

KOSOVO ALBANIA Insider Tour

APRIL 22-MAY 2, 2025



HISTORY

Kosovo (Kosova in Albanian) and Albania are neighboring, intertwined countries on the Balkan peninsula that share history and culture. Kosovo was the center of the Serbian Empire in early medieval times, and many important Serbian Orthodox religious sites were built there. Following the defeat of Serbian forces in 1389, Kosovo spent five centuries under Ottoman rule. By the end of the 19th century, Albanians had become the majority ethnic group in Kosovo. Kosovo was freed from the Ottomans in 1912, and, after World War II, became an autonomous province of Serbia. Tensions between Serbia and its Kosovar province increased in the 1980s, as did the repression of Kosovars under the Serbs, which ultimately led to massacres and the mass expulsion of Albanians. A controversial NATO military operation against Serbia in 1999 eventually led to Kosovo's independence. As one of the world's youngest countries, Kosovo continues to grapple with establishing itself as a new, sovereign nation.

Because of its location on the Adriatic and Ionian seas, Albania has long served as a natural bridge for nations and empires seeking conquest abroad. In the 2nd century BCE, the Illyrians were conquered by the Romans, and from the end of the 4th century CE, the residents of today's Albania were ruled by the Byzantine Empire. The Albanians were then conquered by the Ottoman Turks in the 15th century, along with other neighboring Balkan countries.

Albania declared its independence from the Ottomans in 1912 and established a parliamentary state but was subsequently occupied first by the Italians in 1939, and later by the Germans. In 1944, Communists took over the government and ruled for 46 years, isolating Albania from most of the world. In the early 1990s, Albania's communist regime collapsed, and a multi-party democracy was established. Many challenges remain, but in 2009, Albania joined NATO and, since 2014, has been a candidate for EU accession.



insidertours@americancouncils.org

THE INSIDER EXPERIENCE

On this tailored 10-day tour American Councils' field staff, current program participants, program alumni, and local people will draw you into the intertwining stories of current-day Kosovo and Albania. You will travel from the inland heart of the Balkan peninsula to the Adriatic coast by way of isolated mountains.



CULTURE

Having been subject to Ottoman rule for five centuries, Kosovo and Albania, both with early Roman or Orthodox Christian backgrounds from ancient times and in the first millennium, became infused with Muslim culture. The foundation of Roman, Greek, and early cultures combined with the mosques and hammams common to the Islamic world make this region truly unique. Both countries have tremendous natural beauty--Kosovo features mountains and rivers, and in Albania the mountains meet the sea. Cuisine in both countries is primarily Mediterranean and includes fresh seafood and vegetables, stuffed peppers, lamb, and veal.

One name you are sure to hear frequently in both countries is Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa is of Kosovar/Albanian descent, born in Skopje, now the capital of North Macedonia. She is claimed by Kosovo as well as Albania as their own, although she left the region when she was 18 to join a Catholic religious order in Ireland and became famous for her work with the poor in India. Throughout the Balkans you will find streets, churches, and airports named in her honor. Typical souvenirs from Kosovo and Albania include carpets, felt hats, linen goods, woodcrafts, embroidery, and the brandy-like rakia. Rakia is distilled from the fruits of the region and packs a punch!



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ITINERARY

April
22-23

Arrival to Prishtina and hotel check-in

Prishtina (also Pristina) is the capital of Kosovo. It has a small-town feel that lends itself to exploration on foot. Travelers can see mosques, churches, and streets named after American presidents (Bill Clinton and George W. Bush). Not far from Prishtina's central sights lie the intriguing ruins of the ancient Roman city of Ulpiana.

Note: for those arriving early, an afternoon tour around Prishtina with an English-speaking guide may be arranged.

Welcome dinner and review of itinerary.



April
24

Prishtina City Tour

- Ancient City of Ulpiana
- National Library
- M. Teresa Blvd.
- Cathedral
- National Art Gallery
- Clock tower
- Gračanica Monastery

Drive to Stone Castle Vineyard (1:30)

Lunch and vineyard tour

Return to Prishtina (1:30)



April
25

Drive to Prizren (1:30)

Prizren has played an important role in the Balkans, which were settled in Illyrian times. Located at a crossroads on the Balkan peninsula, Prizren has hosted several empires, with architecture from the Byzantine and Ottoman periods. The impact of the Ottomans can be felt especially around Shadervan, the main cobblestone square, as well as the Sinan Pasha Mosque (one of over 20 in the city) and the Old Stone Bridge, which was originally constructed in the 16th century. On the other side of the Bistrica (Lumbardhi) river is the Gazi Mehmet Pasha Hammam. The 11th-century Prizren Fortress is just a short walk up the hill.

