



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Just smaller than Maryland, Albania covers 11,100 square miles (28,750 square kilometers) and is one of the smallest countries in Europe. The terrain is mostly mountainous, with narrow coastal lowlands along the Adriatic and Ionian seas. Coastal soils are fertile but not well drained for agriculture. Instead, the rocks, forested mountains, and sandy beaches are considered a treasure by Albanians for their tourism potential. Several river valleys provide spring water and room for towns and cities. Mountain lakes also dot the landscape. Albania's northern Alps feature the nation's highest peak, Korabi (9,026 feet, or 2,751 meters), but other ranges also have peaks above 8,000 feet (2,400 meters).

Summers along the Adriatic are hot and dry, while winters are mild and wet. A continental climate prevails inland, with more marked seasonal temperature extremes. Summer temperatures may reach 95°F (35°C), and winter lows may fall to 0°F (-18°C), especially in the north and southeast.

History

Descended from ancient tribes called Illyrians, Albanians are considered one of the oldest peoples in the Balkan Mountain region. A wide portion of the southern Balkans was known as Illyria. This area was invaded by the Romans in the second century BC, and when the Roman Empire divided in the fourth century AD, Illyria remained with the eastern portion. Many of Rome's emperors, including Justinian and Claudius II, had Illyrian ancestry.

Bulgar tribes began entering the area in the fifth century; Slavic attacks followed in the sixth and seventh centuries. Attempts by Slavs to impose their culture and religion on the native population forced Albanians south and into the mountains. An Albanian prince, Progon, established an independent state in 1190 that lasted less than a century, and Albania was conquered in the 14th century by Serbs. Their empire fell in 1355, and Albania was divided under local feudal lords: the Dukagjinis and Topias ruled in the north and the Muzakas and Shpatas in the south.

Turkish invasions began in the late 1300s, but Albanian resistance was organized in 1444 by Gjergj Kastrioti (known as Skanderbeg). Skanderbeg is revered by Albanians as a national hero and was even respected by the Turkish Ottomans, who could not fully conquer the region while he was alive. But by 1500, the Turks had gained complete control. Thousands of Albanians fled, and the nation entered a long period under Ottoman rule. A renaissance in the 1870s eventually contributed to a 1911 uprising against the Turks.

In the 1912 London Conference on the Balkans, an independent Albanian state was created. Its disputed borders, which were finalized in 1913 after the First Balkan War, left some 40 percent of ethnic Albanians outside of Albania. World War I soon engulfed Albania, leaving the country in poverty in the 1920s. Archbishop Fan Noli failed in 1924 to create a Western-style democracy, and he was ousted from power by his rival, Ahmed Bey Zogu. Zogu declared himself King Zog in 1928 and ruled harshly until 1939; he fled when Italy occupied Albania. Italy's rule was followed by a German invasion in 1943. Liberation came in 1944.

After a short civil war, the National Liberation Movement

formed a provisional government and named Communist leader Enver Hoxha as president in 1945. Hoxha eventually led Albania down the path of oppression, poverty, and isolation until his death in 1985. Some Albanians responded to democratization in Eastern Europe after 1989 by seeking greater freedoms at home, while others tried to leave the impoverished country. Communist leaders won elections in 1991 but soon met with riots over food shortages and other turmoil. A second election in 1992 brought the Democratic Party to power with Sali Berisha as president. He began working with international organizations to build a viable economy.

Widespread violence erupted in February 1997, after thousands of Albanians lost their life savings in fraudulent investment schemes that appeared to have government support. Public anger fueled weeks of riots, and the country fell into anarchy. In June 1997, a multinational force oversaw elections in which former prime minister Fatos Nano's Socialists soundly defeated Berisha's Democratic Party. Nano resigned in the wake of severe riots, which followed the September 1998 assassination of Berisha's colleague Azem Hajdari. Socialist Pandeli Majko became prime minister. After a November 1998 referendum approved it, a new constitution was signed into law.

