

Albania in Autumn

Naturetrek Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Tirana and transfer to Zvernec

Days 2-3 Exploring from Zvernec

Day 4 Transfer to Gjirokaster

Days 5-7 Exploring from Gjirokastër

Day 8 Return to Tirana and fly to UK

Departs

August/September

Focus

Birds/butterflies/mammals other wildlife and culture.

Grading

Grade A/B. Easy to moderate day walks.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ALB03).

Highlights

- An array of migrant and breeding birds including Dalmatian Pelican, Greater Flamingo, Black Stork and Egyptian Vulture
- A fascinating country with a rich culture
- Stay in the wonderful UNESCO town of Gjirokastër
- Europe's largest pre-migration gathering of Lesser Kestrels
- Experience the famous archeological site of Butrint.
- Waders likely to include Collared Pratincole, Marsh Sandpiper, Kentish Plover and Stone Curlew
- Rock Partridge, Golden Eagle, Rock Thrush and Rock Nuthatch are among the local specialties.



Dalmatian Pelican, Lesser Kestrel, Butrint Amphitheatre



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N.B. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction and Summary

Shut off for many years from the outside world, Albania has flung open its doors once again to reveal its wonderful array of wildlife, spectacular landscapes and fascinating history hidden within. This autumnal tour complements our popular spring holiday, and showcases the migrant birds that pass through the southern half of Albania each September on their way south to Africa, along with the resident species of the coast and rugged hills inland.

We begin our holiday with a flight to the Albanian capital of Tirana, before driving south for a three night near the historic city of Vlorë. From here we can gaze out along the endless sandy beaches of the 'Albanian Riviera', edged by the clear blue waters of the Adriatic and the Ionian Seas. The vast Divjakë-Karavasta National Park and the Nartë Lagoon will be the focus of our time here. Many thousands of birds pause to rest and feed along the Albanian coast at this time of year, mingling with resident species to create an exciting avian spectacle. Camouflaged parties of Stone-curlews roost on the saltmarshes, whilst flocks of Greater Flamingos, Dalmatian Pelicans and Slender-billed Gulls feed in the shallow lagoons. We will be on the lookout for Caspian and Gull-billed Terns and a host of migrant and resident waders, whilst in the drier areas Collared Pratincole, Greater Short-toed Lark, Lesser Grey Shrike, Tawny Pipit and Montagu's Harrier are all likely.

For the second part of the tour, we will drive south to the wonderfully preserved Ottoman town of Gjirokastër, where we will spend four nights. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Gjirokastër is particularly notable for its hundreds of Ottoman-style tower houses with distinctive stone roofs. En route we will stop along the Vjose River in search of Western Rock Nuthatch, Black Stork, Short-toed Eagle and other local specialities. We will also head south to explore the world-famous archaeological site at Butrint - an ancient Greek, and later Roman city - and spend time enjoying the spectacle of Europe's largest Lesser Kestrel pre-migration roosts.

Thousands of these charismatic little falcons gather in the Gjirokaster region at this time of year, and we are very likely to enjoy several opportunities to observe them closely. Finally, we will climb into the rugged Nemërçka Mountains to look for Rock Partridge, Egyptian Vulture, Golden Eagle and Common Rock Thrush. This exciting holiday has something for everyone with special wildlife, dramatic landscapes and a rich culture and history.



Greater Flamingo

Day 1

Arrive Tirana and transfer to Zvernec

On arrival into Tirana airport, we will transfer to Zvernec, a journey of around two and a half hours. We will make a stop on the way in the Shkumbin river valley, an area of vineyards, agricultural fields and scrubby hillsides where we hope to find Rollers, Bee-eaters, Turtle Doves, Red-backed Shrike and a range of other species. If our flights to Tirana are later in the day, we will overnight in a nearby hotel in Tirana, and transfer to Zvernec the following morning.

Day 2

Divjakë-Karavasta National Park

Today we will drive north from our base at Zvernec near Vlore to the Divjaka-Karavasta National Park. The 4000-hectare Karavasta lagoon at the centre of the park is the largest lagoon in the country, and holds around 5% of the world's breeding Dalmatian Pelicans. These impressive birds can be seen with relative ease here, alongside an exciting range of other species which may well include Pygmy Cormorant, Greater Flamingo, Glossy Ibis, Squacco Heron, Caspian and Gull-billed Terns, Slender-billed Gull, Marsh Sandpiper, Black-winged Stilt and Collared Pratincole. Although the wetlands are a big feature at Karavasta, the woodlands, dominated by pine and low shrubs, provide excellent habitat for migrant flycatchers, warblers and chats, whilst more open scrubby areas support Hoopoes, Bee-eaters, Shrikes and raptors such as Montagu's Harrier and Short-toed Eagle. Whatever happens, in such a rich and varied area, we are bound to have a rewarding and enjoyable day. Overnight at Zvernec.



