

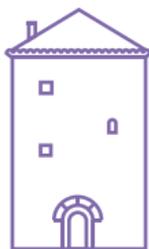


Tower Tour



The Towers of Northeastern Albania

Silent Stones, Loud Stories



Tower Tour



Burrel - Klos - Fshat
Bulqizë - Peshkopi - Lurë

Content

Welcome to Albania 01 Navigating
Northeast 04 The Nature 08 The History
and Culture 10 When To Go 14 The Kulla of
Northeasten Albania 16

Regional Guide

Burreli 20

Klosi 28

Fshati 34

Bulqiza 40

Peshkopia 44

Lura 54

Practical Information 57

Mirësevini! Welcome to Albania

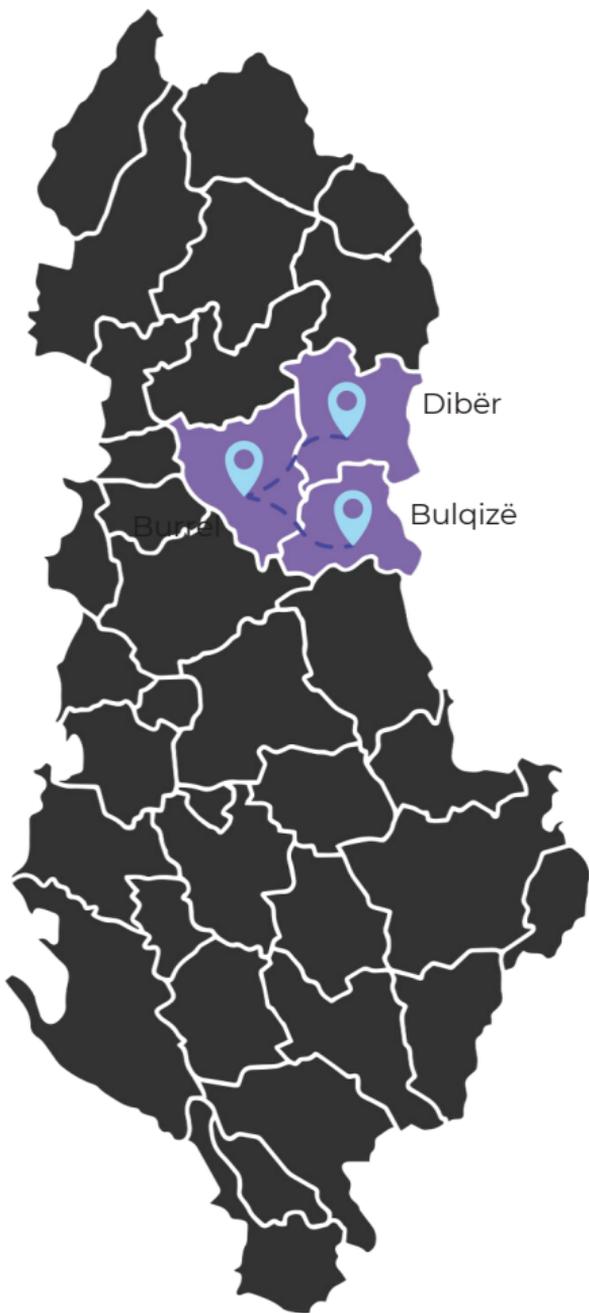
By now, you've probably heard about Albania. You know about the coves of glittering azure sea, maybe about the craggy alpine expanses cradling ancient beech forests, and almost certainly about the little round concrete bunkers from Communism. The country, about the size of Wales and the population of metro Brussels, welcomed 11.7 million visitors in 2024, triple the number 10 years prior. You'll most likely arrive with lots of potential new friends when you touch down at Tirana International Airport. Fortunately, no country in the world is better at welcoming visitors. Hospitality and taking care of guests is central to centuries-old codes of honor that far predate the existence of the Albanian nation. You will certainly be awed by the incredible diversity of natural beauty here and fascinated by the relics of eight millennia of civilizations — Illyrian, Roman and Byzantine ruins; storybook UNESCO-listed medieval castles and Ottoman bazaars. But what you'll remember most are the Albanians you'll meet who will welcome you at their guesthouses, tavernas, farms and homes with fresh pies, heaping plates of roasted lamb, glasses of village wine and folk-song singalongs by the fire, late into the night.

You can find the Albanian welcome anywhere. It's in the lovingly restored inns of fairytale towns like Berati and Gjirokastra, in the stylish Italianate villas of coastal cities like Durrësi and Vlora, and even in the bustle of the capital, Tirana. But nowhere will you be made to feel at home like in rural Albania. The countryside is vast and unspoiled, astonishing yet slow-paced. Cherries, plums, tomatoes, lamb, rabbit and pasta are farm-fresh; age-old culinary techniques are still the everyday way of cooking, with delicious results. Songs, dances and rituals molded by generations of tradition are performed jubilantly and often — any occasion can be a party, and any weekend might be a festival. You might hike, bike or climb to a proud peak or glacial lake and find you have the whole of God's country to yourself. Albania is a fast-changing place, but not too much has changed in these parts, not yet.



Navigating Northeast

Even by the standards of rural Albania, few people visit the wild uplands of the northeast, a world away from the Instagram cocktails and acres of sunbeds on the coast. In the regions of **Dibra and Kukësi**, there are no cities — no towns at all with more than 20,000 residents — but these mountains birthed some of Albania's greatest heroes. From the snow-crowned mountains around the Valbona Valley to the placid Lura Lakes blooming with lilies to the sharp-toothed ridges approaching North Macedonia, the region is blessed with stark, stunning landscapes. Long isolated by geography, the northeast has preserved cultural treasures too: the craftwork of meticulously embroidered dresses called **xhubleta**, the ancient stones of ruined hilltop citadels, and the **kulla**, soaring, fortified tower houses built nearly as strong as the mountains themselves. Today, kullas are guesthouses, museums and simply monuments to a past that feels close to the present here, and they can serve as guideposts along your journey through northeastern Albania's highlands. Northeastern Albania, on modern maps, mostly falls into the Dibra (or Dibër) and Kukësi counties, plus parts of Lezha and Shkodra counties, with Dibra and Lezha closer to Tiranë and Kukësi and Shkodra reaching the northern border of Albania. These counties encompass more historic regions whose names may not appear on your GPS. You'll read about the rivers of **Mati**, for example, or the warriors of **Tropoja**, and these may sound like legends. But if you know where to look, you'll find them.



