Illyrian kingdom based at Shkoder came into conflict with Rome, which sent a fleet of 200 vessels against Queen Teuta (who ruled over the Illyrian Ardiaean kingdom) in 228 BC. A long war resulted in the extension of Roman control over modern-day Albania by 167 BC, after the capture of the last stronghold of the Ardiaean king Genti – the Rozafa fortress in Shkoder.

Under the Romans, Illyria enjoyed peace and prosperity, though the large agricultural estates were worked by slave labour. Like the Greeks, the Illyrians preserved their own language and traditions despite centuries of Roman rule. The main trade route between Rome and Constantinople, the Via Egnatia, ran from Durrësi to Thessaloniki.

When the Roman Empire was divided in AD 395, Illyria fell within the Eastern Roman Empire, later known as the Byzantine Empire. Invasions by migrating peoples – Visigoths, Huns, Ostrogoths and Slavs – continued through the 5th and 6th centuries. The Illyrian language survived

in the mountains of northern Albania and the adjacent areas of Kosovo and Montenegro. The populace slowly replaced the old gods with the new Christian faith championed by the Emperor Constantine the Great. Three early Byzantine emperors – Anastasius I, Justin I and Justinian I – were of Illyrian origin.

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. The Ottomans finally overwhelmed Albanian resistance in 1479, 26 years after they had captured Constantinople. Albanians proudly assert that Skanderbeg's resistance saved Europe from Ottoman conquest, because their courageous ancestors engaged the attentions of the Ottoman army during one of its strongest periods of conquest. After the conquest many Catholic Albanians moved to southern Italy, particularly to the Catanzaro Mountains of Calabria and the region around Palermo in Sicily. Their descendants are called the Arberesh. Today there is a community of something like 100,000 people who speak an Albanian dialect called Tosca in southern Italy.

Meanwhile, back in Albania, the Ottomans settled into a long, largely economically stagnant rule, which lasted until 1912. The Albanian clan chieftains of the mountains largely ran their own affairs, except for paying taxes to the imperial treasury. Gradually, a majority of Albanians converted to Islam, doing so partly because Christians were levied with extra taxes and because Christian families sometimes had to send one of their sons to join the sultan's special army of converts, the Janissaries. Later in the Ottoman era some administrators actively pushed for conversions to Islam, especially in the more easily controlled coastal plains. Some northern tribes such as the Shoshi and Mirdite remained Catholic, while in the south the religious mix eventually stabilised at around 50% Orthodox Christian and 50% Muslim.

In 1878 the Albanian League at Prizren, which is in present-day Kosovo (Kosova to Albanians), began a struggle for autonomy that was put down by the Turkish army in 1881. Not initially successful on the battlefield, the new Albanians nationalists were more successful in the cultural field, sparking the Rilindja Kombëtare (National Renaissance) movement of great poets and writers. The Rilindja leaders quickly realised that one of the keys to building unity among Albanians would be a common script for their language. Previously Albanian had been written in Arabic, Greek and Latin scripts, depending on the faith of the writer. A couple of unique Albanian scripts briefly appeared in the 19th century – the Elbasani script and Beitha Kukju – but weren't widely adopted. In 1909 a conference of writers and intellectuals agreed on adopting a common Latin alphabet, which is used today.

Further uprisings between 1910 and 1912 culminated in a proclamation of independence and the formation of a provisional government led by Ismail Qemali at Vlora 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, William of Weld, as ruler of the rump 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. The country suffered appalling damage, and essentially broke into warring statelets.

In 1920 the capital city was moved from Durrësi to less-vulnerable Tirana. A government under the Orthodox priest Fan Noli helped to stabilise the country, but in 1924 Noli was overthrown by the Interior Minister, Ahmed Bey Zogu. A warlord of the northern Mati tribe, Zogu declared himself King Zog I in 1928, and cooperated extensively with Italy in developing the country. This soon became something of a mixed blessing: the Italians helped develop Tirana from a smallish country town into something like a capital city, but as Albania's debts to Italy stacked up the country increasingly became a de facto Italian colony. Settlers from Italy began moving to the more fertile southern parts of the country,

and Italian advisors increasingly took over the day-to-day running of the country.

During Zog's rule, serfdom was gradually abolished, schools were established and the country's rudimentary infrastructure was vastly improved. Zog himself became a rather eccentric character who played poker relentlessly, hoarded gold and jewels and smoked as many as 150 cigarettes a day. After an assassination attempt in 1931 he became fearful of being poisoned (not by nicotine, evidently) and installed his mother as head of the royal kitchens. In some assassination attempts he actually managed to shoot back. The Great Depression pushed Albania's shaky finances into complete submission to the Italian government. King Zog occasionally managed to get back at the Italians by selling them inaccessible forests and sending them the bill for his lavish wardrobe.

In April 1939, when Mussolini ordered an invasion of Albania, Zogu fled to Britain with his young wife Queen Geraldine and newborn son Leka. He used gold looted from the Albanian treasury to rent a floor at London's Ritz Hotel. In light of the communist regime that followed, Albanians look back on King Zog's reign with some fondness. The first uprising against fascism in Europe occurred in Albania in November 1939, and sparked a long-running fight against the occupiers.

The Rise of Communism

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 (see opposite). The communists led the resistance against the Italians and, after 1943, against the Germans, ultimately tying down 15 combined German-Italian divisions.

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, Albania allied itself with Stalin's USSR and put into effect a series of Soviet-style economic plans. The US and Britain tried to overthrow the regime by sending in Albanians trained in guerrilla

warfare, but they were betrayed by the British spy Kim Philby, captured and killed.

Albania collaborated closely with the USSR until 1960, when Nikita Khrushchev demanded that a submarine base be set up at Vlora. Breaking off diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1961, the country reoriented itself towards the People's Republic of China. The shift also allowed Hoxha to purge some of his rivals in the party on the grounds of

being spies for the Soviet Union, just as he had after the split with Yugoslavia.

From 1966 to 1967 Albania experienced a brutal Chinese-style cultural revolution. Administrative workers were suddenly transferred to remote areas, younger cadres were placed in leading positions, churches and mosques were sacked and destroyed, and the collectivisation of agriculture was completed.

COMRADE ENVER

Enver Hoxha (pronounced hoe-dja) ruled Albania for 40 years, until his death in 1985. The old cliché about ruling with an iron fist would be an understatement on his time in power. An idea of his popularity can be gauged by the reaction after the communist regime had fallen. Every single public image of the self-styled Supreme Comrade was destroyed. Huge ENVER letters spelled out in stones on mountains and hillsides all over the country were painstakingly removed. People ripped down the portraits they had to hang on their walls and smashed them. Some even sought out his endless volumes of theory and doctrine to use as toilet paper.

Enver Hoxha was born into a middle-class family in Gjirokastra in 1908. He attended a French school in Korça and later the American school in Tirana (the latter being something of an embarrassment to official biographers). In 1930 he won a scholarship to study in France, where he picked up a taste for natty French fashion and hard-line communism, writing articles for communist newspapers under the pseudonym Loulou. He returned to Albania in 1936 and became one of seven committee members at the founding of the Albanian communist party in 1941. In WWII Hoxha managed to put himself in control of an increasingly capable guerrilla army, which had 70,000 members by 1944. After the war he began to purge every possible rival through show trials, executions and forced labour camps, and consolidated his grip on power. Partly because of the country's poor communications system, the Party of Labour of Albania (Partia e Punës së Shqipërisë, or PPSH) developed a massive secret police force called the Sigurimi to control the populace. They would intrude into every corner of life. The regime denied Albanians freedom of expression, religion and movement. People could be sentenced to 10 years working in chrome mines for listening to foreign radio broadcasts. A strong admirer of Stalin, Hoxha rejected the USSR's relative relaxation after the dictator's death and became a hard-line defender of Stalinism. Hoxha broke with the USSR in 1961, and took the opportunity to purge rivals he accused of being 'revisionists'. Albania then developed close ties with Mao Tse-tung's China. After Mao's death in 1976, Hoxha felt that China, too, was following a revisionist path, and relations withered by 1978. By then, Hoxha had assessed Eurocommunism, Yugoslav communism, Chinese communism and Soviet communism and found them all to be revisionist errors. Meanwhile his personality cult grew – by 1979 his official title had become 'Comrade-Chairman-Prime Minister-Foreign Minister-Minister of War-Commander in Chief of the People's Army'. In 1980 he engineered the downfall of his long-time deputy Mehmet Shehu, who was driven to suicide. The regime accused Shehu of being a spy for the USA, the UK and Yugoslavia – simultaneously. Hoxha then crept into a kind of retirement in his villa in the Blloku district of central Tirana, an area that no ordinary Albanian was allowed to see. He died in 1985, and was briefly honoured by an entire museum dedicated to his life and works: the Pyramid building in Tirana, which opened in 1988 (it was turned in a conference centre four years later).

Anyone wishing for a sample of the sort of turgid prose Albanians were forced to learn can look up some of Hoxha's writings at www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/. A taste of it can be deduced from this title: 'Reject the Revisionist Thesis of the XX Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Anti-Marxist Stand of Khrushchev's Group! Uphold Marxism-Leninism!' For more information, check the curiously unironic www.pksh.org for speeches, photos and more.

Following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Albania left the Warsaw Pact and followed a self-reliant defence policy. Some 700,000 igloo-shaped concrete bunkers (see 'The Bunkers' boxed text below), conceived of by Hoxha, serve as a reminder of this. The communist party authorities drained the malarial swamps of the central coastal plains, built some major hydroelectric schemes, raised the literacy level and laid down the country's railway lines.

With the death of Mao Tse-tung 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 break with China stunted the economy, 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. In the interests of stability, the regime

perfected the art of doing nothing, and doing it slowly. Meanwhile, people were no longer bothering to work on the collective farms, which led 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, some 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 were held 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 hard liners were purged.

In early March 1991, as the election date approached, some 20,000 Albanians fled the country's crumbling economy. They set out from Vlora 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 an 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 Vlora 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. People who had been forced to move to these collectives by the communist party were forced to leave again. Tirana's population tripled as people who were 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 – which were actually legal at the time – inevitably collapsed. Around 70% of Albanians lost their savings, in total over US\$1 billion, resulting in nationwide disturbances and riots. 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 had destroyed many of the remaining industries from the communist era. Towns where the whole working population had been 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 NATO bombing and the Serbian

ethnic-cleansing campaign. While this put a tremendous strain on resources, the net effect was, in fact, positive. Substantial amounts of international aid money poured in, the service sector grew and inflation declined to single digits. The security situation stabilised and many of the more colourful business activities were shut down.

Since 2002 the country has at last found itself in an economic revival, with large amounts of money being poured into construction projects and infrastructure renewal. Wages have doubled since 1998. It is estimated that around one million out of a population of 3.5 million are working abroad. Remittances from these workers have become crucial to the economy.

The construction boom hasn't been without its problems, however, and the array of ugly concrete apartments and hotels has spoiled the coastline around Durrësi. Corruption also remains a real issue, and the political parties represent rival blocs of business interests as much as they do an ideology. There's still a lingering desire in the electorate for 'strong' leaders, perhaps an echo of the old personality cult of Enver Hoxha. Albanians were very happy to see their kin in Kosovo break free of Serbia in 1999, but there doesn't seem to be much of a groundswell to unify with the territory.

Albanian politics and the economy have become relatively stable, but there's still a long way to go. While new roads are being built and apartment blocks are springing up there are still some seriously poor regions. It is estimated that around 30% of the population lives in poverty, and this figure rises to as much as 50% in the north-eastern mountains. Still, as one person said, the worst day today is better than the best day under the communists.

PEOPLE

In July 2005 the population was estimated to be 3,563,112, 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, whose name is supposed to originate from the Greek word *vlach* (shepherd). The Vlach language is related to Romanian, and Vlachs are historically a trading community, who are by now well integrated into all of the Balkan societies.

THE BUNKERS

On the hillsides, beaches and generally most surfaces in Albania, you will notice small concrete domes looking down on you through their rectangular slits. Meet the bunkers: Enver Hoxha's paranoid concrete legacy, built from 1950 to 1985. Made out of concrete and iron and weighing five tonnes, these hard little mushroomlike creations are almost impossible to destroy, since they were built to repel the threat of foreign invasion and can resist full tank assault. The Supreme Comrade hired a chief engineer to design a super-resistant bunker. The engineer then had to vouch for his creation's strength by standing inside it while it was bombarded by a tank. The shell-shocked man emerged unscathed and the bunkers were built; the estimated number of these concrete gun posts is 700,000 – one for every four Albanians at the time. The plan was for every able-bodied Albanian man to be able to defend his country from a bunker. Around Gjirokastra and Lake Ohrid you can make out some of the grand strategy behind the arrangement of the bunkers, where they spread in rows radiating out from once-permanently manned big bunkers.

Some observers see a link between the communist-era bunkers and the medieval-era *kulla* stone defensive towers, built by families to protect themselves in regions affected by blood feuds. Otherwise their sheer ubiquity says a lot about the mindset of the previous regime. There are so many bunkers around Albania that after a while you barely notice them. They're just a part of a huge legacy of military and security hardware, which includes mysterious tunnels, underground armaments factories, nuclear bunkers under every apartment building (the nuclear bunkers under Tirana built for the leadership are rumoured to be enormous) and nasty surprises like the 16 tonnes of chemical weapons rediscovered at a military base close to Tirana in 2005.

Today the bunkers are the bane of farmers and builders across the country. They are expensive to remove and very hard to destroy. It took one man three months of weekend and after-hours work to demolish one by hand in order to make room for a garage. In places people have tried to decorate them as mushrooms, and have converted larger command bunkers into barns. They do have one modern use. Quite a few Albanians will admit to losing their virginity in the security of a bunker.

One of the best things about Albania is its people, who are kind, helpful and unquestioningly generous. Most speak more than one foreign language: Italian is almost a second language in the north and centre, as well as the north coast of the country, and Greek is widespread in the southern regions where the Greek minority is concentrated along the Drinos River. You can rely on the majority of young people to speak English, but learning a few words of the unique Albanian language will delight your hosts. Note that Albanians shake their heads sideways to say yes (*po*) and usually nod and 'tsk' to say no (*jo*). The Shkumbini River forms a boundary between the Gheg cultural region of the north and the Tosk region in the south. The people in these regions still vary in dialect, musical culture and traditional dress, though the differences are often overstated by outsiders.

RELIGION

Albanians are 70% Muslim, 20% Christian Orthodox and 10% Catholic, but in most cases this is merely nominal. Religion was ruthlessly stamped out by the 1967 cultural revolution, when all mosques and churches were taken over by the state. By 1990 only about 5% of Albania's religious buildings were left intact. The 1976 constitution banned 'fascist, religious, warmongerish, antisocialist propaganda and activity'. Despite the fact that the people are now free to practise their faith, Albania remains a very secular society and it is difficult to assess how many followers each faith has. Intermarriage between people of different faiths is quite common.

The Muslim faith has a branch called 'Bektashism', similar to Sufism, and its world headquarters were in Albania from 1925 to 1945. Rather than mosques, the Bektashi followers go to *teqe* (templelike buildings without a minaret, sometimes housed in former churches). *Teqes* are usually found in mountain towns or on hilltops in towns where they were built to escape persecution, and you will no doubt come across at least one of them. Most Bektashis live in the southern half of the country.

ARTS

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.

There are still some 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.

One of the most delicious Albanian art treats is to be found in Berati's Onufri Museum (p66). 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 with them.

Music

Polyphony, the blending of several independent vocal or instrumental parts, is a southern Albanian tradition dating from ancient 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. Musical improvisation is accompanied by dancing at colourful village weddings. One well-known group, which often tours outside Albania, is the Lela Family of Përmeti.

An outstanding recording of traditional Albanian music is the CD *Albania, Vocal and Instrumental Polyphony* in the series 'Le Chant du Monde' (produced by the Musée de l'Homme, Paris).

Literature

There is no substantial body of Albanian literature before the 19th century besides some Catholic religious works. The Ottomans banned the teaching of Albanian in schools, fearing the spread of anti-Turkish propaganda. The adoption of a standardised orthography in 1908, when the literary wing of the Rilindja (Renaissance) movement rose together with the Albanian national movement, led to Albanian independence in 1912. A group of romantic patriotic writers at Shkodra, including Migjeni (1911–38) and Martin Çamaj (1925–92), wrote epics

THE KANUNS

The traditional Albanian *kanuns* (codes) consist of hundreds of articles covering every aspect of daily life: work, marriage, births, deaths, family organisation, property questions, inheritances and gender roles. Many people in northern Albania still live by their strict laws. There are three main codes still in practice today: the Kanun of Lek Dukagjini, the Kanun of Skanderbeg and the Kanun of the Mountains. The most popular version is that of Lek Dukagjini, the chief of the most powerful clan in 15th-century Albania. The *kanuns* were passed down through oral traditions, and weren't written down until the late 19th century. Many claim that the *kanuns* have their origins in the laws and customs of the pre-Roman Illyrian tribes.

The most important things in life, according to the *kanuns*, are honour (personal and family) and hospitality. If these two are disrespected by any individual, the family of the person responsible can become involved in the dreadful cycle of killing known as the blood feud or *gjakmarria*. 'An offence to honour is not paid for with property, but by the spilling of blood or by a magnanimous pardon (through the mediation of good friends)' states the *Kanuni i Lek Dukagjinit* (The Code of Lek Dukagjini, by Lek Dukagjini, Shtjefen Gjecov and Leonard Fox). Only men are involved in blood feuds, and it is their duty to avenge the life and honour of their clan or *fis* by 'taking blood' (murdering) a male member of the clan who originally committed murder against their family. In centuries past, the cycles of killings of families 'in blood' could go on for generations. Blood feuds were outlawed under the communist regime, but in the chaos and poverty of the immediate postcommunist era, blood feuds made a comeback with a vengeance, so to speak. In the mid-90s something like 2700 families were targets of blood feuds, though one NGO estimates this number had fallen to 670 families by 2005. Some of these families have lived in armed isolation for 10 years trying to avoid revenge attacks. Modern blood feuds rarely follow the strict laws of the *kanuns*, and often descend into relentless violence where even women and children are killed. The prominent activist Emin Spahia of the Reconciliation Missionaries group had helped to negotiate the end of hundreds of blood feuds until he was himself murdered in Shkodra in 2004.

