

## ALBANIA 2025: Land of the Two-headed Eagle

This past May I went on a journey to Albania with my travelling companion Sue and ten other folk dancers from the USA (I was the only Canadian). We were a very compatible group and had great conversations about folk dancing, world events, etc. Our very able dance teacher was Lee Otterholt and our guide was Mili Mullanji. He was very knowledgeable and gave us a great deal of information about the history of Albania, its culture, background to places we visited, etc. Also, when we were going to a spot where we would dance, he helped by bringing along a speaker that we would use. And Lee took his laptop everywhere and often serenaded us with his mandolin (also leading some singalongs or composing lyrics) during our longer van rides.

Albania is called Shqipëria by its citizens (who are called Shqiptarë) and its official language, called “Shqipërisht”, is spoken by Albanians but also by people living in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro. Because of various migrations, there are pockets of Albanians in Italy, Croatia, Romania, Greece and Serbia who also speak this language. It is said to originate from the Illyrians, an Indo-European group from ancient times that lived in the Balkan Peninsula. It is quite unique and complicated; there are 36 letters, some distinguished by diacritical marks. As a result, when transcribing words to English, some variations in spelling are seen. For example: Tirana, the capital, is sometimes spelt Tiranë (the Albanian spelling), and sometimes the dots are left off (probably due to typesetting) and one sees “Tirane”. The name “Albania” comes from the Albanoi, an Illyrian tribe living in this area around 200 B.C. Albanian scholars believe that Shqipëria is derived from the word shqiptoj, meaning “to speak intelligibly” – really? - Or it might mean “Sons of Eagles”!

Albania’s history is a tale of invasions, occupations, dictatorships and finally independence. They are the direct descendants of the Illyrians, and after the fall of the Western Roman Empire the Byzantines (also called the Eastern Roman Empire) continued ruling in this part of the world (the Balkans, Greece, Turkey, Italy, North Africa, the Middle East) and were Eastern Orthodox Christians. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Ottomans occupied Albania, but the local people resisted this rule and its feudal system; many insurrections took place and the greatest hero of this resistance was Gjergj Kastrioti, also known as Skanderbeg (Skënderbeu) a glorious figure who had served in the Ottoman army but then led a revolt against it. Only in 1912 did Albania finally gain complete independence. But more trouble was to come...

Albania has a population of 2,746 million, but lately this number has been decreasing because people are having smaller families, and many people emigrate to other countries. For the many years of the Communist regime it was closed off to the rest of the world, and thus little was known about it, nor was it a tourist destination. With the fall of Communism,

it has reawakened and people are embracing very different lifestyles from those of the past, especially because of western influences. The most famous person who was born in Albania is Mother Teresa, who was actually born in Skopje which is now in North Macedonia, but which was formerly part of the Ottoman Empire. (Both countries claim her as their own.) Another famous Albanian is Feri Murad, the inventor of Viagra. He is a physician and pharmacologist, and a co-winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. This drug (Sildenafil) was discovered by accident as it was initially intended to treat heart problems like angina. And thirdly, the writer Ismail Kabare , a novelist and poet, was nominated 15 times for the Nobel Prize; he never won this award, but along with many other honours he did win the International Man Booker Prize in 2005. Then there is Dua Lipa, a pop singer born in England, but with Albanian roots.

During the two world wars Italy, Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, France and Austro-Hungary fought over Albania, and Nazi-Fascists occupied it until 1944. In 1939 it had become a kingdom and Ahmet Zogu was crowned King, but Italy put an end to his reign. The Nazis and Fascists were defeated by the Communists in 1944, and the dictator Enver Hoxha (pronounced “Hodja”) emerged as leader. He caused the total isolation of Albania from its neighbours and his policies were considered quite extreme. Until 1991 this was the People’s Republic. Today Albania is a democracy and a member of NATO; at the moment it is a candidate for EU membership. Its two main religions nowadays are Orthodox Christian and Shia Muslim with a large group of Bektashi – Sufi Muslims, but there are also some Catholics.