Squacco Heron

Day 3

Nartë

Today we will Visit the Nartë Lagoon and saltpans - Albania's most important wetland. Large numbers of Greater Flamingos and Slender-billed Gull are likely to be present alongside Dalmatian Pelicans, Little Terns and a good range of waders. Depending on the season, these may well include Dunlins, Little Stints, Curlew Sandpipers, Spotted Redshanks and Kentish Plovers, alongside the chance of scarcer species such as Marsh and Broad-billed Sandpipers. In addition, we will hope to see Calandra, Crested and Greater Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipit and Zitting Cisticola alongside raptors such as Montagu's Harrier, Marsh Harrier, Short-toed Eagle and Little Owl.



Marsh Sandpiper

After visiting the Salinas and their surroundings, we will move south to the protected area of Vjose-Nartë. The southern part of Vjose-Nartë offers some beautiful coastal landscapes and areas of Mediterranean maquis that is frequented by species, such as Woodchat Shrike, Hoopoe, Sardinian Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Northern and Black-eared Wheatears, Collared Flycatcher and various other migrants. We'll also take a look out to sea in the hope of a passing Mediterranean Shearwater, tern or surprise skua. Overnight in Zvernec.

Day 4

Transfer to Gjirokastër

Today we will leave Zvernec and the coast and drive towards the UNESCO city of Gjirokastër, which will be our base for the next four nights.

On the way we will make various stops as we drive along the Shushitse River valley and climb up into the Kurvelesh Mountains. The scenery becomes increasingly impressive as we progress, and we'll look out for an exciting range of birds including Honey Buzzard, Levant Sparrowhawk, Golden Eagle, Wryneck, Rock Nuthatch, Black-eared Wheatear and Blue Rock Thrush. Any

pools and streams are worth checking for amphibians such as Yellow-bellied Toad, Balkan Water Frog and even Greek Stream Frog. Additionally, we are likely to encounter an interesting variety of butterflies - including the impressive Cardinal Fritillary. In the latter stage of the journey, as we wind our way down to the Drino Valley we'll keep a good eye open for Egyptian Vultures. The core of Albania's small population of these impressive birds is in this region, and we have a good chance of seeing one.



Gjirokastër



Egyptian Vulture

After a spectacular drive we'll reach Gjirokastër. Known by many as the "City of Stone" and comprising hundreds of Ottoman-style tower houses with distinctive flagstone roofs, wooden balconies and whitewashed stone walls, Gjirokastër is dominated by the imposing flanks of its vast castle. From feudal stronghold to Ottoman jewel to Italian colony, the city has known many rulers and has inspired poets, authors and artists. A walk around the network of cobbled streets will transport you back in time. A visit to the vast 13th-century castle brings the adventurous tales of medieval rulers and communist atrocities alive.

Days 5

Visit Butrint National Park

After breakfast at the hotel, we shall head towards the famous Butrint National Park. We'll make a series of stops on the way to explore the varied countryside with further chances to see such exciting birds as Golden Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Levant Sparrowhawk, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Lesser Grey Shrike, plus a range of reptiles, amphibians and insects. We'll aim to reach Butrint itself in time for lunch after which we'll take guided tour of the site with a local archaeologist guide.

The Roman ruins at Butrint, extensive, well preserved and in a very beautiful setting, are for many a highlight of a visit to southern Albania and we shall make the most of our time here. For those who don't wish to visit the ruins there is the opportunity to explore something of the nearby coastal wetlands where we are likely to find range of birds such as Osprey, Eurasian Spoonbill, Caspian Tern, Mediterranean Gull, Kingfisher and Zitting Cisticola and hopefully, dragonflies including Southern Skimmer and Violet Dropwing.