In the traditions of the *kanuns*, reconciliation is possible through mediation between the families in conflict. Usually, the mediators are respected village elders, and after an agreement has been reached to end the feud (usually through a financial payment or land sharing, or by taking a *besa* – a sacred oath) the families seal their peace by eating a 'Meal of Blood' prepared by the murderer's family. Hospitality is so important in these parts of Albania that the guest 'takes on a godlike status' according to the anthropologist Kauhiko Yamamoto. 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.

and historical novels. Poetry that drew on the great tradition of oral epic poetry was the most popular literary form during the Rilindja period.

Perhaps the most interesting writer of the interwar period was Fan Noli (1880–1965). Educated as a priest in the USA, Noli became premier of Albania's Democratic government until it was overthrown in 1924, when he returned to head the Albanian Orthodox Church in America. Although many of his books have religious themes, the introductions he wrote to his own translations of Cervantes, Ibsen, Omar Khayyám and Shakespeare established him as Albania's foremost literary critic.

The only Albanian writer who is widely read outside Albania is the contemporary Ismail Kadare (1936–). His books are not only enriching literary works, but are also a great source of information on Albanian traditions, history and social events. They exquisitely capture the atmosphere of the country's towns, as in 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, describes the life of a village boy who is next in line in the desperate cycle of blood vendettas (see boxed text, above). One of

Kadare's lighter, more accessible works is *The File on H*, the tale of two Irish academics who go searching for traditional epic poets in northern Albania in the 1930s, and stumble into local politics.

Cinema

With its turbulent historical events, Albania has provided the backdrop for some interesting celluloid moments. Many of the films which were made during the communist era have only recently been screened on Albanian TV again – not because of the turgid socialist themes so much but because there was an unofficial ban on anything which portrayed the greatness of Enver Hoxha, which they almost invariably did. Filmgoers in the West have had the opportunity to see Gjergj Xhuvani's comedy *Slogans* (2001), based on the autobiographical short story by Ylljet Alicka, *Slogans of Stone* (well known in Albania), a satirical account of life during communist times.

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 Bari, Italy, the essence of the film is the unshakeable dignity of the ordinary Albanian in the face of adversity.

Renowned Brazilian director Walter Salles (*Central Station*) adapted Ismail Kadare's novel *Broken April* and, having kept the novel's main theme, moved the action to Brazil in *Behind the Sun* (2001).

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

More than three-quarters of Albania is made up of mountains and hills. There are three zones: a coastal plain, a mountainous region and an interior plain in the south. The coastal plain extends approximately 200km from north to south and up to 50km inland. The 2000m-high forested mountain spine, which stretches the entire length of Albania, culminates at Mt Jezerca (2694m) in the north, near the Serbian border. The country's highest peak is Mt Korab (2751m), on the border with Macedonia. 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.

Albania has suffered some devastating earthquakes, including the one that struck in 1979, leaving at least 100,000 people homeless.

The longest river in Albania is the Drini River (285km), which starts at Lake Ohrid. In the north the Drini flows into the Buna River, which connects Lake Shkodra to the sea. The Ionian littoral, especially the 'Riviera of Flowers' stretching from Vlora to Saranda, offers magnificent scenery from the highest peak in this region, the Llogaraja Pass (1027m). Forests cover 40% of the land, and the many olive trees, citrus plantations and vineyards give Albania a Mediterranean air. One of Enver Hoxha's bolder schemes was to turn the hills into fields, and all over the country you can see the result of backbreaking labour where entire ranges of hills have been terraced. In some places this seems to have successfully established new orchards and olive groves, but in other places the terracing has unleashed appalling soil erosion.

Wildlife

Albania's territory is rich in flora with beech trees and oak, and patches of rare Macedonian pine (*Pinus peuce*) in the lower regions. Birch, pine and fir cover the mountain sides until they reach 2000m, above 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, particularly during the lawless 1990s. Likewise, the koran trout population of Lake Ohrid has fallen dramatically due to illegal fishing since the fall of communism.

The endangered loggerhead turtle nests on isolated beaches on the Ionian Coast and on the Karaburun Peninsula, where Mediterranean monk seals may also have colonies.

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 Durrësi, with many interesting and rare birds (white pelicans, and white-headed ducks, among others) to spot for those with a keen pair of binoculars. The Albanian portion of Lake Prespa is another important haven for birdlife.

National Parks

Most of Albania's national parks and nature reserves, although theoretically protected areas, are not really protected by anything but their remoteness, and tree felling and hunting still take place. There are no hiking maps of the national parks, nor are there generally any hotels or camping grounds. The only place that does have accommodation is the Llogaraja Pass (p69), where you can also go for shorter hikes. Mt Tomorri near Berati is another national park becoming popular with hikers. The Karaburun Peninsula near Vlora is a nature reserve protected largely by its isolation.

Independent camping is not advisable as the mountains are almost completely uninhabited and have no mobile-phone coverage; in case of an injury, help would be impossible to find.

Environmental Issues

Since the collapse of communism, during which time there were around 500 cars in the country, the number of roaring automobiles has risen drastically to around 500,000, many of which are Mercedes-Benzes stolen from Western Europe. There used to be huge caryards full of illegally acquired vehicles around the ports of Vlora and Durrësi, but these have been shut down in recent years. There's a story about an Albanian foreign minister on an official visit to Greece whose Mercedes was impounded at the border after it was found to be stolen. As a consequence of the explosion in vehicle numbers, air pollution in Tirana especially has become a problem.

Illegal logging and fishing was beginning to reach epidemic proportions during the 1990s, but the authorities are now clamping down on the problem.

There is a saddening amount of rubbish littering roadsides, beaches and picnic spots everywhere. This seems to be result both of novelties like plastic bags, which don't degrade, and of a reaction against the harsh communist-era rules on littering. Albanians are, however, doing their bit to improve these conditions and there is considerable Western investment in aiding this process.

FOOD & DRINK

Albanian cuisine is mainly dominated by delicious roast lamb in the mountains and

fresh fish and seafood dishes near the coast. The local ingredients tend to be organic by default – few farmers can afford pesticides and agroindustrial meat factories are rare. Offal, veal escalopes, *biftek* (beef loin), *qebaps* (kebabs) and *qoftë* (meat balls) are also very popular. *Fërgesë Tiranë* is a traditional Tirana dish of offal, eggs and tomatoes cooked in an earthenware pot. The regional cuisine of Korça is particularly varied and rich (in flavours as well as oils and fats); the Tirana restaurant *Serenata* (p57) is a famous exponent of this style.

Italian cuisine can be found everywhere. Most Albanians can't afford to eat out much, and when they do they prefer the food of their Adriatic neighbour. For vegetarians there are some delicious Turkish-style vegetable dishes to be had too, such as roast peppers and aubergines, and cauliflower moussaka. Plenty of *kos* (yogurt) is served in restaurants to accompany any dish. There are also lots of *byrek* (stuffed filo pastry) stands selling both vegetarian and meat-filled varieties.

Albanians do not eat desserts after their meal, but they do drink a shot of *raki* (a local spirit) before they tuck into their food, as an apéritif. *Raki* is very popular and there are two main types in Albania: grape *raki* (the most common), and *mani raki* (mulberry). Ask for homemade if possible (*raki ë bërë në shtëpi*). 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 apéritif, and it's very good indeed.

There are some issues with the quality of milk of Albania. The country's cows are susceptible to brucellosis and tuberculosis, and not all milk is properly pasteurised. It would be sensible to stick to imported UHT milk.

Eat Your Words

Many cafés and restaurants in Tirana and the big cities have menus in English, but here's a list of common menu items in Albanian:

<i>akullore</i>	ice cream
<i>birrë</i>	beer
<i>bukë</i>	bread
<i>çaj</i>	tea
<i>djathë</i>	cheese

domate	tomato
fasule	beans
fruta deti	seafood
gjalpë	butter
kafe	coffee
kos	yogurt
leng	juice
mish lope/kau	beef
mish qingji	lamb
mish vici	veal
mollë	apple
paidhaqe	grilled lamb ribs
patate të skuqura	french fries
patëllxhan	eggplant
peshk	fish
pije freskuese	soft drinks
portokall	orange
pulë	chicken
qumësht	milk
sallam	sausage
sallatë	salad
specë	peppers
sufllaqe	souvlaki
troftë	trout
ujë	water
ujë i gazuar	sparkling mineral water
verë	wine

ALBANIAN ADDRESSES

Albania hasn't yet developed much of a need for things like postcodes, street signs or street numbers. People usually direct you to places by saying things like 'Turn left at the green building near the old bus depot and it's the third house past Sali's café on the right.' This works fine for locals, but visitors won't know that the old bus depot is now a furniture store, and have no idea which of the cafés is owned by Sali. This can make finding a particular house a bit like one of the contests on *The Amazing Race*.

The country has a distinctive address system. An example might read, rr Elbasanit, Pall 18, Shk 3, Ap 6. Decoded, rr means *ruga* or street, Pall or sometimes just 'P' means *palati* or building, Shk means *shkallë* or entrance (there may be several) and Ap means apartment. You may also see the word *përballë* on an address – this means 'in front of', usually referring to some (hopefully) obvious landmark.

In this chapter we've used the abbreviations 'rr' for *ruga* and 'blvd' for *bulevardi*.

TIRANA

☎ 04 / pop 700,000

Tirana is like a cross between Naples and Istanbul with a touch of Minsk: shady boulevards with elegant 1930s Italian architecture, communist monuments, trendy bars, street markets, parks, handsome mosques, rows of moneychangers and fun nightlife. The city has grown rapidly since the end of communism – from around 250,000 people to an estimated 700,000. New neighbourhoods of unplanned housing have sprung up all around the city, and the authorities are struggling to build enough new roads, pipes and power lines to integrate them. Since 2000 the energetic mayor Edi Rama has cleared out a lot of the wilder excesses of the 1990s, restoring the central Parku Rinia, cleaning up the Lana River and installing street lights. Tirana is still very much a work in progress, and the endless rebuilding causes nuisances such as blocked streets and ripped-up footpaths. There's plenty to see and explore on foot (just watch your step), and the city's varied dining and nightlife scene won't strain your finances.

HISTORY

Founded by a Turkish pasha (military governor) in 1614, Tirana developed into a craft centre with a lively bazaar. In 1920 the city was made the capital of Albania as those in power decided it was better to rule the country from its centre rather than from Durrësi, the more vulnerable capital on the coast. Diplomats bemoaned the move to what was then a dusty country town, but the Italians soon built handsome ministry buildings and laid out the main boulevards. The city was severely damaged in the liberation battle in 1944, and the new communist regime knocked down a lot of the remains of the old country town to make space for vast plazas. There's been another building boom in the last decade, with many new apartment buildings going up, and new roads and highways being built on the outskirts.

ORIENTATION

Tirana revolves around the busy central Shehi Skënderbej (Skanderbeg Sq) from where various streets and boulevards radiate out

TIRANA

INFORMATION	SLEEPING
ABC Clinic.....	1 D1 Grand Hotel..... 37 B4
Adion International Bookshop... (see 34)	Hotel California..... 38 B2
Albania Travel & Tours.....	Hotel Endri..... 39 B4
All-night pharmacy.....	Hotel Firenze..... 40 B2
American Bank of Albania.....	Hotel Gova e Qetë..... 41 C3
American Embassy.....	Hotel Luguani..... 42 B2
British Embassy.....	Hotel Mondial..... 43 C3
DHL.....	Qendra Hotel Europapark Tirana..... 45 C4
Dutch Embassy.....	Shkëtion Tirana Hotel & Towers..... 46 C4
F&S-tech.....	10 B3 Tirana Backpacker Hostel..... 47 C3
German Embassy.....	12 A2 Tirana International Hotel..... 48 C2
Greek Embassy.....	13 A2 Vila Tafaj..... 49 B2
Interlab Internet.....	14 C4 Casa Di Pasta..... 50 B3
Italian Embassy.....	15 C4 Lulihite 1 Maji..... 51 B4
Macedonian Embassy.....	16 C3 Elendi..... 52 C3
Main Post Office.....	17 B2 OAJ Klub..... 53 C1
National Savings Bank..... (see 53)	Oda..... 54 C2
Outdoor Albania.....	18 B1 Pasticeri Francëze..... 55 B3
Post Office Branch.....	19 B4 Sarajet Restoran Bar..... 56 C2
Serbia & Montenegro Embassy.....	20 A2 Serejata..... 57 B2
Telephone Centre.....	21 B1 Villa Amsterdam..... 58 C4
Tirana University..... (see 17)	22 C4 Vila Ambasador..... 59 C4
Union Financier Transë Exchange.....	23 B3 Buda Bar..... 60 B4
	Charles..... 61 B4
	Cowboy Pub Manhattan..... 62 C4
	Hotel Dagli..... 63 C3
	Skytower Bar..... 64 B3
	Wine Shop..... 65 C2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	ENTERTAINMENT
Archaeological Museum.....	24 C4 Academy of Arts..... 66 C4
Clock tower..... (see 27)	25 C4 Room 800 Room..... 68 B4
Congress Building.....	26 C2 Kivina Millitum..... 69 C2
Equestrian Statue of Skanderbeg... 26 C2	27 C2 Living Room..... 70 C2
Et'hem Bey Mosque.....	28 C3 Kemal Millitum 2..... 71 C4
Former Enver Hoxha Mausoleum... 29 B4	30 C3 Cinema Millitum..... 72 B4
Fortress of Justinian.....	31 C2 Oemal Safa Stadium..... 73 C3
Government Buildings.....	32 C3 Rozafa Club..... 74 B4
National Art Gallery..... (see 34)	33 B2 Theatre of Opera & Ballet..... 75 C2
National Library.....	34 B2 Palace of Culture..... 35 C3
National Museum of History..... 35 C3	36 C4 Prime Minister's Residence..... 37 C4
Palace of Culture.....	38 C2 Pyramid..... (see 28)
Pyramid.....	

TRANSPORT

Avës..... (see 45)

Bus & Furgions to Durrësi & North..... 76 B1

Bus & Furgions to Pezë, Pogradec & North..... 77 B2

Bus Furgions to Tërbane, Pogradec & North..... 78 A3

Furgions to Elbasani, Pogradec & North..... 79 C4

Hertz..... (see 48)

Pollogu Travel Agency (buses to Macedonia)..... 80 B1

Sheshi Zogut 1 Zi bus stop..... 81 A2

Skt..... 82 A1

TIRANA IN TWO DAYS

Start your day with croissants in **Pasticeri Francaise** (p57) and stroll up to **Sheshi Skënderbej** (opposite) to explore the National Museum of History. Look around Et'hem Bey Mosque and march down to the National Art Gallery. Admire the stunning views of Tirana at sunset as you wine and dine at the **Skytower Bar** (p59). Drink and party in the trendy **Blloku** (p56) area.

On day two visit **Kruja** (p63), where the castle walls hide the Skanderbeg Museum, a fascinating Ethnographic Museum and the Dollma *teqe* (Bektashi temple), full of history. Don't forget to do some shopping at the lovely bazaar and have a traditional Albanian lunch in one of its small restaurants. Back in Tirana, dinner at **Villa Ambassador** (p57) is obligatory for a diverse, mouth-watering menu.

like wheel spokes. Running south is the shady blvd Dëshmorët e Kombit, great for strolling and looking at the communist relics and near the trendy part of Blloku. Running north, blvd Zogu I leads to the busy train and bus station where bus conductors shout out their destinations like market sellers. Most sights and services are within a few minutes' walk of Sheshi Skënderbej.

All incoming buses will drop you off at the bus and train station at the end of blvd Zogu I, a five-minute walk north from the city centre. **Furgons** (minibuses) drop you at various points around the city, but it's easy to grab a taxi to your destination.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Adrian International Bookshop (☎ 235 242; ☎ 9am-9pm) In the Palace of Culture on the right-hand side, this bookshop has Penguin literary classics, maps of Tirana and Albania, foreign magazines and newspapers, and an excellent selection of books on Albania and the Balkans.

Internet Access

Internet cafés charge from 150 to 200 lek per hour.

F@stech (☎ 251 947; rr Brigada e VIII; ☎ 8.30am-11pm) A 1st-floor joint, with high stools bringing you up to your walled-in screen.

Interlab Internet (☎ 251 747; rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit Pall 25/1; ☎ 8am-10pm) Just plain not-so-old computers.

Media

A diverse range of newspapers is printed in Tirana and the independent daily *Koha Jonë* is the paper with the widest readership.

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 lek, or you can read it online at www.albaniannews.com.

Foreign newspapers and magazines, including the *Times*, the *International Herald Tribune* and the *Economist*, are sold at most major hotels and some central street kiosks, though they tend to be a few days old.

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.

Medical Services

ABC Clinic (☎ 234 105; 360 rr Qemal Stafa; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Opposite the New School, with English-speaking doctors, ABC offers a range of services including regular (€50) and emergency (€80) consultations.

All-night Pharmacy (☎ 222 241; blvd Zogu I) Just off Sheshi Skënderbej.

Money

Tirana has plenty of ATMs linked to international networks. The main ATM chains are Tirana Bank, Pro Credit Bank, Raiffeisen Bank and American Bank of Albania.

Independent money exchangers operate directly in front of the main post office and on Sheshi Skënderbej and offer the same rates as the banks. Changing money here is not illegal or dangerous, but do count the money you receive before handing yours over. Travellers cheques are near impossible to exchange outside Tirana, so if you're relying on them (our advice is, don't) try one of the following:

American Bank of Albania (rr Ismail Qemali 27;

☎ 9.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) A reliable, secure place to cash your travellers cheques (2% commission). The 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.

Unioni Financiar Tiranë Exchange (☎ 234 979; rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit) Just south of the main post office, this exchange offers Western Union wire transfer services.