We arrived in Tirana and the procedure at the airport was very smooth: they scan your passport, take your picture, and you are in! One thing we noticed right away – there are MANY people who smoke here, in public buildings, even in restaurants! We spent our first night in Durrës, a city located on the Adriatic Sea. Since we had arrived a day before the start of the actual journey, I took this opportunity to visit the Bunk’art1 Museum in Tirana with two other travellers in our group. This was a “palace” built underground in 1972-78 under the direction of Enver Hoxha (in power from 1944 -1985). Since Albania had been invaded so many times throughout its history, during the height of his rule, this infamously paranoid and isolationist dictator closed off Albania's borders and built enough concrete bunkers to house every family in the country. As a result there are about 175,000 (some quotes mention 750,000) bunkers throughout the country, some of which were designed to be used by machine gunners. The plan was that there was to be one bunker for every three people in the country. Nowadays they are conversation pieces or have been dismantled or repurposed to be used as hostels or homes, even restaurants. Bunk’Art1 is now a historical art centre and extends five stories underground with 106 rooms, many passageways, and a fortified assembly hall. This bunker was meant to house Hoxha and his government in case

of attack, but as it turned out he never slept in these quarters. Provision was made to pipe in oxygen, and even here the dictator's rooms were sealed off from the rest of the "palace". Other artifacts of the time were displayed, such as the "voting station": it was a box with two holes: one had a picture of Hoxha next to it, the other had no picture. If you placed your ballot in the hole with no picture next to it, you were voting against the one and only candidate. As usual, his rule was based on two pillars: propaganda to glorify his regime and promotion of the cult of the leader. The whole museum was like a labyrinth with many rooms showing different displays, and with explanations of the way of life during this era. Very much worth the visit! (Unless you are claustrophobic.) BunkArt2 is also located in Tirana, but this museum is dedicated to the Internal Affairs of the country and the activities of the Sigurimi (secret police). Hoxha lived in Albania and his house was considered a military zone; only guards, party leaders and government officials were allowed to enter. During his rule Mother Theresa was not allowed back into the country as it was declared atheist and she was a devout Catholic – she could not even visit her mother during her last days.

We then took the téléphérique almost to the top of Dajti Mountain, a ride of 15 minutes, 4.7 kilometres long – the longest cableway in the Balkans. In addition to the panoramic view of the city, one can stay at a hotel, play mini golf, zip-line or enjoy the gardens or a restaurant. Our visit was short, but we did enjoy the ride and the view!

After a brief meeting to get acquainted with the rest of the group, we all went for supper. It seems to be a custom in Albania that supper consists of many, many appetizers: salad, always bread, cooked vegetables, soup, pasta or rice, then the main course, then dessert! Salads typically contained delicious chunks of tomato, cucumber, slices of raw onion, olives, feta cheese. It was difficult to enjoy everything because there was always too much food. Fish or seafood was often served, and it was always fresh – but sometimes one got the whole fish on one's plate, and then I struggled to skin it, debone it, etc. At least fruit was the most common dessert. Breakfasts were always plentiful: bread, cheese, eggs, jams, deli meats, yogurt, olives, tomatoes, cucumbers – but never a MUG of coffee! Always small cups of varieties of espresso, americano, latte, etc. A typical snack food is burek (börek), a savoury pastry made of phyllo dough with fillings such as meat, cheese, spinach or potatoes. Raki is the national drink, and "Cheers" in Albanian is Gëzuar!

The next morning we had a walking tour of Durrës; this was once the biggest port city in the Balkans and is the oldest city in Albania. It has a population of 195,920 and is famous for its historic sites such as the Roman amphitheatre which seats 15,000 people. Other ruins in the city included the Byzantine wall – this city was once surrounded by walls, as was the usual protection against invaders in ancient times. Also the Venetian tower was still in very

good condition, part of the defensive system as an observation point, also fortified with cannons. In the 1960's the ruins of some Roman baths were uncovered, dating back from the second century AD; archeologists and tourists often come here to marvel at Roman ingenuity, and the fact that these structures have withstood the test of time. In 2019 there was an earthquake nearby, magnitude 6.4, lasting for 90 seconds with a milder aftershock; 51 people were killed, 3,000 injured and 12,000 people were left homeless. It was the most serious earthquake in that area in 99 years, and the greatest damage was done to the older buildings which crumbled, as they had not been built to withstand such tremors.

