

# MALDIVES of the Med

Budget-friendly Albania has paradise beaches, historic towns and a cool capital



Gorgeous beaches await at Ksamil

**S**andwiched between Montenegro and Greece, with a coastline that fringes the Mediterranean sea, Albania is a little country getting a big reputation for idyllic beaches, charming historic towns, incredible food – and even more incredible prices: you can enjoy a three-course meal, with wine, for under a tenner. Temperatures are warm from May to October, so here are the best places to go and the best dishes to try...

## Roam the Riviera

The Albanian Riviera stretches 110 miles down from the bustling, coastal city of Vlorë (a two-hour drive from the airport in the capital, Tirana) to the tiny resort of Ksamil, which has been likened to an island in the Maldives, thanks to its sugar-white sand and gin-clear, turquoise waters. Vlorë's curving seafront is lined with big hotels and holiday apartment blocks, and dozens of bars and restaurants. You'll find lively nightlife and, if you're exploring by day, a charming Old Town in the centre.

A little further south is the small seaside town of Dhërmi, which holds a famous music festival every summer,

Kala ([kala.al](#)), on its golden sands, while beach-lined Sarandë is bigger and busier, and also a one-hour ferry away from Corfu, which makes it easy to fly in and out from.

The jewel in the Riviera's crown, though, is Ksamil: its best beaches include Bora Bora, with pebbly white sand, the aptly-named Paradise and Beach Number 7, with crystal-clear water and kayaks for hire if you want to explore the nearby islands. Base yourself at Vlorë's stylish, beachfront



Cosmopolitan Tirana is well worth a visit

Hotel Aross, which offers a relaxing spa and wellness centre; double deluxe room from £79 per night, [hotelaross.al](#).

## Capital gains

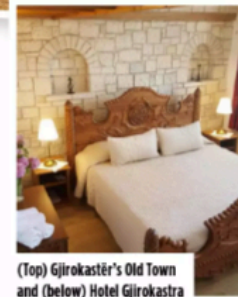
Albania's cosmopolitan capital, Tirana, is well worth a couple of days. For decades, it was ruled over by dictator Enver Hoxha; today you can visit two of the vast underground bunkers he had built, which are now fascinating museums in their own right (tickets from 500 Lek/£4.24, [bunkart.al](#)). One of these is next to Tirana's central main square, Skanderbeg, which is lined with historical buildings such as the Palace of Culture (which includes the National Theatre of Opera and Ballet) and the Et'hem Bey Mosque. The other bunker is on the eastern side of the city, close to the cable car that will whisk you to the top of the city's highest point, Mount Dajti (tickets from £5.25 return, [dajtiokprespres.com](#)). From here you'll get great views over lakes and forests, and can stop to take in the panorama at restaurant Balkoni Dajtit. The best places to eat and drink back in Tirana are in the chic, lively neighbourhood of Blloku. Book into the boutique Areela Hotel, set in a quiet, leafy district a short walk from Skanderbeg; rooms from £52 per night, [hotelareela.com](#).



## Ancient history

Located inland – and only a couple of hours' drive apart – are two beautiful UNESCO heritage towns, Berat and Gjirokastër. Berat is composed of rows of wide, flat-roofed, multi-windowed Ottoman-era houses, layered along the hills through which the Osum river flows. You can take a free walking tour (@ [freetourberat](#)), which takes in the town's 13th-century castle, frescoed Byzantine churches and the elegant Gorica Bridge.

Hilltop town Gjirokastër also has an ancient castle, and an utterly charming Old Town whose cobbled



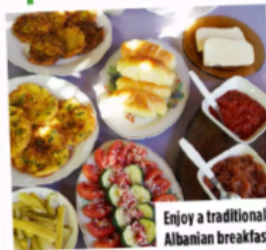
(Top) Gjirokastër's Old Town and (below) Hotel Gjirokastra

streets slope down at slightly alarming angles, and are lined with souvenir shops and busy restaurants. Stay at the friendly Hotel Gjirokastra, right outside the centre, which has a pool and rooms from £52 per night; [booking.com](#).

## Food for thought

A mix of influences from Turkey, Greece and Italy, Albania's food is a blend of hearty stews, perfect pizzas, and some great vegetarian options. Look out for:

- \* **Fërgesë**: more like a dip than a stew, it's a mix of tomato sauce, feta-like cheese, green peppers and garlic.
- \* **Tavë Kos**: delicious tender lamb, baked in yogurt.
- \* **Fasule**: a tasty white bean soup.
- \* **Qofte**: grilled, baked or fried meatballs, which can be made with beef, chicken, lamb or pork.
- \* **Byrek**: a pie made from filo pastry and stuffed with cheese, vegetables or meat.
- \* **Pispi**: cornbread baked with leeks or spinach.



Enjoy a traditional Albanian breakfast

## Book now

Flights from London to Tirana start at £52 one way, [ba.com](#)

\* Always check the latest travel advice before booking a trip