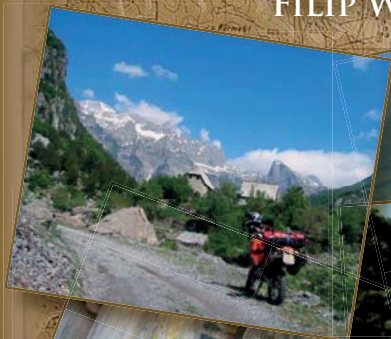


ALBANIA

LAND OF EAGLES

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OFF-ROAD GUIDE
FOR ADVENTURE DRIVERS
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Albania – Land of Eagles

Filip Weber

Off-road guide
for adventure drivers
and riders

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Foreword

If you are looking for a travel guide, you may as well lay this booklet aside. It does not contain a dry description of the country or a list of interesting places and sightseeing attractions.

I would like to introduce Albania from a perspective few people gain. As a friendly and wonderful country with nice and hospitable people.

It always depends on the area you choose. Visit cities and the coast and you will loath it. Visit villages and inland highlands and you will love it. All you need is an off-road car, motorbike, a bicycle or just a backpack and good walking boots.

But hurry up, if you do not want to find standard Europe. Albania is changing as well, and stone roads for donkeys are being replaced by tarmac – a blessing for the locals, to be frank.

The first part of the booklet tells about my wandering throughout Albania during the past ten years to show how easy going the land and its people are. The second part suggests some engrossing routes to take. All of them are passable by off-road 4WD cars or motorbikes only.

Some extracts of this text are on-line on my website, but a book is a book. I will appreciate any tips and comments.

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Where do the best people live?

I was sitting in a German pub in Hechlingen. I happened to get there thanks to filling in a magazine inquiry form and winning a weekend rider training for saddle-sure bikers at the BMW Enduro Park in Hechlingen.

Sitting there after arrival on Friday evening and drinking my beer, I saw some fellows in HP2 or BMW Fahrer Training sweatshirts coming to the bar. The instructors, no doubt! I approached them and introduced myself politely. They nodded, uttered a few civilities and paid no more attention to me.

I returned to my beer and dinner. Then four chaps settled down at the next table and started talking – hard to believe – Russian. I, being an anti-Soviet Russophile, revived and addressed them. They were pleased to hear my Russian when I told them how I had ridden to Mongolia via Moscow earlier that year. But the conversation died off soon, and there I was sitting alone again.

Well, not alone, with my beer and my thoughts. I pondered about my travelling and the people I had met on my ways. Simple but nice in Mongolia. Arrogant in Moscow, great in Siberia. Proud and friendly in Libya, but too confined by Islam. In Turkey, Morocco, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Rumania, Ukraine, England, Scotland, Norway, in the USA, on Réunion and Sumatra. Wherever I have been to.

How were the people? Communicative, hospitable, reserved, unpleasant.

And do you know what I came up with after the third beer? Where did the best people live? In Albania!



*The monastery custodian in Frashër.
Blocks of highland flats on the route Këlcyrë – Osum*



For the first time

I had started considering Albania as a destination a long time ago. But there was the armed uprising in the 1990s, followed by total anarchy of 1997 when most of the people went bankrupt in pyramid investment funds and began rioting army stores. Moreover, my neighbours kept claiming that Albania was a dangerous country.

I visited it for the first time in 1999. I went riding the uplands of northern Greece with a friend of mine and his girlfriend. But the routes I chose put the couple off soon (no wonder), and we parted company. So I decided for a one-day trip to Albania.

My courage was promoted at the very border. The Greek customs officer looked at my BMW, nodded and asked if it wasn't a waste of such a nice motorbike to take it to Albania. Damn! The Albanians allowed me into the country without problems, and I may have been the last visitor to have all his data scribbled into the thick border books by the customs officers.

There was a perfect new tarmac road behind the border. But it ended a few kilometres on, and I turned to a horribly winding road leading to Sarandë. There is a new road from the ridge today and it takes another way. I wavered through Sarandë till some local policemen with tommy guns assured me that the road leading across the town rubbish heap really was the highway to Vlorë and the coast. It was not a road; it was a rock-strewn narrow track barely passable by car, unbelievably hollowed, without a trace of tarmac.

I rode past a submarine base, watched dolphins playing in the bay and reached Himarë. I was sure that it could not be such a wilderness so as not to have a place to eat. And I really found a splendid restaurant with beer

on tap, run by a Greek who could speak good English. He started telling me about the country. He had not been born here, but liked the country and, despite all problems, talked nicely about it. I did not get any further that time, turned and rode back to make it across the border to Greece before nightfall.

I tried to visit the submarine base on my way back, but the soldier guarding it with a tommy gun seemed to be rather tough. There was a brand new green Octavia with a bike on the top and a Prague licence number. So I asked: „Where are the Czechs from the car?“ „Which Czechs?“ wondered the soldier. „This car belongs to our commander!“

By the way, the submarine has been purchased by the Czech Republic and should be placed in the Military Museum in Prague.

1999

Albanian highland donkey



Albania – Land of Eagles

Albania, apart from a patch surrounding Tirana, is a mountainous country. Rough, hollow, more than 2000 metres above sea level. The Mali i Cikës mountain range stretching between Vlorë and Sarandë towers directly above the coastline and encloses the highest saddle Llogorase. Another range of mountains near the Greek border, Dangëll, neighbours the Nëmerçkë mountain range, the Ostrovicës mountain range stretches further inland, and the Mali i Korab with the highest peak of Albania, Korabit, 2753 above sea level, copies the Macedonian border. The northern region is taken up by the Albanian Alps called Bjeshket e Namuna / Prokletije.

Mountains over mountains. And, as it often is the case in mountains, poverty. In Albania, this poverty is magnified by the poverty of the whole country. Neighbouring Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia are funded heavily by EU and UN, and the locals see a UN agent bringing in money in you or a tourist coming to spend money. Nothing like that in Albania! Here, you are a GUEST! A human coming to marvel at their country, coming to visit them. Remember therefore to behave like a guest – be polite and civil.

Ram heads

I found a companion for the next expedition. Albania welcomed us by a heavy rainfall. Getting soaked wet, we tented in a valley running to a village called Poliçan in the centre of the Nëmerçkë range – with beautiful views of snow-capped peaks and a wild river below us. We hid our tents in the bush so it could not be seen from the road. There was no need to do so, for there was nobody

who would like to harm us. We made a tour round the upland valley up to the Greek border and back to the village along the other side. We found a nice pub there and were treated to a local delicacy – ram heads with livers – served with fresh onions, yoghurt, goat cheese, and splendid beer Tiranë. They were so enthusiastic about our arrival that the whole village came to see us and say hello. It really was a hearty welcome.

Hot springs

Leaving this mountain range, we headed for the hot spring at Përmet. The former spa town was in a terrible condition, as in the Czech Republic when the communists used to claim that we were having great times. Nevertheless, a lovely little pub at the outskirts of the town offered delicious cold beer and the owner provided us with superb chops. Whoever passed by stopped with friendly greetings. The locals did their best to start conversation, some of them in Russian, some in German, others in Italian and even in English. But all of them keen on communication.

On the way to Frashër

We left the hot spring and took the favourite course of my companion which included wading through a rather broad river and riding a muddy trail up the hills. The trail copies the river enclosed in a narrow rocky gulch at the bottom of a canyon so that we scarcely got to see it. The journey was rather dramatic. We got through muddy lorry tracks and had to shovel our way through a landslide with a donkey-trodden path only, holding the motorbikes on the steep slope. It was topped by a small inconspicuous field where we drowned our bikes in deep

sticky mud and had to get a mule driver from a nearby village to save us. The man not only did not mind the pains; he joined us knee deep in mud and assisted his beast in pulling our machines out – he was simply overjoyed to be able to help foreigners and refused to accept money for it. We had to force it onto him!

Frashër

When we finally reached Frashër, a nice village at the highest point of this route, the locals were virtually happy to see us and insisted on a guided tour round their museum – never mind we did not understand a word of it. Their care was already something to behold.

The following way from Këlcyrë to Berat will be hard to forget, too. Although marked as a main road in the map, it was dusty and cobblestoned. It led us over a further hill range with blocks of flats in the middle of nowhere – a really noticeable communist idea of a village. And again, all the people we met were eager to talk to us.

Gjerbës

Another warm welcome expected us in the Kulmakës mountain range. The villagers of Gjerbës simply surrounded us talking and talking. I had the only map of Albania that could be obtained in Europe. It featured a red primary road continuing through the valley from Gjerbës to Elbasan. I showed it to them. They studied it for a while and then broke up laughing. „Yes, there is a road, but we use it in dry summers only because it leads through a river bed for about 30 km. It is neck-deep in water now in the spring.“

We really did not feel like swimming on and camped

among the fantastic hills next to the main road knowing that it was pointless to hide our tents to be safe. Passers-by with their donkeys, walking over the original Turkish arched bridge up to the village and further on into the mountains, just stopped to have a chat. I woke up earlier in the morning, and sauntering along the river, I met a photograph from some Tirana newspaper. We chatted for a while and his words left no doubt that he loved his country and how glad he was that we had come to visit it.

The borderland road

We continued through Devollit Canyon the next day up to Lake Ohrid where we parted. My friend wanted to see Macedonia and Moldavia, I returned via the ridge road leading along the border to Greece.

By the way, when riding in the same direction on the other side of the border some years ago, I could see a line of fortifications down the valley. All of a sudden, a few metres away from me, two men with sacks over shoulders jumped out of the undergrowth, crossed the border, raced across the road and ran down into Greece at full pelt.

The border road keeps ascending slightly up to Leskovik, breaks sharply over a saddle in the town and falls down winding through a canyon into the Vjosës River Valley. Riding down the abandoned twisting road at sunset, I was suddenly caught up by a black Mercedes. It kept up with me and I started to feel uncomfortable. I let it take me over, and it stopped. So I took it over and tried to shake it off in the turnings. When it came up with me on the flat again, I decided to stop and see what was going on. The car came to a halt in front of me. I could not believe my eyes - a boy and a girl got out of it, greeted me friendly in English and invited me to a picnic by the road. We sat

down around the basket with food and wine and they started talking about their country and how they loved it, but saw no other perspective than working abroad for the time being.

