

Albania Diary, 2011

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Tuesday, 4 October: Beckenham-Tirana

159 We were up at 6 a.m. to catch the tram to East Croydon and from there the stopping train to Gatwick Airport, where we were met by Oliver Gilkes, Andante Travels' guide lecturer for the tour. Our BA flight to Tirana took just under 3 hours. We landed at what is officially called the Mother Teresa International Airport, but it is known as Rinas, the name of the nearest village. It was a dry, sunny, hazy afternoon, with the temperature in the mid-20s Celsius. The airport lies about 25 kms north-west of the capital and we were taken there by coach. Outside the airport stood a statue to Mother Teresa, who was born in Macedonia of Albanian parents, went to India at an early age and is buried at Kolkata, where she spent her working life.

160 The language on the advertising hoardings along the highway into Tirana was in Latin (Roman) script, but it bore no obvious resemblance to any other Romance language with which I am familiar. Travelling along a section of the Durrës-Tirana motorway, which has been developed in the last 20 years, we saw quite a lot of light industry (replacing, we were told, heavy industry from Communist days) and offices, including those of foreign banks. Unplanned (illegal) buildings were also pointed out to us. Entering the city, we saw buildings in a wide variety of styles, including Art Deco, a most attractive (but rare) Ottoman merchant villa turned into a restaurant ('Sarajet') and brightly-coloured, high-rise apartment buildings. The Tirana International Hotel, a 14-storey 'Socialist' edifice on the north side of Skanderbeg Square was our home for the next two nights. It was conveniently located, comfortable and efficiently run, with quite good food. Although Skanderbeg Square is no longer the hub of commercial or social life, it is still referred to as "the centre" of the city.

161 Oliver and the obligatory Albanian guide, Ilia Grillo, who proved an excellent combination, took us on walking tour of the centre of Tirana. A Byzantine fortress was constructed there in 550 AD, but it was not until the early 17th century that the first settlement was built. Tirana remained a small and unimportant town until it was designated the capital in 1920, but it was still a muddy backwater for several years afterwards. It was thanks to the Italians, between the wars, that the centre of Tirana took on the appearance of a capital city. Italians created the huge new Skanderbeg Square - it was the site of a market in Ottoman times - and, in 1968, Albania's leading sculptor, **Odhise Paskali** (1903-85), created the imposing bronze equestrian statue of Skanderbeg at the southern end of the square (Paskali received commissions from both the Zogists and the Communists and also designed the Socialist Realist statue to the Unknown Partisan close to the square). The Fascist-style boulevards that run north-south and east-west from the square originally went nowhere, but gave the centre its distinctive character. As well as the famous Ministry buildings, which looked resplendent in the evening sunlight, the Italians were also responsible for building a Royal Palace, the National Bank, Town Hall, the Dajti Hotel and the Italian Embassy, all of which are on the edge of or close to the square. The Communists added the Palace of Culture (with Soviet help), which includes the Opera House ('The Magic Flute' was the current production), the National Historical Museum and our hotel. Together with the destruction caused by various earthquakes and the Battle for the Liberation of Tirana in 1944, all these changes have meant that there is little left of Ottoman Tirana (and what there is is under threat from lack of maintenance and unscrupulous property developers).

162 Tirana has undergone massive growth since the early 1990s, the population increasing from 225,000 to almost a million, approximately one-third of the country's total population. This resulted in virtually all public open spaces, parks and squares being occupied by a rash of 'kiosks' (many of them three or four storey illegal buildings). The dynamic Socialist Mayor, Edi Rama, who was voted the 'World's Best Mayor' in 2004, pulled down the 'kiosks' and restored the parks and open spaces. In order to overcome the drab appearance of the city, he restored the original ochre colour to the Ministry buildings and painted the shabby apartment buildings in the streets nearby, and beyond, in bright bold colours. Some congratulated him for transforming Tirana into the largest art installation in the world, others criticised him for turning the city into a circus. In reality, the harsh summer sun has washed out the brightest colours and left a pleasing effect.

163 As we walked around, Oliver talked about the different architectural styles that have characterised Tirana's history ranging from mud brick through Ottoman, Zog (Italian) and Communist to Rama's creations. We could not fail to notice the hundreds of cafes, modern bars, 'pubs', restaurants, ATMs and *bureaux de change*, at one of which I exchanged euros (the rate was 140 lek = 1 euro). Among a number of other places we stopped at were the headquarters of the Socialist Party (previously the PLA); a puppet theatre, which was the home of the first Albanian Parliament; the apartment building occupied by the surviving members of the royal family; the Toptani family palace compound, which became the Royal Palace under King Zog (it now houses the Parliament, the Academy of Sciences and a new cinema, but an old Ottoman mansion survives) and a clock tower dating back to 1830 (people needed to know when it was time to pray), and the prayer ground outside the Haxhi Ethem Bey mosque that we were to visit the following day.

164 The main course at supper, at the hotel, was veal escalope with saffron rice and mushrooms. The lady sitting next to me turned out to have been one year ahead of me at the same grammar school in north-west London.

Wednesday, 5 October: Tirana

165 Overnight, we learned from Oliver that the boulevard to the north was originally named after Zog and then Mussolini (1940) and then Stalin (after WW II) and was now once more Boulevard Zogu I (nowadays it leads to the railway station). The boulevard to the south is known as the Martyrs of the Nation Boulevard (it leads to Mother Teresa Square). The boulevards were deliberately laid out in the form of the Fascist symbol, the fasces, with the boulevard itself and its parallel roads forming the lictors' rods while the ends of the boulevard were in the shape of axe heads.

166 The **Ethem Bey Mosque**, which was begun in 1794 by Ethem Bey's father, Molla, and completed in 1821, is one of the few old buildings left in Tirana and is also one of the most beautiful. Its minaret was shattered in the Battle for the Liberation of Tirana, but it survived the Communist reconstruction of the city centre and the atheist campaign of the late 1960s before being restored in 1974-7. It has an open portico of arches on two sides and a hipped roof below the dome. The exterior walls are adorned by frescoes. It is, however, the beautifully painted interior that is the more striking. Panels, columns and capitals are decorated with scrolled foliage and views of buildings. Flowers and fruit, including the pomegranate, depict health and life. The decorative style belongs to the Tulip period of Ottoman art (17th-early 19th century), which was based on European Baroque, but with

indigenous Turkish elements. Other features that caught the eye were the beautiful frieze around the bottom of the dome, quotations from the Qu'ran, prayer niches, a gallery set aside for women, the stairway to the restored minaret, the pulpit used for Friday prayers and the chandeliers in the shape of lilies. Originally, the mosque was one of a group of buildings including the Bazaar, the mosques of Suleiman Pasha, who founded the city, the Artisans' Corporation, and the Hammam (baths).

167 The massive **National Historical Museum**, which we went to next, dominates the north-west side of Skanderbeg Square. Opened in 1981, it is a fine example of the triumphalist art of the time. The huge mosaic mural above the entrance depicts victorious Albanians from various stages in the country's history, ranging from the Illyrians to the partisans via the fighters and intellectuals who won independence from the Ottoman Empire. Enver Hoxha was once considered such a figure, but a statue of him has since been removed from the museum. The museum's purpose, Oliver explained, was both to glorify the history of Albania and to buttress the claim that Albanians are direct descendents of the Illyrians, thus justifying their claim to occupy their present-day territory. The Illyrian presence is certainly emphasised. There are maps showing the whereabouts of Illyrian tribes and city states at different points in time, and examples of Illyrian artefacts in terracotta and bronze from the 3rd to the 1st centuries BC. Illyria's links with Puglia, the piracy that went on along the Illyrian/Adriatic coast and resistance to Roman rule are among the events recalled.