Post

DHL (DHLAlbania@tia-co.al.dhl.com) rr Ded Gjo Luli (☎ 227 667; fax 233 934; rr Ded Gjo Luli 6); rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit (☎ 232 816; fax 257 294; rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit 7/1) The international courier service has two offices in Tirana.

Main post office (☎ 228 262; Sheshi Çameria; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri) On a street jutting west from Sheshi Skënderbej. There are branch post offices on blvd Zogu I and on rr Muhamet Gjollës.

Telephone

There's a telephone office at the main post office.

Telephone centre (blvd Zogu I) This other telephone office is about 400m north of Sheshi Skënderbej, on the right-hand side.

Tourist Information

Tirana does not have an official tourist office, but travel agencies (below) can help. **Tirana in Your Pocket** (www.inyourpocket.com) tells you what's hot, and is available at bookshops and some of the larger kiosks for 400 lek.

Another useful reference is *Tirana: The Practical Guide and map of Tirana* with telephone numbers and addresses for everything from hospitals to embassies, though some of the entries are only in Albanian. This is also available at the main hotels and bookshops for 200 lek.

Travel Agencies

Travel agencies and airlines of all descriptions and destinations abound on rr Mine Peza. Nearly all sell tickets to leave Albania but there are very few internal tour agencies – in addition, not all operators speak English.

Albania Travel & Tours (☎ 232 983; fax 244 401; rr Durrësit 102; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat & Sun) A good place to arrange ferry tickets from Durrësi (see p403), and/or book private rooms, or possibly tours around the country.

Outdoor Albania (☎ 272 075; www.outdooralbania.com; rr Siri Kodra 42/1; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri) Excellent trailblazing adventure tour agency offering trekking, ski touring, sea and white-water kayaking, paragliding and more. Outdoor Albania organises stays in village houses, and also runs the groovy OA Klub restaurant-bar in Tirana.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Beware the potholes! Tirana's streets are badly lit during the night so arm yourself with a pocket torch to light your way

around, but watch out for the potholes during the day too. Some of these monsters are over a metre deep so you could incur serious injury. There are occasional power cuts in the city – another reason for carrying a pocket torch. Crossing the street is not for the faint-hearted either – don't assume the traffic automatically stops at a red light.

SIGHTS

Sheshi Skënderbej is the best place to start witnessing the daily goings-on, as kids in orange plastic cars zip past your ankles, and real cars zoom around the **equestrian statue of Skanderbeg** on the southern side of the square. If you stop to examine Skanderbeg's emblematic goat's head helmet, the minaret of the 1789-1823 **Et'hem Bey Mosque** (Sheshi Skënderbej) will catch your eye on the left. The small and elegant mosque is one of the oldest buildings left in the city, spared from destruction during the atheism campaign of the late '60s because of its status as a cultural monument. Take your shoes off and go inside to take a look at the beautifully painted dome. Behind it is the tall **Clock Tower** (Kulla e Sahatit; ☎ 243 292; rr Luigj Gurakaj; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-6pm Mon, Wed & Sat), which you can climb to watch the square, with its colourful Ferris wheel entertaining the tiny Tiranans.

On the northwestern side of the square, beside the 15-storey Tirana International Hotel, is the **National Museum of History** (Muzeu Historik Kombëtar; Sheshi Skënderbej; admission 50 lek; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-7pm Tue-Sat, 9am-noon Sun), the largest museum in Albania, which holds most of the country's archaeological treasures and a replica of Skanderbeg's massive sword. There's a sombre gallery devoted to the miseries of the communist era on the top floor, including a full-scale model of a prison cell. Do take a guide (there are English-, French- and Italian-speaking guides) around the museum, as most of the information is in Albanian; it's common to tip the guide 100 or 200 lek. The fantastic **mosaic mural** entitled *Albania* adorning the museum's façade shows Albanians victorious and proud from Illyrian times through to WWII. A golden statue of Enver Hoxha once stood in front of the museum.

If you are an archaeological glutton, there is an extensive collection to be seen in the **Archaeological Museum** (Muzeu Arkeologjik; Sheshi

Nënë Tereza; admission 200 lek; ☎ 10.30am-2.30pm Mon-Fri), close to the main Tirana University.

To the east of Sheshi Skënderbeg is the white stone **Palace of Culture** (Pallate Kulturës; Sheshi Skënderbej), which has a theatre, shops and art galleries. Construction of the palace began as a gift from the Soviet people in 1960 and was completed in 1966, after the 1961 Soviet-Albanian split. The entrance to the **National Library** is on the south side of the building.

Stroll down the spacious tree-lined blvd Dëshmorët e Kombit to Tirana's **National Art Gallery** (Galeria Kombëtare e Arteve; blvd Dëshmorët e Kombit; admission 100 lek; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sun), where the garden is adorned with statues of proud partisans. See the astonishing exhibition of icons inside by Onufri, the renowned 16th-century master of colour. One hall features socialist realist paintings with names like the *Giants of Metallurgy*. There is also a room adjacent to the gallery space where you can see busts of Mother Teresa (who had Albanian ancestry) and Enver Hoxha, among others. Temporary exhibitions are on the ground floor.

If you turn up rr Murat Toptani you pass the 6m-high walls of the **Fortress of Justinian** (rr Murat Toptani), the last remnants of a Byzantine-era castle. The **Parliament** (rr Punëtorët e Rilindjes) building is just a little further on. Head back to blvd Dëshmorët e Kombit and take a break at the Hotel Dajti (p58) for a whiff of 1930s-Italian-meets-communism and feel transported to a different time in this tranquil building with soft armchairs and low chandeliers as the sunlight peeks through the ochre drapes. The Dajti was sold by the government in 2005, and will probably soon be another luxury hotel.

Further down on the left, after crossing the bridge over the tiny Lana River, you'll see the sloping white-marble and glass walls of the 1988 **Pyramid** (former Enver Hoxha Museum; blvd Dëshmorët e Kombit), designed by Hoxha's daughter and son-in-law. Now used as a disco and conference centre, the building never really took off as a museum, but does very well as a slide for children. Nearby is the **Prime Minister's Residence** (blvd Dëshmorët e Kombit), from where Enver Hoxha and cronies would stand and view military parades from the 2nd-floor balcony.

Another creation of the dictator's daughter and son-in-law is the square **Congress**

Building (blvd Dëshmorët e Kombit), just a little down the boulevard. Follow rr Ismail Qemali, two streets north of the Congress Building, and enter the once totally forbidden but now totally trendy **Blloku** area, the former communist party elite hang-out. When it was first opened to the general public in 1991, Albanians flocked to see the style in which their 'proletarian' leaders lived. If we are to judge by the **former residence of Enver Hoxha** (cnr rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit & rr Ismail Qemali), a three-storey pastel-coloured house, they lived like the Western suburban bourgeoisie.

If you fancy a break from the city buzz, head southeast a couple of blocks to the lush **Parku Kombëtar** (National Park), with a *teatri veror* (open-air theatre) and an artificial lake, where Tiranans get fit, breathe some fresh air, or spend a romantic moment or two.

SLEEPING

Tirana's accommodation is improving and there are a few good budget options as well as some quality midrange and more pricey top-end places to lay your head.

Budget

Tirana Backpacker Hostel (☎ 068 216 7357, 068 222 2304; tiranabackpacker@hotmail.com; rr Elbasanit 85; dm €12) Albania's first hostel opened in 2005 in a villa close to the city centre. It has 13 beds in three rooms and two shared bathrooms. It has some big balconies, a garden, a kitchen for guests to use and friendly, helpful young managers. Prices are 20% lower from November to May.

Qendra Stefan (Stephen Center; ☎ /fax 245 924; stefan@icc-al.org; rr Hoxha Tahsim 1; s/d €30/50) This bright, airy little hotel is American owned and is a safe, friendly refuge. The downstairs café is a popular expat hang-out, and has free wi-fi access in case you brought a laptop with you. The rooms have great bathrooms and comfy beds. The very helpful staff make it a delightful base in Tirana.

Hotel Endri (☎ 244 168, 229 334; Pall 27, fl 3, apt 30, rr Vaso Pasha 27; r €18) Good value and located where all the action is, in Blloku. The 'hotel' is basically a couple of clean rooms in a building next to the owner Petrit Alikaj's apartment. This friendly little lodge has nice bathrooms and excellent showers.

Hotel Guva e Qetë (☎ 235 491/40; fax 222 228; rr Murat Toptani 25; s €24-32, d €32-40, q €48) This little

lodge has a central location with some nicely renovated rooms and some less appealing older rooms. The newer rooms are spacious with TVs and brand-new bathrooms. The managers don't speak any English, but at least it's clean and central.

Midrange

Hotel Mondial (☎ 232 372; www.hotelmondial.com.al; rr Muhamet Gjollësja; s/d €80/100) Though situated about 1km away from Sheshi Skënderbej, the Mondial gets lots of reports of good service and excellent food at its Italian restaurant. The rooms are very pleasant and there are lots of original artworks decorating the place. The rooftop swimming pool is just the cherry on top.

Vila Tafaj (☎ 227 581; vilatafaj@abissnet.com.al; rr Mine Peza; s €40-50, d €60-70; ☎) This handsome little boutique hotel in an ornate 1930s villa has a lovely garden at the back with draping vines and wisteria, and canaries twittering in cages. All the rooms have minibar and satellite TV.

Hotel California (☎ /fax 253 191/2; california@albmail.com; rr Mihal Duri 2/1; s/d €50/70) Lyrically named and thankfully nothing like the song, the rooms here are clean with comfy beds, TVs, telephones and sparkling bathrooms. The rooms on the 5th floor have great views over the city from the balconies. Laundry service is free.

Hotel Lugano (☎ /fax 222 023; rr Mihal Duri 34; r €50) The newly renovated rooms have heavy red drapes on the windows, good beds, and some, though not all, have kitsch marble-copy bathrooms that may give you a shock in the morning. It's opposite Hotel California.

Hotel Firenze (☎ 249 099; firenzehotel@albaniaonline.net; blvd Zogu I 72; s/d €50/70; ☎) This cheerfully colourful little hotel between the railway station and Sheshi Skënderbej has seven rooms with TV and minibar, and a nice little restaurant serving Italian and Albanian food.

Top End

Rogner Hotel Europapark Tirana (☎ 235 035; www.rogner.com; blvd Dëshmorët e Kombit; s €180-210, d €220-250, ste €320-350; ☎) With an unbeatable location in the heart of the city, the Rogner is a peaceful oasis with a big garden, free Internet access in every room (if you have your own laptop), banks and travel agencies. The hotel rooms are spacious and very

comfortable, and the restaurant has tasty international cuisine. Drink into the night on the cool terrace. Amex, Visa and MasterCard accepted.

Sheraton Tirana Hotel & Towers (☎ 274 707; www.starwoodhotels.com; Sheshi Italia; r €180, ste €273-384) This is an impressive new upper-end business hotel, whose blank mirrored glass and monumental frame might be a nod to the country's totalitarian past. Services and facilities match the prices.

Tirana International Hotel (☎ 234 185; www.tirana-international.com; Sheshi Skënderbej; s/d €110/130, ste €157-270) Originally the Soviet-built Hotel Tirana, the modern incarnation is just as imposing but far more comfortable. Fine artworks decorate the lobby, and the sleek, luxurious rooms have great views of the busy square.

Grand Hotel (☎ 253 220; grandhotel@icc-al.org; rr Ismail Qemali 11; s/d €120/160, ste €220; ☎) A smaller upmarket hotel in the heart of trendy Blloku. The rooms are a teensy bit dated (the suites and the restaurant look like a set from *Goodfellas*) but perfectly comfortable. The hotel also has a sauna.

EATING

If you thought that cuisine in Tirana's restaurants might be monotonous or that eating out would be a downmarket experience, you were wrong. The buzzing central street of Blloku, rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit, is the top spot for cafés, bars and restaurants.

Pasticeri Francaise (☎ 251 336; rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit 1; breakfast 150 lek; ☎ 8am-10pm) One of the few breakfast spots in Tirana, this French-owned place has red walls and high ceilings, and small lamps light individual tables giving it an ooh-la-la feeling!

Villa Ambassador (☎ 068 202 4293; rr Themistokli Gërmenji; meals 1000 lek; ☎ noon-11.30pm) A smart atmosphere, fantastic service and tasty Albanian dishes for carnivores and vegetarians alike. The former East German embassy has evolved into one of Tirana's best food choices.

Serenata (☎ 273 088; rr Mihal Duri 7; meals 1500-2000 lek; ☎ 9am-midnight) One of Tirana's best places for regional Albanian cuisine, Serenata specialises in Korçan food, which consists of meat dishes like oven-baked liver, veal and wild boar, and vegetarian delicacies. It also serves some interesting local wines and *rakis* from Korça. This

place is traditionally decorated and has gentle Korçan music (*serenata*) tinkling from the speakers.

Case di Pasta (☎ 251 157; Parku Rinia; meals 700 lek; ☎ 8am-midnight) The delightfully weird Disneyesque structure called the Taivan Kompleksi (Taiwan Complex) in Parku Rinia houses this excellent Italian restaurant and a café called Le Café open the same hours. Case di Pasta has terrific pizzas for around 500 lek and entrées such as salmon with rocket for 400 lek. The terrace is a popular spot to watch international football matches on a big screen erected outside.

Lulishite 1 Maji (☎ 230 151; rr Punëtorët e Rilindjes; mains 500 lek; ☎ 8am-late) This complex offers several different kitchens (Chinese, Turkish, Mexican, Italian), lots of tables under umbrellas in the spacious shaded garden, and even a playground for kids. The Turkish food is particularly good, with filling *pides* (a bit like a pizza or calzone) for 400 lek. It also has live music some nights.

OA Klub (☎ 272 075; rr Siri Kodra 42/1; mains 400 lek; ☎ 8am-11pm) This laid-back, arty little café/bar/restaurant is in a slightly out-of-the-way location, but well worth hunting out for its ever-changing array of vegetarian meals, cool little garden under citrus trees and nice lounges upstairs. It's very close to a hotel called the Alpin.

Oda (☎ 249 541; rr Luigj Gurakuqi; meals around 500 lek; ☎ noon-late) A cute little traditional Albanian restaurant run by artist Paskal Prifti, with tasty home cooking, and an array of powerful *rakis* and fragrant homemade wines. Mr Prifti is a fan of traditional Albanian polyphonic singing and sometimes has friends drop by to sing the old melodies. The restaurant is on an alley just off the street near Sheshi Avni Rustemi.

Efendi (☎ 246 624; rr Sami Frashëri 20; meals around 2500 lek; ☎ 11am-11pm) Quite expensive by local standards, the Ottoman cuisine served here by a chef who worked in Turkey is utterly superb. The selection of mezes is tremendous: puréed eggplant, spicy beans and mushrooms and rich kebabs. Main courses cost around 1000 to 1200 lek, entrées around 400 lek. The décor is simple but the food is sumptuous – a great place to blow the budget.

Vila Amsterdam (☎ 267 439; rr Asim Zeneli 9; meals 600 lek; ☎ 7am-11pm) This cheerful pizzeria, bar and restaurant across the street from

the Dutch embassy has a charming little garden where you can sit and devour pizzas and pasta, and enjoy good service.

Sarajet Restoran Bar (☎ 243 038; rr Abdi Toptani 7; meals 600 lek; ☎ 9am-11pm) This restaurant serves fairly typical Italian fare, but what makes it special is the fine Ottoman-era villa it occupies. It once belonged to the wealthy Toptani family. The ground floor has been 'modernised' but the private dining rooms on the first floor retain many original features.

DRINKING

Tirana has a vibrant, fast-changing bar and café scene, with a particular concentration around the corner of Ismail Qemali and Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit in Blloku.

Cowboy Pub Manhattan (☎ 253 822; rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit, Pall 7/1; ☎ 8am-late) Popular with expats and trendy young locals alike, this oddly named pub has a prime location in the heart of Blloku. A Bitburger beer costs 300 lek and comes with a small bowl of crisps. A good selection of tunes plays through a hefty sound system.

Charles (☎ 253 754; rr Pjeter Bogdani 5; ☎ 8am-late) Charles is a consistently popular bar with Tirana's students because of its ever-varying music: jazz, blues, orchestral and rock on different nights of the week. Charles has a very pleasant, relaxed vibe – fashionable but not pretentious.

Buda Bar (☎ 068 205 8825; rr Ismail Qemali; ☎ 9am-late) All about a relaxed atmosphere with subdued lighting, incense burning, chaise longues and armchairs abounding with cushions.

Wine Shop (☎ 264 347; rr Hoxha Tahsim; ☎ 8am-11pm) Popular with a more mature clientele, this cosy little bar just past Qendra Stefan offers wines from all parts of Albania and a goodly selection of vintages from Europe, plus tasty cheese platters and nibbles.

Hotel Dajti (☎ 251 031; blvd Dëshmorët e Kombit 6; ☎ 9am-midnight) The Hotel Dajti has just been sold and will probably become an up-market hotel in the future. In the meantime, this is Tirana's most evocative remaining communist-era relic, and it's well worth visiting the bar on the ground floor to soak up the atmosphere of hushed intrigue. A large splash of Skënderbeu cognac costs just 100 lek. Apparently there are crawl spaces between each floor of the hotel where spies

could listen in on foreign guests. The small terrace in the front is a great place for a break in the shade, too.

Skytower Bar (☎ 221 666; Sky Tower, rr Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit; ☎ 9am-11pm) Spectacular city views from the revolving bar/restaurant and the breezy terrace on top of one of the highest buildings in town. It's more notable for the views and the décor than the food (mains 500 lek), but a swish joint nonetheless.

ENTERTAINMENT

There is a good choice of entertainment options in Tirana, in the form of bars, clubs, cinema, performances and exhibitions. For the low-down on events and exhibitions, check out the monthly leaflet *ARTirana* (a free supplement to *Gazeta Shqiptare*), which contains English, French, Italian and Albanian summaries of the cultural events currently showing in town.

