

ALBANIA

OFF-ROAD PARADISE

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SECOND, ENLARGED PUBLICATION



OFF-ROAD GUIDE



MCA
MOTORSPORT CLUB ALBANIA

RALLY ALBANIA

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www.rallyalbania.org



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Foto: Marek Vincik

SAMPLE

Foto: Filip Weber

Albania
off-road paradise
Filip Weber
Second, enlarged publication

OFFROAD GUIDE



NO BEER
NO POWER



Foto: Albert Weber

SAMPLE

Written by Filip Weber www.advrider.cz

Photo by Filip Weber, Albert Weber, Michal Benátský, Marek Vincik, Vojta Pihr, Jan Mareš, Edvin Kasimati, Rally Albania Org.

Published by WEBER system s.r.o., www.webersystem.cz.

Printed and bound in the Czech Republic by Jan Mareš, www.potisk.com.

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For digital map versions see Touratech QuoVadis, Fugawi, OziExplorer and other map programmes.

Second published in May 2012.

ISBN: 978-80-260-2136-0

Introduction

Do you know how to say “shovel” in Albanian? “Lopata”! Even if you don’t know how to say it in Albanian, be sure to throw one in the car when you go, or better yet take two and make sure they’re really solid ones.

Albania has changed dramatically since my first visit in 1999. The towns have been renovated and new main roads, new bridges as well as a new highway to the north have been built. You can catch a mobile phone signal almost everywhere and the stores are full of goods. Only the mountains have remained the same – or maybe they have become even more desolate as time goes by. Young people are moving to the towns, mountain villages are depopulating and no one maintains the mountain roads. Illegal lumberjacks use IFA trucks to haul wood and the condition of the roads is getting worse and worse. Deep ruts, which are impassable with a regular off-road vehicle, are common. Roads are often washed away by water or covered by landslides. Each year after winter, more and more mountain roads are impassable. But there are still many beautiful, passable routes that lead to the most beautiful places in the mountains. The viewpoints of magnificent mountain lakes and majestic rock formations take your breath away. I would like this guide to lead you through the most beautiful places in Albania, places that I have fallen in love with and that I like to visit again and again. Don’t believe ugly stories that people in Central Europe tell to scare each other. Forget the legends about bloody vendettas and hold-ups. All the same, you can never be too careful and you’ll be wise to camp close to residential areas and greet and chat with the locals when you arrive. You might even bring them a small gift, like beer, a knife, an axe or cigarettes for adults and chocolate, coloured pencils, colouring books or English children’s books for kids. Albanians are very hospitable; I have always been polite and respectful to them and they have been very kind in return.

~~SAMPLE~~

I’d like to thank all the friends who helped and supported me. I’d especially like to thank my wife Zdeňka for her patience and Edvin Kasimati, director of Rally Albania, who was a great inspiration to me.

Filip Weber - Beba, filip@weber.cz, www.advrider.cz

Routes

Despite the fact that new roads are being built all over Albania and that most of the main roads are new, mountains roads are in bad shape. Expect a very slow travel speed. Mountain roads are unmaintained and damaged by IFA trucks hauling illegally timbered wood.

The routes described here are passable only with an all-terrain vehicle or on an Enduro motorcycle. The roads are ancient, evidently built with rocks during the reign of the Turkish empire and originally intended for donkeys and people on foot.

The most interesting roads are inland, where detailed maps are lacking, there have never been any signposts and it is difficult to communicate with locals. The roads are unmaintained and it's not unusual to encounter collapsed bridges.

If you can, bring small gifts for children: coloured pencils, pencils, pads of paper. Adults will be pleased by gifts of local beer, an axe, or a pocket knife. Life is truly hard in the mountains.

GPS and military maps are useful for navigation, but they are not essential. I recommend the Reise Know How map (www.reise-know-how.de), which is evidently the only readily available usable map.

But it's best to ask the locals, who are always willing to advise you.

Road passability changes in relation to the weather and the most recent winter. A road that is passable in dry conditions can change into a muddy hellhole after rain. Likewise, some roads that I drove through one year became completely impassable after winter due to landslides.

Always travel with a good supply of emergency tools (a spade, pick axe and wench for the vehicle) and allow extra time.

Routes marked with the Albania Rally logo were part of this event, which is the most difficult European cross country rally.