168 Oliver drew our attention to two outstanding works of art from the 4th century BC: a head of Apollo, known as the 'Goddess of Butrint', which was discovered by the Italian archeologist, Luigi Maria Ugolini, in the late 1920s, taken to Italy and then returned in the 1990s; and the first mosaic, in Hellenistic style, ever discovered in Albania, which portrays a woman's head, perhaps that of Venus, and is known as 'The Belle of Durrës'. Other highlights included a Roman mosaic pavement from Vlora and a 14th century altar cloth, with a shrouded Christ, decorated in gold thread, from Berat. The bronze relief depicting the 1389 Battle of the Field of Blackbirds pointed out that Albanian occupation of Kosovo pre-dated that of the Slavs, thus seeking to undermine the Serbs' claim to the territory. Other major historical events depicted included the League of Lezhë (1444), the League of Prizren (1878), the Declaration of Independence (1912) and the recognition of Albanian independence by the London Conference of Ambassadors (1913), the Balkan wars, WW I, Parliamentary government in the 1920s, King Zog (1928), the Italian occupation (1939) and WW II, including the role of the Partisans, the SOE and the US. We did not see the final section of the museum, which is devoted to Albania's half-century of Communism and the events leading to the end of it. The display has been adjusted since 1991, a large section on the Communist triumph having been removed and a new section on Communist atrocities added, but this is apparently being reconsidered. According to the Bradt Travel Guide, panels list the names of many of Communism's victims - 5,157 people were killed and 952 people died in prison. As late as 1990, people were still being shot dead trying to cross the electrified barbed-wire fence which sealed Albania's land borders.

169 After a coffee break at our hotel, we went to the **National Art Gallery**. The gallery's collection of Byzantine art, for which it is renowned, included beautiful icons painted by masters such as Onufri (the founder and most illustrious exponent of the 16th-17th Berati School), the Zografi brothers (the best known representatives of the 18th-19th Korça School) and Johannes Katro (19th century). Oliver explained that under the Ottomans no figurative art was allowed and that it was not until the 19th century that Christian families in the south

employed artists to paint their portraits, some examples of which were on display. Paintings and sculptures by Albanian artists of the late 19th and 20th centuries included works by Vangjush Mio (1891-1957), Ibrahim Kodra (1918-2006) - both of whom had pictures of Tirana in former times - and Murat Toptani (1866-1918). The post-WW II collection included a large number of Socialist Realism paintings, for which the gallery is also known. The Communist authorities insisted that art should be "intelligible". Among the themes depicted were the heroism of labour, the building of the New Society, industrial might, electrification and construction, and the contributions of particular categories of workers such as the armed forces. The better known artists included Bukurosh Sejdini (1916-91), Fatmir Haxhiu (1927-2001) and Bashkim Ahmeti (born 1949). However, the 'Actionists' (*Aksionistet*) who caught my eye were Guri Madhi (for his picture of Hoxha denouncing the Soviet revisionists in 1961), Clirim Ceka (born 1945), Petro Kokushta (born 1943), Bajram Mat (1940-83) and Edison Gjergo (1939-89) for 'The Epic of the Morning's Stars'.

170 The section on modern art was unexceptional, although it included a bust by the ubiquitous Odhise Paskali. Other artists whose work was displayed included Kristaq Rama (1932-98) and his son, Edi. We did not notice them until we passed the gallery later in the day, but on the waste ground at the back of it stood badly decaying statues of Lenin and Stalin and a couple of other socialist worthies dumped there.

171 We had lunch at the Tajvani (Taiwan) restaurant in a park close to the centre, where we ate pork chops. Opinions differed whether those who named the restaurant were out to irritate the People's Republic of China or to show Albania's once close Chinese connection. After lunch, Oliver took us on a walk to the southern end of the Zog boulevard. First, we walked through the 'Blok', an enclave of high-rise apartment buildings reserved in the past for Party officials, admired a handsome Art Deco building, and paused outside what had been Hoxha's official residence. There used to be an underground passageway from there to the Prime Minister's villa on the other side of the road; this would have made it all the more easy for Hoxha to eliminate Shehu, if that is what happened. Stopping next at a surviving machine gun pillbox at a corner of the boulevard, Oliver gave us a briefing on 'bunkerology' and the paranoid feeling of isolation that prompted it.

172 Along the boulevard, we passed the Congress building (now the new Palace of Culture), where the PLA used to hold its congresses, and the current Presidential Palace until we arrived at the Mother Teresa Square at the end. The Academy of Arts is on one side of the square, but our objective was the Archeological Museum (and Institute of Albanology). As at the National Historical Museum, after rooms devoted to finds from the Stone, Bronze and Iron Ages, there were artefacts from Illyrian settlements, including bronze and terracotta figurines, jewellery and pottery. The Epirus civilisation was represented by a huge terracotta storage jar (*pithos*), a little bronze dog and a well-preserved helmet. Statuary from the Roman period included two huge feet with their toes, but nothing else, glassware and tombstones inscribed with Illyrian names and a recently excavated marble bust. Oliver also drew our attention to early mediaeval majolica from kiln sites at Durrës and Butrint.

173 Outside again, we opted to make our own way back to the hotel. First, we climbed up the steps to the Polytechnic University (Faculty of Mechanical Engineering) at the southern end of the square and the end of the boulevard, where we were rewarded with another statue to Mother Teresa. Standing on the university steps and looking up the very wide boulevard, with its collection of impressive neo-classical buildings, reminded us of being in the EUR

district to the south of Rome built in Mussolini's time. As we were retracing our steps we were joined by Oliver, who pointed out the cenotaph, in the shape of a pyramid, hitherto dedicated to Hoxha and now, perhaps, to be turned into new accommodation for the National Assembly. He also told us that two new identical highrise buildings said to have been financed by Osama bin Laden's family were (distastefully) known as the 'Twin Towers'. We also paused at the magnificent Embassy of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta (the main diplomatic quarter is elsewhere), the now closed, Italian-built Dajti Hotel, and the offices of the Council of Ministers (Cabinet) and the Prime Minister (formerly the PLA Central Committee Building).

174 We had dinner at the Villa 31 restaurant, where we enjoyed an excellent meal of salad, Greek-style *tyropita* (cheese pie), barbecued meat, vegetables and fresh fruit. By chance, we sat next to another former British Diplomatic Service couple - I had taken over his job in 1982, but had not seen him since.

Thursday, 6 October: Tirana - Apollonia - Vlora - Saranda

175 We left by coach for the south-west, but making first for the port of Durrës, passing flat arable land and light industry on the way. Zufi, our driver, proved to be utterly dependable. Oliver talked about the Illyrians. He sounded somewhat sceptical whether any such identifiable group had existed, but conceded that the Romans' naming a province "Illyricum" suggested otherwise. Ilia gave us a briefing on the Albanian language and regaled us with stories of the 'Wild West' economy of the 1990s. He stated as a matter of fact that there were more Mercedes cars per head of population in Albania than anywhere else, which, by the end of our tour, we had no reason to doubt. Petrol was around 165 *leke*, about 90p. per litre. Oliver explained that under Communism most large towns or cities were made to specialise in the production of one particular commodity (monoeconomies). Turning south after Durrës, we passed through Kavaje, Lushnjë (plastics) and Fier (fertilisers) before we took a minor road towards the coast and came to the archeological site of Apollonia.

176 **Apollonia** is situated high above the Vjose plain, with magnificent views down onto the river meandering below and, even more so, out to the Adriatic. Moreover, it rained while we were there and afterwards the cloud effects were quite spectacular. Apollonia is reckoned to have been founded by the Corinthians about 600 BC. Much of what we were to see was excavated after WW I by Léon Rey, a French archeologist, but recent excavations have revealed finds of the Mycenaean Later Bronze Age. Apollonia was taken over by the Romans in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC and supported them in their Macedonian wars. It was one of Julius Cæsar's bases in his fight with Pompey. Octavian (later Augustus) was studying at Apollonia when he had to rush back to Rome to claim power after the assassination of Cæsar. At one period, it was flattened by an earthquake.

