



From Hidden Champion to Rising Star

ITB Berlin Host Country 2025: Albania “With all the Senses“

By Sabine Neumann and Horst Schwartz

Albania is in a unique position, one that is rare in the tourism world. The country in the Balkans is new to the local travel scene and among some of the established tourism destinations and hot spots. The reason has to do with its past. "We were an isolated country for over 50 years, and when democracy arrived we spent the first 20 years trying to understand what freedom was and what it meant", explains Mirela Kumbaro Furxhi, Albania's Minister of Tourism and Environment. The dual role she occupies reflects the government's approach to organising and implementing a regulated tourism development programme.

Choosing to become the host country of ITB Berlin in 2025 was good timing. Albania will be presenting itself as a hidden champion to the travel industry at the World's Largest Travel Trade Show. It is barely ten years now that this democratic parliamentary republic has been working on developing a tourism sector aimed at significantly improving the country's economy, furthering social progress and achieving growth. The ministry's focus is on sustainability, protecting natural and cultural spaces, education, local participation and incentives for foreign investors in order to build a first-rate tourism infrastructure. It looks as if the ideas, plans and measures are coming to fruition.

A Magnet for those Keen on Adventure

What is still a very unspoilt country has been rapidly gaining favour with travellers. The country described by the minister as "small, in a way mystical, with breathtaking mountain scenery, a rich cultural heritage, UNESCO-designated historical cities, outstanding local traditions and the vibrant capital Tirana" is luring travellers with "new travel experiences". What is remarkable is the many different types of tourist it attracts. All the tour operators who were interviewed mention steady growth.

"It's a place for those keen on adventure," says Uwe Frers, with the market for motorhome and camping holidaymakers in mind. He is CEO of pincamp, the camping platform of the German motoring association ADAC, which at the beginning of the year repositioned itself in order to appeal to a more international market. This type of tourist travels wants to "experience nature's diversity over relatively small distances, and the sensation of camping next to nature in the countryside."

He keeps close contact with the tourism community via the platform. Slowly but surely, Albania can no longer lay claim to being "a well-kept secret", says Uwe Frers. "It offers good to very good campsites, ranging up to four-star in quality. The infrastructure has improved significantly in recent years and the sanitary facilities are in good order", says Frers. "The Lake Skadar campsite was shortlisted for the pincamp award for the first time. A four-star campsite, it has 107 permanent pitches and 20 rental accommodations. The fact that there is a focus on smaller, family-run campsites, often at vineyards or on farms, as well as on pricing, is also highly appreciated. The 69 Albanian campsites listed receive "good feedback, praise and excellent ratings", says Frers, "Lake Skadar gets top marks."

Pioneers encourage Moderate Growth...

Albania's tourism pioneers are the study tour operators. According to area manager Anja Habersetzer, Studiosus Reisen has been promoting tours to Albania for "at least 20 years." Providing that rapid growth is managed more or less sustainably, she predicts it will have "a very good future as a travel destination." Prices are lower than those of its neighbours, so "the diverse attractions of high mountains, coastlines and cultural history over a small area and the allure of the unknown will continue to be popular with visitors."

Felix Willeke, founder of Lernidee Erlebnisreisen, remembers "having first organised trips to Albania around 2005." In 2008, his team organised a company trip to Macedonia and Albania. Since then, and with only minor breaks, Albania has "always been part of the Lernidee portfolio, even if a booming market was not foreseeable at the time." An experienced tourism operator, Lernidee's managing director Felix Willeke says: "Since 2024 at the latest, Albania can no longer be described as a well-kept secret. It is too firmly

established with specialist tour operators and increasingly also being promoted by beach holiday providers."

TUI Germany has registered "excellent demand for Albania, albeit at a low level". The biggest package tour operator still calls it a "well-kept secret in the eastern Mediterranean, a blank spot on the map for many holidaymakers." Its location, beaches and many natural attractions could lead to it becoming "the new crown jewel of the Mediterranean."