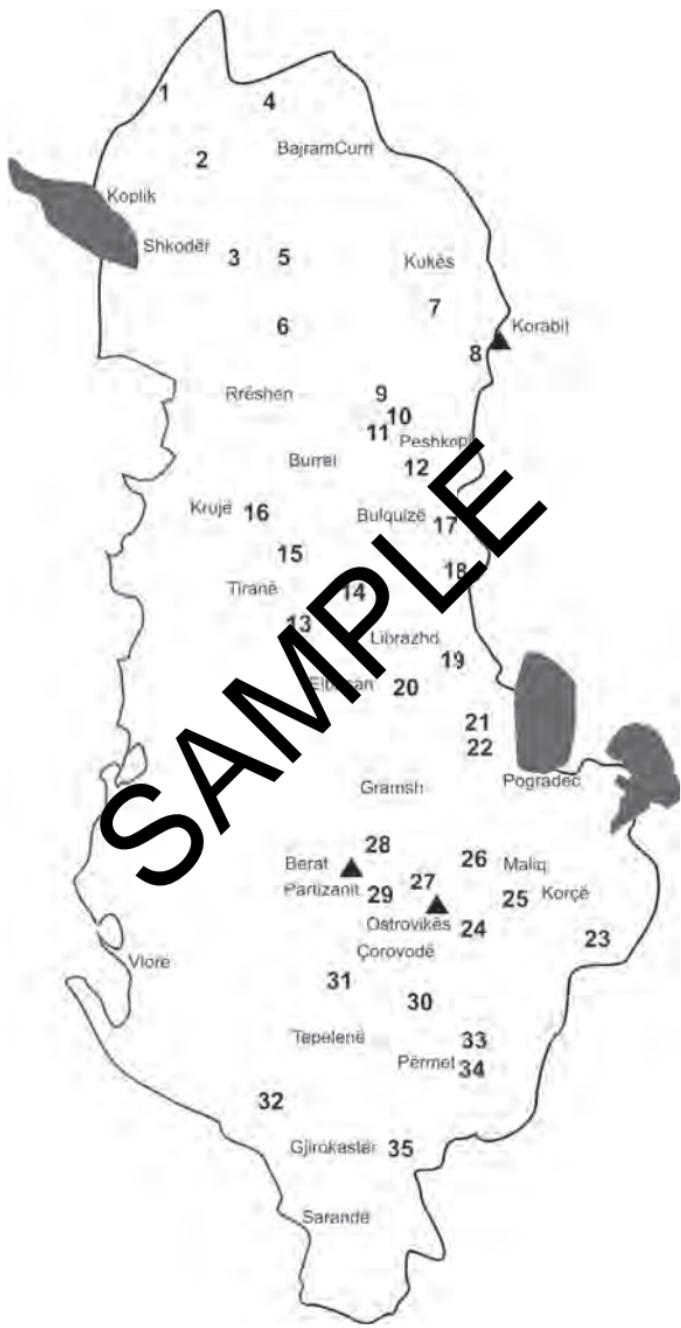
Foto: Albert Weber

Engine driver from Pérrenjas.

Recommended Route

A two-week travelling route across Albania. The route starts at a crossing point from Montenegro and terminates by Lake Ohrid. I have chosen routes that are passable for loaded travel Enduros and travel off-road cars. None of the routes requires a winch or mud tyres. But be cautious, the situation can change after rain or after winter.

Name	Order
Cermi Canyon - Vermosh, north Albania	1
Bjeshkët e Namuna mountains/ Prokletije, north Albania	2
Fierzë - Koman ferry, north Albania	3
Valbonë valey, north Albania	4
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Drinit të Zi valey, central Albania	7
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Elbasan - Bulqizë, central Albania	14
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Guri i Kamjes, southern Albania, only switch from main road	22



North Albania

1. Cem Canyon – Vermosh

Route: Koplik – Hot – Rrapshë-Stare – Brojë – Tamarë – Lëpushë – the border at Vermosh – Gusinje

Length: 120 km

Driven: Toyota Hilux, KTM LC4 Adv

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

The tarmac ends a few kilometres past the turn-off from the main road and is replaced by well-passable fine gravel up to the saddle. Wonderful and breathtaking serpentine curves will bring you down into the Cem River valley.

There is a small brewery in Tamarë. 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 word that it has been blocked by a landslide.

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

You can stop for a snack in Lepushë before or after crossing the border to Montenegro. In Vermosh I can recommend the campground and basic accommodations. Albanian custom officers are usually friendly; the Montenegrins tend to be rather serious and thorough.

Do not miss the strong crystal clear river springs near Gusinje – “Oko Skakavice” and “Alipašini izvory”. Ask the locals how to get there.

2Vermosh1	N42 20.314 E19 26.120
Tamara	N42 27.698 E19 33.674
Dobry	N42 29.930 E19 35.190
Lepushi	N42 31.927 E19 43.071
2Vermosh	N42 34.768 E19 44.551
Border	N42 35.011 E19 46.488
OkoSkakavica	N42 30.711 E19 50.150

A sample map from the 'Atlas of the Czech Republic' showing the Malá Sázava River area. The map includes labels for towns like Dobříš, Vráž, Dobříšská Lhota, Brod, Cíferna, and Orlík, and mountains like M. e Kostelec, M. e Dobříns, and M. e Brdiště. A large black diagonal watermark reading 'SAMPLE' is overlaid across the map.



2. Bjeshkët e Namuna / Prokletije Mountains

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

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

Description: The Albanian Alps – Bjeshkët e Namuna / Prokletije – is the most beautiful mountain range in Albania and at the same time the most deserted and wildest part of the country.

Set off on the new tarmac road from Koplik to Bogë. Off-road drivers and riders will enjoy the track from Bogë to Theth. The route goes up over the Tërthorë Pass 2000 m above sea level. You can take a wild canyon trail following the river downstream to Nderlysaj. There is a nice waterfall on its tributary and another one called Capri 5 km upstream. The Rrok and Dede families in the village are very kind and will gladly provide you with accommodations.

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

The onward journey over Nicaj, Lotaj and Kir is quite demanding even for an off-road vehicle. Be prepared for slow progress and be especially careful in the canyon below Kir.

