

Instant

Tirana

Winter 2005/2006
Downloaded free from
www.inyourpocket.com



Introducing Tirana

Tirana is a chameleon of a city; it can be anything you want it to be. It can be the poor, dusty, dirty, corrupt town as often shown on TV abroad, and we'd be the last to deny that Tirana has its fair share of problems. But on the other hand, Tirana can also be a city in rapid transformation, with bold city centre reconstruction plans; with pretty, well-maintained parks, the fascinating *xhiro* evening stroll, an incredibly lively cafe scene, and all with an air of the east: this country, after all, is strongly influenced by Islam.

A real humdinger of a destination, just mentioning Albania is sure to put a stop to the conversation at any Islington or Greenwich Village dinner party. To visitors with an open mind, Tirana is a great trip waiting to happen.

If we've been able to help improve or ease your trip to Tirana, please help us by letting us know what you think of the guide; send your praise, criticism, comments and corrections to tirana@inyourpocket.com. Enjoy the city.

Instant Tirana

About this Instant guide

This small PDF guide has been written to aid the traveller to Tirana who doesn't need or want to carry an encyclopedia-sized guidebook around in their pocket. A bold experiment in travel writing, the best bits of Tirana have been boiled down and condensed into one fun-sized read for the lightweight traveller.

The Tirana In Your Pocket guidebook

Tirana In Your Pocket is Tirana's leading (and only) English-language city guide that is published and distributed locally every six months. The full guide con-

tains 52 pages of densely packed information about the city, including hotel, restaurant and bar reviews, information about transport and sights, daytrips, city maps and more. Ask for your print copy (sold for 400 lek, or •3) at the Tirana Airport book shop (departures hall only), at the reception desk or kiosks of all upmarket hotels in Tirana, at selected embassies, or at the main English-language bookshops.



The Basics

Health

Although the locals say the water is safe to drink, it's probably best to stick to bottled water, which is readily available. The city is extremely dusty, so contact-lens wearers should carry eye drops with them or consider wearing glasses. Travellers should beware of holes and bits of metal sticking out of the pavement, and missing sewer lids. Pedestrians should use caution when crossing busy streets, even ones with traffic lights. Finally, up-to-date tetanus and hepatitis-B inoculations are recommended if you want to play it safe and are staying some length of time in Albania, particularly rural areas.

Money

The Albanian currency is the lek (plural leke). The **exchange rate** is: •1 = 123 lek, £1 = 183 lek, US\$1 = 101 lek (20-9-05). Banknotes come in denominations of 100, 200, 500, 1000 and 5000 lek, while there are coins of 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 lek. Although hotels and some other services quote prices in foreign currency, payment is nearly always made in lek. If payment in foreign currency is possible, it usually means you're getting a bad rate.

Recently, Albania became the last country in Europe to have **ATMs** (bankomats) connected to the international grid, and nowadays getting cash using your debit or credit card is no problem in Tirana. Elsewhere in Albania, most major towns now have a few ATMs you can use. Albanian ATMs do not charge for transactions, but your home bank may. If you insist on bringing along cash foreign currency, you can **change** your euros or dollars at banks and (better) at exchange offices (see p.38) dotted around town, but their rates are not as good as using an ATM. People who still believe in traveller's cheques in this electronic era can cash them at most banks at a fee. Finally, the money changers waving wads of banknotes outside the National Bank offer competitive rates and are generally honest, but it's always wise to ask the exchange rate and carefully count and examine the lek they give you.

Roads

Before 1991, only Party officials were allowed to own and drive around in cars. There were about 600 cars in Albania, most of them deluxe Mercedes and Volvos. When the restriction was lifted, Albanians brought thousands of cars into the country from Italy and Greece. At the time, there were no traffic regulations, no driver's license requirements, no traffic enforcement and no traffic lights. Fortunately, all this has changed. The quality of the roads has improved dramatically and driving around is fun as foreigners gain "new Albanian driving skills."

Street smarts

Here's a typical Tirana address: Rr. Sami Frashëri, Pall. 20/1, Shk. 1, Ap. 8. And here's how to decipher

Visas

All citizens of Western European countries, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Israel, Japan, Turkey, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, Malaysia and Singapore can purchase a visa on entry for •10 (to be paid in cash euros; British pounds and US dollars accepted, but at less advantageous rates). Most others need to get a visa from an Albanian embassy or consulate abroad before travelling to Albania. Before you set off, confirm your entry requirements at the nearest Albanian embassy or consulate.

it: Rr. means *rruga*, or street (*sheshi* is square). The abbreviation 'P' or 'Pall.' stands for *pallati* (building, or block of flats). 'Shk.' stands for *shkallë* ('entrance' - since there is often more than one), and 'Ap.' means *apartment*. Unfortunately for guidebook writers and other foreigners, Albanian addresses often do not include street numbers. Instead, a close landmark (like a building, school, ministry, statue, etc) is mentioned for reference, prefaced by *pane* ('near'), or *përballë* ('in front of'). The medieval logic behind this is that the locals know where it is and you can ask them, so why bother painting an ugly number on it when you can sit down and have a nice cup of coffee instead?

Tipping

It's customary to tip about 10% or round up to the nearest lek note at restaurants and bars, and for short taxi rides. At restaurants the tip is usually given directly to the waiter upon paying, rather than left on the table.

inyourpocket

Instant Tirana

General Manager Gazmend Haxhia

Editor, photo Jeroen van Marle

Research Emir Dhardha, Denada Gazheli, Ermelinda Zeqiri

Sales & Distribution Anila Zeqo, Dritan Xhengo, Morena Rryta

Tirana In Your Pocket

Blv Dëshmorët e Kombit

c/o Avis Albania

Hotel Rogner Europapark

Tirana, Albania

tel. (+355) 4 23 50 24

fax (+355) 4 23 50 24

albania@inyourpocket.com

www.inyourpocket.com

© A.S.G. sh.p.k. Hotel Rogner Europapark

Copyright notice

Text and photo copyright *Tirana In Your Pocket* 2001-2006. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, except brief extracts for the purpose of review, without written permission from the publisher and copyright owner.

Arriving

Arriving in Tirana is not as straightforward and smooth as it should be, but we're working on it.

By plane

Tirana's tiny Nënë Tereza (Mother Teresa) or Rinas Airport, 25km northwest of Tirana, is a 30-45 minute drive from the city centre. Renovated a few years ago, it has air-conditioned lounges, but still can become very crowded (a shiny new terminal is under construction and will open in 2007). After passport control, you pay a •10 visa fee (see also *Basics*) before being introduced to the country's one and only luggage conveyor belt. It's kept company by a useful ABA Bank ATM (accepting cards compatible with Mastercard and Visa) right next to the baggage conveyor, as well as some scant tourist information and car rental booths. Outside, there is an ABA bank office to change money and another ATM, and a slew of grinning taxi drivers; expect to pay •20 for a trip to the centre.

By car

Driving to Albania is certainly an option now that roads and safety have greatly improved - but don't expect to get there quickly. Coming from Greece, cross at Kakavija, Kapshtica, Qafe Bot or Dogana Tre Urat. Expect long queues and grinding bureaucracy on both sides of the line. Coming from Macedonia, you have the choice between Blata, Qafë Thana and Tushemishti; the latter is quiet, has beautiful scenery and no delays. From Serbia & Montenegro, you can cross over from Kosovo at Qafë Morina and Qafë Prush, or Hani Hotit and Murriqan from Montenegro.

By bus

Tirana has decided to skip the 'build a bus station' stage of development. Actually, it's in the middle of the 'rebuild the ringroad' stage, and due to the construction work, buses drop off passengers at points all along the ringroad (they're not allowed further); from there you'll need a taxi or bus to get to the city centre.

