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RCGS: HIGHLIGHTS OF ALBANIA WITH JOHN GEIGER

Some say that visiting Albania is as close as you'll get to traveling back in time. It wasn't until the collapse of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania in 1991 that the world got its first glimpse of the country within. You'll get a firsthand look at this previously isolated country accompanied by internationally bestselling author, renowned lecturer, and CEO of the RCGS, John Geiger. John has been featured on countless television and radio programs and documentary films such as Nat Geo's 'The Angel Affect', and PBS' 'Arctic Ghost Ship', so you can be sure he has plenty of stories to share throughout your 10-day adventure.

Huge snow-capped mountains, inviting beaches, pretty rural villages, a genuine subsistence culture and an exceptionally friendly welcome is what awaits anyone who makes the journey to this much unknown gem. From the artist havens of Voskopoje, and the sweeping panoramic views of the Gramos Mountains to forgotten ancient Greek sites in Llogora National Park and the narrow cobbled streets of UNESCO-listed Berat, each day is packed with new adventures. See a different side of life at a local farm and taste local produce, taste your way through Permet which is famous for its food and wine, follow in the footsteps of Julius Caesar at the site where his battles against Pompeii were won, visit crumbling castles in Korce, and so much more.

Please note: travelers on this tour must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 with the last dose having been administered no less than two weeks prior to travel. The total number of doses must have been given, as required by the vaccine manufacturer (in most cases this is two doses).

At a Glance

- 9 nights hotels with en suite facilities
- Group normally 9 to 16 including the RCGS guide. Plus local leader. Min age 16 yrs
- Travel by air-conditioned private bus
- Countries visited: Albania

Trip Highlights

- Visit Albania's UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Pogradec, Butrint, Berat and Gjirokaster.
- Taste your way through Permet, situated in the heart of the white mountains and famous for its food and wine.
- Follow in the footsteps of Julius Caesar at Llogora National Park, where his battles of Pompeii were won.
- Discover historical monuments including Durres Amphitheatre and Korce Museum Of Medieval Arts.
- Discover Albania's sites with bestselling author and CEO of the RCGS, John Geiger.

Is This Trip for You?

This itinerary includes the main highlights of this fascinating country as well as some well-kept secrets that provide true insight into the Albanian culture. There will be some long drives (maximum 5 hours on day 4) on winding roads through the spectacular wild scenery of southern Albania. Most hotel stays are for one night only. All hotels are equivalent to 3 and 4-star accommodation with en suite rooms yet the standard may vary depending on location. Roads in Albania have improved drastically in the last decade, however many stretches (especially in the south) are winding and have poor signage, making for slower travelling times. Please be prepared for some bumpy journeys where roads have not been resurfaced.

Group

All groups will have a Royal Canadian Geographical Society Guide plus an experienced Exodus English-speaking local Albanian Leader throughout the trip.

Adult min age: 16 **Min group size:** 9 **Max group size:** 16

ITINERARY



Land Only

Start City: Tirana

End City: Kruje

Land Only Itinerary

Day 1

Start Tirana.

The tour starts today at our hotel in Tirana, Albania's capital. This afternoon we'll have an orientation tour of the colourful streets of Tirana, which was made the capital of Albania in just 1920. We'll see the main sites, including the impressive façade of the National History Museum which is adorned with a gigantic mosaic known as 'The Albanians'. This is one of the finest examples of late Albanian Socialist Realism in the country, depicting the resilience of the people in their fight against invasion and occupation throughout the centuries, and dominates Skanderbeg Square. The exhibits within the museum give great insight into Albania's intriguing past and recent history up to the present day.

We also visit Et'hem Bey Mosque, one of the oldest buildings in the city. This monument has been under reconstruction for the last two years so we will be able only to view it from the outside in 2020 as well. Closed under communist rule, it reopened as a house of worship in 1991 despite opposition from communist authorities (Et'hem bey Miosque is currently under restoration and is closed, so will be visited only if restoration work is finished). We also explore an area known as Blloku on foot, where villas were once occupied by members of The Politburo (a former leading sect of the Party of Labour of Albania) but which is now the lively centre of Tirana's nightlife where trendy bars, cafés, and fashionable clubs can be found.

