

# 5 REASONS TIRANA SHOULD BE ON YOUR TRAVEL BUCKET LIST

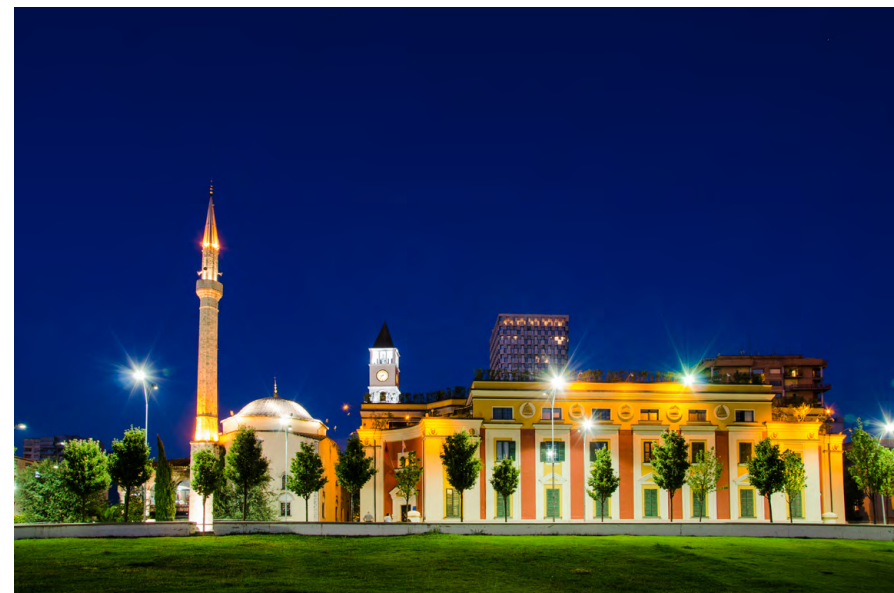
Having undergone an extraordinary transformation since its time under communist rule, Tirana, in its present-day form, is a lively and colourful mix of business hubs and unfettered fun. Its grand boulevards are lined with captivating relics of its Ottoman, Italian and communist past, with excellent museums detailing its various periods of occupation through captivating murals, paintings and artefacts. Trendy bars and cafes see locals and tourists come together to enjoy freshly prepared espressos and expertly crafted cocktails, with new friendships bringing both parties to the hip neighbourhood of Blloku for some all-night fun. The surprisingly green destination is also ideal for scenic strolls around its Grand Park and Farka Lake, and offers hiking, biking, climbing and even paragliding opportunities up high on Mt Dajti National Park.

## 1 FASCINATING HISTORY

A relatively new capital, Tirana was only established in 1920. However, before being declared as Albania's capital, the central city existed for decades under Ottoman, Italian and most recently Soviet rule (which, like within the rest of Albania, lasted almost 50 years). Numerous architectural feats situated throughout the city showcase the varying styles and trends of particular periods of rule, and Albania's storied and often tumultuous past can be explored through a wealth of museums, the largest of which is situated within the central Skanderbeg Square. The National History Museum holds many of the country's archaeological treasures, as well as a replica of rebellion leader Skanderbeg's enormous sword. The impressive collection of statues, mosaics and icons is almost entirely signed in English and takes visitors chronologically from ancient Illyria to the post-communist era. The iconic Et'hem Bey Mosque additionally sits to one side of the square, and a further dive into history can be had at the National Archaeological Museum and the House of Leaves.



