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Skerdilajd King's Trail

Weight limit: 90 kg

Nearest airport: Tirana

8 days / 7 nights / 6 riding days



Experience true Albania with the best local cuisine, history and hospitality. This trail follows in the tracks of Ilirian King Skerdilajd, on his way to conquer Kaonia 2,300 years ago. Experience unspoilt nature, colourful culture and welcoming people while riding reliable, strong horses. Wind your way through a variety of landscapes combining mountain climbing, river crossings, woods and the beach. You will find ancient ruins, castles, churches and monasteries sitting adjacent to the bunkers and military infrastructure from communist past.

The Riding

This is a mountainous trail ride with around 5-6 hours riding and some walking every day. Although this trail includes some beach riding, any fast riding takes place along the old path 100m from the beach. The beach sand is rocky and is therefore only suitable for walking on. The mountain horses are also not too keen on the water so will not tend to want to paddle!

Guides & Group sizes

The guides are professionals with many years of experience in guiding trails through the Albanian mountains. They are adventurous, knowledgeable about the history and nature, and most of all, passionate about their horses.

The group size is 3- 10 riders. A departure date will confirm for 2 riders for a supplement.



Horses and Tack

The horses are small but very robust and surefooted Arab and Tarpan crosses. They are strong and perfectly suited for the challenging, rocky terrain being sure footed and accustomed to trekking over long mountainous trails. The tack is English style with small saddlebags provided

for items such as water bottles, packed lunches and cameras. Tacking up is optional. Riders are expected to help with feeding and watering the horses during the trail.

Level of riding and fitness

This trail is suitable for upper intermediate and experienced riders with a good, balanced seat. You will be riding over challenging mountainous terrain and enjoying long trots, canters and gallops in the valleys and where the terrain allows faster riding.

Good riding fitness is required as you'll be spending 4-6 hours in the saddle each day, one day even up to 8 hours.

Accommodation & Dining

You will be accommodated in local or family guesthouses every night where your host families will provide a delicious local meal and conversation is enjoyed by all over dinner. Most of the dishes are homemade while fruits, vegetables and meat come from local gardens and farms.

Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive at Tirana airport in the morning or early afternoon (by 2:30 PM). Transfer from Tirana airport to your accommodation in Gjirokstra. After settling into your hotel you can enjoy a walk around the historical town and the old Bazaar before dinner. Riders can also visit Enver Hoxha's house, Gjirokastra castle, the church of the Old Bazaar, the mosque of the Bazaar and Skenduli house, representing an ideal sample of Gjirokastra traditional life. Dinner will be served at a traditional restaurant. During dinner your guides will be able to speak to you about the trail; possible requests or needs, advice and things which are good to know. We recommend that you buy a map of the area before dinner in order to gain a good understanding of the itinerary.

Day 2

You will start riding from the stables, a 15-minutes drive from Gjirokstra. You will be astonished by how this mountainous ecosystem changes so suddenly. The ride starts by crossing valleys, allowing for exhilarating canters already, before crossing the Drino river. The rest of the day you'll head through hilly terrain, small rivers and pine woods. Lunch will be a home made picnic at the monastery of Cepo. You can visit the monastery which is an important orthodox cult object and has one of the most strategic views of the Drinos Valley. Located on a historical scale it cuts down a rocky slope on the north side of the "Wide Mountain". Today only two

objects remain from the former monastery complex: the basilica with a dome and dozens of former guesthouses which have hosted travellers for centuries. After lunch you will ride down to the Kardhiq River, where you'll find some intriguing natural formations like the "Gods of the Light" pillar rocks and other natural monuments. Today's ride finishes at the village of Fushbardha, one of Labëria area's most important centres. Labëria Laws originate from ancient times and were reintroduced by Julie Pope, who lived in the XI century. During the Norman invasion in 1081 he was described as a priest and Mayor of Kurvelesh. You will spend the evening and night in a village house enjoying homemade traditional food and drinks.

Riding hours: 6



Day 3

After a traditional breakfast at the family house you will get ready for a very long day riding (up to 8 hours). Your ride will follow the tracks of the King Skerdilajd's Army which passed through the "Neck of the Rock" around 2,300 years ago. He was the youngest brother of King Agron and one of the main supporters of Queen Teuta. He led the invasion army in 230 BC to the capital of Epirus Phoinike (Finiq). King Skerdilajd played a determined role in Teuta's plans to create an Adriatic Front against Rome.