Accommodation: : Hotel Opera or Similar

Day 2

Visit Elbasan Fortress en route to Pogradec, offering views across Lake Ohrid.

After breakfast, we begin our drive to Pogradec (approx. 3 hrs. drive), but en route we make a short stop to visit the fortress of Elbasan. A city influenced by various cultures including Turks and more importantly Italians, the fortress here dates back to the 15th century. The fortifications originally incorporated twenty-six towers equidistantly spaced from each other along the length of a nine-metre high wall; today the ruins can be seen along the southern wall which remains more or less intact.

Our final destination for today is one of the most charming resorts in Albania, Pogradec, thanks to its position on beautiful Lake Ohrid with clear waters and mountain views. The Albanian side of the lake was included in the UNESCO protected monuments list in 2019. Keep your eyes peeled for Ohrid trout (known as 'Koran' in Albania), a species endemic to the lake. We go for a scenic walk at Drilon Park on the far side of the lake, to discover the waterways and ornamental plants and trees that make up this special ecosystem.

Accommodation: Elite Hotel or similar

Meals included: Breakfast

Day 3

Transfer to the artists' village of Voskopojë; continue to Korçë.

This morning we continue driving for about an hour to reach Voskopoja Village (formerly known as Moskopole) an important and well-known centre of art where many talented Albanian painters chose to practice their profession. The village has suffered over the years, as many of its treasures were stolen during the second half of the 18th century and this continued during the world wars. We take a 40 minute walk to visit one of the oldest churches representing Voskopoja religious art.

Another short drive (approx. 30 mins.) takes us to the largest city of south-eastern Albania, Korçë, which sits at the foot of Moravia Mountain, 800m above sea level. This city became an important trading and handicraft centre in the 18th Century and has also been referred to as 'the city of museums', being home to the National Museum of Mediaeval Art and Archaeology, the Museum of Education (where the first Albanian School was opened in 1878), and the new museum of 'Bratko Collections' displaying antiquities from the Far East. Our visit to Korçë includes the National Museum of Mediaeval Art and Archaeology, Mirahori Mosque (one of the oldest in the Balkans) and the famous church 'The Resurrection'. Korçë has been an important religious centre for Orthodox Christians. It's also worth trying the famous local beer whilst in the city.

Accommodation: British Hotel or similar

Meals included: Breakfast

Day 4

Drive via the mountain village of Ersekë to Përmet, famous for its food and wines.

Our drive through the mountains today is truly spectacular as we enjoy sweeping views across the Gramos and Nemercka Mountains. Along the winding route, we enjoy a short stop in Ersekë, which at 1050m is the highest town in Albania. This 17th century town is surrounded by beautiful green pastures of the Gramos Mountains. In the lush forests of Leskovik we stop at a working farm situated in the beautiful woodland. We will see how the different animals are raised here, as well as sample some authentic organic produce. Continuing onwards to beautiful Përmet, we make a quick stop at the old bridge of Benje village, and the hot springs, where we have time to relax and swim. After quite a long day (approx. 5 hrs. drive in total) we arrive in Përmet, situated in the heart of the white mountains on the Vjosë River. This evening you're sure to be in for a treat as Përmet is famous for its food and wine, including 'gliko' sweets and raki.

Accommodation: Hotel Villa Permet or similar

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

Day 5

To Gjirokastrë via the characteristic village of Dhoksat.

Drive to the beautiful town of Gjirokastrë (approx. 2 hrs. drive), calling in at the traditional village of Dhoksat en route for a home-cooked lunch. In the afternoon we enjoy a guided visit around the famous town of Gjirokastrë. Set on a mountain slope, the cobbled streets wind their way between old houses with interesting architectural features including mediaeval towers. The castle is the main feature and stands like a balcony over the town offering wonderful panoramic views of the surrounding landscape. We visit the ethnographic museum which is the house of Albania's former dictator Enver Hoxha.