By ferry

Arriving by ferry from Greece, Italy or Slovenia is perhaps the most relaxed way of entering the country. There are many ferries from Italy (Bari, Trieste, Ancona), Slovenia (Koper), Greece (Korfu, Thessalonica) to the ports of Durrës, Vlora and Saranda. Durrës is closest to Tirana, with many buses departing daily for the 45min-1hr trip.

Tourist Information

Tirana has no tourist information office; this guidebook and your hotel reception desk will have to suffice. If you're hungry for more, you could try asking the tourism department at the ministry for information after visiting their useful website.

Tourism Development Committee B-1, Blv. Dëshmorët e Kombit 8, tel./fax 25 83 22, tel. 25 83 21, tdc@interalb.net, www.albaniantourism.com. The marketing and promotion department (*Drejtoria e Marketing Promocionit Specialistet*) on the third floor is a government office and is not designed for tourist information. Nevertheless, the staff will graciously try to answer your questions and hand out brochures and maps. **Open 09:00 - 16:00. Closed Sat, Sun.**

By train

Albania has an international railway line, but no international passenger trains running on it. The line from Shkoder to Podgorica in Serbia & Montenegro is used for freight only. Train passengers will have to change to the bus in Podgorica (which is much quicker than the train anyway) to get to Tirana.

The Pocket Phenomenon



The UK recently became the 14th country covered by *In Your Pocket* with the launch of *Belfast In Your Pocket*, and we're proud to announce the launch of *Sofia, Pristina and Skopje In Your Pocket* in winter/spring 2005/2006. *In Your Pocket* now covers 27 cities in 14 countries across Europe. Surf to our acclaimed

website www.inyourpocket.com for the complete content of all guides, as well as all our free downloadable PDF **Instant Guides**.

The media has noticed the success and quality of our online and print guides. Some recent quotes:

"...highly useful in avoiding tourist traps and other travel hazards ... (the series has) become a European publishing phenomenon."

International Herald Tribune

"...there's no point finding a great deal on your airfare and accommodation and then spending a lot of money on a guidebook. Go to www.inyourpocket.com and download over 25 city guides..."

The Independent

"...sites that you really should have in your own list of favourites... www.inyourpocket.com. ...easy to navigate, irreverent and forensically detailed. ... they have their fingers on the pulse of Europe's most exciting and dynamic cities"

The Sunday Times

Restaurants

So you thought Albanian restaurants and the local cuisine was bland and horrid? Here we present some of the many options where you can sample the country's Mediterranean mix of fresh fish, vegetables and pasta, infected with Balkan and Turkish scents - with not a single boiled cabbage in sight. The prices listed indicate the price range of main dishes.

Upmarket

Apollonia C-5, Blv. Dëshmorët e Kombit, Rogner Hotel, tel. 23 50 35. Apollonia's menu features not only Greek, Albanian and Italian specialities, but also kangaroo meat. The restaurant has a stylish setting, with outdoor seating in the lush hotel garden. Occasionally musicians also saunter around the dining room, serenading guests with Albanian ballads. **Open 06:30-10:30, 12:00-22:30 (Sun until 23:00), (1900-2400 Lek)** ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑

Carlsberg B-6, Rr. Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit, President Hotel, tel. 24 68 52. Classy Carlsberg is deservedly popular with the foreign crowd. It's hard to go wrong with anything on this menu, but we are especially taken with the excellent steaks, the salad bar and the decadent selection of cheese. **Open 12:00 - 22:30. (Main dishes 800 - 1,200 lek)**

Green House C-4, Rr. Jul Varibova 16, tel. 25 10 15. Found residing on a small road behind the pyramid, the quiet courtyard lies behind high hedges that grow vociferously over the walls and under God's very own propagating hand. Within the villa good Mediterranean meals are cultivated. **Open 08:00 - 02:00.** ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑

Metropolitan C-6, Sheshi Italia, Sheraton Hotel, tel. 27 47 07. Set underneath a groovy wave roof, the Sheraton's Metropolitan restaurant has excellent Albanian and international fusion dishes on offer at international prices. The dress code is smart casual. **Open 12:00 - 23:00.** ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑

Piazza A-1, Rr. Ded Gjo Luli, tel. 23 07 06. Opened by an Albanian-American family in 1993, Piazza was Tirana's first truly elegant restaurant. The competition has made it more accessible and affordable - but Piazza hasn't lost its cachet. This is still the place for chic parties and business dinners. The fresh salad bar is excellent. **Open 12:00-16:00, 19:00-23:00. (1000-1500 lek)** ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑

Albanian

Era (Wind) A-5, Rr. Ismail Qemali/Rr. Sami Frasheri, tel. 25 78 05, era_delivery@yahoo.com. This foreigner-friendly spot makes for a good casual dinner. We wished the waiter would put a little Wind in his sails. Still, the food was worth the wait: stuffed eggplant and peppers, and fërgesë (fried minced lamb with feta cheese and garlic). Era also delivers; email or phone to order. **Open 10:00 - 24:00, Fri 10:00 - 23:00. (400-600 lek)** ☑

Sarajet C-2, Rr. Abdi Topani, tel. 24 30 38. Most traditional Ottoman-era houses have disappeared in Tirana, but the Sarajet is housed in one of the survivors, the grand wooden Toptani family house dating from 1780. Ask to see the preserved carved wooden ceiling on the first floor and the small hammam. The service is slightly overzealous, but the Albanian and international food is just fine. ☑

Editor's Pick

Serendipity Café Rr. Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit, 21, next to Hotel President, tel. 25 93 77. A favourite among foreigners, Serendipity offers an irresistible combination of attractive clientele, innovative cocktails and fusion food (curry, chicken jambalaya, etc). There's excellent live music every Friday and Saturday, with partying until the early hours. **Open 07:00 - 23:00, Fri, Sat, Sun 07:00 - 05:00. BEP**

Villa Ambassador D-5, Rr. Themisiokli Gërmenji 5, tel. 068 20 34 655. This restaurant offers homestyle food like the Albanian plate (byrek, stuffed peppers and eggplants and meatballs). Seating is inside the elegant building or out on the slightly tacky terrace. Villa Ambassador has real diplomatic credentials - the building once served as the East German embassy. **Open 12:00 - 23:30.** ☑ ☑

Asian

Mimi D-5, Rr. Dervish Hima, behind Qemal Stafa stadium, tel. 26 99 47. An unusual name for a Chinese restaurant in an unusual location along a terminally clogged road - don't even think about a romantic quiet meal on the terrace, or finding parking space on the street. There's friendly service and a full range of chicken, pork, noodle and beef standards. The seafood specialities include calamari and shrimps. Home delivery, too. **(400-500 lek)** ☑ ☑

Thai House D-6, Rr. Dervish Hima, Kulla 1, tel. 068 28 95 900. Overlooking the Sheraton, Albania's only Thai restaurant is surprisingly authentic. The surroundings may be somewhat modern, but the food won't disappoint. Don't be afraid to ask if you prefer your food hot hot hot. **Open 12:30 - 15:30, 19:00 - 23:00.** ☑ ☑

Fast food

Kolonat C-6, Sheshi Italia, tel. 25 51 27. Albania's first real wannabe US-style fastfood outlet - complete with faux-McD logo - is a large tent wedged between the columns of the Archeological museum at the southern end of the boulevard. It serves huge four-person super-pizzas (400-600 lek), hamburgers (even a *Skanderburger*) and paninis to a crowd of willing gluttons. For the children cartoons are projected on the walls in the evening, while adults can enjoy the somewhat surreal atmosphere of the blue-lit colonnade. **Open 08:00 - 24:00.** ☑ ☑

