ALBANIA

A COUNTRY OF CONTRAST

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ALBANiA

While passing through the mountainous country of Montenegro **UPSHIFT Issue 59,** we were warned about the next country on our southern journey along the Adriatic Coast. "Albania is a very dangerous country! You should be careful. Watch your motorcycles; they will steal them from you."

I respectfully asked, "When was the last time you traveled to Albania?"

The reply was, "I haven't, but..." I pretended to continue listening, but my mind was already wondering about a country we've only heard about but never experienced for ourselves.

Albania is a country of contrasts. There is incredible natural beauty with magnificent mountains contrasted against mountains of garbage piled in forests and plastic-waste covered beaches. Albanians are very generous and kind people, unless they are behind the wheel of their late model Mercedes Benz, where they often drive with reckless abandonment. It's a country where high-end luxury vehicles speed past donkeys pulling rickety carts full of wood. Albania was the first country in our travels around Europe where we felt like we were transplanted into another continent, and we absolutely loved all of our nearly two-months of time there.

If you're willing to look past the trash problems and aggressive drivers, Albania is a wonderful country full of interesting history, backcountry riding, incredible natural beauty, tasty and inexpensive traditional meals, and extremely generous and kind people.

ALBANIA

A PROUD PEOPLE AND HISTORY

Various archeological sites throughout Albania indicate that people settled here as early as 6,000 B.C. During the 7th century B.C., Greek colonies were established along the Illyrian Coast. One of the most significant and well preserved is the city of Butrint. This national park and UNESCO World Heritage Site is near the southern border and is considered to be one of the most important archeological sites of Albania.

One of the most significant leaders of the Albanian people is Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu, better known as Skanderbeg. His military victories, during the Ottoman-Venetian War of 1463-1479, are legendary. While visiting the Castle of Krujë, we learned that his army of 10,000 men successfully overcame multiple sieges of the castle. Skanderbeg then led his army through the Ottoman territory winning battle after battle, despite fighting against consistently larger and better supplied Ottoman forces. Skanderbeg's influence on modern day Albania can be seen throughout the country. His coat-of-arms, a black double-headed eagle on a red background, is the national flag. The largest paper banknote in Albania, the 5,000 lekë, depicts various images of Skanderbeg and the Castle of Krujë. There are also many statues of Skanderbeg throughout Albania with the most prominent being in Skanderbeg Square in the capital city of Tirana.

During WW2, Albanian resistance forces fought against Italian and German occupation. One of the most influential was the forces of the National Liberation Front (NLF), a largely communist organization. The NLF quickly became the national government, and after WW2, Albania became isolated from Europe under the new Communist leadership. During this period, power was controlled by killing political adversaries, imprisoning citizens who spoke against the leadership, and establishing Stalinism principles. In the late 1960s the government began the construction of concrete bunkers throughout the country. Thirty years later, Albania had over 173,000 bunkers on beaches, roadways, mountain passes, and cities. We rode past hundreds of these abandoned bunkers on our travels through the country.

ALBANIA

Up until the 1990s not many Western Europeans traveled to Albania. It was a country that had largely closed itself off to the western nations and even alienated itself from the Soviet Union and China. The collapse of communist regimes started a change in Albania, but not without its associated economic problems and social unrest. Many Albanians ended up leaving their country to seek employment and prosperity in neighboring countries like Greece, Italy, and Germany. However, the last decade has seen steady economic growth for many sectors in Albania, including the tourism industry.

We thoroughly enjoyed visiting many of the historical sites and castles throughout the country. Some of our favorites were the castles of Rozafa, Rodoni, Krujë, Berat, Gjirokastrës, the Ali Pasha Fortress, and Bunk'Art - a former military command bunker that has been converted to a museum and art gallery.

ACCESSIBLE BACKCOUNTRY ROADS

In Albania, you don't have to look very hard for backcountry trails to ride your motorcycle on. Just plot your GPS from any random town to the next town and you'll be rewarded with dirt roads shared by the occasional vehicle, farmers, and goat herders. On one occasion, we were warned that the direct road from Krujë to the capital city of Tirana was too difficult for our motorcycles. We decided to try it anyway, and were rewarded with some wonderful riding and picturesque backcountry. Along the way we even passed an Albanian bumping along and scraping the underside of his Mercedes C-Class sedan on various rocks. Locals seem to take their cars on anything!

On another occasion, we rode from Tirana to Paulesh on backcountry roads that quickly turned into a heavily-rutted and muddy mess of a trail. We started to feel the weight of our heavily loaded BMW G650GSs as the rear wheels were engulfed in the ruts of previous four-wheel-drive vehicles. I ended up dropping my motorcycle when the rear-wheel slid out sideways in the slick mud. While we were picking up the bike, a random goat-herder came along and helped us push it through the mud to the next dry section.

Albania also features a section of the Trans Euro Trail (TET) that snakes through the country from Montenegro to the north to Greece in the south. A lot of the route is mountainous and was, unfortunately, snowed over during our visit in the winter season. However, we did get a chance to ride a portion of the TET in the south near the warmer Adriatic coastline. Plan your ride through Albania in June through October if you want to ride the entire 400 km (250 miles) of Albanian TET.