177 Apollonia's immunity from paying tax, granted by Augustus, meant that unlike other Roman colonies it continued to elect its local authorities, its everyday language was Greek, not Latin, and its coins had Apollonia's own symbol on them. At first, Apollonia was a port, and for centuries its importance rivalled that of Durrës, but in late antiquity the Vjose shifted course far to the south and Apollonia lost its harbour. Its prosperity generally declined after the 2nd century AD and it was abandoned four centuries later. Before then it was a bishopric and the remains of an early 6th century church have been uncovered. The Byzantines must have been in Apollonia as another church dating from the 13th century, with poorly preserved

frescoes (dated as 1275-82), has been uncovered. Other frescoes (1261-1328) have been found in the remains of the refectory. The Monastery of St. Mary on an adjacent site, is also thought to date originally from the 13th century. Edward Lear spent an uncomfortable night in it in 1848; the monastery buildings were restored in 1985.

178 Features Oliver pointed out to us as we walked around the site included the city walls, with towers, an acropolis, the temple of Artemis (6th century BC), a stoa (covered promenade, where Apollonia's rich citizens strolled and enjoyed the marvellous views from their city and where Roman statues were found during excavations, an odeon (covered theatre, used both for drama and political gatherings), a triumphal arch, and the façade of a bouleuterion (council house, paid for by the Romans, who continued to dabble in Apollonia's affairs), a nymphaeum and connected fountain and houses, a gymnasium, an agora (marketplace) and a library. Limestone was shipped from south of modern-day Vlora, over 70 kms. away, to build temples and other principal buildings; local sandstone was used for the foundations of houses. In WW II, Apollonia came in useful again as an anti-aircraft site.

179 After Apollonia, we headed south again, reached the Adriatic coastline and went on to **Vlora**, Albania's third largest city and second sea port. The Bay of Vlora is where the Adriatic and Ionian seas meet. Vlora was known as early as the 1st-2nd centuries AD for its wool and wine; by the 4th century, it was being mentioned as the port where ships from Otranto and Brindisi landed (Vlora is 75 kms. from Italy); in the 6th century AD, it was one of the largest eight cities in the province of New Epirus and was the seat of a bishopric; in 1081, it was taken by the Normans and, like other coastal towns, changed hands several times over the centuries (it has been a particularly attractive prize because the island of Sazani in the Bay of Vlora controls maritime access to the Adriatic); it was a Byzantine fortress and, in the Middle Ages, the fortress of the powerful Albanian Muzaka family; in 1417, it was the first Adriatic port to fall to the Ottomans; in 1810, Ali Pasha of Tepelana took it over; in November 1912, Vlora was the venue for the declaration of Albanian independence; in 1914, it was occupied by the Italians and it was 1920 before they could be dislodged (Albanian sovereignty over Sazani was not fully recognised until after WW II); in March 1991, thousands of young Albanians seized ships in the port and took them to Brindisi; in February 1997, it was the riots in Vlora against the failed pyramid savings schemes that started the civil uprising; and in the 1990s and early 2000s, Vlora became the centre of an international network for clandestine emigration and trafficking in women and was for a few years effectively under the control of armed gangs. It has also suffered from much ugly, illegal property development, which we were also to see further down the coast, but is now considered to be safe. Vlora is roughly midway between Tirana and Saranda and it therefore made an ideal spot to stop for lunch. This was at the Hotel New York(!), where we were served chicken with yoghurt and salad, followed by fresh fruit. With palm trees outside the hotel and all the way along the main road, Vlora has a distinct southern Mediterranean feel to it.

180 Continuing our journey south, we passed the site of Oricum, where in 47 AD Julius Cæsar landed during his war with Pompey and where a former SOE base was located, before climbing the stunning Llogara Pass, where the Albanian Riviera begins. Ilia pointed out ruined summer villas once occupied by Hoxha and Shehu. The road wound its way among Greek and Albanian-speaking villages in a very Grecian landscape: olive trees, pine trees, including the flag pine, a national emblem, sage bushes, pomegranate trees and beehives dotted the landscape. As happened several times during the day, we encountered cattle and

goats on the road. We saw graffiti calling for a 'Greater Greece'. Greek Albanians, we were told, speak Albanian among themselves, but not in the presence of Greeks and, for official purposes, say they are Greeks.

181 We passed through Himara, a mediaeval city, which was later captured by Ali Pasha of Tepelena. Colonel Martin Leake, a British traveller in 19th century Albania, who became a military adviser to Ali Pasha, served as his Pro-Consul in Himara. Most of its inhabitants are ethnically Greek and Greek is their mother tongue. Before Communism, Himara had strong links with the outside world. It suffered large-scale emigration when Albania's borders were opened in the early 1990s, but in recent years greater political stability and economic opportunities provided by tourism have seen a reversal of this trend.

182 We continued through Porto Palermo, where Ali Pasha built a fine castle on the island in the bay, and the Soviet Union constructed a submarine base tunnelled into the mountainside. Eventually, we arrived in **Saranda** (literally, forty, but also known in the 20th century as Zogaj, in honour of the King, and Porto Edda, after Ciano's wife) at the southern end of the Albanian Riviera, overlooking the Corfu Channel. In antiquity, it was a small sea port and was observed by Cicero to be a convenient harbour with a favourable prevailing wind (he travelled frequently through Saranda after visiting his great correspondent and friend, Titus Pomponius Atticus, at nearby Butrint). Mosaics from the 2nd and 3rd centuries have been found in the town and in the 4th century it was fortified. Coins dating back to the late 6th century have been found in one of the turrets on the city wall. The walls, which were described by Colonel Leake in 1804, were intact until the 1920s, but have now virtually disappeared. In the past 10 years, Saranda has developed into a major tourist resort, the population has increased from 14,000 to 40,000 and uncontrolled development has created a "commercialised monster" (Andante Field Notes). In the process, most of the ancient city sites have been bulldozed. A small section of the city wall, dating back to the 5th century, is hemmed in by the market and an enormous, new tower block known locally as 'Godzilla'.

183 The town takes its name from a Byzantine church on the hills overlooking it where 40 Christian legionaries were put to death in AD 340. The church was damaged in 1944, when British commandos captured the town and it was blown up by the Albanian army in the 1950s so that it could not be used as a range-fixing point by Greek artillery.

184 We were glad to check into the quite comfortable Hotel Butrinti at the end of what turned out to be the longest day of our tour. After a modest supper, we took a stroll to a nearby mini-market, where we bought some anti-mosquito repellent and soap.

Friday, 7 October: Saranda - Butrint - Saranda

185 After breakfast, we set off south, coming first to Ksamili, which was once a charming hamlet, with a few dozen houses, a little sandy beach and a restaurant. Now, like many formerly idyllic spots on the Adriatic coast, it has become a construction site as the tourist industry takes over. From there, we continued along a good asphalt road, with the Ionian Sea (Straits of Corfu) on one side and Lake Butrint on the other until we reached the ancient city of **Butrint** (Buthrotum). It is probably Albania's best known and most spectacular archeological site and it was the first UNESCO World Heritage Site in the country.

186 The rediscovery of Butrint was effectively the work of Ugolini. Mussolini and his Fascist Party considered themselves to be the lineal successors to Imperial Rome and thus, in theory, entitled to rule wherever the Romans had ruled. Ugolini was despatched to confirm the Roman presence at Butrint. It was evidently founded to exploit its position at the head of the Ksamili peninsula, fresh water springs prompted mariners to stop there, and the fisheries have been traced back to prehistoric times. According to legend, Butrint was founded by Helenus, the son of King Priam, as a new Troy. Aeneas visited briefly whilst on his journeyings to Italy to found the Roman race.