Skanderbeg Square



Et'hem Bey Mosque

## 2 ART & ARCHITECTURE

Tirana's once grey and dull centre is now unrecognisable from the days of communist rule, with vividly painted facades, street art graffiti and murals adding brightness to the already lively city. The easiest way to admire the various colours of the capital is by strolling between the Blloku and Pazari i Ri neighbourhoods, which are adorned in captivating geometric patterns, and contain a buzzing bazaar, luxury boutiques, trendy cafes and renowned restaurants. For a one-of-a-kind experience, visitors should head to the Bunk'Art1 and Bunk'Art2 museums. The original, situated on Fadil Deliu Street, just behind the city's cable cars, represents an epic conversion – from a gigantic Cold War bunker into an astonishing contemporary art and history museum. The almost 3,000 square metres of underground space spans several floors and contains exciting exhibits that combine the modern history of Albania with pieces of contemporary art and photography from a wide range of Albanian artists. The Tirana Ekspres and the Tulla Centre also both host a rotating series of exhibitions throughout the year.



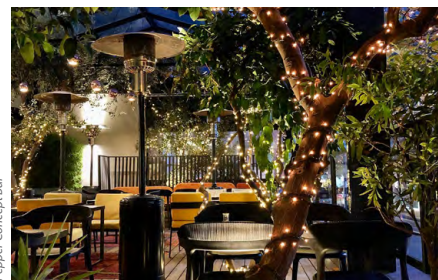
Images by: PaulSat / Shutterstock.com



Entrance of Bunk'Art 2 - Images by: pozatos / Shutterstock.com



Nouvelle Vague



Pepper Concept Bar

## 3 NIGHTLIFE

Expanding year on year, Tirana's assortment of clubs, pubs and bars vary greatly in theme and atmosphere, lending the city an especially diverse and vibrant nightlife scene. Trendy Blloku, which was once restricted to only high-level communist party members, remains at the heart of all epic nights out. Here, visitors can spend the evening hopping between Tirana's many famed bars, such as Bufe Wine Bar, Radio, Colonial, and Nouvelle Vague, where some of the city's most creative cocktails are served. For those looking to head straight to the dancefloor for a night of intense strobe lights and electronic, house and disco beats, Pepper Concept Bar (Tirana's own Studio 54) is the right place to be, along with local and visitor favourites Discobox, Lollipop and Folie Terrace. For every club open until the early hours of the morning, there is sure to be a nearby 24-hour bakery to match, so don't forget to get those hangover remedies going early with a fresh bite to eat before heading to bed.

## 4 MT DAJTI NATIONAL PARK

Just 25km east of Tirana's city centre is Mt Dajti National Park. This ever-popular retreat is the most accessible mountain in the country and provides the perfect escape from the crowds and clamour characteristic of the capital. The sky-high Austrian-built cable car, Dajti Express, takes visitors to the very top of Mt Dajti in just 15 minutes, providing breathtaking views over scenic forests and farmland along the way. The mountainside itself is covered in shady beech and pine forests throughout which walking and biking trails wind. As many of the trails do not feature distinct markings with several potential routes available, it is advised that explorers source a guide from one of the many hostels within the area. There is also an 18-hole minigolf course, as well as a zipline and aerial adventure park, perfect for fun-filled family days out. For those seeking goosebump-inducing adventure, Mt Dajti additionally offers paragliding and mountain climbing sessions headed by professional and experienced instructors.



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Trilece

## 5 CAFÉ CULTURE

One of the best ways to experience the authentic spirit of Tirana is to spend some time in one of its gorgeous cafes, and the capital city certainly has no shortage of them. Watch daily life unfold from behind the window as you sip on a sweet and smooth *kafe turke* (Turkish coffee) or savour each bite of a freshly prepared pastry. With so many cafes to choose from, it's important to know the hotspots. Komiteti Kafe Muzeum is a true highlight. Its interior design expertly reflects the Communist era with boldly patterned carpets, ancient radios and large murals adorning its walls and tables. Komiteti is additionally the only place in the capital that offers more than 20 types of different raki, the famous Balkan grappa liquor. For those with a sweet tooth, Patisserie Française is sure to be a hit, providing an assortment of freshly baked biscuits, macarons and cakes, and Sky Tower in Blloku is a must-visit for its *trilece* (three milk cake).