

# Albania in Autumn

## Naturetrek Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Tirana and transfer to Vlorë
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- Day 2/3** Explore from Vlorë for two more nights
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- Day 4/7** Explore from Gjirokastër for four nights
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- Day 8** Leave Gjirokastër for Tirana

### 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 and Greater Flamingo.
- A fascinating country with a rich culture.
- Stay in the wonderful UNESCO town of Gjirokastër
- Europe's largest Lesser Kestrel roost of up to 4000 birds!
- Experience the famous archeological site of Butrint.
- Waders may include Temminck's Stint, Broad-billed Sandpiper and Kentish Plover.
- Rock Partridge, Rock Thrush, Golden Eagle and Egyptian Vulture possible.



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 so many years from the outside world, Albania has flung open its doors once again to reveal the wonderful array of birdlife, spectacular landscapes and fascinating history hidden within. This new 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 three nights in 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 and Orikumi Lagoons 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 lurk in the shadows, whilst flocks of Greater Flamingos, Dalmatian Pelicans and Slender-billed Gulls feed in the reed-fringed lagoons. We will be on the lookout for Caspian Tern and a host of migrant and resident waders, whilst in the drier areas and open grasslands Calandra Lark, Tawny Pipit and Montagu's Harrier are likely.

For our final four nights we will drive south to the wonderfully preserved Ottoman town of Gjirokastrë. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Gjirokastrë is particularly notable for its hundreds of Ottoman-style tower houses with distinctive stone roofs. En route we will stop along the Vjosa River in search of Western Rock Nuthatch, Egyptian Vulture and possibly Short-toed Eagle. We will also head south to explore the world-famous archaeological site at Butrint – an ancient Greek and later Roman city – and its surrounding Mediterranean maquis and wetlands which are home to Golden Oriole, Turtle Dove and Osprey, amongst others. Europe's largest Lesser Kestrel roost lies nearby too and can hold up to 4,000 birds! Finally, we will climb into the rugged Nemërçka Mountains to look for Black Stork, Common Rock Thrush and Rock Partridge. 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 Vlorë

On arrival into Tirana airport, we will transfer to Vlorë which is a journey of around 2.5 hours. We will make a stop on the way for our first wildlife of the holiday, before checking in to our hotel. If our flights to Tirana are later in the day, we will overnight in a nearby hotel in Tirana, and transfer to Vlorë the following morning.

## Day 2

## Divjakë-Karavasta National Park and its surroundings

Following breakfast at the hotel, we will drive towards the northern surroundings of the Divjake-Karavasta National Park, just on the other side of Shkumbini River, that marks the border of the National Park. The area represents some excellent rural and agricultural landscapes. Even this late in the season, breeding birds will still be around and we can hope to see European Roller, European Bee-eater, Black-headed Bunting, Corn Bunting, Crested Lark and Montagu's Harrier.

Continuing to the little visited and fascinating Divjake-Karavasta National Park, we can explore a mosaic of different habitats including saltwater and freshwater lagoons, sand dunes and pine forest, the area can hold a great range of different bird species, butterflies and reptiles.

The 4000-hectare Karavasta lagoon is the largest lagoon in the country holding around 5% of the world's breeding Dalmatian Pelicans! These impressive birds can be seen here with relative ease and we shall explore the area enjoying whatever we may find. Many migrant birds pass through this site and a whole host of species may be found. Garganey, Pygmy Cormorants and Greater Flamingos and waders often including Marsh Sandpipers and Black-winged Stilts, while Caspian Terns pass through and herons may include Squacco Heron and Great Egret. Although the wetlands are a feature here, the woodlands here are dominated by pine and low shrubs provide excellent cover and food for passerines. Birds such as Collared Flycatcher and Eastern Subalpine Warbler may be found and Hoopoe and Bee-eater are regularly seen. We shall also visit the largest colony of Collared Pratincole in Albania that was only discovered in 2020! We shall overnight in Vlorë.



Squacco Heron

## Day 3

## Narta

Today we will Visit the Narta Lagoon and Orikumi Lagoon with a range of species to enjoy here. Narta Lagoon and Salinas is a superb site and we shall explore and hope to enjoy flocks of Stone Curlews that



gather here in autumn. Flocks of Greater Flamingo, Dalmatian Pelican, Slender-billed Gull, Little Terns and hopefully a range of waders can be found too. Depending on the season regarding migration, large numbers of Dunlin, Little Stints, Spotted Redshanks and Marsh Sandpipers may be found. In addition, we will aim to see here Calandra Lark, Crested Lark, Short-toed Lark, Tawny Pipit and a number of birds of prey including Montagu's Harrier, Marsh Harrier and Little Owl.