The northeast, mostly, is bounded by mountain ranges. To the west, the Skanderbeg Mountains (Vargmalet e Skënderbeut) march from Tirana north through the middle of Albania, separating the coastal lowlands from the eastern highlands. These eventually fade, and the Albanian Alps, or "Accursed Mountains" (Bjeshkët e Nemuna), begin to rise in the far north. A parade of mountains, including Dajti and Shebeniku east of Tirana, also demarcates the south of the northeast. The northern and eastern limits of the northeast are the national borders with Montenegro, Kosovo and North Macedonia. There, you will also find — you guessed it — mountains.

The main population centers of northeastern Albania are **Peshkopia**, the seat of Dibra County, and **Kukësi**, in Kukësi County. Both towns were heavily developed as manufacturing centers under the Communist system (1944 to 1991), but both have obvious charm, with tree-lined promenades, peaks on the horizon, attractive historic centers and abundant snow to sprinkle some winter magic on everything. If that sounds like your cup of mountain tea, see page 44 for information on how to get there.



The Nature

The mountains shape everything about northeastern Albania, from its history to its climate to its food. This is a true-blue Balkans country, nothing like the Mediterranean Albania you may imagine. You'll find canyons, pinnacles, bluffs, forests thick with firs and pines, crystalline glacial lakes, waterfalls and snowy bridges over deep gorges. Beer, roasted meats and hearty pastas fill up the tables. Folks here even speak **Gheg**

a noticeably different language, called Albanian. The **Lura Mountains** sail through the middle of Dibra County, with the Lura-Mount Deja National Park (Parku Kombëtar Lurë-Mali i Dejës) providing one of the most serene and enchanting stretches of blue sky and lush hills in all of Albania. To the far north, the

Valbona Valley (Lugina e Valbonës) with postcard-perfect alpine streams and year-round snowcaps, has now become a celebrated destination, linked to the fjord-esque turquoise **Komani Lake** reservoir (Liqeni i Komanit). **Mount Korabi** (Maja e Korabit), the white peak of the forbidding Korabi Massif, stands a bit southeast, the highest point in Albania. It's a gentle giant, though, hikeable in a day, past fields of Albanian lilies, shepherd's huts and rumbled shale formations.

In the valleys, the **Mati** and **Black Drini** (Drini i Zi) rivers form spectacular contrasts with the gorges around them, glittering blue-green against the slate and sienna hues of the hillsides.

Most of the marquee nature parks here have at least a few well-marked trails for hiking and mountain biking, and the Albanian Alps offer plenty for climbers, including routes with bolts and fixed pins. The glacial lakes around the region are excellent perches for birdwatching, and critter lovers should stay alert for eagles, bears, foxes, deer, lynxes, frogs and salamanders. Several farms in Dibra offer horseback rides, and if you're hardy enough, you can brave some of the chilly ponds and streams for a swim. There's even at least one ski slope.



The History and Culture

Recent archaeological research in the Mati River valley of Dibra County suggests that early modern humans were hunting, gathering and sheltering in the caves of northeastern Albania as early as 40,000 years ago! By 6000 BC, agriculture and settlement had arrived in Albania, and Stone and Bronze Age peoples inhabited the fertile valleys of the Mati and Black Drini rivers here. The first builders to appear in the historical record in northeastern Albania were Illyrians and Dardanians, who fashioned hillforts from local limestone and forged helmets, swords and jewelry from iron and bronze. These cultures rarely unified into kingdoms but coexisted (not always peacefully) as smaller tribes around modern-day Albania, Kosovo and beyond. When the Roman Republic attacked Albania in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, Illyrians in northern Albania fought back, but they were overpowered. Nonetheless, northeastern Albania, walled off by mountains, was largely left alone by the Romans. By the medieval era, this region had sprouted a handful of prosperous cities and even minor centers of Orthodox Christianity, such as Peshkopia. The area was sandwiched between the Serbian kings to the northeast and the Venetians on the Adriatic Coast in Durrësi and Shkodra; power struggles were constant. In the 14th century, the houses of Kastrioti and Dukagjini emerged as the dominant Albanian clans in the northeast, and the Kastrioti lineage would

produce one of Albania's greatest leaders: Gjergj Kastrioti, known as Skanderbeg (Skënderbeu or Skënderbej in Albanian). Born in the Dibra region around 1405, Skanderbeg recognized that small Albanian noble families squabbling for power stood to lose their lands to much greater forces if they could not unite. In 1444, with the Ottoman Empire squeezing the Albanian principalities, Skanderbeg called his fellow ruling families in north and central Albania to resistance under the banner of the League of Lezha. For the next quarter-century, he fought much larger Ottoman armies in both siege and guerilla warfare, frequently using the treacherous mountain terrain to his advantage. Skanderbeg had grown up in the highlands, and generals from Istanbul were frustrated and flummoxed by his tactics.



Tribal law in the highlands has no single author, but its principles governed life in northeastern Albania until the 20th century — and some of its codes are still followed today. The concept of besa places utmost importance on honor, loyalty, integrity and protection, which influences the Albanian view of hospitality toward strangers as a high responsibility. Besa (or besë) is also the word for a specific pledge or promise of honor. Another obligation of the Kanun proved to be more troublesome: gjakmarrja (or gjakmarrje), the vengeance of blood. As gjakmarrja could be triggered by crimes like theft or debt, blood feuds started easily and could continue for generations as members of rival families murdered each other. According to the rules, the target of a feud could seek refuge for a period of time in a “safe tower” or “lock-in tower” while the families discussed other solutions. You may begin to understand, now, the environment in which fortified stone kulla houses became necessary for survival here. As the men of the northeast engaged in their feuds, women focused on more productive crafts, the most celebrated of which is the xhubleta (or xhubletë). A flowing dress or skirt woven from felt and intricately embroidered with colorful regional patterns, the xhubleta signaled wealth, beauty and status, and it was regularly worn for weddings and other family celebrations until the mid-20th century. The most elegant and vibrant of Albania’s folk garments, the xhubleta was added to UNESCO’s list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2022.