International

Amsterdam D-5, Rr. Asim Zenell. Logically located right opposite the pretty Netherlands embassy building, this pleasant restaurant has great semi-covered terrace seating where you can plot the downfall of the Dutch government. Or perhaps just tuck into the delicious Albanian and Italian food on the menu. ☑ ☑

London B-1, Blv. Zogu I, 51, tel. 23 88 51. With Albanians now the fastest growing immigrant group in London (a 1374% increase between 1991 and 2001, from 154 to 2270 people), this place should get pretty quiet soon. Wandering Brits should feel right at home here in this small Albanian corner of Blighty, where quality British and Italian food is served. A favourite for expats and visitors alike. **Open 12:00 - 23:00. (500-1000 lek)** ☑ ☑

Lulishte 1 Maji D-3, Rr. Punëtorët e Rilindjes, near Parliament, tel. 25 45 71. A large, tree-shaded garden of delights, shared by four restaurants, fountains, a kid's playground and, in the summer months especially, most of the city's population under 40 years old. There's pasta and pizza at good prices and a large red building housing the culinary equivalent of the UN, with kebabs, Mexican and Chinese food. **Open 11:30 - 23:00.** (500-700 lek) [📍] [📞]

In the Park

Juvenilja I-5, Rr. Gjeneral Niko Pushkini, tel. 27 22 22. These fine purveyors of Italian and Albanian specialties, a multi-talented salad bar and gigantic pizza have had themselves a customised castle built on the edge of the park. Excellent dining in large dining rooms, all-encompassing balconies or tiered terraces overlooking the greenery. **Open 12:00 - 23:30.** [📍]

Nena Mbretreshes Rr. Labinoti, near the Martyrs' Cemetery, tel. 37 13 40. The "Queen Mother" restaurant is a quaint wooden lodge-type building set on a hill overlooking the trees of Grand Park. The terrace is great for a coffee or one of the grill or meat dishes on the menu, but foreigners sitting inside will have a hard time understanding why a restaurant in such a fine location keeps the curtains tightly closed. **Open 07:00 - 23:00.** [📍] [📞]

Sofra e Ariut (Bear's Lair) I-5, Rr. Labinoti, near Martyrs' Cemetery, tel. 37 29 04. Sensitive Westerners may balk at the idea of caged animals serving as the main attraction of a restaurant, but in this popular Albanian restaurant, the bears, monkeys, eagles and chickens surrounding the park-like terrace have much better accommodations than their buddies in the zoo, even though it's cramped, and infinitely better lives than whatever is on your plate. **Open 07:00 - 24:00.**

Italian

Casa della Pasta B-3, Biv Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit, in Rinia Park, tel. 25 11 75. A large Italian eatery occupying half of the Taiwan complex, and looking very neo-rustic. The open kitchen offers full views of cooks whacking lamb chops into submission, spinning pizza dough or preparing the "capricious fish salad", and although their efforts result in fine dishes, the service can be numbingly slow. The huge fruit salad is recommended on hot days. **Open 12:00 - 02:00.** (400-900 lek) [📍] [📞]

Il Passatore B-6, Rr. Vaso Pasha 22/1. Vivacious owner Antonella came here from Cesena, Italy, in the early 1990s and boasts that she introduced *pasta fresca* to Tirana. A grateful foreign community has been booking tables at this elegant place ever since. **Open 12:00 - 16:00, 19:00 - 23:00.** Closed Sun. [📍]

La Tavernetta B-5, Rr. Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit, tel. 069 21 30 958. Lurking in a cellar below a modern high-rise lies this rustic Albanian tavern with wooden beams, medallions, large spoons and lutes. The reasonable Italian food here is complemented by an excellent salad bar. **Open 12:00 - 23:00.** [📍]

Napoli F-2, Rr. Durresit 2, tel. 23 15 67, www.restorantnapoli.com. Located in an area practically devoid of restaurants, Napoli serves as a good spot for embassy officials or Albanians determined enough to brave the long visa lines at Western embassies. Its scrumptious pizzas and seafood are conjured up by a chef who trained in Italy. **Open 12:00 - 22:00.** (250-1100 lek) [📍] [📞]

Pizza

Bogova A-3, Rr. Myslym Shyri 47, tel. 23 52 00. Named for a beautiful river in southern Albania, this place is well known by the locals. Tasty pizzas served in fresh surroundings. **Open 12:00 - 23:00.** (250-500 lek) [📍] [📞]

La Voglia B-3, Rr. Reshit Çollaku, tel. 25 88 99. La Voglia draws a chic young Albanian crowd. The outside dining area is pleasant, and the wait staff is friendly and English-speaking - always a good combination. Uniquely for a Tirana restaurant, DJs spin chill tunes on the terrace in summer. Just across the square, the restaurant has a new outlet, imaginatively named La Voglia 2. **Open 09:00 - 01:00.** (250-500 lek) [📍]

Mozart G-1, Biv. Zogu I, across from the Natural Sciences Faculty, tel. 23 46 65. Situated on one of the city's busiest streets, Mozart nevertheless provides a quiet and intimate setting. Try the *kadaiç*, or, as the locals call it, 'the broom of the throat'. **Open 08:00 - 23:00.**

Venecia D-6, Rr. Gjeneral Niko Pishkini, behind Qemal Stafa Stadium, tel. 23 32 33/068 20 57 933. Excellent pizza, but also a great place for coffee and cakes. If weather allows, sit outside on the nice terraced terrace with interesting views of the ragged arse of the Qemal Stafa stadium. **Open 07:00 - 24:00.** [📍] [📞]

Seafood

Rozafa C-2, Rr. Luigj Gurakuqi 2, tel. 23 91 14, www.rozafa.com.al. Head straight here for cheap, simple and superb seafood. The fish market that's run by the restaurant just across the road is the ultimate guarantee that everything that ends up on your plate is as fresh as can be. The waiters are clad in silly sailor uniforms, but at least the owner speaks English and is happy to help you pick a fish at the display case. **Open 12:00 - 23:30.** [📍] [📞]

Cafés

Pasticeri International B-5, Rr. Abdyl Frashëri, in the park. The only thing international about this place might be your presence - but it's still one of the better places to go to get your sugar-and-coffee fix. Wolf down tarts (from 100 lek) and various other pastries - if you can find a seat, that is. The children will love the small playground in the park. **Open 07:00 - 23:00.** Also on Rr. Durresi, Rr. Sami Frashëri and near the University Library in New Tirana. [📍]

Patisserie Francaise B-4, Rr. Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit, 1, tel. 25 13 36. An intimate Parisian-style café serving top-notch coffee and cakes (see also *Where to eat*). **Open 08:30 - 22:00.** [📍]

Quo Vadis B-5, Rr. Ismail Qemali 27. A fabulously popular cafe at Tirana's most fashionable crossroads. The deep red walls provide the perfect backdrop for the hip, young and rich to do their thang and glare at the loud common people across the street at the Manhattan bar. We recommend ordering a pint of hair gel and a clipped goatee. **Open 08:00 - 23:00.** [📍]

Sky Club Café B-4, Rr. Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit, 5, tel. 22 16 66. The floor of the glass box on top of Albania's highest building revolves slowly to give an all-round vista of the city. That's also the main reason to come - the coffee and cakes on offer are pricey and no better than those at ground level. **Open 08:00 - 24:00.** [📍]

Bars & Clubs

Tirana is not yet the alcohol-soaked budget-flight stag/hen party destination that some Eastern Euro-pean cities are becoming. Albanians like drinking more than mad partying, and there are few clubs.