Then our van took us to Apollonia, the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC Greek (then Roman) colony, the second largest archeological site in Albania. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Centre. The monuments found here indicate the Greco-Roman-Byzantine cultural and historical functions of the times. It is named after Apollo, and a temple ascribed to him, also that of Artemis / Diana are wonderfully preserved. One can discern the agora or social space, an amphitheatre, a library, the acropolis on a hill, baths, a basilica, a monastery and a necropolis. It was abandoned in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD because of an earthquake, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century archeologists began excavating the site; only about 10% has been unearthed. We enjoyed the museum, housed in a 14<sup>th</sup> century building which was once the monastery of St. Mary; it has seven pavilions, a gallery and two porticos, one of which has an impressive collection of crumbling statuary. Many artifacts are catalogued and displayed here: pottery, jewelry, armour, mosaic floors, etc.

We then went further south to the city of Vlorë (Vlore, Vlora) on the Ionian Sea, one of the most beautiful cities and the main port city in this region with lovely sandy and rocky beaches nearby. On November 28, 1912, Ismail Qemali declared the independence of Albania here and raised the national flag: a red background with a black two-headed eagle in the middle. There have been slight variations in its design over the years, but this has been the basic depiction. Its population is about 80,000 and its ancient name was Aulona.

Sazan Islan, off the coast of Vlore was used as the site of a German and Italian submarine base and naval installation during World War II; during the Communist era it continued to be used in this way, but also as storage for chemical weapons. Soldiers and their families used to live there, but the island is uninhabited now, with neither water nor electricity in the buildings that still stand there. Hikers and other intrepid tourists have visited it over the years. (P.S.: Since our visit I learned that Ivanka Trump and her husband Jared Kushner are planning to spend 1.4 billion dollars to buy this island, rehabilitate it and turn it into a hotel for the wealthy and privileged. Some people are already calling it "Trump Island". The Albanian government approved its sale in January of this year, and this sale will surely help the Albanian economy; in addition, many more tourists will go to Vlore, and there are

thoughts to build an international airport nearby. The downside: since it was used to store chemicals and there are still many land mines throughout the island, clean-up costs will be huge. It is one of the last undeveloped islands in the Mediterranean Sea.)

Our guide, Mili was very versed in Albanian history, and spent much time recounting life in his country, especially during the Communist era and after its fall: he lived through some of this period, thus it was quite fresh in his mind. The dictator, Enver Hoxha was an extremist, even when one considers the day-to-day lives of people in other Communist countries. Travel was severely restricted, both internally and externally, with Albania famously known as one of the most isolated countries in Europe. At times people were shot while trying to leave the country. Mili himself escaped once as a young man, just to see if he could do this; luckily he was successful, but then he returned to Albania because his family was there. He mentioned that when he got to Greece, he was amazed that the city was full of light! During this period if a plane flew over this part of the Balkans during the night, there was a black hole where one should find Albania. Freedom of speech, press, and assembly were heavily suppressed, with the government controlling media outlets. The economy, industry, agriculture and education, were all state-controlled with the aim of modernizing the country and increasing living standards. However, this was often achieved through political repression, with the Sigurimi monitoring citizens, and there were many instances of dismissal from employment, imprisonment, and even execution for those deemed “counter-revolutionary”. An atmosphere of fear and suspicion prevailed, with severe consequences for expressing discontent: loss of one’s job, denunciation, isolation, restriction of one’s movement, reprisals against whole families. Some say Hoxha kept Albanians in a state of isolated terror. Private property was outlawed and state-owned enterprises and collective farms were set up. Religion was banned, churches were destroyed or repurposed, and Albania was declared an atheist state in 1967, with all religious practices outlawed. Artists and writers were expected to portray “socialist realism” in their work or they could be prevented from working or worse: exile, work camps, political prisons, torture, firing squad, etc. People were never sure who might be spying on them, thus conversations were very bland, so that no suspicious behaviour could be reported. On the plus side, aspects such as public order, job security, and a good healthcare system were appreciated, but at the expense of limitations on personal freedoms. The ideology was that this was a classless society with everyone being equal, but of course that was the propaganda, not the reality. The state declared that everybody was happy and that they were living in a paradise, unlike in the corrupt western countries. Hoxha died in 1985 and at that point there was a period of anarchy, unrest, corruption, pyramid schemes, etc. There was finally a transition to a multi-party democracy in 1991 , with the introduction of a market economy and the re-establishment of religious freedom,

