Discover the Albanian Alps
Dear reader,

The Albanian Alps are one of the most attractive and fascinating areas in the country. Their natural beauty and unique values can be regarded as a hidden treasure that requires everybody’s care and protection.

The present publication, which is aimed at visitors to Albania, introduces the wealth of tourist attractions to be found in the area, including its unspoilt nature, majestic mountains, warm hospitality and authentic traditions. Visitors from throughout the world are drawn by the beauty of the protected areas, the mountains, rivers and forests which are home to many different wild animals such as bears, lynx and wolves.

The area’s climate and specific weather conditions have resulted in the existence of a number of endemic plant species, making the mountains a fascinating destination for hikers. In terms of freshwater ecosystems, the Albanian Alps are also the most water rich areas in the Mediterranean.

Visitors will likewise be attracted to the area by its diversity of cultural treasures, and by the friendly welcome offered by local residents, whose warm hospitality is another important symbol of the Albanian Alps.

Finally, no visitor will be disappointed by the exciting flavours and colourful dishes that owe their existence to the rich agricultural diversity of the area.

Welcome to the Albanian Alps!
The Albanian Alps are located in northern Albania and cover around 8 percent of the country’s territory. They lie north of the Drini River valley, and west of the lower stretch of the Valbona River. They are geographically isolated, with few road links to neighbouring countries or to the rest of Albania.

The Alps are the highest, most impenetrable and most rugged mountain massif in the country. The highest peaks in the central Alps exceed 2,000 m, while the lowest points on the outskirts of the range reach between 50 and 300 m in height and offer a panoramic view of the zigzagging peaks that loom above.

Although at first glance the mountains have a very complex formation, their uniformity becomes more apparent as you travel through them. The steep ridges and most of the deep valleys are found in the central part of the Alps, dropping towards the outer parts of the range like the spokes of a great circle. Sharp, jagged ridges tower above the narrow, deeply cut valleys that are filled with waterfalls, canyons and ravines.

The Albanian Alps feature 13 peaks with an altitude of over 2,500 m, including Jezera, Ismet Sali Bruçaj (Grykat e Hapta), Kollata, Radohina, Maja e Lekurave, Shkëlzeni and Sheniku.
The Alps are home to a fascinating diversity of natural beauties and provide a habitat for many species of wildlife.

- The area has a Mediterranean/continental climate, characterised by cold winters and relatively cool short summers. Winter snowfall in the Alps is normally up to 60 centimetres, and even during the summer months patches of snow are visible on the mountaintops.
- The Albanian Alps are considered a rainy area. In the village of Boga, which is located in a dry valley, the highest recorded annual precipitation is 3,033 mm, although the annual average is between 2,000 and 2,500 mm.
- The Alps are rich in water resources. The main rivers are the Valbona, Shala, Cemi and Kiri, which have a typically alpine regime. The high mountain lakes are largely of glacial origin and therefore poor in species. However, they still contribute to the area’s geodiversity and biodiversity.
- The most common type of vegetation in the Albanian Alps is montane beech forest, which covers more than a third of the area. Other types of vegetation with significant coverage are thermophilous and supra-Mediterranean oak forests, spruce and fir forests, and thermophilous beech forests. In some cases, plant communities include both endemic species and species of international importance.
- Karst caves, which are a relatively unknown and unexplored part of the Alps, form a unique habitat particularly for bats. The most fascinating caves are the Arapi Cave in Theth, the Black Hole in Qeresh, the Rock of Rajas, Kakverrit Cave, and the caves along the Drin River.
Alpine treasures
A wealth of biodiversity

The Alps have a unique natural beauty and ecological value. They constitute a major environmental, economic, cultural and recreational asset for the country.

There are two national parks and one strict nature reserve in the territory of the Alps. Thethi National Park, which was declared in 1966, covers an area of 2,630 ha; Valbona Valley National Park, declared in 1996, covers 8,000 ha; and Gashi River Strict Nature Reserve, also proclaimed in 1996, covers 3,000 ha. Recently, two regional nature parks, Nikaj-Mërturi (17,505 ha) and Shkreli (20,282 ha), were added to the protected areas in the Alps.

The area’s rich and varied plant species belong to the Central European continental type of vegetation. Oak trees are generally found at altitudes between 800 and 1,100 m; at altitudes between 1,200 and 1,800 m the vegetation cover comprises beech and coniferous forests; while alpine pasture is typical at over 2,000 m.

Great yellow Gentian (Gentiana lutea L.)

Plants of the Gentiana genus commonly grow in rocky, alpine habitats. The trumpet-shaped gentian flower has petals of an intense blue colour. It is said, that the flower received its name from the Illyrian king Gentius, who is supposed to have discovered the plant’s medicinal properties.
Agricultural biodiversity, or agro-biodiversity, is the result of natural selection processes and the painstaking efforts of farmers, herders and fishermen over millennia. Agro-biodiversity refers to the genetic resources for crop and livestock farming (agriculture).