During the early years of Albanian independence and Communism, the Dibra region contributed modern Albania's only king, Zog I, who reigned from 1928 to 1939, and the harsh mountains became the sites of prisons, mines and heavy fortifications against border countries. But today, a new generation of innkeepers, restaurateurs, farmers, adventure guides, folk dancers and xhubleta weavers are welcoming visitors from near and far to this unique and magical corner of the country.



When To Go

Northeastern Albania is a year-round destination. Winter enthusiasts will love snowshoeing and cozying up with piping-hot coffee, though travel can be slow, and roads do get blocked by snowfall. Spring brings out the highland flowers, and the waterfalls are at their most brilliant. In the summer, the northeast is an escape. Relatively few international tourists venture beyond the Albanian Alps, for now, and the heat is turned down several notches from western inland cities like Berati and Gjirokastra. Still, you'll want to wear sunscreen and carry plenty of water when you hike. Some people consider autumn the most beautiful time of year here, as the leaves turn red and yellow while the sun's intensity backs off a bit. In fact, the very best time to visit northeastern Albania is in October or early November, when the biggest, most action-packed annual **folk festival** in the Albanian-speaking world arrives. The **Oda Dibrane** is a boisterous celebration of food, drink and dance, and quiet Peshkopia lights up when the fest comes to town. Watch folk singers and dancers from around the country don dazzling xhubletas and other costumes for two days of performances in the streets and the local theater. Then fill your belly with **sheqerpare** shortbread cookies, **sarma** snacks (meat and rice wrapped in vine leaves), roasted walnuts and chestnuts, and juice or **raki** made from plums, pears and cherries.



The Kulla of Northeastern Albania

Hiking, strolling or riding around northern Albania, you'll see the kullas everywhere. Some of these tower houses are mostly made of local mountain limestone, others of wood, and still others, a mix of materials. They can be tall and lithe or stout and hulking. Each has the character of the family who lived there, and all are distinctive, a vernacular style of architecture only found here and in the historically Albanian parts of Kosovo and Montenegro. The kulla has evolved for centuries, but the ones you'll most likely encounter were built between the 1700s and early 1900s. In this remote area, seasons can be extreme, and in a society of complicated dynamics that often turned violent, people could be pretty extreme, too. These houses had to be built strong, by exceptionally skilled craftsmen, to withstand both the elements and one's enemies. As in other parts of Albania where family fortresses became an art form, such as Gjirokastra, kullas in the northeast also telegraphed class and taste. Among friendly families, they were beacons of safety, hospitality and a warm fire.

The design and function of the kulla varies from region to region, but many share certain architectural components. Construction started with taking measurements, and folk tradition tells us, “When building a kulla, the master craftsman would measure its height with the span of his hand and wouldn't consult the homeowner. However, the tower's length and width were determined by the homeowner, who measured them with their own arm's reach.” The result, usually, was a cube-shaped building, with a floorplan of around 10 by 10 meters. Kullas are typically three stories tall, though some are two and the grandest are four.



The exterior, whether stone or timber, had to be sturdy; protecting one's family was the tower's primary function. You'll notice the windows are usually small. These are called frëngji, and they're just big enough to stick a rifle or other artillery weapon through. Up on the highest floor, many kullas have a curious stone or wooden feature that protrudes from the rest of the wall and hangs over the façade beneath it. These bulges, which look like walled-up balconies, can poke out of just one corner, wrap around the side of the kulla or surround the whole level. They generally functioned as galleries or corridors which the people inside traversed to access common rooms. But they also provided useful positions for firing rifles — and for toilets. A timber-built gallery, often a sign of an older kulla, is called a qoshk, while a stone-built one is a çikma. As in other traditional Balkan dwellings, the ground floor of these homes was devoted to stables for livestock and other storage for the long winters. An external staircase often leads to the main entrance on the second level, where families slept, cooked and played. Here's where the kitchen (sometimes called a "firehouse") was located, along with bedrooms for children and married couples. The uppermost floor was reserved for the oda (or odë), sometimes called the oda e burrave ("men's chamber"), the most ornate room in the kulla. This living room is where the family received and entertained guests. Gossip, dinner parties and special occasions were celebrated up here, with the guest of honor seated nearest to the fireplace. In a walled yard surrounding the kulla were mills, gardens and sometimes cabins for new couples.

While kulla appear around the Albanian north, this guide focuses on those in Dibra County. We hope the following pages inspire you to visit some of our favorites, get to know the nearby towns and villages, and immerse yourself in the poetry of this land and its people. You'll find website or contact information for visiting the kullas and other heritage sites of the area throughout the booklet.



Regional Guide

Burreli

The town of Burreli is a fine introduction to northeastern Albania. Here, the lowlands are left behind on the western side of the mountains, yet you're only about 1 hour, 30 minutes' drive from either **Tirana** center or Tirana International Airport . Burreli is the administrative center of the Mati region, the place where a tribe of Illyrians called the **Albanoi** lived. From the **Albanoi**, some scholars posit, came today's Albanians. Two thousand years later, Burreli is a quiet mountain town with an appropriately well-supplied museum of history and ethnography, and plenty of intriguing natural and cultural sites in the nearby villages and along the **Mati River** (Lumi i Matit).



Barçi Tower (Kulla e Barçit)

In the village of **Lisi**, 16 kilometers by road east of Burreli, stands one of the more intimidating kullas in the northeast, now restored to a look that's almost friendly and welcoming, with a wooden gate opening to a vine-shaded **terrace**. Barçi Tower is a reminder that the history of the **Kanun**, the blood feud and the perilous northeast is not so far in the past. The fortified stone mansion was constructed just a century ago, in 1926, with additions in 1936. This kulla

has a nicely reconstructed example of a stone *çikma* gallery and small *frëngji* windows. Like most *kullas*, it's not only meant to bare teeth, but also to show off some wealth. The fireplace **mantel** in the family gathering room is decorated with stone carvings in geometric patterns, and the *oda* (reception room for guests) is also dressed to impress. No one would mistake the Barçi family's social stature.