Accommodation: Argjiro Hotel or similar

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

Day 6

Visit Butrint, continue to Llogora National Park

After an early breakfast, we travel to Butrint National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site situated about 18km south of Saranda. Butrint owes its growth and early fame to a sanctuary dedicated to Asclepius, the god of medicine, founded in the 4th century BC. The sanctuary was located on the south slope of the acropolis (hill) and was visited by worshippers to be healed. The Sanctuary was the making of Butrint and the sacred power of Butrint's water, was to be revered as long as the town lasted. The city developed during the Roman times however it fell into decline after an earthquake and was abandoned towards the end of the Middle Ages. From here we drive to Llogora National Park stopping along the coast on the way. Overnight in Llogora.

Accommodation: Llogora Tourist Village Hotel or similar

Meals included: Breakfast

Day 7**Llogora National Park walk and visit Apollonia.**

After breakfast, we take a walk in Llogora National Park, possibly reaching Caesar's field. Yes, Julius Caesar crossed into today's Albania in his battles against Pompei which was won in this territory.

Next, we stop at the wonderful ruins of Apollonia (approx. 1.5 -2 hrs. drive). Originally occupied by the Illyrian tribes and then the Greek colonists from Corfu and Corinth around 600BC, Apollonia flourished in the Roman period and was home to a renowned school of philosophy (Octavian studied here) but began to decline in the 3rd century AD when its harbour started silting up as a result of an earthquake. After Apollonia we transfer for just over an hour further inland to the UNESCO town of Berat where we spend the night.

Accommodation: Portik Hotel or similar

Meals included: Breakfast

Day 8**Day in Berat.**

Today is dedicated to Berat the gem of Albania. This morning we enjoy a guided tour around the old district of Berat, with its pretty white buildings perched on the hill amid pine forests. We walk through the narrow cobbled streets and finally reach Berat Castle on the slopes of Mount Tomorr, where we are rewarded with breath-taking views (and begin to understand why it is known to Albanians as 'The City of a Thousand Windows'). Within the castle walls are dwelling houses and the Onufri Museum (Museum of Iconography), which we will visit. The rest of the day is free to explore the town.

Accommodation: Portik Hotel or similar

Meals included: Breakfast

Day 9**Drive to amphitheatre and port of Durrës; Continue to Krujë.**

From Berat we drive to the port of Durrës (approx. 2 hrs. drive), the second largest city in Albania and famed for housing the largest amphitheatre in the Balkans. The amphitheatre dates back to the 2nd century AD, seats 15,000 people and contains an early Christian crypt with rare wall mosaics. The city was colonised by colonists from Corinth and Korkyra in 627 BC and was named Epidamnus, but later became Dyrrachium.

We then drive to the famous mediaeval citadel of Krujë (approx. 45 mins. drive), where Albania's national hero, Skander beg, led the resistance against the Ottomans. He kept them from crossing into Western Europe for 25 years, earning the title "Champion of Christ". In the evening we take a walk to Kruja Hospitality a characteristic house in the castle where you will sample raki and local cheeses.

Accommodation: Hotel Panorama or similar

Meals included: Breakfast

Day 10**Tour of Krujë; visit the ethnographic museum and wander through the bazaar.**

After breakfast we'll have a tour of Krujë. We will visit the Skanderbeg Museum, a rich ethnographic museum inside the castle, and enjoy inspirational views out to the Adriatic Coast. We have time to wander through the medieval bazaar full of souvenirs and handicrafts. A transfer is included to Tirana Airport (approx. 45 minutes drive), which will be scheduled for mid-afternoon for those who wish to join. It is also possible to extend your stay and request additional accommodation in Krujë after the tour or arrange a private transfer back to Tirana Airport or city.

