

Vehicle: a motorcycle. Objective: to take an exceptional trip into an exotic picture postcard setting without spending a fortune. Solution: Albania. The result was an Easy Rider style adventure à la Don Quixote that ended up as a

# Albania: the new motorcycling destination

ON THE ROAD

by Maurizio Crema

book titled *Viaggio ai confini dell'Occidente* (Travels to the Frontiers of the West), southward bound from Durazzo in search of the sea and history. Biker and writer: a journalist of “Gazzettino di Venezia”

**T**here are places and histories that form a hinge between our world of multinationals and all-inclusive tourist packages and the East. One such place is the Italian Far East on the other side of the Adriatic known as Albania (or rather “Shqipëria”) where, to the modern traveller’s eyes, time seems to have stopped half a century ago. This is a people and a nation that has just emerged from a war and is still living in another, parallel time rich in contradictions. The West and consumerism can be seen in the way youngsters in Durazzo dress, in the port and the entry to the Country of Eagles and in Tirana, where the statue of the national hero Skanderberg (born George Kastrioti, he was an ally of the Most Serene Republic of Venice in the 15th century) dominates a square with Communist architecture. For the rest, the East predominates – the mosques in this country, where the majority of the population is Muslim, the traditional costumes worn in the mountains towards Macedonia and Kosovo and the narrow alleys of Saranda and Valona. But the castles of the medieval nobles who held out against the Turkish floodtide for one century, which still contain many legends, such as that of the gentle Rosafa in Scutari, and the Greek theatre in Butrint need no



postcards to illustrate that history was made here and that it has left roots. Split between North and South, Catholics and Muslims, the rich (few, and generally traffickers) and the poor (many of whom have emigrated), the country is a fascinating kaleidoscope and a genuine voyage – one of the last real voyages of exploration that one can allow oneself today, for exploring Albania is also a luxury that requires time, will, discomfort and fear. It's still an adventure – without necessarily turning into an Indiana Jones-style mission. Uneven roads, a splendid sea and uncontaminated mountains are the basic ingredients of this trip towards our past and the nearby East before wealth and business make Albania digestible, manageable and so very... normal. Will this happen? I believe it will, and soon, but not too soon. Ten years? Five? One doesn't really know. However, a means of transport is required to travel through this nearby otherworld. And, being a bit lazy and a bit nostalgic for the

1970s, I chose a motorcycle – not a Pirsig Zen model, but one with strong shock absorbers; no chrome details, but knobby enduro-style tyres. The roads of California are a long way away, but here on the last frontier of Europe, there's no fear of films and suggestions of a disposable past. It's a raw, fascinating, no-frills experience: it's all real.

So I got on my bike and rode. I started from Durazzo – the port, the chaos, the Sunday promenade street with girls in miniskirts and the beaches where everyone congregates to let it all hang out – and travelled southwards in search of the sea and history. First stop after 130 km: Valona, the port of the ancient Roman town of Aulona, with its bay where the Adriatic ends and the Ionian Sea begins and where the Canina, a fort that has always been a bulwark and a wall between West and East, was built. Today there is little left of its 18 towers, demolished by repeated assaults and retreats (the last one, the Morea campaign in 1691, was very peaceful). The fort continues to dominate its surroundings, offering a breathtaking view. Below it spread the large bay and the city of Valona. I can already see its minarets rearing up; I make my first friends and realise how much these people, whom we superficial Italian journalists depict as ugly, dirty and wicked are, conversely, open and united, ingenuous and extremely talkative. In fact, it's very easy to get buttonholed by passers-by; in less than half an hour they've even organised a blind date for me with an English teacher who's still single at 30 (which practically means being condemned here; in Albania people marry at 25 at most). I accept, and meanwhile I visit the mosque at Muradie – stones fused with lead and red bricks, a holy spire that has overlooked a north-south road crossing for the past 500 years.

"I don't drink, I don't smoke and I don't eat pork, but I've no problem if you do", Tini, a 21-year-old law student in Brescia and a fervent Muslim in Italy as well as in Albania, tells me. I met him after Friday prayers and now we're sipping coffee with his friends in front of the ancient mosque. "Islam is a religion of peace that preaches respect. You Westerners depict us all as extremists, but do you see any veiled women here in Albania? Anyone looking at you with dislike?" he asks me with the air of a wise owl. I have to admit I haven't encountered either veiled women or looks of dislike.



Contrasto

"70% of the population is Muslim, but no-one would dream of creating an Islamic dictatorship", Tini says forcefully. "Here, religion has always been linked to a very tolerant sect, that of the Bektashi, who were respected in Ottoman times as holy men and precious counsellors of the king." The fearful Turks... who conquered Albania at the end of the 15th century and held it for half a millennium, transforming churches into mosques but leaving few other traces of their presence. "The truth is that people – especially the young – couldn't care less about religion, just as in your country", says Andi Tepelena, a 30-year-old who went to university in Italy and organised the Albania pavilion at the 2005 Biennale d'Arte (a gigantic white Ku Klux Klan style tent) and organises exhibitions and promotes cultural events here. Right: the only difference is that the girls in shorts disappear come evening – "because a woman is still mainly a female here", Linda, my blind date for the evening, tells me, "and people talk. It

doesn't take much to end up with a bad reputation and marginalised. This is still a male-dominated society; in the countryside it's the parents that arrange marriages and make the decisions for you". Fortunately there's Tirana, the capital that's as scintillating as the 1980s "Milano da bere" ("city to be consumed", the advertising slogan that symbolised a hedonistic, post-industrial Milan). But it's something else I want; I've had my fill my modernity and I set off on my road towards the past, the road that traditional ballads sing of, illustrated anew in novels by Ismail Kadare.