Points of interest: The Cave of Puci, Bogë. The cave is 1,087 meters above sea level. It is 5 by 5 and has several floors in a karstic ensemble which connects to another cave, that of Husi, located nearby. The central area of the cave consists of 5 floors which are linked to one another through vertical shafts and sloping galleries. The cave is composed of calcite concretions. Both tourists and speleologists will find it worth visiting. They can find accommodation in houses characteristic of the region in Theth and Bogë.

Pass	N42 23.448 E19 43.023
THETH-BRIDGE	N42 23.149 E19 46.809
PowerStation	N42 21.488 E19 46.865
Ndërhyshaj	N42 21.242 E19 46.546
NICAJ	N42 18.255 E19 47.814
Cave	N42 10.698 E19 43.185

33. Frashëri

Route: Përmet – Frashëri and back

Length: 60 km

Ridden: 2007 – 2011 – KTM LC4 Adv, Toyota Hilux

Difficulty: Easy gravel road

Description: Easy route through mountains and forests

Leave Përmet in the direction of Tepelenë and continue for about 9 km till the turn-off to Çorovodë and Frashëri (2Frasheri3). There is another turn-off to the left towards Çorovodë after 6 km, but you need to keep going straight on the road to Frashëri (2Frasheri4), which will start winding soon to climb up to the forest belt. It is a nature preserve where Albanians like to go picnicking. Nevertheless, a 4WD is a must here.

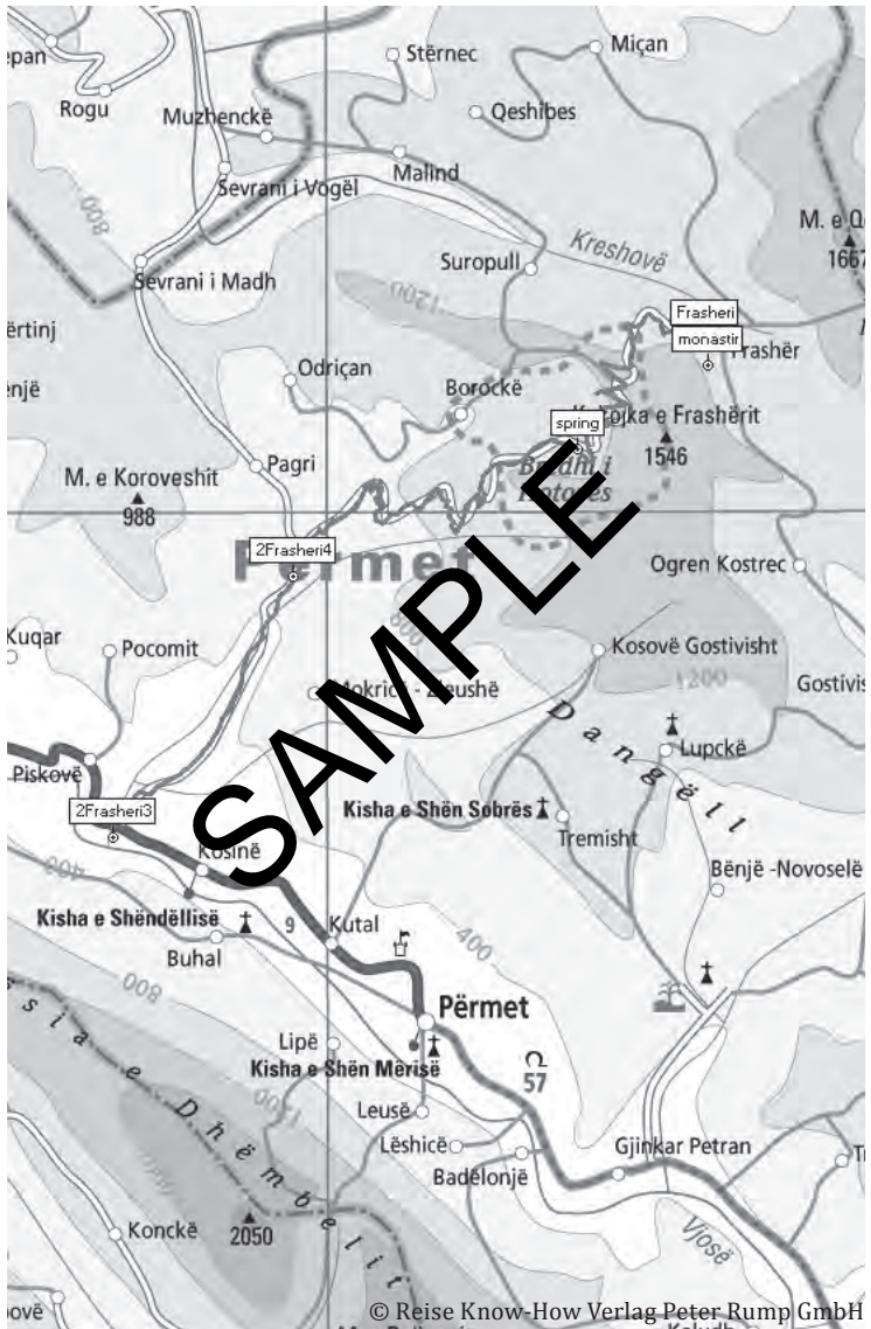
I do not recommend continuing from Frashëri to Luarasi – Qafezzi. Next to the underground military hospital above Frashëri there is a mass of fallen rock that can be passed through only on a motorbike and even that is extremely risky.

