



CICERONI
T R A V E L

CONTRASTING CULTURES EXPLORING ALBANIA

MONDAY 2 – MONDAY 9 MAY 2022 (8 DAYS)

LECTURER: GILLIAN HOVELL

£2395

- Gently-paced exploration of rural & coastal Albania
- Spectacular mountain scenery & countryside
- Evocative archaeological sites at Apollonia, Butrint & Durres
- Discover traditional Ottoman houses & historic mosques
- Engaging museum collections in Tirana & across Albania
- Centrally located 4* hotels in Tirana & Gjirokastra & a historic house hotel in inland Berati



Butrint, Baptistry mosaic

OVERVIEW

Undiscovered and largely misunderstood, Albania is perfectly located between Greece at its southern border and Italy, which it faces across a narrow strait of the Adriatic Sea. At this Western edge of the Balkan Peninsula, Albania's complex history is both furrowed into its landscape and weighs heavily on its shoulders. Yet, it is a history that has to be admired, given the resilience of its people and its engaging cultural heritage.

Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Age settlements mark its early history, while Illyrian tribes then dominated the peninsula, from one of whom the Albanians trace their descent. These later coexisted with Greek colonists who settled along the coast from the seventh century BC onwards. The 'Hellenization' of southern Albania led to wars between rival kingdoms, seen by the Romans as an opportunity to invade and conquer, which resulted in their division of the territory into three provinces – Dalmatia, Macedonia and Moesia Superior. Prosperity blossomed with much investment to protect road communications which continued under the Byzantine emperors – hence the remarkable wealth of classical sites throughout the country.

In the Medieval period, regional Byzantine supremacy was challenged by Bulgars and Avars while the 'Albanoi' emerged as a powerful local force. Feudal citadels mark this unsettled era as Crusaders, Byzantines and even Venetians vied for control. Competing dynastic interests could not contain the looming threat of the Ottomans who swept through Albania and despite some revolts in the fifteenth century, the Turks regained control and ruled until 1912 when Albania gained independence.

Chaos and occupation was a heavy veil over the presidency, and later kingdom of Ahmet Zog which was formed in between the two world wars. Post World War II, the Stalinist regime of Enver Hoxha then dominated the country until 1992. In the thirty years since, Albanians have re-engaged with the world with considerable economic development and a warm welcome for visitors.

The long and complex history of Albania has survived to be discovered via its archaeological sites at Butrint and Apollonia, towns and rural villages such as Berati and Gjirokastra, and many mosques, churches and art and artefacts both ancient and modern. These are some of the facets we shall encounter, which will make for a voyage of discovery to a country that until recently was so close, yet so far.

We shall stay in three hotels in central and southern Albania. The **5* Hotel Rogner** is located in the heart of the capital Tirana, close to all the principal sites of interest. The **4* Hotel Agjiro** is located in the old hilltop town of Gjirokastra whilst the **4* Hotel Portik** lies at the foot of the old town of Berati.

ITINERARY OUTLINE

Day 1: Monday 2 May – We fly from Heathrow to Tirana airport arriving early evening. We drive into **Tirana** to our hotel and our first dinner – wine, water and coffee are included with all group lunches and dinners.

Day 2: Tuesday 3 May – We begin with a visit to the **Archaeological Museum** and continue to the eighteenth-century **Mosque of Et'hem Bey** and the fascinating **Bektashi Sufi Order Temple**, this latter an insight into the mystical side of Islam. After a group lunch we visit the **National Museum of Albania**, an excellent introduction to the salient aspects of Albania's history seen through a variety of objects and displays. The evening will be free.

Day 3: Wednesday 4 May – This morning we engage with twentieth century **Tirana** followed by a visit to the **National Gallery of Arts** which displays modern works. We leave Tirana and drive southwards stopping for a group lunch. We visit the **Monastery of Ardenica** to view the fine eighteenth century **Church of St Mary** and, in the afternoon continue to the town of **Gjirokastra**. Our group dinner will be in our next hotel.

Day 4: Thursday 5 May – We spend the morning exploring medieval **Gjirokastra**, a hilltop town which flourished under the Ottomans with many surviving **traditional Ottoman houses** and an imposing **Citadel**. Following a group lunch we drive into the local countryside to visit the remarkable thirteenth century **Labova of the Cross Orthodox Church**. We return to our hotel via the small, semi-excavated **Roman Theatre** and the possible location of **Hadrianopolis**, the town built by the Emperor Hadrian. The evening will be free.

Day 5: Friday 6 May – We drive to the south-west corner of Albania, close to the Straits of Corfu to visit the impressive coastal site at **Butrint** with remarkable Greek, Roman and medieval remains, now a UNESCO World Heritage site. After a late group lunch at the nearby coastal village of **Ksamili**, we return via the **Church of St Nicholas at Mesopotami** and the remarkable **Blue Eye**, an unusual underwater spring. The evening will be free.

Day 6: Saturday 7 May – Leaving **Gjirokastra** we return to the centre of Albania to visit **Apollonia**. The second Greek colony on the Illyrian mainland was a strategic and economic force. When young, the future emperor, Augustus, studied rhetoric here. After a group lunch this semi-excavated site reveals a range of re-erected buildings with fine views. We continue to the town of **Berati** and our final hotel where we have dinner.

Day 7: Sunday 8 May – Today we explore one of Albania's oldest towns, **Berati**. It thrived in the middle ages and because of its historic status, Berati has survived the destructive modern era. The imposing **Citadel** commands astonishing views. We shall visit a number of its small churches and houses including the **Onufri Museum** dedicated to the Albanian school of icon painters. After lunch, not included, we visit the **Ethnographic Museum** and two historic sixteenth century **Mosques**. Our final dinner will be in a typical restaurant in the town.

Day 8: Monday 9 May – We travel north to the coastal port town of **Durres**. Founded by Greek settlers from Corinth on a pre-existing Illyrian settlement, parts of the **Amphitheatre** remain whilst the **Archaeological Museum** is rich in Greek and Roman finds. After our final group lunch in Durres, we continue to the hilltop town of **Kruje**. Its **Castle** was the stronghold of fifteenth century Albanian resistance to the Ottomans under national hero, Gjergj Kastrioti. Kruje today pays homage to Albanian identity, and with its pretty bazaar is an apt finale to our week. We make the short journey to Tirana Airport and our early evening flight.

PRACTICALITIES

Price £2395 **Price without Flights** £2245 **Deposit** £350 **Single Supplement** £160 (Double for Sole Use)

Hotel 2 nights at the 5* Hotel Rogner, Tirana; 3 nights at the 4* Hotel Argjiro, Gjirokastra; 2 nights at the 3* Hotel Portik, Berati. All accommodation with breakfast.

Flights British Airways

Outward: **BA2648** Depart London Heathrow **1430** arrive Tirana **1835**

Return: **BA2649** Depart Tirana **1935** arrive London Heathrow **2140**

Price includes 4 dinners & 6 lunches with water, coffee & wine. All local transfers, entry fees & gratuities, City tax, the services of Gillian Hovell, James Hill and our local guide

Not included Travel to/from Heathrow, 3 dinners and 1 lunch



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