North of the former capital of rubber boats, the Narta lagoon emerges among dirt roads and a thick pine grove. The lagoon hosts a small Orthodox jewel, the St Maria monastery. To reach it, you have to cross a 200-metre-long, somewhat disjointed wharf. At the end of the wharf, you're met by mediaeval frescoes and cypresses that recall San Francesco del Deserto, the Venetian island



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that the great Italian saint visited. It's beautiful. The cicadas sound the rhythm of ancient Greece and the heat makes you forget your desire for the old same beach and sea of this land that appears, like 1950s Italy, to be poised on the verge of a miracle. Here, on the night before the Feast of the Assumption, the Virgin Mary's feast day is celebrated with dances and libations.

The beaches further ahead are wild and deserted, dotted only with the bunkers the Communist dictator Enver Hoxha obsessively built throughout his country, not so much to stop an invasion as to keep his own people under control. Communism has left a deep mark on Albania; half a century of living in an open-air prison remains in people's inability to feel civic pride, resulting in property speculation and uncontrolled waste. Thirty kilometres on is Fier and, nearby, Apollonia. This Roman town was an intersection of the Via Egnatia, which joined the Adriatic coast to Constantinople in ancient



times. Hardly anything is left of the theatre; the flashily restored temple of Artemis is rather more complete.

Only in Butrint, 250 kilometres and many hours of a southward “gallop” on a bike to within a stone’s throw of Greece, does history surround and cradle you, taking you through 3,000-year-old walls that may have shielded Aeneas on his voyage towards the foundation of Rome and that generations of young girls have certainly used to whisper secrets and sins to each other at the fountain excavated in the rock that emerges mere steps away from the Lion’s Gate. Sculpted in marble, the ferocious beast savaging a bull closes the top of the one and half metre-high gate. Pushed downwards by an earthquake, it has remained in that position for reasons of defence (try crouching over like dwarves to attack a bastion!). Butrint is ancient but close to us in Italy, for here the Venetians left the remains of a fort, which rises on the other side of the small river that links the lake to the sea, and a proud

quadrangular tower with small windows. This archaeological site reflects the tourism potential of the new Albania; it is the pearl shown off with pride to visitors from nearby Corfu or faraway (400 km) Tirana, who arrive here after having survived the dust and the potholes on the state road that passes through the mediaeval jewels of Berat and Argirocastro, two towns where houses could become single forts and the high windows a thousand eyes to spy the arrival of enemies. “The West is no closer today than in Communist times”, murmurs Armir, a driver and interpreter for a World Bank mission, gazing at the island of Phaeacia (Corfu) that emerges, ghostlike, on the horizon of the castle of Saranda, where we have just had dinner. “Then the police controlled everyone and everything; there were spies, threats to the family. Now you people and your laws stop us entering”. And spark off strange ideas: some years ago, two youths wanted to swim their way to freedom – what’s a few lengths



compared to wellbeing? They came ashore on Corfu; the Greeks got hold of them and returned them to sender without much ado. "People continue to flee – only they do so more quietly and discreetly, in rubber dinghies, in groups of 20 or 30; there are no longer the floating wrecks and the swarm of migrants as in 1997", says Don Patrizio, a border priest who tends his flock in the mountains of the north. "A thousand or two thousand euros gets you into Italy, without worrying about visas and procedures." He tells me of the *kanun*: "In Northern Albania there are still thousands of families subject to the ritual blood revenge, people who live shut up inside their homes for fear of reprisals", and the women who go astray on many Italian roads. "These days, it's only people who live lost up in the mountains who have no idea of what may happen if you emigrate", says Kaluje, a young worker in Italy and a hedonist at home. "Those who end up as prostitutes do so 90% of the time out of choice, not because

they've been duped."

It's crude talk, like the trip from Saranda to Valona, 130 km of rocks and chasms where the roadside often plunges into wild valleys. It's pure fun on an enduro motorcycle and unremitting torture for those in search of comfort and safety – who are recompensed, however, by beaches forgotten by Man (Jal, Palasa, Gjipea, Porto Palermo), where the water is a limpid blue. Near places like Himare or Dhermì, on the other hand, the beaches are crowded, especially in August. At the end of this gallop, which skirts the ancient Turkish fortress of Ali Pashia Tepelena and a Russo-Chinese atomic submarine tunnel, the road climbs a thousand metres to enter the Llogarà park, with real mountains where the air is pungent and there is a profusion of pine forests and restaurants. Bears still live here, the inhabitants assure me. Valona is only 30 km away, but the trip isn't over yet. Albania is a big country and adventure is always around the corner. All you need to do is look for it. ■