A teacher by the spring

The wine made me a bit dizzy. The road led back to the Greek border over Përmet and Gjirokastër. I stopped by a hot spring near Përmet to have a swim and met a man with two little boys bathing there. The man noticed that I had no soap, lend me his and we started talking. His English was very good because he used to be a teacher. But he later had to make his living as a lorry driver and ended up unemployed. He planned to go abroad and was sure to get some job there. Saying goodbye to yet another nice person, I left Albania for the second time.

2004

Coat-of-arms at the monastery door in Frashër





*World War II Memorial in the Nëmerçkë mountain range
Orthodox altar, Këlcyrë*



Albania from a motorcycle

An interview for Around the Globe, a programme on Radio Czech.

Have you been to Albania before?

Eight times. I started visiting Albania eight, maybe nine years ago and have returned every year ever since, because I am absolutely fascinated by the country. However, I must admit that the last visit made me a bit disappointed because Albania is getting very Europe-like step by step.

Which might be a welcome fact for the Albanians, mightn't it? What is your main motive for going back so often?

The people and their hospitality. They are unbelievably friendly and communicative. They realised soon that their future lies in knowing foreign languages; they can speak English, some of them Italian, some of them German. And you have no barriers talking to them – you pass them on a motorbike and they wave to you, they pass you on a donkey and salute you. They are great.

There are less than four million Albanians living on 28 748 square kilometres, to ad some facts. How did you actually get there?

My first trip to Albania nine years ago lasted a single day. I just popped in from Greece. I remember being taken aback a bit at the border by the customs officer who looked at my bike and said: „Isn't it a waste of such a nice motorbike to take it to Albania?“ I spent there the whole day and the people were so marvellous; when I stopped somewhere to eat everybody kept asking me how I liked their country and wanted to tell me something about it.

They were simply happy to have a guest.

What language did you use then?

English, because I can speak only English or Russian. It did work even then, you don't need many words.

And on your last journey in September?

It was a short trip really because most of my travelling time had been consumed by a Mongolian expedition. We had just four days there and bad luck in catching the severe storms that were rolling over Europe, which is not the best weather for riders.

Which way did you take?

We took a ferry from Venice to Igoumenítsa, which is a Greek port. It takes two hours on good roads to get to Albania from there. And because I am not especially fond of riding European highways, we drove the bikes and ourselves by car to Venice and left the car there.

When you cross the border today, is it still obvious that you are in a different country, that it is not Greece any more.

Of course it is. I, for example, experienced those thick books and the customs officers scribbling in all my data. This is not the case any more; they have computers, you just show your passport, your motorcycle registration. They note it down and wish you a pleasant stay.

You said there was a group of three motorbikes and four people, one of them your wife?

Exactly. My wife backed me on my motorbike. She kept me company in Mongolia last year as well. We are quite a pair in this, you know. Even on the stony and muddy roads Albania still has despite the rapid changes, she

clung to me patiently throughout all the sliding in mud.

Did you say you chose a submarine base as your first stop?

The submarine base lies by Himarë at the channel between Albania and Corfu. The West used to be afraid of this base because it did not know what was hidden there and what could or could not happen. But it came out that the submarine parked there was totally harmless, maybe even forgotten. I don't know what kind it is, but the Czech Republic purchased it for its Military Museum some time ago as a means of servicing Albania's debt. By the way, Albania is one of the few countries which acknowledged their actual indebtedness, obliged themselves to clear it off and do so. The amounts are not especially high and it will take a long time till Albania pays it off, but it does pay.

What can be seen there today?

It remains a military ground so that you are allowed to look into it over the bay from 300-350 metres distance only. There were some small troopships anchored in the bay, which I could not identify. As I said, entry is forbidden there. But there is a beautiful building next to it, an old Turkish fort, which is open to public and is neighboured by a splendid Greek style restaurant. Its owner can speak a bit Russian, which is surprising, and always mentions Stalin. Not in good terms, though. I'll never forget how I met him for the first time when Albania was still on its knees and the people were very bad off – he walked up and down kicking litter into a ditch and shouting something like: „Albania, land of eagles, and it is such a mess!“

Why is Albania called Land of Eagles?

Because there are so many high mountains – one next to another. And the highest saddle, passable on tarmac, lifts up to 1200 metres straight from the sea. That is why Albania is such a poor country, nothing can be grown there and the people make their living on keeping cattle on the hillsides.

The highest peak is 2753 metres above sea level...

It is Korabit, directly on the border to Macedonia.

Is it really so that the romantic air of the wild country gives, slowly but surely, way to European features?

Yes, it is. There are roads being built everywhere, even roads that had been repaired five years ago simply by putting tarmac on the dusty base are now being refurbished. I was, for example, surprised by the new coast-line road.

What else is changing? I expect that they concentrate on touristic infrastructure.

That is true, there are many hotels growing on the coastline, which starts to resemble the Adriatic coast. Most of the money, unfortunately, comes from organized crime, but that is the curse of this country.

Is it still dangerous in Albania?

Albania is a totally risk-free country, criminality has been outsourced to Europe.

Let's come back to its romantics. Can you still find such corners, forlorn beaches, little romantic hotels?

Of course you can. But you must leave the most frequented touristic routes and destinations and move further on into the highlands. There is still the old Albania

without concrete and tarmac, with stony trails passed by people on donkeys which they park and exchange for cars only to go some distance or to the market. When they return, they mount their donkeys again and ride home to their village.

How about riding a motorbike through such a country?

It is absolutely easy-going and I have always felt safe there. The people are so hospitable and would never harm anybody. On the contrary – you camp near their village and they come with their Raki to see you and have a chat with you. They are glad somebody is visiting their country.

Did you really camp all the time?

We slept in the tent one night, it was high upland and the weather was good all night long. But we bivouacked in old barracks by the submarine base the previous night because of chain storms coming from the sea. We originally wanted to spend the following night in the mountains again but gave up in the end and took refuge in a small hotel in a former spa town.

Have the prices for accommodation changed a lot?

Yes, this is changing as well with more and more Albanians being able to compare European standards abroad and more and more tourists coming to Albania. I must say that I felt like in Italy as far as the prices were concerned when it was so stormy and we had to stop at restaurants and spend one night in a hotel.

What is Albanian cuisine like?

Delicious. It is very similar to the Greek one.

What do they drink there?

Surprisingly especially beer because there are several local breweries, but people from the south prefer wine.

Would you say that people from various parts of the country differ?

Certainly so. The south is inhabited mostly by ethnic Greeks. They grow olives and wine and the numbers of new wine yards and olive groves have increased rapidly over the last few years. They are very welcoming. We reached an abandoned but reconstructed monastery high in the mountains. It was empty, but we found its custodian in the village and he let us in. We had had a lovely rainy evening with him there a year and a half ago when he let us stay overnight.

Did you notice any influence of the fact that 75 per cent of the population profess Islam?

No, it does not seem to have such significant influence. There are, of course, some new mosques because Islam can afford to finance them, but Albania is largely atheistic. It was even stated in their constitution and they used to boast of being the first atheistic country in the world banning any religion whatever. Religion has started to play a role in their lives again, but people tend to be rather indifferent to it.

Albania attracts more and more tourists from the Czech Republic. What would you recommend to them?

I would certainly advise them to try and take the route along Albanian coastline when going to Greece, for example, rather than using the highways of former Yugoslavia. Or make a one-day trip from Corfu on those ships taking visitors to see one of the largest amphitheatres of the Mediterranean.

Talking about sightseeing – what has made the greatest impression on you in Albania throughout the years?

Nature. That's what I admire most there. The towns do not seem to be very attractive to me; they are very much like towns anywhere else. You can see some ancient monuments there, too, because Albania used to be a Roman colony and many Romans would buy land across the sea to have summer-houses built here.

What relationship do Albanians have to the Czech Republic?

A worm one, it has even come down that Albania was the only country to offer us the help of its air force in 1968. They did not have but two air-fighters from World War II...

What would you say about the north of the country? Is it different from the south?

The north is completely unlike it. The mountains are dissimilar to those in the south; they look more wild and forlorn with their rugged shields reminding of the Alps. There is the Valbonë Valley which I personally consider to be the most beautiful place. There are old towers in the village Theth where male family members sorting out blood feuds used to be locked in so that nobody could approach them. We met a group of Czech alpinists in the mountain range of the same name. Theth is an absolutely marvellous spot; the only trouble is how to get there. You end up with the only possibility of renting an off-road car. There is also the problem of getting to Albania itself. Most adventurers take the train in spite of having to change many times. The journey is complicated but definitely worth it.

Many riders head to Rumania or Ukraine. How is it in Albania? Can you ride the highlands as you please?

Oh yes, you could choose whatever way you wanted, but the ranges are so rough that you have no other chance but to stick to the beaten tracks.

What quality are the highland roads.

Very poor. They are rock-strewn and muddy. We once got stuck so deep in mud that we had to get a mule from a village to pull us out. But the willing friendliness of the locals was overwhelming.

I have read in an encyclopaedia that the land has got predominantly continental climate. Which time of the year would you recommend?

We weren't very lucky in that, but September and the beginning of October are the best time there. Or the spring.

Has Albania something to offer in the winter?

I don't know, I wasn't there in the winter, but there are definitely no skiing resorts.

What do the Albanians live from?

Most of them work abroad. Some of them are certainly involved in organized crime, but many of them have regular jobs. They send all their income to their families. There is some farmable land along the coast where leguminous plants and corn can be grown. But the uplands allow for cattle tending only.

An interesting commodity might be also the olive oil...

Surely. There are olive groves in the south, but what could be of more future interest is mining. The land has got enormous supplies of crude rock-oil, and I visited sev-

eral closed zinc and nickel mines. You can enter them, but it is damn dangerous. The western corporations which would have the necessary means to open new mines are still afraid to enter these lawless environs.

And Albania must get rid of its dangerous-country label. There are too many weapons circulating among the people, aren't there?

The population happened to trust the pyramid investment funds some years ago, losing most of their money. People started rioting and attacked army stores as well, getting hold of great amounts of weapons. Today's laws, of course, forbid possession of weapons and most of them have been returned, but some highlanders have retained them. However, I do not believe they could turn them against tourists, against their guests.

2008.

On the way to Lurë Lakes





*The road to Luaras
On the road to Përmet from the hot springs*



The Expedition

Our spring 2007 expedition was five motorbikes strong. We entered Albania via the new roads from Greece to Sarandë and continued on the coastline road to the submarine bay. Mobile phones could be used everywhere and the new tarmac stretched on up to Vlorë.

There was also a new restaurant opened by the submarine bay. The owner grilled fresh fish for us and kept wailing how bad and dead Albania still was but did not hesitate to charge us coastline prices. Well, Italian and German tourists ventured up to here already and he was quick to adjust himself.