Bars

Buda Bar A-5, Rr. Ismail Qemali, tel. 068 20 58 825. A sleek, upmarket bar and club with DJs spinning comfortably relaxing music. **Open 17:00 - 01:00.**

Canon A-5, Rr. Pjetër Bogdani. Let's rock! In chilled style, in a narrow dog's leg room painted bright orange you will find Tirana's indie-rock youth packed in tighter than the socks in Lenny Kravitz's flared rock star trousers. **Open 08:00 - 23:00, Sat 08:00 - 03:00.**

Charli's Bistro B-4, Rr. Pjeter Bogdani, tel. 24 22 72. An eclectic, fashionable thirtysish crowd populates this fantastic lounge bar with 1960s-80s inspired music in the *bllok* area. The somewhat oddly spelt Charli's puts on live music and other events from Thursday to Saturday, but the cocktail bar in the lush small garden spits out great drinks all week. **Open 08:00 - 24:00, Fri, Sat 08:00 - 03:00.**

Cowboy Pub Manhattan B-5, Rr. Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit. Should you be anything but a 20-year-old boy with a glower and gelled hair, or a war-painted 18-year-old girl with a diploma in withering stares then you may want to tether your horse elsewhere. Hardcore techno that actually hurt our ears, red, and dark as hell. Hell. On a stick. On the *bllok*. **Open 08:00 - 03:00.**

Infinity C-6, Sheshi Italia, Sheraton Hotel, tel. 27 47 07. The Sheraton's elegant piano bar and lounge is a peaceful place for a beer, or something stronger, sometimes accompanied by live music. **Open 08:00 - 24:00.** [📍] [📞]

Insomnia A-5, Rr. Ismail Qemali, tel. 069 21 27 001. A great American-owned lounge bar in the heart of the *bllok* area. The large room has sofas and other comfy seating, and centred on a large bar where the barman really know what they're doing. There are English-language magazines to flip through while waiting for your date to arrive - else start testing the cocktails. [📍] [📞]

Kaluha B-4, Rr. Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit, Nr 56/2. A contemporary bar. Taking its cue from the revamp of British industrial cities in the 1990s, post-modern fittings and imported beers buzz to the electronica being spun in the corner of the bar - at a level almost designed to allow you to talk to your neighbour. A young, hip and unpretentious crowd speak loudly to each other. **Open 08:00 - 23:00, Sat 08:00 - 03:00.**

Wine Shop D-1, Rr. Hoxha Tasin, near the river, tel. 26 43 47. Heavy and earnest wooden furniture sends echoes around this chilled alternative to the younger-focus of Tirana nightlife. Combine wines from around Europe, Albania and Macedonia with Albanian cheeses. **Open 08:00 - 23:00.** [📍]

All content online:
www.inyourpocket.com

Editor's pick

Living Room C-2, Rr. Punëtorët e Rilindjes 16, near Parliament, tel. 069 20 33 224. Tirana's coolest bar by far - literally, as the large rooftop lounge area catches the evening breeze after a hot day. The first floor of the building houses a living room style bar that's great for the cooler season, but in summer the pretty people come out in force to cram themselves on the multilevel decks overlooking the city. The restaurant serves good pasta and fish dishes (500-1000 lek), though it's cocktails and parties that interest the majority of visitors. **Open 19:00 - 03:00.**

Clubs

Calvin I-5, Rr. Elbasanit 118/1, tel. 34 75 58/34 73 88. A purple and lime green lego brick motif, both inside and out, represents the best of 1980s disco shape throwing in Tirana. The club sometimes puts on live acts. Come jiggle with the glittering girls. **Open 22:00 - 02:00, Sat 22:00 - 03:00.** [📍]

Rosafa Palace I-2, Rr. Arkitekt Kasemi, Ish Markata, tel. 34 36 56. The rich and well-to-do fight over the reservations around this ship-shaped bar. Live music occasionally brightens up the most famous, and most expensive, bar/club in town. **Open 08:00 - 23:00, Sat 08:00 - 08:00.** [📍] [📞]

Around the Bllok

If you're just in town for a day and need a coffee, snack or meal, the *Bllok* is the area to head. Tirana's Greenwich Village or Rive Gauche, the *Bllok* ('block') area consists of the streets around dictator Hoxha's former residence: Rruga Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit, Rruga Vaso Pasha, Rruga Sami Frashëri and the connecting streets in between. The northern end of Rruga Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit and Rruga Ismail Qemali are especially trendy and lively. Once completely shut off for locals and inhabited exclusively by Party members, the area now has the most blatantly capitalised streets in the country, with countless restaurants, bars and especially cafés noisily sitting shoulder to shoulder. The *Bllok* is an essential stop-off for any trendy Tiranan, and having a coffee on one of the terraces along Rr. Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit to scan the passersby is a must for any discerning visitor.

Symbol key

The following symbols are used to indicate the services at restaurants, bars and clubs.

- | | | | |
|------|-----------------------|-----|-----------------|
| [🌬️] | Air conditioning | [🪑] | Outside seating |
| [💳] | Credit cards accepted | [🅇] | Guarded parking |
| [🎸] | Occasional live music | [👉] | Take away |
| [🚭] | No smoking | | |

Sights

Tirana's sights are quite low-key, and therefore the must-sees can nearly be counted on one finger. If time allows you to take in some culture, follow our short city walk, visiting the **Et'hem Bey Mosque** and the **National History Museum** before getting a coffee in the *bllok* area.

Main sights

Clock Tower (Kulla e Sahatit) B-2, Sheshi Skënderbej, next to Et'hem Bey Mosque, tel. 24 32 92. Built in 1821-1822 by Et'hem Bey, this tower was enlarged to 35m in 1928, when a German-made clock was mounted onto it. The tower is a symbol of Tirana, and is lit up like an Ottoman rocket at night.

Et'hem Bey Mosque B-2, Sheshi Skënderbej, tel. 22 37 01. Perhaps the only real sight in Tirana, this pretty mosque is right on the city's main square, making it hard to miss. Construction of the 'Xhamia e Haxhi Ethem Beut' mosque started in 1794 and was finished in 1821 by Et'hem Bey (who evidently got all the credit). Closed under communist rule, the mosque reopened as a house of worship in 1991, without permission from the authorities. 10,000 people dared to attend, and remarkably, the police did not interfere. The event was a milestone in the rebirth of religious freedom in Albania. Take a look at the frescoes outside and in the portico which depict trees, waterfalls and bridges - motifs rarely seen in Islamic art. Take your shoes off before entering the inner room. Women are expected to use a separate area upstairs. **Open 08:00 - 22:00 (summer), 08:00 - 19:00 (winter).**

City walk

Many of Tirana's most significant buildings are concentrated along one thoroughfare: the **Boulevard of the Martyrs** (Bulevardi Dëshmorët e Kombit). The grand boulevard was the brainchild of the Italian Fascists, who held parades here during World War II. The boulevard begins with a set of newly painted **government buildings**. These were built in the 1930s, during the rule of King Zog. On your right are three ministries: Economy & Privatization, Agriculture, and Defense. On your left are their symmetric counterparts: City Hall; the Public Works Ministry (responsible for roads, or lack thereof); and the once-feared Interior Ministry. Cross the next street (Rruga Myslym Shyri). On your left is the **Fine Arts Gallery**, then, hidden behind trees, the infamous **Hotel Dajti**. On your right is **Rinia Park** with the Taiwan complex. Cross the next wide streets (Bulevardi Zhan D'Ark; Bulevardi Bajram Curri). You may not have noticed, but you just crossed the Lana River, whose banks, like Rinia Park, were crammed with illegal buildings until order was restored a few years ago. Here you arrive at the pyramid, or the **International Centre of Culture**. On your right, next to a frightful new business centre,

Fortress of Justinian (Kalaja) C-2, Rr. Murat Toptani. When this fortress was built in the 6th century, Albania was but an outpost on the western fringe of the Byzantine Empire. Emperor Justinian ordered fortifications like this built all over the Balkans to defend against the Illyrians, forebears of today's Albanians. (So obviously the defenses didn't work). The fortress the place where the main east-west and north-south roads crossed, and formed the heart of Tirana. About all that's left of the fortress today is a 6m-high stone wall, covered in vines and pierced by ancient archways.

