

Lifting the curse

From the Accursed Mountains to the welcoming locals, Joey Tyson explores the appeal of untouched Albania

Albania is a bit of a mystery. Its language is unique, its people are friendly and open despite decades of fierce oppression, and it is home to spectacular mountains, untouched beaches and ancient, historical cities.

Yet it remains off the radar for most, even though it sits among European heavyweights Italy, Greece and Croatia.

Like most emerging travel

destinations, the answer is in the not-too-distant past.

Under ruthless communist dictator Enver Hoxha, who ruled over the Balkan nation from 1944 to 1985, Albania was cut off from the world for much of the last century. In effect a secret state, few people were allowed to enter – and even fewer allowed to leave.

As communism collapsed around Europe in the late 1980s, Albania began to awaken from

its enforced slumber, but it would take another decade before travellers began to arrive in meaningful numbers.

Of course, getting over almost half a century of political and economic turmoil takes some doing, but the signs of progress are all there. Over the past decade, travel to Albania has increased steadily, with 2018 likely to be another record-breaking year.

In his recent BBC series, comedian Romesh Ranganathan brought the country's epic scenery and cultural quirks to our screens. Finally, the secret is starting to get out.

▶ WILD MOUNTAINS, WARM HOSPITALITY

Even with a steady increase in tourism, there are parts of Albania that still feel wild and largely untouched. None more

so than the mighty Accursed Mountains in the country's northeast (*pictured*).

Part of the Dinaric Alps, a rugged stretch of peaks that extends across the Balkans all the way to Italy, this ominously named hinterland has some of the most spectacular mountain scenery in Europe.

The highlight for many is the hike between Valbona and Theth, an old mule track that

winds through the peaceful alpine meadows, pine forests and panoramic mountain vistas that are typical of inland Albania. Surrounded by knife-blade peaks and towering pines, it's an incredible way to witness Albania's dramatic mountainous landscape. Although it's become increasingly popular with hikers in recent years, walkers will have long stretches of the well-marked route completely to themselves.

As much a cultural enclave as a natural playground, these highlands are also home to Albania's ancient traditions and customs. Rustic stone dwellings dot the valleys and mountainsides, and modernity feels a century away.

In Theth, one of Albania's few remaining lock-in towers stands as a monument to the 'blood feuds', a period when tribal disputes often ended in murder.

Those who had offended another family would be sent to such towers – for their own protection – while the village elders decided their fate. Luckily, those days are gone, but this is still an area of deep tradition.

Getting to the Accursed Mountains is an adventure in itself – a three-hour ferry trip along Koman Lake, a winding fjord-like expanse of reflective water surrounded by sheer

RIGHT:
Theth's
lock-in tower

FAR RIGHT:
Residents
of Theth

BELOW:
Lake Koman



PICTURES: SHUTTERSTOCK



Intrepid Travel offers a 15-day Kosovo, Albania & Macedonia Explorer tour, from £1,650 for departures from May to September 2019, including B&B accommodation, transport and activities, but excluding flights. intrepidtravel.com/uk

Exodus has an eight-day Walking in Albania tour that starts in Tirana and takes in Theth, Valbona and a traditional folklore evening. Land-only prices start at £1,149 including accommodation, some meals, and transfers. exodus.co.uk

→ peaks. At points, it seems as if the boat is completely enclosed, only for another immense gateway in the rock to open up as the ferry turns a corner. It's a remarkable journey, made all the more impressive by the fact that it costs only €5.

▶ PEOPLE POWER

But beauty is not only skin deep here. Albania's people are as much a reason to visit as its glorious mountains and placid lakes. There's a genuine warmth to Albanians, and an immense pride in their country, language and culture.

After undertaking the seven-hour trek from Valbona, we were welcomed at our guesthouse in Theth by the entire family. As Raphael, one of the younger generation, showed us to our room, he said earnestly "please



Beauty is not only skin deep, as Albania's people are as much a reason to visit as its placid lakes and glorious mountains

treat our home as your home". And that's exactly how it felt. In Albania, hospitality is an integral part of cultural tradition.

This wasn't an isolated case, either. After taking a wrong turn on a bike ride to a 500-year-old Ottoman bridge near Lake Shkoder, I paused to look at my map and within seconds a passer-

by had stopped to help. In the capital Tirana, a bus conductor ran after us, after we got off a stop too early.

That's not to mention the happiness and enthusiasm that greeted us whenever we attempted a few words in Albanian - a notoriously difficult language. Besides a warm welcome, a complimentary raki, Albania's potent national drink, is never too far away. Albania is full of the small gestures that make travelling all the more enjoyable.

That Albania will become more popular in the coming years is not in doubt - it is too beautiful not to. But with many established European destinations struggling with over-tourism, this unusual and unassuming nation is perfectly placed to take some of the weight. See it now, before the mystery is solved for good.