Lunch and City Tour in Prizren

Drive to Shkodra (2:45)

Shkodra (Shkodër) is one of the most important cities in Albania. To understand the city of Shkodra, a visit to Rozafa Castle is a must! Travelers will also visit the renovated Marubi National Museum of Photography, which is famous for its large and rare collection of photos from throughout Albanian history. Finally, take a stroll through Pedonalja and Kole Idromeno Street, the old center of Shkodra. The mosques and churches have a distinctly Mediterranean feel.

Walk in Pedonalja

Dinner and Check-in to the Hotel in Shkodra



ITINERARY

April
26

Morning city bus/walking tour of Shkodra

- Rozafa Castle
- Marubi Museum
- Coffee with YES alumna & family

Drive to Durres (1:30)

Durres is the second largest city in Albania. Located on the Adriatic, Durres is a beach town with much to offer visitors, including archaeological landmarks like the largest Roman amphitheater on the Balkan peninsula and an Archeological Museum. The city walls were built by the Byzantine emperor Anastasius I in the 4th century CE to defend the city from invaders. The Venetian castle, built in the 6th century, was part of one of the most powerful fortresses along the Adriatic.

Durres

- Amphitheater
- Archeological Museum
- Venetian Tower

Dinner in Durres

Drive to Berat (1:30)

Berat was registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005. Berat is home to treasures of Illyrian, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman periods, including many old churches with frescoes, icons, and engravings. In 1961, the government of Albania declared Berat a "Museum City." The Berat Castle stands high above the Osum River and dates back 2,500 years. The castle contains several Byzantine churches, Ottoman mosques, and a museum of medieval art.

Dinner and Hotel in Berat

Walking tour of Berat UNESCO World Heritage Site (Very steep!)

Onufri Museum, Ethnographic Museum, Communist Cemetery

Lunch in Berat

Drive to Gjirokaster (2:30)

Located in southern Albania, Gjirokastra is nestled on the steep side of the Drino valley in the shadow of snow-capped mountains. Its old town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The town is defined by its castle, slate-roofed houses, and views of the Drina Valley. Gjirokastra is considered one of the best-preserved medieval towns in the Balkans, with the earliest settlement dating approximately 2,500 years ago. The town is famous for its Ottoman-era homes which feature distinctive stone roofs, wooden balconies, and whitewashed stone walls. The town is also famous as the birthplace of Enver Hoxha, the former Communist dictator who ruled Albania for more than 50 years. The Ethnographic Museum is located in Hoxha's childhood home.

Dinner and Hotel in Gjirokaster

Gjirokaster Castle UNESCO World Heritage Site tour

Polyphonic festival stage, Museum of Weapons

Gjirokaster city tour

Visit the neighborhood and house of Enver Hoxha, former Albanian communist dictator, and Ismail Kadare, renowned writer and Nobel candidate.

Lunch in Gjirokaster

Drive to Syri i Kalter (1:00)

Syri i Kalter is a deep subsurface well, or "blue hole," as they are often called. Reaching unknown depths, this blue hole in Albania's Delvinë District is fed by an underground spring. Its name means "blue eye" and it is mesmerizing! It appears as a deep sapphire blue hole beneath the surface of more tranquil turquoise water — colors more often observed in saltwater environments.



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April
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ITINERARY

April
28
continued

Drive to Sarandë (0:30)

Sarandë is located on the Ionian Sea and its beaches are considered some of the best in Europe. It's also an important coastal town with the largest architectural park on the Balkan peninsula. Sites include Lekurësi Castle, built in the early 16th century by Sultan Suleymani, and the Monastery of 40 Saints, which offer a beautiful view of the city and the sea.

Dinner and Hotel in Sarandë



Drive to Ksamil (0:30)

Ksamil, a short drive from Sarandë, is a beautiful beach that looks out to the Greek island of Corfu.

