



Albania

A small, mountainous land on the Adriatic and Ionian seas, with Ottoman stone towns, Roman ruins, a wild coast and a language unlike any other.

Albania lies in the south-west of the Balkan Peninsula, facing Italy across the Adriatic and Ionian seas. It is only about 148 km wide from east to west and around 340 km long from north to south, yet it packs in the snowy Albanian Alps, deep river valleys, the great lakes of Shkodër, Ohrid and Prespa, flat coastal plains and the rocky Albanian Riviera in the south-west.

AT A GLANCE

Facts to know

CAPITAL

Tirana

POPULATION

About 2.4 million (2023 census)

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

Albanian

CURRENCY

Albanian lek (ALL)

AREA

28,748 km²

GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary republic

HIGHEST MOUNTAIN

Korab, 2,764 m, on the border with North Macedonia

LONGEST RIVER

The Drin, about 285 km including its headwaters, flowing into the Adriatic

NEIGHBOURS

Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Greece by land. Italy lies across the Strait of Otranto, linked by ferries

DRIVES ON THE

Right

CALLING CODE

+355

A 45-minute trip to Albania

Everything you need is in this pack. No preparation beyond printing. Adapt the timing to your group.

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| 0 to 5 min | Welcome. Show the map page and find Albania together. Ask: who has been there, or knows someone from there? |
| 5 to 15 min | Read the facts at a glance, then three moments from the story: 627 BC: Greeks found Epidamnos; 1920: Tirana chosen as capital; 2009: Albania joins NATO. |
| 15 to 25 min | At the table: talk about Baked lamb with yogurt and Fërgesë. Idea: bring a small taste (bread, cheese, fruit, tea) if your kitchen can help. |
| 25 to 30 min | Say it like a local: practise "Tungjatjeta" (Hello), "Mirëmëngjes" (Good morning), "Mirëdita" (Good day, hello). Everyone says them together. |
| 30 to 40 min | Quiz: read the questions aloud, or play the big-screen version at https://worldstroll.com/countries/albania/group . No scores needed. |
| 40 to 45 min | Talk about it (questions page), then stamp or sign everyone's passport page. |

You will need

- This printed pack (one per table, or one each)
- Pens for the quiz
- Optional: a world map or globe, a small tasting, music from the country

Albania and its cities



- Tirana (Tirana County): Skanderbeg Square, The Et'hem Bey Mosque, The Pyramid of Tirana
- Durrës (Durrës County): The Roman amphitheatre, Its busy port, The start of the Via Egnatia
- Vlorë (Vlorë County): The 1912 Declaration of Independence, The Albanian Riviera to the south, Ferries to Italy
- Shkodër (Shkodër County): Rozafa Castle, Lake Shkodër, The gateway to the Albanian Alps
- Elbasan (Elbasan County): Tavë kosi, Summer Day on 14 March, The Ottoman fortress
- Korçë (Korçë County): The Old Bazaar, Birra Korça beer, Lakror pies
- Berat (Berat County): Berat Castle and its churches, The Mangalem and Gorica quarters,

Mount Tomorr, rising to the east

- Gjirokaštër (Gjirokaštër County): Gjirokaštër Castle, Stone-roofed tower houses, The National Folk Festival, held every five years
- Sarandë (Vlorë County): Views across to Corfu, Trips to Butrint, The beaches and islets of Ksamil
- Krujë (Durrës County): Krujë Castle, The Skanderbeg Museum, Its old bazaar of crafts
- Pogradec (Korçë County): Lake Ohrid, Koran trout, Lakeside walks

A short history of Albania

Albania's story runs from Illyrian kingdoms and Greek colonies on the coast, through Rome, Byzantium and the hero Skanderbeg, to four centuries of Ottoman rule, independence in 1912 and a hard road from communism to democracy.

627 BC **Greeks found Epidamnos**

Greek colonists from Corinth and Corcyra (Corfu), working with the local Illyrian Taulantii, founded the port of Epidamnos. It later became Roman Dyrrachium and is today's Durrës.

168 BC **Rome defeats King Gentius**

Gentius, the last known Illyrian king, went to war with Rome in 168 BC. He was defeated, and by 167 BC the Romans had conquered the region and divided it into three parts.

1190 **The Principality of Arbanon**

Progon of Kruja founded the Principality of Arbanon, with its centre at Krujë. It is seen as the first sketch of an Albanian state, and lasted into the 13th century.

1444 **The League of Lezhë**

In March 1444 Skanderbeg, who had left the Ottoman army and taken Krujë the year before, united Albanian noble families in the League of Lezhë against the Ottoman Empire.