... and Sensitive Sustainable Development

Tourists with Gebeco "often travel hidden paths and hand-picked routes". Since 2010, they have been "getting to know Albania and the people who live there in a special way with a competent German-speaking tour guide". For product manager Steffen Keese, the country remains "one of Europe's most unexplored places." Like his colleagues, he welcomes the ongoing efforts to build tunnels, roads and hotels. The product manager advises "everyone working in tourism to invest in improving quality, especially that of buses and hotels." He desperately wants "to train more German-speaking tour guides."

Tour operators are unanimously encouraging "sensitive and sustainable development of this travel destination." Felix Willeke sees it as "important to allow everybody involved to partake of the added value" and "protect this unexplored travel destination from overtourism and subsequent collapse".

That is the Albanian government's aim. It has just finalised its new tourism strategy until 2030, and set its sights on balancing economic growth, social progress and environmental sustainability. To achieve this, economic stability, diversified growth and a commitment to responsible tourism must form a symbiosis, says the dual ministry: "Our focus is on alternative rather than mass tourism." The country has been divided into six tourism regions - each "possessing unique features and offering authentic travel experiences." The minister has an ambitious goal: "We are positioning our country as a place for good investment and creating the conditions for a new era of sustainable and prosperous development in the heart of the Balkans."

The Figures Speak for Themselves

Albania has a coastline on the Mediterranean and is roughly the size of Belgium. The small country in the Balkans has a population of around 2.78 million. It shares borders with Montenegro and Kosovo to the north, North Macedonia to the east, and Greece to the southeast. 384 kilometres of coastline along the Adriatic and Ionian Seas make up its western border.

As an up-and-coming travel destination, Albania is growing rapidly. According to Herida Duro, director general of Tourism at the Ministry of Tourism and Environment, in 2024 "tourism increased not only on the coast, but everywhere

in the country and flourishes all year round". The travel season has grown significantly, with tourist groups arriving as early as January.

According to the World Tourism Organisation UNWTO, in terms of international visitor flows the hidden champion has topped the European rankings for the past two years. Along with new markets, large tourist numbers are arriving from China, Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand, the US, Canada and Brazil.

Kosovo as well as Italy, whose tourists value Albania's Adriatic as a budget alternative and which has made strong gains over the last two years, together with North Macedonia, Greece and Montenegro remain strong neighbouring markets. Visitor numbers from traditional European markets such as the Netherlands, Spain, France, the UK and Germany have increased. The German market in particular is growing steadily. In 2022, Albania welcomed 187,000 arrivals from Germany, 58 per cent more than in 2021. In 2023, their numbers rose by a further 66 per cent to 312,000. The previous year saw yet another increase, by 20 per cent to 364,642 arrivals.

A comparison of 2014 and 2024 reveals figures that speak for themselves. In 2014, 3.6 million people visited the country from abroad. In 2019, before the pandemic, the figure was 6.4 million. Albania recovered quickly from the decline in visitors to 2.6 million during the year of the pandemic. In 2021, arrivals climbed to 5.6 million. And for 2024, the tourism destination reports 11.7 million visitors. Tourism has become an important economic force and creates new jobs. In 2023, revenues totalled 4.2 billion euros.

Regulated Growth: A balancing Act

The Albanian government launched its Urban Renaissance development programme in 2014. The project focused on restoring and improving city centres and tourist areas after years of neglect under the Hoxha dictatorship. City centres were upgraded with regard to urban development, facades were renovated, green spaces were created and investment was strongly encouraged. From 2014 to 2017, 573 projects were realised with a combined value of almost 360 million euros.

Tirana 2030 project was launched in 2016. Two million trees are to be planted by 2030, ensuring ecological sustainability and surrounding Tirana with a green belt. In November 2024, the Albanian Development Fund announced a further investment project for urban regeneration in four main regions of the country. The country is determined to continue its balancing act of encouraging growth and social progress, but also environmental protection and sustainable development.

