

Ancient Pathways

Ride on ancient and mountainous trails in Albania: a challenging and exciting experience for adventurous riders, with a true insight into Albanian rural life.

ALBANIA
8 DAYS | 7 NIGHTS
6 DAYS RIDING
Intermediate

Ride up and down steep mountain passes before enjoying fast canters in the grassy valleys. This trail is a cultural immersion with accommodation on the trail with welcoming host families for a true insight into Albanian rural life.

The Albanian mountain horses you'll be matched with willingly go places you would never believe possible for a horse; happy cantering over rocks, down loose scree or climbing mountain sides without hesitation. This trail offers challenging and exciting riding with the pace changing every few minutes to suit the terrain. Expect steep climbs where you can trust your horse to get you to the top.

Each day usually includes around five hours of riding with a rest break and a lunch stop during the day. You'll cover around 35km a day riding at all paces. The horses used on these trail really know their jobs so although the riding is challenging the horses are easy to ride.

Highlights:

- Six days through Albania's untouched mountain landscapes on ancient merchant caravan routes
- Ride fearless and sure-footed Albanian Tarpan horses
- A genuine cultural immersion: nights spent with welcoming local families, sharing home-cooked meals
- Pass medieval churches, Roman bridges, Byzantine monasteries and a 2,300-year-old city founded by King Pyrrhus
- Ride 35km a day through valleys, gorges and remote shepherd country
- Albania's best-kept secret: spectacular scenery and rich history at a fraction of the cost of more visited destinations.



ITINERARY

Day 1: Arrival

Arrive at Tirana airport, aiming for a morning arrival but no later than 14:00 to allow time for transfer and a visit to Gjirokastra. The drive to Gjirokastra will take approximately 3 hours. Once you reach your hotel, conveniently located just a 10-minute walk from the historical centre of Gjirokastra, settle in and get ready to explore. Before dinner, take a leisurely stroll by yourself through the captivating historical town and the old Bazaar. For dinner, enjoy a delicious meal at a traditional restaurant. During this time, your guides will be available to discuss the trail with you, addressing any questions or requests you may have and providing valuable advice and insights.

Day 2: Gjirokastra – Karjan

After enjoying breakfast at the hotel, it's time to head out on a horseback ride through the picturesque countryside towards the charming medieval village of Karjan. This village embodies tradition and serves as a rural haven for passing caravans, boasting quaint churches and an ancient Roman bridge. The journey unfolds amidst a backdrop of rolling hills, serene valleys, babbling water streams, and majestic cliffs. Along the way, we will be treated to breath-taking views of the River Drino, a significant water source deeply rooted in ancient pagan beliefs. On route, we will encounter the remnants of the Santa Triada castle, which was reconstructed by Ali Pasha between 1809 and 1810. This strategically positioned castle once served as a control point for caravan routes. We will pause for a well-deserved lunch break in the scenic Shen Toder village. Afterward, we will continue our journey, riding for approximately 1.5 hours, until we finally arrive at the enchanting village of Karjan. Here, we will be warmly welcomed by a local family who will provide us with accommodation. For dinner, we will have the opportunity to savour delectable dishes made from locally grown ingredients sourced from their own garden, accompanied by raki and wine, offering a true taste of the region.

Total Riding Hours: 4-5

ITINERARY

Day 3: Karjan – Nderan

Continue north on an ancient merchants' stone road with panoramic views over the surrounding hills and valleys. Enter the village of Labova and visit the famous medieval church. Your path will then take you up the mountain through native vegetation of mountain tea, oregano, wild rose and foxglove. Reach the valley of Cajupi and have lunch here with the local sheep shepherds before enjoying a wonderful gallop along the valley. In the afternoon the trail will follow a medieval caravan pathway and pass by a notorious bandit hangout, "The Cursed Shadow", which was used by the thieves to rob caravans passing through Zagoria. Your destination today is the village of Nderan, placed right in the heart of Zagoria. The next two nights will be spent here with a local Vllah linguistic minority family who will be happy to show you their way of life. Dinner will be a delicious mixture of local products, raki and wine.

Day 4: Nderan

Wake up to the clean mountain air and start your day with a breakfast of fresh mountain produce. Today's ride will bring plenty of variety with steep cliffs, rivers, woodlands and rolling hills. Breathe in the gorgeous scent of flowers and enjoy the wild landscapes where the only people you meet are shepherds tending to their flocks. Continue along an ancient pathway which, back in the 17th and 18th century, was an important link between the biggest merchant centres in Southern Albania. Pass the beautiful natural monument of Rock of Zhej before taking a challenging track downhill to the ruins of a medieval stone bridge. Stop here for a refreshing swim during the summer months before riding to Hoshteva to visit a unique church built in 999AD with many pagan elements visible on the wall paintings. Continue past a byzantine church and the monastery of Nivan Saint Mehili, built in 1702. Cross a medieval bridge to enter the village of Nderan once more and spend the night here.

Day 5: Nderan - Polican

An exciting day ahead! After a fresh country breakfast, ride through a mountain valley perfectly suited for many exhilarating canters, passing small remote farms and wild cliffs. The route through Pogoni region is a true travel back in time, passing by ancient ruins and mythical natural wonders. Stop for a picnic lunch by one of the most famous stone bridges - the most isolated construction of the merchant's period and can only be reached by horse. In the afternoon you will reach the centre of the Pogon region. Your overnight stop is the mountain village of Polican, populated by a Greek minority. Spend the night with a local family who will offer you the chance to explore and enjoy the local gastronomic delights.