1468 **Death of Skanderbeg**

Skanderbeg died on 17 January 1468 after about 25 years of resistance. Krujë fell to the Ottomans ten years later, and Albania remained under Ottoman rule until 1912.

1878 **The League of Prizren**

On 10 June 1878 Albanian leaders met in Prizren to defend Albanian-populated lands that treaties were about to give to neighbouring states. The league later worked for Albanian self-rule.

1908 **The Congress of Manastir**

Albanian scholars meeting in Manastir, today's Bitola in North Macedonia, agreed on a Latin alphabet for Albanian. It became the basis of the 36-letter alphabet used today.

- 1912** **Independence declared in Vlorë**
On 28 November 1912 an assembly led by Ismail Qemali declared Albania independent from the Ottoman Empire in the port city of Vlorë, and the flag with the black eagle was raised.
- 1920** **Tirana chosen as capital**
On 8 February 1920 the Congress of Lushnjë proclaimed Tirana the temporary capital of Albania. Until then the small Ottoman town had played only a minor role. It has been the capital ever since.
- 1928** **Zog becomes king**
Ahmet Zogu, who had been prime minister and then president, turned Albania into a monarchy in 1928 and took the title King Zog I.
- 1939** **Italy invades Albania**
On 7 April 1939 Mussolini's troops landed in all of Albania's ports at once. King Zog went into exile, never to return, and Italy made Albania a protectorate.
- 1944** **Communist rule begins**
In 1944 partisan forces led by communists drove out the German army, which had replaced the Italians in 1943. Enver Hoxha led Albania from 1944 until his death in 1985.
- 1967** **Religion is banned**
In 1967 the regime launched a campaign against all religions, closed mosques and churches and declared Albania an atheist state. Worship was allowed again only in the early 1990s.
- 1991** **First multi-party elections**
After student protests and the fall of communism across Eastern Europe, Albania held its first multi-party elections on 31 March 1991. The Republic of Albania was proclaimed on 29 April 1991.
- 1997** **Pyramid schemes collapse**
Huge pyramid investment schemes, which had drawn in a large part of the population, collapsed in late 1996 and early 1997. Protests turned into armed unrest in 1997, and in April an Italian-led international force, Operation Alba, arrived to help.

2009

Albania joins NATO

Albania became a full member of NATO on 1 April 2009 and applied to join the European Union later the same month. It became an official EU candidate in 2014.

What people eat in Albania

Albanian food is Mediterranean at heart, built on olive oil, fresh vegetables, herbs, yogurt, cheese and meat, with strong Ottoman and Italian touches. The north cooks with maize, beans and cabbage, the centre is known for baked dishes, and the south for olive oil, dairy and seafood. Bread is on every table, and lunch is traditionally the main meal of the day: often a slow-cooked meat and vegetable dish with a fresh salad of tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, onions and olives, followed by fruit.

Baked lamb with yogurt (tavë kosi)

Elbasan, in central Albania

Pieces of lamb and a little rice baked under a thick layer of yogurt beaten with eggs, butter and flour, which sets into a golden, slightly tangy crust. It is seen as one of Albania's national dishes.

Fërgesë (fërgesë)

Tirana and central Albania

A thick, creamy bake of peppers, tomatoes, onions and garlic cooked in olive oil with gjizë, a salted Albanian curd cheese. It is eaten hot with bread, as a main dish or on the side of grilled meat.

Rice balls with mint (qifqi)

Gjirokastër, in the south

Small round patties of cooked rice, egg and dried mint, fried until golden and crisp. They are served warm with white cheese or yogurt, as a starter or light meal.

Byrek (filo pie) (byrek)

All of Albania

A pie of thin layers of pastry filled with spinach, cheese, meat, onion or tomato. There is the large home-made byrek baked in a round tray, and the triangle byrek sold as street food, often eaten with a glass of yogurt.

Flija (flija or fli)

Northern Albania and Kosovo

A savoury dish of many thin, crêpe-like layers of batter, each brushed with cream and baked one after another under a hot metal lid. It is served with sour cream, honey, cheese or pickles.

Lakror (lakror)

Korçë and southern Albania

A thin-layered pie baked on embers under a metal lid, with fillings such as leek and curd cheese, tomato and onion, or greens. Korçë is especially proud of its lakror.

Meatballs (qofte)

All of Albania

Small meatballs or patties of minced meat with herbs and spices, fried or grilled and often served with tomato sauce, beans or salad.

