

Is Albania Safe for Tourists — and Why Bother? September 2002



Albanians are still seething about the travel book “The Accursed Mountains”*, written by Robert Carver who visited in 1996. From the end of the Second World War Albania was isolated from the mainstream of European culture for fifty years and Carver’s book is a terrifying account of a bankrupt, lawless country devoid of infrastructure, riven by blood feuds, and oppressed by a thoroughly corrupt police force. His life was in jeopardy more than once. A year later, the pyramid banking schemes that underpinned the economy collapsed, the government fell and civil war broke out. The populace liberated weapons from the armouries, including tanks, to prosecute ancient enmities. There were more guns circulating in Albania than there were men, women and children, according to Carver - mostly the long-barrelled version of the Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifle. Many of the people he had met were later killed or fled the country.

Six years have wrought tremendous changes and it’s time for reassessment. This is a country not yet covered by the Rough Guides. Does anyone go there? Why? How safe is it now?

There are flights to the capital, Tirana, and cross-border buses from Ioannina in Greece, but the cheapest and most convenient way to get to Albania is to book a charter flight to Corfu between May and October. At its narrowest point the strait which separates Albania from the Greek island tourist playground is less than two kilometres across. At night the seductive lights of Corfu seem a short swim away. Albanians will tell you that during the Communist regime few gambled against the armed patrol boats; whether or not they succeeded, their relatives were routinely executed.

Today hundreds of thousands of Albanian migrants work, legally or illegally, in Greece and Italy. Adventurous holiday-makers can take a day trip from Corfu harbour, including a bus excursion to Butrint, one of the most important yet under-visited archaeological ruins in the Mediterranean. For a longer stay, you need a visa. It's a disconcerting moment when the captain of the launch commandeers your passport for the two-hour crossing, but you retrieve it upon arrival at Saranda, where it's stamped by immigration officials, in exchange for ten US dollars. Because counterfeiting is big business in the Balkans, the notes should be new and in small denominations.

At first glance Saranda, a small town of about 12,000 inhabitants, is a typical attractive Mediterranean port. A modern promenade dotted with smart cafés and restaurants that serve fresh seafood skirts the sandy shore; at dusk, when the prosperous residents of the town turn out for the traditional evening *vuelta*, you could be forgiven for thinking you were in a smart Italian resort. Then you spy a rat nonchalantly roaming the beach, you notice that the skyline above the port is composed not of romantic Italianate villas, but crumbling concrete Stalinist blocks of flats, and that those forests of new building works which ascend every hillside are derelict and the main roads are full of potholes. The countryside around Saranda is an immense building site where the workforce is on permanent holiday. The groups of men clustered at street corners are not waiting for the pick-up truck to take them to work; they stand there all day. It's the legacy of the pyramid banking boom of 1996 when everyone with access to cash from Albanian émigrés abroad rushed to throw up a hotel, a villa or a block of holiday flats. The rusting skeletons of steel and concrete remain; here and there one occupied flat exists, curiously suspended on an upper storey. During the communist era farming was collectivised, and people seem to have forgotten how to provide for themselves. Olive trees are abundant, but their fruit lies on the ground, trampled underfoot.

Yet, the country has a scruffy charm; it's like visiting Greece in the 1950s. It has three great attractions: rugged mountain scenery, a stunning coast lined with solitary beaches, and fascinating classical ruins. Right on the High Street in Saranda there are the ruins of Roman dwellings and water cisterns — used as a prime site for advertising hoardings.

The Albanian tourist board claims 500,000 visitors a year, and apart from the capital of Tirana, most of them must come to the south. But we saw very few. Southern Albania is best for beginners; most of the murderous tribal conflicts have occurred in the remote mountains of the north-east which border Kosovo.

This region was also a training ground for the underground Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) until after the NATO bombing war of 1999. In southern Albania the Kalashnikovs were not in evidence, though there are disturbing reminders of the recent conflict: elaborate tombstones have been erected in the midst of thoroughfares, always bearing the photograph of a young man and a date in 1996 or 1997.

The only way to get around in Albania is by ancient bus or by taxi — Mercedes cars with a murky cross-border provenance. Buses are cheap, while the taxi drivers have time on their hands and will negotiate. (It's a good investment to befriend a taxi driver. Ours entertained us in his home with a limitless supply of raki while he and his father intoned polyphonic songs of great antiquity.) We made Saranda our headquarters for day excursions. There is now a good range of accommodation, from rooms in private houses to the multi-storey Hotel Butrint block. This was formerly the state hotel. Burnt out in the 1997 fighting, it now aspires to five-stardom. It was empty and the desk clerk we met at the taxi-driver's home confided that you could get a room for \$75 per night. For \$20 a night we stayed in a villa just behind the promenade where Nikita Khrushchev once visited Enver Hoxha. The electric water heater in the bathroom was dodgy, and if either of those dictators had failed to take the precaution of switching it off before stepping into the shower, the course of history might have been very different. The grounds were walled and, as throughout Albania, cars were locked within the compound at night.

Below the Adriatic the ragged Albanian coast borders the Ionian sea for another 150 km, its rocky bluffs harbouring providing a dramatic background to long stretches of isolated white sandy beaches. At the back of the beach, every fifty metres or so, there is the hump of an abandoned concrete pillbox, and on the hills above the remains of more substantial gun emplacements poke through the citrus, fig and olive trees. An enormous quantity of discarded concrete lies scattered in the Albania landscape. Behind the coastal mountains the broad, green Drino valley leading up to the picturesque town of Gjirokastra is crossed by irrigation channels every hundred metres or so. Each ditch is lined with pillboxes, all pointing towards



Greece. Where did they find the troops to man so many?