Cinemas

Kinema Millennium (☎ 248 647; rr e Kavajës; admission 200-500 lek) The best cinema in Tirana, the Millennium shows recent box-office hits (earlier shows are cheaper).

Kinema Millennium 2 (☎ 253 654; rr Murat Toptani; admission 200-500 lek) A second location nearby shows art-house productions and boasts a lovely garden bar. All films are shown in the original language with Albanian subtitles.

Live Music

Qemal Stafa Stadium (Sheshi Italia) Next to the university, this stadium often hosts pop concerts and other musical events. Look out for street banners bearing details of upcoming events. Football matches are held here every Saturday and Sunday afternoon.

Boom Boom Room (☎ 243 702; rr Gjin Bue Shpata; ☎ 7pm-2am) This place has a smoky jazz crowd, live performances most evenings and a lively atmosphere.

Theatre of Opera & Ballet (☎ 224 753; Sheshi Skënderbej; admission from 300 lek; ☎ performances from 7pm, from 6pm winter) Check the listings and posters outside this theatre for performances. You can usually buy tickets half an hour before the show for 200 lek.

Academy of Arts (☎ 257 237; Sheshi Nënë Tereza) Classical music performances take place throughout the year in this building opposite the Archaeological Museum. Prices vary according to the programme.

Nightclubs

Rozafa Club (rr Ismail Qemali; ☎ 8pm-late) Next door to the Buda Bar, this club is the place to dance till dawn. House, hard House and techno dominate the DJ repertoire.

Living Room (☎ 242 481; rr Punëtorët e Rilindjes; ☎ 24hr) One of the hippest places to drink and dance in Tirana, with an eclectic mix of tunes (Latin, funk, jazz, House, etc), DJ and an up-for-it, fun crowd. It has cool lampshades, '70s armchairs and sofas for you to lounge on when you're danced (or drunk) off your feet. It's a pink-and-yellow building across the street from the parliament.

SHOPPING

There are a few good souvenir shops along rr Luigj Gurakuqi between Sheshi Skënderbej and Sheshi Avni Rustemi, plus a couple more on rr Barrikadave, including a communist-relic tourist kiosk evocatively named **Albsouvenir** (rr Barrikadave). Most of them sell the same things: Albanian flags, carved wooden plates, beaten copper plates, pistols and knives (not a great hit with airline security these days), as well as traditional textiles and some very funky T-shirts.

Public market (Pazari i Ri; Sheshi Avni Rustemi; ☎ 7am-8pm) Tirana's eclectic market, north of the Sheshi Avni Rustemi roundabout several blocks east of the Clock Tower, is largest on Thursday and Sunday. The fruit market is right on the square, then there's a collection of butchers and cheese shops, and further on there are stalls selling carved wooden trays, small boxes, wall hangings and bone necklaces, though many just sell cheap house supplies for the locals.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Nënë Tereza (Mother Teresa) Airport (surely the only airport named after a nun?), also known as Rinas Airport, is at Rinas, 26km northwest of Tirana. It is currently being modernised and a new passenger terminal opened in 2005. The unruly queues for passport control are followed immediately by an unruly queue to pay the €10 visa fee. There are currency exchange counters and car-hire offices at the airport.

For a list of airlines flying from Albania to other parts of the Western Balkans, see p83.

Bus

The public transport system is quite confusing because it's impossible to pin down exactly where all the buses and *furgons* leave from. Some of the traditional bus and *furgon* depots have been shifted because of building projects, and have ended up in temporary digs in unlikely parts of town (such as an abandoned factory somewhere off rr Durrësit). Generally, buses and *furgons* going north (Kruja, Lezha, Shkodra) leave and drop you off next to the train station. If you are arriving from the south, your bus/*furgon* will drop you at Sheshi Zogu i Zi – the intersection of the ring road (Unaza) and rr Durrësit. *Furgons* to Korça, Pogradeci and Elbasani leave from a stand by Qemal Stafa stadium. If you want to take a bus or *furgon* anywhere else in the south, the departure points are in a complete state of flux. The easiest is just to jump in a taxi and say 'Dua të shkoj në (Berat, Vlorë, wherever)', meaning 'I want to go to (Berat, Vlorë, wherever)'. Taxi drivers always know the latest departure points.

The following table will give you an idea of distances and average costs involved for departures from Tirana. *Furgons* are usually 40% to 50% more expensive than buses.

Destination	Cost	Duration	Distance
Berati	250 lek	2½hr	122km
Durrësi	100 lek	1hr	38km
Elbasani	300 lek	1½hr	54km
Fieri	260 lek	3hr	113km
Gjirokastra	700 lek	7hr	232km
Korça	700 lek	4hr	181km
Kruja	150 lek	¾hr	32km
Kukësi	1000 lek	8hr	208km
Pogradeci	600 lek	3½hr	150km
Saranda	800 lek	8hr	284km
Shkodra	300 lek	2½hr	116km
Vlora	300 lek	4hr	147km

Note that both buses and *furgons* normally leave when full. Pay the driver or conductor on the bus.

For information on buses arriving in Tirana from other countries in the Western Balkans, see under Land, p83.

Car & Motorcycle

For the brave few, there are car-hire companies at the airport, and here are some major car-hire companies in Tirana:

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

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

Sixt (☎ 259 020; rr e Kavajës 116)

Train

The run-down train station is at the northern end of blvd Zogu I. Albania's trains range from sort-of OK to very decrepit. Eight trains daily go to Durrësi (55 lek, one hour, 36km). Trains also depart for Elbasani (160 lek, four hours, three daily), Pogradeci (245 lek, seven hours, twice daily), Shkodra (150 lek, 3½ hours, twice daily) and Vlorë (210 lek, 5½ hours, twice daily).

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The airport is 26km from Tirana. The only public transport to Tirana is a very irregular bus for airport workers (50 lek), but taxis ply the route. The fee should be settled before you hop in – the going rate is €20. You can avoid haggling the minute you arrive in Albania by arranging for a hotel to send someone to collect you. Given the state of traffic in Tirana, and particularly in this direction (it's via the main highway out of town), give yourself a little extra time to get out to the airport when you're leaving.

Car & Motorcycle

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

Taxi

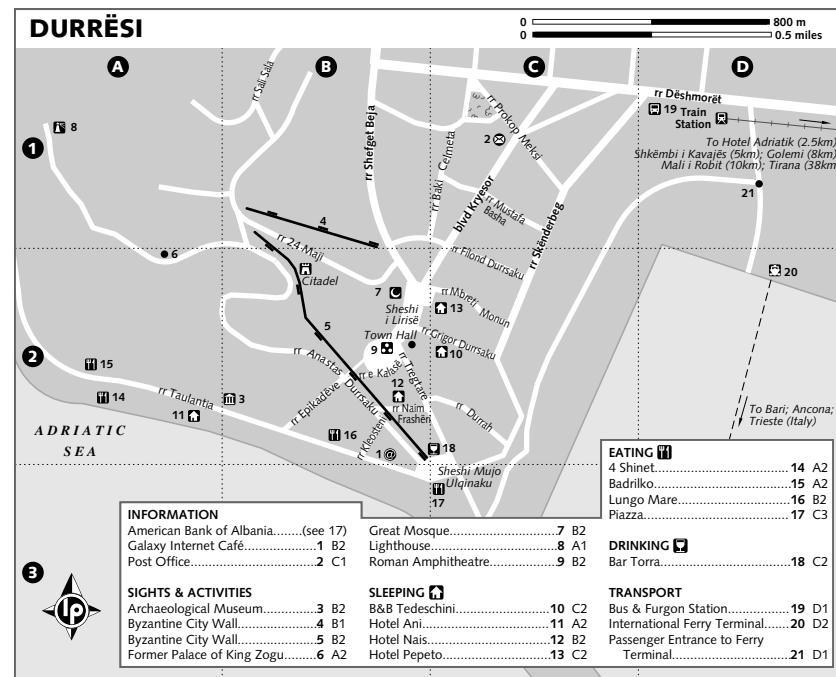
Taxi stands dot the city and charge 400 lek for a ride inside Tirana (600 lek at night). Make sure you reach an agreement with the driver before setting off. **Radio Taxi** (☎ 377 777), with 24-hour service, is particularly reliable.

CENTRAL ALBANIA

DURRËSI

☎ 052 / pop 85,000

Durrësi is an ancient city and Albania's old capital. It has a 10km-long built-up beach stretching south where families play football, and people stroll and cool down in the shallow waters of the Adriatic. The town



authorities have built a boardwalk along the beach and added some Disney-style streetlights, but the city's beaches are something of a lesson in unplanned development. An outbreak of skin infections among swimmers in 2005 suggests all is not well with the water quality. Away from the sea, Durrësi is a relaxed, amiable port with some gracious early-20th-century buildings, interesting ancient remains, an excellent museum and a clutch of very good bars and restaurants. Good bus and train connections make Durrësi a great base for exploration of archaeological sites such as Apollonia, and it's a quieter alternative to the capital.

Orientation

The town centre is easily covered on foot. In the centre, the **Great Mosque** (Xhamia e Madhe Durrësi; Sheshi i Lirisë) serves as a point of orientation: the archaeological attractions are immediately around it, and the train and bus stations plus the harbour are to the northeast. Durrësi's main *xhiro* (evening stroll) goes from this square down rr Tregtare to Sheshi Mujo Ulqinaku, so there are

lots of cafés along this street. The palace of King Ahmet Zogu and the lighthouse are to the west, on the ridge.

Information

The **post office** (blvd Kryesor) is one block west of the train and bus stations. There are quite a few ATMs around town, including a branch of the **American Bank of Albania** (Sheshi Mujo Ulqinaku); **Galaxy Internet** (rr Taulantia; per hr 200 lek) is near the bank.

Dea Lines (☎ 30 386; dealines@dealines.com; rr Tregtare 102; ☎ 9am-6pm) is a trustworthy travel agency in the middle of town with up-to-date information on ferries and flights from nearby Nënë Tereza Airport.

Sights

The **Archaeological Museum** (Muzeu Arkeologjik; rr Taulantia; admission 200 lek; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 5-7pm Tue-Sun) on the waterfront is very well laid out and has an impressive collection of artefacts from the Greek, Hellenistic and Roman periods on the ground floor. Highlights include engraved Roman funeral stelae (memorial stones), some big

carved stone sarcophagi and the collection of statues. Back in the day when the city was called Epidamnus, Durrësi was a centre for the worship of Venus, and the museum has a cabinet full of little busts of the love goddess. There's a collection from the Byzantine era upstairs, which the curator says will open when the government comes up with some money.

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

The impressive but neglected **Roman amphitheatre** (rruga e Kalasë; admission 100 lek; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) was built on the hillside just inside the city walls between the 1st and 2nd centuries AD; in its prime it had the capacity to seat 15,000 spectators. There's a little chapel down in the amphitheatre dating from the Byzantine era. The caretaker may or may not be there to collect tickets around at the Byzantine wall side of the amphitheatre.

On the hilltop west of the amphitheatre stands the **former palace of King Ahmet Zogu** (rr Anastas Durrsaku), which is not open to the public as it is a military area. It's a 1.5km walk to the top of the hill, but the views of the bay make it well worth the climb. A **lighthouse** (rr Anastas Durrsaku) stands on the next hill from where you can enjoy the royal views and check out the bunker constellation (see p46).

Sleeping

Durrësi has a variety of accommodation in the city itself and many, many hotels line the long beaches of Shkëmbi i Kavajës, Golemi and Mali i Robit. Most of these hotels cater to local holidaymakers and ethnic kin from Kosovo and Macedonia.

IN TOWN

Hotel Pepeto (☎ 24 190; fax 26 346; rr Mbreti Monun 3; s/d €30/40; ☎) A homely, well-run guesthouse just off the square fronting the mosque. The rooms are decent and quiet, with good showers, minibar and TV. There's a spacious, groovy lounge with big couches and a bar downstairs, and the hotel offers free laundry service.

Hotel Nais (☎ 30 375; fax 24 940; rr Naim Frashëri; s/d €30/40) Perched by the city walls, this refurbished 1930s building is now a

charming boutique hotel. The comfy rooms have balconies.

B&B Tedeschini (☎ 24 343, 068 224 6303; ipmcersp@icc.al.eu.org; Dom Nikoll Kaçorri 5; s/d €15/30) This gracious 19th-century former Italian consulate has airy rooms with antique furniture, watched over by portraits of former consuls. From the square fronting the mosque, walk down the alley right next to the town hall, take the first right, a quick left, then a quick right.

Hotel Ani (☎ 24 288; fax 30 478; rr Taulantia; s €40-80, d €50-90; ☎) On the waterfront opposite the museum, this quirky little hotel has an eye-catching colour scheme, sparkingly clean rooms and friendly staff. The rooms have TV, telephone and minibar.

THE COAST

Hotel Adriatik (☎ 60 850; www.adriatikhotel.com; Plazhi Illiria; r €65-81; ☎) The grandest hotel on Durrësi's beaches, this hotel, located 2.5km east of the centre, has several restaurants, a tennis court, sauna and comfortable rooms with all the mod cons.

Eating & Drinking

Badriko (☎ 25 560; rr Taulantia; mains 500 lek; ☎ 9am-11pm) This restaurant on the landward side of rr Taulantia may lack sea views but it has the best pizzas in Durrësi, good service and a lively terrace bar.

4 Shinet (☎ 25 429; rr Taulantia; meals 600 lek ☎ 9am-11pm) Right by the sea at the end of rr Taulantia, the 'Four Seasons' is popular with young professionals looking for fresh sea air, good tunes and tasty light meals such as pasta and pizza.

Lungo Mare (☎ 35 835; rr Taulantia; meals 700-1500 lek; ☎ 11am-10pm) This restaurant is on the 1st floor of a two-towered pale green apartment building between Bar Torra and the museum. It's renowned locally for fine seafood; fish dishes are priced by weight, and start at 700 lek for smallish portions.

Piazza (☎ 069 209 4887; Sheshi Mujo Ulqinaku; meals 800-1000 lek; ☎ 9am-midnight) Situated above a branch of the American Bank of Albania opposite the Bar Torra, Piazza offers excellent Italian cuisine and a terrace overlooking the city. The antipasto platter (500 lek) is practically a meal in itself. Piazza also has a good array of wines and icy cold beer.

Bar Torra (Sheshi Mujo Ulqinaku; ☎ 8am-midnight) Housed inside a fortified Venetian tower,

this was one of the first private cafés in Albania, opened by a team of local artists. There's a roof terrace for cheap alfresco eating (order a panini for 100 lek) or drinking coffee, cocktails or beer under the stars.

Getting There & Away

Albania's 720km railway network centres on Durrësi. There are eight trains a day to Tirana (55 lek, one hour), two to Shkodra (150 lek, 3½ hours) via Lezha, three to Pogradeci (245 lek, 6¾ hours) via Elbasani, and two to Vlora (210 lek, five hours) via Fieri. The station is beside the Tirana highway, conveniently close to central Durrësi.

Furgons (150 lek, one hour) and buses (100 lek, one hour) to Tirana leave from beside the train station whenever they're full, and service elsewhere is frequent as well.

Numerous travel agencies along rr Durrësit handle ferry bookings. All offer much the same service (see p403). International ferries leave from the terminal south of the train station.

KRUJA

☎ 0511 / pop 17,400

Kruja's impressive beauty starts on the approach from Tirana, up the winding road, into the grey rocky mountains. The fields stretch around you, and soon you can make 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 gems and quality traditional ware, such as beautifully embroidered traditional tablecloths, copper coffeepots and plates, and hand-woven *qilims* (rugs). You can also see women hand weaving these rugs at the bazaar.

As you get off the bus a statue of Skanderbeg (Gjergj Kastrioti, 1405-68) wielding his mighty sword greets you, with the sharp mountain profiles as his backdrop. In fact, this hill-top town attained its greatest fame between 1443 and 1468 when national hero Skanderbeg made Kruja his seat of government. At a young age, Kastrioti, the 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 at Edirne in Turkey. 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 and Montenegro, which gave the nationally minded 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. Though beaten back in 1450, 1466 and 1467, they took control of Kruja in 1478 (after Skanderbeg's death) and Albanian resistance was suppressed.

The main sight in Kruja is the splendid **castle** and its peculiar **Skanderbeg Museum** (admission 200 lek; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3-8pm). Designed by Enver Hoxha's daughter and son-in-law, it mainly displays replicas of armour and paintings depicting Skanderbeg's struggle against the Ottomans. The museum is something of a secular shrine, and takes itself very seriously indeed with giant statues and dramatic battle murals. There's a fantastic view from the terrace at the top.

The **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 22 225; admission 100 lek; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3-8pm), opposite the Skanderbeg Museum, is certainly one of the most interesting experiences in Kruja. Set in an original 19th-century house that used to belong to the affluent Toptani family, you can see the level of luxury and self-sufficiency maintained in the household with the production of necessities such as food, drink, leather and weapons, and their very own steam bath. The English-speaking guide will explain everything in detail; it's polite to tip him 100 or 200 lek.

Dollma teqe is a small place of worship for the Bektashi branch of Islam (see p48), and maintained by successive generations of the Dollma family since 1789. It was resurrected after the fall of the communist regime and is now functioning again.

Hotel Panorama (☎ 30 92; Bazaar; s/d €10/15; ☎) has eight simple rooms, TVs and a small restaurant. It's just opposite the entrance to the bazaar.

Kruja is 32km from Tirana. A cab from Kruja to Tirana and back with two hours'

waiting time costs around 4000 lek while a *furgon* will cost 200 lek.

MT DAJTI NATIONAL PARK

Mt Dajti (1611m) is a national park 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 which levies a park admission fee of 100 lek for cars with up to three passengers, or 200 lek for those with 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 **Panorama Restaurant** (☎ 361 124; meals 800 lek; ☎ 9am-11pm), the most popular spot on Dajti. There are several other restaurants along the road to the Panorama. The very top of the mountain is a restricted zone with military communication aeriels.