Ohrid trout (koran)

Lake Ohrid, around Pogradec

A trout native only to Lake Ohrid and the rivers that flow in and out of it. It has become rare from overfishing. Like other fresh fish in Albania, it is usually grilled or fried whole and served simply with a squeeze of lemon.

Turkey with përsesh (gjel deti me përsesh)

All of Albania, especially at New Year

A turkey first boiled and then roasted, served with përsesh: pieces of bread baked in the turkey broth with mint and other seasonings.

Tarator (tarator)

All of Albania

A cold mix of yogurt, cucumber, garlic, olive oil and salt, served on hot summer days with fried or grilled vegetables and seafood.

Baklava (bakllava)

All of Albania

Thin layers of pastry filled with walnuts or hazelnuts, baked on large trays, cut into diamonds and soaked in syrup.

Three-milk cake (trileçe)

Albania and the Balkans

A light sponge cake soaked in a mixture of three kinds of milk and usually topped with caramel. It is soft and moist, almost like a pudding.

Ballokume (ballokume)

Elbasan

A crumbly cookie made from butter, sugar, eggs and maize flour, beaten hard in a copper bowl and baked in a wood oven.

Raki (raki)

All of Albania

A strong clear fruit brandy, the national spirit. A common kind is raki rrushi, made from grapes, but raki is also made from plums, blackberries or mulberries, and in the south a version with oregano is popular.

Mountain tea (çaj mali)

The Albanian mountains

A herbal tea made from the dried flowers and stems of a mountain plant, Sideritis. It has no caffeine and is often drunk with honey and lemon.

GOOD MANNERS

At the table

- Guests are treated with great honour, and visitors are often invited to eat and drink with a family. The old saying offers guests 'bread, salt and heart' (bukë, kripë e zemër).
- Bread is on the table at every meal. The Albanian way of saying 'to go and eat a meal' is literally 'to go and eat bread'.
- When glasses are raised, people say 'Gëzuar!' (cheers).
- Lunch is traditionally the biggest meal of the day. A fresh salad dressed with olive oil, salt and vinegar or lemon comes with almost every lunch and dinner.
- Café life is a big part of the day: friends meet over coffee, and business is often done in cafés, especially in Tirana.

Baked lamb with yogurt

Pieces of lamb and a little rice baked under a thick layer of yogurt beaten with eggs, butter and flour, which sets into a golden, slightly tangy crust. It is seen as one of Albania's national dishes.

Ingredients

- 700 g lamb on the bone (shoulder or leg), cut in serving pieces
- 2 tablespoons olive oil and 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano, salt and black pepper
- 50 g rice and 150 ml hot meat or chicken stock
- For the topping: 1 litre thick plain yogurt, 3 eggs, 2 tablespoons plain flour and 80 g butter

Method

1. Heat the oven to 180°C. Rub the lamb with the oil, garlic, oregano, salt and pepper and lay it in a baking dish.
2. Bake for about 1 hour, basting now and then with the juices, until the meat is tender.
3. Scatter the rice around the meat, pour in the hot stock and bake for 15 minutes more.
4. Meanwhile melt the butter in a small pan, stir in the flour and cook for 1 minute, then let it cool a little. Whisk the yogurt with a pinch of salt, beat in the eggs one at a time, then whisk in the butter and flour.
5. Pour the yogurt mixture over the meat and rice and bake for 25 to 30 minutes, until the top is set and golden in places. Rest for 10 minutes before serving.

Fërgesë

A thick, creamy bake of peppers, tomatoes, onions and garlic cooked in olive oil with gjizë, a salted Albanian curd cheese. It is eaten hot with bread, as a main dish or on the side of grilled meat.

Ingredients

- 3 to 4 green or red peppers, chopped
- 5 to 6 ripe tomatoes, peeled and chopped
- 1 onion, chopped, and 3 garlic cloves, crushed
- 350 g salted curd cheese (gjizë), or crumbled feta
- 100 ml olive oil
- 2 to 3 bay leaves, salt and black pepper

Method

1. Heat the oven to 175°C.
2. Warm the olive oil in a wide pan and cook the onion and peppers gently for about 10 minutes, until soft.
3. Add the tomatoes, garlic and bay leaves and simmer for 10 minutes, until thick.
4. Stir in the cheese until it melts into a creamy sauce. Taste before adding salt, as the cheese is salty, then season with pepper.
5. Spoon into an ovenproof dish, ideally clay, and bake for about 15 minutes, until bubbling. Remove the bay leaves and serve hot with bread.

Rice balls with mint

Small round patties of cooked rice, egg and dried mint, fried until golden and crisp. They are served warm with white cheese or yogurt, as a starter or light meal.