What is agro-biodiversity?

- Mixed agro-ecosystems
- Crop species/varieties
- Livestock and fish species
- Plant/animal germplasm
- Soil organisms in cultivated areas
- Bio-control agents against crop/livestock pests
- Domesticated wild species (landraces)
- Cultural and local knowledge of diversity
Visitors and tourists to the Albanian Alps will find a wide variety of exciting flavours and colourful agricultural produce: varieties of grapes, cherries, corn, tomatoes, chestnuts, sage and lavender; as well as products such as wines, salads, jams, teas, and cheese and other dairy products from local breeds of goats and cows.

Due to the relative remoteness of the area, a large variety of genes, species, ecosystems and landscapes — in other words, a rich biodiversity — can be found in the northern Albanian Alps. Local communities have preserved their traditional farming practices over centuries, thus protecting the local native plant species and animal breeds that provide their livelihoods.

Cultivating native plant species and tending animals unique to the region helps to mitigate the negative impacts of agriculture on biodiversity and contributes to the restoration and conservation of local ecosystems. This in turn makes an essential contribution to preserving the quality of the soil, air and water, allowing rare species of wild plants and animals to survive and flourish in the protected areas of the Albanian Alps.

The conservation of agro-biodiversity in the Alps goes hand in hand with sustainable economic and social development:
• farmers are able to compete on the market, offering a greater variety of produce to their customers;
• mountain produce can be sold to the various guesthouses and shops in the region; and
• the availability of local produce attracts tourists who want to learn more about how and where the foods were grown.
Agriculture in the Albanian Alps

The Albanian Alps are home to many traditionally cultivated varieties of plants and indigenous animal species. From ancient times, local communities have relied on animal breeding for their livelihoods. Since animal breeding was one of the primary activities among the Alpine population, the seasonal movement of livestock was an integral aspect of life. During the summer months, cattle breeders still move their livestock to higher mountain zones, where the animals can graze in the more abundant pastures, and temporary settlements were built.

Busha cattle (Illyric dwarf cattle)
Around 300 animals of this native breed can be found in the Nikaj-Mërtur Regional Nature Park. The distinctive Busha has a short body, sturdy build, reddish brown coat, which is white around the mouth, and short pointed horns. It weighs between 200 and 280 kg, and the cows produce 1,200 to 1,300 litres of milk per year.

Bardhoka: An autochthonous breed of sheep
The Bardhoka is a sturdy breed of sheep with a strong bone structure. It has powerful jaws, a wide muzzle, large ears and strong legs. It has a white fleece and white hair on its head and legs. The rams have heavy, spiral horns. Sheep farms typically comprise 50 to 300 head of sheep, and the population is currently not endangered.

Capore goat of Dragobia
The Dragobia goat is a typical alpine animal with medium body size, a developed skeleton and thin, strong legs. It has a black to ash grey coat and backward curving horns. This ecotype represents valuable genetic material in terms of agro-tourism and rural development in the area.
Due to the area’s height above sea level, as well as its micro-climate, fruit trees are generally grown without the use of chemical sprays or fertilisers, meaning that the fruit produced is of organic quality, helping to protect the crops against genetic erosion.

**Chestnuts**
As the Nikaj-Mërtur region has long been rich in chestnut forests, local residents have developed a variety of dishes using chestnuts and have become experts in carving the wood, which is used for both furniture and building. In order to preserve the chestnuts after harvesting, they are traditionally spread out on a flat piece of ground, surrounded by stones and covered with chestnut leaves and branches. In the past, arable land was regarded as less valuable than land on which chestnut trees were growing. Locals say chestnuts are both bread and butter as they are rich in starch and fibre. Prospective husbands would traditionally be asked about the land they owned, and, since it would be a pity to eat both bread and chestnuts together, chestnut tree owners were always the first choice of the bride’s family.

**Walnuts**
Three types of walnuts can be found in the area: soft-shelled walnuts (easy to break open by hand), which are grown both for their flavour and as a source of income, as they are popular and easy to sell on the market; hard-shelled walnuts, which need to be smashed open; and gumushe walnuts, which grow beside streams.

**Grapes**
Although there are no vineyards in the area, each family would grow grapes among the trees, including varieties such as rokoqel, xhylek, which are suitable for producing raki, ujçak, gastaran, mandakuq, muskadi, and grezde, both white and red (a small type of grape that grows in oak forests and is harvested exclusively for making the traditional local drink raki).

**Fruits**
Commonly grown fruits include the white and black mulberry; red cherries, apricots, red and yellow summer plums (bardak); black autumn plums; zoje and gjokmeme pears; quinces; and figs.
The Gashi River Valley has been declared a strict nature reserve in January 15, 1996 (according to IUCN category Ia), covering a total area of 3,000 ha. A strict nature reserve is the highest category of protected area and is created and managed mainly for the purposes of research or scientific fieldwork.