I recommend the hot sulphuric spring (hotspring) behind Përmet.

Points of interest: The village is named after the Frashëri brothers, prominent figures of the Albanian National Renaissance movement.

There is a museum and a Bektashi monastery in the village. The remains of an underground military hospital can be seen below a cliff on the opposite bank of the valley. The locals will gladly let you into the museum and the monastery if you ask them to. Ask for Pandy or his son Ilji, who have the keys.

2Frasheri3	N40 16.313 E20 16.813
2Frasheri4	N40 19.261 E20 19.508
Frasheri	N40 21.953 E20 25.613
monastir	N40 21.652 E20 25.658
spring	N40 20.709 E20 23.719
hotspring	N40 14.605 E20 25.926



34. Hot springs to Frashëri

Route: Përmet – Gostivishi – Frashëri

Length: 90 km

Ridden: 2007 – BMW 650 Dakar; 2008, 2010, 2011 – Yamaha TT600RE

Difficulty: Frequent landslides on the route, only for motorbikes. A lot of mud after rain.

Description: The route begins at the hot springs (Hotspring) about 10 km from Përmet towards Leskovik. Watch for a distinct rock marked by a cross (Hotspring) to find the turn-off.

Going upstream along the river on a good tarmac road, you will reach a Turkish bridge (bridge_otoman) where there are thermal springs. It is a real pleasure to have a bath there.

Look for a pillar from a torn-down bridge about 700 m below the Turkish bridge. Wade the river above the pillar (rivercross) and take the steep uphill track next to the pillar. It is rather muddy up to Gostivishi and very beaten by trucks.

You have to turn left before Gostivishi to the bridge over the gorge (bridge_fras)

The way beyond Gostivishi is often blocked by landslides (Landslip) which may be bulldozed through in some summers. It is about 10 km up to the next village, Ogren. There is a hard-surface road from the saddle to Frashëri.

From Frashëri you can take a comfortable hard-surface back to Përmet.

Continuing from Frashëri to Luarasi – Qafëzez cannot be recommended. Next to the underground military hospital above Frashëri there is a mass of fallen rock that can be passed through only on a motorbike and even that is extremely risky.

There is a tarmac road going to the hot springs and a new bridge is under construction, so there will most probably soon be a new road to Ersekë.

Points of interest: My friends have kayaked through the Len-gatice river gorge, which ends by the hot springs.



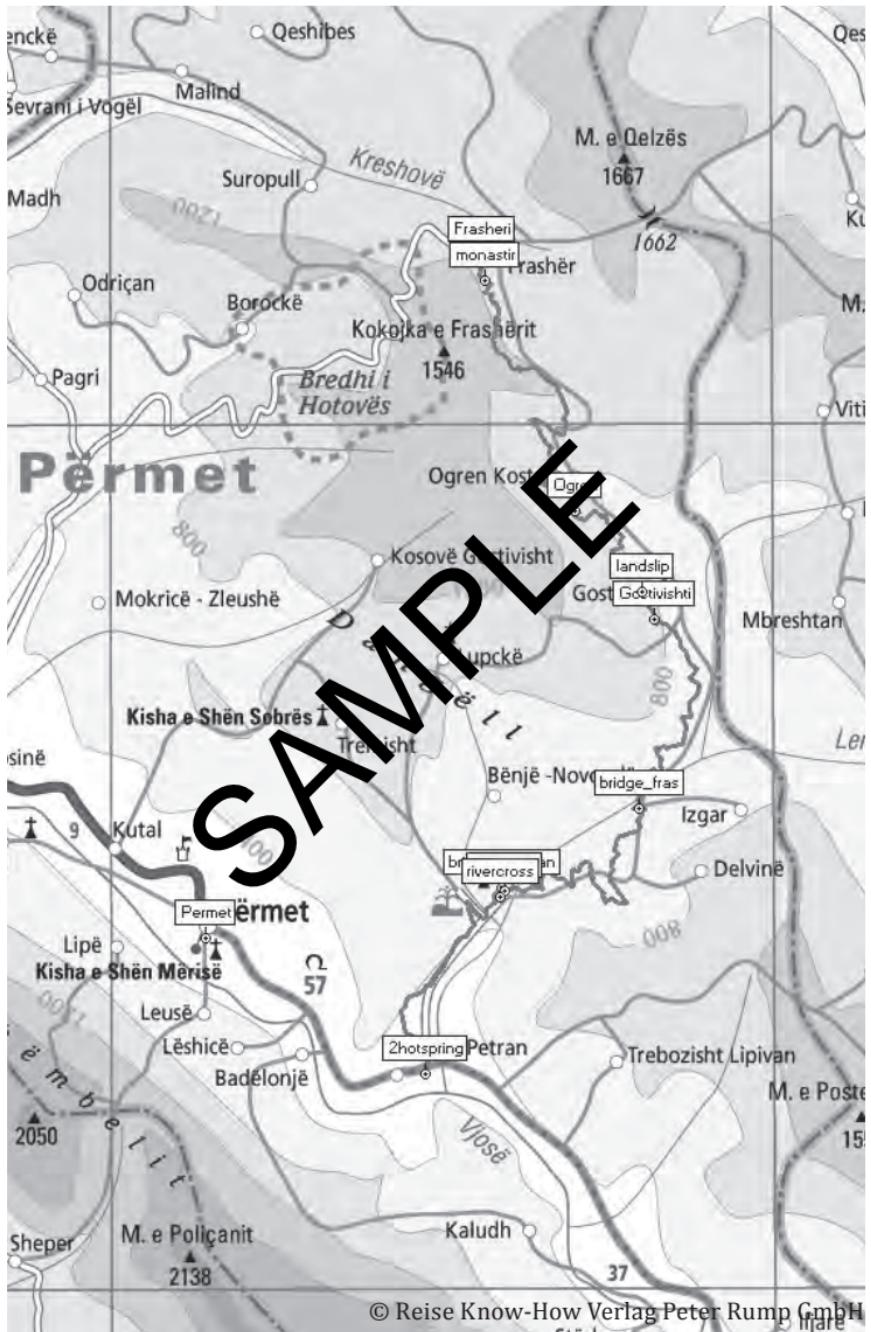
*The monastery custodian in Frashëri.
Coat-of-arms at the monastery door in Frashëri.*