187 Having entered the site near the Vivari Channel, which links Lake Butrint to the Ionian Sea, we came first to a watch tower built by the Venetian Republic in the 16th century and then to the Sanctuary of Asclepius, the God of Healing, based around a natural spring at the bottom of a hill. Butrint attracted countless pilgrims on account of this sanctuary. Although Butrint had been settled for hundreds of years before, it became an urban centre in the 4th-3rd centuries BC and the earliest structures that can be seen date from then. One, which is close to the sanctuary, is the theatre. The rows of seats, which could accommodate 1,500 people (another source says 2,500) immediately caught one's attention. The frontage was added in the 1st century AD, when Butrint became a Roman colony and a lot of construction work took place throughout the city. Changes in the water table mean that the orchestra is now flooded and a wooden platform has had to be installed as a stage. Several marble statues were uncovered when the theatre was excavated, including the famous 'Goddess of Butrint', which we had seen in the National Historical Museum. Other statues were of Augustus, his wife, Livia (stolen in 1992, but since returned), and Marcus Agrippa. Inscriptions carved on the wall of one of the passageways into the theatre included the names of slaves freed as an act of homage to Asclepius. A temple to him stands close by, as do several Roman bathhouses, with hypercaust heating, and a Roman forum, previously a Greek agora.

188 We went down a side path to see the remains of the Triconch Palace, a vast townhouse built around a central courtyard in the early 5th century AD, which takes its name from the three-apsed (or scallop-shaped) walls of its dining room. The rooms and the porticos were paved with fine mosaics while the walls were elaborately painted. The decorations have not survived, but a fragment of the owner's name found in one mosaic floor reveals that he was a *Clarissimus* (senator) and, probably, a major local magnate. As we could see even on a damp morning, the house offered fine views over the Vivari Channel and the house could be accessed from a 'water-gate' in the channel. The house seems not to have been completed or to have been abandoned, perhaps on account of the rise in the water table.

189 Butrint was the seat of a (Byzantine) bishop by 458 AD, and in the 6th century a Baptistry was constructed. It was circular in shape, with a double row of eight columns around the central font. A magnificent pavement around the font survives, but as it is protected by a layer of sand and gravel we could not see this for ourselves (pictures show that it contains a series of concentric rings depicting water creatures, birds and animals). The baptistry as a whole is the second largest in the Mediterranean after Hagia Sofia in Istanbul. It is only used on Easter Sunday.

190 A second ecclesiastical building was the monumental Great Basilica, which was built in stages over the centuries, with parts of the outer walls of the aisles dating back to Roman times. The tripartite transepts, originally equipped with an arcade of columns, and the apse

date from the 6th century AD. The original mosaic floor has been replaced by stone slabs, except for a patch of mosaic in one corner. The foundation of the pulpit can be seen in the nave. The church is a funerary basilica, and it is thought that another, grander, church must have existed elsewhere in Butrint.

191 The city's first walls are thought to have dated back to the 4th-3rd centuries BC, when Butrint was an Epirote centre, but they were rebuilt as the city expanded. Those that have survived on the north-west side of the city stand 9 m. high; they were built of two rows of massive blocks of stone, fitted together without mortar, but with a course of smaller stones sandwiched in between as an anti-seismic measure (Butrint is known to have been struck by earthquakes). Six gates at regular intervals gave access to the city and two can still be seen. The first is the long, narrow and easy-to-defend Hellenistic Lake Gate, which, when Ugolini found it, he immediately identified as the Gate of Æneas. The second gate was the Lion Gate, named after the lion carving placed on the lintel. This gate is set in the wall in such a way that it cannot be seen at all from the lake.

192 Oliver told us that Butrint declined in the 7th-9th centuries AD, but revived later and was an important base of the Despotate of Epirus by 1205. A substantial township, it enjoyed revenues from fisheries, the woods and the plains. It was invaded by the Normans, the Angevins and the Venetians. In 1386, the Venetians purchased the city as a bastion in their unending conflict with the Genoese. It remained in Venetian hands until 1797, when it was briefly occupied by Napoleon's forces, who fought Ali Pasha of Tepelena's army on the plains to the south of the channel. Ali Pasha also constructed the rectangular fortress at the head of the Vivari Channel to protect Butrint from British designs on Corfu. Thereafter, Butrint became part of the Ottoman Empire.

193 At the end of the morning, we made our way up to what was once Butrint's acropolis. There, in the 13th century, the Venetians built a new castle as part of their refortification of the whole area. This castle was reconstructed in the 1930s by the Italians. Andante had arranged a tasty picnic lunch for us in the castle courtyard. Afterwards, we visited the new Butrint Museum, opened in the castle in 2005. The display included statues and busts found at Butrint and its sister city, nowadays Fniqi, and coins struck in Butrint, some showing the aqueduct that brought water into the city and others bearing Butrint's symbol, a bull. Photographs of some of the mosaics included the magnificent pavement at the baptistery.

194 We took a chain (or cable) ferry across the Vivari Channel to have a closer look at the massive, red brick triangular fortress the Venetians had built which, together with the watch tower, was designed to protect Butrint against Ottoman (or Genoese) attacks. In practice, the Venetians abandoned old Butrint after 1572 and founded a new village on the southern bank of the channel to exploit the fisheries. Both the Venetians and the Turks, who periodically took Butrint for short periods, added to the fortress until the original triangular design had acquired three cannon towers. In 1819, it was the scene of a meeting between Ali Pasha and Sir Thomas Maitland, the British Governor of Corfu, to sign a post-Napoleonic settlement for the area. We walked around the outside of the impressive fortress, but were unable to go inside. The remains of the Roman aqueduct also lie on this side of the channel. Having re-crossed the channel, we tried, unsuccessfully, to buy a cup of tea at the hotel close to the Butrint site.

195 Having returned to Saranda, we decided to walk into the centre of this singularly unattractive concrete jungle of hotels, some completed, some not, restaurants, night clubs, bars, cafes, souvenir shops and beachside 'attractions', redeemed only in part by the promenade itself and the occasional palm tree. It had been raining and it was getting dark and the place was drab. What we were looking for (and eventually found) was the main square and, in particular, a corner off it which has been excavated to reveal the remains of a 5th century synagogue or, at least, of a mosaic floor depicting Jewish symbols such as a menorah. It was difficult to make much sense of it without a guide and the museum next to the site looked to have been abandoned. It seems that earlier mosaics on the same site formed the floor of a Roman villa and that towards the end of its life in the last quarter of the 6th century, part of the synagogue was converted into a Christian church and an third layer of mosaics laid.

196 Returning to the hotel, I was hailed by an English-speaking Kosovar, who was looking for somewhere to change money (he was the second Kosovar I had met in a week, the other being at the hairdresser's I now go to in Beckenham!) It transpired that he was working on the base the US has built in Kosovo; he said it was the second largest American base in Europe and implied that it had been used during the Second Gulf War. Saranda, he said, was a popular tourist destination for land-locked Kosovars and Macedonians as well as Albanians. It also attracts day trippers from Corfu and visitors to Butrint. We had a not particularly memorable supper at the hotel.

Saturday, 8 October: Saranda - Gjirokastra - Saranda

197 We set off in a north-easterly direction, heading first over the coastal plains towards the Muzine Pass (650m.) and its spectacular mountain scenery. We followed the Bistricë River for much its course; it arises from an unusual underwater spring known as the 'Blue Eye', where the water bubbles up through a deep pool, making a curious circular shape, deep blue at its centre and almost electric blue around the edges, like the pupil and iris of an eye (a pretty spot, it was reserved in the old days for the Party elite to hunt and fish in). A short distance north of the road after leaving Saranda lay the ancient site of Phoinikë (Finiqi), which was once the capital of northern Epirus and was said to have had the largest walled acropolis in the ancient world (Queen Teuta sent an Illyrian force to capture it). Another nearby place of interest was Sofratikë, where the ruins of Hadrianopolis, another abandoned city, lie and where a Roman theatre is visible.