Marsh Sandpiper

After visiting the Salinas and its surroundings, we will move south to the protected area of Vjose-Narte. The southern part of Vjose-Narte protected area offers some amazing coastal landscapes and areas of Mediterranean shrubs that are often enjoyed by a number of species, such as Woodchat Shrike, Hoopoe, Sardinian Warbler, Lesser and Common Whitethroat, Spotted Flycatcher, Collared Flycatcher and other migrant species that might occur here in this season. We will attempt to carry out some sea watching as well in the southern part. Overnight in Vlorë.

## Day 4

## Travel to and explore Gjirokastër

Today we will check out of our hotel 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 and include a drive along the Vjosa River, making a stop in Pocem that offers some fabulous riverine landscape and some exciting bird species such as the Western Rock Nuthatch, Blue Rock Thrush and possibly Egyptian Vulture, Peregrine Falcon, Short-toed and Golden Eagle.



Gjirokastër

Travelling further south we may make a stop at a lake where Black Storks sometimes appear on migration before continuing further to Gjirokaster.

Gjirokastër is known by many as the "City of Stone" and comprises hundreds of Ottoman-style tower houses with distinctive stone roofs, wooden balconies and whitewashed stone walls. Dominated by the sheer flanks of its vast castle, Gjirokastër is a magical city with a tumultuous past. 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.

We will have time this afternoon to explore the city and look for wildlife as we visit the castle.

## Days 5

## Visit Butrint National Park

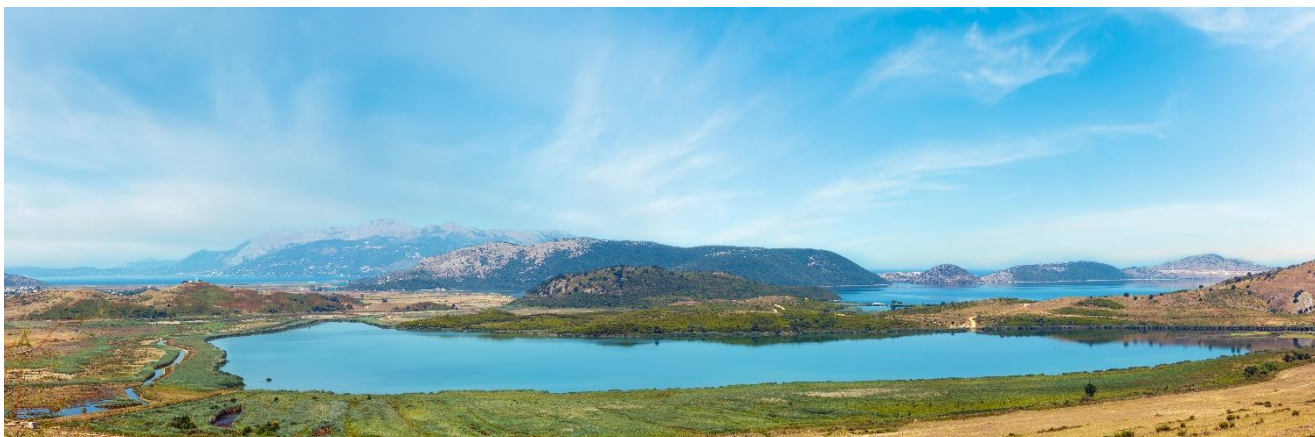
After breakfast at the hotel, we shall leave towards the famous Butrint National Park and spend the day exploring this area.

On the way to Butrint, we will stop at a very nice site with plenty of birds and particularly Rock Nuthatch and Blue Rock Thrush, but also other species such as Black-Eared Wheatear, Northern Wheatear and possibly Short-toed Eagle and Sombre Tit.

Reaching Butrint, we visit the very well-preserved archaeological area, in a lovely area of Mediterranean maquis. This site also has a lake that is connected to the Ionian Sea by a natural channel. The excavations and studies have proved that by the 5th century BC Butrint had the full form of an ancient city.

This is a fascinating place and one of the highlights of a visit to southern Albania and we shall explore this site and learn about its history. As well as the historical interest, this site can be rewarding for the naturalist too with species such as the Golden Oriole, Wryneck, Turtle Dove, European Bee-eater, Red-throated Pipit possible. In addition, Butrint is known to be the most diversity-rich site in Albania for herpetofauna, and it is sometimes possible to find Margined Tortoise in this area.