The only downside is that there is no public transport to the mountain, so unless you have private transport you will have to get a taxi from the city; the ride takes about 45 minutes, and you can arrange to phone the driver to pick you up when you want to go back. The taxi ride shouldn't set you back more than 700 lek each way. The road to Dajti starts on rr Qemal Stafa in Tirana.

APOLLONIA

The ruined city of ancient **Apollonia** (admission 700 lek; ☎ 9am-5pm) is 12km west of Fieri (Fier), itself 89km south of Durrësi. It's set on rolling hills among olive groves, and the views of the plains below stretch for miles.

See the picturesque 3rd-century BC **House of Mosaics**, and examine the elegant pillars on the façade of the city's 2nd-century AD administrative centre. The Byzantine church of St Mary is a jewel with fascinating gargoyles on the outside pillars. In the church garden there are artefacts displayed, although they are labelled only in Albanian.

Apollonia was founded by Corinthian Greeks in 588 BC and quickly grew into an important city-state, which minted 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 here. 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 Apollonia.

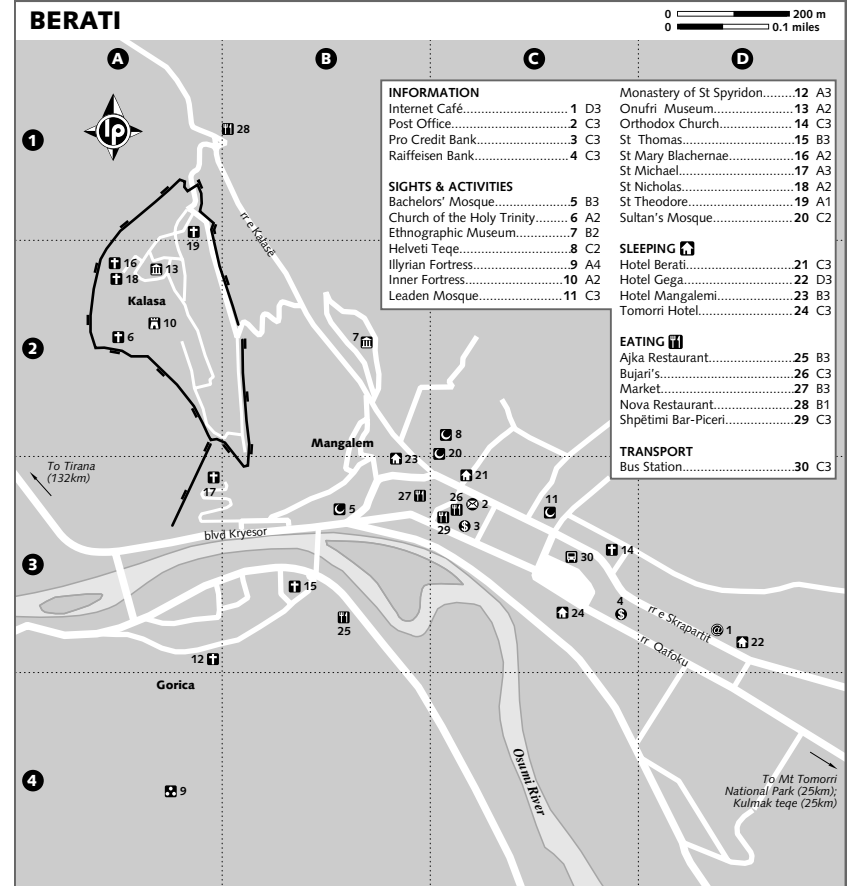
Fieri is a drab agroindustrial centre with a couple of not particularly friendly hotels. It's better to visit Apollonia on a day trip Tirana or Durrësi. The lack of public transport to Apollonia means that you will have to get a bus/*furgon*/train to the nearest town, Fieri. There's a bus from Durrësi (200 lek, 1½ hours), and from Tirana (300 lek, two hours). Once in Fieri, you will have to get a taxi; you should expect to be charged around 2500 lek for a return journey (30 minutes each way) and an hour's waiting time.

BERATI

☎ 062 / pop 47,700

Berati (Berat) is one of Albania's most beautiful towns and thanks to being the second 'museum city' in the country, its churches and mosques were spared destruction during the atheist campaign. The handsome Ottoman-era villas in the three old quarters of Gorica, Kalasa and Mangalem give Berati the name 'the town of a thousand windows'. The old quarters are lovely ensembles of whitewashed walls, tiled roofs and old stone walls guarding courtyards shaded by grapevines. Around the town, olive and cherry trees decorate the gentler slopes, while pine woods stand on the steeper inclines. However, this being Albania, the centre of town and the newer outlying areas along the river flats are blocks of rectilinear concrete. In the best Albanian tradition of religious co-operation, an elegant mosque with a pencil minaret is partnered on the main square by a large new Orthodox church.

In the 3rd century BC an Illyrian fortress called Antipatrea was built here on the site of an earlier settlement. The Byzantines strengthened the hill-top 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, or 'White City', and there is speculation that



this is where the town's name came from. In 1450 the Ottoman Turks took Berati. After a period of decline, the town began to thrive in the 18th and 19th centuries as a crafts centre specialising in woodcarving. For a brief time in 1944 Berati was the capital of liberated Albania.

Information

Berati is another one of those towns where street signs are nonexistent and street names are mere rumours. Luckily, the locals are very friendly and will direct you to the right place if you look lost.

There are two ATMs in town: one at the Raiffeisen Bank across from the Tomorri Hotel, and another at Pro Credit Bank

about 200m away. The post office is on rr e Kalasë.

Albanien Reisen (☎ 069 268 1308; info@regio-berater.de) is a local tourist information centre and travel agency run by a German-Albanian husband and wife team who can organise accommodation in a traditional Berati house, tours to Mt Tomorri National Park and trips way off the beaten track to local waterfalls, villages and other sites. If you can't email or phone in advance, any hotel can help you track down co-owner Martin Heusinger.

A simple, functional no-name **Internet café** (rr e Skraparti; per hr 100 lek; ☎ 9am-10pm) is on the ground floor of an apartment block near the Hotel Gega.

Sights

There is plenty to see in this small town and the best place to start is the impressive 14th-century **Kalasa** (Citadel; admission 50 lek; ⏰ 24hr) along a ridge high above the gorge, surrounded by massive walls with 24 towers. The lower sections of some of the walls are made of bigger, rougher blocks that date from fortifications built by Illyrian tribes in the 4th century BC. Most of the fortifications dates from the 14th century: there's a cross made of bricks set above the main entrance archway with the initials of the Byzantine ruler of Epirus, Michael II Comnenas Doukas, who did much of the rebuilding.

Traditionally a Christian neighbourhood, the citadel quarter used to have 20 churches, of which about a dozen remain. The quarter's biggest church is now the **Onufri Museum** (Muzeu Onufri; ☎ 32 248; admission 200 lek; ⏰ 9am-2pm Mon-Fri), in the Church of the Dormition of St Mary (Kisha Fjetja e Shën Mërisë), displaying some of the most spectacular work in iconographic art by master Onufri. The museum is filled with magical icons painted on metal and wood, as well as some rare old tapestries. The church itself dates from 1797, but was built on the foundations of a 10th-century church. The centre has a beautiful gilded iconostasis and hanging lamps made of ostrich eggs partly covered with silver.

The 10-hectare Kalasa neighbourhood inside the citadel is very pretty, and it's well worth just wandering around to stumble across delightful old houses, churches and tiny chapels, including **St Theodore** (Shën Todher), close to the citadel gates; the substantial **Church of the Holy Trinity** (Kisha Shën Triades), below the upper fortress; and the little chapels of **St Mary Blachernae** (Shën Mëri Vlaherna) and **St Nicholas** (Shënkolli). Some of the churches date back to the 13th century, but it's a bit hit and miss if they'll be open. The staff at the Onufri Museum can help in tracking down caretakers with keys. The views from the walls over the rest of Berati and the Osumi valley are quite spectacular. The highest point of the citadel is occupied by the **Inner Fortress**. It's quite an exhausting slog up to the Kalasa from town, so you might want to take a taxi up to the citadel gates. Perched on a cliff ledge below the citadel is the artfully positioned little chapel of **St Michael** (Shën Mihell).

The **Ethnographic Museum** (Muzeu Etnografik; ☎ 32 224; admission 200 lek; ⏰ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) is based in a fine 18th-century two-storey villa just off the road up to the citadel. The building is as interesting as the exhibits. The ground floor displays traditional clothes and the tools used by silversmiths and weavers, while the upper storey has kitchens, bedrooms and guest rooms decked out in traditional style. Check out the *mafila*, a kind of mezzanine looking into the lounge where the women of the house could keep an eye on male guests being entertained.

Down in the traditionally Muslim Mangalem quarter there are three grand mosques. 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 – unfortunately it's rarely open. The Helvetis are a dervish order or brotherhood of Muslim mystics. 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 Osumi River, with enchanting paintings on the external walls. The mosque was built for unmarried shop assistants and junior craftsmen; there are some fine Ottoman-era shopfronts alongside.

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** (Shën Tomi) and see the lovely citadel and the Mangalem-quarter houses stretching before you. The Gorica quarter is tucked under a steep hillside and never sees the sun in the winter. If you feel energetic you can climb up to the remains of an old **Illyrian fortress** in the woods above Gorica.

Sleeping & Eating

Tomorri Hotel (☎ 34 462; fax 34 602; Central Sq; s/d €30/50) A tower-block hotel with nice, clean rooms overlooking either the citadel or the mountains. There's a good rooftop café and pizzeria with great views over the town. The hotel is on the main square by the bus station.

Hotel Berati (☎ 36 953; rr Veli Zaloshnja; s/d €18/30) This traditional-style building is just off rr e Kalasë, hemmed in by modern buildings.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel Mangalemi (Hotel Tomi; ☎ 32 093, 068 242 9803; rr e Kalasë; s/d €12/24) For our money this is the best budget B&B in Albania. Run by the affable Tomi Mio (it's also called Hotel Tomi locally) 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 Berati over to Mt Tomorri. Kind hospitality, tasty food, decent plumbing – does it get any better? It's on the street up to the Kalasa from the main square.

The hotel offers nine pleasant rooms and a cosy little restaurant.

Hotel Gega (☎ 34 429, 069 208 7181; rr e Skrapartit; r €20) This communist-era hotel has been renovated, so the rooms are rather small and plain but quite comfortable. The restaurant on the ground floor has a certain socialist grandeur.

Ajka Restaurant (☎ 34 034; Gorica; meals 800 lek; ⏰ 9am-late) This substantial restaurant is run by an Armenian family whose ancestors settled in Albania early in the 20th century. The restaurant has a lovely setting above the Osumi River, looking over the houses of the Mangalem quarter. Pizzas cost around 400 lek, and a substantial mixed meze platter costs 500 lek. It also serves grilled dishes and ice cream.

Bujari's (meals 200 lek; ⏰ 9am-9pm) In the *markati* (market) area between the two main roads in the lower town you might be able to find this simple café with wonderful home-style meals. The restaurant doesn't have a menu, just a selection of daily offerings. There's no sign, so look for a single-storey light-blue building in the lane behind the Shpëtimi Bar-Piceri.

Nova Restaurant (Kalasa; meals 700 lek; ⏰ 10am-11pm) Succulent shish kebabs with generous salad portions on a sunny terrace overlooking the citadel. It's north of the citadel entrance.

Shpëtimi Bar-Piceri (rr Margarita Tutulani; pizzas 400 lek; ⏰ 9am-10pm) Shpëtimi is a cheerful modern place with good pizzas.

Getting There & Away

Buses and *furgons* run between Tirana and Berati (250 lek, 2½ to three hours). From

Tirana, they leave from rr e Kavajës, and go every hour on the hour until 3pm. In Berati, all buses depart and arrive at the bus station next to the Leaden Mosque. *Furgons* leave when full (roughly one an hour) for Tirana until about 4pm. There are nine buses a day to Vlora (250 lek, 2½ hours), one bus at 7am to Gjirokastra (350 lek, five hours) and one at 8am to Saranda (400 lek, six hours).

Around Berati

Mt Tomorri National Park is Albania's biggest nature reserve. The mountain is some 20km long and 6km wide, and its highest peak of 2415m is almost always covered in snow. Tomorri has been a holy mountain since pagan times, and is the Albanian equivalent of Mt Olympus. On the southern peak of the mountain is an important Bektashi shrine, the **Kulmak teqe**, with the grave of the Bektashi saint Abaz Aliu. The roads up to the mountain are pretty hairy, and require a 4WD and an experienced guide. Contact Albanien Reisen (p65) for information on getting to the park.

SOUTHERN ALBANIA

Stunning views of sharp, snowcapped mountain peaks, wide green valleys zigzagged by rivers, and inviting white beach crescents touching the gentle blue sea make southern Albania the most visually exciting part of the country.

VLORA

☎ 033 / pop 71,200

One of Albania's major ports, the Mediterranean port of Vlora (the ancient Aulon) is set on a fine bay. It's a bustling little city with a long palm-lined avenue stretching across the centre of town towards the seafront and the beaches. There isn't a great deal to see or do in the city itself. The beaches around the town are muddy and grubby, but the coves and little beaches along the rocky shore of Uji i Ftohtë nearby are charming. Vlora has the sense of a work-in-progress to it: there are lots of shiny new buildings going up, but just a block away from the main road the town turns into ramshackle neighbourhoods of concrete connected by potholed dirt tracks. The city was one of Albania's wilder towns during the 1990s – the 1997

revolution after the collapse of the pyramid schemes started here, and it took several years for the authorities to crack down on local gangs. Vlora's main claim to fame is that it was the place where Albanian independence was proclaimed in 1912.

Information

Everything you'll need in Vlora is on rr Sadik Zotaj, which runs across the centre of the city. A small room with half a dozen computers passes for an **Internet café** (rr Sadik Zotaj; per hr 200 lek; ☎ 9am-noon) halfway up the long avenue. There are several banks with ATMs along rr Sadik Zotaj, and the main post office and its three branches and telephone centres are also dotted along the avenue.

The helpful **Colombo Travel & Tours** (☎ 27 659; www.colomboalb.com; Hotel Sazani, Sheshi i Flamurit; ☎ 8am-7pm), on the ground floor of the Hotel Sazani, sells ferry tickets for Brindisi in Italy and organises yacht tours to the Karaburun Peninsula and Sazan Island for 1000 lek per person with a minimum of five people.

Sights

At the top end of Zotaj (away from the harbour) is **Sheshi i Flamurit** (Flag Sq). The magnificently socialist realist **Independence Monument** (Sheshi i Flamurit) stands proud against the sky, representing the key figures in the movement for Albania's sovereignty, with a statue of a flag bearer on the top of the monument hoisting the double-headed eagle into the blue.

Opposite the Independence Monument is the **Historical Museum** (Sheshi i Flamurit; admission 100 lek; ☎ 9am-2pm & 7-9pm Tue-Sun), housed in what was originally the town hall, with artefacts showing the history of the Vlora area up until recent times. Next to the Historical Museum is the **Ethnological Museum** (Sheshi i Flamurit; admission 100 lek; ☎ 9am-2pm Tue-Sun), in a house which saw the establishment of the Labëria Patriotic Club, a major player in Albania's movement for independence. Walk down towards the **Muradi Mosque** (rr Sadik Zotaj), a small, elegant structure in red and white stone with a modest minaret, whose exquisite design is attributed to one of the greatest Ottoman architects, Sinan Pasha. Further down and by the harbour is the **Museum of Independence** (rr sadik zotaj; admission 100 lek; ☎ 9am-noon & 5-8pm), with plenty of old ministerial ornaments, photographs

and maps, all recording Albania's road to sovereignty.

The hill overlooking the town is topped by the Bektashi shrine of **Kuzum Baba**, with a fantastic view over the Bay of Vlora and the Narta Lagoon. If that view isn't enough, head about 4km southeast of the city – either on the road from Kuzum Baba or from Uji i Ftohtë, where the buses stop (near the post office) – to **Kanina Castle** (Kalaja e Kaninës), first fortified in the 4th century BC and remodelled over the centuries by the Romans, Byzantines, Normans and Ottomans.

The beaches close to the port aren't terribly nice, so jump on a bus or take a taxi to **Uji i Ftohtë** (which means 'cold water'). The bus stops at the Uji i Ftohtë's post office, from where you can take a taxi or walk to several small beaches scattered along two or three kilometres. There are several villas which used to belong to the Party of Labour of Albania (PPSh) hierarchy along this stretch of coast, some of which are being renovated into hotels while others lie spookily derelict. The little beaches here are semiprivatised and you will be asked to hire a chaise longue and umbrella for 100 lek per person. Each beach has several bars and cafés. The water along here is very clean, but it's a bit of shame the road runs so close to the sea.

About 6km north of Vlora is the Narta Lagoon, with salt pans on the landward side separated by a dyke from a calm expanse of water closer to the sea. The lagoon attracts water birds in their thousands. The **Monastery of St Mary** (Shën Mëri) occupies a wooded island reached by a wooden boardwalk from the village of Zvernëci, about 10km from Vlora. The main church is a modest little country construction with some battered frescoes, but it's a very peaceful spot. There's a festival here on 15 August with much feasting and dancing. The road out to Zvernëci passes through some of the Vlora neighbourhoods that harboured illegal immigrants during the 1990s – speedboats laden with Kurds, Chinese and marijuana used to zip across the 75km Straits of Otranto to Italy almost nightly.

Sleeping & Eating

Palma (☎ 29 320; Uji i Ftohtë beach; per person €8) Seated on top of a hill with views of the Bay of Vlora to die for, this former workers' camp

still gives off a whiff of socialist idealism. Encircled by gorgeous gardens, this is the best budget choice. It has basic double and triple rooms with run-down bathrooms.

Hotel New York (☎ 25 648; www.hotelnewyork-al.com; Uji i Ftohtë beach; s/d €30/50, ste €70-120) Situated near the road tunnel, this hotel has great views across the Bay of Vlora to Sazan Island. The tiled rooms are airy and tidy, and the cheaper suites have balconies while the larger ones have a lounge room as well. There's a bright, modern restaurant here with Italian meals for around 1300 lek. The hotel also has a swimming pool.