International Centre of Culture (Pyramid) B-4, Blv. Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurrit. The pyramid, as it's popularly known, opened in 1988 as a museum dedicated to the Albanian dictator (or pharaoh?) Enver Hoxha. Designed by Hoxha's daughter Pranvera, the building was reportedly the most expensive ever erected in Albania. After the regime collapsed, the memorial (in a refreshing bit of iconoclasm) was converted into a conference center and disco. Meanwhile, the truant youth of Tirana have discovered that the building's 30-degree slopes are ideal for climbing up and sliding down. In front of the building, the **Peace Bell** hanging in a modern art installation was made in 1999 as a memorial to peace by the children of Shkoder. The metal comes from thousands of melted-down bullet cartridges, fired off during the lawless end of the 1990s.

Tanners' Bridge (Ura e Tabakëve) C-2, Rr. Punëtoret e Rilindjes, intersection with Blv. Zhan D'Ark. This elegant Ottoman stone footbridge was once the main connection between Tirana and the highlands to the east. It was used to get agricultural produce and livestock across the Lana River to the markets, and sits in the area of skimmers and leather workers. The Lana was rerouted in the 1930s and the bridge was neglected, eventually becoming a rubbish tip. It's now restored to its former glory and is used by pedestrians again. A small cafe beneath some fragrant fig trees overlooks it. Watch out - the stones are very slippery when wet.

Tomb of Kaplan Pasha (Tyrbe e Kapllan Pasha) C-2, Rr. Punëtoret e Rilindjes. This *türbe*, or tomb, dates from 1817. It honors Kaplan Pasha, who ruled

stand the **busts of the Frashëri brothers**. Cross the next street. On your left is the **Prime Minister's Residence**, which was once the Communist Party headquarters. During parades, Party leaders stood on the balcony here and waved to the masses below. On the right is the former Party Central Committee building. Crossing Rruga Ismail Qemali you'll pass the **Hotel Rogner Europapark**, and beyond Rruga Abdyl Frashëri, the boldly modernist **Palace of Congresses**. Originally built for Party congresses, it now hosts concerts, festivals and fairs. On your right, fenced off and concealed behind vines and pine trees, is the **President's Palace**. This building served as the Soviet embassy until 1961, when all diplomatic relations were broken off. For a while thereafter it housed Parliament. The disproportionately large, empty square at the end of the boulevard is **Sheshi Nënë Tereza** (Mother Teresa Square). On the left is the **Archaeological Museum**; on the right, the **Art Academy**. At the end of the boulevard stands the **Polytechnic University**, erected by the Italian Fascists. The paths on either side of the university whisk you into the **Grand Park**.

Tirana in the early 19th century. It consists of eight classical columns linked by arches. Unfortunately, in its present, dilapidated condition, it's easily missed, except at night when it's dramatically lit up... by a single blue neon light.

Zoo (Kopshti Zoologjik Tiranë) F-5, west of Grand Park. Visiting Tirana's zoo is a fairly depressing experience. The inmates are kept in a small block that is divided into ten cells. The animals appear to be reasonably well fed and physically cared for, but the financial challenges of the institution are evident. The pens are small, featureless and clad with hospital tiles. The wolf scatters at any approach to the bars, a money gazes at the ceiling, his chin resting against the wall. The bedraggled golden eagles - supposedly the proud symbol of Albania - do have a perch, but it's a stepladder. A little further into the park along the pond, the lamas don't know how good they have it in their chalet housing, while at the back the gap in the broken fence seems an ideal escape route for the animals when the locks finally rust through. Thankfully, we've heard that there are plans to overhaul the zoo soon; it certainly has enough space to accommodate more fitting pens. Find the unmarked entrance gate on the square at the end of the Grand Park dam. **Open 07:00 - 18:00 (winter 07:00 - 16:00). Admission 50 lek, children free.**

Museums

Fine Arts Gallery (Galleria e Arteve) B-3, Blv. Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurrit, tel. 23 39 75. Thoroughly looted in 1997, this gallery has seen a comeback since mayor Edi Rama's election, and now hosts a varied collection that's worth browsing through for an hour. Apart from an impressive selection of medieval icons, there's a good hall devoted to realist socialist art, with busts, paintings and a very sexy statue of a factory worker (more Commie-era statues can be found near the café in the garden). **Open 09:00 - 12:00, 16:00 - 19:00. Closed Mon. Admission 100 lek, Sunday free.**

National History Museum B-2, Sheshi Skënderbej, tel. 22 83 89. You can't miss the gargantuan mosaic on the facade - it represents the development of Albania's history with everyone from Illyrians to partisans represented. Inside, each hall of this vast building covers one of the stages in the development of the Albanian nation. Repeated looting has robbed the museum of many artefacts, but nevertheless it remains the best place in Albania to tank up on history and to view beautiful finds from the many archeological sites across the country. A new hall focuses on the years around the Second World War and the resistance movements, while the museum ends with a harrowing exhibition about Albania's gruesome labour camp system and the thousands of men and women who were swallowed by it. There are some English texts in the museum, but certainly not enough, so bring an Albanian for a better understanding of what's on show. The museum shop is an excellent place to shop for traditional crafts. **Open 09:00 - 13:00, 17:00 - 19:00. Closed Mon. Admission 300 lek.**

Churches

Cathedral of St. Paul (Katedralja e Shen Palit) C-3, Blv. Zhan D'Ark, tel. 23 46 55. Tirana's brand new Catholic cathedral looks somewhat bland on the outside, but has quite a nice interior, with impressive concrete architecture. Note the late Mother Tereza and Pope John Paul featured in the stained glass windows. **Open 08:30 - 12:30, 17:00 - 19:00 (winter afternoons 16:00 - 19:00).**

Catholic Church (Kisha Katolike) F-3, Rr. e Kavajes. Built in 1865, the Catholic Church of St. Marie was a gift of Franz Josef, the Austro-Hungarian emperor. In 1967 - when all religious activity in Albania was banned - it was closed and turned into a cinema. It reopened as a church in 1990.

Out of Town

Kruja

Kruja, 47km north of Tirana, is one of the best sights near the capital, not only for sightseeing but also for souvenir-hunting. The most important sight is the **citadel**. This fortress dates back to the fifth or sixth century. Only by the end of the 12th century was the citadel completed. It weathered many sieges, the most famous being the Ottoman campaigns repulsed by the Albanian warrior Skanderbeg and his men. Kruja thus became a symbol of national resistance - not until 1478 (after Skanderbeg's death) did the Ottomans succeed in capturing the citadel. To the left of the citadel's main entrance is the **Gjergj Kastrioti Museum**, built to honor the man otherwise known as Skanderbeg. Across from this museum is another, which gets high marks from visitors: the **Ethnographic Museum**. It displays the reconstructed interior of an Albanian house circa 1800. Within walking distance of the citadel are the **Turkish baths**, a **church** and rows of **medieval houses**, and don't miss the old **bazaar**. The restaurants within the castle walls serve traditional Albanian food. Turkish coffee comes in the traditional copper pot and is best enjoyed while sitting in the garden facing the majestic mountains, or curled up on the rows of pillows that surround the Turkish tables.

Getting to Kruja: A taxi will cost 2000 - 3000 lek (negotiate this beforehand). The bus costs 150 lek. As Kruja is near the airport, it can easily be visited in the morning for some last minute shopping before you catch your afternoon flight.