We will also have time to explore the nearby Butrint Wetlands which comprises reedbeds and open water, and sometimes, muddy pools and shallow ponds depending on the season. Various bird species can be



Butrint National Park

found here and may include Squacco Heron, Wood Sandpiper, Black-tailed Godwits, Penduline Tits, Garganey and Gull-billed Terns. Osprey and White Stork are other species we may encounter here.

As we drive back to Gjirokastër we shall stop off at the largest roosting site of Lesser Kestrels in all of Europe! The number of birds vary from year to year and through the season, but up 4000 birds may roost here and we can enjoy this spectacle and attempt to count the birds!

After a most varied day of wildlife, history and culture, we will return to Gjirokastër to spend the night.



## Day 6

## Kurvelesh Limestone Canyons

Today we shall drive to the Kurvelesh area and one of the most beautiful landscapes in the whole of southern Albania. Characterized by shrubby, dry habitats and limestone rocky canyons and outcrops, many birds can be found here and we will be blessed with some spectacular scenery. Here we will find the most gorgeous canyons of Albania and it is where one of the last five remaining pairs of Egyptian Vulture breed.



Kurvelesh Canyon

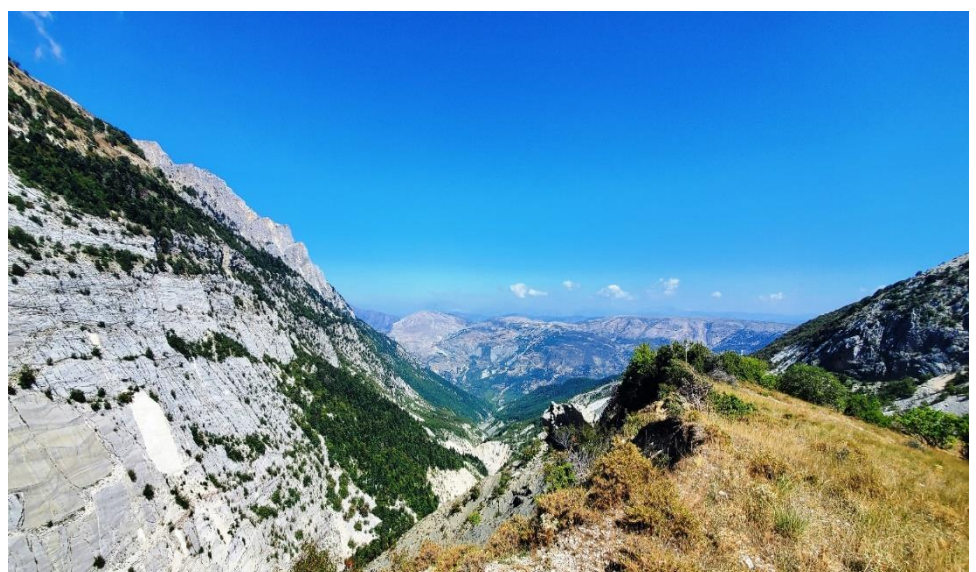
We will drive up to Gusmar village in the hope of possibly watching Egyptian Vulture and maybe even seeing the nest site. We may also find Northern Wheatear, Eastern Black-Eared Wheatear, Woodlark, Golden Eagle and Rock Partridge.

Driving back to Gjirokastër, we will make several stops to watch birds and other wildlife. The journey being around 1hr 20 minutes so we will have ample time to stop and take some short walks to explore the area. Return to Gjirokastër to spend the night.

## Day 7

## Drino Valley and Çajupi Mountain

For our final full day in Albania we will visit several parts of the Drino Valley ending up in Çajupi Mountain. Short walks will be taken at different sites and we have opportunities here to see Golden Eagles, Red-Footed Falcons, Levant's Sparrowhawk, Woodchat Shrike, Lesser Grey Shrike, Alpine Choughs and even Rock Partridge if we are lucky.



A view from Çajup Mountain

We will likely take a picnic lunch with us today to maximise our time in the field exploring this area before returning for our final night in Albania. We will arrive early in the afternoon at the hotel and we will leave some free time before our final dinner together.

## 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 of course.

## 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 wildlife watching on foot, taking a number walks but none of them across large distances. We will be walking at a slow, pottering pace with our intention to find and watch 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 having 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](http://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.