 Phone: +355 68 473 2744



Mati Historical Museum (Muzeu Historik Mat)

To understand the people and culture of this corner of Albania, you should make a stop at the Mati Historical Museum, a compact but comprehensive collection of artifacts from more than 3,000 years of Mati. The museum, opened in 1983 near the center of Burreli, holds antique ceramics from the Iron Age, including some wonderful **two-handed drinking cups**, then moves through the story of the Illyrian, Roman, medieval and Ottoman eras. There's a motley assemblage of weapons, farm tools, archival photos, folk costumes unique to Mati and proud **socialist realist murals** painted during Communism, which celebrate key triumphs of both Skanderbeg and independence fighters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Mati villages of Prelli, Gurra, Guri i Bardhë and Lisi all get to shine in the exhibitions here, and each has its own identity. It's a great first stop on a visit to the region; the heritage sites around Mati will feel more alive once you see the bigger picture here.

 Facebook: Muzeu Historik Mat



Lake Ulza and Lake Shkopeti

To understand the people and culture of this corner of Albania, you should make a stop at the Mati Historical Museum, a compact but comprehensive collection of artifacts from more than 3,000 years of Mati. The museum, opened in 1983 near the center of Burreli, holds antique ceramics from the Iron Age, including some wonderful **two-handed drinking cups**, then moves through the story of the Illyrian, Roman, medieval and Ottoman eras. There's a motley assemblage of weapons, farm tools, archival photos, folk costumes unique to Mati and proud **socialist realist murals** painted during Communism, which celebrate key triumphs of both Skanderbeg and independence fighters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Mati villages of Prelli, Gurra, Guri i Bardhë and Lisi all get to shine in the exhibitions here, and each has its own identity. It's a great first stop on a visit to the region; the heritage sites around Mati will feel more alive once you see the bigger picture here.



Burgajeti Castle (Kalaja e Burgajetit)

Near the village of Burgajeti, a few stones are all that remain of this kulla. If most tower houses follow the philosophy that “a man’s home is his castle,” well, this one actually was a castle: the birthplace of the future **King Zog I**. Zog ruled as modern Albania’s only king in the 1930s, and if you glimpse his seaside villa in Durrësi or palace in Tirana, you’d know his personal style was more for pastel colors and Italianate frills. But he was a man of the north (it is said he collected some 600 blood feuds against him). Zog’s legacy in Albania is complicated. He enacted important reforms, tried to kickstart the young nation’s economy and allowed Jews fleeing Nazi-occupied countries safe passage into Albania. He also brutally protected his own power, except when it mattered most. With Benito Mussolini’s army landing on Albania’s shores, Zog fled immediately. But here in Burreli, the hometown king is appreciated enough that Zog gets a modest statue in the town center.





Sataj Tower (Kulla e Satajve)

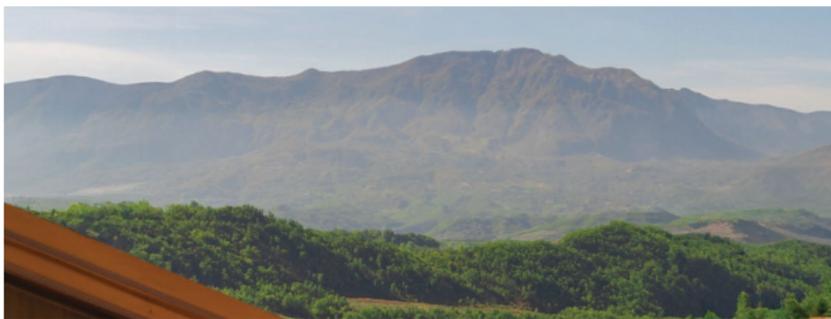
East of Burreli town, in the village of Kurdaria, the Sataj Tower is one of the most architecturally intriguing kullas in Dibra County. A formidable three-story complex, it has many of the typical characteristics of tower houses, such as an impressive **gallery** protruding from the uppermost floor, and frëngji windows shaped to aim at potential attackers. The ground floor may have been a stable for livestock — or a **prison** for more dangerous human creatures on the property! Aficionados of kulla construction can also admire the stairs here. An external staircase leads from the entrance to the messy but necessary business on the ground floor, while a separate stone stairway bypasses all that, up to the living quarters and kitchen on the second floor. The stairs to the third floor, of course, are wooden.

 Phone: +355 69 704 5551



Balgjaj Massif (Mali i Balgjajt)

One of the most enticing of Albania's secret destinations, Balgjaj Massif is an enclave of mirrorlike glacial lakes, Albanian lilies, Illyrian ruins, succulent wild blueberries, brown bears, red foxes, deer and, it is said, freshwater **mermaids**. A landscape that's half-mythical is appropriately difficult to reach, but with a 4WD and steady hands on the wheel, you can get here from Kurdaria village. Lakes, creeks and pine forests all hover up here at 1,700 meters in altitude. The old roads used by miners in these mountains can be trails, but how you want to tackle Balgjaj is mostly up to you; try searching for "Balgjaj" on the map app Wikiloc (www.wikiloc.com) for some inspiration. Don't miss the **Lake of Flowers** (Liçeni i Luleve) in bloom with lilies in July, or the **Black Lake** (Liçeni i Zi), where legend has it a shepherd once caught a mermaid. (After three years, the mermaid disappeared because the shepherd had been stricken with a curse as ancient as the lakes and pines: having a bad attitude.) And be sure to take in views of the **Kacnia Lakes** and **Four Gorges** on the eastern side of the mountain. The Kurdaria guesthouse Bujtina Çeliku can arrange guided trips up into Balgjaj.



Where To Stay and Eat

Bujtina Çeliku

In Kurdaria village near the Sataj Tower, Bujtina Çeliku provides one of the friendliest (and tastiest) farm stays in all of Dibra County. Opened in 2022, this quiet, secluded family-run inn has the coziness and comforts of the 21st century, but you can leave all that behind on a horseback ride or a day trek up to Balgjaj. Çeliku really stands apart for its farm-fresh feasts: Try chicken or roasted rack of lamb in milk and garlic sauce, and don't skimp on homemade treats like honey and raki.

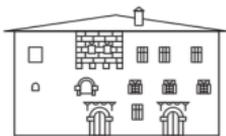
 Instagram: [bujtina_celiku](https://www.instagram.com/bujtina_celiku)



Klosi

About 18 kilometers south of Burreli on the Mati River lies the tiny town of Klosi, which comprises two boulevards, a mosque, a school, some brightly painted Communist and post-Communist offices and apartment buildings, and not too much else. But the villages on the Skanderbeg Mountain slopes around Klosi are special. The mountainlands here are rugged, pine-covered and more gentle than jagged, looking wizened by time and erosion. The Klosi municipality is part of the Mati region, and some of its most powerful families built their kullas here.