Berat

Another possible target for a (long) daytrip from Tirana, the stunning museum town of Berat (140km by road from Tirana) is a well-preserved Ottoman city with a lively lower town and a beautifully preserved medieval citadel district on top of the hill. It's certainly worth staying longer to visit all the sights, and to go hiking on wild Mount Tomorri. In the lower town, visit the **Leaded Mosque**, so named for the roofing material, the **Bachelor's Mosque**, the **Sultan's Mosque** and the **Ottoman han** (inn). Berat's highlight is the inhabited **citadel**, reached via a very steep road. Once inside the walls, you can visit ruined mosques, several medieval Orthodox churches, all with restored frescoes and icons, and the famous **Onufri museum** (www.beratmonument.org.al) which is housed in a wonderful church, and holds the best collection of Albanian icons, many painted by local artist master Onufri.

Contact the German-Albanian **Berati Tours** agency (tel. 069 20 65 239, www.regio-berater.de) for information, accommodation bookings and tours of town.

The luxury new **Residenza Desaret** hotel (Lagja 13 Shtatori, tel. 032 375 93; rooms from •50) offers great views of town; a cheaper option is the **Berati Hotel** (Lagja 28 Nentori, tel. 032 369 53, rooms •10-20), in a quiet alley off the main shopping street. A fun budget choice is the **Mangalemi** (or Tomi) hotel (Lagja Mangalemi, tel. 032 320 93/068 24 29 803; rooms •10-20), a cheerful family run traditional inn with an excellent restaurant for both eating and drinking.

Culture

For schedule information, call the venues or grab a copy of the free monthly brochure *Buletini Informativ Kulturor i Tiranes*, which includes entertainment listings in English, French, and Italian. The monthly brochure *ARTirana* (a free supplement to *Gazeta Shqiptare*) also includes entertainment listings in English and Italian. A few cultural events are listed on the back page of the *Albanian Daily News*. Ask for these publications at the main hotels.

Cinema

Millennium 2 C-2, Rr. Murat Toptani, tel. 25 36 54. Inside the former Palace of Pioneers, Millennium shows recent American films, in their original language, with Albanian subtitles. You may want to book in advance, especially in the evenings. The Millennium 1 cinema is currently being renovated. Screenings: Mon-Thu 10:00, 12:30, 15:00, 18:00, 21:00; Fri-Sun 10:00, 12:30, 18:00. Tickets 100 lek, afternoons/evenings 300 lek, weekend nights 500 lek.

Cultural centres

Alliance Française G-2, Rr. e Barrikadave, tel. 22 56 97, www.aleancafranceze.com. Join for 500 lek, and borrow French books or language-learning materials. Open 08:00 - 14:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

British Council B-1, Rr. Ded Gjo Luli 3/1, tel. 24 08 56, www.britishcouncil.org.al. Join for 2,000 lek, and you can rent books, audio tapes, and videos to view on-site or to take home. Open 09:00 - 16:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

German Centre I-5, Rr. Elbasanit, Shkolla Asim Vokshi, tel. 34 50 43. German-language textbooks and literature, in a small library. Bring your passport to join the library. Open 08:00 - 14:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

Italian Institute of Culture D-4, Rr. Mustafa Matohiti 10, tel. 25 72 37. Italian language courses and a library. Open 09:00 - 14:00, 15:00 - 17:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

USIS (United States Information Service) I-5, Rr. e Elbasanit, next to the US Embassy, tel. 24 72 85. Here and at the USAID center are American literature, history books, periodicals, etc. Not a lending library. Open 08:30 - 16:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

Theatre, Opera & Dance

Black Box Theatre B-6, Sheshi Nënë Tereza, inside the Art Academy, tel. 24 75 98. Mostly avant-garde and student shows. Once in a long while there's a performance in a foreign language.

National Theatre (Teatri Kombëtar) C-2, Rr. Samedin Said Toptani, tel. 22 89 33. This is Tirana's oldest theatre, built in 1940 to honor Mussolini on his visit to Albania. Performances range from Shakespeare to contemporary Albanian and foreign playwrights, though nothing is in foreign languages. Ticket office open 09:00 - 13:00, 15:00 - 19:00.


Opera B-2, Sheshi Skënderbej, Palace of Culture, tel. 22 47 53. Ticket office open 09:00 - 12:00, 15:00 - 19:00.

www.inyourpocket.com

Hotels

Tirana's hotel scene has seen a surge of new hotels opened after the heady days of the early 1990s when there were only two options in town for foreigners. Prices are quoted in euros, but generally need to be paid in lek.

Cream of the crop

Chateau Linza Qesarakë, Komuna Dajtit, tel. 36 29 06. On the outskirts of town and on the slopes of Mount Dajti, Linza is a foreigner favourite for the sweeping views from the rooms and the swimming pool. A shuttle bus connects the hotel to the city, lower down. 20 rooms (10 singles •120, 10 doubles •150).  ★★★★★

Diplomat Fashion E-4, Rr Irfan Tomini, tel. 23 50 90, fax 23 27 99, diplomat@cc.al.eu.org, www.diplomatfashion.com. Tirana's one and only boutique hotel is Italian-designed, and has a different city theme on each floor. Expect different decorations on walls, cupboards and ceilings on the 1st (and best) New York floor; the 2nd (Milan) and 3rd (Paris) floors. Downstairs is a pleasant library and TV area, a few conference rooms and a small but good fitness and sauna centre. Uniquely, the whole hotel is no-smoking. 26 rooms (singles •85 - 110, doubles •130 - 160).  ★★★★★


President B-6, Blv. Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit, tel. 25 95 75, fax 24 68 52, carlsberg@abissnet.com.al, www.hotelpresident.al.com. The frills of the President reside in the 'blok' area, at the quiet end of the most popular street. The silk-draped four-posters in the suites may be a little over the top for some tastes, but then there are the less frivolous double rooms, all with internet connection, and the excellent restaurant. 17 rooms (10 singles •100, 7 doubles •130).  ★★★★★

Rogner Europapark C-5, Blv. Dëshmorët e Kombit, tel. 23 50 35, fax 23 50 50, info@tirana.rogner.com, www.hotel-europapark.com. Set on the main boulevard in the heart of town, the luxury Austrian-owned Rogner is surprisingly quiet. It has been Albania's top hotel for years, and rooms have satellite TV, safes and internet connections. Some have a balcony and overlook the lush garden in courtyard, where there's also a tennis court and swimming pool. A favourite of the foreigners, and a point of reference for the locals. 137 rooms (100 singles •200, 30 doubles •230, 7 suites •350).  ★★★★★

Sheraton C-6, Sheshi Italia, tel. 27 47 07, fax 27 47 11, reservations.tirana@starwoodhotels.com, www.sheraton.com. A gigantic grey concrete and glass block, cleverly spun 180° to face the park, not the decaying stadium. Inside the best of everything as you would expect. The huge flower-heads in the lobby are a nice touch. 151 rooms (singles •145, 95 doubles •160, 55 suites •235, 1 presidential suite).  ★★★★★

Upmarket


Arber B-1, Rr. Bardhok Biba, tel. 27 38 11, fax 27 38 13, hotelarber@yahoo.com, www.hotelarber.com. An excellent option hidden in the streets east of the International Hotel. The Arber has small, efficient rooms, and is mercifully quiet compared to hotels along main roads, especially after the surrounding buildings and the street are completed by late 2005. (singles •50 - 60, doubles •80, suites •100). ★★

Nirvana F-3, Rr. e Kavajes 96/2, opposite the Catholic Church, tel./fax 23 52 70. Do you think they would notice if you booked a room under the name Kurt Cobain? If you're staying here, you might as well go all the way and get the room with the jacuzzi. All rooms have a minibar, TV and telephone, and furnishings are modern and cosy. 15 rooms (10 singles •50, 4 doubles •80, 1 suite •100 - 120).  ★★