I set off a bit earlier in the morning and waited for the rest of the group over breakfast and a cup of coffee in the next village. The locals asked me where I was going and guessed I was waiting for a ferry to Greece. I told them that I had come to ride about Albania. „That’s great!“ they said and really meant it!

On the road to Berat

We took a cobblestoned highland road. It winded up steeply, offering beautiful views of the mountains directly from the sea level. We came across a nice little coffee shop and stopped for coffee there. The locals thought we were Italians at first but grew warmer and talkative when they realised we were Czechs, telling us how we did a good job with our velvet revolution and they were still in a mess. Though they did not complain; it was a matter-of-fact statement.

The route to Berat was wonderful. The dusty road

turned into tarmac and than back into dust again. The last 30 km to Berat, cut in the steep slope of a high mountain falling down into a deep valley, were made of holes and stones. The machines could not help howling.

We spent the night by my favourite hot spring near Përmet. What a bliss to a frozen rider to submerge in hot water with cold beer and watch the surrounding snow-capped mountains!

Përmet

We rode to Përmet in the morning to have breakfast there. Seeing locals to withdraw money from a cash dispenser there, we surrounded it to back off the unpleasant curious proximity of several teenagers. Nevertheless, we got our money and a warm welcome in the coffee shop: how do you like your coffee, where are you from, would you like something to eat, help yourselves to these nuts, how nice of you to come to our town. As we were sitting there with our coffees and beers, a familiar man approached us – it was the teacher/lorry driver of last year who had lent me his soap. He was virtually happy to see me. It reminded me of my repeated visit in Ysufeli in Turkey where I had been recognised by Sirali Aidin after some years, embraced and kissed on both cheeks. Well, the teacher did not kiss me, but he was overjoyed that somebody liked his country so as to come again and bring his friends. He joined us by the table and we chatted for a long time. He recommended a beautiful highland route to Corovodë to us which our map did not show. The farewell was cordial. It was a see-you-soon to me.

Frashër

Some boys preferred to wade and take a muddy road to the monastery, but Roman and I decided to try an easier sightseeing highland way through a national park. The sun was shining and the views were marvellous, but my tyre tube got flat and I had to change it. We reached the monastery in rain with the grey sky promising several rainy days. We were caught up by a local drunkard Aliko, who insisted that we leep in the monastery. I, in fact, relied on it because we had visited the site last year and I knew it was possible. I had some photographs of the custodian and of some locals from the museum. The custodian was not there any more, but the locals recognised him and themselves on the snaps. It did take just some beer shopping in the pouring rain and there we were, lodged in the monastery. The locals lit up the fireplace so that we could dry ourselves after the wading and rain; the party could start. Aliko claimed that he, as a Muslim, could not drink, but got pretty tight pretty soon anyway. He showed us a card to prove that he was chairman of some party, but we could not comprehend which one, and boasted to be a member of secret police and the like. He had a big dictator moustache and two Dracula canines. We understood each other very well thank to the local Raki, a kind of spirit distilled from grape pomace.

It kept raining the next day and we talked the villagers into selling us a slaughtered sheep and roasted it in the old monastery kitchen. Aliko believed to hear wolves on the slope and ran outside with a tommy gun. One of us was even allowed to shoot from it. The party was gradually joined by the whole neighbourhood. Aliko sent his

son Ilji to get some more beer and Raki. It luckily stopped raining the next day and we could ride on.

Do you know how much a new Nissan Pick Up costs? 3000 € to acquire it and 1000 € to legalize it...

Night quarters at Gjerbës in the Malësia e Kulmakës range, a stop in the mining town Tresovë at the upper end of Devollit Canyon, tyre changing in Librazhd – everything was marked by the amazing kindness of the highlanders.

On the ferry from Fierzë to Komani

We spent two days riding through the highlands and came to Fierzë at night. This town lies between two dams and the lower one can be crossed by a ferry up to Shkodër. That was all we knew. It was pitch-dark and we were wandering along the shore of the lake for a while till we found a pub and could ask about the ferry. They did not comprehend, but when I sketched a ship with cars on it, the most-drunk one of them said he was the captain!

We had some beer, and because it was late at night and we had nowhere to sleep, the captain took us to the ferry where we could sleep in the passenger cabin. We did not mind being woken up rather early in the morning, as it had been raining all night again. The ferry got peopled soon and it set off across the dam. It did not seem very trustworthy, but it kept moving.

I noticed a strange thing on those ferries – there always was a petrol tank, but transported from the highlands to the coast and not the other way round. I wondered whether it came from Kosovo and had not originally been intended for KFOR vehicles.

Theth

We disembarked at Shkodër and made for the Bjeshket e Namuna/Prokletije mountain range. We took a side road over a village called Kir. It was exactly on this route that three Czechs got lost in 2001. I do not believe that the locals could be blamed. They might have lost their lives in a landslide in the mountains (I witnessed one myself here before) or trying to explore a part of the vast chalk cave system.

It was getting dark when we saw the ruins of a house in an orchard in Ndërlyaj. We slipped in, not unnoticed though – the villagers came within minutes bringing firewood and Raki to show how happy they were to see us. We were very tired after the previous night and the day on the road and wanted to go to sleep. They understood and left us. They came again in the morning and took us to a local waterfall, an operating power station and a shattered school. We could not have felt safer with them.

Arriving at Theth the next day, we, to our mutual surprise, ran into a group of Czech hikers crossing the mountains. The villagers were glad to see us and got the local shop keeper to open the shop and sell us some beer. We rode on and, from a saddle not far above the village, witnessed rocks sliding off a nearby mountain side with horrible roaring and clouds of dust everywhere. Something like this might have easily buried the three missing students.

We had some troubles on the road from Bjeshket e Namuna to Koplik. One of us managed to break his

motorbike frame not far from the town, and because his XT uses the frame to cool oil, the oil got aflame on the cylinder. And again, the locals were very willing to help, pushed the motorbike into a garage and welded the frame in no time. I discovered fresh fish from Shkodër Lake displayed on the pavement at a nearby crossing. I pointed at one of them and then to a restaurant and the fish was on the grill in a minute. There was a policeman at the crossing waving away everybody who wanted to park there. He did not seem to mind us with the bikes standing right in the crossing while we were having beer next to them.

Customs duty point

Our time was short and we decided to leave Albania through the Cemit River valley over Lëpushë to a totally deserted customs duty point on the border to Montenegro. The Albanian customs officers were at ease, but the Montenegrin did not like us. He went over to the Albanians at first to complain that they let us photograph his custom house, meaning the ancient hut by the dust road. Then he had us pack out our luggage.

But he could not poison the wonderful impression we were carrying from Albania. His behaviour only accentuated the incredible friendliness of the Albanians.

2007



*Submarine base in Palermo Bay
Turkish bridge by the hot springs at Përmet*





*Dangëll mountain range
Young villagers from Grepckë admiring our motorbikes*





*One of the numberless communist monuments
Wading below the hot springs at Përmet*





*Rescue on the way to Frashër
Ilji, son of the monastery custodian*





*Turkish bridge by the hot springs
Leskovik at the border to Greece*





*Choosing a sheep to roast
Frashër – in the monastery*





*Road to Liqeth
Gjerbës*





*On the village square in Mustafaj
Albanian highland donkey*





*On the ferry Fierzë – Komani
Highland mill in Bjeshket e Namuna / Prokletije*





*Village houses in Ndërlysj
Phone connection with the world*





*Nika Dedë, Stani Rrok and his granddaughter
Stani Rrok treats his guests to his home-made Raki*





*Wading above Nicaj
Waterfall by Ndërlysj*





*Field ploughing in Theth with a „kula“ at the background
Bjeshket e Namuna/Prokletije*





*Korabit, the highest peak of Albania 2753 metres above sea level
Cheese works in Radomir*





*One of the Lurë Lakes
Water lily lake*





*On the ridge above Devollit Canyon
Billy goats on the slopes of Ostrovicës*



This time by car

I did not feel like riding through the rain again in 2009 and took my wife to Albania in our Toyota Hilux. Mind you, I seem to attract rainfall even in the Libya desert.

Theth

I have been to Theth several times and I still cannot help marvelling at the beauty of the surrounding mountains and at the hospitality of the local people. They live here isolated from the world for half a year when snow-bound saddles allow no passage. There are just two roads leading to the village and both of them require off-roads. One of them, the better one, leads from Koplik over Bogë, the other one, worse and more demanding, from Shkodër over Kir.

Ndërlysay is inhabited by two families only. The Rroks are old, but their two granddaughters come to see them from the town where they live with their parents. The Dedës are a young family, have two sons and are not lured by the town. All of them are Christian, so that the women can communicate friendly as well and drink beer and Raki. Stani Rrok took us along the whole valley up to Theth, we transported their things and children between the villages and they grilled fish for us.

Walking through a canyon to a wonderful waterfall called „Capri“, we had to zigzag among vipers. Their number was really frightening. We stayed for two days and gave Nika Dedë a lift to Shkodër when leaving. I hope to see them again sometime.

The way over Kir is quite challenging and rather slow. There was a coach of Adventura, a Czech travel agency, in Komani where we wanted to embark the ferry across the

dam lake to Fierzë. The tourists took a ferry to Valbonë and went cycling. The owner of a nearby hotel let us sleep behind the fence next to the bus, offered us to use the hotel shower and made us coffee in the morning. When I wanted to pay, he took me round the corner where we could not be seen by other guests (mostly from Israel) and waved his hand. He liked my effort to speak Albanian and that I have been here many times. The hotel was nice and neat. Waiting for the ferry, we crossed the bridge and popped in a pub belonging to Marco, a friend of the hotel owner. He had joined our little party on the hotel stairs the previous night and was delighted to see us again. We were served beef stakes for breakfast and treated to a glass of beer on Marco.

Valbonë

Valbonë Valley is beautiful, though I felt a bit disappointed this time. There was a tarmac road being built from Bajram Curri, which should reach Valbonë next year, and we could see a new water supply growing from the other direction. Moreover, there was a big packed camp above Valbonë. Some of the Jewish guests were just returning from a Theth-Valbonë transit. Those who stayed in the camp were entertaining themselves by shooting clay pigeons. We drove through the river bed (literally so, because the road had been torn down in a flooding) up to the last settlement below a waterfall – Rragam. We wanted to walk to the waterfall but were put off by heavy rain.