Gjini Tower (Kulla e Gjinit)

Near the Mati River between Burreli and Klosi town, in the hamlet of **Shulbatra** (Shulbatër), stands the tower house of the Gjini family, perhaps the best example of a classically proportioned Mati *kulla*. No surprise: Shulbatra had a reputation in past centuries for excellence in the craft of construction. When this three-floor miniature castle was erected, it was the dominant structure of the village, positioned to surveil and defend against unwelcome intruders coming from the river valley. But these houses were also homes, and the expansive upper-floor **windows** here are a reminder of that. They gave the family plenty of light in the living chambers, cooling the Gjinis down in the hot summers and brightening things up during the bleaker winter months.

Phone: +355 68 511 3239





Shaban Zajmi Tower (Kulla e Shaban Zajmit)

Nearby in Shulbatra village, the kulla of Shaban Sulejman Zajmi and his family drives home the point that “rural” didn’t always mean “rustic” in northeastern Albanian. Kulla builders were often local leaders with considerable wealth and influence, and their homes were intended to project taste and refinement as well as strength. The number of floors, rooms and fireplaces could all signal wealth to your neighboring frenemies. The Zajmi tower was, according to local tradition, built between 250 and 300 years ago, and reconstructed after World War II. A monumental entranceway leads to five rooms across three stories in this 100-square-meter fortress-villa. You’ll notice that several rooms have their own **fireplaces**, more of them for comfort than cooking, and one is flanked by an accessory of next-level luxury: a pulley-operated **dumbwaiter** that delivered coffee from the ground floor to people lounging upstairs. The owners decided they’d try the same trick for fetching water, digging a 33-meter-deep well in the courtyard.

 Phone: +355 68 511 3239



Suka Mountain (Maja e Sukës)

From Burreli south to Shulbatra and Klosi town, you follow the Mati River as it squeezes some meadowland between the Skanderbeg Mountains to the west and the Balgjaj Massif to the east. But Albanians here aren't afraid to live and even farm in the foothills, with shepherds and goatherds spending much of summer up at the peaks. To take in the full vista of Mati, you should consider a day trek to a summit, and Suka Mountain, at more than 1,700 meters, is a fine one to take on. The roughly 12-kilometer trek (up and down combined) can be done in a day in any season, and routes leave from the village of **Gurra e Vogël**, due west of Shulbatra. The difficulty is only moderate, but a 4WD is usually needed to reach the village. It's best to download a hiking route from the map app Wikiloc in advance (www.wikiloc.com; simply search for "Gurra e Vogël"). If you love to be alone amid the streams and trees, you can have a perfect day up here. Below and around you, northeastern Albania looks much the same as it did during the days of kullas, blood feuds and Skanderbeg's skirmishes.



Imer Kurti Tower (Kulla e Imer Kurtit)

It's not surprising that in a time when anyone could become a mortal enemy, the Albanians of the north made use of protective terrain. Even more than the river villages, Gurra e Vogël has the hills at its back and on its flanks. But nowadays the kulla of Imer Kurti welcomes strangers, the perfect place to rest and hear Mr. Kurti play soothing flute tunes after a day hiking Suka Mountain. The three-story home is an eye-catching example of traditional architecture, with a **qoshk**-style timber-built upper-floor gallery overhanging the lower levels. Sitting in the **oda** gathering room, you can appreciate excellent carved details on the fireplace mantel.

Phone: +355 68 294 9837



Koçi Tower (Kulla e Koçit)

The kulla tradition is as much about spirit as stones, so it's not a knock on Koçi Tower to say that it is, in fact, a new building, faithfully executed according to standards of design and craftsmanship passed down through generations. This kulla is the Koçi family's ode to Gurra e Vogël rendered in wood and stone, a fresh landmark in the village. It's also a unique opportunity for you to see what a kulla would have looked like new in the 19th century, in this place that still preserves the complete essence of the rural northeastern highlands.

Phone: +355 69 369 5831



Fshati

You'll pass through Fshati going north to Burreli, east to Bulqiza and Peshkopia, or southwest to Tirana. At first glance there's not much to see in Fshati, a village whose imaginative name is the Albanian word for "village." But the mountain pass here has long been part of an important overland route for both caravans and armies. Some scholars think it's the birthplace and early stomping ground of the most famous Albanian military commander of all, Gjergj Kastrioti, who would grow up to be called **Skanderbeg**. If you know where to look, Fshati, 3.5 kilometers south of Klosi, is rich with heritage.



Petralba Castle (Kalaja e Petralbës)

On a ridge nearly 800 meters above its surroundings there was once a city called, depending on the language, **Petralba** or **Guri i Bardhë**, and both mean “white stone.” According to the historian and Catholic priest **Marin Barleti**, who wrote a biography of Skanderbeg in the early 16th century, the city was nearly as large as Shkodra and could be overpowered by no enemy. Petralba Castle was a chief stronghold of the Kastrioti principality when it was led by Skanderbeg’s father, **Gjon Kastrioti**, and it guarded the mountain pass on the old route linking Dibra to the medieval Venetian coastal metropolis of Durazzo (now Durrësi). Local lore says Gjon Kastrioti’s family lived here, and that Skanderbeg himself was born in the castle, but the village of Sina makes a similar claim (see page xxx). Whatever the reality, Guri i Bardhë is just a humble village today, and the castle survives only in fragments of stone walls. It’s not hard at all, however, to turn in every direction and imagine a kingdom of crags and pines.



Klosi Museum of History and Culture (Muzeu Historik dhe Kulturor i Klosit)

In late 2024, a new museum opened here in Fshati, shining a light on the traditions and craftsmanship of Klosi and the southern Mati Valley. Visitors can check out agricultural tools, kitchen ceramic ware, Communist-era electronics and even a life-sized mock-up of the northeastern Albanian oda, complete with **brightly colored qilims**, sheepskin rugs and traditional copper coffee carafes. Perhaps the highlight of the ethnographic collection are the **folk costumes** of the region. Men wore these intricately embroidered vests and felt hats, while women dressed up in *xhubletas* and shawls popping with red, blue, green and black, overlaying them with necklace chains and gold pendants. The occasion may have been a wedding, a springtime festival or any other excuse to party, but you'll notice that the garments here really dazzle, even compared to the traditional garb you might see in other regions of Albania.