Ingredients

- 150 g rice and 20 g butter
- 300 ml chicken stock or hot water
- 3 eggs
- 1 tablespoon dried mint
- 1 teaspoon salt and 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 100 ml olive oil for frying

Method

1. Melt the butter in a pan, stir in the rice, then add the stock or water and a pinch of salt. Cover and cook gently until all the liquid is absorbed. Leave to cool.
2. Mix the cooled rice with the eggs, mint, salt and pepper into a soft mixture.
3. Heat the oil in a frying pan. Without the special qifqi pan, drop in heaped tablespoons of the mixture and flatten them slightly.
4. Fry over medium heat for 3 to 4 minutes on each side, until golden all over and cooked through.
5. Drain on kitchen paper and serve warm with white cheese or yogurt.

Byrek (filo pie)

A pie of thin layers of pastry filled with spinach, cheese, meat, onion or tomato. There is the large home-made byrek baked in a round tray, and the triangle byrek sold as street food, often eaten with a glass of yogurt.

Ingredients

- 500 g filo pastry
- 500 g fresh spinach, washed and chopped
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 250 g gjizë or feta cheese, crumbled
- 2 eggs and 150 ml plain yogurt
- 120 ml olive oil or melted butter, salt and pepper

Method

1. Heat the oven to 190°C. Cook the onion in 2 tablespoons of the oil until soft, add the spinach and stir until it wilts. Let it cool, then squeeze out the extra water.
2. Mix the spinach with the cheese, eggs and yogurt, and season with pepper and a little salt.
3. Brush a round or square baking tray with oil. Lay in half the filo sheets one by one, brushing each with oil.
4. Spread the filling evenly, then cover with the rest of the filo, brushing each sheet. Score the top into portions with a sharp knife.
5. Bake for about 40 minutes, until deep golden and crisp. Leave to rest for 10 minutes, cut and serve warm or cold.

Useful phrases

Tungjatjeta

toon-jah-TYEH-tah · Hello

Mirëmëngjes

meer-muhn-JESS · Good morning

Mirëdita

meer-DEE-tah · Good day, hello

Mirëmbërëma

meer-MBRUH-mah · Good evening

Natën e mirë

NAH-tuhn eh MEER · Good night

Mirupafshim

mee-roo-PAHF-sheem · Goodbye

Si jeni?

see YEH-nee · How are you? (polite)

Jam mirë, faleminderit

yahm MEER, fah-leh-meen-DEH-reet · I'm fine, thank you

Më vjen mirë

muh VYEN MEER · Nice to meet you

S'ka përse

skah pur-SEH · You're welcome

Më falni

muh FAHL-nee · Excuse me

Më vjen keq

muh VYEN KETCH · I'm sorry

A flisni anglisht?

ah FLEES-nee ahn-GLEESHT · Do you speak English?

Nuk kuptoj

nook koop-TOY · I don't understand

Sa është kjo?

sah UHSHT kyoh · How much is this?

Ku është tualeti?

koo UHSHT twah-LEH-tee · Where is the toilet?

Gëzuar!

guh-ZOO-ar · Cheers!

Ishte e shijshme

EESH-teh eh SHEEY-shmeh · It was delicious

Ndihmë!

NDEE-muh · Help!

Things you might not know

1. Albanians call their country Shqipëria, a name often explained as 'Land of the Eagles'. A black double-headed eagle on a red field is the country's flag, and the golden eagle is its national animal.
2. Albanian is an Indo-European language, but it forms a branch of its own, with no close relatives among living languages.
3. Under Enver Hoxha, Albania was covered with concrete bunkers built from the 1960s to the 1980s against an invasion that never came. Counts vary widely, from about 173,000 to more than 750,000, and many still stand in fields, on beaches and in towns.
4. Mother Teresa was born Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu in Skopje in 1910. Gonxhe means 'flower bud' in Albanian, and Tirana's international airport is named after her.
5. During the Second World War, Albanian families hid Jewish residents and refugees, guided in part by besa, the Albanian code of honour and keeping one's word. Albania was one of the few occupied countries in Europe with more Jews at the end of the war than at the start.
6. In 1967 communist Albania declared itself an atheist state and closed its mosques and churches. When Tirana's Et'hem Bey Mosque reopened in 1991, 10,000 people came to pray.
7. Albania loves its coffee. In 2016 it was reported to have more coffee houses per person than any other country, about 654 for every 100,000 people.
8. Albanian iso-polyphony, a traditional form of many-voiced folk singing over a held drone, is on UNESCO's list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.
9. The xhubleta, a bell-shaped woollen skirt worn by women in the northern mountains, was added to UNESCO's list of heritage in need of urgent safeguarding in 2022.
10. The lek, Albania's currency since 1926, has two stories behind its name. Officially it honours the medieval lord Lekë Dukagjini. Many say it is named after Alexander the Great, called Leka in Albanian, whose head appeared on the first 1 lek coin.