Turkish bridge by the hot springs at Përmet

2hotspring	N40 12.491 E20 24.737
bridge_otoman	N40 14.629 E20 25.890
Hotspring	N40 14.605 E20 25.926
rivercross	N40 14.531 E20 25.870
bridge_fras	N40 15.545 E20 27.967
Gostivishti	N40 17.728 E20 28.208
Landslip	N40 18.053 E20 28.015
Ogren	N40 18.992 E20 27.004
Monastir	N40 21.652 E20 25.658
Frasher	N40 21.953 E20 25.613



36. Nëmerçkë mountain range

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

Length: About 80 km, one day

Ridden: 2006 BMW GS650 Dakar, 2011 – Yamaha TT600RE Anuch

Difficulty: A fine-gravel road, only from Zrej to Labova there is a more difficult stretch across the saddle.

Description: Take the main road between the Kakavia border-crossing and Tepelenë and turn right (2Nemerstika) into a river canyon in the direction of Poliçan. By the big trees at the end of the canyon you will see a road turning right in the direction towards the Greek border, which will take you over a bridge after a while. The track is covered with fine gravel. You will pass through several villages with churches and beautiful trees. Reaching the top of the valley, the way goes steeply downhill to a stream with a 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 church and a pub on the square. You will pass a bunker when leaving Poliçan and a World War II memorial on a saddle going on to Topovë. The highland plateau past the following saddle resembles plateaux on Crete. The final descent will bring you down from an unbelievable height to the main valley. Keep to the left and you will come to Labova and then back to the main road over a bridge. There might be a new border crossing opened between Sopik in Albania and Pogoniani in Greece. However, it might be open only for local residents.

Points of interest: The area is populated by ethnic Greeks. Over the last few years, the majority of houses, which had been in ruins, have been repaired. The orchards and vineyards have also been renewed. Heavy battles took place in this area during WWII.

There is a large plain with old trees nearby the village of Libohovë. The trees are 32 m tall, up to 220 cm in diameter and are up to 220 years old.



Foto: Filip Weber

Villagers.
Monument commemorating WWII fights.



Foto: Filip Weber

2Nemerstika	N40 00.084 E20 12.870
SELECKE	N40 06.145 E20 18.104
HILOME	N40 04.050 E20 20.786
CATISTE	N40 01.867 E20 20.597
BROD (river cross)	N40 04.310 E20 24.319
SOPIK	N40 05.233 E20 24.686
SKORE	N40 06.430 E20 22.014
Poliçan	N40 08.045 E20 20.981
POMNIK (monument)	N40 09.937 E20 18.677
NDERAN	N40 10.136 E20 16.875
ZREJ	N40 11.525 E20 13.564
SEDLO (pass)	N40 11.280 E20 11.926
LABOVE	N40 12.423 E20 08.196
BENZIN (petrol)	N40 12.542 E20 05.340