also communication with neighbouring countries. But it was a long road to the situation today, and many people are still suffering from the scars that this regime caused them to endure. Mili fled a second time to Greece, crossing over the mountains with 26 other people. This was January and they had to walk in deep snow up to their hips at times; at other times there were ice-covered rocks. They were always watching for spies. When they got to the Greek border a van picked them up – it was meant to hold six people, but all 27 got in and went for a six to seven hour ride, finally arriving in Athens. He worked at any odd jobs he could find and stayed for two years, but finally returned again to his homeland. He eventually got a law degree, but worked instead at restoring frescoes, or at hotels or restaurants. Now he is a tour guide during summers, but works at his other pursuits during the rest of the year.

We stayed in Vlore for three nights, during which time the Aulona Folk Festival was taking place. Dancers from Kosovo, Italy, Macedonia, Georgia, Poland, Ukraine, Slovakia and of course Albania were taking part. And our intrepid leader, Lee, arranged for us to meet with Genci Kastrati, a supremely talented folk dancer and choreographer, to teach us a dance that we would perform at this festival! I am not a performer, nor were most of us in the group, but we bravely learned the dance that Genci had put together for us: Valle Vajzash Matjane. We practised for two hours in the morning, then two hours in the afternoon for two days, with many tweaks, adjustments, etc. He had acquired some Albanian costumes for us to wear, and we gamely went along with plans. The first night we joined the parade dressed in our outfits through the streets of Vlore to the site of the stage; many people took pictures of our group, as Mili was carrying the flag of the USA. We were able to watch the entire performance by other groups that had been practising for months. More rehearsals, even on the stage in the daytime before our evening event. The second night we performed and did fairly well, considering the hours of practice we had had – and people applauded! After our performance a couple from the US who were staying in Albania at an Air B&B were very impressed and excited to meet and talk to us. (They said that during his tenure George W. Bush had helped Albania by supporting its borders; as a result, US citizens can stay in this country longer than others without requiring a visa.) The groups taking part in this festival were amazing, with many intricate, involved dances; we were able to watch their performances for three nights; an impressive array of talent, enthusiasm, agility, love of dance!

On our last day in Vlore Mili took us on a walking tour of the centre of town; the Muradie Mosque, built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is located in a central square and is very small with just a minaret. It was unused for many years, but is very well-preserved; it is now being rehabilitated. [Nearby was the Independence Monument](#): a circular monument topped with a statue of Ismail Qemali ; very impressive! Many areas still had apartment buildings

from Communist times: always only five stories high, so that elevators were not needed – also to show that everyone is “equal”.

A few words about the hotels we stayed in: they were functional, but sometimes the arrangements were a bit peculiar: one bed would be queen size; the one next to it twin size. In one hotel only a king-size bed was allotted for two people who were not a couple. Very rarely were there bedside lamps or water glasses. The bathrooms usually had no hooks, no towel bars and very little room to place toiletries – but they often had a bidet! However they were always clean and comfortable with a shower stall. One hotel had a very STEEP ramp that led to the lobby – we had to get our luggage up and down it; luckily some of us got some help from some of our fellow travelers.