The ever-present problems of rival gangs, arms smuggling, and lawlessness were eclipsed by fighting between Serbs and independence-seeking ethnic Albanians in the neighboring Yugoslavian province of Kosovo. Violence rapidly escalated in 1998, forcing thousands of refugees into Albania. After failed negotiations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces began air strikes on Yugoslavia in March 1999; Albania allowed NATO access through its territory. After 78 days of bombing, Yugoslavia agreed to withdraw its forces from Kosovo, but not before the systematic killing of and atrocities against Kosovar Albanians forced nearly a million refugees into Albania, Macedonia, and other states. Many have now returned under the protection of a multinational peacekeeping group, but regional tensions remain high. In 2001, Albania reestablished diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia, which became Serbia and Montenegro in 2002 until those republics separated in 2006.

Albania remains one of Europe's poorest countries. The government is working to strengthen the economy, improve infrastructure, reduce corruption and crime, and create stronger ties with the rest of Europe. In 2006, Albania signed a Stabilization and Association agreement, a preliminary step in eventual European Union (EU) membership and, in 2009, officially joined NATO.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Albania's population of just under 3 million is growing by about 0.25 percent annually. Another three to four million Albanians live in neighboring countries; most have lived in those regions for generations. Albania itself is about 95 percent ethnic Albanian. Small groups of Greeks, Serbs, Roma (Gypsies), and Bulgarians live in the country. Only

about 47 percent of the population resides in urban areas.

Language

Albanians speak *Shqip* (Albanian), which is an Indo-European language directly descended from Illyrian. In 1908, Albania adopted a Latin script. The alphabet has 36 letters (7 are vowels). Two dialects, Gheg and Tosk, historically were spoken in Albania, but a national language based on Tosk was adopted after 1945. This Tosk-based Albanian is the official language.

Religion

Prior to the Ottoman era, Albanians were mostly Christian. Under the Turks, however, a large percentage of the population converted to Islam and accordingly changed their names. Albanians could practice religion freely until the Communist era, when the country's many mosques, monasteries, and churches suffered damage and destruction under the government's antireligion policy. In 1967, religious practices were outlawed altogether. Religious freedom was restored in 1990 and religion has since regained importance in people's daily lives. Although official figures are lacking, it is estimated that 70 percent of Albanians are Muslim (Sunni and Bektashi), 20 percent Orthodox Christian, and 10 percent Catholic. Protestant Christian churches and other denominations are beginning to establish a presence in Albania.

General Attitudes

Albanians value their families and their ethnic heritage. Personal honor is also important. Albanians, particularly those in the isolated, mountainous north, are known to be courageous, resourceful, courteous, and hardy. They honor a traditional institution called the *besa* (sworn truce). Adherence to the *besa*, along with family honor, hospitality, and a patriarchal order, is considered to be the basis for successful relationships. However, these northern groups also tend to engage in blood feuds, resist governance by others, and distrust outsiders. Southern Albanians are known to be openly emotional and more socially liberal.

Albanians resist appealing to the wisdom and advice of others. Adjusting to a Western system of competition, free speech, capitalism, and materialism has been difficult. The country's peoples are more accustomed to force and autocracy than to democracy and the rule of law.

Most residents are weary from continued social and economic turmoil. Anger, hopelessness, and poverty have replaced the country's post-communist optimism, increasing wealth, and progress. Guns are commonplace, particularly in lawless areas where government mistrust is strong. The lack of social order has nearly destroyed community and national values. Some Albanians feel a loss of pride and dignity in not being able to govern themselves. Most people feel discouraged and hopeless about the future.

Personal Appearance

Before 1991, clothing was often homemade; now it is usually purchased. Urban professional men wear business suits and ties. Urban women wear dresses and skirts more than pants.

They wear Western tops and colorful blouses. The youth like jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers.