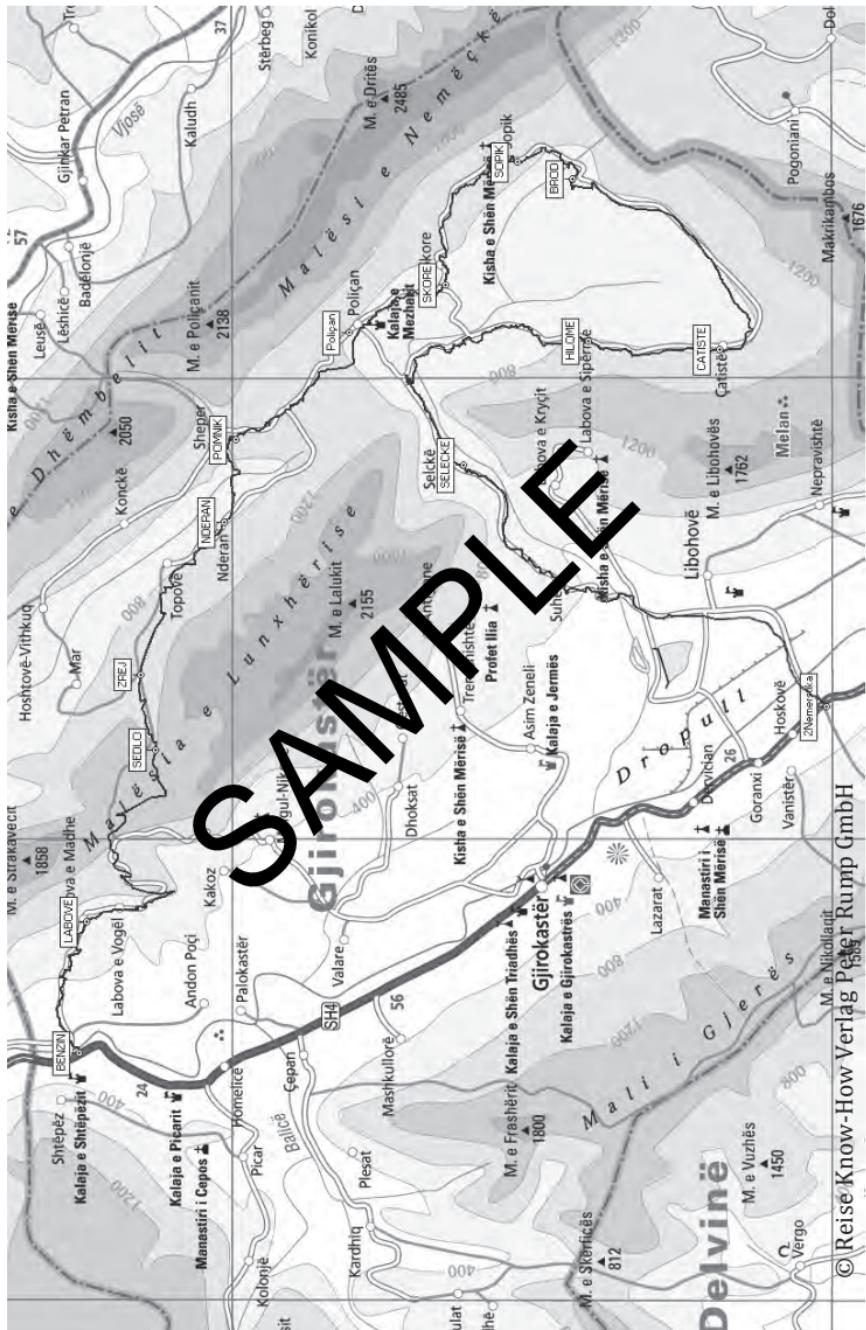




Foto: www.expeditioncars.cz

*Still life with a piggy, mountains in North Albania.
School break, North Albania.*



Foto: www.expeditioncars.cz



Foto: www.expeditioncars.cz

After morning grass mowing, Theth.



Foto: www.expeditioncars.cz

Village symbiosis, North Albania.
Horses know their way from the meadows, Radomire.



Foto: www.expeditioncars.cz



Foto: www.expeditioncars.cz

*Wood for the winter, Theth.
Beggar Shkodër.*



Foto: www.expeditioncars.cz



Foto: www.expeditioncars.cz

Goat herdsman, Roman Lake.
Slaughterhouse, Peshkopi.



Foto: www.expeditioncars.cz



Foto: Marek Vincik





Foto: Filip Weber

In Dangerous Mountains.
Ford under hot springs close to Përmet.



Foto: Filip Weber



*Recovering on the way from the springs to Frashëri.
Niq, Frashëri.*

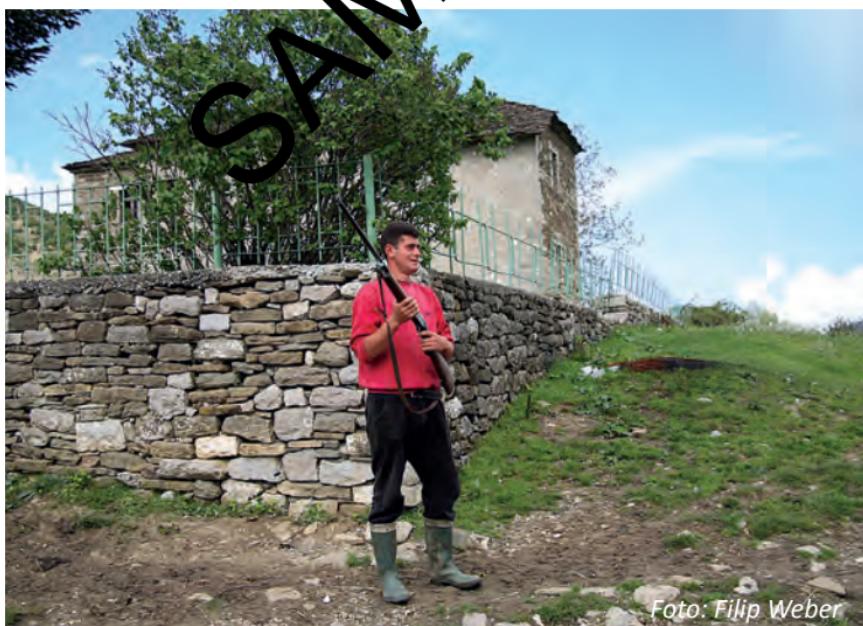




Foto: Filip Weber

Turkish bridge by the hot springs.
A mill in Bjeshkët e Namuna / Prokletije mountain range.

