

Albania

Natural Europe

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 2

Arrive Tirane & to the Qafshtamë National Park

After our direct morning flight to Tirane we'll soon be out of the capital's airport and not lovely countryside. We'll spend our first night in the beautifully situated Shkreli Resort in Qafshtamë National Park. Only a little over an hour from the airport and already we'll be at 1300m! We'll soon realise that much of Albania is very mountainous and indeed the country has some of Europe's most beautiful mountain scenery. From the airport we rise up through thick oak forests with a very varied ground flora (orchids, lilies etc) before reaching Black Pine Forests on the Cudhi Kampt pass. Some of the Black Pines are very impressive. The pass crosses ultrabasic rocks with stands of lovely *Forsythia europaea* on the western side. The forests around the lodge have populations of Bears and Wolves, impressive so close to the capital!

Days 3 - 5 Valbonë National Park

Valbonë National Park is one of Europe's loveliest montane areas. The national park protects a superb area of high mountain reaching 2694m in Maja Jezerce which dominates the western views from the lovely valley at Valbonë. This is both the southernmost part of the Dinaric Alps and the highest part of those mountains. The Dinaric Alps in Albania are some of the most natural landscapes in Europe, the population low and the human influence on the landscapes, though still apparent, much less than elsewhere in the Balkans. The slopes rising from the hay meadows in the valley floor by our hotel are clothed in mixed deciduous and coniferous species. The park has important populations of Brown Bears, Wolves and even the extremely endangered Balkan Lynx, though of course we are not likely to come across any of these.

The mostly limestone mountains have a tremendously intricate topography with karsts, caves, springs and waterfalls in almost equal profusion and thus a very rich variety of plantlife – Albania has for its size the highest plant biodiversity in Europe.

The montane pine forests have *Pinus peuce* and *Pinus heldreichii* and amongst them much *Abies alba* and *Picea alba*. Higher still alpine areas have *Pinus mugo* and a rich variety of beautiful flowers. One of the star plants here is the beautiful *Edraianthus montenegrinus* with deep purple-blue bells forming mats in rocky crevices. *Achillea ageratifolia* forms silvery compact clumps and we'll see *Ornithogalum divergens*, *Saxifraga paniculata*, *Moehringia muscosa*, *Montilia*

petraea, *Viola tricolor* subspecies *latisepala*, *Lotus alpinus* and the lilac pompoms of *Globularia cordifolia*. In these high areas we'll find one of Albania's most gorgeous flowers. The elegant *Lilium albanicum*, whose turk's-caps blooms vary from clear yellow to bright orange-red.

The cerise goblets of *Paeonia arietina* illuminate forests of Sweet Chestnut and Beech with stands of Lily of the Valley as well as nice colour forms of *Aquilegia vulgaris*. There's *Helleborus odoratus* and abundant yellow *Lamium galaeobdolon*. The striking blooms of *Dictamnus albus* wave at us on dry rocky slopes with a diverse forest cover comprising *Tilia cordata* and *Tilia platyphyllos* as well as *Acer heldreichii*, *Acer obtusatum*, *Fraxinus oxycarpa*, *Ulmus glabra*, *Carpinus betulus* and *Sorbus aucuparia*. Here are stands of purple *Iris pallida* subspecies *cengialti* blooming with *Salvia ringens* and *Veronica austriaca* subspecies *dentata* with its prolific blue flowers in little spikes. *Pinguicula balcanica* colonises seepages on cliffs here. Damp hay meadows along the river close by our hotel have a beautiful flora with clumps of yellow *Hemerocallis lilioaspedelus*, wands of purple-pink *Gladiolus palustris* and white stars of *Ornithogalum umbellatum*.

Day 6 to Peshkopi

After a morning further exploring Valbonë National Park we'll spend the afternoon driving south to Peshkopi for a one-night stay.

Days 7 & 8 Shebenik-Jabllanicë-Rrajcë National Park

This morning we've a bit more ground to cover before we reach the Shebenik-Jabllanicë-Rrajcë National Park. We'll have an early lunch at the well-known Trofta Borove Restaurant, famed for its fresh trout cooked with butter and nuts. *Ramonda serbica* decorates rocks just a five minute walk away.

We'll spend the afternoon in Albania's wild mountainous heart in the Shebenik-Jabllanicë-Rrajcë National Park. This national park protects some fine forests with an excellent flora, the valleys carpeted with a simply magnificent show of *Narcissus poeticus*. Dotted amongst them are *Orchis morio* and *Orchis palustris*. The drier slopes above have *Muscari latifolia* and much butter-yellow *Pedicularis brachyodonta*. The oak forest is a mix of *Quercus frainetto* and *Quercus cerris* and under them the lovely white and yellow *Pseudofumaria alba* and much *Arum maculatum*.

Days 9 & 10

Mount Tomorri

Mount Tomorri is a really special mountain. Its ancient *Pinus heldreichii* forests are home to no less than one-quarter of the country's plant species. There are many rare endemics amid the superbly preserved forests. And there's a brand new tarmac road that goes right to the top, making the summit not much more than one hour from our hotel in Berat! There are some very rare and local species on peak.

By the last snows we'll find vari-coloured *Crocus novicii* and another *Crocus* whose taxonomic status is yet to be decided – it might be a form of *Crocus veluchensis* or perhaps it will be called *Crocus tomorricos*! Reflecting affinities with areas east of the Balkans are *Muscari bourgaei*, *Ornithogalum oligophyllum* and *Daphne oleoides*. Blues are the domain of *Scilla bifolia* and *Gentiana verna*, yellows the two lovely buttercups, *Ranunculus demissus* and on the screes by snow, *Ranunculus brevifolius*. Rocky areas on Tomorri's high ground host some real alpine gems such as *Viola albanica*, vibrant purplish *Saxifraga federici-augusti*, *Saxifraga marginata*, *Draba lasiocarpa*, *Centaurea epitota*, *Daphne Jasminea*, and starry-blue *Campanula aureliana*.

Meadows are also abloom with yellow *Tulipa sylvestris* subspecies *australis*, *Salvia officinalis*, *Muscari neglectum*, and *Narcissus poeticus* subspecies *radiiflorus*. The floral variety on this mountain seem endless – there's *Achillea fraassi*, the gorgeous little white *Papaver dubium* var *albiflorum* with purple spots at the base of the petals, some fine *Phlomis* bushes, *Geranium macrostylum*, *Astragalus autranii*, *Orchis pallens* and *Corydalis solida* subspecies *incisa* which comes in a variety of colour forms.

Day 11

Departure from Tirane

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