It did not take long and two girls from the settlement came to have a look at us. I gave them some crayons, though one of them seemed to be nearly fit for other joys; but the little gift pleased her anyway. They brought

us sheep-milk cheese in return. We watched the sheep coming home from pasture in the evening. The night remained undisturbed by the camp but for a car bringing some early risers to set off on the transit to Theth which woke us up at five in the morning.

The morning was fresh with blue sky lining the ranges and cold beer was of highland discount. I had it back in Valbonë and it was the cheapest one in Albania. A pint of Tiranë cost 100 leka, less than 80 cents. The journey to Kukës through the occasional rain would not have been worth mentioning but for the big turtle we met. A part of the road is stony; the other part is being surfaced with tarmac. I found a bakery in Kukës and bought a still warm loaf of dark bread there. It was a true delicacy!

The roadway forks up before Drini të Zi Valley. I know the route through the valley, so I took the new road under construction. It, luckily, ended up soon and we continued on a typical paved road up to a hill where we camped with Drini të Zi Canyon to our feet on one side and Korabit, the highest peak of Albania, towering above our heads on the other side – though we could only guess it somewhere in the rain clouds.

The car has, apart from sheltering us from constant rainfalls, another doubtless advantage over the motor-bike: an ice box with beer.

Cheese produced at the end of the world

The district towns Kukës and Peshkopi are connected by a main road along Drini të Zi River, which is frequented by lorries, minibuses, cars. It is neither surfaced with tarmac nor wide. It leads through a gap and is barely passable. I had taken it before and was therefore looking for an alternative. The map shows a white road winding

directly below Korabit on the Macedonian border. It was deserted and the surrounding was grey with few little villages on the way. I stopped in the first one to ask the villagers. They looked at our raised off-road Toyota and assured us that we would make it. We kept rolling up and down trails that seemed to lead nowhere for three hours, and zigzagged among flocks of goats and sheep. The locals riding their donkeys and mules reassured us of the right direction. It was getting dark and we stopped at the top of a hill protected by several typical Albanian pill-boxes. There was a storm coming and we could see a man on a mule followed by three women running in the rain. The mosque in a nearby village confirmed that the locals, in compliance with their belief, thought a woman was of no use apart from labouring in the field and dragging stones.

The storm passed, clearing the sky, and we, despite the darkness, could see the magnificent Korabit in all its beauty. The night was peaceful but for the few shots in the distance. It was not a tommy, just a shotgun.

We were woken up by a story-tale grandfather, a tiny grey-haired, blue-eyed Muslim. He stopped his white mule right next to our car, jumped off his wooden saddle in sheep skin, climbed up the ladder and almost joined us in our roof tent. He kept mumbling something in Albanian, patted our heads, smiled and flapped our cheeks.

We carried on in the highland tracks through several other villages. There were mosques everywhere, women turned away when we came near, men only rarely returned greetings. In the north, where Christianity prevails, men as well as women are more cheerful and sociable and work in the fields side by side. It is not the case here with men sitting in the village square, drinking

coffee and disputing whereas women toil in the fields. Is that how Allah wants it?

The last village Radomir was marked on the main road in our map. But it lay aside and could be reached by a several-kilometre-long side turning cut in the hillside of a deep highland valley. We were lucky to meet three men on the crossing so that I could ask the way using some Albanian words.

We drove past several villagers with milk cans on their mules and donkeys ridden by men now and then but mostly by small boys. Women dragged cans in their hands by the side of the road.

There were two brickworks, each on one side of a wild mountain stream, where the way formed a sharp V directly below the peak of Korabit. Donkeys waited in front of the buildings while their owners poured milk from cans into cauldrons – the cheese works.

The brickworks had large fireplaces on their sides where beech firewood was burning. Flames were licking the large double-coated vessels bricked into the house walls. Inside the houses, men stood by the cauldrons, stirring the milk from the bottom with large twirling sticks and drowning a temperature indicator into it from time to time. Outside, small boys, looking like little devils, were feeding the fires. When milk reaches the right temperature, rennet must be added to curd it. The curd is then poured into holed vessels and submerged into a reservoir by the wall. If the water is clear, the cheese retains its natural curd-flavour; salty water gives it the typical Balkan cheese-flavour. We were allowed to taste everything and got take-away samples.

The road ended in this maybe most out-of-the-way

place in Europe surrounded by high mountains. The village houses were fenced off by stone walls. Korabit towered above. Such end of the world and cheese is produced here!

My pleasure was tainted by a single fact. What I had difficulties to mount with my 4WD, the locals passed easily in their old Mercedes - the „pianos“. True, theirs were raised a great deal. Do the local specialised shops sell some extra kits to raise running gears?

Why have you raised my car so much?

Trout for breakfast, trout for lunch, and had we not slept upland 1800 metres above sea level, I would have had one for supper as well. Central Albania and the Lurë National Park covering the mountain range of the same name are famous for their countless highland lakes.

We had to wait on the truss bridge across Drini të Zi till a flock of sheep followed by two Mercedes cars pass the plunk surface. There is a small pub behind the bridge where I had stopped several times before. We were offered „peshk“ – trout. Drinking beer and mineral water, we saw a Mercedes bus stopping there and the driver greeted us in Czech. He used to work in the Czech Republic, but we preferred not to ask what he was doing there. He wanted to know where we were going. „Lurë Lakes? It is ‘sum mir’ there, beautiful, but you won’t get there. What car do you have? This one? All right then, but you must go over Arras. This road from the map is just for donkeys.“

The track started to rise up steeply in Arras, just behind the large trout hatcheries. The stone road winded up the hillsides and we, in horror, watched the precipices below. Nevertheless, we climbed up to the top safely in

the end and reached Lura e Vjetër behind the saddle. There is a new street with pavements under construction through the village, although all access routes are dusty. The old stone buildings look like little forts with their slate roofs, small windows and Gothic-castle-style privies on the first floor - right into the cattle yards.

If I hadn't got the following route passed on the GPS from a friend of mine, I wouldn't have bothered even considering it. But the friend was better off with his motorbike, being able to push or pull it over broken ground or under fallen trees. A car, even an off-road one, is off luck in such case. If the previous ways were stony, this one was horribly rocky and ran up under a dreadfully acute angle. We kept clambering up on gear reduction through a pine forest for five kilometres.

Nearing the top, we met some Albanian women with children loading sacks full of blueberry growth on donkeys. I offered some sweets to the children. Seeing it, one of the women simply took the bag away from me and served the rest out. The women seemed to be even greedier than the children.

The Lurë Lakes lie 1400-1600 metres above sea level. Most of the twenty-two lakes run dry in the summer so that we could see only eight of them. The first one resembled a man-made dam but the others were natural. The last one is called „Siqeni i Luleve“ because of the water lilies covering its 20 acres. It was beautiful.

The route kept testing us. My friend marked a point on the way where they had troubles with fallen trees. Looking down the depth below us I certainly did not want to risk driving rearward the narrow winding track which rendered any turning impossible. We left the car

on a wider spot and walked on to check it. My wife suddenly stopped and motioned me to do the same. I did and turned carefully just to see a viper vanishing under a stone I passed seconds ago. Not again! The snakes were everywhere.

The track turned out to be all right, only a bit too narrow on the hill-side. We reached the water lily lake and rejoiced at having managed. But then it came – a water-logged beech forest with tractor tracks and deep puddles. Like in Rumania. We proceeded very slowly, scraped the wheel-frame on tractor-unearthed rocks, measured the puddles by sticks and hoped that the next bend-up would reveal a better passage. It did, as far as water was concerned, but rocks accrued and the road was steeper. I promised myself to put on a winder. The situation was getting dramatic with the coming storm and night. We had to leave the forest as soon as possible because we had no saw and did not know what the storm could turn the way into.

Now, to explain the title: when a friend of mine, Low, had adjusted my Toyota, I cursed him that he had raised it too much and I would not be able to load my motorbike on the body myself. Well, I blessed him now; had it not been for the height, we would not have passed. Thank you, Low!

We came across another lake and a chalet in the last saddle. Well, a chalet – few sticks topped by plastic with shepherds in front of it. We greeted them, offered some beer to them and asked if we could stop by the lake for the night. Cooking soup, we suddenly spotted some figures on the opposite slope watching us through binoculars, and, a few minutes later, saw a huge German Nissan coming out of the undergrowth. The Germans, an older

couple and a Defender driver, who was seventy-two, invited us to their campfire. The lady could speak good English and we had a pleasant party. They were going in the opposite direction and did not know what to expect. Supported by Albanian beer, we started discussing what was better: axle locks everywhere or a winder. I advocated local help, pointing to the tractor I saw by the chalet.

We returned to the pub by the bridge via the other rode which should have been just for donkeys and had trout and beer to celebrate it.

Gazuar!

Koran must be pink.

Koran is an endemic kind of trout living in Ohrid Lake. It is under strict protection on the Macedonian side, but Albanians fish it as a popular delicacy. If you want to be sure that you have been served a Koran and not an ordinary trout, just check if it is pink.

We had a last day and tried to take the rugged dust road through the wild Devollit pass connecting Maliqi and Elbasan. There was a turning in the middle of the pass leading over an iron truss bridge and up the mountains. We passed a typical Albanian mill and, after an hour of ascending, came up to a guerrilla monument on the ridge offering a marvellous view of the ranges Malësia e Kulmakës and Malësia e Ostrovicës.

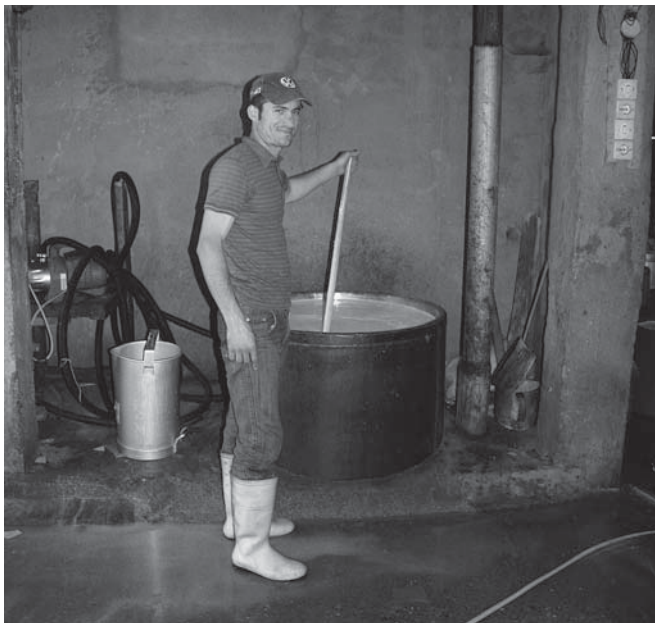
We moved on by car as far as we could and, walking up the nearby peak, 2060 metres above sea level, met a shepherd who waited for us and kept us company to protect us against his sheepdogs. He had big beasts, something between a bear and a wolf with spiky dog-collars and severely cropped ears. He accompanied us up to the

very top, showed us the snow-capped peaks and pointed to them in the map. The enormous Billy goats in his flock kept fighting and the booming bangs of their horns and the tinkling of their big bells echoed around. He walked with us down to the car again because of the dogs and gathered herbs for us to make tea.