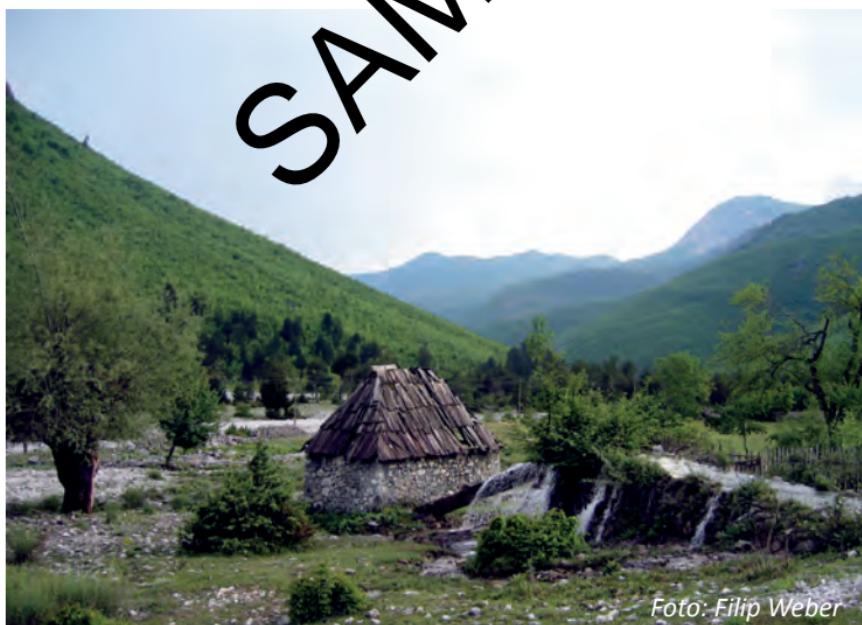


Foto: Filip Weber



*On a ferry between Fierzë - Koman.
Nderhycaj village.*

SAMPLE





Foto: Filip Weber

*Ploughing in Theth, aulla in the background.
Korabit, the highest Albanian mountain, 2753 m.*



Foto: Filip Weber



Foto: Filip Weber

Ares Lakes.

On a way from Ares to Fushë Lurë.

SAMPLE



Foto: Filip Weber



Foto: Filip Weber

Water Lily lake.
Yellow water lily in the Water Lily Lake.



Foto: Filip Weber



Foto: Filip Weber

Trickeyt Lakes.

Saddle at 1984 m above sea level in the Kreshtës mountain range.



Foto: Filip Weber



Foto: Filip Weber

*In the Ostrovicēs mountains.
View of Ostrovicēs from the saddle opposite from Gjerbēs.*



Foto: Filip Weber



Foto: Vojta Pihr

Copper mines near Gurth Spaç.



Foto: Vojta Pihr



Foto: Albert Weber

*Foot bridge across the Voskopojës River.
In the navigation stage of the Albania Rally.*



Foto: Jan Mareš



Foto: Filip Weber

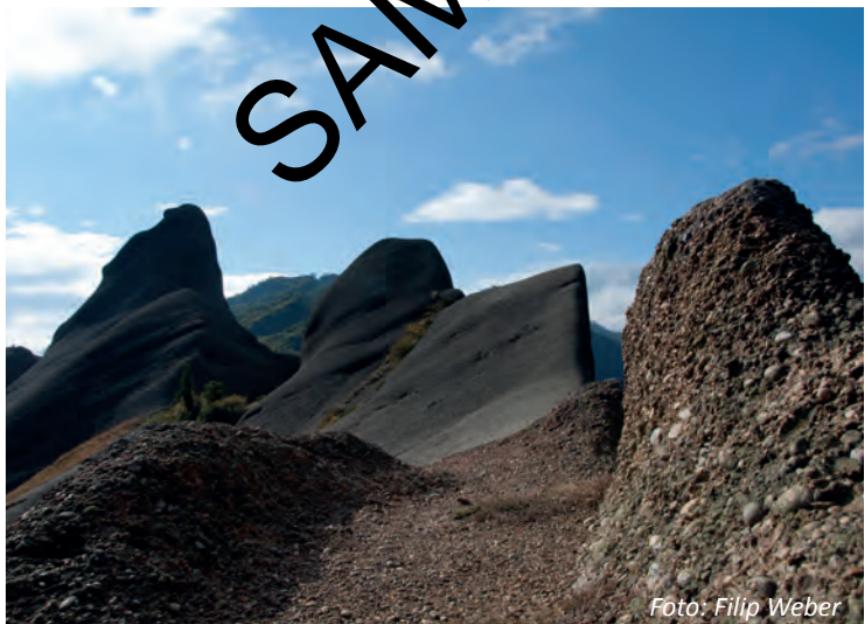
Dolës mountains.
Perrenjas.