As we drive back to Gjirokastër, we'll check out one or more of the roosting sites of Lesser Kestrels. There are several potential sites in the Gjirokastër area and collectively they constitute the largest pre-migration roosts of this species in all of Europe with several thousand birds present at the peak time! Where the birds choose to roost changes from year to year, but using the best of local knowledge we will do our utmost to make sure that we enjoy something of this amazing spectacle.

Day 6

Kurvelesh Limestone Canyons

This morning we'll explore locally and visit a dramatic cliff-bound valley not far from Gjirokastër. An exciting cast of birds that we are likely to encounter here include , Sombre Tit, Black-eared Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush and Cirl Bunting. There's a good chance of migrants such as Collared Flycatcher, Common Redstart and Subalpine Warblers and we must keep an eye on the cliffs and skylines as Short-toed Eagle, Peregrine and Egyptian Vulture all occur regularly. Even the ultra-elusive Rock Partridge is a possibility.



Western Rock Nuthatch

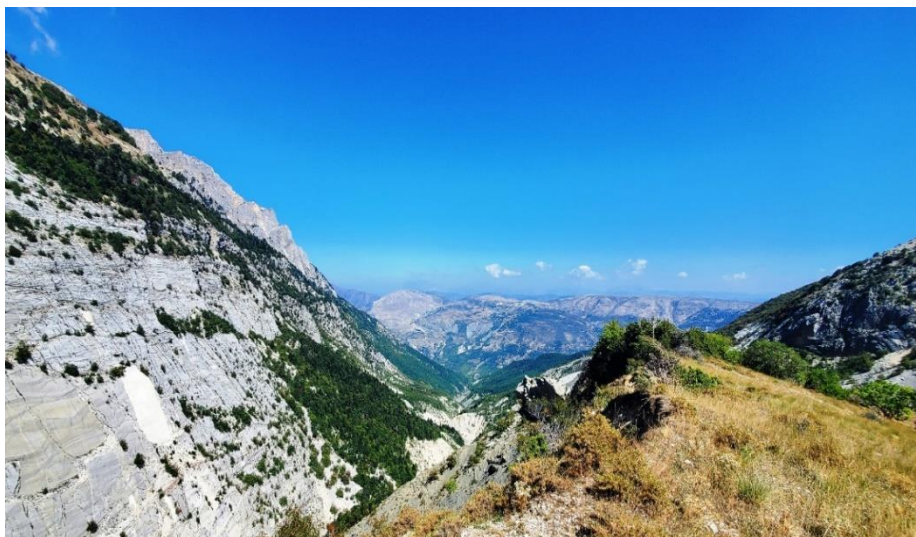
In the afternoon we'll have a relaxed time in Gjirokastër with the opportunity to visit the famous castle or take a hike to the celebrated and scenic Ali Pasha's bridge. In the evening, for those who wish to, we'll make another visit to one of the known Lesser Kestrel roosts.

Day 7

Drino Valley and Çajupi Mountain

For our final full day in Albania we'll visit various sites along the Drino Valley including the spectacular Çajupi Mountain. We'll take a series of short walks in a range of habitats from high mountain grassland to river valley scrub and farmland. Once again we'll be immersed in wonderful countryside and scenery throughout and we have the chance of encountering a wide range of exciting birds from Bee-eaters, Golden Orioles.

Turtle Doves and Red-backed Shrikes to Sombre Tits, Common Rock Thrushes, Rock Buntings and Alpine Choughs. Raptors such as Golden and Short-toed Eagles, Goshawk, Honey Buzzard and Levant Sparrowhawk are constant possibilities, Black Storks frequent the river and Rock Partridges are to be found on the quieter rocky slopes. There will be a good range of butterflies to be seen too and we'll keep our eyes open for Balkan Green Lizards and any other reptiles and amphibians



A view from Çajup Mountain

Day 8

With our final explorations complete we will reach the airport in good time for our flight back to the UK. Depending on flight times, we may be able to make some stops along the way.

Grading

Grade A/B. For part of this tour, we will be following the format of a traditional birding tour, with no strenuous walking involved. During the latter part of the holiday, we will be spending more time watching wildlife on foot, taking a number of walks but none of them across large distances. We will be walking at a slow, pottering pace with the intention to find and observe wildlife.

Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday and we will be staying in excellent family-run establishments throughout. All rooms in the hotels have private facilities.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting flights, at the time of booking.

Flights and Extensions

Our flights will be from London Gatwick or Heathrow to Tirana on a direct service. Should you wish to extend your stay in Albania please let us know on booking.