I gave him two beer bottles and opened a third one. We toasted with the Albanian „Gazuar!“

Gazuar, beautiful Albania!

Cheese works in Radomir



Travel routes

Despite the fact that new roads are under construction everywhere and the main roads usually have new tarmac already, local roads remain in terrible conditions. Allow for very slow travelling speed.

Most of the described routes can be passed by an off-road car or motorcycle only as they take original paved ways many of which have been built by the Turks and designed for donkeys or foot passengers.

The most interesting routes lead through the upcountry, but there are no detailed maps of the hardly ever signposted roads, and to communicate with the locals is, for all their friendliness, rather difficult. The roads are not maintained and fallen bridges are no exception.

If it is possible, have little presents for children – crayons, pencils, pads. Adults will be pleased by local beer, an axe, a pocket knife. Highland life is hard.

GPS and military maps are of great help, but not indispensable. I recommend the Reise Know How (www.reise-know-how.de) which, to me, seems to be the only useful one.

If you can make yourself understood, the locals will always help you willingly.

Nëmerçkë mountain range, south Albania

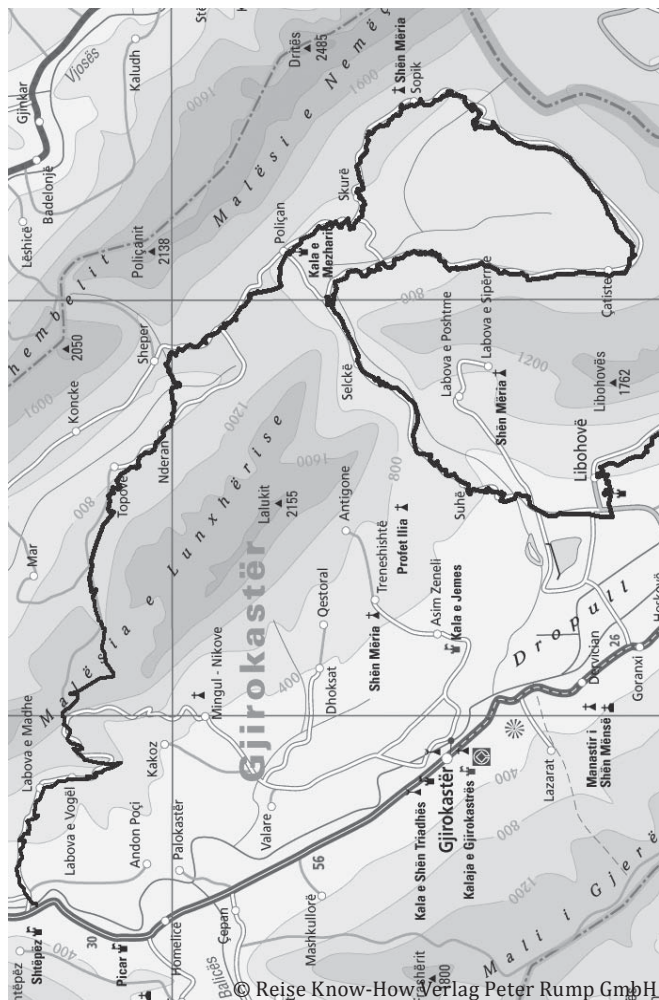
Route: Dhuvjani – Suhë – Catista – Sopik – Poliçan – Topovë – Labova

Length: about 80 km, a whole day

Description: a fine-gravel highland road

Take the main road between the border-crossing Kaka-via to Tepelenë and turn right into a river canyon in the direction of Poliçan. You will see a right turning by big trees at the end of the canyon in the direction of the Greek border, which will take you over a bridge after a while. The track is covered by fine gravel. You will pass through several villages with churches and beautiful trees. Reaching the top of the valley, the way breaks downhill steeply to a stream ford and goes uphill again on the opposite side of the valley. A very neat fine-gravel road will take you to Poliçan. There is a nice church and a pub in the square. You will pass a pill-box when leaving Poliçan and a World War II memorial on a saddle going on to Topovë. The highland plateau past the following saddle resembles plateaus on Crete. The final descent will bring you back to the main valley deep down. Keep to the left and you will come to Labova and then back to the main road over a bridge.





Borsh – Tepelenë, southeast Albania

Route: Borsh – Fterrë – Kuç – Gjiormë – Vajzë – Sevaster – Dorez - Tepelenë

Length: about 150 km

Description: a connecting route between the submarine base and hot springs

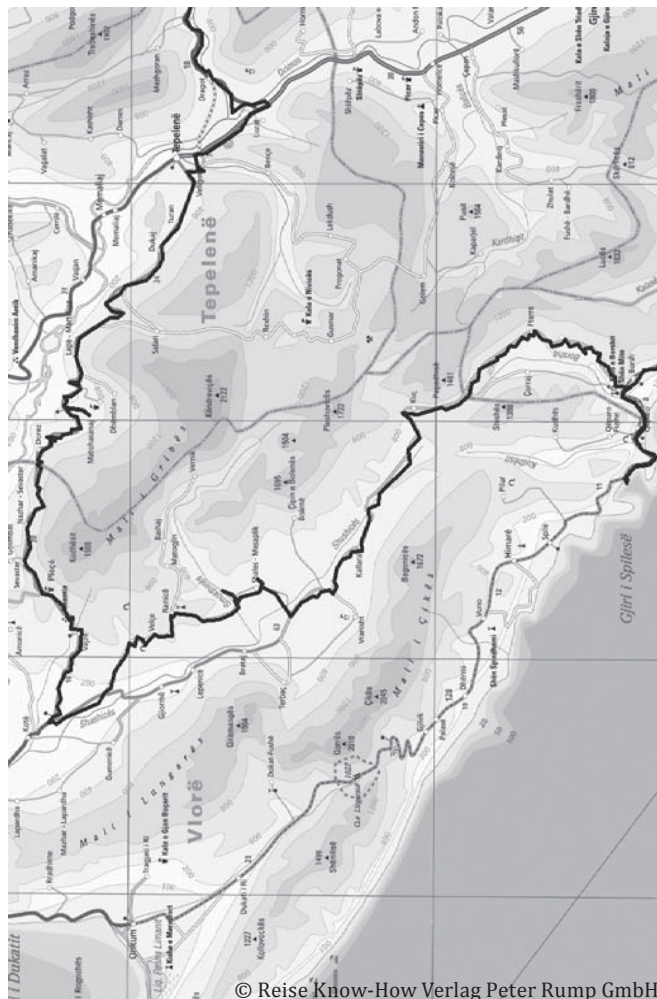
Have a look at the submarine base and the Turkish fort by Borsh. Going uphill, make sure you do not miss the turning with a ruined signpost to Fterrë. Wonderful windings of the stony road will bring you from the sea right up to the mountains. There is a wrecked tarmac road leaving the village past a trout farm and a restaurant.

The tarmac road copies a river up to the turning to Vajzë. Should you get fed up with the tarmac, you can take a shortcut over the villages Shales-Mesaplik – Ramicë – Velçe, enjoy river wading and admire rock dwellings.

The tarmac ends behind the turning to Vajzë where you can stop at a beautiful restaurant in a rock with delicious cuisine. There are also several communist monuments by the road.

It might be a bit difficult to find the right turning uphill to Tepelenë behind Sevaster, but the locals will friendly advise you. Be ready for about 7 km of an absolutely horrible rock-strewn way. The rest to Tepelenë is all right.

I recommend to carry on up behind Përmet to the hot sulphuric spring.



Dangëll mountain range, south Albania

Route: Përmet – Vinjaki – Frashër – Luaras - Qafëzez

Length: 90 km

Description: a mountain range transit with frequent landslips. The first part up to Frashër might be passable for off-road cars as well provided the landslips are cleared up. The second part to Luaras is fit for motor-bikes only.

The route along the hot springs from Përmet to Leskovik is about 10 km long. Watch for a distinct rock marked by a cross to find the turning.

Going up the river, you will reach a Turkish bridge and the thermal springs by it. To bathe in it is a real pleasure.

Look for a pillar of a torn-down bridge about 700 m below the Turkish bridge. Wade the river above the pillar and take the steep uphill track next to the pillar. It is rather muddy up to Gostivisht and much-beaten by lorries.

The way past Gostivisht is often blocked by landslides which can be bulldozed through some summers. It takes about 10 km up to the next village, Ogren. There is a built-up road from the saddle to Frashër.

Another built-up road from Frashër to Përmet will allow you to quit this route

To carry on, turn right in the direction of Luaras. Steep stony serpentines will take you to a military hospital and on through a pass. The track is very challenging and difficult to find. Continue from Luaras up to Qafëzez.