Hotel Tozo (☎ 23 819; rr Sadik Zotaj; s/d €20/40; ☎) Just off Zotaj about halfway between the bus station and the port behind a small park, this friendly and comfortable little hotel has luxurious beds in large rooms, good bathrooms, air-conditioning and TVs.

Hotel Vlora International (☎ 24 408; rr Sadik Zotaj; s & d €50) By the port at the end of rr Sadik Zotaj, this is the biggest hotel in town with modern, comfortable rooms and a good restaurant downstairs.

Kobolira (☎ 068 220 4430; Skela Beach; mains 340-400 lek; ☎ 9am-11pm) For traditional Vloran baked fish (*tavë peshku*), this is your place.

Riciola (☎ 069 255 3469; Skela Beach; mains 400 lek, fresh fish around 1000 lek; ☎ 9am-11pm) Good fish dishes and seafood pasta in a convivial local atmosphere.

Getting There & Away

It's easy getting to Vlora from Tirana (bus/*furgon* 300/400 lek, three hours) and Durësi (bus/*furgon* 300/400 lek, three hours), with buses and *furgons* whizzing back and forth in the morning hours. Buses from Vlora to Saranda (500 lek, six hours) and on to Gjirokastra (700 lek, 5½ hours) leave at 6am, 7am, 1pm and 2pm. There are also buses every hour till 3pm to Berati (250 lek, two hours). In Vlora, the bus terminus is easily spotted near the Muradi Mosque.

There are two ferries daily (but only one on Sunday) to Brindisi, with Skenderbeg Lines (€40, 4½ hours) and the Agoudimos Line (€40, seven hours). Both have one class only. Book tickets through Colombo Travel & Tours (opposite).

Getting Around

There are municipal buses to Uji i Ftohtë every 20 minutes (15 lek, 15 minutes) from

8am to 6pm, which run from the Muradi Mosque along rr Sadik Zotaj out to the Uji i Ftohtë post office. There are usually taxis at the terminus which can take you to a beach or hotel further along.

IONIAN COAST

Maritime Albania's greatest gift is the coast between the Llogaraja Pass and Saranda, a dramatic meeting of steep, cloud-shrouded mountains plunging into a deep sea. Ethnic Greek and Albanian villages cling to ridges and hillsides, eking a living from olive groves and orchards. The road along the coast is being improved but it still has some rough stretches. At the moment most accommodation is in village houses, but you get the feeling that this area is just about to be discovered. Club Mediteranee is said to be eyeing a beach near Saranda.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Buses go regularly between Vlora and Saranda via Himara and stop at the Llogaraja Pass and Dhërmiu on the way. Ask the conductor when you get on to let you off at your destination. At Llogaraja, the best place to be dropped off is at the Tourist Village, 1km from the summit.

Public transport on the Vlora-Saranda road is hit and miss: there are quite a few *furgons* in the busy summer months but not many at other times of the year. *Furgons* run from 7am between Saranda, Himara and Vlora (Saranda-Himara and Himara-Vlora each 300 lek and three hours on a winding road). From Himara *furgons* leave from the seafront at the end of the promenade. A *furgon* passes through from Saranda on the way to Vlora at around 8.30am; wait for it by the Hotel Gjįçali. Going from village to village along the Ionian Coast by public transport is a time-consuming business, so many travellers take the risk of hitchhiking, or throw away any notion of a schedule and take as much time as it takes.

In July and August there are usually two ferries a week going to Corfu (one way €25, around three hours) that stop in Saranda, though these depend entirely on demand.

Llogaraja Pass (National Park)

The road going south from Vlora climbs up to the Llogaraja Pass, over 1000m high, for some of Albania's most spectacular scenery

and delicious spit-roast lamb. If you are going to Dhërmiu or Himara, this is the road you will take. From it you will see clouds descending onto the mountain, steep hillsides crashing into the sea below, shepherds on the plains guiding their herds, and thick forests where deer, wild boar and wolves roam. The local name for these mountains is Malet e Vetetimes, which means 'thunder mountains'. Despite its uncreative name, the **Tourist Village** (Fshati Turistik; ☎ 068 212 8640; per chalet 8000 lek) is the best place to sleep if you decide to stay and breathe the fresh air in Llogaraja. Wooden chalets with modern amenities, fresh food and pure spring water house up to four people.

Dhërmiu & Around

As you zigzag down the mountain from the Llogaraja Pass, the immaculate white crescent beaches and the azure waters lure you from below. The first beach along the coast is **Palasa**, around the alluvial fan at the foot of the pass. There are no hotels here yet, so if you have your own transport it's a wonderfully isolated spot to visit. **Dhërmiu** (Dhërmi) has several comfortable hotels and a beautiful long beach, and is a popular summer destination among locals and expats. This ethnic Greek village saw most of its inhabitants take Greek passports and head south in the 1990s, and now the village is mostly inhabited by a small population of elderly people outside of the tourist season. People have started to return to the village in the warmer months to rent out rooms to visitors, while others rent out houses in their entirety. The whitewashed church of St Mary (Shën Mëri) stands on the hill above the village. The beach is about 2km below the Vlorë-Saranda road. The bus stop is in the village on the mountain road and you have to make your own way down to the beach, which is an easy 10-minute walk downhill (not so easy on the way back though).

Right on the beach is the **Hotel Dhërmi** (☎ 069 207 4000; Dhërmiu Beach; r 6000 lek), with rooms that all look onto the sea. The bathrooms are sparkling clean and the hotel restaurant serves excellent fish courses for 500 lek. Prices drop to around 4000 lek outside of July and August, down to 2500 lek in winter.

The **Hotel Riviera** (☎ 068 263 3333; Dhërmiu Beach; r 4000-6000 lek; 🍷) is fairly simple lodge

with six rooms with TV, minibar and a little private stretch of beach.

Also on the beach, barely 10m from the sea, is the **Hotel 2000** (☎ 068 225 7164; Dhërmiu Beach; r 8000 lek), with beach umbrellas and lounges just out the front door. The rooms are simple but comfortable, with TV, minibar and views onto the Ionian. The restaurant serves Greek and Italian cuisine. The prices drop by about half outside of July and August.

A half-hour walk through some olive groves brings you to **Drymades**, a quieter option, with a white virgin beach stretching before you. You can stay in a bungalow, camp or simply sleep under the stars on the beach. To get to Drymades, turn off the asphalted road going down into Dhërmiu at the sign indicating 1200m to Drymades Beach. **Drymades Hotel** (☎ 068 228 5637; per bungalow 4000 lek) is a constellation of bungalows under the shade of pine trees, a step away from the blue sea. Each can house two or three people, although the interiors are a little shabby. There's a bar and restaurant in the shade, plus a beach bar with a straw roof.

Jal Beach is an isolated spot 3km from the charming roadside village of **Vuno**, which is 8km along from Dhërmiu. There are a couple of simple hotels (around €25 per person) and camping sites here. Some of the villagers in Vuno also rent out rooms in the summer.

Himara & Around

☎ 0393 / pop 4500

This sleepy town has tremendous potential as a holiday spot, with fine beaches, a couple of Greek tavernas and some nice hotels. Unfortunately, the beaches are marred by half-demolished concrete buildings and a disturbing amount of litter – strolling past rusting car wrecks and a tidal line of plastic may not be quite what you'd expected in a beach. Hopefully the government can find the money to clean up the shoreline. There are two sections to the town: the handsome old town is up on the hill and the seaside fishing village where boats from Corfu dock in summer is about 1km away. The port is at the western end of the town beach, with outdoor cafés along a promenade. To the east is a small headland and another beach.

Himara has a number of hotels, and quite a few villagers rent out rooms.

Near the port, the **Hotel Manol Kolajji** (☎ 27 01, 068 230 5107; s/d €25/50) has 10 rooms with kitchenettes, TV and plain, simple décor. There's a restaurant here as well.

Likoka (☎ 27 45, 068 226 3608; s/d €20/40) is a white, circular hotel at the far end of the beach (towards Saranda) with spacious rooms and light balconies for alfresco breakfasts overlooking the sea. Eat fish, pizza or pasta on the veranda of the hotel restaurant for 450 lek.

On the headland between the beaches, right by the sea, is the **Hotel Gjçjali** (☎ 26 57, 068 244 5832; s/d €20/40). The downstairs café is very pleasant, but the rooms are simple to the point of being stark – a single bare light bulb and plain white walls. Still, you can't get closer to the ocean.

One good beach near Himara is Llanan, 2km away, which has the **Llanan Beach Bar-Restaurant** (☎ 069 241 2172; pizzas around 400 lek; 🍷 Jul-Sep). It serves pizza, cold beer and grilled fish on a shaded terrace right on the beach.

Heading towards Saranda the next sight is **Porto Palermo**, a bay with a submarine base at one end (off limits) and a large castle on a peninsula in the middle. The castle was built by Ali Pasha Tepelena in the 19th century on the foundations of an older fortress. The road then passes the village of **Qeparo**, another semideserted village perched above a nice beach, then the road passes through **Borshi**, where a rushing mountain stream passes under a roadside café. Below the village there's a fertile plain with a 3km-long beach – the warmest spot in Albania, apparently. The owners of Borshi's café can help people find accommodation in village houses. Next along is the village of Piquerasi, and after 4km there's a turn-off to **Buneci** beach, which has a couple of restaurants. The road then climbs over a pass and loops around behind the mountains before reaching Saranda.

SARANDA

☎ 0852 / pop 12,000

Horseshoe-shaped Saranda is a stone's throw from the Greek island of Corfu (27km) and a good point to cross into Albania from Greece and vice versa. Its houses descend from the hillsides, small boats bob on the blue sea, people stroll up and down the relaxing promenade and the

town boasts around 290 sunny days a year. An early monastery dedicated to 40 saints (Ayii Saranda) gave Saranda its name. The town was called Porto Edda for a period in the 1940s, after Mussolini's daughter. At present it is half holiday destination, half building site. The number of buildings in various stages of construction (active and dormant) is phenomenal, and new neighbourhoods of apartments and hotels are spreading along the coast either side of the town. Saranda's beaches are quite modest, but the town has a charmingly relaxed atmosphere anyway.

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

Orientation & Information

There are four main streets, which arc around Saranda's bay. There are three banks with ATMs along the sea road (rr 1 Maji) and the next street inland (rr Skënderbeu). Buses to Butrinti leave from rr 8 Nëntori, which is the next street uphill from rr Skënderbeu, while the bus station is on rr Lefter Talo, uphill from rr 8 Nëntori. There's one main street linking the four called rr Vangjel Pando, where taxis wait for customers. Most of the restaurants, bars and cafés are around this street and along the seafloor.

The **post office** (☎ 23 45; rr Skënderbeu) is near the bus stand. Cardphones abound while mobile-phone users can pick up Greek transmitters as well as Albanian ones. Mobile phones have the annoying habit of switching inexplicably between the Albanian and Greek networks, depending on where you're standing. To find an Internet café, head up the street along the sea (rr 1 Maji) towards the port, and look for a blue petrol station on a roundabout. Hang a hard right and there's a coffeeless **Internet Café** (rr Skënderbeu; per hr 150 lek) in the shops above the petrol station. With luck there will be a terminal free of adolescents playing Counterstrike.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation prices in Saranda vary a lot according to the season: prices rise by

about 20% on those given here in the busiest periods of July and August, and drop by 30% during the winter season. The rates are always negotiable, no matter what time of the year. Most of the 60-odd hotels in and around Saranda are in the one-star category, and charge similar prices to the Hotel Kaonia and Hotel Ari.

There are many more bars, cafés and restaurants around the centre of town than we've listed here, as well as several *byrek* joints. With the current building boom, there are certain to be more still.

Hotel Kaonia (☎ 26 00/8; rr 1 Maji; s/d €20/40) A lovely, small hotel on the seafront with great beds, power showers, TVs and sea views. It's right in the centre of town (walk down the steps to the shore and take a right) and the owners are very affable.

Hotel Butrinti (☎ 55 92; www.butrintihotel.com; rr Butrinti; s €90, d €90-100, ste €135-210; 🍷 🍷) This hotel, on the opposite side of the bay from the port, styles itself as five star, when it's more of a three-star hotel, but it's very nice nonetheless. The spacious modern rooms have satellite TVs, and the hotel has a fitness centre. The restaurant serves very acceptable Italian cuisine for about 1500 lek per meal, and has an indoor section and great views from the tables on the terrace. The hotel accepts Visa.

Hotel Palma (☎ 29 29, 069 232 7261; rr Mithat Hoxha; s/d €20/30, apt €120; 🍷) Right next to the port, this new hotel has a spacious restaurant downstairs, and handsome rooms in blue and white with great views over the bay – plus a disco!

Hotel Ari (☎ 27 65, 069 231 3536; rr 1 Maji; s/d €20/40) Next door to the Kaonia, the Ari has similar standards, though the rooms are a little smaller. The rooms facing the bay have balconies.

Zhupa Restaurant (rr 1 Maji; meals 400-800 lek; 🍷 9am-last customer) This is a friendly little eatery just past the Hotel Ari serving Greek, Albanian and Italian dishes. Pastas cost around 200 lek, steaks around 500 lek while fish dishes depend on weight – 800 lek is a medium-sized meal.

Limani Café-Bar (rr 1 Maji; meals around 600 lek; 🍷 8am-midnight) A series of open-air pavilions set between two little harbours in the middle of the seafront promenade, serving very good pizzas amid many potted plants.

Kalaja e Lekurës (☎ 55 32; Lekurës; meals around 1500 lek; 🍷 9am-midnight) This restaurant is situated inside the Lekurës castle above Saranda and serves traditional Albanian cuisine (grills and fish) plus Italian dishes. The views over Saranda, Corfu and the Butrinti Lagoon are tremendous. A taxi up to the castle costs about 300 lek.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

There are usually three boats a day to Corfu, depending on demand. The two ferry companies are **Petrakis Lines** (☎ 0030-2661 038 690; petrakis@hol.gr; 9 Eleftherios Venizelou, New Port, Corfu, Greece) and **Finikas Lines** (☎ 60 57; finikasilines@yahoo.com; rr Mithat Hoxha). A one-way ticket to Corfu costs €17.50 (euro only; you can change money at any of Saranda's banks), while coming from Corfu costs €15 (there's a €2.50 port tax charged leaving Saranda). At the time of writing, boats left at 9.30am, 11am and 2pm. Finikas Lines have an office just above the port, but for the Petrakis boat you buy a ticket downstairs in the cute little terminal building. In July and August there are boats which stop at Saranda on the way to Himara, usually twice a week.

BUS

There are regular buses nine times a day between 7am and 6pm to Butrinti via Ksamili (50 lek, about 40 minutes). They leave from the street just below the bus station (rr 8 Nëntori).

There are buses to Tirana (1000 lek, eight hours) at 5am, 6.30am, 8.30am, 9.30am and 10.30am; to Gjirokastra (300 lek, 1½ hours) at 6am and 8.15am; and one bus to Durësi (900 lek, seven hours) at 2.30pm. There are two or three services a week to Korça (1000 lek, eight hours). There are also *furgons* to Gjirokastra (one hour, 500 lek) and Vlorë (six hours, 600 lek) via Himara, usually leaving between 7am and 9.30am.

TAXI

A taxi to the Greek border at Kakavija will cost 3500 lek while a cab to the border near Konispoli will cost around 3000 lek.

Around Saranda

The ancient ruins of **Butrinti** (Butrint; ☎ 0732-46 00; admission 700 lek; 🍷 8am-7.30pm), 18km south of Saranda, are renowned for their size and

beauty. They are in a fantastic natural setting, part of a 29-sq-km national park; set aside at least three hours to lose yourself and thoroughly explore this fascinating place.

Although the site had been inhabited long before, Greeks from Corfu settled on the hill in Butrinti (Buthrotum) in the 6th century BC. Within a century Butrinti 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. Butrinti's prosperity continued throughout the Roman period and the Byzantines made it an ecclesiastical centre. The city subsequently went into decline, and it was abandoned until 1927 when Italian archaeologists arrived.

As you enter the site the path leads to the right, to Butrinti's 3rd-century-BC **Greek theatre**, secluded in the forest below the acropolis. Also in use during the Roman period, the theatre could seat about 2500 people. Close by are the small **public baths**, with geometric mosaics, which are unfortunately buried 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, symbolic of a protective force vanquishing assailants.

The top of the hill is where the **acropolis** once was; there's now a castle here, which is closed, but you can have a look around the courtyard. The view of the city from above gives you a good idea of its layout. You can enjoy the views of Lake Butrinti from the courtyard and see the Vivari Channel which connects it to the Straits of Corfu.

There are nine buses a day from Saranda to Butrinti (50 lek, about 40 minutes) via Ksamili. A cab to Butrinti from Saranda will cost around 2000 lek and you can usually negotiate to get there and back and see the Blue Eye Spring for 4000 lek.

The **Blue Eye Spring** (Syri i Kalter), about 15km east of Saranda, is a hypnotic pool 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. You can also check out the 12th-century monastery of **Mesopotami** en route, perched on a little hill by the Bistrica.

A better bathing alternative to Saranda's beaches is **Ksamili**, 17km south, with four small, dreamy islands within swimming distance and a couple of beachside bars and restaurants open in the summer. Ksamili was founded in 1973 as a model communist collective. Tourist developers have big plans for it, and a couple of hotels were being built at the time of research.

GJIROKASTRA

☎ 084 / pop 24,500

Austere old Gjirokastra watches over the Drinos valley beneath it from its rocky perch. It's sometimes called the city of a thousand steps, and you'll see why when you tackle the steep cobbled streets that wind between solid grey stone houses and mansions roofed in slate. Spend a day absorbing the life of the labyrinthine streets of the old town and, for an architectural feast, check out the unique houses and the dark castle overlooking the town.