People from rural areas wear traditional outfits, which vary by region. In the north, women wear a headscarf and a *fustanelle* (full, colorful wool skirt) over tights. Men wear cotton or wool pants, heavy cotton shirts, a *xhamadan* (wool vest), and a *qeleshe* (white cap). In the south, such traditional attire is used mainly in ceremonies. Clothing is neat and clean; Albanians tend to consider cleanliness a personal duty.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Most Albanians greet with a handshake, but friends may also hug. Greetings between women may also include a kiss to each cheek. Typical phrases include *Si jeni?* (How are you?), *Si keni kaluar?* (How are you doing?), *Ç'kemi?* (What's up?), or *Njatjeta* (Hello). Friends may also greet by saying *Miremengjes* (Good morning). When parting, they say *Mir u pafshim* (Good-bye), *Do te shihemi* (See you later), *Shendet* (Stay healthy), or *Gjithe te mirat* (All the best). Northern male villagers greet by lifting the cap and saying *Tungjat jeta* (Have a long life). Albanians smile or nod when passing strangers on the street.

Close friends address each other by first name, but Albanians otherwise use *Zonja* (Mrs.), *Zonjushë* (Miss), or *Zoteri* (Mr.) with first or last names. Before 1990, the communist term *Shok* (Comrade) was used for introducing someone. Specific kinship terms are important when addressing family members. For instance, an uncle may be called *xhaxha* (father's brother) or *daje* (mother's brother). Likewise, an aunt is either *halle* or *teto* (father's sister) or *teze* (mother's sister). It is common to call an older man *xhaxha* or an older woman *nene* (a term for mother), regardless of their relation.

Gestures

Albanians often move their hands and heads when conversing, although they maintain as much eye contact as possible. To indicate “yes,” one shakes the head slowly from left to right. A person signals “no” either by nodding briefly up and down or by clicking the tongue and nodding the head down once. A “thumbs up” gesture is impolite, meaning “You'll get nothing from me.” Placing the left hand over the chest and moving the head slightly shows appreciation.

Showing both hands with open fingers, palms up, means “Our conversation is over.” To pat another person's shoulder means “I am proud of you.” Young people might show strong approval by quickly moving the hand horizontally, while at the same time bringing the thumb and index finger together and clicking the tongue.

Visiting

Visiting is considered a joyful event, and hospitality is a cultural hallmark. Unplanned visits are common. Guests usually are greeted with the phrase *Mire se vini* or *Mire se erdhet* (Welcome). They respond with *Mire se ju gjeta* (I am glad I find you well). Guests bring gifts for birthdays and

special occasions, but not if they are invited for a meal or are just visiting. Gifts, even birthday presents, are opened only after the guests are gone. In northern villages, people often socialize while sitting cross-legged on the floor near the fireplace, a custom stemming from an old tradition of sitting around a low table (*sofra*). Otherwise, people sit on chairs.

After seating guests, the hostess offers the men strong alcoholic drinks such as *raki* (brandy) or *konjak* (cognac) and sweet liquors to the women, even during the day. These drinks are accompanied by homemade jam, candies, and Turkish coffee, which is served with biscuits, cookies, or cake. Before drinking, visitors politely say *Gezuar* (Cheers). Evening visits usually occur between 4 and 8:30 p.m. Visits do not necessarily include a meal, but hosts may extend such an invitation. Albanian hosts traditionally walk their guests a little way down the street when they leave.

Eating

An Albanian breakfast (6:30–7 a.m.) usually consists of milk, eggs, bread and butter, jam, cheese, and Turkish or espresso coffee. A traditional restaurant breakfast is *paçe*, a creamy soup made with a cow or calf head, tomato sauce, garlic, flour, butter, and seasonings. Lunch (3–4 p.m.), usually the main meal, begins with vegetables, rice soup flavored with chicken or veal, and fresh green or tomato salad, followed by the main course of *gjelle* (boiled beans or vegetables with meat) or baked, stuffed eggplants or peppers. Cakes, fresh fruits, and coffee follow the meal.

Dinner (7:30–9:30 p.m.) consists of light soup or pasta, plain yogurt, bread, and dessert. The mother usually prepares each plate before serving it. For holidays or when guests are present, serving dishes are put on the table and each person chooses his or her portion. Hosts serve guests *meze* (appetizers featuring boiled eggs, feta and *kackavall* cheese, cold cuts or sausage, onions, tomatoes, and olives) with *raki* to drink. In the north, *meze* is prepared with cottage cheese and *turshi* (vegetables preserved in salt water).