Frashër, jižní Albánie

Route: Përmet – Frashër and back

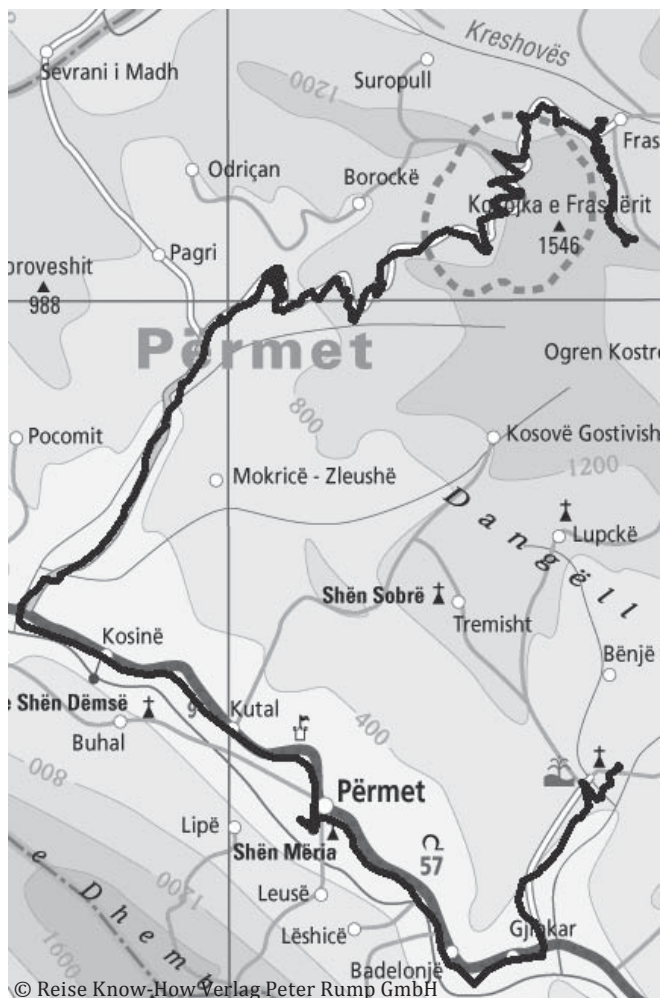
Length: 60 km

Description: a route through mountains and forests

Leave Përmet in the direction of Tepelenë and continue for about 9 km till a turning to Corovodë and Frashër. There is another turning to the left to Corovodë after further 6 km, but you need to keep the straight road to Frashër which will start winding soon to climb up to the forest belt. It is a nature preserve where Albanians like to go picnicking. Nevertheless, 4WD is a must here.

The village is called after the Frashër brothers, prominent figures of the Albanian National Renaissance movement. There is a museum and a Bektashi monastery. Remains of an underground military hospital can be seen on the opposite rocky bank of the valley. The locals will gladly let you into the museum and the monastery if you ask them to.





Këlcyrë – Osum, south Albania

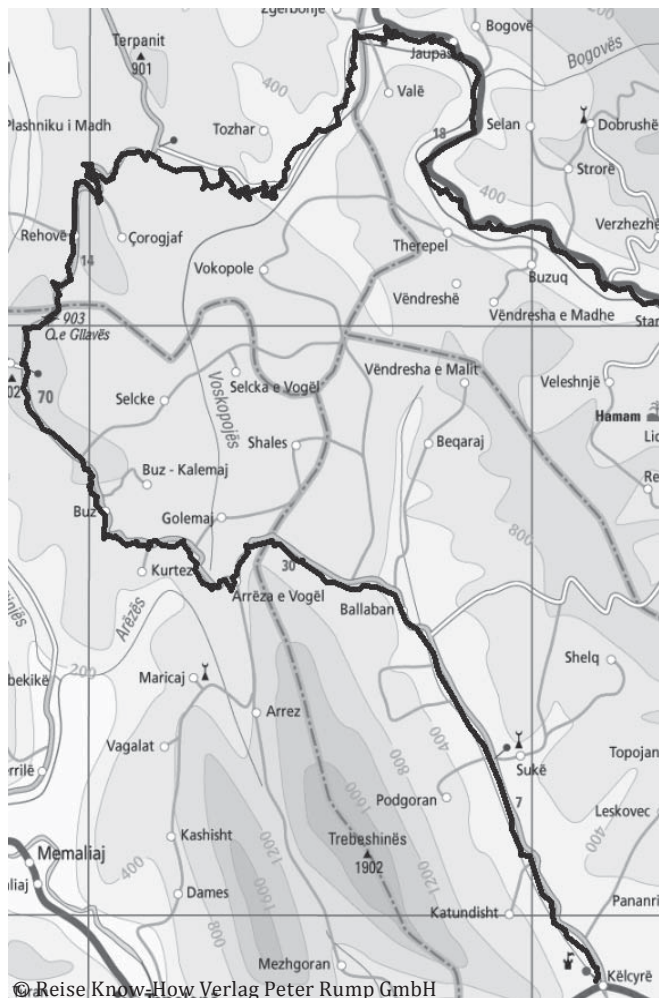
Route: Këlcyrë – Sukë – Gillavë – Terpani – Osum River Valley

Length: 50 km, half a day

Description: The road is marked as the main connection between Këlcyrë and Berat. But forget about tarmac!

The road starts going upland through little villages from Këlcyrë. Let your feeling navigate you over the saddles; the places are not signposted, but if you are lucky to meet somebody, they will kindly show you the way. You must pass a dam and a village called Rehovë. You can marvel at an example of communist architecture in Gillavë (or maybe in a village on) – highland blocks of flats along a hilly road evoking the Middle Ages. Turn to a little beaten track in Terpani. The road may be still original, built by the Turks of round stones (to test your bike dampers). What era are the bridges from, I do not know. Carry on through the valley to the river confluence and cross a cable bridge to the other bank. You will find an excellent restaurant there and a new tarmac road.





Përmet – Corovodë, south Albania

Route: Përmet – Pagri (Rabon) – Odriçan – Sevrani – Dhores - Corovodë

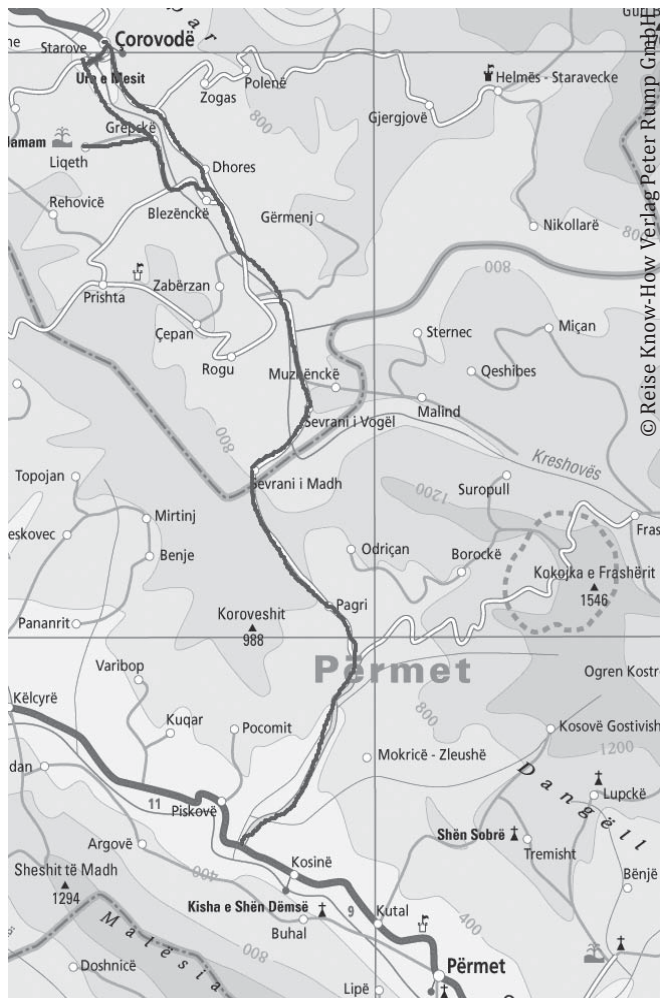
Length: about 70 km, half a day

Description: a shortcut across the mountains

Take the same way to Frashër from Përmet and look for an inconspicuous turning to Rabon-Pagri. It is in fine gravel, nothing demanding, and will take you over a saddle to a bridge across the gap cut by Kreshovës River. The route continues up to Corovodë without any difficulties.

You can flavour it by a detour to a hot spring in Liqeth providing that it has not rained a lot. It is marked in the Know-How map as a turning from Grepckë. To reach Grepckë, you can either ascend from Corovodë on a nice fine-gravel track above the gap, or go downhill from the bridge to Rehovicë. The turning, easily missed, starts a while after the road leaves the river. Be prepared for a lot of jolting.





Ostrovicës mountain range, south Albania

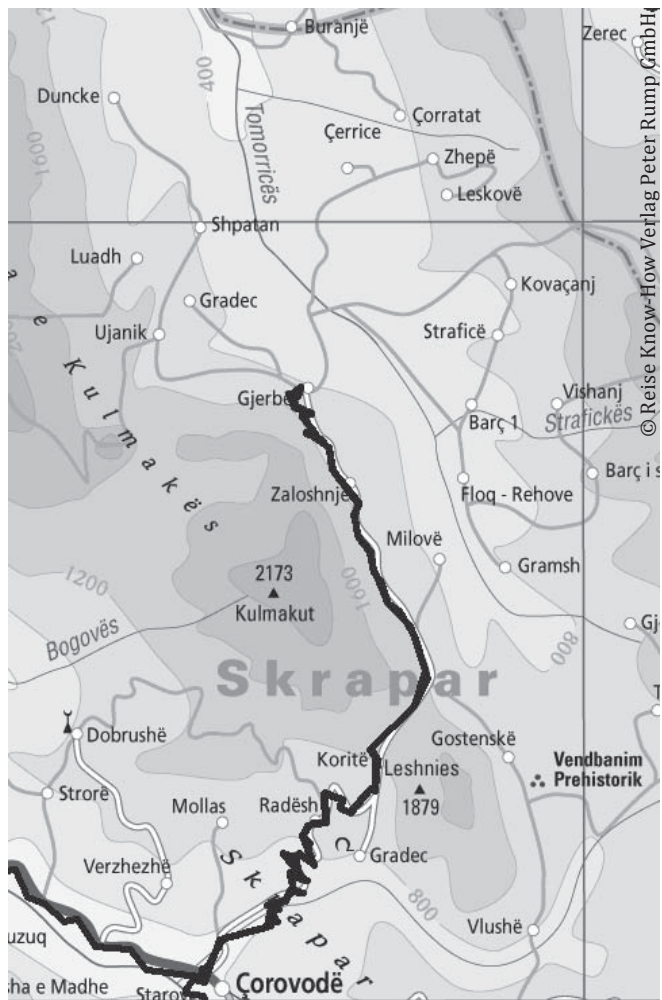
Route: Corovodë – Gjerbës and back

Length: about 60 km

Description: a journey through the mountains

The fine gravel road from Corovodë ascends past a Roman bridge and then takes a steep course upland over a saddle, past a quarry and a memorial, offering countless viewpoints of Ostrovicës. The road ends in Gjerbës, a village with several pubs. There are two possible onward journeys: either through the river bed of Tomorricës to Gramsh providing that it has run dry in the summer; or you can cross Tomorricës, get on the opposite ridge under the mountain Cuka e Banjës and descend into Devollit Valley.