The path combines beautiful woods, mountain climbing, rocky landscapes and ruins of ancient civilizations. Basha Stones, Dhespina cave, the Rock of Kaze, The Valley of Cheries, the Crooked Brook, Shameti Brook, Trullas Neck and Derrasa Hole are some of the local sights en route today. Your lunch break will be in a mountain valley surrounded by a small oak wood. After lunch you continue through the mountain of Borsh towards the next village. The whole day's landscape offers images of wild unspoiled nature. Flowers, old trees, streams of water, shepherds, hundreds of goats, sheep and cows will be part of this riding experience. Be prepared to dismount and walk for around 1 hour 30 minutes during the day in difficult paths and steep downhills. Good mountain hiking shoes are recommended for today. You will arrive at a family house by late afternoon and enjoy traditional food, rich in the region's olive oil. Wine, raki and mountain tea will provide comfort after a long day riding and walking.

Riding hours: 8 (including walking by leading the horses)

Day 4

After a traditional breakfast with the shepherd's family, you will start a shorter but very pleasant riding day. First you will visit the castle of Borsh (known in history as Castle of Sopot), located on a hill in Borsh's village at 500m above sea level and dates back to about IV-III century B.C. Sopot is mentioned in 1192 in memory of Anna Komnenes, daughter of the Byzantine Emperor Alexis I Komnenai. In 1266, Sopot was in the French power of Charles I of Anjou and then under German jurisdiction, and later on, for a long time under the Republic of Venice. In the Middle Ages, it was adapted for military garrison and took full view of the fortification at the time of Ali Pasha. The mosque was built at the castle by Haxhi Bendo, one of the supporters of Ali Pasha. After visiting the Castle ruins you will start a 3 hour ride from Borsh and take the old road along the seaside. Olive trees, oranges, lemons, citrus and grapefruits are planted everywhere on the upper part of the road. Many defense bunkers remained along the seaside of Piqeras, an old fishing village. We will stop the ride in the village and drive to the sea for a lunch break on the beach. After lunch you can enjoy a fairly long break to enjoy the sea and to rest. The day's ride continues as you enter a small "jungle" of trees, bushes and rocks on the remains of an old road that once connected the sea with the villages along the coast. In the afternoon, visit the village of Shen Vasil, a medieval center with a dark history. The village suffered a long period of terror during the dictatorship, being a labour camp for political prisoners. Hundreds of intellectuals suffered and died in this camp during 4 decades, and your hosts can share with you memories of a very dark period of Albania. Traces of the past are visible everywhere. You will spend the night in a typical house on the coast, tasting seafood, the special local cheese and salad. Homemade raki and wine will be offered with the meal.

Riding hours : 4

Day 5

This morning you'll enjoy breakfast on the terrace with the beautiful view of the Ionian Sea. You can enjoy traditional coastal delicacies such as byrek (cheese pie) and cookies, butter, fresh milk and honey. Today you will ride through olive tree terraces along the beach of Bunec, a pristine

stretch of sand and pebbles, enjoying the refreshing sea breeze. Continue your journey towards the village of Shen Vasil, which you visited yesterday. Along the way you may encounter herds of sheep and goats and their local shepherds. In the late afternoon, you will arrive at a typical coastal house where you will stay overnight. The house provides a cosy and comfortable setting, allowing you to rest and recharge for the next day's adventures.

Riding hours: 5



Day 6

Today's ride embarks on a journey through the picturesque landscapes surrounding the Kalasa river, tracing the footsteps of the ancient army led by King Skerdilajd. As you ride accross the remnants of the majestic hill of Foinike, you'll hear the echoes of history whispering through the valleys. The ride offers thrilling gallops, invigorating both for you and your horse!

Ascending gentle hills towards Varfaj village, you'll be greeted by breathtaking vistas before reaching the summit of Mount Sopot, where a delightful picnic lunch awaits. The descent provides a panoramic view of the Drinos valley, with some sections requiring dismounting and walking with your horse.

Arriving at Lazarat village, you'll find yourself immersed in its rich culture. Once infamous for its marijuana fields, Lazara now proudly showcases its timeless traditions. Your accommodation is a local house that offers an authentic experience, enhanced by your participation in a cooking

class led by your hosts. Among the serene olive groves, dinner turns into an unforgettable feast, with an atmosphere of calm and tranquility.

