



Overland adventure

As Intrepid Travel and sustainable operator Byway team up to offer flight-free trips, **Diana Jarvis** finds the joy is in the journey

Some people just love travelling. I don't mean sipping limoncello in an Italian backstreet cafe or soaking up the sun in Mauritius, I mean the act of travelling – sitting on trains, buses or boats and watching the landscape roll by. As I stare out of the TGV window, marvelling at the mountainous peaks of Mont Blanc and Aiguille du Midi on day two of my five-day journey, I realise I am one of those people.

I'm not the only one: heightened awareness of the climate crisis, plus a rising interest in slow travel, means the market for overland holidays is growing. Sustainably minded operators Byway and Intrepid Travel have therefore teamed up to offer clients Byway-organised flight-free routes to the starting point of Intrepid's European tours.

I'm travelling from London to Tirana for the start of Intrepid's new Albania Expedition, launched last month, and the route that Byway has tailored for me goes through France and Italy, with overnight stops in Chambéry, Turin and Bari, before boarding the overnight boat to Durrës on the Albanian coast.

THE JOURNEY

The client's ticket comes as an Interrail pass with a QR code, which is stored in the Interrail app. Byway plans routes on high-speed train lines for convenience, but deliberately incorporates stopovers in lesser-known places rather than major transport hubs (and busy tourist destinations) such as Paris or Milan.

That's how I end up in Chambéry, with its tantalising bars and heaven-scented boulangeries. It's only a brief taster of the ➤

Mountains in
Tragias, Albania

PICTURE: Diana Jarvis

DESTINATIONS

SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL | EUROPE



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Sunrise in Durrës; Alpine scenery between Chambéry and Turin; Bari street vendors selling handmade orecchiette pasta; taking souvenir snapshots of the journey PICTURES: Diana Jarvis; Shutterstock/Andrew Mayovskyy

place, though, and I find myself wishing I could stay longer in all of my en route stopovers.

In Turin, I book onto a two-hour walking tour with guide Melissoula. She takes us from the Cattedrale di San Giovanni Battista and Porta Palatino via backstreets to the Mercato Centrale and shares fascinating facts about the city's history. I'm dead on my feet by the end, which proves the ideal preparation for the eight-hour rail journey between Turin and Bari the following day.

TRAVELLING LIGHT

Before clients set off, Byway makes them a bespoke Journey Guide – a digital itinerary accessed via their smartphone. It contains all they need to know, including links to seat reservations, hotel bookings and tips for where to eat and what to do at each stop. It's how I know to buy my Paris Metro ticket in the Eurostar buffet car and, more importantly, it's how I know I must try *rapini* (turnip pasta) and *moscato* (local sweet white wine) in Bari.

Throughout the journey, clients can access Byway's 24-hour support via WhatAspp. This is useful not only for emergencies, but for general queries, such as where to leave my suitcase while I meander along the waterfront promenade in Bari until it's time to board the boat.

There's something excitingly retro about embarking a huge vessel to another country. Check-in to my overnight ferry is easy and I'm assigned a cabin and tucked up

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ready for sleep well before departure. My first sighting of Albania is just after sunrise. Despite the industrial port in the foreground, Durrës and its backdrop of folding mountains look resplendent in the morning light.

SMOOTH ARRIVAL

I'm out sipping the first (of many) Albanian espressos within 10 minutes of arriving. I then transfer to Tirana by public bus and check in to Hotel Capital, where the metaphoric baton is passed from Byway to Intrepid and the next stage of the trip begins.

I'm here a day earlier than the rest of the Intrepid group, so I have the chance to explore the monumental Skanderbeg Square, become acquainted with Albanian history at the National Museum and catch the sunset from the Pyramid of Tirana before the others arrive.

It may have taken me five days to get here, but having seen the landscapes change and sampled ➤

ASK THE operator

Paul Conroy,
partnerships manager,
Byway



“Intrepid has a common focus on purpose-led sustainable travel and off-the-beaten path adventures.

Offering flight-free alternatives to Intrepid customers will open up a whole new market for our services – for customers who are already travelling on a sustainable and responsible product and want to reduce their climate impact even further by arriving flight-free.

“It's also really impactful for us to partner with other brands to empower the travel industry as a whole to bring flight-free into the mainstream, making it easier for people to travel more sustainably.

“Travel agents selling Intrepid trips will now have more flexible travel options to offer their customers, particularly with the use of our trip-building technology that makes it simple to book bespoke flight-free holidays.”

DESTINATIONS

SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL | EUROPE



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Varied and colourful wildlife can be found across Divjakë-Karavasta National Park; host Dhurata serves pancakes with honey; the National Museum in Tirana, Albania **PICTURES:** Diana Jarvis; Shutterstock/posztos

the culinary and cultural shifts along the way, I've relaxed into holiday mode and my mind is already open to the serendipity of adventure.

SUSTAINABLE ALBANIA

In the past year or so, Albania has been moving from an under-the-radar destination to hot holiday choice. Our guide Elton Caushi was a child in communist Albania. He's a huge ambassador for the country and welcomes this rise in foreign tourism, so long as it's "done right".

Intrepid has crested that wave with its new 12-day itinerary, taking in some of the most awe-inducing parts of the country. It has also collaborated with Meet (the Mediterranean Experience of EcoTourism) Network to ensure that visitors experience some conservation efforts, including those in Divjakë-Karavasta National Park.

This natural marine lagoon is home to the Dalmatian pelican, a species under threat, as well as greater flamingos and thousands of other bird species. We glide among the waterways in a small motorboat in the early morning, spotting flashes of kingfishers and egrets, before cycling 12 miles along the strip of land between the lagoon and the sea in time for a home-cooked lunch and coffee-reading (like tea leaf fortune-telling, but with coffee) at the eccentric dwelling of the Adriatik family.

In Tragias we hike up a mountain at sunset and arrive at a shepherd's hut, belonging to Sofo and Dhurata,

“As dusk descends, we watch Sofo put his turkeys and goats to bed before serenading us on his harmonic wooden flute

who welcome us with homemade cinnamon-and-honey-infused *raki* and celebratory sweet treats. As dusk descends, we watch Sofo put his turkeys and goats to bed before he serenades us on his harmonic wooden flute, while Dhurata brings us grilled goat, aubergines, peppers and freshly made cheeses for dinner – plus plenty more homemade *raki*.

Our last day is spent exploring the 'town of a thousand windows', Berat, known for its tiered Ottoman townhouses. A final lunch at Bunker Farm (as the name suggests, there are many former bunkers on site) is a chance to bid the group – and Elton – farewell over delicious platters of cheeses, homegrown salad, 'old goat' hamburgers and fresh honeycomb for dessert.

The rest of the group make their way to the airport while I head to Albania's wild north for further mountain fun, knowing that there are plenty more memories to be made on the slow route home. **TW**

ALBANIA SELLING TIPS

🌱 Highlight how affordable Albania is as a destination. Dinner for two – with drinks – for example, costs £20-£25.

🌱 There is plenty for active travellers, from hiking opportunities in spectacular mountains to kayaking in crystal-clear rivers and lakes.

🌱 History lovers will enjoy learning about the country's past, which spans the ancient Illyrians, Romans, Byzantines and, more recently, communists.

BOOK IT

Intrepid Travel offers a nine-day Albania Expedition from £1,255 including accommodation, selected meals, activities and transport. Get there with **Byway** on a five-day train journey with a sleeper ferry to Durrës from £853. intrepidtravel.com byway.travel