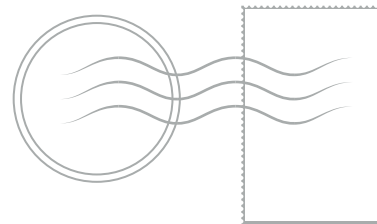


POSTCARD

Tirana



Albania's beaches are garnering attention, but its capital has an intriguing story to tell too, discovers **Alice Barnes-Brown**

Albania has everyone talking. In 2025, the country received a record 12 million tourists, many of whom head to the budget-friendly beaches of the Albanian Riviera. However, I was keen to see another side to this Balkan nation so, during a stay in seaside city Durrës, I hopped on a 40-minute coach journey to capital Tirana – recently added to Tui's city-break portfolio.

Stepping off in Skanderbeg Square – a 90,000sq m piazza centred around a statue of medieval folk hero Skanderbeg, who led a long resistance against the Ottomans – Tirana's vibrant atmosphere was clear. A rainbow of paving slabs beneath my feet consisted of stones from different parts of Albania, and young urbanites sipped iced coffee under the country's giant crimson flag.

To learn more about Tirana's Ottoman past, I passed under the portico of 18th-century Et'hem Bey Mosque. Its modest exterior belies the prayer hall inside, resplendent with frescoes of symmetrical vines, waterfalls, bridges and Arabic calligraphy.

The nearby House of Leaves has a suitably botanical feel with pink walls covered in creeping plants, but its innocuous looks are deceiving: this 1930s building served as the headquarters of the Sigurimi, Albania's secret police during the communist dictatorship from 1944 to 1991. Today, its rooms are stocked with surveillance devices, lists of known dissidents and harrowing visuals that show how Albania's apparatus of terror operated.

The subterranean Bunk'Art museums will also enhance clients' knowledge of this grisly period. Going beneath Bunk'Art 2's dome, I was shocked to find 24 rooms displaying everything from weaponry to a nuclear-bomb-proof apartment designed to shelter the minister of the interior and his family in the event of an attack.

Emerging with a heavy heart, I sought solace in the sunshine with lunch at Odas Garden. Set in an old Ottoman courtyard, shaded by crocheted parasols and trees laden with ripening lemons, it's an oasis in the heart of the busy city.

Clients will find a scrumptious and wallet-friendly menu: I plumped for *fërgesë* – a garlicky, roasted red pepper dip with salty white cheese – plus warming butter bean stew, minty *qifqi* rice balls, classic pastry *byrek* and copious amounts of bread with olive oil. As I munched, I considered what I'd learnt about Albania's past that morning. The country's recent history may have been dark, but the blossoming tourist industry means its future could be very bright. **TW**



BOOK IT

Tui sells a four-night stay in a Standard Double Room at the Tirana International Hotel & Conference Centre from £336 per person. The price includes breakfast and is based on flights from Stansted on June 15. tui.co.uk



TOP: Skanderbeg Square, with Et'hem Bey Mosque
ABOVE: Traditional Albanian cuisine

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Andrii Lutsyk, Nemir2000, Mikhail Grachikov