198 At Jorgucat we turned north into the high, wide valley of the River Drin. Off to the right, close to the border with Greece, among the Greek-speaking Albanian villages, lies Lohovë, where Ali Pasha of Tepelena's fearsome sister, Shainitza, kept a caravanserai (an inn or hostelry, with a central courtyard for caravans). Just to the south is Melan, another ancient fortified city which is home to an old Bektashi *teqe* and is where Byron passed in 1809 on his way north to Tepelena.

199 **Gjirokastra**, which now came into view, dates back to the 3rd century BC, when it was one of a number of fortified settlements along the sides of the valley between the Greek states to the south and the Illyrians to the north. It was re-fortified in late antiquity. The citadel, which overlooks the whole city and river valley, may have been started as early as the 3rd century BC, although it was not until the 6th century AD that walls went up around it and it began to take on the appearance of a castle. Gjirokastra survived into the Middle Ages,

when it became the centre of the Zenebeshi family, one of the Albanian feudal clans that made up the Despotate of Epirus. In 1419, it was besieged and captured by the Ottomans. They recognised the importance of the castle and the town that had spread below it in the previous century and, for a while, it was the administrative centre of a new province (*sanjak*) covering what is now central and southern Albania. It became a major trading centre. Most of its inhabitants converted to Islam, although a substantial Orthodox community remained, especially in the surrounding villages. By the 17th century, the city had 2,000 houses and the bazaar was built at that time (subsequently burned down). After 1810, the city, as it had become, fell under the control of Ali Pasha of Tepelena, who invested heavily in its infrastructure. By then, Gjirokastra was becoming known to the Western world and Byron and Lear were among those who visited it. Thereafter, it was an Ottoman regional centre of some importance until the independence of Albania. Most of the traditional houses in the town date from the first half of the 19th century and shops and other buildings from the early 20th century.

200 Gjirokastra produced three well known sons in the last century: Enver Hoxha - the house where he was born has been converted into the Ethnographic Museum; Çerçiz Topulli, who led an uprising against the Ottomans in 1908; and Ismail Kadare, who has captured the haunting atmosphere of his birthplace in 'Chronicle in Stone'. In 1961, the Albanian government awarded Gjirokastra the status of a 'museum city', which resulted in its being lavishly restored and rebuilt with fine cobbled roads and alleys but, at the same time, it tended to mean that its local history was sacrificed so that the myth of Hoxha as the town's hero was not challenged. After 1967, when churches and mosques were closed or destroyed across Albania, only one of Gjirokastra's minarets and bell towers survived. With the fall of Communism, Hoxha's statue was removed and the museum dedicated to his life closed. Gjirokastra suffered much damage during the civil unrest of 1997. It became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2005 - Butrint and Berat are the other two such sites in Albania - and a new programme of restoration is under way. The town's name means 'Silver City', one possible explanation for which is that its grey stone walls and black slate roofs shimmer in the sunlight after it has rained.

201 We arrived in Topulli Square, where a statue by Odhise Paskali commemorates the eponymous local hero. Another monument commemorates two young women, Bule Naipi and Persefoni Kokëdhima, who were hanged in the square by the Germans on suspicion of their being partisans. During a coffee break at the Hotel Cajupi in the square, we were able to see paintings of 'daily life under Socialism'. The town hall and the Greek Consulate were close by. We were taken to the nearby Cold War nuclear-proof shelter, which was reserved for the use of the local *nomenklatura* (the regional Party and Government bigwigs). Civil defence was taken seriously under Communism, at least so far as protecting the lives of those at the top was concerned. Zufi drove us up to the vast castle (citadel) at the top of the town, where we entered through the Vizier's Gate. Oliver explained that the original complex of the pre-Roman castle had vanished, though some walls of the mediaeval castle were visible and that virtually all the surviving fabric was the work of Ali Pasha of Tepelena. This included a 10 kms.-long aqueduct pipe drinking water into the fortress. After Ali's demise, his fortresses were surrendered to Istanbul officials and some were dismantled. Gjirokastra's castle became the site of a small garrison and, later, a prison. Built in 1932, the prison was used by Zog's regime, the Italians, the Germans and the Communists, until it was closed in 1968. The Albanian National Armaments Museum, which was opened in 1971 in what was once part of the prison, is mostly dedicated to the Partisan struggle against the occupation

forces. It includes an array of captured German and Italian arms and some British weapons supplied to the Partisans - Albanian light weapons such as daggers and pistols were looted in the civil unrest of 1997. The punishment cells, the writings and drawings on the walls made by those incarcerated there, the torture and execution chamber and a display commemorating the two young female Partisans whose statues we had seen in the main square, graphically illustrated what had gone on in the prison. One room contains a copy of a large sculpture by Paskali of a Partisan beating down the Nazi Beast; the original stands at the former Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. Another statue is of Mother Albania ordering religion and fascism out of the country. A fine selection of Albanian Socialist Realist painting is hung around the Museum.

202 The Great Gallery of the Castle is lined with Italian and German artillery pieces (some of the former are of Austro-Hungarian origin, being part of the reparations made to Italy at the end of WW I). A copy of another Paskali statue, this one of the Partisan hero, stands in this gallery. A collection of Ottoman cannons is displayed outside on the Castle's ramparts (some of them were supplied by the British). One gun on display was one of three that Martin Leake gave to Ali Pasha; two stayed in Gjirokastra and the other was taken to Butrint by Ugolini.

203 Also on the ramparts and more remarkable in contemporary terms, were the remains of a USAF two-seater Lockheed T-33 Shooting Star Trainer Jet, which was forced to land at Rinas Airport in December 1957, after running into technical difficulties. The Communist regime claimed that it was a US spy plane. The pilot was released and returned to the US a short time later and, unlike the American U2 pilot, Gary Powers, a few years later, he was not heard of again. Albanian music and dance festivals are held on the ramparts.

204 We returned to the Hotel Cajupi for lunch, where a good meal included dolmades, filo pastry, a vegetable frittata, a fig and cinnamon dessert and yoghurt. Afterwards, we visited one of Gjirokastra's grand dwelling houses, the Zekate House, in the High Palorto quarter of the city. This was built in 1811 by Beqir Zeko, a general and administrator in Ali Pasha's government. It is but one of some 400 traditional houses dating back to the late 18th or early 19th centuries in Gjirokastra and they give it a distinct character. The principal feature of the houses is a massive defensive stone base with wooden living quarters on top and roofs of grey stone slates. The houses vary from two to four storeys, as in the case of the Zekate house, and some had one or two wings added. Although designed for extended families, the purpose of the houses was to demonstrate wealth and power. Internally, the main room in a typical house was the 'winter room', or fire room, with an ornate fireplace. Guests were received in a separate room, which was always the most beautifully decorated (the walls were sometimes adorned with frescoes and the ceiling with carved and sculpted wood). The rooms, including those set aside for daily family activities, were linked by wide corridors and covered balconies, which were also used as living areas in hot weather.

205 The Zekate house had a great water cistern and large store rooms, with stairs leading up to the various communal areas. On the first floor were the kitchen and women's quarters, and on the second the apartments of Beqir's two sons, with integrated latrines and a steam bath, plus the principal suite, a single massive room with a magnificent fireplace and frescoed walls. On the third floor were the summer rooms. The northerly of the two wings contained the principal reception room. A single *divan* ran around all the walls, which held cupboards for bedding. The rooms were used for living, eating and sleeping. Weddings and important

gatherings were held in the reception suite. The frescoes, carved, painted and gilded ceilings and the Venetian glass were most attractive. The decorations were typical of the ‘Tulip’ period, which was fashionable for longer in provincial centres than in Tirana. Many of the ceilings and fireplaces in the dwelling-houses are modelled on Istanbul households.

206 The traditional houses are meant to enjoy strict legal protection. No external modification is permitted in the case of 50 listed buildings and any modifications must not alter the façades of another 350 buildings. In practice, several houses in the first category have either collapsed or lost their roofs and many in both categories are at risk from neglect, abandonment and fire. Some were wrecked in 1997 and Ismail Kadere’s family home burned down in 1999.