Meals included: Breakfast

Accommodation

Hotels

We spend each night in a different 3 or 4-star hotel or pension with good service, amenities and en suite rooms. Each night we will be situated within walking distance of local attractions and a variety of choice for restaurants to eat in the evening. The accommodation ranges from comfortable modern properties to older properties bursting with character.

Please note: In the older properties we stay at the rooms vary in size, this is part of the charm of the buildings. Rooms are distributed at random.

Where a single supplement is available, paying for a single will only guarantee a room for single use. It does not necessarily mean a twin or double room will be provided for sole occupancy.

Please note that a member of the group may be allocated a single room by default if the make-up of the group means there isn't anyone for them to share with. Paying the supplement in advance is the only way to guarantee a single room.

Single supplements cannot be refunded retrospectively.

Single supplement from \$279.00 USD

Food & Transport

Eating & Drinking

All breakfasts and 1 lunch included.

Food in Albania is quite varied thanks to the many influences on the country and particularly Mediterranean combining Turkish, Greek and Italian tastes. Dairy products, especially milk and yoghurt are present in almost every meal, usually locally sourced. Under the leadership of Enver Hoxha Albania became a self-sustaining country due to its isolation from the world. However the lush fertile valleys, fresh mountain springs and Mediterranean climate, means it is still very much a subsistence culture and shows very little sign of changing. In the countryside expect your food to be very locally sourced. Breakfasts are typically eggs, fresh bread, jam, honey and coffee. For lunch and dinner, meat dishes are often goat or lamb, with fish dishes ranging from trout to whitebait. Courses often come in mezze form complimented with a variety of vegetables and salad, freshly baked bread, homemade cheeses, local wines and of course, raki. In the cities along the coast there are a number of restaurants to choose from with an array of Mediterranean cuisine and fresh seafood.

Although treated we recommend that you always drink bottled water including when consuming meals. The most environmentally friendly method is to share larger 750ml re-usable glass bottles served in most restaurants.

Transportation

For this trip we use a private air-conditioned bus, the size of which will depend on the group size, with a local driver.

Weather & Seasonality

Weather Information

Albania generally experiences a Mediterranean climate with summer temperatures at 25-30°C/ 77-86°F on average in the day, and the warmest months are July and August where temperatures can rise to 35°C/95°F or above. It becomes cooler further inland towards Pogradec & Korçë during these months, especially in the evenings with high temperatures around 25°C/77°F. There is always the small chance of rain in the mountains yet we do not to travel in the coldest and wettest months, which are November to January. Berat also experiences a Mediterranean climate but thanks to its location in the shadow of Mt Tomorr, summers are much warmer than expected for the Mediterranean.

Joining Instructions

Travelling land only: 10 days starting in Tirana and ending in Kruje; places are equidistant from Tirana International Airport.

Your trip normally starts at our accommodation in Tirana in the afternoon of Day 1 of the itinerary. Details of how to reach the start point are provided in the Final Joining Instructions - sent approximately two weeks before departure.

Full joining instructions including local emergency numbers will be sent to you as part of our Final Joining Instructions. If you do not receive these at least a week before departure, or require them earlier please contact our office or your travel agent.

Transfers Details

There will 1 group arrival and 1 group departure transfer to and from Tirana Airport.

If you would like to enquire about joining both or either of these airport transfers, you must request further details with Exodus at least a month before departure.

If you are not able to take either group transfer, or miss it, you must make your own way to the joining point at your own expense.

Private arrival and departure transfers are also available (extra fee) if requested and pre-booked at least a month before departure.

Location start: Tirana

Location end: Krujë

What to Take

Essential Equipment

- Sunhat, sun cream and sunglasses
- Refillable Water bottle
- Small backpack for day use
- Sturdy shoes as the terrain can be quite rough or slippery in some areas
- Swimming costume, towel
- Sandals/flip-flops

Optional Equipment

- Shoes for swimming at pebbly beaches

Practical Information

Visa

No visa required for most nationalities, including UK passport holders, most other EU nationalities, US, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand.