Devollit Canyon, south Albania

Route: Shtëpajë – Gramsh – Moglica – Maliqi

Length: about 200 km, a whole day

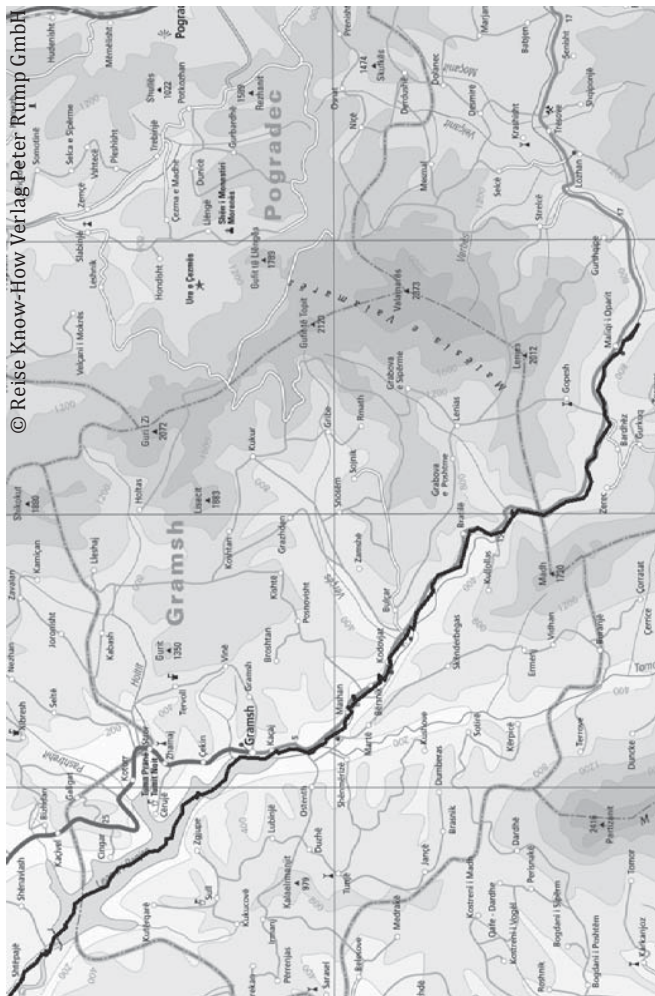
Description: a stony trail through a wonderful canyon

The canyon of Devollit between Shtëpajë and Maliqi is beautiful, rocky and wild. The route copies an original Roman lane all along.

There is a dam marked in all maps behind Shtëpajë with roads signposted around it, but the dam wall holds no water and you can still use the roads at the bottom. I noticed some prospecting work done on the dam in 2009 which may suggest that they would like to finish it.

The road continues through Gramsh and bites into the canyon together with the river. The only signs of civilisation are a wrecked bulldozer by the road and many kilometres of the gravel road leading through wild nature.





Along the Macedonian border

Route: Librazhd – Stërblevë – Osteni Vogël – Tuçep – Cerenec - Shupenzë

Length: about 70 km, half a day

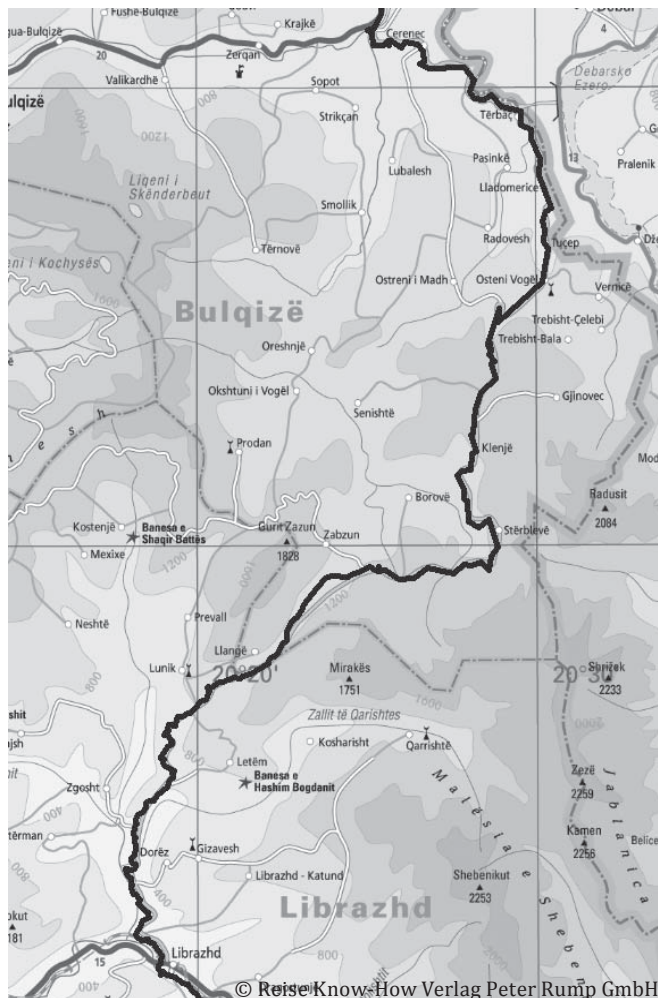
Description: a beautiful journey through the mountains lining the Macedonian border

Start from the town square in Librazhd and ask about the road to Peshkopi. It is rather stony and climbs up the mountains where you can find nice spots to bivouac on the ridges. Navigation is not difficult, just keep the direction.

Note the crystal clear river flowing out of a Macedonian dam close to the border by Tërbaç.

A new road from Librazhd came under construction in 2009.





Drinit të Zi River Valley, east Albania

Route: Peshkopi – Kuben – Rreth-Kolaj – Arras – Lugaj – Zall-Reç – Mustafaj - Kukës

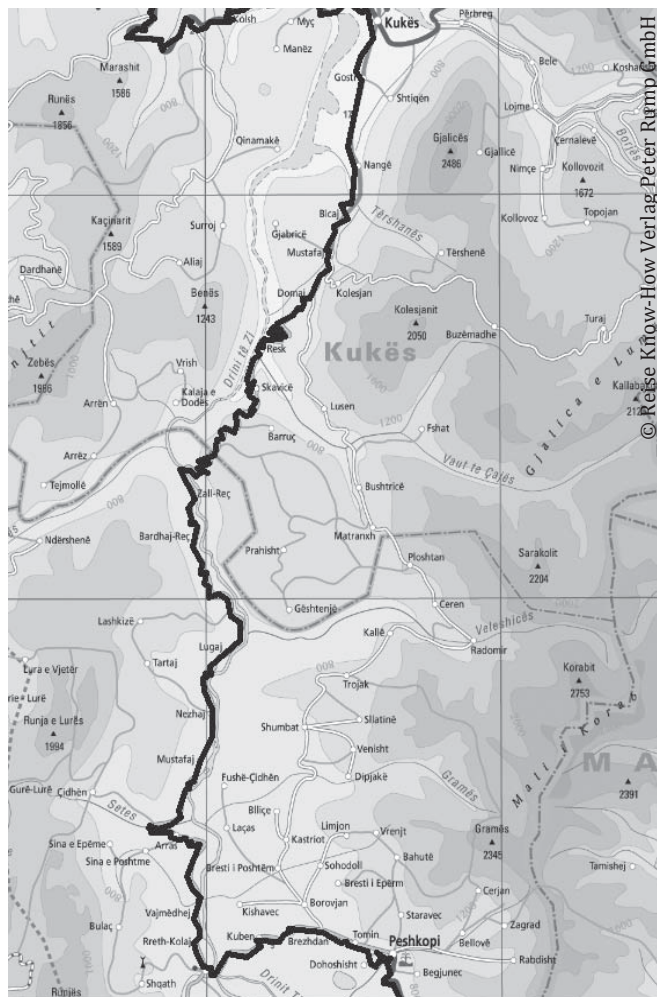
Length: about 80 km, half a day

Description: a route leading through a beautiful valley high above Drinit Të Zi River

Cross a bridge behind Kuben and stop at the restaurant there. Turn right towards Arras where you can stop at another restaurant by the fish hatcheries. Follow your nose for about 20 km up to a bridge. The road goes over it and swings up into a saddle and once more down and up to Mustafaj where tarmac starts to take you to Kukës.

It is a route frequented by Peshkopi – Kukës public service buses as well...





Below Korabit, east Albania

Route: Peshkopi – Kastroit – Trojak – Radomir – Bushtricë – Domaj - Kukës

Length: 100 km, half a day

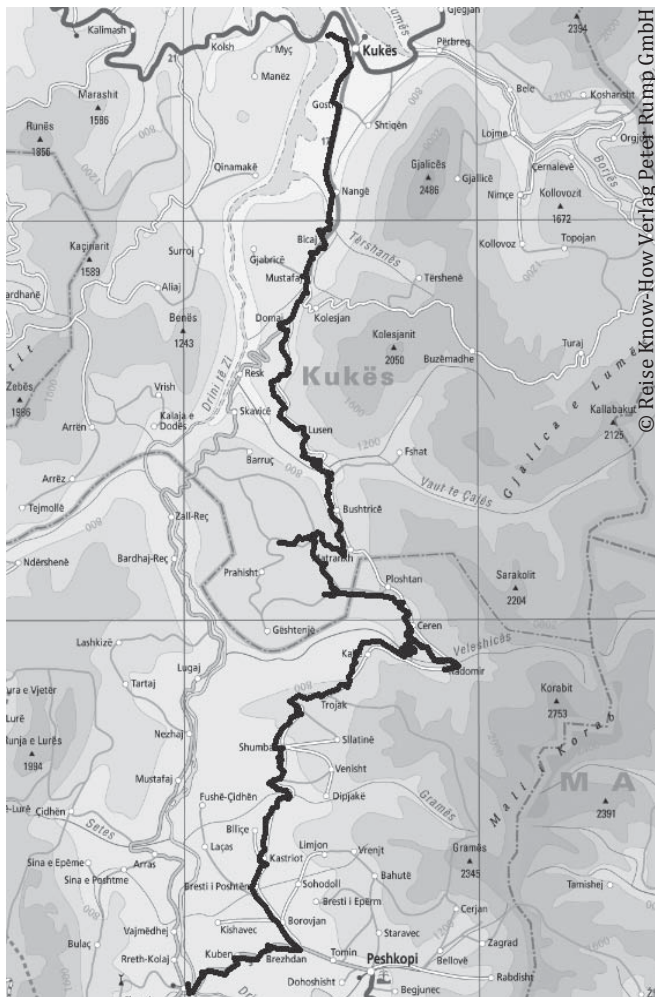
Description: an alternative course of the previous route through the valley of Drinit Të Zi River

There is tarmac from Peshkopi (the name of the town would be something like „Trouty“ in English because „peshk“ means trout) to Kastroit followed by comfortable fine gravel. The road is getting worse behind the bridge over Veleshicës and climbing upland rather steeply. Radomir lies directly under Korabit, a bit off the road, but the two marvellous village cheese works are worth the detour.