207 Nearing Saranda on the return journey, we stopped at **Mesopotam** to see a mediaeval monastery and an elaborate Byzantine church thought to date from the 13th century, though, according to tradition, it was founded by the Emperor Constantine in the 11th century. The church reminded us of the wonderful Byzantine churches at Mystras in the Peloponnese we saw several years ago. We could only admire the building from the outside.

208 On returning to Saranda, we had another walk in the town. We spotted the local offices of the two main political parties, the DP and the SP. For supper, we were taken to a restaurant at the 19th century Lëkurës Castle on a hill above Saranda overlooking the Straits of Corfu. Oliver had first set foot on Albanian soil at this point in 1994. He told me that the following day would be the 67th anniversary of the liberation of Saranda by a joint force of British officers and Albanian partisans. The town was liberated before Tirana and, at that stage, the Allies were, if anything, more interested in tying down German forces in Albania than in their being free for redeployment in Europe.

Sunday, 9 October: Saranda - Byllis - Berat

209 After breakfast and checking out of the hotel, we set off for the vast archeological site of **Byllis** overlooking the River Vjose. This meant re-tracing our route of the previous day along the Drinos Valley and continuing in a north-westerly direction beyond Gjirokastra. We stopped for a coffee break at a clean, new Greek-operated service station near Tepelena. Described as a “tatty town of Socialist apartment blocks” (Andante Field Notes), the longstanding ruins of Ali Pasha’s fortress, with his palace within, can still apparently be seen. Tepelena is also where the Greeks fought the Italians during WW II. We crossed the ancient boundary between Epirus and Illyria. In this context, our guides told us that while the Greek claim to parts of southern Albania, even to all the territory up to the Shkumbi River, was dormant now that Greece and Albania were fellow members of NATO, the Greeks still took an interest in the welfare of the inhabitants of what it calls Northern Epirus and still “plays the Northern Epirus card” when it is politically expedient. In the 1990s, Athens subsidised housing for the Greek-speaking minority in southern Albania. Our guides also talked about such local customs as putting dolls (or other figures) or a string of garlic or an animal skull on a building under construction in order to ward off evil spirits.

210 Reaching the Mallakastë hills, we left the main road and found our way over minor roads and tracks to Byllis, which is spread out over 35 hectares. The ancient walls surrounding the site were built in the 4th century BC, and within are the remains of Illyrian private houses, Roman public buildings and Byzantine basilicas. Archeological and other

evidence points to Byllis, the capital of the Illyrian kingdom of the Byllines and the largest city in southern Illyria, dating back to 370-350 BC (the site was first identified in modern times by a British traveller, Henry Holland, in the early 19th century and systematic excavation began in 1917-18). The Byllines had a sophisticated system of government, minted bronze coins and controlled an area of about 20 square kms. The walls enclosing the city formed a rough triangle more than 2 kms. around, and were 8-9m.-high, built with large rectangular limestone blocks. Gates in the wall - six have been discovered - were guarded by towers (on the southern edge there is a gap in the wall where the hillside drops away in a steep cliff for about 200m. The state flourished until 229 BC, when the Romans captured Apollonia, and Byllis became a battle ground between Rome and Macedonia, thanks to its strategic position overlooking the Vjose river and the route from Apollonia to Epirus and Macedonia. The advantages of this location prompted the Romans to make Byllis one of its colonies. The city again flourished - Roman ex-servicemen built luxury houses and paid for public works such as bridges and bath houses.

211 The first mention of the city, in the form of Bulis, appeared in 48 BC, when it surrendered to Julius Cæsar and became a base for supplying his army ('Byllis: Its History and Monuments', Neritan Ceka and Skënder Muçau, p. 6). Several years later, Cicero informed the Roman Senate that Byllis had been taken over by the followers of Mark Antony; in the first half of the 1st century AD, Pliny considered Byllis to be a Roman colony; and Greek scholars in the 2nd and 6th centuries AD put Byllis among the principal cities of the province of New Epirus. Towards the end of the 4th century AD, Byllis was sacked by the Visigoths, and its enclosing wall was repaired using the original blocks. After a further attack in the mid-6th century AD, the Wall of Victorinus (named after the general who oversaw its construction) was built, enclosing about two-thirds of the old Illyrian fortified city. Even so, the city underwent a period of decline and when it was destroyed again by the Slavs in 586 AD, Byllis was abandoned over time. It was no longer defensible, but it was also more comfortable to live in the valley than on the hilltop. The new settlement inherited the name of the old city, and over the centuries it was transformed from Byllis to Ballis and finally to Ballsh ('chief place').

212 Among the several highlights of our walk around the site was a series of eight basilicas with magnificent mosaic pavements (mostly covered for protection), the most striking of which was the cathedral, the largest monument of the city in late antiquity, stretching to 67m. in length. Its columns had been painted as well as carved, in the Illyrian tradition. The mosaics that could be seen in some sections of the church included a rustic scene, the fishermen of Nazareth and smaller panels bearing pictures of different animals and birds. Other highlights included the theatre, the most important monument of the ancient period, together with its *stoa* (colonnaded walkway), the stadium (one straight track rather than the usual oval form), the gymnasium, a place where boys studied and were trained, the *agora* (market, later public square) and public baths from the Byzantine period. Two residences (dwelling houses) from the 3rd century BC revealed that wealthy families lived upstairs and their servants and animals downstairs. We also admired the city walls - seven gates have now been discovered - with their gates and towers and a fortified courtyard added some time from 230 BC onwards. Oliver also showed us a wine pressing room, the remains of *pithoids* (large clay vessels used to hold grain) and kilns, as well as the necropolis.

213 For lunch, we stopped at Beqo (Taverna Byllis). We had lamb and (cold) chips, followed by a honeyed cake (*revani*, which we have come across in Greece).

214 It was the mid-late afternoon before we set off for **Berat**. We first passed by Ballsh, an oil producing centre. The oil field stretches from Ballsh to Fier in the north west, which we had passed through on the way south, and north beyond Berat. The industry was quite primitive, but parts of the oil fields are now being developed by multi-national companies using modern technology. Gas, which is imported, is not piped to households, which is quite often the case in Southern Europe, but supplied in cylinders, although new apartment buildings may have their own gas storage tanks. We were seeing filling stations at very frequent intervals and Mercedes cars everywhere. Beyond Ballsh, the soil was clearly very fertile: crops included cereals, vines, citrus fruit, pomegranite and vegetables. Litter disfigured some of the river beds and roadsides, but there was not as much of it as we had been warned to expect. Oliver and Ilia talked to us about the Bektashi before we arrived in Berat and checked in at the Hotel Tomorri, another former Communist hotel.

215 Berat has been inhabited since the Bronze Age, over 4,000 years ago (it may take its name from the Turkish word *berat*, meaning an order conferring a decoration, or it might derive from 'Beligrad', the name the Slavs gave the town). The great Tomorri massif, which rises behind the town, was a sacred mountain from very early times (and still hosts a huge Bektashi festival every August). A highly visible citadel, on the right bank of the River Osumi, encircles the whole of the top of the massif. It was in the second half of the 4th century than an Illyrian tribe fortified what is now the citadel and the hill opposite, on the left bank of the river, known as Gorica Castle, the remains of which can still be seen. The pair of fortresses ensured that the whole river valley could be defended. Berat then became part of Macedonia, until the Roman conquest in 200 BC. The town thrived in the Middle Ages, thanks to its being at the point where the trading routes from the south met the lowland plain, but this made it an attractive target for successive invaders. The Bulgarians took it in 860 AD and held it - barring a 40-year period during which it was re-conquered by Byzantium - until 1018. Byzantium held it again, despite the Angevins besieging the citadel for seven months in 1280-81. By the mid 14th century, however, when Byzantium's power waned, it became, along with the rest of Albania, part of Stefan Dusan's 'Empire of the Serbs and Croats'. Thereafter, the whole of what is now south-east Albania came under the control of the Muzaka family of Berat. In 1417, the citadel fell to the Ottomans and, despite an attempt by Skanderbeg to retake it, Berat remained in their hands until the 20th century. During WW II, the mountains of the Berat region were a hotbed of Partisan activity. The town was the first seat of Hoxha's interim government in October 1944.