ITINERARY

Day 6: Polican – Libohova

Leave Polican and enjoy a day of challenging riding through gorgeous mountain landscapes looking down upon the Suha river below. Pass by the Swallow Rock, 500m above the valley floor, on the way to the lunch spot at Church of Labova of the Cross. This is a monument representing the oldest church in Albania built in 554 by Justinian the Great, an Eastern Roman emperor, who married his wife Teodora here in the small chapel. After lunch, the ride takes you to Libohova, the site of an ancient merchant town nestled at the foot of the Bureto Mountain. This historic town offers great sightseeing for the afternoon. Spend the night with a local family and taste the local delicacies.

Day 7: Libohova – Gjirokastra

The last days' ride will take you through rolling hills and across Drino River valley. Climb up steeply to reach an archaeological site of Antigonea, a city that was built in 295BC by King Pyrrhus and named after his beloved wife, Antigona. After a short break continue ride back to Gjirokastra and to the stables. Say goodbye to your trusted steed and turn them out for a well-deserved rest. A picnic lunch will be served close to the stables before returning to your hotel in town. It's time to unwind and relax with your riding companions over the farewell dinner, and perhaps a drink or two at the old Bazaar.

Day 8: Departure

Time for your onward journey. After breakfast you will be transferred back to the airport in Tirana.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Level of Riding & Fitness

This trail is suitable for confident intermediate and experienced riders only with a good, balanced seat. You will be riding over challenging mountainous terrain so a head for heights is also important! Good riding fitness is required as you'll be spending 4-6 hours in the saddle each day. This programme is not suitable for non-riders. Help to mount or dismount can be provided by the guide if required and the minimum age is 16. Please be aware that on difficult paths riders should be able to walk beside their horse (for around 10 minutes) In the evenings, riders feed their own horses. Weight limit: 14 stone / 90kg



Guides & Group Size

The guides are professionals with many years of experience in guiding trails through the Albanian mountains. Every trail has two guides, one in the front and one at the back. They are adventurous, knowledgeable about the history and nature, and most of all, passionate about their horses and Albania. They speak English, Italian and Greek.

Maximum number of riders in a group is 10.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

The Horses

The horses used on this ride are of local Albanian breed, Tarpan, mixed with Arabs. They are small, strong and perfectly suited for the challenging, rocky terrain being surefooted and accustomed to trekking over long mountainous trails.



Tack & Riding Equipment

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.

ACCOMMODATION

The first and last night of the trail will be spent in a hotel with en suite bathrooms and WiFi. The rest of the nights are spent at local, friendly family homes which offer a great opportunity to soak in the rural Albanian lifestyle. The accommodation during the family stays is fairly basic with shared bathroom facilities. If travelling in the colder months we advise you to bring warm sleepwear. Your hosts may not speak English.

The food served during the trail will be of local produce and traditional Albanian meals. Picnic lunches will be brought to you by the support vehicle or alternatively carried in your saddle bags while riding. Dinners will be served in a local restaurant when staying in a hotel or by your hosts when spending the night in a local family home. Allergies and special dietary requirements can be catered with advance notice.



WHAT'S INCLUDED

Price includes:

- 6 days riding (4-6 hours per day)
- Shared accommodation
- Breakfasts
- Lunches
- Evening meals
- Drinks during meals

Price excludes:

- Flights
- Airport transfers
- Tips
- Entrance tickets to monuments & parks



FLIGHTS & AIRPORT TRANSFERS

Flight and transfer information:

- Arrival airport: Tirana (TIA)
- Arrival time: Before 14.00
- Departure time: After 12.00 (midday)
- Transfer arrangements: Two set transfers at 12.30 and 14.30. Journey time is 3 hours.

Single room supplement: Available on the first and last night of the trail. However, on other nights, riders must be prepared to share accommodation.

CLIMATE

This trail takes place in Southern Albania which has temperatures on average 5 degrees higher than the rest of the country. Months with the lowest precipitation are from April to October, however, rains can occur at any time of the year. July and August are the hottest months when daytime temperatures can rise well above 30°C during the day. You will experience very different types of weather during the trail from cool mountain air to warmer climate closer to the coast.

CURRENCY & TIPPING

The local currency in Albania is the Lek. However, Euros are widely accepted. We recommend not bringing too much currency as the holiday is fully inclusive but just enough for souvenirs, drinks outside of meal times etc.

Tipping your guide is at your discretion.



WHAT TO BRING

We recommend wearing your riding boots when travelling and carrying one set of riding clothing and your riding hat in your hand luggage, so should your luggage not make it to the destination you'll still be able to ride.

- Comfortable riding trousers / jodhpurs
- Your own well-fitted hard hat / helmet
- Riding boots/ walking boots with a good grip (riding boots with smooth sole are not suitable as they can be slippery when walking)
- Chaps
- Riding gloves
- Waterproofs
- Long sleeved shirts to protect against the sun
- Warm fleece / jumper for the cooler nights
- Casual clothes for evening
- Lightweight shoes for evening
- Buff / bandana
- Sun cream & lip balm
- Sunglasses & sunhat
- Bumbag
- 2 x reusable water bottle (no bigger than 1l)
- Insect repellent & bite cream
- Compact camera
- Plug adapter
- Head torch
- Copy of passport & insurance details
- Personal medication

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 Advise website: <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/albania/entry-requirements>

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

RIDING DECLARATION

"I am an experienced rider and able to mount & dismount unaided. I have a firm seat and I'm confident and in control at all paces over rough terrain (including rising trot, light seat canters and gallops) and have a good level of current riding fitness. I do not suffer from any illness or disability that could prejudice my safety or that of others."

PAYMENT & CANCELLATION TERMS

SaddleTravel.com holidays are confirmed with 20% non-refundable deposit. The full balance is due 56 days before 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% refund
- 28 days or more: 30% refund
- less than 28 days before booking date: no refund.

TRAVEL 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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