The Gashi River Valley is located in the district of Tropoja and covers the north-eastern border of Albania, including the highest point on the border between Albania, Kosovo* and Montenegro.

The Gashi River, which flows into the Valbona, rises in the Dobërdol glacial area at an altitude of 1,600 m. The remote valley is known as the pearl of Albanian nature: it is well known for its natural beauty, with slopes and narrow canyons creating many attractive features.

The valley is lined with oak, coniferous and beech forests that are home to many species of wildlife, including brown bears, chamois, wolves, squirrels and mountain eagles. The fresh, clean waters of the Gashi River are home to the globally threatened European otter (Lutra lutra).
Valbona Valley

The Valbona Valley lies at the heart of the Albanian Alps in the municipality of Tropoja. Due to its wealth of plant and animal species and rare natural beauties, the valley was declared a national park in 1996 (IUCN category II). The main goal of this kind of protected area is to protect natural biodiversity, conserve the underlying ecological structure and environmental processes, and promote education and recreation.

The valley is 27 km long, extending from Shtrejti Canyon to the Valbona Pass and covering an area of 8,000 ha. It is surrounded by many peaks, including Maja e Hekurave peak (2,561 m), Jezerca peak (2,694 m) and Kollata peak (2,528 m).

The valley slopes are almost vertical, with perpendicular rocks overhanging the river, towering peaks covered in trees, and cirques filled with permanent snow at an altitude of 1,700 m above the riverbed.

The Valbona Valley is dominated by high mountains that offer spectacular views, and landscapes that differ in colour with the changing seasons. This is the only area in Albania to feature such a large number of forest formations containing spruce (*Picea abies*). The climate here is suitable for species such as beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), mountain pine (*Pinus leucodermis* and *Pinus silvestris*), Balkan pine (*Pinus peuce*), chestnut (*Castanea sativa*), walnut (*Juglans regia*) and wild apple (*Malus sylvestris*).

The park is one of the most important national bio-centres for wild fauna. It provides a habitat for large mammals such as the bear (*Ursus arctos*), wolf (*Canis lupus*), lynx (*Lynx lynx*), deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra*) and wild boar (*Sus scrofa*).
Theth National Park

Theth is situated in the central Albanian Alps. In 1966, Thethi was declared a national park (IUCN category II), with the primary goal of protecting the area’s natural biodiversity and managing it in such a way as to preserve representative examples of wild species in their natural state, to maintain viable and ecologically functional populations of native species, and to contribute to local economies through tourism.

Theth lies 70 km from the city of Shkodra and the national park covers 2,630 ha, of which 1,680 ha are forest. The park is one of the most important tourist and alpine centres in northern Albania and is surrounded by various mountain peaks, including Radohima (2,570 m), Arapi (2,217 m), Papluka (2,569 m) and Ali’s peak (2,471 m).

The Shala River that runs through the valley and its villages is notable for its abundance of brown trout (*Salmo trutta fario*). Thethi National Park is also home to the lynx (*Lynx lynx*), which is an endangered species.

One of the most attractive natural features in Thethi National Park is the 30 metre high Grunas waterfall.

Other important species found here include the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), several species of woodpecker, the alpine salamander (*Salamandra atra*), as well as a variety of butterflies.

Over 1,500 species of plants, representing almost half the country’s flora, can be found in the park alone. The endemic plant Wulfenia (*Wulfenia baldaccii*) is found exclusively in Theth.
Kelmendi

mountain region

The municipality of Kelmend is located in northern Albania, covering an area of 353 km² and with a population of around 6,000. The Kelmendi region features some of the most impressive landscapes in the Albanian Alps. Hydrographically rich, the area has fast-running rivers and streams with cold, crystal-clear waters.

Around 52 endemic species can be found in Kelmendi, including the buttercup (Ranunculus hayekii), Albanian licorice root (Ligusticum albanicum) in Seferçë; the butterbur (Petasites doerfleri) in Bjeshkët e Namuna; the pinemat manzanita (Arctostaphylos uva-ursi) at heights of 1,200 to 1,400 m in Vermosh; and the Dalmatian cranesbill (Geranium dalmaticum) in the mountains surrounding Cem.

The area’s fauna is rich and diverse. The rare brown bear (Ursus arctos) and the lynx (Lynx lynx) can both be found in Vermosh, Vukël and Nikç. In the surrounding settlements, it is common to see foxes (Vulpes vulpes), beech martens and stone martens (Martes foina), while the isolated, rocky areas of Seferçë and the Accursed Mountains of Vukël are home to the chamois (Rupicapra rupicapra).