Enchanted Mountains, Gorges and Nature Reserves

Mirela Kumbaro Furxhi is full of enthusiasm whenever she talks about her home country: "Albania is a hidden gem of the Mediterranean that is now showing itself to the world as a destination". Mountains and rivers cover three-quarters of the country. There are many mountain peaks all over the country, with vastly differing stages of difficulty for hikers and nature lovers.

The "Enchanted Mountains", the Albanian Alps in the north with small border crossings to Montenegro, Kosovo and North Macedonia, Lake Skadar and other mountain lakes as well as the Peaks of the Balkan Trail are a year-round destination for hikers, motorhome travellers and winter holidaymakers. Their numbers have grown considerably in recent years and the rewards for their efforts are spectacular views of mountains and valleys.

TUI Germany has added a new ASI hiking tour to its portfolio: "Albania's pristine north features breathtaking mountain landscapes with crystal-clear rivers and high peaks". It is one of 49 package trips to Albania organised by the Austrian hiking tour specialist. Gebeco also organises a guided hiking tour. Hikes on the "peaks of the Balkans" lead "through deep green valleys and pristine villages" and "hospitality and local culinary delights round off the adventure."

The Hospitality Experience: A Tradition

Albania tour operators and travellers alike praise the locals' hospitality. Philip Unrein, CEO of SKR Reisen, would like to see this reciprocated: "A friendly 'faleminderit' (thank you) always goes down well." Director general Herida Duro is quite clear: encounters bear lasting fruit. "Our traditional hospitality encourages people to stay, work and thrive in their home towns and villages."

With all its valleys, rivers and streams, Albania is a fascinating place for holidaymakers who want to have fun on and in water. The upper valleys of the River Osum in the south have gorges that stretch for 17 kilometres and form 100-metre deep canyons - ideal for rafting. The River Vjosa, often referred to as Europe's last untamed river, meanders from its source in Greece through canyons, gorges and valleys across Albania to the Adriatic. It is popular with kayaking and white water rafting enthusiasts as well as hikers on the paths along the river banks. The river recently became the Vjosa Wild River National Park, one of 12 national parks in the country. 21.5 per cent of the country's surface area is a designated nature reserve.

The 288-metre deep Lake Ohrid in the east is a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. Measuring 358 square kilometres, it is considerably larger than the German part of Lake Constance, for example. One-third of it lies in Albania and two-thirds in North Macedonia. It holds two records: at 1.26 million years old, it is one of the oldest lakes in the world. And it is deeper than almost any other lake in Europe.

From Mountain Peaks to the Coast

From the mountains, it takes only a few hours to get to the beach, one of this travel destination's most important attractions. From the northern border with Montenegro to the southern border with Greece, bays are strung out like pearls along the west coast - some heavily frequented for bathing, others slightly hidden or – like the Canyon of Gjipe between Himarë and Dhërmi in the south - only accessible after a half-hour hike or by boat. According to the TUI product team, the Syri I Kaltër spring, also known as the Blue Eye of Albania, is a genuine must-visit.

There are some particularly beautiful beaches in the south. Experts consider the Albanian Riviera on the Ionian Sea to be one of the most beautiful stretches of coastline in Europe. Places such as Ksamil, Dhërmi and Himarë impress with their white sandy beaches, crystal-clear water and relaxed atmosphere. According to Michael Kunkel, director, Eastern Mediterranean at Dertour Group, "travelling along the Riviera past Vlorë, Himarë and Borsh to Sarandë is a great way to explore Albania away from the tourist crowds."

The "Bay of Mirrors" 15 kilometres south of the town of Sarandë is so named because on calm days its clear waters reflect the sky and surrounding landscape like a mirror. Only a few kilometres to the south is the coastal village of Ksamil, whose sandy beaches TUI describes as dreamlike, with a turquoise-coloured sea like the Caribbean. "A visit to the beach here should be combined with a boat trip to the many small islands."