Foto: Albert Weber



sample
Foto: Albert Weber



sample
Foto: Filip Weber

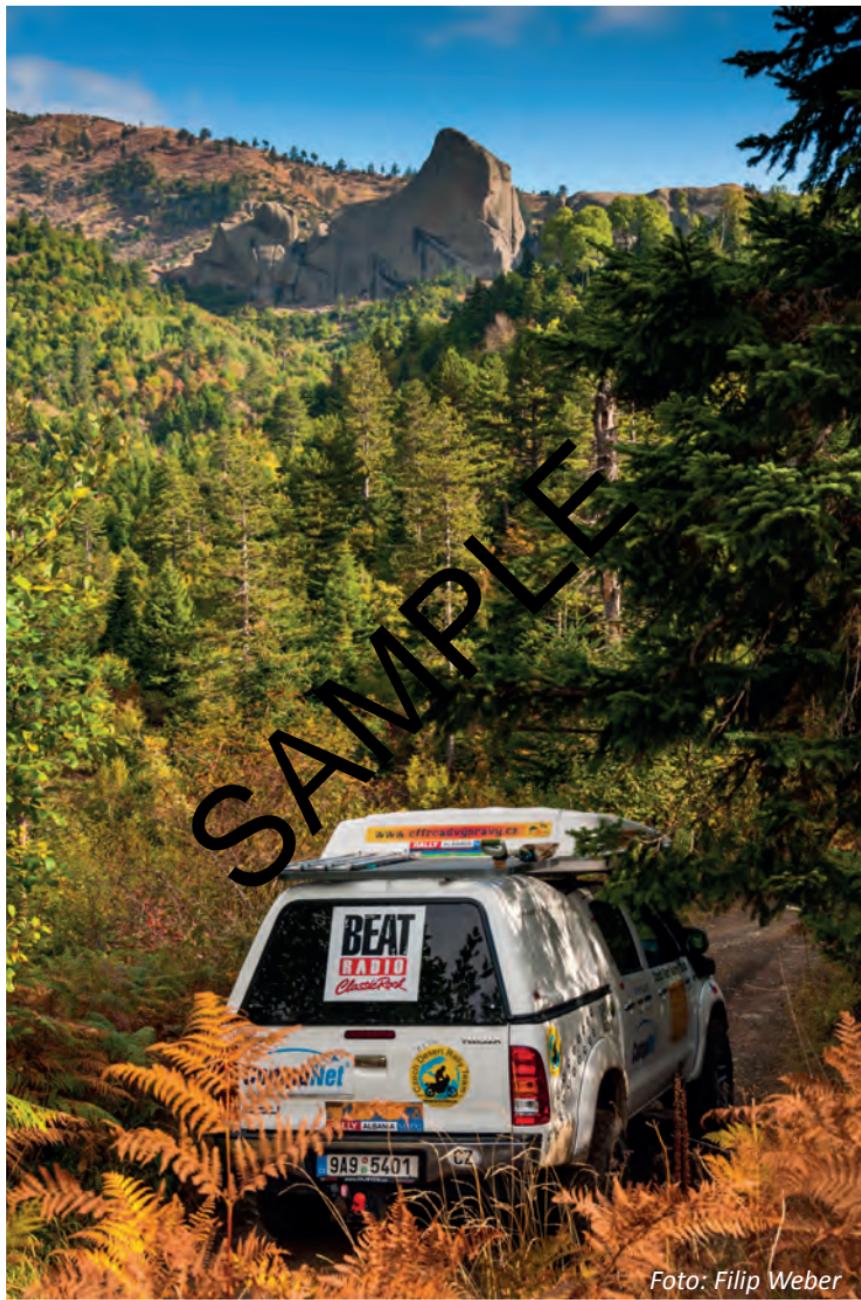


Foto: Filip Weber

Guri i Capit.



Foto: Albert Weber

*On the Voskoppia – Tresovë route.
Saddle between Devoll and Gjerbes.*



Foto: Albert Weber



Foto: Filip Weber

A favourite dish – baked sheep brains.
Road to Fushë Lurë.



Foto: Filip Weber



*A village woman on her daily pilgrimage.
Sign on the former gate to the Frashëri monastery.*



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 sweat-shirts 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 here 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!

Albania – Mountain lakes

“Lakes in the Kreshtës Mountains? I have no idea how to get there!” says Edvin Kasimati, the director of Rally Albania and one of the best experts on the wild Albanian mountains. He spends months wandering around the mountains on his all-terrain motorcycle to prepare new routes for the most difficult European cross-country rally. “It’s the remotest part of Albania. In the 1950s English and Yugoslavian enemy agents sent to fight the communist regime were dropped by parachute there,” continues Edvin over a Tirana beer and delicious roasted trout, an Albanian speciality. We met about two weeks after the Arras rally at the fish-ponds. The lakes have been on my mind for a long time, so I packed satellite images, military maps, KTM EXC 450, a tent, a sleeping bag, and we set out to explore with my friend Roman sporting the same gear.

Kreshtës Mountains

The Kreshtës Mountains are divided into several valleys all of which share a ridgeline with Micëut, the highest mountain in the range at 2,101 m. In each of the mountain valleys there are one or more lakes just below the crest. The lakes are of glacial origin, but their water level was artificially raised by the construction of dams around 1985. Today, we may only guess why this was done. Most probably, the dams were intended as a natural reservoir of water for dry years. The water is crystal clear and the lakes are home to newts, swarms of tadpoles and tiny fish. The lakes are surrounded by spectacular mountain meadows full of yellow and blue flowers. Shepherds graze their sheep flocks there.

The purpose of our trip wasn’t only to visit the lakes, but also to find a route for off-road vehicles and to document it. I am not worried cars or motorcycles would cause much damage to this land. A car or a motorcycle won’t do much damage in places where all-terrain trucks carrying illegally logged wood have passed. Driving on difficult rocky trails with muddy ruts and climbing rocky patches and breakneck slopes requires a good amount of

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