Private restaurants that had been closed during the Soviet era reopened after 1990. Albanians eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Toasting is common, with the first toast made to everyone's health and friendship. Bills are presented on request and are paid at the table. Tipping is customary.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Urban families generally have one or two children, while rural families have three or four. For the most part, the father heads the family, and women are responsible for cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children. Male children are seen as the future backbone of the family and protectors of the family name. Both parents usually work and send their children to day care. Because there is a housing shortage, unmarried adults often live with their parents, as do married children, usually on the groom's side. Children are expected to take care of their aging parents. Men and women have equal social rights; however, society remains largely

patriarchal.

Housing

Home ownership is both highly valued and very common, in part due to former communist practices of providing housing to all. The typical urban dwelling is an apartment with one to three rooms. Though many communist-era apartments still exist, many new buildings have been constructed since 1990. Massive urbanization during the 1990s has resulted in unofficial settlements that connect illegally to electric lines and lack roads and sewage systems.

Rural houses are constructed from natural stones or bricks. They tend to be small and sparsely furnished. In isolated areas, fires are used to heat houses during the winter. Running water and indoor plumbing are often lacking.

Dating and Marriage

Before 1945, most marriages were arranged. This custom came from an early era when northern tribes would announce a girl's engagement at birth. Today, young people make their own choices regarding a spouse, but rural families are still heavily involved in the selection process. Urban youth begin dating around age 16; they go to movies or small café bars to socialize. Men generally marry after they are 26, and women marry in their early twenties.

A civil ceremony is required for a marriage to be legal, but after 1991, many couples also began having church ceremonies. There are usually two wedding celebrations: one on Saturday for the bride and one on Sunday for the groom. At the first party, given by the bride's parents, the groom and his family representatives appear only after 10 p.m., and the bride changes from a white dress to a more colorful one after midnight. The party continues until 3 a.m. The next day around noon, the groom goes with a few relatives to the bride's house to take her to his parents' home. There they receive the congratulations of visitors before having the second dinner party, sponsored by the groom's parents.

Life Cycle

Births are marked with a celebratory lunch, which only women attend, where *havla* (a sweet made with sugar and flour) is served. Among the Muslim majority, circumcision is a common practice for boys between the ages of three and eleven years. After the circumcision, the boy may be dressed in traditional clothing and wheeled around his village or city in a decorated carriage. The event is usually celebrated with a family feast. Upon a death, family and friends visit the deceased's family and may eat *havla*. A procession accompanying the body to the cemetery is led by a representative from the family's religion. In some cases, the procession includes only men. A mourning period, whose length varies with religion and region, follows the burial.

Diet

The Albanian diet is influenced by Greek, Turkish, and Italian cuisines. Traditional specialties include *fasule* (boiled dried beans) cooked with onions and tomatoes and flavored with *pasterma* (dried salt mutton); *turshi* salads; *byrek* (a pastry) with vegetables, cottage cheese, or minced meat; and *tave*

kosi (meat or liver baked in yogurt). The most popular meats are lamb, veal, and chicken. Albanians also enjoy pork and seafood. Meat often is boiled together with vegetables such as potatoes, onions, okra, peas, beans, leeks, spinach, or cabbage. Typical dairy products include homemade yogurt, cottage cheese, feta cheese, and *kackavall* cheese. Locally grown fruits include apples, pears, peaches, watermelons, plums, oranges, figs, and grapes. People often drink *Raki* before the main meal, while wine is served either during or after the meal.

Recreation

Albanian men often play basketball or soccer. Families gather for religious, historic, and cultural events. Urban families like to picnic or go to the beach in the summer. People like to watch television or attend movies. Music from western Europe and the United States is popular.