Tirana International B-1, Sheshi Skënderbej, tel. 23 41 85, fax 23 41 88, reservation@tirana-international.com, www.tirana-international.com. A great selection of Albanian art spices up this central, standard, and pricey three star which in the 1980s was the best hotel in town. The view of the traffic chaos on Skanderbeg Square from the upper floors will keep your nose pressed to the glass for hours. 161 rooms (singles •78 - 149, doubles •91 - 174, suites •198).  ★★

Mid-range

Brilant D-2, Rr. Jeronim de Rada, near Parliament, tel. 25 11 66, fax 25 11 67, fatiha_nas@yahoo.com. A welcoming family-run hotel in a quiet, central location. The new Brilant has large rooms and suites, and a good traditionally furnished Albanian restaurant in the basement. English is spoken. 6 rooms (2 singles •35, 2 doubles •50, 2 suites •60).  ★★

California F-2, Rr. Mihal Duri 21, tel./fax 25 31 91. Welcome to the Hotel California, where you can check out any time you like, but unlike pre-1990 Albania actually can leave. There's no arguing with the location of this place, and small but pleasant rooms contain generally matching furnishings. 25 rooms (20 singles •50, 5 doubles •70).  ★★

Doro E-3, Rr. M. Gjollës, tel. 23 22 06, fax 24 70 70, expressdoro@albmail.com, www.dorohotel.com. Along the busy ring road near the Durres highway, Doro has quality rooms fitted with plenty of wood, and some boasting large terraces. (singles •50 - 90, doubles •70 - 100, suites •100).

Iliria I-5, Rr. e Labinotit, opposite the Foreign Languages Faculty, tel. 37 17 00, illiriahotel@albaniaonline.net. Clean, spacious and hideously brown rooms to the southwest of the centre. It's near the noisy and terminally jammed Elbasan road. 23 rooms (singles •40, doubles •60).  ★★

Lugano F-2, Rr. Mihal Duri, tel. 22 20 23/068 20 31 523. A small and warm little hotel in the very centre of town. All rooms have a quality, florid bathroom and a balcony. 8 rooms (singles •40, doubles •50).  ★★

Miniri B-1, Rr. e Dibres 3, tel. 23 09 30, fax 23 30 96, hotel_miniri@yahoo.com, www.miniri.com. This Croatian-owned hotel's excellent location - just off the main square - is not matched by its interiors. The peach-coloured rooms are decent but nothing special. (singles •50, doubles •50 - 80, triples •100).  ★★

Hostel

Tirana Backpacker Hostel D-4, Rr. Elbasanit 85, tel. 068 21 67 357/068 22 22 304, tiranabackpacker@hotmail.com, www.tiranabackpacker.com. Albania's first hostel is a cosy set of rooms with bunkbeds on the first floor of a yellow villa. Reception (open 16:00 - 21:00) is friendly and facilities are spanking clean. Find it just east of the Rogner Hotel, near the end of Str. Ismail Qemali. (dorm beds •12).

Symbol key

	Air conditioning		Credit cards accepted
	Conference facilities		Facilities for the disabled
	Dataport		Guarded parking
	Fitness centre		Non-smoking rooms
	Restaurant		Sauna
	Swimming pool		Stars

Shalom Center I-3, Rr. All Demi, tel. 35 52 13, fax 35 52 15, shalomcenter@albnat.net, www.shalom-center.com. Just east of the centre, this new hotel is favoured by NGOs, missionary groups and other do-gooders for their conferences (plus a bit of spacing out beside the glorious swimming pool naturally). The rooms are simple but adequate, and the views from the terrace across the city and the mountains quite pretty. 19 rooms (singles •20, 16 doubles •40, 1 triple •60, 2 quads •80).  ★★

Stela H-2, Rr. e Dibres, tel./fax 23 55 67. With its white tile floors and large bathrooms, Stela seems a good choice. However, the rooms have thin rugs and small towels, and the rooms face a noisy street. All rooms are equipped with TV and minibars, as well as tacky artificial flowers. 9 rooms (6 singles •40, 3 doubles •60).  ★★

Victoria H-2, Rr. e Dibres 445, tel./fax 36 15 94, hotel.victoria@interal.net, www.geocities.com/hotelvictoria_al/main.html. The modern Victoria, and its pizzeria, is run by a family who spent several years in Italy, and has pleasant if somewhat chintzy rooms. The reception can be found upstairs beyond the restaurant. 10 rooms (singles •50, doubles •70).  ★★

Budget

Ambasador H-1, Rr. Isa Boletini 36, tel./fax 25 86 29, tel. 068 20 34 655. Only a five-minute walk from the centre, the Ambasador is a small, quiet place decked out in rustic style. The comfortable rooms include a TV, telephone and fax. 12 rooms (6 singles •40, 6 doubles •60).  ★★

Artur Mullet Tiranë, 15km out of Tirana, tel. 37 52 64. In the summer many Tiranans trek the 15km south of the city towards Elbasan, through misty mountains, to swim here. OK, it was built on the cheap 20 years ago, but the odd green marble effect in the rooms can be endured in return for the stunning view of Petrela Castle on the opposite peak.

Haxhiu I.1, Rr. Qemal Stafa 391, tel./fax 36 05 47. This family-run hotel is tucked away off the main street and set behind potted trees and flowers. It's got a light and airy feeling and views of old tile roofs. The relative lack of amenities is compensated by the management's eagerness to please. Taxis to the centre are provided free. 11 rooms (6 singles •30, 5 doubles •40).  ★★

Kalaja C-2, Rr. Murat Toptani 9, tel. 25 00 00. Kalaja amounts to a good budget choice, if you can overlook the fact that the staff speaks almost no English. In this hostel-like setup, you can either share a room or be unapologetically selfish and take one all for yourself. Rooms are clean, with tile floors, basic bathroom, a TV and a fan. Best of all, the hotel is ensconced inside the ancient walls of Justinian's Fortress, protecting you from 6th-century barbarians. 10 rooms (5 doubles 1500 - 3000 lek, 5 triples 1500 - 4500 lek).  ★★

Getting around

Whether you take a taxi, bus, car or plane, as long as you are on the ground it's going to be a bumpy ride.

Taxis

Taxis are a useful form of transport in Tirana (and after 22:30, they're the only game in town). It's best to negotiate the price beforehand, since few drivers speak English, and none of the taxis have meters. Only the yellow taxis are licensed - these are a little more expensive, but more reliable. Taxi drivers are generally honest, although some will charge foreigners more than locals. A trip from Sheshi Skënderbej to the university (just over 1 km) should run about 300 lek - but you'll pay more if you pick up a taxi from Tirana International Hotel or Hotel Rogner Europapark.

Radio Taxi: tel. 24 44 44; tel. 37 77 77; tel. 25 55 55; tel. 25 15 00; tel. 25 88 88; mob. 068 22 25 657.

Trains

Tirana Train Station G-1, Blv. Zogu I, tel. 25 10 94. Bus travel is faster, comfier and more reliable than train travel in Albania, so we recommend you only perhaps use the train for trips to Durres. The train station has no left luggage office. There are no international trains.

Airport & Airlines

For the flight schedule, see p.32. **Rinas Airport** (TIA, tel. 36 33 69, 069 20 66 616, info@tirana-airport.com) is 25km northwest of Tirana. A taxi there should cost about •20, and takes about 30-45 minutes. Both a new airport and a shorter access road to Tirana are currently under construction, so expect improvements soon.

Ada Air D-5, Rr. Dervish Hima, Ada Tower, tel. 25 61 11, fax 42 33 21. Open 08:00 - 19:00, Sat 08:30 - 18:00, Sun 08:30 - 19:00.

Adria Airlines A-1, Rr. Mine Peza 102, tel. 234919, fax 235489. Open 08:00 - 17:00. Closed Sun.