The Kelmendi region provides a habitat for 96 varieties of medicinal plants, some of which are harvested and marketed by local residents. Herbs and other medicinal plants are grown on an estimated 3,313 ha, among them walnut (Juglans regia) in Cem; St John’s-wort (Hypericum perforatum), little-leaf linden (Tilia cordata) in Grabom, Tamara and Gjadë; blueberries (Vaccinium myrtillus) and little-leaf linden in Berizhdol and Seferçë; and flowering ash (Fraxinus ornus) in Vermosh.

In Lëpushë alone, 24 varieties of clover have been identified. (A. Osja, 1995)
The Shkreli Regional Nature Park has been described as the “gateway to the Alps”. Established in 2015, the park covers a total of 20,282 ha. This category of protected area is managed by the local community, which means that certain agricultural and economic activities can be carried out within it.

The park is located about 10 km north-east of the town of Koplik and just 20 km from Shkodra. Most of the area is covered by mountains and peaks, which reach up to 2,400 m above sea level. Some of the mountainous areas are traversed by deep valleys, the most remarkable of which is the Përroi i Thatë canyon (or Dry Stream), creating numerous caves that are linked with both history and legend.

Various endemic plant species can be found in the park, thus environmental protection is vital in order to ensure that future generations can also enjoy plants such as the bellflower (Chamaemelum nobile), the early green hellebore (Helleborus multifidus) and the Albanian lily (Lilium albanicum).

Aromatic and medicinal plants in the park include sage (Salvia officinalis), chamomile (Anthemis nobilis), oregano (Oregano sp.), savory (Satureja hortensis) and lavender (Lavendula sp.). The park is also rich in flowers, with over 60 different species to be found in gardens and along the hiking trails.

The endemic fauna and endangered species include the green salamander (Aneides aeneus), alpine newt (Triturus alpestris), griffon (Gyps fulvus), booted eagle (Hieraaetus pennatus), badger (Meles meles) and chamois (Rupicapra rupicapra), which visitors may be lucky enough to spot.
Nikaj-Mërtur
Regional Nature Park

The Nikaj-Mërtur Regional Nature Park covers a relatively small area of 18,544.6 ha. As a regional nature park (IUCN category IV), the area is managed by the local community, and certain agricultural and economic activities are carried out within the territory.

The park can be considered one of the most beautiful landscapes in the country. Its borders are marked by various peaks: Bosh-Curraj peak to the north, Dren peak to the east, and Korja e Mërturit peak in the south-east.

Owing to its remote geographical location and specific climate, Nikaj-Mërtur is rich in both flora and fauna. The area is mainly covered by beech and chestnut forests, while approximately 88 different kinds of medicinal plants have been recorded, among them species used to manufacture pharmaceuticals, such as colchicum (*Colchicum autumnale*), yellow gentian (*Gentiana lutea*), Albanian lily (*Lilium albanicum*), mistletoe (*Viscum album*) and wulfenia.

Animals typically found in the park include the wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra*), wolf (*Canis lupus*), fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), lynx (*Lynx lynx*), otter (*Lutrinae*), roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), wildcat (*Felis silvestris*) and hare (*Lepus europaeus*).

Look carefully while hiking and you might spot a black salamander as well.

Nikaj-Mërtur Nature Park is famous for its chestnut forests.
The flora growing in the Albanian Alps constitutes 43 percent of the country’s total flora. The Alps are home to approximately 1,500 plant species, including 100 species of medicinal plants, a large number of relict and sub-endemic plant species, and 70 endangered and rare species.

Besides plants that have an economic value, such as pasture or medicinal and aromatic plants, the area’s endemic, relict and rare plant species have a significant value. These plants require particular ecological conditions and grow in specific environments such as canyons, springs and rocky peaks.

Did you know? Endemic species in the Albanian Alps constitute 0.7 percent of the flora in the Alps. They include the buttercup (Ranunculus hayekii), Albanian licorice root (Ligusticum albanicum) in Seferçë; the butterbur (Petasites doerleri) in Bjeshkët e Namuna; the alpine star (Leontopodium alpinum) and the violet (Viola dukadjinica). Some of these species can only be found at one particular place in the Alps and are at risk of extinction. These include the Wulfenia baldaccii, which can be found in Theth along the so-called Sheep Trail; and the Sanguisorba albanica, which can be found in Seferçë in northern Vermosh.
The diversity of habitats in the Alps accommodate a rich fauna.

The rivers appear to be relatively short, as the water is not visible on the surface, but continues to flow underground, due to karst. Due to their isolation, the rivers in the Alps contain a large number of endemic species, primarily fish.

These freshwater habitats are home to two species of trout. Mountain trout, like all other species of salmonid, are used as biological indicators of water quality and aquatic ecosystem conditions. The brown trout (Salmo trutta fario) and Drini trout (Salmo farioides) can be found in the Shala, Kiri and Valbona rivers. Both types are endangered and require protection, particularly during their breeding period.

The Albanian Alps are home to 40 species of amphibians and reptiles and 135 species of birds, the most important being the bearded vulture (Gypaetus barbatus), griffon vulture (Gyps fulvus), hazel grouse (Bonas bonasia) and Western capercaillie (Tetrao urogallus).