The Arts

Under the Communist reign, the development of literature, cinema, and theater was limited; however, the current government has made a concerted effort to promote and preserve Albanian culture. Folk dances such as the *valle* and *ajsino oro* are still frequently performed, particularly in the smaller villages. Indigenous music uses unique instruments such as the *çiftelia* (a type of mandolin with two strings) or *lahuta* (a one-stringed instrument played with a bow) in the north, the *Tarabuka* (a kind of drum made of pottery and goat skin), and the *gajde* (type of bagpipe) in the central region. Wood carvings, woolen rugs, and decorated clothing are common folk arts. The National Archaeological Museum houses the world's largest collection of Illyrian artifacts.

Holidays

Official public holidays include New Year's (1–2 Jan.), Orthodox and Catholic Easter (Friday–Monday), May Day (1 May), Independence Day (28 November), and Catholic Christmas (25–26 Dec.). Muslims celebrate *Ramasan Bairam* (feast at the end of *Ramadan*, the holy month of fasting) and *Kurban Bairam* (Feast of the Sacrifice). On Memorial Day (5 May), people place flowers on graves and honor fallen warriors. The most popular holiday is New Year's Eve, which Albanians celebrate with dancing, joking, singing, and eating big meals (usually a turkey dinner with special desserts such as *baklava* or *kadaif*, two types of nut-filled pastries). They spend the following day visiting and sharing holiday sweets.

SOCIETY

Government

Albania ratified a constitution in 1998, which provides for rule of law and separation of powers. Executive power rests with the president (currently Bamir Topi), who is elected by parliament to a five-year term. The prime minister (currently Sali Berisha) is head of government. Albania has a unicameral parliament, the 140-seat *Kuvendi Popullor* (People's Assembly). One hundred of the seats are determined by popular vote, and the remaining seats are distributed by

proportional representation. All members serve four-year terms. Democracy is not yet strong, and inexperience is a key stumbling block. The voting age is 18.

Economy

Prior to 1997, the country was progressing in a difficult transition toward a decentralized economy. Land was privatized in 1992, and free-market principles were being introduced. Small businesses were becoming more numerous. Then, the pyramid scheme collapse in 1997 ruined the country's economy. Albanians lost nearly US\$1.2 billion in savings, the equivalent of more than half of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).

Though GDP per capita has increased, many people earn less than US\$1,000 per year. Albania's greatest asset is a skilled and educated workforce. The economy continues to rely on foreign aid, remittances from Albanians working abroad, and revenues from contraband smuggling. The economy continues to grow, but more than a quarter of the workforce is still unemployed. The government is working to encourage foreign investment and privatization. However, long-term economic progress is unlikely without political reform and stability. Crime remains a serious problem. Exports include textiles, asphalt, iron ore, copper, oil, and agricultural produce. The currency is the *lek* (ALL).

Transportation and Communications

The state operates urban transportation, but private lines provide intercity transport. More automobiles (used cars from Europe) have become available since the early 1990s, but roads are frequently in poor condition. However, new roads are currently under construction, and a freeway connects Tirana and Durrës. Bicycles and motorcycles are popular. Albania has a small railway system and an airport at Tirana. With the end of communism, private newspapers were established. The country has a few television stations and several radio stations; most homes have televisions and radios. Phone lines are not readily available, but mobile phones are becoming more common.

Education

Education is provided free to all citizens. Children begin school at age six and are required to attend for 10 years (up from 8 before 1994). Parents may be fined if they do not send their children to school for the full period. Education is extremely important to Albanians. At age 16, students can obtain secondary education at vocational and other schools. After four years, qualified students may attend college at the state's expense. Albania's first university was founded in Tirana in 1957. Other institutions exist, and some students study in other countries.

Health

The government provides free health care at clinics and hospitals, and private clinics are available to those who can afford them. Most medicines are either imported or donated. Facilities are poorly equipped and rely on international aid. Children and pregnant women receive the most health care.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Albania, 2100 S Street NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 223-4942; web site <http://embassyofalbania.org>.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	2,986,952 (rank=136)
Area, sq. mi.	11,100 (rank=142)
Area, sq. km.	28,750

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	64 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	61 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$7,700
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate	19 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	75 (male); 80 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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