

# Albania: How Europe's most secluded country became a dream destination

By Henri Nanushi

Until few years ago, Albania was a country that was solely recognized because of its negative stereotypes; four decades of communist dictatorship, an ongoing diaspora that started way back in 1992, a civil war that tore apart the country in 1997 and continuous negative portrayal in media, affected heavily the scepticism and prejudices that foreigners had towards the Balkan state.

This was the norm, until the country saw a significant increase in its number of visitors during the last two years; according to the Albanian ministry of tourism, the land of eagles registered more than 10 million visitors in 2023, which is impressive considering that Albania has a population of only 2.7 million people, European stats also confirmed that Albania was the country with the highest growth when it came to first time visitors.

But how did a country that was for decades considered the 'North Korea' of Europe become one of the most visited and appreciated countries of the continent in the recent years?

Albania's history is tumultuous, the totalitarian regime of Enver Hoxha that ruled the state between 1945 and 1990 was the main reason behind the country's lack of development. Because of its communist regime, Albanians weren't allowed to leave their country and foreigners were hardly allowed to visit. After the fall of Communism in 1990 and the opening of the borders in 1992, the country experienced a literal exodus, a constant brain drain that Albania is still experiencing as of this day. The already precarious economy of the country totally collapsed in 1997, after the scandal of the pyramid schemes and subsequent civil war that made Albania one of the poorest countries in the world at the time.

Since Albania had already been struggling with its economic and social aspects for years, it was not hard to see why its tourism industry was also underdeveloped. The turning point arrived in 2020 during the pandemic. The worldwide lockdowns led to an increment of focus towards social media, as well as an increment of influencers. Among them, travel bloggers played a key role in Albania's advertisement, and because of them Albanian beaches and mountains became viral; Albania wasn't anymore Europe's North Korea but Europe's Caribbean.

In terms of tourism and natural beauties, Albania is a country that offers a lot. The white beaches of Ksamil and Dhermi in the south of the country have been recognised as two of the most desirable seaside resorts in Europe. The Albanian Alps in the north are one of the most untamed and underrated hiking locations in the continent. The Canyons of Osum are a renowned rafting location and the historic cities of Berat and Gjirokaster are protected UNESCO sites.

Another focal point in Albania's touristic growth is that the country is easily affordable: The cost of living is lower compared to European standards, A night in a 5-star hotel can be as low as 100€ and the country is also easily reachable via plane, car or ferry.

Julian Lala is a travel blogger, radio and TV personality. Being the owner of the TV channel 'Aventurat TV' and social media channel "Aventurat e Julit" that counts 131K subscribers on YouTube and more than 200K on Tik Tok, Juli is Albania's most important travel blogger.

When asked about how the wave of visitors affected the economy of the country and its tourism industry, Juli said:

"The wave not only contributed economically to Albania's touristic sector. It also raised the income of the hotels, which also raised the income of hospitality workers. The wave contributed to an increased founding of the infrastructures, we now have an organised tourist sector that includes High and low-end hotels, resorts, camping sites and everything the modern tourist might need."

When asked about why do people visit Albania, Juli pointed out that the country can accommodate the interests of different tourist groups:

"Northern Europeans, come here for our 320 days of sun and for the cheap prices. Tourists from eastern Europe come here for the sun and sea but might also visit for a nostalgic reason, we are relatively underdeveloped...A Polish tourist, for example might find here what he used to find in Poland 20 years ago, before the country got too westernised".

asked about the ways in which Albania can improve its tourism experience, Juli said:

"We don't need to invent new ways of working with tourism, we can take existing examples like Croatia, that also got recently developed tourism-wise, and copy what they did best. We might need to improve a lot...maybe we can build more 5 stars hotels but does Albania really need that for its tourism? Are we sure that our tourists come here for the high-class lifestyle?"

With his history and natural beauties, Albania is a destination that should be on the books of every traveller. The country already became popular but newcomers should book their tickets as soon as they can before the prices skyrocket even more. despite being underrated for a long time, Albania finally found its way to shine.