Mammal species which can be found on the list of threatened species include the wild boar (Sus scrofa), chamois (Rupicapra rupicapra), roe deer (Capreolus capreolus), brown bear (Ursus arctos), wolf (Canis lupus) and lynx (Lynx lynx).

The most common small mammals are Mediterranean horseshoe bats (Rhinolophus euryale) and Geoffroy’s bats (Myotis emarginatus).
Bats are the only mammals capable of sustained flight due to the webbed wings formed by their forelimbs. Many bat species are endangered. Threats include loss of habitat or colony sites, intensive land use leading to pollution and a decline in the insect populations (moths and flies) on which the bats feed.

Many bat species have summer breeding and winter hibernating colonies, in which large numbers of bats gather. Bats use echolocation for navigation and to find their prey. Female bats typically have one offspring at a time. The young bats are nursed for six to eight weeks until they have grown to nearly adult size, as a bat’s wings at birth are too small for flight. A bat’s lifespan can exceed 20 years.

Cave dwellers
The Albanian Alps National Park comprises a mosaic of ecosystems. In addition to high peaks and dense forests, natural caves form a unique habitat in this area. Horizontal or vertical, big or small, caves are an opportunity for great adventure, if you follow the safety rules.

This fascinating world should be visited accompanied by a trained guide or speleologist. The caves in the Alps are home to a rich and endangered biodiversity and host beautiful but fragile geological treasures.

Like bats, the stalactites and stalagmites in the caves are very sensitive to disturbance and movement. When you enter a cave, it is worth stopping to reflect that the 1 m stalactite in front of you is growing at a rate of 0.1 mm per year, and that protected bat species that have their home here are of benefit to human beings as natural insect regulators.

There are several karst caves in the Alps that can be explored by tourists, although for safety reasons it is recommended always to go with a local guide.

The Albanian Alps conceal an amazing underground world
# Threats and risks in the Albanian Alps

## Threats

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<th>Threat</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>Habitat destruction</td>
<td>The main threats to this area are habitat fragmentation and modification and extinction of species as a result of inappropriate infrastructure construction, illegal logging, and the expansion of urban centres.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soil erosion</td>
<td>Erosion is associated with the modification or destruction of habitats, especially in the upland areas of the Alps, and is linked in particular with deforestation.</td>
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<td>Hunting</td>
<td>Hunting is a threat to biodiversity. The greatest problem is illegal hunting that targets species under a high level of protection, such as wild boar, roe deer and chamois.</td>
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<td>Uncontrolled tourism</td>
<td>In certain parts of the Alps, tourist activities are damaging the fragile balance of mountain ecosystems.</td>
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<td>Overgrazing</td>
<td>The increasing numbers of cattle are intensifying pressure on alpine pastures and exhausting their natural capacity.</td>
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<td>Climate change</td>
<td>Global climate change is threatening to drastically alter alpine hydrological systems, causing summer droughts, and flooding and landslides in winter. As a result, many species may face extinction or relocation to the north, or, more seriously, may be replaced by new species.</td>
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<td>Changes in river flow</td>
<td>Hydropower exploitation affects the natural river flow, blocking sediments that would normally be deposited along the riverbanks and in deltas, resulting in increased risk of flooding.</td>
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<td>Invasion of alien species</td>
<td>The introduction of foreign species seriously threatens the flora and fauna of the Alps.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harvesting of medicinal herbs</td>
<td>Harvesting medicinal herbs is particularly damaging when carried out on a large scale, in a disorganised way, at inappropriate times of the year, and using destructive techniques.</td>
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Natural monuments

Monuments of nature are natural features with unique scientific, ecological, cultural, historical, aesthetic, didactic or religious value; habitats of rare or threatened species; or areas of special importance of up to 50 ha.

To meet the criteria for natural monument status, an area or habitat:
• must contain one or more features of outstanding significance;
• must be entirely natural and large enough to protect the integrity of the feature; and
• must be undamaged by human impacts or natural factors, or must have the possibility of renewal.

In the Albanian Alps there are around 25 natural monuments, some of which are presented below.
The Albanian Alps are rich in cultural and spiritual highlights, all of which have their own stories to tell about how people have lived for generations in this part of the country. Life in the Alps has been shaped not only by the area’s natural features, but also by the changing historical and socioeconomic conditions.

Throughout history, the Albanian Alps have been affected by various factors that have left significant traces on the area’s tangible and intangible cultural heritage. As you walk the cultural and spiritual paths of the Albanian Alps you will come across features of the cultural landscape that are among the area’s most valuable assets.

**Tower houses:** The traditional Albanian stone house known as a *kulla* is found predominantly in the Alps. In the face of attacks from various armies, the *kulla* became a necessity in mountainous regions as a place of refuge, largely because villages were so scattered, making coordinated defence complicated. Some *kullas* were designed to provide safe havens in the case of blood feuds.