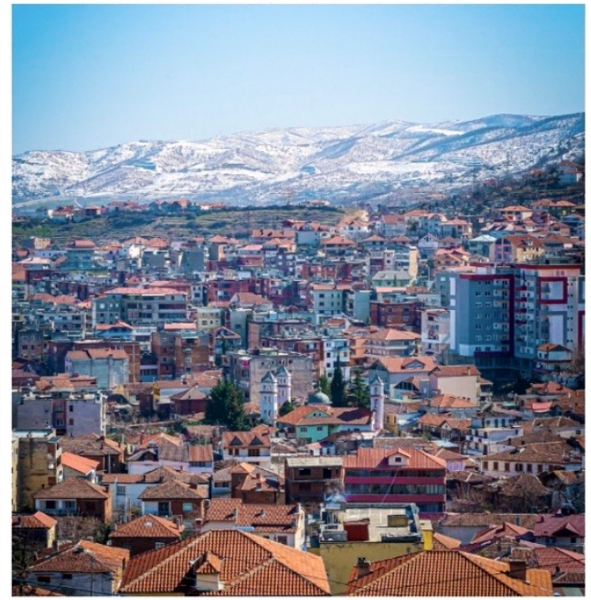
INCREDIBLE NATURAL BEAUTY

Although Albania is a relatively small nation, just slightly larger than the state of Vermont, it packs a lot of diversity and beauty into its borders: scenic snow-capped peaks, rugged hills and cliffs, emerald-green and aqua-blue lakes, coastal scrublands and marshes, and lush green forests. It's an adventure rider's paradise that is perfect for riding, remote camping, and experiencing the raw beauty and isolation of these diverse regions.

The real beauty of Albania is that most of it is accessible by motorcycle. Dirt roads transport you from the often frantic paced-highways to remote isolation. Riding along the blue-green waters of Bovilla Lake in Dajti Mountain National Park and along the rugged cliffs of Osum Canyon, were a motorcycle overlander's dream. In the evenings, it was easy to find remote areas to wild camp and marvel at the billions of twinkling stars without any light pollution.

In addition to riding through Albania, we enjoyed the many hiking areas and national parks. Some of our favorites were hiking among the rugged, snow-capped mountains of Valbona Valley, hiring a boat to explore the salt-water marshes of the Divjakë-Karavasta, and marveling at the archaeological sites of the ancient Roman structures at Butrint. We also enjoyed hikes overlooking the historic city of Krujë, and exploring the sandy beaches around the Cape of Roden, and Durrës Coast.

ESTHETIC CENTER

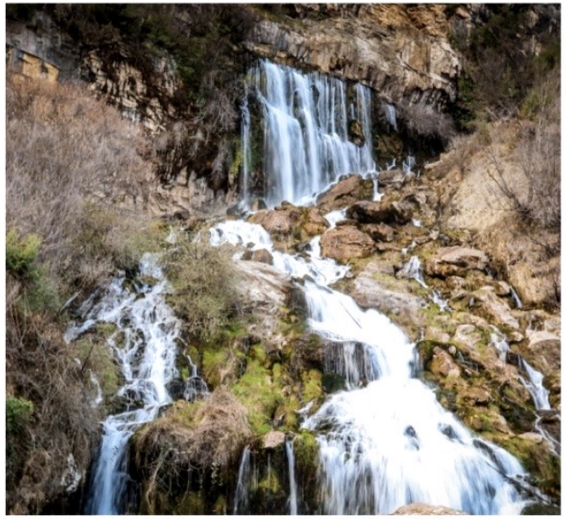


ALBANIAN CUISINE

Albanian food is as rich and colorful as the natural beauty of the country, combining the exciting flavors of both Mediterranean and Balkan cuisine. The meals here are traditionally prepared and are inexpensive and delicious. Each region of Albania seems to have its delicacies. Along the Mediterranean Coast we enjoyed fresh Peshk (fish) that was baked and often topped with olive oil and salt. In the south, we often ordered Ćevapi - a delicious ground lamb and beef that is mixed with fresh parsley, onions, garlic, and spices. Ćevapi is grilled and often served with vegetables and pita bread. For dessert, we were rewarded with Ashure – a gelatin-type porridge with local nuts and dried fruits. It was sweet and delicious!

EXTREMELY GENEROUS TO AMERICANS

People often ask us, "Are you accepted in the various countries you've visited throughout Europe?" In general, it's been really positive, but in Albania we felt even more welcomed! A large part of this is due to the generous hospitality that is a fundamental custom of their society. However, we also felt like Albanians loved the American ideal of democracy, freedom and prosperity. Throughout Albania we came across American flags, a vintage Cadillac painted with the stars and stripes, and even a town devoted to President George W. Bush with a bakery, bar, street, and statue named in honor of his visit to Albania in 2007.



FUTURE PLANS

After we reached the southern coastal city of Ksamil, we had hoped that we would be able to cross into Greece. Unfortunately, the borders were closed up tight for non-essential travel. Fortunately, there are more of the Balkan countries to explore to the north – Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia & Herzegovina, are just waiting to be explored on two wheels. More adventure awaits...

ABOUT VIAJARMOTO

Travis and Chantil Gill started full-time motorcycle overlanding in early 2020 and plan to continue traveling until they see as much of the world as they can. You can follow them on their website, www.viajarMOTO.com, and on YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook.