

UNESCO Treasures of Albania & Macedonia (8 nights - 9 days)

This tour explores the most important monuments of two neighbouring Balkan countries, Albania and Macedonia. It has the right mixture; of cultural elements with 4 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, delicious cuisine be it traditional homemade or more elaborated, daily life, and the genuine hospitality of the inhabitants.

Day 1: Airport – Tirana (20 km, 30 min drive)

Meet at airport and transfer to Tirana at the hotel which is centrally located. Then we visit the National Museum of History which is a great introduction to the history of the country and its people. Afterwards take a walking tour of the major sites of Tirana, including the Scanderbeg Square where the different architectural styles of distant and recent past collide. The beautiful Ethem Bey Mosque and clock tower represents the beginnings of Tirana as a growing town, the Italian architecture of the main boulevard, ministerial and university building represent Tirana's projection as a capital city while the national museum, the opera house, the pyramid, and palace of congresses represent its communist recent past. We will walk through the forbidden area known as the "Bllok" where the communist elite had their villas and area forbidden to locals for nearly half a century. Dinner and overnight in Tirana. **Hotel 4***



Day 2: Tirana – Shkodra - Kruja – Tirana (240 km, 3.5 hours drive)

After breakfast we drive to Shkodra the most important town of north Albania and the Illyrian capital, in the 3rd century BC. Visit Rozafa Castle with striking views all around. Continue to visit the Marubi Photographic Museum with a selection of prints of negatives taken in the 2nd half of the 19th century till the mid-20th century, illustrating the life of the population of the area in that period. Shkodra was the most anti-communist of all Albanian towns and a walk in the city will give us an idea of this city's anti-communist resistance as well as Shkodra's historical links with Venice and Austria. Light lunch. After lunch proceed to Kruja - the centre of Albanian resistance against the Turks under our national hero Scanderbeg who kept them from crossing into Western Europe for 25 years, thus earning the title "Champion of Christ" given by the Pope. Afterwards we visit the Skanderbeg Museum, a very rich Ethnographic Museum and the Old Bazaar where you can buy the best handmade souvenirs. Return for dinner and overnight in Tirana. **Hotels 4***



Day 3. Tirana – Durres - Ardenica – Apollonia – Vlora (170 km, 3.5 hours drive)

After breakfast continue to Durres one of the oldest towns in Albania and the first and perhaps the most important of the Greek colonies in the country. It was founded at Epidamnus in 627 B.C. by Greeks from Corcyra (present-day Corfu) and Corinth. Greek and Roman authors called it "the Admirable City" for its temple, statues, and other monuments. Today only a few remains remind us of this city's glory days. We will visit the Amphitheatre, as well as the well-stocked Archaeological Museum. Afterwards we depart to Vlora where Albanian Independence was proclaimed. On the way we stop at the

Monastery of Ardenica, supposed to have been built in the middle ages, as argued by a stone in entrance dating back to the 1417. In fact it is said that Scanderbeg was married at the small chapel of Ardenica. Today inside the church you can admire icon paintings of 1743-1745, by Albanian artists such as Konstandin and Athanos Zografi, as well as Konstandin Shpataraku. Proceed to the ancient city of Apollonia situated on the famous Via Egnatia - one of the most important cities in Roman times. Although not a UNESCO Apollonia is only 5% excavated and what has been unearthed confirms the elegance and glory of very important ancient city which could well make the UNESCO list in the future. Caesar chose to send his nephew Augustus Octavian to study oratory in Apollonia which testifies the importance of this ancient city. Afterwards we continue to Vlora where we visit the Independence Museum, situated in the original house where the first Independent Albanian Government had its offices. Dinner in a local restaurant. Overnight in Vlora. **Hotel 4***



Day 4: Vlora – Butrint (UNESCO) – Mesopotam – Gjirokastra (UNESCO) (230 km, 5 hours drive)

After an early breakfast we depart to Saranda and drive on the spectacular Albanian Riviera towards Saranda. Breath taking sceneries await us at the Llogara pass - 1000 m above sea level. We make a short stop at the fortress of Ali Pasha a fortification used to control the sea trade routes where we have a light lunch. Then we continue past Saranda, to the ancient city of Butrint a UNESCO world heritage site and the most important archaeological discovery in Albania. Light lunch in Ksamil next to a beautiful turquoise water bay. Legend associates Butrint with Trojan settlers who fled Troy under the leadership of Aeneas. In fact the city was first settled by Greek colonists and was continuously inhabited for centuries forming archaeological layers of several eras of civilization. Apart the beautiful antique ruins it has the added benefit of being situated in a beautiful peninsula, rich in flora and fauna. After the visits we drive to the UNESCO town of Gjirokastra. On the way we stop at the Mesopotam monastery for a short visits. Of interest are the mythological beasts to be found in the outer walls, which probably shows that stones from ancient buildings may have been used to build the church. Continue to Gjirokastra for dinner and overnight. **Hotel 4***



Day 5: Gjirokastra - Berat (UNESCO) (170 km, 3.5 hours drive)

After breakfast we will visit the fortress of Gjirokastra, part of which was turned into a political prison for dissidents of the regime and the Arms Museum. Visit to the Ethnographic Museum, which is also the house the Albanian dictator was born in, as well as a 300 year old house next to it, where the grandeur of Gjirokastra's master builders can be observed. After these visits we will pay a visit to a village home near Gjirokastra where we will have lunch. After this experience we drive to Berat another UNESCO protected wonderful Museum town with a distinct architecture where windows seem to be on top of each other. It is one of the best examples of ottoman architecture outside of Turkey. We will be based in the Mangalem old quarter where we will visit the King's Mosque, the Alveti Tekke and the Bachelor's Mosque. Dinner and overnight in Berat. **Hotel 3+***



Day 6: Berat – Ohrid (UNESCO) (200 km, 3.5 hours drive)

After breakfast we will visit Berat's Castle and Onufri Museum. Onufri was an Albanian master painter of the 16th century who had a preference for a particular red colour he used so much that it is known today as the Onufrian Red. Many of his wonderfully painted Icons still remain in the museum while others can be found in churches in Albania and Greece where he worked. Depart for to the city of Ohrid in Macedonia another UNESCO protected area for its natural and cultural wealth. On the way to Ohrid we will have light lunch. In Ohrid we visit the: Church St. Sofia, built between the 11th and 14th century, which was the seat of the Archbishop. "St. Clement", a classic Orthodox Byzantine church, dominating the Old Town, demonstrates the link between Byzantine and Italian Renaissance art. At "Plaoshnik", in the 9th century, St. Clement of Ohrid founded the first University of Europe and educated 3.500 students. St. John at Kaneo, stands alone on a small peninsula which juts out into the lake at the western end of the Old Town, and provides spectacular panoramic views of the lake and surrounding mountains, Samuil fortress, Saint Panteleimon Church, the Holy Virgin of Peribleptos Church, Icon Gallery and old Bazaar. Dinner in a local restaurant and overnight in Ohrid. **Hotel 4***



Day 7: Ohrid – Sveti Naum - Bitola - Ohrid (205 km, 4 hours drive)

After breakfast continue with a boat trip to St. Naum Monastery. In the monastery we follow the path of St. Naum, meeting the legends of all the miracles he made before and after he built his church on the top of the rock. Drive to Bitola the second largest in the country, historically known as Monastir or Manastir and often called the city of consuls during the Ottoman period, since many European countries had their consulates there. Located close to a border crossing with Greece it is an important junction connecting the south of the Adriatic Sea with the Aegean Sea and Central Europe. We have lunch at a restaurant in the Pelister Park just before entering the town. Bitola is one of the oldest cities on the territory in the Republic of Macedonia. It was founded as Heraclea Lyncestis by Philip II of Macedon in the middle of the 4th century BC, after he had conquered the surrounding region of Lyncestis and incorporated it into his kingdom of Macedon. The city was named in honour of the mythological Greek hero Heracles. The epithet Lyncestis means "the Land of the Lynx" in Greek. Famous for its dazzling mosaics, ancient theatre and Roman baths, Heraclea is the most vividly preserved city from the surviving ancient Macedonian Empire in the country. After visits of Heraclea ancient site we return to Ohrid for dinner in a local restaurant and then overnight. **Hotel 4***



Day 8: Ohrid – Tetovo – Skopje (200 km, 3.5 hours drive)

After breakfast drive to Tetovo one of the largest cities in Macedonia home to a majority ethnic Albanian population, to visit one of its most important monuments known as the Painted or Decorated Mosque. This amazing colourful mosque was originally built in 1438 and later rebuilt in 1833 by Abdurrahman Pasha. Most mosques of the time had sultans, beys (noblemen) or pashas financing their constructions, however the Painted Mosque, was financed by two sisters from Tetovo and their request was to introduce flower mosaics and bright colours in its decoration. The result an out of the ordinary religious monument deserving of the attention of any visitor. Continue on to Skopje where we visit the old Turkish bazaar where we have lunch. Visits continue with the Mahmut Pasha Hammam, the stone Bridge, the Macedonia Plaza and the memorial house of St. (Mother) Teresa of Calcuta who was born in Skopje. The rest of the afternoon is left free to explore. Dinner and Overnight in Skopje. **Hotel 4***



Day 9: Skopje – Airport (20 km, 30 min drive)

After breakfast free to explore on your own until time to drive to the Airport for return flight