Gjirokastra, a fortified mountain town with a turbulent history, protects this historic invasion route. It sits beneath brooding limestone peaks, its mosques and 19th Century merchants' houses of fine stonework and carved wood clinging to a steep incline. A protected World Heritage 'Museum City', it exudes the Albanian spirit: severe, reclusive and uncompromising. The old three and four-

storey houses themselves are fortified, stone white-washed lower storeys without windows are enclosed by high walls, with protected doorways and overhanging balconies to offer an unobstructed field of fire on their neighbours. The town is commanded by a mighty 13th Century citadel of dark granite built on a brutal scale, a bulwark of generations of tyrants. Ali Pasha Tepelena reinforced it in the 19th century and used it as a prison, a tradition preserved by the Nazis in 1943-4, and by the Enver Hoxha regime until a couple of decades ago. Today its gloomy caverns house a collection of armaments: antiquated field guns, a tiny early Italian armoured tank, and even an American Lockheed fighter plane, lying on a terrace like a wounded bird, which the regime claimed to have forced down during a spying mission in the 1950s.

Southern Albania is an ethnic mix which has never satisfactorily melted. Complicating the usual Balkan Muslim/Christian divide, there are Greek-speaking villages and Vlach communities, the descendants of nomadic shepherds thought to have originated in Romania. The communists outlawed religion, and encouraged indiscriminate destruction of churches and mosques. A whole generation has grown up not knowing what these buildings are for. Faded icons stare from crumbling walls in every village. Sometimes they're covered with a coat of whitewash, because the building had been converted into a gymnasium or office. Now, with donations from abroad, many of them are being magnificently restored.

If only to distinguish themselves from Greeks, many educated Albanians are keen to identify with the original inhabitants, the Illyrians, who settled here at the beginning of the Bronze Age, around 2,000 BC. The archaeological jewel of southern Albania is Butrint, an 18 kilometre, eight-dollar taxi ride (wait and return) south of Saranda. Its location is spectacular: on a small peninsula jutting into the Strait of Corfu, fronting a channel leading to a large salt-water lake. To the south is a flat reclaimed plain leading to the range of mountains that form the frontier with Greece.

Virgil claimed the city was founded by the Trojans. The French classical tragedy *Andromache*, by Racine, takes place at Butrint. It has certainly been inhabited since prehistoric times; a fortress city was established here as early as the 7th century BC. Later it became a Greek colony. Julius Caesar used it as a base for his Balkan campaigns. After an attack by the Goths in 551, Butrint dropped out of history until 1294 when it was absorbed into the Despotate of Epirus. The next conquerors were the Venetians, who maintained a naval base here for three centuries, but were ousted by the Turks. In the early 19th century the city fell to the notorious Ali Pasha Tepellean of Ioannina, who built a fort that still stands across the channel. By the mid-19th century the site was abandoned and forgotten.

Today an air of quiet mystery pervades this ruined stronghold with its layers of Illyrian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Venetian civilisation. Overgrown walls connect the 4th century AD to the 4th century BC. This perimeter created an island fortress. Through wooded glades you glimpse men in skiffs patiently fishing the salt-water lake while waterbirds start from the marshes beyond. A

restored Venetian tower rises next to the remains of a Roman bath. The Well of Nymphs, identified from a Greek inscription as a sacred source where brides used to draw lustral water, was in use from the 4th century BC to the 1st century AD. By the channel the remains of an early Byzantine palace poke through the weeds; not far away are the ruins of a Byzantine baptistery with a perfectly preserved 5th century AD mosaic pavement. The base of an acropolis lies on the hill. Surmounting it is a restored fort where Venetian and Turkish cannon aim towards Corfu, its hills seeming almost within range. Below is a 4th Century Roman theatre, its floor a brown, flooded pond piping with frogs.

Butrint was first excavated by the Italians in the 1920s; today explorations are conducted jointly by the Albanian Institute of Archaeology and the British Butrint Foundation, and not without rivalry. As with so much in Albania, personal honour is at stake here. A member of the British archaeological team told us of their recent exciting discovery: "An ivory chess piece that sets the introduction of the game into Europe back 500 years." His Albanian colleague later dismissed this as "a piece of bone". His team had also made headlines recently by unearthing a 2000-year-old statue over seven feet tall, which was declared to be a representation of the Roman goddess Minerva, because of a Latin inscription on a marble slab previously found nearby. The British were sniffy about this because they felt it had been unprofessionally ripped out of the ground without careful examination of the site. Their laughter was doubtless discreetly stifled when "Minerva" subsequently turned out to be a man. The upright statue was muffled in hessian when we came across it at Butrint, so we were unable to adjudicate on this issue.

The Albanian Tourist Board claims that 30,000 people visit Butrint each year, implying a charter-season intake of around 200 people per day. This seems unlikely; we saw less than a dozen visitors. Across the road from the site we had a pleasant fresh fish lunch in a café which was also the home of the owner. Two days later we heard it had been bulldozed. There was, of course, no private land ownership in the Communist era; the land title to many recent buildings is dubious and depends on political connections. The café had been illegally erected within a national park, and so visitors to Butrint will henceforth go hungry.

*published by John Murray, 1998