216 Oliver explained that the lower part of the town was Muslim and the upper part Christian. The lower part was richer than the upper. We had a walk around the lower town before supper at the hotel (pizza, fruit and pastries). I asked Oliver, with whom we sat, a number of questions about Albanian politics. He said that clans, families and personalities (currently Sali Berisha for the Democratic Party and Edi Rama for the Socialist Party) counted for more than parties and ideology. The two major political parties took it in turns to occupy the post of President, even though the incumbent was formally elected by Parliament. Constitutionally, the post of Prime Minister was more important than that of President, but incumbents could make a difference. No election over the past 20 years had been free and fair. Ballot boxes were frequently tampered with. In 2009, voters had been brought in from Kosovo to swell the Democratic Party vote and at the 2011 Mayoral election in Tirana a false declaration of the vote had been made. Albania treated Kosovo as if it was part of its territory - weather forecast maps showed it as part of the country - and if Kosovo was attacked Albania would come to its defence, with or without NATO's support.

Monday, 10 October: Berat

217 After breakfast, we first went to see Berat's three historic mosques. The King's Mosque, the oldest, was built in 1492 as an imperial Ottoman mosque, with local features. It was reconstructed in 1822 and used as a workshop during the Albanian Cultural Revolution. It has a beautifully carved and painted wooden ceiling, a large gallery for women and other features which are also found in the much later Ethem Bey Mosque in Tirana. The mosque complex also includes a library and a bath house. Across the courtyard from the mosque stands a two-storey *teqe* of the Sufi Order of the Halveti. Like the King's Mosque, it is a functioning place of worship, but it was closed when we were there. The second mosque was the Bachelors' Mosque, which was built in 1827 for the city's unmarried shop assistants. It has beautiful frescoes in the Tulip style, which include pictures of mosques elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire. The Leaden Mosque, the third of the historic mosques, took its name from the covering of its dome. It dated from 1555. We stayed in the Mangalem district to have coffee at the Hotel Palma.

218 Afterwards, we drove up to the castle (citadel). The last cannon fired in anger from the citadel was in 1914 in Prince Wilhelm of Wied's time, but a memorial to WW II Partisans stands within the grounds of the citadel. It is still inhabited. We first visited the Church of the Dormition (Assumption) of St. Mary, a basilica with three naves built in 1797 on the foundations of an 11th century church of the same name. It is one of eight remaining churches in the citadel - once there were 42 - and it now houses the National Onufri Museum. Onufri painted many of his finest icons for the Berat citadel churches and was renowned for his mastery of colour, the red paint he used being technically known as 'Onufri red'. As well as Onufri's icons, the museum has a collection of silver and gold bible covers and chalices. Items in the church's annex include Onufri's beautiful icon of Mary holding Christ on her right arm, a reversal of the normal representation in which Christ is held in her left arm. Mary's robe is in 'Onufri red' and decorated with filigree; the background is of hammered metal.

219 The Church itself, which is considered to have the finest iconostasis in the Western Balkans, has been Berat's cathedral church since 1967, when the original cathedral was destroyed during the atheism campaign. Two manuscripts known as the Codices of Berat were discovered in the church in 1968 and are kept in the State Archive in Tirana. One of them, the 6th century Purple Codex, is one of the oldest such manuscripts ever found.

220 We walked around the perimeter walls of the citadel, along which other churches nestle. One was converted into a restaurant during the Communist period, but has now been restored. Another is the beautiful 13th century Holy Trinity Church, which housed an underground water system that supplied the citadel's water until the 1930s, when the Italians piped spring water across country from a mountain facing Mount Tomorri to the west. Two 15th century mosques, built by the Ottomans, one the White Mosque (from the beautiful white stone used) and the other, the Red Mosque, which was badly damaged by German bombs during WW II, can also be seen. A cannon set in an archway in the outer walls, bears the date 1684 and is reckoned to be English and to have been supplied that year to the Republic of Venice. Looking down from the perimeter walls, we had fine views of the city below and the mountains across the river. Oliver reminded us that the buildings in the higher Christian quarter were of a simpler and less expensive design than the lower, more ornate Muslim quarter, reflecting the comparative wealth of the two communities.

221 We came down from the citadel to have lunch at the Restaurant Tomi in the Mangalem district. Perhaps the best meal of the whole tour, it included salad, *birek* (cheese-filled pastry), beef and fruit. Having eaten, we walked up the street from the restaurant to the Ethnographic Museum, which is in one of 140 Ottoman houses still standing in Berat and the surrounding area. The ground floor was used for storage and household activities such as pressing olive oil and distilling raki, usually from grapes, but part of it has been converted to represent a mediaeval bazaar, with examples of traditional costumes and displays of the crafts practised in Berat, such as metal work and felt processing. In the 19th century, Berat's bazaar had some 900 shops, Christian and Muslim. The first floor, where the family lived, leads to a vast covered balcony on which they would have spent most of their time in the hot summer months. From there rooms furnished with items used in daily living, such as looms for wool and silk, lead off. Two of the rooms have a screened gallery in which the women of the household sat while their menfolk ate and drank in the room below.

222 Before returning to our hotel, we looked into an antique shop, stopped at a mini-market to buy honey (*mialte*), Turkish delight and Turkish coffee to take home, and went into the huge, new Orthodox Cathedral in the square where the hotel stood. Its interior was bare and unappealing. A new university building also lies close to the hotel. I wrote postcards in our room before supper (salad, stuffed aubergines, chicken and soggy chips).

Tuesday, 11 October: Berat - Durrës - Tirana

223 On the journey to **Durrës**, Ilia gave us a briefing on the Albanian educational system, the main point of which was that whereas under Communism schooling was compulsory since 1990 many families had not been sending their children to school (either for lack of transport to distant schools or fear of blood feuds or, in the case of poorer families, forcing their children to work, even if it was only selling chewing gum, cigarettes or trinkets on the street). Before 1990, university students were obliged to undergo one month's military training (now the army was professional) or one month's voluntary labour (this too was now abolished and, in contrast to what had happened under Communism, local communities no longer joined together in communal activities such as street cleaning). Moreover, before the 1990s, educational achievement depended on getting good marks and not falling foul of the Party, now social status and, if necessary, bribing of teachers were more important factors. After a while, we stopped for a coffee break at an Italian-style motorway service station calling itself 'Welcome' (*mire se vini*). As we approached Durrës, we saw that, as in Tirana, highrise residential and commercial buildings were brightly coloured - Edi Rama's influence has spread beyond the capital. It was also dry, sunny and warm again, in contrast to the cooler temperatures in Berat and Gjirokastra.

224 Durrës entered history in 627 BC, when it was colonised by settlers from Corfu, who may have been attracted by silver mines further inland. The new colony prospered for many years until internal political unrest led to war between Corfu and Corinth. It flourished again during the 4th-2nd centuries BC as it continued to benefit from Greek cultural influence and temples were built to Greek deities, the late 4th century mosaic 'Belle of Durrësi', which we had seen in the National Historical Museum in Tirana, being the best example of Hellenistic art of this period. Illyrian kings ruled over a city whose population was growing and which minted its own coins. After the Roman conquest of 229 BC, the city became a major transit point between Italy and points further east, and the Via Egnatia was built. It was the Romans too who, in the late 1st or early 2nd century AD, built the huge amphitheatre that survives to

this day. The area was briefly the epicentre of the Roman civil war; Pompey and Julius Cæsar fought an indecisive battle nearby in 48 BC. In 1501, Durrës was occupied by the Ottomans and it began to decline (the harbour which had been such an important link across the Adriatic was of little interest to an empire centred far to the east). It was not until the Balkan Wars and Albanian independence that Durrës re-emerged from obscurity. It was the new nation's capital in 1914, under Prince Wilhelm of Wied, and then again from 1918 until the final decision, at the Congress of Lushnje in 1920, to site the capital in Tirana. King Zog built a palace for himself on the hill at Durrës (it was ransacked by rioters in 1997). In 1939, when the Italians invaded, Durrës was one of the few places to resist. Under Communism, it was a major industrial centre. Post-1990, it has been blighted by illegal and uncontrolled development.