The *kullas* in the Alps were constructed using uncut stone and were often located on rocks or cliffs. To reduce the threat of attack the windows were kept small and the walls featured shooting holes. On the upper floor were the *çelers* — small sleeping rooms, a room with a fireplace and the kitchen. The main room was the guestroom, which had a fireplace opposite the door. The rooms were decorated with sheepskins, goat wool rugs, carpets and woollen pillows embroidered with folk motifs.

Many *kullas* have been declared cultural monuments, with significant value in terms of Albania’s cultural heritage, and are protected by UNESCO.
**Song and dance:** From ancient times people have expressed their feelings through folk poetry and dance. In Albania, the decasyllabic meter was used in heroic poetry, which was typically sung to the accompaniment of a one-stringed instrument known as a *lahutë*. Another traditional musical instrument found in the Alps is the two-stringed çifteli, which accompanied lyrical songs and dances. There are several traditional dances in northern Albania, such as the *vallja e logut* (Logu dance), the dance of swords danced by two men, and the dance of Tropoja. It is not unusual today for the owners of guesthouses and restaurants to perform songs accompanied by the *lahutë* or çifteli.

**Traditional costumes** were mainly made of heavy woollen cloth, as livestock breeding was the primary source of subsistence. The cloth was hand woven by women, who also produced woollen blankets, rugs and various decorative items. They would sit by the fire with a distaff (*furkë*) in their hands, spinning yarn for knitting or weaving on the loom. Wool was knitted into socks, gaiters, gloves, various styles of jacket known as *jaketa*, *zhgun* and *dollama*, and sweaters. Goat hair was typically mixed with the wool in order to improve the quality of the raw material for making rough rugs, covers and cloaks.

The *xhubleta*, a traditional item of women’s folk clothing, has an undulating, bell-shaped skirt and shoulder straps. It is typically made from 13 to 17 strips of cloth and felt. In the past, the dress was extremely colourful: according to one 17th-century author, the *xhubleta* worn by the women of Kelmend displayed more colours than a peacock.

A typical item of men’s clothing is the çakshiri, which comprised a white shirt with a round collar, white trousers, a black or red woollen waistcoat, a broad sash and a doublet trimmed with gold thread. The closely fitting trousers, or *tirq*, decorated with a length of black ribbon and worn with a tight waistcoat, were designed to make men appear taller and more agile.
The Albanian Alps celebrated in epic song

The Eposi i Kreshnikëve or “Songs of the Frontier Warriors”, are intimately linked with the natural features of the Albanian Alps. The Albanian epic song cycle represents one of the intangible cultural heritage and has survived exclusively in oral form. The bards who performed these epic songs have been referred to as the “last Homerians”.

Among researchers, the song cycle is also known as the “northern epic cycle”, as it originated in the north of the country, above the Drini River that divides Albania. In the songs, the homes of the fairies and Fates are to be found in the untouched beauties of nature, in features such as waterfalls, mountain peaks and forests. The Fates, or Zanas, are invisible beings, generally without corporeal form. It was them who kept homes and tribes safe. The Fates were believed to reside on the highest peak in the territory of the tribe. The Fate protecting the Shala tribe, for example, “tall, swift as light, bitter as a snake”, was thought to dwell on the peak of Ershellit; the Fate of the Mërturi was to be found on the top of Mërturit; the Fate of the Nikaj, “with severe and frowning face”, stood on the peak of Kaki; while the Fate of the Krasniqi, “petulant and blond”, dwelt high on Gri.

Many place names in Albania are directly related to this epic character, including the Fates’ Springs of Shalë, Rragam and Tropojë; the Fates’ Log in Kiri, Pult municipality; the Cave of the Fates (in Ganjoll, Mërturi), and the Hole of the Fates (Aprripë e Gurit in Puka).
Young Mujo is sent to work as a cowherd in the high mountain pastures. There, in the night, he comes across two infants in cradles. He rocks the cradles to comfort the children. Two zanas appear before him and grant him a wish for having cared for the infants.

Mujo wishes for strength to overcome the other cowherds who tease him. The zanas give Mujo milk from their breasts until he is strong enough to raise a heavy boulder to his shoulders. Mujo then returns home to teach the other cowherds a lesson.

“We are the zanas, Mujo, on our journey, Giving to mankind our help and assistance. And what favour do you ask of us, oh Mujo, For rocking our infants to sleep in their cradles? Do you want strength, Mujo, to put up resistance? Do you want might, Mujo, to fight in pitched battle? Or do you, Mujo, desire goods and possessions? Or do you want wisdom, to speak foreign tongues? Tell us your wish and to you we will grant it.”

Listen how Mujo then turned and responded: “The shepherds on many occasions have teased me, For me they have only shown ire and derision, Just give me strength so that I can outdo them.”