Where To Stay and Eat

The Old Tower (Kulla e Moçmë)

One of the handsomest kullas in northeastern Albania, the Old Tower lives up to its name: Some foundations were laid here 400 years ago according to the owners, supposedly near a teqe (tekke; a place of worship) frequented by Skanderbeg. In the traditional style of tower houses in the southern Mati, the Old Tower has been restored with a wooden qoshk gallery protruding from the uppermost floor and a **grand exterior staircase** from the ground to the entrance on the second floor. Note the **construction technique**, alternating bands of timber and stone. Today, the tower house can be your tower home away from home. It's a rustic-chic guesthouse in which suites are traditionally appointed with *qilims*, fireplaces and exposed-stone walls. From the garden and the apiary, the family that owns the property makes wine, raki, pickles, honey and much more. Coffee on the terrace overlooking the junction of mountain ranges is a must for starting your day in Mati.

 Instagram: [kulla_e_mocme_shefqet_cupa](https://www.instagram.com/kulla_e_mocme_shefqet_cupa)



Bulqiza

Not quite within the historic regions of either Mati or Dibra, Bulqiza is no less interesting for being undiscovered. In fact, the town and surrounding villages are having quite a moment, with a new road making the drive to Klosi, Peshkopia and even Tirana an easy one, as well as new energy in agritourism and a brand new museum honoring the unexpected heritage that first put Bulqiza on the map: chromium mining.

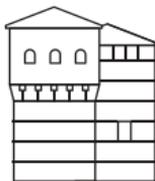


Mining Museum (Muzeu i Minierës) at the Bulqiza Museum

Dibra County looks like unspoiled wilderness today, but not so long ago, resource extraction was the name of the game here. Forests were stripped by logging and mountains blasted apart for metals. Reforestation and habitat revitalization are still in progress — but then, so is mining. Walk just one block from the central promenade of Bulqiza town, and you're in a chromium mining complex. Extraction is inextricable from Bulqiza history, and the town recognizes the work of miners past and present with this neat little museum, opened as an extension of the **Bulqiza Museum (Muzeu Bulqizë)** in 2024. The main museum showcases archaeological finds, local history and regional folk dress. The **mining museum** adds another chapter to the story of Bulqiza, with a life-sized model of a mine tunnel displaying authentic mining equipment. You can learn how the mines are ventilated with enormous tubes, see how ore is carted out of the mountains on tracks and size up protective gear worn by miners.



Where To Stay and Eat



Hupi Tower (Kulla Hupi)

Kulla Hupi, is among the most striking and magnificent historic homes in the entire country, full stop. Built two centuries ago in Dushaj village near Bulqiza, it has appeared on postcards and even stamps, a triumph of mountain stone and forest timber incorporating both traditional and unusual kulla designs. The Hupi Tower is equipped with **çikma galleries** of stone bulging from the highest floor, and you can spot both *frëngji* windows (for rifles) and larger windows (for enjoyment). The property's spacious yard may have once been populated with barns and outbuildings, and the *kulla* itself with Hupi men and women chitchatting by fireplaces. But now Hupi Tower has been restored to its latest incarnation as an agritourism destination.

 Instagram: [kullahupi](#)

Kulla Hupi is among the most charming places to spend some quality time in Dibra County, and the guestrooms are restored to a 19th-century ambience, with exposed stone walls, qilims in fantastical colors and patterns, and antique wooden furniture in the common areas. Breakfast and dinner come from the farm and garden, and the Hupi family leads tours on bike and horseback into the majestic rocky terrain of the area. It's a top choice for nature immersion in all seasons, and you may have the chance to catch folk dances or hear traditional songs by the fire, too.



Peshkopia

The capital and biggest city of Dibra County (population: 14,700), Peshkopia is an obvious choice of base for exploring the region. It's under an hour's drive northeast from Bulqiza via fairly robust highways, and about 1 hour, 30 minutes from Burreli; both are linked to the city by bus. The gateway villages to the Lura Lakes are also about 1 hour, 30 minutes away, to the northwest. Peshkopia has a lively, multicolored **old town**, with a handful of century-old Ottoman-style **konak houses** rising along gentle hills. The city has historic pedigree as an episcopal center of the 11th century and a crucible of the Albanian resistance to both the Italian and German occupations during World War II. There are a ton of things to see and do near Peshkopia, but it's refreshingly free of crowds.



The Old Town and Boulevard of Linden Trees

Along Rruga Shehat Shehu and Rruga Tercilio Kardinali, you'll find the area locally called "Pazari" — the old bazaar district. It preserves some delightful Ottoman-style architecture, with former houses and storefronts now converted into shops and cute B&Bs. Just west is the main town promenade, **Bulevardi Elez Isufi**, more romantically known as the Boulevard of Linden Trees. It's reserved for pedestrians, entirely flanked by shade-throwing lindens, and provides a delightful avenue for shopping, coffee-sipping and people-watching. Here you'll also find a statue of Skanderbeg marking the town center, the Dibra regional tourist information center and a passageway to the entrance of the Dibra Museum.



Dibra Museum (Muzeu i Dibrës)

It's hard to miss this museum, now housed in a grand neoclassical building just off Bulevardi Elez Isufi. The museum's three pavilions are devoted to Dibra the collection spans about 2000 objects. Archaeological finds from the Stone Age to medieval period at sites around Dibra are of high interest; check out Neolithic pottery and tools from the Burimi and Topojani sites, Illyrian weaponry, and artifacts from the enormous 4th century AD **Castle of Grazhdani**. The history wing can help you learn about the figures who shaped Dibra, such as Albanian independence fighter **Elez Isufi** and Islamic leader **Vehbi Dibra**, while the ethnographic collection showcases musical instruments, *qilims*, kooky folk costumes, a reconstruction of a traditional *kulla*'s oda and contemporary art from Dibran talents.