225 We looked first at the Byzantine Forum, which is thought to date from the end of the 5th century AD. A circular area 40 metres in diameter, the forum was paved with marble and surrounded with an elegant colonnade. Several of the Corinthian columns are still standing, looking incongruous amidst the Communist-era apartment buildings flanking the forum. In its centre was a podium, and around the colonnade were shops. The forum was abandoned in the 7th century and used as a cemetery.

226 The Roman amphitheatre, our next stop, is the largest in the Balkans. It was discovered only in the 1980s and has not been fully excavated, not least because there are houses built on top of it. The arena would have been about 60 metres by 40 metres across, with room on the terraced seats for about 15,000-20,000 spectators, roughly a third of the capacity of the Colosseum in Rome. The Romans alternated rows of brick with a mixture of stones and mortar with a view to the amphitheatre resisting earthquakes, and the technique was evidently quite successful since most of it is still standing. We went down into the vaults below the rows of seats and saw the tunnel through which the gladiators entered the arena and the pens where the lions were kept. A Byzantine chapel has mosaics of saints and angels on the walls (they are said to be the only wall mosaics found in Albania). Glass-making and iron work were also carried out in the bowels of the amphitheatre. Gladiatorial combat, animal fights, wrestling, and the public execution of criminals, as well as athletic games, took place in the amphitheatre. It was a mark of a city's wealth and power that it hosted such events. The aristocracy went to the amphitheatre to be seen, they rode in their carriages through a tunnel to a special entrance. In the 5th century, the local Christian community took over the amphitheatre, whereupon the arena became a cemetery and a little church was built for funeral services. Part of a Roman bath house, built in the 2nd century AD, stands right up against the back wall of the amphitheatre.

227 Some of the city's best surviving walls are those around the amphitheatre. The oldest parts are Byzantine, from the late 5th and early 6th centuries AD, and were built to replace earlier fortifications destroyed by an earthquake in 348 AD. They protected the city for several centuries, until the Byzantine empire began to collapse and the city fell prey to one invader after another. New fortifications were constructed in the 15th century when it was part of the Venetian Republic. We saw a Venetian tower, where in 1939 Abas Kupa and his men held up the Italian advance for three days. A relief on a nearby wall depicted a revolt against the Italian occupation by Albanian schoolchildren on 12 July 1940. We also had a view of Durrës castle before lunch at the Restaurant Piazza (rather overcooked vegetable soup, bruschetta, seafood risotto, mussels, fish and strawberries and ice cream as we had evidently arrived later than the restaurant expected).

228 On returning to our coach, we were beset by beggars; this had not happened elsewhere outside Tirana. As the coach pulled away I spotted a statue to Queen Teuta atop a nearby highrise building (it seemed unfortunate that it did not occupy a more prominent position in the town). I did not catch sight of Zog's palace.

229 As we re-entered Tirana, having sped along the modern highway from Durrës, I noticed a large billboard advertising Belleair airline and several travel agencies with English names. Having checked in again at the Tirana International Hotel for our last night of the tour, we bought more postcards and stamps from a helpful woman running a souvenir shop in the lobby, and then walked over to the foreign-language book shop in the old Palace of Culture, where I purchased two of the novels by Kadare to which I have referred. After that, we took ourselves off to the 'diplomatic quarter', with a view to having a look at the British Embassy, which I try to do when we are in a foreign capital. The German, French and British Embassies, including the British Ambassador's residence, were, among others, in close proximity to each other. We had been told that since Albanians were given visa-free access to the Schengen zone (to which the UK does not belong), the British Embassy was alone among EU missions in Tirana in still attracting queues of applicants for visas. To cope with this, a 'cattle pen' queueing system had been set up outside the British Embassy, which hardly enhanced its appearance.

230 Back at the hotel, I wrote our remaining postcards, and noticed that the stamp I put on them carried a picture of Elvis Presley, which tended to confirm the Albanian fascination with celebrities, about which we had been told. Our group had supper together in the hotel for the last time.

Wednesday, 12 October: Tirana - Kruja - Beckenham

231 Having checked out of the hotel, we set off for **Kruja**, a hour's drive from Tirana, beyond Rinas airport. Kruja was the centre of Albania's resistance to the Ottoman invasion in the 15th century, which was led by the great national hero, Skanderbeg. On the way there, our guides explained that as one of the youngest European nations identity and self-respect were crucial issues for Albania. Skanderbeg's birthplace and the museum there in his memory were important in this regard. Once in Kruja, we saw the statue of Skanderbeg in the town centre before making our way to the castle (citadel) in the upper part of the town. Having passed through its vaulted entrance, we went into the Historical Museum, a modern (1982) building more or less in the form of a castle. A most handsome cream-coloured limestone structure, it was designed by Hoxha's daughter, Pranvera, and her husband, also an architect. The museum tells the history of Albania from the earliest times through to Skanderbeg's exploits. Thus, we saw, among other items, the early Illyrian monarchs, scenes of battles between the Illyrians and Romans, various maps of mediaeval Albania, including ones made out of stained glass, a reproduction of the meeting of the 1444 League of Lezhë and the Ottoman invasion and the resistance to it. The highlight was Skanderbeg's study, where he was depicted as a larger-than-life giant of a man, a warrior, with his sword and helmet, a statesman signing treaties and a man of learning. Oliver pointed out that most of the exhibits were copies, not originals, and that we were therefore in a virtual museum. It also began to dawn on me that the museum's real purpose was to draw a parallel between Skanderbeg and Hoxha. Oliver had long ago reached this conclusion. He added that when the museum was opened the collection included some of Hoxha's sayings, but these had later been discreetly removed.

232 Thereafter, we went to a nearby Ethnographic Museum at the citadel. This showed how life in Kruja would have been a century or more ago. The lay out of the rooms and furnishings and the description of household activities we were given were similar to what we had come across in other such houses in Albania. However, this house was distinct in that it belonged to the Toptanis, one of Albania's wealthiest families, and had its own *hammam* (steam bath), one of a handful only surviving in the country, though not, in this case, in use. One family living in the citadel was the Dollma family, who are the hereditary guardians of the castle's beautiful little Bektashi *teqe*, which was built in 1789, and is one of the oldest in the country.

233 The bazaar (market), which I went to next, was restored in the 1960s. The wooden shops and cobbled streets seemed authentically Ottoman. Kruja is geared towards tourists, and it is considered the best place in Albania to buy souvenirs. The wide range of goods on sale included Albanian flags, copper plates, silver jewellery, ashtrays in the shape of (Hoxha's) bunkers, felt slippers and caps, carpets, wooden butter paddles, cradles and dowry chests. The numerous stall holders were almost invariably good natured and not over-persistent in their efforts to sell their wares. Cathy bought some jewellery, a pashmina, a red and black shoulder bag and one of the bunkers as presents.

234 Zufi drove us to the airport, a half-hour journey, for our 14.25 flight to Gatwick. It was with regret that we had to say goodbye to Oliver and his team. They had given us a memorable holiday. Our Boeing 737 was half full and we landed on time.

235 I attach a map of Albania and a selection of photos.

D F MILTON
14 July 2012