After we left Vlore we had a lovely drive along the Albanian Riviera with the Ionian Sea below. We passed through the Llogara mountain pass within the Llogara National Park; this pass is the watershed between the Adriatic and Ionian Seas and its height is 1,027 metres above sea level. We enjoyed beautiful vistas while our van driver navigated the many twists and turns in the road. Outside of the city drivers here take curves in the road differently from what is done in the west: often they “straighten out” the curves and go over the middle line when there is no oncoming traffic; thus they need not slow down as much in the curved spots. Of course, the roads were quite narrow with just two lanes and with rarely any shoulders (the speed limit was 60 kph). But our driver was careful and when going through towns he often stopped to let another car through as a parked car might be in the way; he was always patient and respected other drivers. You rarely heard a horn honking, on the highways or in the city; people allowed for other vehicles to make their way without reacting angrily as one might do here in the west.

We drove through the seven villages of the Himara (Himare/ Himarë) region which have been here since ancient times, and one of them, Palasë, is notable because Julius Caesar landed here in 49 BC to lead an army against Pompey. We stopped at Ali Pasha Castle in Porto Palermo Bay. (The term “Pasha” is the title of a Turkish officer of high rank). Ali Pasha of Tepelenë had built several castles along the Ionian coast as fortifications against invaders, and this one (called “Panormus” in ancient times) had been used as a prison during the Communist era, as it was very isolated. It was very well preserved with arches, a courtyard, many hallways, but the cobblestones were a bit tricky to navigate. We were treated to some polyphonic singing by a lady in costume, and then a gentleman and another lady who serenaded us, and we tried to join in one song after some instruction. Polyphonic singing involves two or more simultaneous lines of melody sung independently, rather than being in harmony with the main melody. We climbed up to the terrace above the castle where we had a great view of the sea and the surrounding area – and the lady who

had been singing led us in a dance! Quite the amazing interlude! And then we performed the dance we had learned for the Aulona festival (Mili had the speaker, Lee had his laptop).

On leaving the castle we went to the Blue Eye Spring: a natural, deep spring with waters that are very clear and blue, a very lush, quiet spot with some trails and with a great view of the waterway produced by this spring. Afterwards we drove to Lekursi Castle (near the village of Lëkurësit), built in 1537 by the Ottoman Suleiman the Magnificent. It is quite isolated, on the top of a hill with stunning views of the Ionian Sea, and of Corfu in the distance. Some ancient artillery is displayed on the grounds, and some bunkers can be seen dotting the landscape nearby. It was built as a barrier from invaders but was raided by Ali Pasha at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and later abandoned. It has been rehabilitated with a lovely open-air restaurant overlooking the sea; since there were no diners at the time we were there, Lee led us in a few dances on the lovely stone patio.

Girokastra (Gjirokastër) was our next stop; this is known as the City of Intellectuals, the City of a Thousand Steps and also the City of Stone; a UNESCO Heritage Site. All the buildings in the Old Town are built of stone, with Ottoman-style tower houses with stone roofs. It is the birthplace of both Ismail Kadare, and Enver Hoxha. Excavations have revealed that there were settlements here before the Ottoman period: 5<sup>th</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C. The same Ali Pasha of Tepelenë, (also of Yanina) subjugated this town and enlarged the fortress high on a hill, and built an aqueduct (which has now disintegrated) to supply it with water from Sopot Mountain. At the very top of a high hill (with a slippery cobblestoned path up to it) is the Citadel, also called the Castle, once the fortress. We walked up to visit it and found that one could get a 360 degree view of the city and surrounding area – and it is visible from everywhere below it. At times one can see snow-capped mountains in the distance. It was constructed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and was large enough to contain all the people living there, in case of an attack from outside. It had workshops, storage areas, a prison, gardens, living areas, etc. Since then tanks, gunnery equipment and even a downed US warplane had been placed on the grounds. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a clock tower was built. Then in 1968 to commemorate Enver Hoxha's birthday a National Folk Festival was organized, and since then it takes place every five years and has become the most important event in Albanian culture. It has been recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage event, and involves dancing, cultural events, and polyphonic singing (also called laments); at times there are about 2,000 performers. The most recent festival was in 2023 and lasted for one week; it showcases traditional Albanian music, dress and dance from local groups, as well as those in the diaspora. We were able to dance on the stage of this festival, with a few spectators watching; as a coincidence, a few of the people that had seen us dance at Lekursi castle were also here and joined us in a dance! After exploring the castle, on the

way down from the high hill we were able to browse and shop in the many stalls and shops containing artisanal crafts, jewelry, items of clothing, etc.