Gjirokastra's Greek name, Argyrokastro, means Silver Castle. The town was well established and prosperous by the 13th century, but declined after the arrival of the Turks in 1417. The 17th century brought about improvement and the town became a major trading centre with a flourishing bazaar where embroidery, felt, silk and its white cheese (which is still famous today) were traded. One of the Ottoman Empire's most prominent individuals, Ali Pasha Tepelena, seized the town in the early 19th century and strengthened the citadel.

Gjirokastra was the birthplace of former dictator Enver Hoxha who awarded it the status of 'museum city'. Thanks to this, special care was taken to retain its traditional architecture during the communist era; the modern city in the basin below the old town was built during that time. Gjirokastra's other famous son is writer Ismail Kadare, who set the novel *Chronicle in Stone* in his

home town. Today, a large student population studying at the local university helps to enliven the place.

Information

The main street of the old town has little besides some small cafés – most businesses are down in the new town – though there is a branch of Raiffeisen Bank with an ATM near the courthouse. The main street in the new town, blvd 18 Shtatori, has banks, a post office and pizzerias. There are a couple of Internet cafés on the street around the uphill side of the football stadium, just off 18 Shtatori.

Sights

Gjirokastra's **19th-century houses** were mostly built between 1800 and 1830. Most have three storeys: the lower floors are used for storage and the upper floors for living quarters, some with lavishly decorated rooms, especially those for receiving guests. The neighbourhoods with these classic Ottoman houses encircle the castle. The houses are fiercely expensive to maintain, and some are sadly falling into disrepair. About 10 of the 400-odd legally protected houses have collapsed in the last five years. The local Ethnographic Museum is being moved to a particularly fine mansion up past the Hotel Kalemi on the road up to the Këculla Bar-Restaurant.

The splendidly gloomy **castle** (Old Town; admission 100 lek; ☎ 8am-noon & 4-7pm) is the city's dominant feature. There are two gates into the fortress: one at the end of the ridge and one in the middle of its northern flank. Built from the 6th century AD onwards, this brooding giant was used as a prison by King Zogu, then the Nazis, then the communists until 1971, when it became a museum. The prison is on top of the highest point of castle; turn left when you enter from the gate in the middle of the castle's flank and pick your way up the stairs to have a look. This gate is also the entry to a display of tanks in the main gallery of the fortress. There isn't much lighting, and the silhouettes of cannons in the gloom are quite striking. Outside, the shell of a 1957 **US military jet** is a bizarre addition to the ramparts of the castle. The communist party used to explain that it was a spy plane that had been forced down and captured. In fact it was a training jet from a NATO

base in Italy which had run into mechanical trouble and made an emergency landing in Albania.

There's a quaint old **Orthodox church** on the tip of the ridge in front of the castle, which is worth a look if churches interest you.

If the mountains around town look inviting, jump on a local bus to Këlcyra and Përmeti (300 lek, 1½ hours). The route up the Vjosa valley is nothing short of breathtaking. There are regular *furgons* between Gjirokastra and Përmeti until about 5pm.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Kalemi (☎ /fax 67 260; draguak@yahoo.com; Lagja Palorto; r incl breakfast 4000 lek) Somewhere between a hotel and a museum, this is the most authentic experience of old Albania, with carved wood ceilings and stone fireplaces in the 1st-floor rooms. The breakfast is delicious.

Guest House Haxhi Kotoni (☎ 35 26; Lagja Palorto 8, rr Bashkim Kokona; s/d incl breakfast 1500/2000 lek) This guesthouse has small but clean and comfy double rooms with TV and heating.

Hotel Çajupi (Sheshi Çerçiz Topulli; r 600-2000 lek) This is one of the hotels located by the main square of the old town that seem to be just clinging on. It has a couple of renovated rooms with en suite bathroom for 2000 lek and some grim, unrenovated ones with shared bathrooms for 600 to 800 lek.

Fantazia Bar-Restaurant (☎ 66 991; Pazar i Vjëtër; meals 800 lek; ☎ 11am-midnight) This modern café-bar-restaurant just past the courthouse in the upper town has a fantastic view over the new town from the tables on the terrace. The restaurant serves Italian food.

Këculla Bar-Restaurant (☎ 069 214 6265; Lagja Palorto; meals 700 lek; ☎ 11am-midnight) If you want spectacular views of the castle and town with your dinner, walk uphill to the radio towers and dine in this friendly restaurant. Lamb and chicken grills cost 400 lek. It's quite a steep walk up to the restaurant (about 15 minutes from the Hotel Kalemi), so nonathletic types should consider a taxi from the upper town (150 lek).

Cueva de Toro Bar (Lagja 18 Shtatori; ☎ 10am-late Mon-Sat) For something different, head down to the new town to the Cueva de Toro, on the road around the downhill side of the football stadium. The interior has been rendered into a bizarre cave. The sound system pumps out the latest from Top Radio, Albania's hippest station.

Getting There & Around

Buses to and from Gjirokastra stop on the main highway, 1.5km from the old town. Taxis can take you into town for about 200 lek. A taxi between the new town and the old town (which saves a lot of hard walking) costs 150 lek. In the upper town there's a taxi rank on the main square, Sheshi Çerçiz Topulli. Buses to Tirana (1000 lek, eight hours) are fairly frequent. There are four a day to Saranda (300 lek, 1½ hours) and one to Korça (700 lek, seven hours), which takes the spectacular route through Përmeti and Erseka. You'll need to take a taxi to get to the Greek border at Kakavija (1500 lek, 30 minutes).

KORÇA

☎ 082 / pop 62,200

Korça prides itself as being one of the most 'civilised' places in Albania, and while it's a friendly, easygoing place there's isn't a great deal to see or do. There is a busy market by the bus station where goats get sold and carried off like handbags, and where you can buy everything, from fruit, vegetables and livestock to CDs and cassettes of pumping music. There are several banks and Internet cafés along the main street (blvd Republika). The main reason to visit Korça is to tackle the dramatic route along the Greek border down to Gjirokastra or to explore the city-turned-village of Voskopoja.

Sights

The Museum of Albanian Medieval Art (Muzeu i Artit Mesjetar; ☎ 43 022; rr Stefan Luarasi; admission 200 lek; ☎ 10am-3pm Mon-Fri) is a treasury of religious art collected from churches sacked during Albania's cultural revolution. The main gallery has an astonishing array of icons from the 13th to the 19th centuries alongside silver bible covers, grails, crucifixes and two complete carved iconostases. Another gallery has early Christian stone carvings from Butrinti, Apollonia and other sites. The museum was opened in 1980 on the site of an Orthodox cathedral dynamited in 1968 during the cultural revolution. The museum is a bit hard to find. Facing the new Orthodox Cathedral, head left for two blocks left along blvd Republika, then turn right and head 150m or so uphill into the warren of the old town, and look for the imposing white Episcopal Residence on a little square;

the museum is in the light brown three-storey building next to the bishop's house.

The other big sight (literally) in Korça is the new **Orthodox Cathedral** (blvd Republika), a striking confection in pink, blue and brown. From the Hotel Grand head up blvd Shën Gjergji (the main shopping strip) and you can't possibly miss it.

Sleeping

Hotel Gold (☎ 46 894; rr Këço Golniku 5; s/d 1888/2830 lek) This is the best budget option in town, with clean rooms, TVs and heating, and en suite bathrooms. Follow the signs for 800m from the avenue leading from the bus stop to the main square.

Hotel Grand (☎ 43 168; www.grandhotelkorca.com; Central Sq; s/d/ste €21/34/44) Around the corner from the bus station, this is a comfortable hotel with a grandiose reception area and large plants. The rooms are spacious, the beds good and the bathrooms have shower curtains – a rarity in Albania. The helpful staff, particularly the young manager, can arrange trips to nearby villages and sights. The hotel has a good restaurant and a bar.

Hotel Turizëm Behar Koçibelli (☎ 43 532, 068 239 3395; Central Sq; s/d €15/25) This hotel is one half of the old Hotel Turist – the other half being the Hotel Grand, which rather overshadows it. Still, it's not bad, and the rooms are comfortable and clean.

Eating

Restaurant Alfa (☎ 44 385; blvd Shën Gjergji; mains 400-500 lek; ☎ 9am-midnight Mon-Sat) Located off the main square, this restaurant has a tasty Greek menu and a good atmosphere.

Vasport (☎ 50 388; rr Naim Frashëri; mains around 500-600 lek; ☎ 9am-midnight) Opposite the cathedral with a popular bar on the ground and 1st floors, this restaurant has a rustic feel, decent meat and good wine.

Shtëpia Voskopojare (☎ 42 784; rr Stefan Luarasi; mains 600 lek; ☎ 10am-11pm) Just behind the Orthodox Cathedral, this bar-restaurant with a startling orange and burnt-red exterior has a charming dining room, a good selection of Albanian and Macedonian wines, and well-prepared steaks and local specialities; the name means 'Voskopojan household'.

Getting There & Away

Buses and *furgons* all congregate at the official bus station, a block away from the

main square near the market. Arriving *furgons* will normally drop their passengers off on the main square as well. *Furgons* to Tirana (500 lek, four hours) via Pogradeci (100 lek, one hour) depart when full. There are buses to Tirana (300 lek, six hours). There are three *furgons* a day to Voskopoja (80 lek, 40 minutes) at 8am, 10am and 1.15pm, and three buses a week to Gjirokastra (300 lek, around seven hours) on the awesome Korça–Gjirokastra road.

For Greece there are three buses daily to Thessaloniki (€19, seven hours) and four a week to Athens (€30, 16 hours) at noon on Sunday, Monday, Thursday and Friday. Go to the ticket office in the street behind the Grand Hotel to book your seat.

Note: you can take a *furgon* to the border at Kapshtica for around 300 to 400 lek, but a Greek taxi from the Albanian–Greek border to Florina or Kastoria alone will cost you a minimum of €30. There are only two or three inconveniently timed local buses daily linking the Greek border village of Krystalopigi with Florina, and none to Kastoria. The direct international bus from Korça is by far the best option; the trip to either Florina or Kastoria takes about two hours.

Around Korça VOSKOPOJA

Around 1750 Voskopoja was the biggest city in the Balkans, with a population of 35,000 and 24 churches. Today this village, 21km from Korça, has a population of a couple of hundred (roughly half Muslim Albanian and half Orthodox Vlach) after repeated sackings and lootings as recently as WWII. There are piles of grey rubble around the village that hint at the scale of the town when it was at its peak, before Ali Pasha Telepena sacked it in 1788. Eight churches remain, including **St Michael** (Shën Mihali), **St Nicholas** (Shënkolli) and **St Athanasius** (Shën Athanasi), scattered between old stone houses and around neighbouring fields. Some of the church murals painted by the Zografi brothers Konstantin and Athanas are still in superb condition. About 2km out of town, up a dirt track across the river, the Monastery of St Prodhomi nestles in the woods. It is mostly in ruins, but the walk to it is very pretty. There are plans to establish a ski resort near the village (it's at

an altitude of 1160m), but for now it's best enjoyed for its lovely highland setting and wealth of monuments.

The delightful little **Hotel Pashuta** (☎ 068 266 4374; s/d €10/20) has four rooms, three with bathrooms. It's on the far side of the village from the Korça road, over a little bridge – anyone in town can direct you to it. Breakfast costs €4. Ask if they'll prepare the traditional Vlach meal of *pitau* (layers of thin pastry filled with leeks).

The handsome **Hotel Akademia Voskopoja** (☎ 068 256 9435; s/d €18/42) is about 1.5km out of Voskopoja on the way to the Monastery of St Prodhomi. It's a former communist hotel and has been comprehensively renovated. The manager is keen and helpful. There's a lovely garden with tables set out on the lawn and a good restaurant. It's a bit of a surprise to find such a nice place in such an isolated spot.

From Voskopoja there are *furgons* to Korça (80 lek, 30 minutes) at 7am, 8am and 11am. Otherwise it's easy to hire a taxi for a day trip from Korça.

KORÇA–GJIROKASTRA ROAD

The **road to Gjirokastra** is worth the bumps and aches for its stunning scenery and raw isolation. After the highland town of Erseka, about one hour south of Korça, the road begins to climb into the wild pine forests along the edge of the Grammoz mountains and crosses the Barmash Pass (1759m). There's a small hotel called the **Jorgos** (☎ 0821-2700; r €20) about 45 minutes south of Erseka, with a restaurant. After the village of Leskoviku the road descends into the spectacular narrow valley of the Vjosa River to Përmeti. The region around Këlcyra downstream is sometimes called the Tibet of Albania. Following the gorge of the Vjosa, the road then turns up the Drinos valley to Gjirokastra. There are buses three times a week in either direction between Korça and Gjirokastra (700 lek, around seven hours).

NORTHERN ALBANIA

The northern Albanian landscape has rich wildlife, swamps and lagoons around Shkodra and Lezha, and high, unforgiving mountains in the northeast (named the

Accursed Mountains, Bjeshkët e Namuna, in Albanian). Visits to the region still involve some element of risk due to continuing instability in the neighbouring area. The main road corridor from Tirana to the border with Serbia and Montenegro (the area where Shkodra and Lezha are located) is generally fine.

SHKODRA

☎ 022 / pop 91,300

Shkodra (Shkodër), the traditional centre of the Gheg cultural region, is one of the oldest cities in Europe. Rozafa Fortress is beautiful and the Marubi permanent photography exhibition is fascinating. The city is quite run down and hasn't had the sort of economic rebirth that other Albanian cities have enjoyed. The tatty grey apartment buildings only serve to lend it a rather sombre air. Most travellers just pass through on the way between Tirana and Ulcinj in Montenegro.

As the Ottoman Empire declined in the late 18th century, Shkodra became the centre of a semi-independent *pashalik* (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), a move not approved of by the international community, and the town changed hands often during WWI. Badly damaged by the 1979 earthquake, Shkodra was subsequently repaired and is Albania's fourth-largest town. The communist-era Hotel Rozafa in the town centre is a dump but it makes a good landmark – restaurants, transport to Montenegro and most of the town's sights are close by.

Information

There's a **Tirana Bank ATM** (rr 13 Dhjetori) next to the Hotel Colosseo, and a buzzing Internet café called **ArtCom** (☎ 068 212 3599; rr Çajupi; per hr 150 lek; ☎ 9am–11pm) on the street behind the Hotel Rozafa.

Sights

Two kilometres southwest of Shkodra, near the southern end of Lake Shkodra, is **Rozafa Fortress**, founded by the Illyrians in antiquity and rebuilt much later by the Venetians and Turks. 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 that two holes 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. There are marvellous views from the highest point. The castle is about 3km south of the city centre and the walk there from the town centre takes you through some very poor neighbourhoods, so it would be better to take a taxi.

Hidden inside a building that looks like a block of flats, the **Marubi Permanent Photo Exhibition** (rr Muhamet Gjollësja; admission free; ☎ 9am–1pm) boasts fantastic photography by the Marubi 'dynasty', Albania's first and foremost photographers. The first-ever photograph taken in Albania is here, taken by Pjetër Marubi in 1858. The exhibition shows fascinating portraits, places and events, including a young Enver Hoxha giving a speech while he was still in local government in Gjirokastra. Not only is this a rare insight into what things looked like in old Albania, it is also a collection of mighty fine photographs. To get there, go north-east of the clock tower into Çirimi street, and Muhamet Gjollësja street darts off to the right. As the building is unmarked, you may have to ask for directions.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Colosseo (☎ 47 513; hotelcolosseo@hotmail.com; rr 13 Dhjetori; s/d €50/60, ste €60–70; 🚻) Shkodra's best hotel has 14 rooms with balconies, satellite TV and possibly the best plumbing in northern Albania. There's a café-bar downstairs where the local nouveau riche hang out.

Mondial Hotel (☎ 40 194; hotelrestaurantmondial@hotmail.com; rr 13 Dhjetori; s/d €50/60, ste €80–110) The standard rooms are a little small at this new hotel above a popular local restaurant, but the suites have two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room and a spa!

Hotel Kaduku (☎ 42 216; rr Vasil Shanto; r €20) This simple hotel is on the roundabout next to the Hotel Rozafa. The old wing is very basic but the new wing next to it is quite good, with new bathrooms. There's no sign for the hotel, so look for the brick building on the roundabout with 'hotel' painted on the wall. No English is spoken here.

Getting There & Away

There are frequent *furgons* to and from Tirana (300 lek, 2½ hours), leaving Tirana from the Zogu i Zi terminal and dropping you off in the centre of Shkodra. From Shkodra, *furgons* depart from the main road near Rozafa Castle.

There are also regular *furgons* between Shkodra and Ulcinj (Ulqini in Albanian) in Montenegro (one way €8, around 40 minutes). The 17km road between the two towns has been fixed up, and while a bit narrow it is vastly superior to its previous incarnation. *Furgons* leave from outside the Hotel Rozafa. The length of the trip depends on how busy the border at Muroqani is. Don't forget the €10 fee to enter or leave Albania. The road to Han i Hotit on the way to Podgorica was in poorer shape at the time of research, and there were no *furgons* going straight through. A taxi to this border costs about €15.

LEZHA

☎ 0215 / pop 13,500

This quiet little town was home to one of Albania's most significant historic moments: it's the place where Gjergj Kastrioti, Skanderbeg (see p43), brought the Albanian clan heads to unite against their common enemy, the Ottomans. He was buried here in 1468, in Lezha's cathedral. The Ottomans ravaged his tomb some years later, and turned the cathedral into a mosque.

You can see **Skanderbeg's memorial tomb**, with the double-headed eagle flag stretched behind a bronze bust of the man himself, in the remains of the cathedral.

Perhaps the most interesting reason for coming to Lezha is outside the town: **Hotel i Gjuetisë** (☎ 069 217 0898; Ishulli i Lezhës; r 2000 lek, mains 500 lek), a hunting lodge built by Mussolini's son-in-law Count Ciano set in a quiet wetland park rich with flora and rare birds. To get to Hotel i Gjuetisë you will have to take a taxi, which shouldn't set you back more than 500 lek.