 Facebook: MUZEU DIBER





Tower of the Kaloshi Family (Kulla e Kaloshëve)

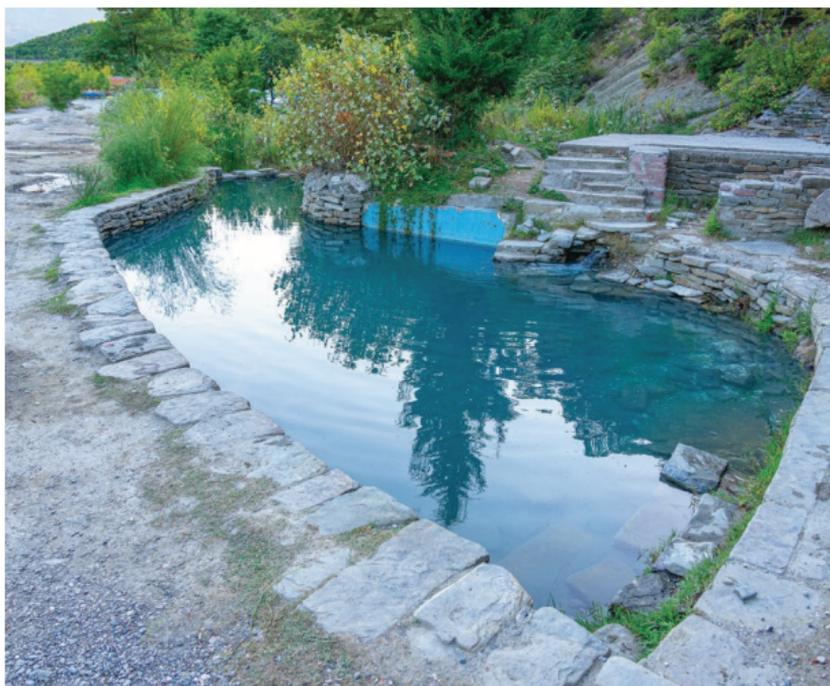
One of the toughest old tower houses in Dibra belonged — and still belongs — to the Kaloshi family, an influential clan of leaders and warriors in Dibra history. The *kulla*, in the village of **Kandëri** to the northwest of Peshkopia city, was built 150 years ago. It holds plenty of space in the *oda* rooms to welcome guests, but plenty of defensive *frëngji* windows to shoot through as well, for when things got tense. And they did, here: The Kaloshi Family Tower was attacked and burned three times, during the Serbian occupation of Dibra in 1912 and 1913 and again during the Italian invasion of World War II. A symbol of the family, its survival was important, and the *kulla* has been restored to its stately appearance as an unbreakable family fortress.

 Phone: +355 68 405 899



Thermal Waters of Peshkopia (Llixhat e Peshkopisë)

For centuries, folks from Dibra and afar have been coming to Peshkopia to soak in the mineral-rich waters burbling up from the thermal springs in a gorge just east of the city. Two **sulfurous springs** heated by volcanic activity pump water to the surface at over 40°C. Laden with potassium and sulfates, the spring water is said to help alleviate respiratory and rheumatic issues, but you can also simply lollygag in one of the many spas here to relax and unburden your muscles. One imagines men who'd escaped blood feuds came here to do the same, once upon a time ...



Mount Korabi (Maja e Korabit)

At more than 2,700 meters tall, the peak of Mount Korabi is the highest point in Albania. And because the massif is split with North Macedonia, it's the highest point in that country too. Trails on Korabi are not difficult to reach, nor even exceptionally difficult to hike, but it remains a mercifully crowd-free environment of divine alpine scenery — a can't miss trek on any visit to Dibra. Most hikers leave from the village of **Radomira**, about 35 kilometers north of Peshkopia by road. A highlight of the 11-kilometer ascent is crossing the **fields of Korabi and Panairi**, meadowlands of sheep, horses, alpine flowers and cool springs, with the windswept limestone peaks of the Korabi crest in the picture. The final ascent is the most demanding, but up here you're on the rooftop of two nations, with a full panorama over all the lesser mountains that had looked so intimidating earlier in the day. You can follow a loop trail or an out-and-back, and either will take a full day. Find routes on a map app like AllTrails or Wikiloc, or go with a guide.



Museum of the Kastriotis (Muzeu i Kastriotëve)

About 20 kilometers northwest of Peshkopia on the road toward Lura, there's a small village with a medium-sized monument to a very big hero in Albanian history. In your travels in Albania, you're likely to encounter Gjegj Kastrioti, better known by his honorific **Skanderbeg**, in Skanderbeg Square in the center of Tirana, at the Skanderbeg Museum in Kruja or even at the Tomb of Skanderbeg in Lezha, but Skanderbeg was born in Dibra, very likely near the village of Sina, around 1405. This small museum, completed in 1985 and crenelated like a castle, gives some shine to the rest of the Kastrioti house as well. Gjegj, his father **Gjon** and grandfather **Pal** appear as busts at the entrance, and display cases hold original Kastrioti weapons, archival documents and placards describing famous battles. A 2018 renovation brought some digital and immersive flair to the exhibitions, bringing the exploits of the Kastriotis to life for the next generation.



Where To Stay and Eat

Bujtina Konaku i Dibrës

This agritourism property within walking distance of Peshkopia center has been a leader in Dibran hospitality and the farm-to-table philosophy for a few decades now, and it hasn't lost a step. A family-run guesthouse and restaurant, it's built of stone and wood in the style of a warm *kulla*, and the interior beckons with intricate wood carvings and cozy fireplaces. Rooms have modern amenities, but the kitchen is 100 percent traditional northeastern Albania, with the dinner menu changing seasonally.

Pickled vegetables, preserved fruit and the Dibran specialty *jufka me pulë* (chicken in a homemade pasta casserole) will stick to your ribs in the chilly seasons, while tart cherry juice refreshes in warmer weather. The owners can also help you make the most of Dibra, leading tours to Radomira, Lura, Rabdishti village and up Mount Korabi.

 Phone: +355 69 205 3492



Guest House Sabriu

Just west of the Macedonian border, Rabdishti village is one of the hidden gems of northeastern Albania, a foothills hamlet of cobblestone alleys, slate-shingled villas, old millhouses, tiny mosques and chapels, and swatches of farmland growing potatoes, apples and nuts. It bursts with old-fashioned mountain charm, and it's right down the road from Peshkopia. The four-room Sabriu guesthouse here is one of the choicest retreats in Dibra. Rooms for families are spacious and comfortable, with modern amenities, and yes, there is a traditional *oda* gathering room with *qilims*, sheepskin rugs and a big stone fireplace. Dinner is included in the price of the stay, and almost everything is grown locally and made right here by the host family. It's an absolutely tranquil getaway for a night or a week, with the Korabi mountain range in your window every morning.