Visa regulations can change without notice: please check the current regulations in good time to obtain a visa if one is required.

There are no specific health risks on this trip.

Vaccinations

There are no specific health risks.

Travel health can often be something people forget about before going away, but a little preparation and knowledge can go a long way to help you stay fit and healthy while abroad.

The above information can change at short notice; as we are not qualified to answer all your questions about travel health we strongly recommend you contact your Medical Professional or a Travel Health Clinic at least 8 weeks prior to departure for up-to-date information. Please note: vaccinations that are routinely recommended to residents of the UK, North America or Australasia are not considered to form part of the travel health advice, and you should ensure these are kept up to date where necessary.

For additional information please visit: <https://travelhealthpro.org.uk/countries>

Insurance - are you adequately covered?

It is a condition of joining any of our holidays that you must be fully insured against medical and personal accident risks (to include repatriation costs and air ambulance or helicopter rescue services where appropriate). On arrival in destination for your trip, you will be asked to present details to your leader or local representative of your policy.

If you are resident in the UK we strongly recommend the [Exodus travel insurance policy](#), this is specifically designed to cover all activities on your trip. If arranging your own policy please ensure that you are covered for all activities that are part of the trip, optional activities that you intend to take part in and/or on high altitude itineraries, that you are covered up to the maximum altitude of the trip.

Local Time

Albania's Timezone: Europe/Tirane CEST (GMT +02:00)

Electricity

Albania's Electricity: European plug - 2 round pins. 230 Volts AC.

Money

Albania's Currency

The national currency of Albania is the Albanian Lek (ALL), with an exchange rate at the time of publication (June 2020) of approximately 136 to the GBP, 109 to the USD, 80 to the CAD, 123 to the EUR, 76 to the AUD and 71 to the NZD.

ATM Availability

It is best to use a mixture of cash and ATMs.

Visa and MasterCard are widely accepted in shops for larger purchases. Albania has a good network of ATM cash machines, which can be used to withdraw Albanian Lek.

Many shops and restaurants in the main cities also accept EUR & GBP which are exchanged by the businesses on the spot at a slightly disadvantaged rate. However, change back will be given in local currency.

Extra Expenses & Spending Money

Allow about CAD 250- 330/ USD 190- 250/ GBP 150-200 for lunches, evening meals and drinks. You will notice that prices in the mountains and along the coast are very different. In the mountains we are more off the beaten track, so prices are generally much cheaper than at the coast. In the mountains, you can expect to pay approx. CAD 5-10/ USD 4-7/ GBP 3-6 for a meal, 1.50 CAD/ USD 1/ GBP .90p for a local beer or glass of local wine, and under 1 CAD/USD/GBP for a large bottle of water.

For restaurants in the cities along the coast, approximate meal prices can vary between CAD 11-25/ USD 9-18/ GBP 7-15, a beer CAD 2.50- 3.30/ USD 2- 2.50/ GBP 1.50-2, bottle of wine CAD 18/ USD 14/GBP 11, large bottle of water CAD 1.70/ USD 1.25/GBP 1 & soft drink CAD 2.20/ USD 1.60/GBP 1.30.

Tipping

Our local staff are paid well and fairly for their work with Exodus, however, most of our clients wish to give a tip to their guides in appreciation of their help and friendliness. This, of course, is in no way compulsory and depends on the service received. If you feel you would like to leave a tip, as a guideline we would suggest a total of approximately CAD 50/USD 38/ GBP 30 GBP per person in total on this itinerary to be broken down as follows:

CAD 33/USD 25/GBP 20 for the local leader

CAD 17/USD 12 /GBP 10 for the driver

Your leader will advise about tipping in restaurants. Usually, the bill is rounded up to include a tip.

Tipping your RCGS Quest host is not necessary.

Responsible Tourism

Tourism can be a real help to local communities, providing income, positive cultural exchanges and a financial incentive to protect their natural environment. Ours is a 'total approach' to responsible tourism, covering everything from the way we plan and operate our trips to the practices of Exodus as a company.