There are also a couple of hotels at Shëngjini, a quiet fishing village about 7km north of Lezha. **Hotel President** (☎ 068 222 2802; dritan1@supereva.it; s/d €20/30) is a simple little place with a small restaurant and modern, clean rooms.

Furgons from Tirana to Shkodra stop at Lezha (200 lek, 1½ hours).

ALBANIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

The accommodation reviews in this chapter are listed in order of preference. Albania's budget accommodation is usually decent and clean; breakfast is often included in the price. Midrange hotels are a notch up, with telephones and a touch of glamour to the rooms. Top-end hotels are on a par with modern European hotels in terms of comfort and facilities. Most top-end places offer satellite TV and Internet access, and some have swimming pools.

Accommodation has undergone a rapid transformation in Albania, with the opening of lots of new, custom-built, private hotels to replace the run-down state ones. Another positive development for visitors is the conversion of homes or villas into so-called private hotels. For budget travellers, these are without doubt the best way to go. Outside of Tirana, Durrësi and Saranda the choice of lodgings is limited, but there's usually a good hotel or B&B in most price categories. It's worth noting that tourism is just starting to take off in Albania, and the accommodation scene is developing quite rapidly. The local hotel booking company **Albania-hotel.com** (www.albania-hotel.com) is a reliable resource for finding out about new lodgings; the company does a good job assessing recently opened hotels.

PRACTICALITIES

- *Albanian Daily News* is a local English-language newspaper, mostly only available in Tirana. Some of the 18 or so Albanian-language newspapers and news magazines are owned by political parties.
- The national TV and radio broadcaster is RTSh, augmented by dozens of regional radio stations and a growing number of national and regional TV stations. Top Radio is the country's hippest FM station.
- Albania uses standard European electricity (220V to 240V/50Hz to 60Hz).
- The system used for measurements and weights is metric.

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

ACTIVITIES

Swimming is great all along the Adriatic and Ionian Coasts. You can go bird-watching around Lezha (opposite) and hiking in Mt Dajti National Park (p64). Hiking and adventure sports are really in their infancy in Albania, and the national leaders are the enthusiastic young team at Outdoor Albania (p55). Albanien Reisen (p65) has tours to off-the-beaten track areas around Berati, including to Mt Tomorri National Park.

BOOKS

For a helpful list of Albanian words and phrases check out the *Mediterranean Europe Phrasebook* from Lonely Planet, while *Colloquial Albanian* (1994) by Isa Zymeri is a good teach-yourself language course, accompanied by a cassette.

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.

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

Albania – From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity (1999) by Miranda Vickers and James Pettifer covers the tumultuous 1990s in great detail, while managing to convey a sense of the confusion Albania faced as it shed its communist past.

Biografi (1993) by New Zealander Lloyd Jones is a rather arresting story set in post-1990 Albania, and is a semifactual account of the writer's quest for the alleged double of former communist dictator Enver Hoxha.

Rumpalla – Rummaging Through Albania (2002) by Peter Lucas is a personal account by an American journalist of Albanian descent detailing several visits to Albania before and after the revolution.

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

High Albania (published in 1909 and reprinted in 2000), written by Albania's 'hon-

orary citizen' Edith Durham, recounts the author's travels in northern Albania in the early 20th century.

Albania – The Bradt Travel Guide (2004) by Gillian Gloyer is a thorough guide to the whole country, though like any travel guide published during an economic transformation, it can't be completely up to date.

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 **Tirana University** (Map p53; ☎ 228 402; http://pages.albaniaonline.net/ut/unitirana_en/default_en.htm; Sheshi Nënë Tereza, Tirana) runs a summer-school programme in Albanian language and culture in August. The registration fee is US\$100.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Many prejudices regarding dangers surround Albania, but the country is now safe for travel. Some Serbs and Macedonians love to tell stories of bloodcurdling danger if you say you're going to Albania. First of all, the myth that travellers stumble into Albanian blood feuds isn't true. Poverty is a problem, but not this hoary old custom. It pays to be cautious about travelling without a local guide to Bajram Curri and Tropoja in the far north. There are reports of people being held up at gunpoint in isolated corners of northern Albania, though these are becoming rare. There may still be land mines near the northern border with Kosovo around Bajram Curri.

Otherwise, personal safety in Albania is very good. The number of people walking around central Tirana late on a summer evening shows that the locals are confident about safety. There isn't a hard-core drinking culture here so it's almost unheard of to be bailed up by drunks after dark. Take the usual precautions about avoiding rowdy demonstrations, and beware of pickpockets on crowded city buses. The most serious risk is on the roads – Albania has a high traffic accident rate. Other dangers are the

ripped-up pavements, ditches and missing manhole covers – watch your step!

There have been a couple of reports of *furgon* drivers ripping off travellers who've just entered Albania from Montenegro. They've been charged up to €50 for the ride from Shkodra to Tirana. The real price is 300 lek, or about €2.30.

As Albania was closed for so long, black travellers may encounter some curious stares; in fact most visitors to Albania can expect a certain amount of curiosity.

There are risks in drinking tap water or local milk; plenty of bottled water and imported UHT milk is available. The standard of health care in Albania is variable: local hospitals and clinics are understaffed and underfunded, but pharmacies are good.

DISABLED TRAVELLERS

There are few special facilities for travellers in wheelchairs. However, there are toilets that cater to people with disabilities in the Tirana International Hotel (p57) and the Rogner Hotel Europapark Tirana (p57).

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

There are no Australian, New Zealand or Irish embassies in Albania, and vice versa.

Albanian Embassies & Consulates

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

Canada (☎ 613-236 4114; embassyrepublicofalbania@on.albn.com; 130 Albert St, Suite 302, ON K1P 5G4, Ottawa)

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

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

Greece (☎ 21 0723 4412; albem@ath.forthner.gr; Vekiarli 7, GR-15237 Athens)

Italy (☎ 6 8621 4475; fax 6 8621 6005; Via Asmara 5, 00199 Rome)

Macedonia (☎ 2-614 636; ambshqip@mt.net.mk; ul HT Karpoš 94A, 1000 Skopje)

Netherlands (☎ 70 427 2101; embalba@xs4all.nl; Anna Paulownastraat 09b, 2518 BD, The Hague)

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

UK (☎ 020-7828 8897; fax 020-7828 8869; 24 Buckingham Gate, 2nd fl, London SW1 E6LB)

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

Embassies & Consulates in Albania

The following embassies and consulates are in Tirana (area code ☎ 04):

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

Germany (☎ 232 048; www.tirana.diplo.de; rr Skënderbej 8)

Greece (Map p53; ☎ 223 959; grembtir@albnet.net; rr Frederik Shiroka 3)

Italy (Map p53; ☎ 234 045; www.ambitalia-tirana.com; rr Lek Dukagjini)

Macedonia (Map p53; ☎ 233 036; macambas@albnet.net; rr Lek Dukagjini 2)

Netherlands (Map p53; ☎ 240 828; www.netherlandsembassytirana.com; rr Asim Zeneli 10)

Serbia and Montenegro (Map p53; ☎ 223 042; ambatira@icc-al.org; rr Skënderbej Pall 8/3 Shk 2)

UK (Map p53; ☎ 234 973; www.uk.al; rr Skënderbej 12)

USA (Map p53; ☎ 247 285; www.usemb-tirana.rpo.at; rr Elbasani 103)

HOLIDAYS

Albania respects the holy days of four different faiths and sects, which makes for a busy religious and secular holiday schedule. The dates of the Muslim religious holidays of Bajram i Madh (the 'big feast' at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan) and Bajram i Vogël (the 'little feast' commemorating the prophet Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son Ismail to God) fall 11 or 12 days earlier every year. Over the next couple of years Bajram i Vogël falls in December, while Bajram i Madh falls in October. See p131 for precise dates. In addition, the Catholic and Orthodox Easter (Pashkët) dates only rarely fall on the same day. Following are the main holidays:

New Year's Day 1 January

Summer Day 14 March

Nevruz 22 March

Catholic Easter March, April or May

Orthodox Easter March, April or May

May Day 1 May

Mother Teresa Day 19 October

Bajram i Madh October

Independence Day 28 November

Liberation Day 29 November

Bajram i Vogël December

Christmas Day 25 December

LANGUAGE

Albanian (Shqip) is an Indo-European language, a descendent 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 ll and dh). It shares certain grammatical features with Romance languages such as Romanian, but it's fair to say the Albanian language is a world unto itself. Most of the vocabulary sounds completely unfamiliar at first.

The core words of the main dialects of Albanian – Tosk and Gheg – were the same, but the grammar was slightly different. For example the word 'working' was *punuar* in Tosk but *punue* in Gheg. A unified form of Albanian was established in 1972 and is now taught wherever Albanians live.

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). See also the boxed text, p41. In this chapter we use the definite form, the one most commonly used in English.

Many Albanians speak Italian, thanks to Italian TV broadcasts which can be picked up along the populated coast. During the communist period people grew skilled at rewiring their TVs to overcome the Albanian government's attempts to block Italian channels.

Quite a few people in the south also speak Greek, and younger people are learning English.

See the Language chapter on p413 for pronunciation guidelines and useful words and phrases.

MONEY

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

Everything in Albania can be paid for with lek but most of the hotel prices are quoted in US dollars or euros, both of which are readily accepted.

ATMs

In 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

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

Moneychangers

Travellers cheques are about as practical and useful here as a dead albatross, though you can change them at Rogner Hotel Europapark Tirana and at major banks in Tirana. Some banks will change US-dollar travellers cheques into US cash without commission. Travellers cheques (euro and US dollar) can be used at a few top-end hotels, but cash is preferred everywhere.

Every town has its free 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.

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

POST

Outside of main towns there are few public mail boxes, but there is an increasing number of modern post offices springing up around the country where you can hand in your mail directly. Sending a postcard overseas costs around 40 to 80 lek, while a letter costs 80 to 160 lek. The postal system is fairly rudimentary – there are no postcodes, for example – and does not enjoy a reputation for efficiency. Don't rely on sending or receiving parcels through Alapost.

TELEPHONE & FAX

Long-distance telephone calls made from main post offices are cheap, costing about 90 lek a minute to Italy. Calls to the USA cost

230 lek per minute. Calls from private phone offices are horribly expensive though – 800 lek per minute to Australia. Unfortunately there are no cheap Internet phone offices, or at least none 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. Albania's country phone code is ☎ 355. For domestic directory enquiries call ☎ 124; international directory assistance is ☎ 12.

Mobile Phones

There are two established mobile phone providers (Vodafone and AMC), and 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 quite a mountainous nation. The tariffs are quite high. Check that a roaming agreement exists with your home service provider. Numbers begin with ☎ 068 or ☎ 069 (Eagle Mobile's prefix is not yet known). To call an Albanian mobile number from abroad, dial ☎ 355 then either ☎ 68 or ☎ 69 (ie drop the 0).

Phoncards

Phoncards are available from the post office in versions of 50 units (560 lek), 100 units (980 lek) and 200 units (1800 lek). It's quite common to buy some phoncard time from men waiting around public phones: you use one of their cards, then they check how much credit you've used up and you pay them. Be wary of kids trying to sell you phoncards – sometimes they have no credit left on them.

TOURIST INFORMATION

There are no tourist information offices in Albania, but hotel receptionists or travel agencies will help you with directions. You can buy city maps of Tirana in bookshops and larger kiosks in the capital, but in most

of the other towns they're unobtainable. In addition, many streets lack signs and the buildings have no numbers marked on them! Some streets don't seem to have any name at all. However, you will find that most of the towns are small enough for you to get around without them.

VISAS

No visa is required by citizens of EU countries or nationals of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Norway, South Africa or the USA. Travellers from other countries should check with an Albanian embassy (p80) for appropriate visa requirements. 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 is €10. Israeli citizens pay €30.

Upon arrival you will fill in an arrival and departure card. Keep the departure card, which will be stamped, with your passport and present it when you leave.

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 in the evenings, and women generally stay at home. While they are not threatening, 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.

TRANSPORT IN ALBANIA

This section covers transport connections between Albania and the other countries in this book, eg Serbia and Montenegro and Macedonia. For information on getting to Albania from further abroad, see the Transport chapter.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Albania's only international airport, and in fact the only one with any regular passenger flights, is Nënë Tereza Airport (aka Mother Teresa Airport) and more commonly Rinas Airport), 26km northwest of Tirana. There are no domestic flights within Albania, and the selection of flights within the region is limited to Ljubljana in Slovenia and Prishtina

DEPARTURE TAX

Airport departure tax is €10, payable in euros or lek. A €4 tariff is imposed on people leaving Albania by ferry, and there's a €1 daily tariff on vehicles, payable upon crossing the border out of the country.

in Kosovo. The following airlines fly to and from Albania within the Western Balkans:

Ada Air (airline code ZY; ☎ 02-256 111; www.adaair.com; hub Tirana)

Adria Airways (airline code JP; ☎ 02-228 483; www.adria.si; hub Ljubljana)

Albanian Airlines (airline code LV; ☎ 02-235 162, 233 494; www.flyalbanian.com; hub Tirana)

Land

For information on travelling to and from Greece, see Transport (p402). There are no passenger trains into Albania, so the options are buses, *furgons* or taxi to a border and picking up transport on the other side.

BORDER CROSSINGS

Kosovo

The best crossing for travellers is at Morina/Vrbnica between Kukësi 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 the through-buses to Prishtina should have no problems.

Macedonia

The two best crossings are on Lake Ohrid. The southern crossing is at Tushëmishti/Sveti Naum, 29km south of Ohrid; the northern crossing is at Qafa e Thanës/Kafa San, between Struga and Pogradec. If you are taking a bus to/from Macedonia (Tirana–Struga–Tetovo), use the Qafa e Thanës/Kafa San crossing. The Tushëmishti/Sveti Naum crossing is most commonly crossed on foot, as taxis from Pogradec will drop you off just before the Macedonian border.

There are two smaller border crossings at Blato, 5km northwest of Debar, and at Stenje on the western shore of Lake Prespa. There is no public transport on these routes.

Serbia & Montenegro

At the time of writing there are two border crossings, one is at Han i Hotit (between

Shkodra and Podgorica) and another at Muriqani/Sukobin between Ulcinj and Shkodra. There are no regular buses from Tirana to cities in Serbia and Montenegro, but there are *furgons* between Shkodra and Ulcinj (one way €8, around 40 minutes) on a nicely rebuilt stretch of road; see p78 for details.

BUS

Kosovo

Buses to Prishtina depart daily from beside the Tirana International Hotel on Sheshi Skënderbeg at 6pm (€30, 12 hours).

Macedonia

There are buses from Tirana via Struga (€10, five hours) to Tetovo (€15, seven to eight hours), but not to Skopje. The **Pollogu travel agency** (Map p53; ☎ 04-23 500, 069 209 4906; Pall 103 blvd Zogu I) sells tickets for the Macedonian bus company Polet, which has services at 9am and 9pm daily from the bus stand next to the train station. The Pollogu office is a little hard to find – it's upstairs in a modern apartment building at the top end of Zogu I – in 2005 the entrance was between a jewellery shop and kids' clothing store.

In July and August there are additional services to ethnic Albanian towns in Macedonia from Durrësi.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Macedonia

The busiest route to Macedonia is from Tirana to Struga Tirana via Qafa e Thanës/Kafa San, and there are sometimes delays because of trucks. The route around the southern end of Lake Ohrid via Tushëmishti/Sveti Naum is quieter and delays are much less common.

GETTING AROUND

Bicycle

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

Bus

Most Albanians travel around their country in private *furgons* or larger buses. These run fairly frequently throughout the day between Tirana and Durrësi (38km) and other towns north and south. Buses to Tirana

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

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

depart from towns all around Albania at the crack of dawn. Pay the conductor on board; the fares are low (eg Tirana–Durrësi costs 100 lek). Tickets are rarely issued.

City buses operate in Tirana, Durrësi and Shkodra (pay the conductor). Watch your possessions on crowded city buses.

Car & Motorcycle

Albania has only acquired an official road traffic code in recent years and most motorists have only learned to drive in the last 10 years. During the communist era car ownership required a permit from the government, which in 45 years issued precisely 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 Durrësi and Tirana, and north from these cities to Shkodra, but the main roads leading south are still being expanded. Highway signage is bad – there are hardly any signs in central Tirana showing the route to Durrësi, for example. Plus, there are a lot of roadworks 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 a whole new field of extreme sport. There is no national automobile association in Albania as yet.

DRIVING LICENCE

Foreign drivers' 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 available along all major highways, but fill up before driving into the mountainous regions. A litre of unleaded petrol costs 120 lek, while diesel costs 85 lek. 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 detailed above we wouldn't recommend it unless you have a lot of experience with similar conditions.

ROAD RULES

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

Local Transport

Most Albanians travel around in private *furgons* or larger buses. Bus/*furgon* activity starts at the crack of dawn and usually ceases by 2pm. Fares are low and tickets are rarely issued. Shared *furgons* leave when they are full or almost full. They usually cost more than the bus, but they're still cheap. On intercity *furgons* people usually pay the driver or assistant en route, but on suburban trips they pay when they get out.

Train

Prior to 1948 Albania had only a few minor military and mining industry railway lines, but the communist party built up a limited rail network. Today, however, nobody who can afford other types of transport takes the train, even though train fares are seriously cheap. The carriages are almost invariably in poor condition (a lot of the rolling stock was vandalised in the 1990s) and journeys proceed at a pace best described as leisurely. That said, they are something of an adventure. The line between Pogradeci and Tirana is rather attractive, especially when it crawls along the shores of Lake Ohrid. There is only one class of travel, and there is no reservation system. Ticket offices generally open 10 minutes before a train is due to depart.

Daily passenger trains leave Tirana for Shkodra (120 lek, 3½ hours), Fier (175 lek, 4¼ hours), Vlora (210 lek, 5½ hours) and Pogradeci (245 lek, seven hours). Eight trains a day also make the trip between Tirana and Durrësi (50 lek, 1½ hours).

There is no official Albanian Railways (HSh, Hekurudha e Shqipërisë) website, but there's an informative unofficial one at www.angelfire.com/ak/hekurudha/.

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