Riding hours: 6-7 (including some walking leading the horses)

Day 7

On the final leg of your journey, we'll embark on a shorter riding day, beginning with the crossing of Lazarat village en route to Drinos Valley. The path will lead us to a crossing over the Drino river, where we'll also enjoy numerous exhilarating canters. As we approach the southern outskirts of the village of Asim Zeneli, we'll ascend the hills, eventually arriving at the stables. Here, we'll take care of our horses, granting them a chance to roam freely and unwind.

After bidding farewell to our four-legged companions, we'll take a lunch break picnic, thoughtfully prepared by a local family in Lazarat, which we'll savor with a refreshing drink at the village cafe. A great opportunity to conclude this week and reflect over the adventurous equestrian adventure you've just experienced!

Riding hours: 3

Day 8

After breakfast, you will be transferred to Tirana airport.

Price includes

- Accommodation for 7 nights
- 6 days riding
- Meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast of day 8
- English-speaking guide (2 guides if the group is more than 4 riders)
- Water and drinks during the meals
- Luggage transport by car during the trail

Not included

- Flights
- Entrance tickets to monuments and parks
- Lunch on day 1
- Extra drinks
- Other services or expenses during free time.

International flights & Airport transfers

Tirana airport to Gjirokstra: €90 return per person, duration 3 hours.

There are two scheduled transfers from Tirana airport every Saturday, the first one at 12:30pm, the second one at 2:30pm. Arrivals should coincide with these times and departure flights should be no earlier than 1pm.

Riders that arrive in Tirana one day in advance can plan to arrive at the airport for the 12:30pm or the 2:30pm transfer.

What to bring

- Normal riding clothes: riding hat, long sleeved shirts (please avoid packing your favourite or expensive clothing due to risk of damage, riding trousers and chaps, gloves.
- Good mountain shoes - with a grip for walking but not too thick as you will need to ride in them too. Normal riding boots with a smooth sole are not recommended as they can be slippery when walking on foot.
- Waterproof raincoat
- Casual clothes for the evening
- Sun cream
- Sunglasses
- Hat
- Swimming clothes, shoes to walk on a rocky beach, and a beach towel.
- Anti-allergy medicine for possible insects bites
- Camera - please bring small cameras as large professional ones are very difficult to transport on horseback.
- Copy of passport
- Personal saddlebags are welcome if riders would like to bring their own. Small saddlebags are provided by the ride but just for food and water.
- Since Albania lacks equestrian shops, finding necessary horse equipment locally is sometimes a challenge for your hosts. If you have any spare or unused equestrian items such as old saddle pads, halters, ropes, girths, bridles or any other equipment you no longer use, you could bring them with you to donate to the center - your contribution would be greatly appreciated!



Climate

The best months to visit Albania are from April to October. Although precipitation is quite high in Albania there is less rain during these months and because of the continental air mass, most precipitation is over the central highlands. Albania has a high number of climatic regions relative to its landmass - the coastal lowlands have a typically Mediterranean climate; the highlands have a Mediterranean continental climate. This ride takes place in southern Albania which is around 5 degrees warmer than the rest of the country. You will experience different types of weather on the trail; from cooler mountainous air to a warmer climate down on the coast.

Health

For health and vaccine recommendations, please consult your healthcare provider at least 8 weeks before your trip.

Country specific information can also be found at National Travel Health Network and Centre website: <https://travelhealthpro.org.uk/countries>.

Travel documents

For entry requirements to Albania for UK citizens, please visit the Foreign Travel Advice website: <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/albania>

For any other nationalities, please contact your local embassy to check entry requirements. Having the correct travel documents is entirely your responsibility.

Currency & Tipping

The local currency in Albania is Lek, although euros are widely accepted. We recommend not bringing too much currency as the trail is fully inclusive, but just enough for personal items, souvenirs etc.

Tipping your guide is at your discretion.

Cancellation policy

Payment & Cancellation Terms - saddletravel.com

Holidays are confirmed with a 20% non-refundable deposit. The full balance is due 56 days before the start date.

If you cancel your booking less than 56 days before the start date of your trail we are entitled to receive full payment, less refunds as follows:

- 42 days or more before booking date - 50%
- 30 days or more - 30%
- less than 30 days - nil.



Insurance

All saddletravel.com customers are required to take out appropriate travel insurance that covers horse riding and holiday cancellation. Proof of insurance details will be required during the booking process.

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