Drive to Butrint National Park UNESCO World Heritage Site (0:30)

Inhabited since prehistoric times, Butrint has at times been a Greek colony, a Roman colony, and a bishopric. It is the largest and most famous archaeological park in Albania and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The city was first noted by Hekateus in the 6th century BCE. The theater of Butrint has housed statues of many Greek and Roman gods, as well as portraits and epigraphs. The present archeological site is a repository of ruins that represent each period in the city's development.

Lunch in Butrint

Drive to Vlora (3:30)

Vlora is a harbor city along Albania's coast and is famous as the city where Albania declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century.

Dinner and Hotel in Vlora

Drive to Tirana (2:30)

Tirana is the capital of Albania and its largest city. While tribes lived in the Tirana area during paleolithic times, there are few references to it until medieval times after the Ottoman conquest of the area when it was home to an important bazaar. In the early 20th century, the country declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire, was conquered by Italian fascists in 1939, and in 1944 freed from Nazi German rule by communists. Both the Italian and communist regimes left their marks on the architectural landscape of the city. Tirana is home to the most important cultural institutions in the country, several of which are located on its main square.

Lunch in Tirana

Explore **Bunk'Art Museum**, **National History Museum** and **Skanderbeu Square**, **Blloku** (Hoxha's residence and coffee shops), **Orthodox and Catholic churches** (M. Teresa)

Dinner and Hotel in Tirana



Drive to Kruje Castle (1:00)

Krujë castle was built in the 5th or 6th century. At the time of the Ottoman threat, it was the headquarters of Gjergj Kastrioti, the "Dragon of Albania," an Albanian nobleman and military commander. Kastrioti was sent as a hostage (janissary) to the Ottoman court early in his life, and after leaving service, led a rebellion against the Ottoman Empire in Albania. The Ottomans gave Kastrioti the name Iskander bey (Lord Alexander), which has been translated into English as "Skanderbeg." A statue of Skanderbeg is located on Tirana's central square (photo above). The castle now contains a museum dedicated to this legendary Albanian leader.

Lunch in Kruje

Gjergj Kastrioti Museum

Return to Tirana (1:00)

Dinner and Hotel in Tirana



April
29

April
30

May
1

ITINERARY

May
2

Pack up your souvenirs and depart in the early morning. Farewell!



Dates: April 22-May 2, 2025

Cost:

\$4,000 per person (including a \$750 tax-deductible donation to American Councils)
For two travelers sharing a room, the cost is \$7,000 (\$1,250 tax-deductible).

Excluded:

- Airfare to Prishtina International Airport "Adem Jashari" (PRN) and return flights from Tirana International Airport "Nënë Tereza" (TIA). Travelers may purchase their own flights or book and purchase through American Councils' travel agent.
- Airport transfers at the home airport
- Travel Insurance

Included:

- Hotel accommodations (single occupancy for individual travelers and double occupancy for travel companions)
- Local transportation, including comfortable passenger vans and airport transfers in Kosovo and Albania.
- All meals, scheduled activities, and admissions

Next Steps: Register online at <https://ais.americancouncils.org/insider>. Full payment is required by January 31, 2025.

LOGISTICS

Group Size:

Participation is limited to 20 people; a minimum of 10 registered participants is required for the trip to take place.

Advisory:

This program is reasonably strenuous and will include a fair amount of walking over sometimes uneven pavement, often including stairs. If mobility accommodations are not available in the cities and locations visited, there will be no alternatives but to walk. In some locations, you may need to walk for up to an hour with no option for a cab or a bus. Please consider your physical stamina and abilities prior to registering.



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RESOURCES

Recommended Reading:

The Three-Arched Bridge (Kadare, Ismail)
The Chronicle in Stone (Kadare, Ismail)
The Palace of Dreams (Kadare, Ismail)
Kosovo: Aar and Revenge (Judah, Tim)
Kosovo: A Short History (Malcom, Noel)
The Hemingway Book Club of Kosovo (Huntley, Paula)
Albania Enchantment of the World (Mara, Wil)
The Albanians (Vickers, Miranda)
Albania (travel book) (Gloyer, Gillian)
[NYT Albania Travel Guide](#)
[Newsweek Religious Tolerance Article](#)

Recommended Viewing:

[The Forgiveness of Blood](#)
[Slogans](#)
[East West East](#)
[Dear Enemy](#)
[Mao Tse Tung](#)
[The Sorrow of Ms. Schneider](#)
[Time of the Comet](#)



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