A new Airport in the South

German operators are eagerly awaiting the opening of Vlora International Airport, scheduled for this year. As soon as it is up and running, "places such as the Bay of Vlorë or the island of Sazan will be added to our portfolio", says an enthusiastic Michael Kunkel. Tirana International Airport (TIA) handled ten million passengers last year. "That makes it the number one airport in the Balkans," says Herida Duro. The airport on the island of Corfu currently plays an important role for tourists coming to Albania, acting as a hub for the south. Corfu is only two kilometres from the Albanian coast.

According to Booking.com, a comparison of 2023 and 2024 search data for flights shows that Tirana "has taken over as the number one flight destination for Germans, with the highest growth", with almost twice as many searches compared with Rome and Budapest.

Interest in boat trips is also on the rise. "After Split, Dubrovnik and Kotor, it is now time to discover Durrës and Vlorë," says Felix Willeke. The government is showing "a clear interest in developing water sports, existing marinas such as Orikum, and new marina projects," the minister says.

Coast or Hinterland?

A growing number of voices are cautioning against attracting too many holidaymakers to coastal resorts. Even though Albania still boasts many untouched natural landscapes and coastal areas, "The most important question will be whether Albania can resist the temptation to concrete over the entire coast," says Jochen Szech, managing director of Go East, a tour operator for Eastern Europe.

Laura Freire, deputy managing director, Sales and Operations at Forum Anders Reisen specialist Geotoura, shares those concerns. As a smaller tour operator, she often has to seek out less crowded coastal areas beyond the tourist places. In these locations, she finds small boutique hotels that cater to customized travel experiences. "For us, authentic and individual holiday experiences are essential. Our guests also want to visit the beach", she emphasizes.

On the German market, Albania has primarily established itself as a destination for round trips rather than beach holidays. "We only offer round trip packages in Albania," says trendtours CEO Markus Daldrup, as an example. "Package beach holidays are not part of our portfolio."

In any case, tour operators recommend not just holidaying on the coast. "If you're looking for more than a classic beach holiday, you should definitely visit Tirana, which is a modern capital city," says Michael Kunkel. Studiosus area manager Anja Habersetzer also advises "to not just visit the coast, but the hinterland and mountains too."

“Renting a Car is a Must“

"The hinterland has so much to offer," says Isabelle Bongers from the team of Erlebe Albanien. "The people are very welcoming." And there is no need to worry about safety. She is convinced Albania is "suitable for all age groups and travellers." Like Geotoura, the tour operator has been organising trips to the country since 2023. The team of Erlebe Albanien puts together the "perfect trip" according to the wishes of customers and the pace at which they intend to travel. Isabelle Bongers also tries to avoid large hotels and chains: "We look for authentic and locally run guesthouses."

That is also where SKR Reisen heads with its small groups. The adventure and cultural tour operator has been expanding its Albania portfolio over the last ten years. "It is important for us to have enough time in the right places," says CEO Philip Unrein. "We enable encounters and exchanges that are not possible with larger groups." Chamäleon plans its Albania experience for small groups just as meticulously. The company's founder, Ingo Lies, places an emphasis on authenticity, local tour guides trained by Chamäleon, and lodgings owned by locals.

"Plan enough time for the scenic, longer routes", is Laura Freire's advice to travellers exploring Albania on their own. "Renting a car is a must if you want

to get to know the country properly, as the public transport is still underdeveloped and often unreliable. However, those who can pick and choose their itinerary are rewarded with unique landscapes and hidden places that would be difficult to access without a car."

Many travellers appreciate this independence. The car rental company Sunny Cars says that "for many people, having a car on the spot is now part and parcel of their Albanian holiday." Their bookings have risen significantly. Albania has also become popular with visitors journeying by rented car - either for an entire road trip from the Albanian Riviera to the foothills of the Alps, or for day trips during a beach holiday. CEO Thorsten Lehmann: "The road network has improved significantly in recent years, especially the motorways."