11. Mount Korab, 2,764 m, is the highest point of both Albania and North Macedonia, as the border runs across its summit.
12. In 2023 Albania made the Vjosa, one of Europe's last large wild rivers flowing freely without dams, into the Vjosa Wild River National Park.
13. Skanderbeg's helmet and sword are kept in the Imperial Armoury in Vienna. The Skanderbeg Museum in Krujë shows a copy of the helmet.

TALK ABOUT IT

Questions for the group

- Have you ever been to Albania, or has someone in your family? What do you remember?
- Have you ever tasted Baked lamb with yogurt or Fërgesë? What is a dish you remember from a trip?
- First multi-party elections (1991). Do you remember hearing about it? Where were you then?
- Pyramid schemes collapse (1997). Do you remember hearing about it? Where were you then?
- Have you seen Butrint, in person or in pictures? Which famous place would you most like to see?
- If you could spend one day in any city of Albania, which would it be and why?

QUIZ

How well do you know Albania?

Circle the right answer. The answers are on the last page.

1. A shopkeeper says '2,000 lek' for something priced at 200 lek. What is most likely happening?

- A) They are adding a tourist tax
- B) They are quoting the price in euros
- C) They are giving the price for ten items
- D) They are counting in 'old lek', worth a tenth of today's lek

2. Which castle held out against three great Ottoman sieges under Skanderbeg?

- A) Rozafa Castle
- B) Berat Castle
- C) Gjirokastër Castle
- D) Krujë Castle

3. What is raki rrushi made from?

- A) Aniseed
- B) Plums
- C) Grapes
- D) Honey

4. What is the capital of Albania?

- A) Shkodër
- B) Tirana
- C) Durrës
- D) Vlorë

5. Visitors to the Et'hem Bey Mosque in Tirana must take off their shoes before entering the inner room.

- A) True
- B) False

6. In parts of southern Albania, a shake of the head can mean yes.

- A) True
- B) False

7. What does 'po' mean in Albanian?

- A) Yes
- B) No
- C) Please
- D) Hello

8. Trileçe is a sponge cake soaked in three kinds of milk.

- A) True
- B) False

9. Who united Albanian noble families in the League of Lezhë in 1444 to fight the Ottomans?

- A) Ismail Qemali
- B) Enver Hoxha
- C) Skanderbeg
- D) King Zog

10. What do Albanians say when they raise their glasses?

- A) Mirëdita
- B) Më falni
- C) Nuk kuptoj
- D) Gëzuar!

11. In 2016 Albania was reported to have more coffee houses per person than any other country.

- A) True
- B) False

12. What does 'A flisni anglisht?' mean?

- A) I don't understand
- B) How much is this?
- C) Do you speak English?
- D) Where is the toilet?

Quiz answers

1. D) They are counting in 'old lek', worth a tenth of today's lek

They are counting in 'old lek', worth a tenth of today's lek. Many Albanians still count this way, decades after the 1965 change.

2. D) Krujë Castle

Krujë Castle withstood sieges in 1450, 1466 and 1467. The Skanderbeg Museum stands inside its walls.

3. C) Grapes

Grapes: raki rrushi is grape raki. Albanians also make raki from plums, blackberries and mulberries.

4. B) Tirana

Tirana is the capital and largest city. It was proclaimed the capital in 1920.

5. True

True. Tours are given daily outside prayer times, and shoes come off before the inner room.

6. True

True. To avoid mix-ups, listen for the words: po means yes and jo means no.

7. A) Yes

'Po' means yes, and 'jo' means no.

8. True

True. It is based on the Latin American tres leches cake and is usually topped with caramel.

9. C) Skanderbeg

Skanderbeg formed the League of Lezhë in 1444 and resisted the Ottomans for about 25 years, from his stronghold at Krujë.

10. D) Gëzuar!

Gëzuar! means cheers.

11. True

True. It had about 654 coffee houses for every 100,000 people, passing Spain.

12. C) Do you speak English?

It means 'Do you speak English?'. 'Nuk kuptoj' means I don't understand.

Albania visa page

Name: _____ Date: _____



Next stops

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Country: _____	Country: _____	Country: _____

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