The track winds through the mountains and is difficult to find. Try to ask the locals.

I recommend continuing on the sightseeing tarmac road along the left bank of Drinit Të Zi River from Kukës to Fierzë and taking a ferry to Komani. If you prefer terra firma, carry on to Valbonë.





Lurë Lakes, central Albania

Route: Peshkopi – Arras – Lura e Vjetër – Lurë Lakes – Quafa-Murë – Lukan – Selishtë - Peshkopi

Length: 80 km, a whole day, but take two into account

Description: Lurë Lakes are not easily accessed. I recommend taking this course as it is very difficult to ascend the mountains in the reverse direction.

The road starts climbing from the trout hatcheries in Arras over a saddle up to Lura e Vjetër. It is steep and stony, but passable.

There is a pub and a shop in the village. You will probably have to ask the locals to show you the way. It continues upland steeply to the ridge Kukorë e Lurës.

However unlikely you are to loose your way here, you will very likely find it difficult. There is a shortcut down the hillside from the last lake, but I recommend looking for a more northern track through a forest along the hillside. The map shows the shortcut as well as the track. The way from Qafa-Murë does not improve much, but it is well passable.

Have a trout when you return to the bridge below Peshkopi.



Valbonë Valley, north Albania

Route: Bajram Curri – Valbonë – Rragam and back

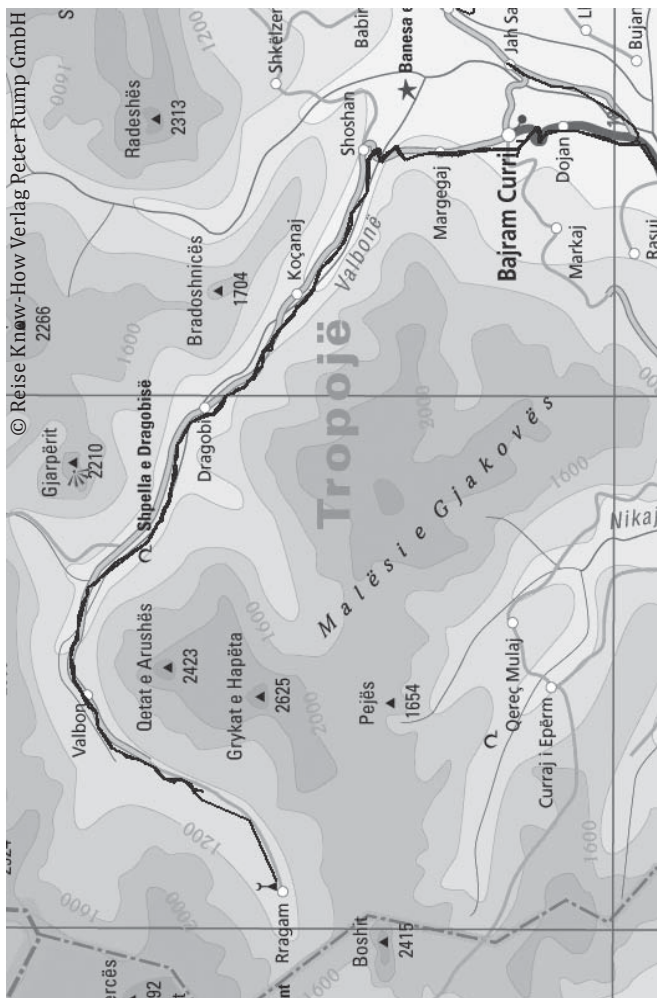
Length: 40 km

Description: one of the most beautiful valleys of Albania

The Valbonë Valley is not what it used to be any more: a fully forgotten, wild and hardly accessible valley. There is a new tarmac road being built to Valbonë and a large camp site above it. Yet the valley retains its beauty and is certainly worth visiting.

Consider leaving Valbonë where the built-up road ends and take the dried-up river bed up to Rragam to bivouac somewhere. You can also venture a hike through the surrounding mountains to a little lake by Cerem, or a transit to Theth on foot. Do not underestimate this tour and plan more days for it.





Bjeshket e Namuna / Prokletije

Route: Koplik – Bogë – Theth – Nicaaj-Shalë – Lotaj – Kir – Prekal - Shkodër

Length: 130 km, two days, but it would be a pity not to stay longer in the mountains

Description: Bjeshket e Namuna / Prokletije, sometimes called the Albanian Alps, is the most beautiful range of mountains in Albania and the most deserted and wildest part of Albania, too.

Set off on the new tarmac road from Koplik to Bogë. Off-road drivers and riders will enjoy the track from Bogë to Theth. You can take a wild canyon trail along the river down to Ndërlysaj. There is a nice waterfall on its tributary and another one called Capri 5 km upstream. The only two families living in the village, the Rroks and the Dedës, are very kind and will gladly accommodate you.

You can try the newly marked hiking paths through the surroundings of Theth and Ndërlysaj.

The onward journey over Nicaaj, Lotaj and Kir is quite demanding even for an off-road car. Be prepared for slow progress and take special care in the canyon below Kir.





Cemit Canyon, north Albania

Route: Koplik – Hot – Rrapshë-Stare – Brojë – Tamarë – Lëpushë – the border by Vermoshit - Gusinje

Length: 120 km

Description: a journey through a deserted corner of Albania, a splendid possibility of entering or leaving the country

Tarmac ends a few kilometres behind the turning off the main road and is replaced by well-passable fine gravel up to the saddle. Wonderful and breathtaking serpentine will bring you down into the Cemit River valley.

Note trout hatcheries above Tamarë and an aqueduct cut through a rock on the right above the river.

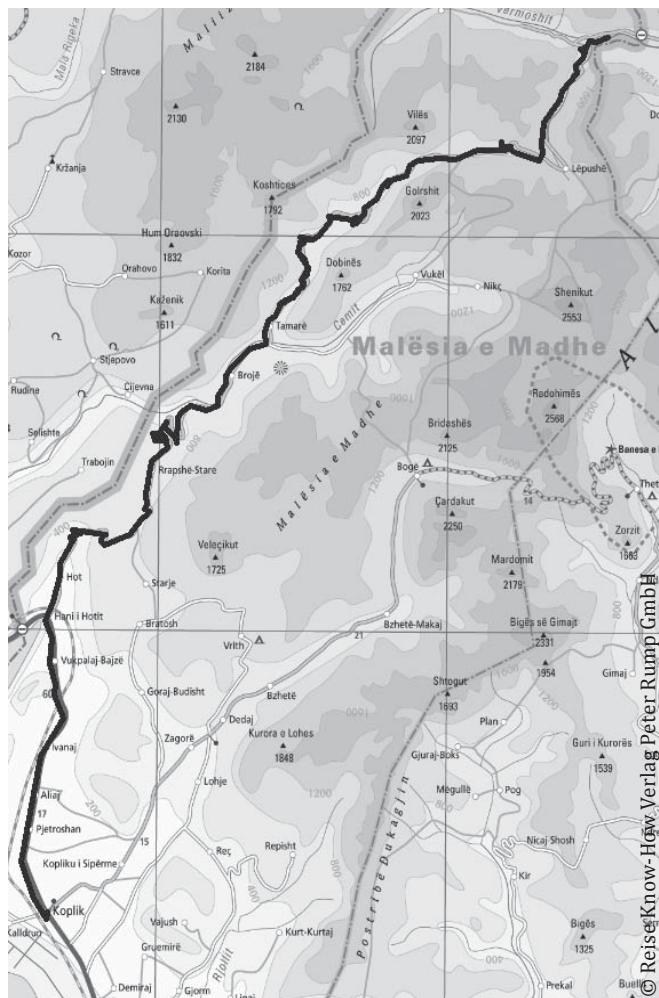
There used to be a reasonable shortcut to Bogë, but I got a word that it had been blocked by a landslide.

The trail climbs over dramatic rocks above the village Selçe, which must have collapsed in some earthquake.

You can stop for a snack in Lëpushë after or before crossing the border to Montenegro. Albanian custom officers are usually friendly; the Montenegrins tend to be rather serious and thorough.

Do not miss the jetting crystal clear river by Gusinje. Ask the town dwellers to get there.





Fierzë – Komani ferry

Although no off-road route, it is such a spectacle that you should not cut it out.

The ferry crosses the dammed river Drinit të Zi. It used to be the only transport possibility between Kukës, Bajram Curri, Kosovo and the coast. Two vessels used to cruise the dam up to four times a day. The new road from Bajram Curri and the highway under construction reduce the dam traffic to a ship a day. There might be another ferry in the afternoon during the summer, but I am not sure. The ferry leaves Fierzë at six in the morning and sets off back from Komani at ten in the morning. Check this timetable with the locals.

The captain of the ferry always transports a tank full of petrol, interestingly enough from the mountains to the coast. The ferry owners then portion the charged money on the captain's walk during the passage.

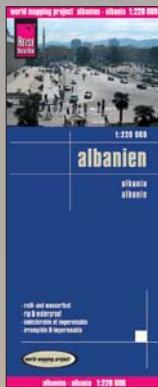


Vocabulary

please	ju lutem	1	nje
thank you	faleminderit	2	dy
conventional greeting	mirëdita	3	tre
farewell	mirupafshim	4	kater
yes	po	5	pesë
no	jo	10	dhjetë
good	mirë		
bad	keq		
today	sot		
tomorrow	nesër		
when?	kur?		
where, which way?	ku?		
how far?	sa larg?		
what is the price?	sa kushton?		
beer	birra		
trout	peshk		
water	uj		
bread	buk		
I don't understand	nu kuptoj		
here	këtu		
there	atje		
left	majtas		
right	djathtas		
directly	drejt		
way	rruga		
bridge	ura		
hill	kodra		
village	fshat		
bless you	shëndet		

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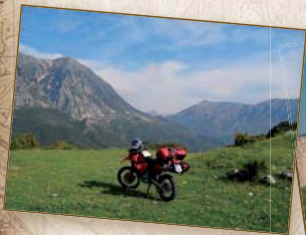


ALBANIA

LAND OF EAGLES

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