Undreamt of Historical Riches

Albania has some impressive UNESCO World Heritage Sites. "The country boasts undreamt of historical riches," says Steffen Keese. There is Butrint, an ancient city in the south, whose ruins date back to Greek, Roman and Venetian times. Berat in central Albania is known as the Town of a Thousand Windows because of the many houses with large windows from the Ottoman period. It is probably one of the country's most beautiful towns. The fortress and several mosques are also part of the cultural heritage. Above the city of Gjirokastër, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, towers a castle with a historical museum. It has become the City of Stone because of the stone houses from the Ottoman era,

The country has a surprisingly large number of museums, the largest of which is in Tirana. The National History Museum houses artefacts from ancient times and the Ottoman Empire right through to the communist era. In two former fallout shelters, two museums (Bunk'Art 1 and Bunk'Art 2) in Tirana take a look at Albania's communist past.

Two further examples: directly next to the sea, the Archaeological Museum of Durrës displays impressive finds from the Greco-Roman period, and in the ruins of the ancient city of Apollonia near Fier in central Albania, the local museum exhibits artefacts from the Illyrian, Greek and Roman periods.

Activities for every Season

German tour operators are creative when it comes to their products. Numerous round trips cross the borders to Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo. The activities are often quite inventive - "whether sports trips involving

rafting or hiking, and for fans of good cuisine, a good wine tasting or cookery course for example," says Isabelle Bongers.

Meeting people is important too. "We have one of the largest portfolios of study and adventure tours on the German market," says Steffen Keese. How does Gebeco organise them? "A relaxed chat with a local artist or a get-together over tea with teachers from an agricultural school". The scouts from Marco Polo Reisen meet students with their guests.

Speaking of cuisine, "as is so often the case on holiday, guests on our trips are inspired by the local cuisine away from the hotel," says Steffen Keese and adds, "there is a wide range of relatively inexpensive culinary delights on offer." For Chamäleon, enjoying Albanian hospitality is part of the travel experience. Lernidee, a pioneer of guided e-bike tours worldwide, is in fact the only operator offering guided e-bike tours of Albania on the German-speaking market. Many holidaymakers also come here to observe the country's rich birdlife.

The ministry sees the country as "a travel destination for every season". Demand is currently heading in this direction. In winter, Albania boasts snow-covered mountains, idyllic ski resorts, a festive atmosphere in Tirana and brightly illuminated Christmas markets with a Mediterranean atmosphere.

Considerable Investment

The tour operators acknowledge the substantial efforts being made to improve the infrastructure. "Considerable investment is being undertaken which increasingly benefits tourism and especially round trips," says Laura Freire from Geotoura.

According to data from Booking.com for the beginning of February, over 10,000 offers of accommodation for a one-week stay in Albania for two were available at any time in May, June and July 2025.

The majority are holiday accommodations and flats, followed by hotels. Overall, the figures reveal over 20 different types of accommodation, including villas, guesthouses, hostels, campsites, bed & breakfast, resorts and country houses.

Successful efforts have been made to attract premium hotel chains by offering tax breaks for large investments. This applies particularly to international four and five-star brands. Up until five years ago, there were no international hotel

chains in Albania. Since then, major global players have opened hotels in Tirana and on the coast.

For the minister, the rising quality of services is "a key aspect in making Albania attractive to tourists with a higher income."

Feedback from Organisers

Some tour operators take a more critical view. "Many of our customers compare the infrastructure and quality of hotels with destinations such as Montenegro and Croatia," says Markus Daldrup, head of trendtours. "When it comes to hotel standards, they often do not meet customer expectations. Five-star hotels are often more in line with four-star accommodation." As Daldrup puts it: "There is potential for improvement here in order to better meet the demands of international guests." At the same time, the operators acknowledge the significant progress that has been made. In Ksamil and Himarë, among others, there is an increasing investment in quality and comfort.

Tour operators are also committed to meeting expectations. "Our aim is to provide an authentic and intense experience of a region, in line with a high-value, low-impact strategy," says Felix Willeke, on behalf of those offering a gentle and sustainable approach to visiting Albania. He appeals for the tourism destination to make this possible too.

Studiosus sums up the view of the pioneers: "Avoid slow development and an uncontrolled urban sprawl." Chamäleon's founder Ingo Lies is particularly keen to encourage local investment with local participation.