Albanian Airlines A-1, Rr. Mine Peza 102, tel. 23 51 62, fax 23 51 38. Open 08:00 - 17:00, Sun 09:00 - 16:00.

Alitalia C-5, Blv. Dëshmoret e Kombit, in Rogner Europapark, tel. 23 00 23, fax 25 70 61, wwww.alitalia.it. Open 08:30 - 17:00, Sat 08:30 - 13:00. Closed Sun.

Austrian Airlines C-5, Blv. Dëshmoret e Kombit, in Rogner Hotel Europapark, tel. 235029, fax 235026, tirana.office@aaa.com, www.aaa.com/al. Open 09:00 - 16:30. Closed Sat, Sun.

Malev (Hungarian Airlines) C-2, Rr. Abdi Toptani, Torre Drin Centre, tel. 22 79 00, fax 23 45 78, tirana@malev.hu, www.malev.com. Open 09:00 - 17:00, Sat 09:00 - 12:00. Closed Sun.

Olympic Airways B-1, Blv. Zogu I, in Veve Business Centre, tel. 22 89 60, www.olympic-airways.com. Open 08:30 - 17:00, Sat, Sun 09:00 - 13:00.

Turkish Airlines B-1, Sheshi Skënderbej, Tirana International Hotel, tel. 234902, fax 240964, www.turkishairlines.com. Open 08:30 - 17:00, Sat 08:30 - 15:00. Closed Sun.

Car rental

Renting a car costs from around •45 per day for the cheapest model. Make sure you have the helpline number and a mobile.

Alb F-4, Rr. Sami Frasheri, Pallatet Agimi, tel. 28 81 66/068 22 47 721. Open 08:30 - 18:00.

Avis C-5, Blv. Dëshmoret e Kombit, Rogner Hotel, tel. 23 50 11, fax 23 50 24, reservations@avisalbania.com, www.avisalbania.com. Avis operates a fleet of brand-new Opel vehicles, from the small Corsa to the 4x4 Opel Frontera. Open 08:30 - 18:30, Sun 08:30 - 14:00. Also at Hotel Sheraton (tel. 26 63 89/068 20 55 806, open 08:30 - 18:30, Sun 08:30 - 14:00) and the airport (tel. 068 20 55 807).

Europcar F-2, Rr. e Durrësit 61, tel. 22 78 88/068 20 93 922, fax 24 61 92, europcar@abissnet.com, www.europcar.com. Open 08:00 - 18:00. Closed Sun.

Hertz B-1, Sheshi Skënderbej, International Hotel, tel. 25 50 28/068 20 58 775, hertz@albaniaonline.net, www.hertz.com. Open 08:00 - 19:00, Sat 08:00 - 16:00. Closed Sun. Also Rr. Ded Gjo Lull 1, and at the airport (tel. 068 20 58 775, open 08:00 - 19:00, Sat, Sun 08:00 - 16:00).

Travel Agents

Albania Experience C-6, Sheshi Italia, Sheraton, tel. 26 63 89, fax 23 50 24, www.albanianexperience.com.

Albania Travel & Tours A-1, Rr. e Durrësit, Pallati 102, tel. 23 29 83. Open 08:00 - 20:00, Sat, Sun 08:00 - 14:00.

Albtours B-4, Rr. Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit, in front of Sky Tower, tel. 25 33 43, fax 25 33 42, albtours@albaniaonline.net. Open 08:00 - 20:00. Closed Sun.

Arjon Travel B-5, Rr. Ismail Qemali Nr 7, tel. 23 24 67, fax 23 85 46. Open 08:00 - 18:00. Closed Sun.

Concord A-1, Rr. Durrësit Nr. 12, tel. 24 72 67, concord@abissnet.com.al. Open 09:00 - 18:00. Closed Sun.

Meridiana Travel & Tour B-4, Rr. Dëshmorët e 4 Shkurtit, Pall. 7/1, tel. 25 80 10, andialimehmeti@hotmail.com. Open 08:00 - 20:00. Closed Sun.

Premier Travel C-5, Blv. Dëshmorët e Kombit, Hotel Rogner Europapark, tel. 23 20 11/069 20 60 114. Open 08:30 - 18:30, Sat 09:00 - 13:00. Closed Sun.

Public transport

City buses in Tirana cost 20 lek. Pay on the bus. Buses run from 06:00 to 22:00. Buses tend to be old and dilapidated, and sometimes conk out. Drivers tend to lean on their horns, and have been known to park a bus full of passengers in order to take a coffee break. If this happens, just get out and walk. The main bus lines are include a circle line on the ring road (*unaza*), as well as buses from Sheshi Skënderbej to Kombinat, Kinostudio, Laprakë, Kamëz, Tirana e Re, Profarma, and Sanatorium/Sauk.

We recommend using the *furgon*, or minibus. It costs 25 lek, but unlike the bigger buses, it won't break down, and it runs from 05:00 - 22:30. Minibuses operate along the same routes as the bus, except for the Tirana e Re route, which is a little shorter. Minibus drivers don't always stop at the stops, so you may have to flag them down. Don't worry if the minibus is full; the driver will always try to find you a seat. The best thing about the minibus is that once you're on, the driver will let you off wherever and whenever you want.

Useful information

Other relevant titbits.

Currency exchange

Cash can be exchanged by banks and exchange offices (liria 98 currently being the best), but also by the dodgy-looking men hanging around the park on Skanderbeg Square waving thick wads of banknotes at passing drivers. Surprisingly for Eastern Europe, most of them seem to be honest. Depending on your home bank's charges, it's probably cheaper and safer to get Albanian Lek from one of many new **ATMs** around Tirana; these do not charge for the transfer. **liria 98 A/B-2, Sheshi Skenderbej, next to the puppet theatre, tel./fax 24 88 21.** Open 08:30 - 15:30, Sat 08:30 - 14:00. Closed Sun.

Clinics

ABC Family Health Centre I-2, Rr. Qemal Stafa 260, tel. 23 41 05. English-speaking clinic. Open 09:00 - 13:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

DSF Medical Centre E-4, Rr. Irfan Tomini 5, tel. 23 27 99. Open 08:00 - 14:00, 16:00 - 20:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

Pharmacies

Farmacja 7 G-2, Blv. Zogu I, next to Tirana Bank, tel. 22 22 41. Open 08:00 - 23:00.

Shopping

Books

Adrion B-1, Sheshi Skënderbej (Palace of Culture), tel. 25 72 31, books@adrionltd.com. The best selection of books on Albania (or on anything else) in English. Lots of magazines as well. Open 09:00 - 20:00.

Rogner Hotel C-5, Blv. Dëshmorët e Kombit, tel. 23 50 35, ext 802. The hotel's gift shop stocks books on Albania, newspapers and magazines. Open 09:00 - 20:00. Closed Sun.

Tirana International Hotel B-1, Sheshi Skënderbej. The gift shop has a good selection of newspapers and magazines and a few books on Albania too. Open 08:00 - 23:00, Sat, Sun 09:00 - 13:00, 16:00 - 22:00.

Souvenirs

There are also some kiosks selling Albania mugs, plastic guns etc at the southern end of Rr. e Barrikadave.

Albapost G-2, Rr. Reshit Çollaku, tel. 23 21 33, alpost@icc.al.eu.org. Philatelic shop of the Albanian postal service, selling recent commemoratives. Open 08:00 - 16:00. Closed Sat, Sun.

Reil-Erebara A-2, Rr. Ded Gjo Lull near Rr. e Durrësit, tel. 22 12 82. Traditional folk costumes from all over Albania, as well as wood, bronze and silver souvenirs, pottery and ceramic wares. Antiques. Open 08:00 - 21:00, Sun 08:00 - 14:00.

Advertise here

For more information, contact Dritan Xhengo

Tel. (+355) 4 23 50 24
albania@inyourpocket.com