The zanas took counsel at this and decided: “Some milk from our breasts will we give unto Mujo.” And milk of their breasts they did give him to drink of, Three drops were sufficient to nourish the young lad. Such was the strength that the Lord did accord him That he had the force to make lofty cliffs tremble.

...
Major traditional holidays in the Albanian Alps

Traditional holidays, costumes, beliefs and superstitions are an important part of the area’s intangible cultural heritage. Most of the festivals mentioned below have been transmitted from generation to generation.

- Opening of the tourist season (last week in May in Valbona, and second week in June in Nikaj-Mertur)
- May 6: Day of Flowers in the Alps
- June: Sofra Dardane is celebrated in Valbona
- August 15: St. Mary’s Day is celebrated in Theth
- Second Saturday in August: The “Miss Bjeshka” festival is organised at Logu i Bjeshkëve in Vermosh
- Third weekend in August: The full moon is celebrated in the village of Tamara
- Last week of September: The “Lami” festival celebrates the union of summer and autumn products
- December 26: St. John’s Day is celebrated in Shalë, traditionally with the roasting of meat on a spit to honour friendship
“Miss Bjeshka”, Kelmend

This cultural festival has taken place annually on the second Saturday in August since 1998 in the village of Lepushë in Kelmend region. Girls from Kelmend compete at Qafa e Predelecit for the title of “Miss Bjeshka”, the most beautiful girl in the mountains. The festival provides a colourful opportunity to get acquainted with the traditional costumes, songs and dances of Kelmend.

The “Logu i Bjeshkëve” festival goes back to ancient times, when residents expressed their appreciation of the most graceful and accomplished bride in the village, who was the personification of attractiveness, cleanliness and health. A girl might be picked out as she walked to the village fountain, or during celebrations or ceremonies at church on Sundays. As a symbol of beauty, others would try to imitate the way she dressed, behaved, walked and sang. The dedicated day of celebration then came to have a religious character, as the day of St. Prende.

Dita e Bjeshkëve, Theth

Dita e Bshkeve, or Highlands Day, takes place in Thethi National Park each year on June 25. Traditionally, this was the day when people gathered and prepared to move their cattle to the higher summer pastures. It was a day of hope after the long, difficult winter season. The residents of Thethi celebrate together by organising games, holding an agricultural fair and displaying handicrafts.

Highlands Day is also dedicated to legends and historical tales in order to promote tourism and agrobiodiversity values. It is an opportunity for reflection and for expressing hopes for a better life in the future, with better infrastructure and facilities for visitors and tourists.
Outdoor activities in the Albanian Alps

The Alps are an ideal destination for a wide range of mountain activities, including “white tourism” in the cold winter season, and “green tourism” in the summer months.

Tourist activities include winter sports, mountaineering, hiking and trekking, agro-tourism, fishing, camping, mountain biking and motorcycling, rock climbing and caving.

With the support of GIZ, guesthouses have been built to provide accommodation for tourists, while family tourism is the main source of income for the local population. Help has also been given by GIZ to mark trails with red and white signs and to prepare and publish related maps and tourist guides. There are also a few existing maps and guidebooks for tourists, mainly by foreign writers.

One of the most successful tourism projects is the 192 km “Peaks of the Balkans” trail, which lies mostly in the Balkan Peace Park. This cross-border trail through the Alps in Kosovo*, Albania and Montenegro won the 2013 prize “Tourism for Tomorrow”, awarded by the World Travel and Tourism Council. For more information, visit www.peaksofthebalkans.com
Outdoor activities

**Hiking:** The Albanian Alps area offers hiking trails of varying degrees of difficulty. Some thematic trails, such as literature trails, the chestnut trail or the strawberry trail, have also been developed recently. All trails are marked with red and white signage. The best way to obtain information about the trails and their starting points is to ask or hire a local mountain guide.

**Literature trails:** These paths allow you to discover the role of biodiversity through the literary heritage of the northern Alps. Wander through the landscape of Ismail Kadare’s *Broken April*; investigate the cultural use and meaning of the region’s flora through ethno-botanist Franz Nopče’s travel memoirs; or trace Mary Edith Durham’s footsteps through the landscape, culture and legends of her beloved High Albania. The literary heritage trails encourage you to explore the communities and landscapes that have shaped the country’s identity and that continue to inspire visitors who venture into its rugged natural beauty.

**Caving:** Discover the natural monuments of this limestone region, including the Cuckoo Cave, the Cave of the Shakujve Valley, the “Red” Cave, the Cave of Kakverri, the Cave of Muldea, the Cave of Raja, the Cave of Frati, the Cave of Boshi, or the Black Hole Cave. Bear in mind that many caves have still not been fully explored and that visitors are encouraged to take particular care and to enter caves only if accompanied by an experienced local guide.