As much as possible, we try to use accommodations that are locally owned or at least employs local staff and uses local produce. This ensures that our money remains in the community by providing income for people in the area. When meals are not provided, our local guides strongly recommend and encourage clients to visit local cafés and restaurants to try local delicacies. On our way to the town of Gjirokastër, we stop by a traditional village to have a home-cooked lunch and foster friendship over a meal. Clients will also have a chance to witness the running of a working farm in Leskovik, to learn about how livestock are raised and sample some authentic organic produce.

Our local operator is always trying to operate with the locals and wider communities in mind. They have fundraised within their organisation

and partners to help children with learning disabilities, providing school materials for a day care in the outskirts of the Tirana. They were also involved in the Albanian Paralympic activities where they provided vehicles for the event and helped people globally with different disabilities to participate in the activities.

Every time we travel, we are part of a global movement that creates jobs, builds more sustainable societies, encourages cultural understanding and safeguards common natural and cultural heritage. To learn more about what Responsible Travel means to Exodus click [here](#)...

Exodus Community

Join the Exodus online community

Don't forget to visit the Community area on our website. You can view the range of Exodus videos and podcasts, read trip write-ups which have featured in the national media and take advantage of some special deals on travel gear and equipment.

In the Community Travel Forum you'll find the Departure Lounge where you can discuss your trip with fellow travellers before you depart. When you get back from your holiday remember to upload your images to the relevant trip page on our website. This helps other people see what our holidays are really like and you'll be entered automatically into our monthly photo competition.

To make full use of the Community you'll need to join My Exodus. It's free, registration is simple and easy, so what are you waiting for?

Important Information

On all guided trips

Although our leaders are well trained to deal with different capabilities, if they have any concerns about someone's ability to safely partake in an activity, or their impact on other people's enjoyment, we authorize them to take necessary action which, in some circumstances, may involve asking someone to miss that activity.

Although rarely enforced, by booking this trip you agree to section 16 of our Booking Conditions which clearly states that our leaders have the authority to do this. In these circumstances we will ensure anyone sitting out is safely provided for and offered alternative options where possible. Refunds will not be provided for activities missed and customers may be liable for additional costs incurred.

On all trips

In booking this trip you should be confident in your ability to participate in all activities described in these Trip Notes. If you have any doubt about your suitability you should call the Exodus office and ask to speak to one of the experts on this itinerary.

In an emergency, please contact us using our 24-hour number at +44 (0) 844 326 7041.

Every time that you travel abroad you should take the time to read the warnings in the essential information in the brochure.

Full joining instructions including local emergency numbers, and details of how to reach the start point, will be sent to you approximately two to three weeks prior to departure. If you do not receive these at least a week before departure or require them earlier, please contact our office or your travel agent.

The information in these Trip Notes is given in good faith. Where differences exist between the Trip Notes and our current brochure or website, the Trip Notes supersede the brochure and website. All holidays can be subject to unexpected changes; in order to enjoy them you should be prepared to be flexible where necessary. Occasionally, as stated in our brochure, it may not be possible to follow the itinerary as planned. This may be for a variety of reasons - climatic, political, physical or other. In these circumstances we will make the best possible alternative arrangements that maintain the integrity of the original itinerary.

As fuel prices, airport taxes and exchange rates fluctuate, and airlines manage their rates to match demand, it is proving harder than ever to guarantee our Flight Inclusive prices. Although we endeavor to keep our website as accurate as possible, daily fluctuations mean that our Flight Inclusive price may be out of date. For accurate prices we recommend that you contact one of our Travel Experts, or your Travel Agent.

Please note, although this trip doesn't visit any FCO no-go areas, it does visit a region close to an area where the advice is not to travel. If joining this trip, or if planning any additional travel pre or post tour in the area, you should ensure you visit their website to familiarise yourself with the advice. Any independent travel to these areas is entirely at your own risk and is likely not to be covered by your insurance.