 Website: <https://sabriu.com/>





Lura

“Suddenly the lakes appear, one after another, greener than blue, surrounded by mountains and pines. As always, when you are in front of beautiful things, it’s hard to describe them. Words pale before the water and greenery that make up all the hues of this living beauty.” That was Albanian writer and Booker Prize winner **Ismail Kadare’s** impression when he visited the lakes of Lura: He was at a loss for words.



Lura-Mount Deja National Park (Parku Kombëtar Lurë-Mali i Dejës)

The Lura Mountains roughly divide the old regions of Mati, to the west, and Dibra, to the east, and the wonder of this land has stirred poetry in the souls of famous wordsmiths and ordinary visitors alike. The villages of **Lura e Vjetër** and **Fushë-Lura** are the gateways to the park that protects the peaks and lakes of Lura. They're only about 45 kilometers northwest of Peshkopia by road, but it's a difficult route through hairpin turns on dusty roads. The reward is the diverse ecosystem and ethereal beauty of the famous **Lura Lakes** (Liqenet e Lurës), at up to 1,700 meters in altitude, and the mountains and meadows around them. Depending on how you count, there are somewhere between seven and 21 glacial lakes in these ridges, and it's well worth taking a few days to hike to some of them. You can head directly from the villages into the park, either on foot or with a 4WD. Don't miss the **Great Lake** (Liqeni i Madh), an iridescent pool of blue that reflects the fir-forested hills around it; the dark, deep and dramatic **Black Lake** (Liqeni i Zi); and the **Lake of Flowers** (Liqeni i Luleve), blanketed with lilies that bloom in July. If you're lucky, you'll spot some of Albania's most regal animals here. Brown bears, Balkan lynxes and snake eagles, among many others, call this park home. For a more strenuous hike and equally stunning views, you can tackle **Mount Deja**. You'll get the most out of the park with a hiking guide.

Where To Stay and Eat

Doçi Tower (Kulla e Doçit)

This **kulla** is a labor of love honoring the tradition, style and craftsmanship of tower-building in the Lura area. The oda exudes the warmth of a family hearth centuries older than it actually is, and folk musicians transfix visitors with their tunes here. The Doçi *kulla* offers visitors the opportunity to stay in a traditional-style Dibran tower. As a guesthouse, it's called **Bujtina OXHAKU I DOÇIT**, and it's open all year for the region's summer glory and winter mystique. Rooms are stylishly outfitted with folkloric touches, and all amenities are new. Once it's time for dinner, dishes like *jufka me pulë* (chicken in pasta) and **roasted rabbit over potatoes** are served under wood-paneled ceilings; all ingredients are locally grown and sourced. Dibran singers will serenade you at the table, and you'll wake up fresh for an adventure in the highlands. The guesthouse can help you find the way, leading tours to the Lura Lakes on foot and quad bikes.



Instagram: [bujtina_oxhaku_i_docit](https://www.instagram.com/bujtina_oxhaku_i_docit)

Practical Information

Getting to Northeastern Albania

It's easiest to visit the cultural and natural attractions of the northeast by rental car or guided tour, though buses and taxis are available for hire in a handful of towns. The nearest villages in Dibra County to Tirana are only about 40 kilometers from the center of the capital, a 1-hour drive via the recently completed *Rruga e Arbërit* country highway (SH61). Peshkopia, the county capital, is 100 kilometers from Tirana, a 2-hour, 15-minute drive. Kukësi town is 145 kilometers from Tirana, but reachable via freeways in under 2 hours. You can also reach Peshkopia easily from the town of Debar in North Macedonia, or reach Kukësi from Prizreni in Kosovo. Be aware that in this part of Albania, many roads between villages are slow-going, with high-altitude twists and turns along slopes, and roads in some rural areas won't be asphalted. Be mindful of rockfall and, between November and April, snowfall and ice. **Buses** will get you from Tirana to Peshkopia, Burreli or Kukësi, with stops in smaller towns along the way. Many leave throughout the day until late afternoon, all year (4 hours, 15 minutes to Peshkopia; 2 hours to Burreli; 2 hours to Kukësi). For information about tour operators specializing in the region, see below.



Emergency Phone Numbers

All emergencies: **112**

Medical: **127**

Police: **129** (state police) or **126** (traffic police)

Fire: **128**



Banks and ATMs

You can find branches of major national **banks** with ATMs (cash machines) in the mid-sized towns of northeastern Albania, usually right in the center: Peshkopia and Burreli in Dibra, and Kukësi and Bajram Curri in Kukësi. Make sure you have enough cash to cover your lodging, dining, shopping and gas expenses, as credit cards are not usually accepted in rural Albania.



Health

There are **hospitals** with urgent care facilities in Peshkopia and Kukësi, open 24 hours. Most mid-sized towns have smaller clinics as well as **pharmacies**.



Touristic Information

Dibra Tourist Information Center
Bulevardi Elez Isufi near the Skanderbeg
monument
www.visitdiber.com



Tour Operators

Smart Tour Albania

www.smartouralbania.com

contact@smartouralbania.com

+355 69 204 5099

Explorer Travel & Tours

www.explorer-albania.al

info@explorer-albania.al

+355 69 606 0342

Ave Tour

www.ave-tour.com

info@ave-tour.com

+355 69 606 0344

Sondor Travel

www.sondortravel.com

incoming@sondortravel.com

Albania Trip

info@albaniatrip.com

+355 67 60 56 055

Login Albania

eliana@vamos.al

+355 69 20 35 077

As a federally owned enterprise, GIZ supports the German Government in achieving its objectives in the field of international cooperation for sustainable development

Published by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Registered offices Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

Sustainable Rural Development

GIZ Office Albania

Rr. Asim Zeneli, Nd. 6/10, P.O.

Tirana, Albania

giz-albanien@giz.de

Author:

Ben O'Donnell

Design/Layout:

McCann Tirana

Printing and distribution

GIZ Albania

©Tirana, 2025





Implemented by



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

**Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC**



**UK International
Development**

Partnership | Progress | Prosperity



MINISTRIE E TURIZMIT, KULTURËS DHE SPORTIT
MINISTRIA E TURIZMIT, KULTURËS DHE SPORTIT