Agritourism – The Rhythm of Rural Life

Agritourism guarantees authentic encounters with locals and participation. More than 270 agritourism businesses exist all over the country. Farmsteads, vineyards and rural estates invite visitors to explore the rhythm of rural life and support local communities as guests.

Six years ago, there were only ten agritourism businesses in the country catering for guests. Both sides benefit greatly: farmers keep their livelihoods and farms and are able to build a flourishing business. "Agritourism is more than just a business opportunity," says the Ministry of Tourism. "It promotes

cohesion, cultural exchanges and community awareness." Guests enjoy an authentic product and get to know their Albanian hosts closely.

In order to whet visitors' appetites for Albania and provide easy access to its agricultural heritage, an app approved by the Ministry of Agriculture will be presented at ITB Berlin. It also sets an example. The agriturismo AL app spans a bridge between technology and tradition in both Albanian and English. Users can easily make direct bookings for any type of agritourism, while rural producers gain access to the global market. Features range from a comprehensive directory of agritourism including interactive maps and routes, to artisanal products and food.

Welcoming Tourists

Hospitality is a standout feature of the up-and-coming travel destination that is Albania. Around 278,000 locals work in tourism. Laura Freire puts it in a nutshell: "The people who work in the tourism industry welcome guests on a very personal level and are keen to have them visit the country." She recommends that those travelling on their own explore the hinterland for a really authentic experience.

There is every chance that the wish of a pioneering operator who has been offering round trips, hiking and cycling tours, off-road tours and custom trips for those travelling independently to Albania since 2015 will be fulfilled. GoEast Managing Director Jochen Szech: "Don't spoil your landscape! Try to do it sustainably. You still have the chance..."

Albania at ITB Berlin 2025

The Ministry of Tourism and Environment has carefully prepared for ITB Berlin 2025. Minister Mirela Kumbaro Furxhi, along with her two deputies will represent Albania at the world's leading travel trade show. They will participate in tourism policy discussions, the ITB Berlin Convention, and engage in direct dialogue with the tourism industry and media. The official opening of ITB Berlin 2025 will take place on Tuesday morning at the Albania Pavilion, Hall 3.1/105.

In addition to contributions at the ITB Berlin Convention's Destination Track and the Lighthouse Stage in the Adventure Hall 4.1, thematic press conferences, presentations, and panel discussions will be hosted at the Albanian main stand. [The Official Host Country Flyer](#) provides a full overview of events, including cultural performances, showcasing Albania's rich traditions. The theme: Albania All Senses.

A glimpse of what's in store: Agrotourism featuring the new Agriturismo AL app, wine tastings, and kitchen experiences; active tourism including hiking, mountaineering, and cycling on the transnational Western Balkans Route; a new cultural app; cultural exchange as a foundation for a sustainable future; discussions on Beyond Traditional Tourism and Digital Nomads; Gjirokastra as a model region for destination management; Rising Gateway in Southeastern Europe and The Next Investment Frontier.

Business & Networking

The Albanian National Tourism Agency will welcome trade visitors, media, and young professionals at the Albania stand. Around 50 exhibitors, including Air Albania, Tirana International Airport, and telecom provider One Albania, will be present to engage in business talks and build new partnerships.

At the South Entrance of ITB Berlin, visitors will be greeted by a Vjosa installation, symbolizing Albania's untouched nature. On Tuesday at 1 PM, the Minister of Tourism and Environment will officially inaugurate the installation with a live musical performance.

Prime Minister to Attend ITB Berlin

On March 3, 2025, the day before ITB Berlin opens, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama will travel to Berlin to speak at the Official Opening Press Conference. He will also inaugurate the Grand Opening Gala in the evening. Under the theme All Senses, Albania, as the Official Host Country, will present a spectacular multi-visual show featuring music, dance, and cultural performances, followed by a networking reception at the CityCube Berlin.

Hall 3.1/105 & Hall 4.1/200

More Information:

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