**Canoeing:** Rich in rivers, the Albanian Alps make an ideal destination for canoeing. However, tourists wishing to take to the waters will have to bring their own equipment. To ensure safety, tourists should contact local guides and tour operators, who offer canoeing, if they wish to paddle through the different waters.

**Horse riding:** This is an ideal way to discover the natural landscapes and villages of the Alps. Guesthouse owners can provide horses and accompany tourists.
The people of the Alps are known in Albania for their hospitality and eagerness to take care of their guests, their sense of humour, and their talent for telling stories about the past and about local traditions. They are also eager to introduce their guests to the wide variety of local foods and products.

Biodiversity in the Alps is a source of income for local communities. Agricultural production is based mainly on livestock breeding and the cultivation of grains, vegetables and fruits. Family gardens are also used to grow vegetables, potatoes, and a wide variety of fruits such as plums (Prunus sp.), grapes (Vitis vinifera), cherries (Cornus mas), blueberries (Vaccinium myrtillus L.) and pears (Pyrus sp.).

Gastronomy: Tourists can sample meat and fish prepared in a variety of different ways; corn and potato mash (kaçimak); sour cream (maza); boiled cheese (djathë i zier); meat roasted on a spit (fërliku); baked pancakes with yoghurt (flija); dried meat (pastërmaja); honey; and forest products.

In the Albanian Alps five watermills are still in operation, all for grinding corn. They are run by the local community, or by groups of communities. The mill near Theth Tower on the bank of the Shala River, and the mill in Vukël both deserve mention.
Mishavina cheese, which is produced in the village of Vermosh, has a tradition going back over 100 years. It takes up to 10 litres of milk to make 1 kg of this cheese. With mishavina, you can really taste the mountain meadows.

Livestock production is based mainly on local indigenous breeds of sheep and goats, kept in alpine pastures. 35% of livestock in Albania (1.8 million sheep and 0.8 million goats) are located in the northern, mountainous part of the country. Autochthonous breeds of cattle are adapted to the local climate and are more resistant to disease.
1. Plan Ahead and Prepare

- Know the regulations and special concerns for the area you’ll visit.
- Prepare for extreme weather, hazards, and emergencies.
- Schedule your trip to avoid times of high use.
- Visit in small groups when possible. Consider splitting larger groups into smaller groups.
- Repackage food to minimize waste.
- Use a map and compass to eliminate the use of marking paint, rock cairns or flagging.

2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces

- Durable surfaces include established trails and campsites, rock, gravel, dry grasses or snow.
- Protect riparian areas by camping at least 200 feet from lakes and streams.
- Good campsites are found, not made. Altering a site is not necessary.
- In popular areas: Concentrate use on existing trails and campsites.
- Walk single file in the middle of the trail, even when wet or muddy.
- Keep campsites small. Focus activity in areas where vegetation is absent.
- In pristine areas: Disperse use to prevent the creation of campsites and trails.
- Avoid places where impacts are just beginning.

3. Dispose of Waste Properly

- Pack it in, pack it out. Inspect your campsite and rest areas for trash or spilled foods. Pack out all trash, leftover food and litter.
- Deposit solid human waste in catholes dug 6 to 8 inches deep, at least 200 feet from water, camp and trails. Cover and disguise the cathole when finished.
- Pack out toilet paper and hygiene products.
- To wash yourself or your dishes, carry water 200 feet away from streams or lakes and use small amounts of biodegradable soap. Scatter strained dishwater.
4. Leave What You Find
- Preserve the past: examine, but do not touch cultural or historic structures and artifacts.
- Leave rocks, plants and other natural objects as you find them.
- Avoid introducing or transporting non-native species.
- Do not build structures, furniture, or dig trenches.

5. Minimize Campfire Impacts
- Campfires can cause lasting impacts to the backcountry. Use a lightweight stove for cooking and enjoy a candle lantern for light.
- Where fires are permitted, use established fire rings, fire pans, or mound fires.
- Keep fires small. Only use sticks from the ground that can be broken by hand.
- Burn all wood and coals to ash, put out campfires completely, then scatter cool ashes.

6. Respect Wildlife
- Observe wildlife from a distance. Do not follow or approach them.
- Never feed animals. Feeding wildlife damages their health, alters natural behaviors, and exposes them to predators and other dangers.
- Protect wildlife and your food by storing rations and trash securely.
- Control pets at all times, or leave them at home.
- Avoid wildlife during sensitive times: mating, nesting, raising young, or winter.

7. Be Considerate of Other Visitors
- Respect other visitors and protect the quality of their experience.
- Be courteous. Yield to other users on the trail.
- Step to the downhill side of the trail when encountering pack stock.
- Take breaks and camp away from trails and other visitors.
- Let nature’s sounds prevail. Avoid loud voices and noises.
Useful addresses

- Ministry of Environment: www.mjedisi.gov.al
- National Agency of Protected Areas: www.akzm.gov.al
- National Agency of Tourism: www.akt.gov.al