After an overnight stay in Saranda (Sarande/Sarandë) we set out the next morning to drive to Korça, (pronounced Korcha) along the beautiful, winding Vjosa River valley. This river, sometimes called the Blue Heart of Europe, is 272 kilometres long, beginning in Greece and ending in Albania. It is called a “wild” river in that it has no man-made obstructions such as dams or power stations. It winds around mountains, a pristine turquoise blue, and petitions were held in the past to have it remain as untouched as it is now. It is contained in the Vjosa Wild River National Park and supports 1100 species of aquatic animals, some in danger of extinction such as the Egyptian vulture, Eurasian otter and the critically endangered European eel. We had lunch in Përmeti, the City of Flowers, where a huge rock sits by the river, placed there during an earthquake. Hoxha wanted to turn it into a bunker, but this did not happen. That evening we arrived in Korça, sometimes called the Little Paris of Albania because of its wide avenues. It is the birthplace of Albanian beer, called Birra Korça; we were able to walk through the Old Bazaar and have lunch there. A defining landmark is the Resurrection of Christ Cathedral, Albania’s biggest orthodox church; it is in the Byzantine style with twin bell towers and a four tier dome design – quite impressive! The city is located 850 metres above sea level, and has been a centre of culture and learning dating back to the Middle Ages. It had the first ever Albanian language school, and in 1881 a girls’ school was established.

The next day we went to the Dance Studio of Bardhi Pojani located in the House of Arts. He is sometimes called the Elvis of Albania because of his style and demeanor; in addition to traditional Albanian dances that he has choreographed and teaches, he also has a rock band where he sings, and he loves all kinds of dance. He spoke no English, but with Mili translating we were able to spend some time learning some steps and dancing with him. And we even did a Country and Western line dance! (Steve Kotansky has learned some dances from him as well.) His wife Lirika makes folk dance costumes and we visited their shop showcasing traditional Albanian ones. She began doing this because the students that Bardhi taught had no appropriate outfits, so she began making garments for them. She has become quite well known and now designs some costumes for the Gjirokastër festival.

A few words about Albanian Folk Costumes: the women’s garments are usually longer skirts, vests, aprons, lots of embroidery, sometimes head gear, lots of red. The men’s choices are white pants with black seams and white caps (Qeleshe) which can be shaped like a fez or sitting more closely to the head. Or they wear a fustanella, a skirt-like garment often to the knees, or longer; they can be very full – the fuller or longer they are, the richer the family. They originated in Greece (and many Albanians had emigrated there); it could be

that the Illyrians already had devised this type of costume; more recently they have been considered to be symbols of bravery. The Greek fustanella can have up to 200 pleats, whereas those worn by Albanians have about 60 pleats. While dancing, men wearing a fustanella will make high kicks or loops, showing off the fullness of their skirt, indicating their wealth or standing. On their feet they can have leather shoes (called opingas) with the toes turned up, and with black or red pompoms at the tips.

Later that day we drove to the Greek border; Albania is not part of the European Union, thus we had to have our passports examined. We stayed overnight in Limos at the Mimallones Hotel near Lake Prespa where we met Yiannis Konstantinou – the owner of this hotel and also a Greek folk dance instructor who often hosts groups of dancers. He taught us a few Greek dances that were not too complicated, and we had a pleasant session with him – a very agreeable, (tall) unassuming guy. He gave us a bit of history of this region: both Greece and Macedonia had been populated by Slavs from the former Yugoslavia; the other large ethnic group that settled here was the Vlachs that had come from Romania. Most Vlachs were shepherds or skilled merchants, but more importantly, many were silversmiths and goldsmiths. The Vlachs were a minority and were often used as pawns by other nations when carving out borders; as a result some emigrated, and one family in particular needs to be mentioned: Sotirio Bulgari's family decided to move to Corfu, then to Italy, first to Naples, then finally to Rome. With their skills in working with silver and gold, at first they set up shop offering antiques, then later they switched to jewelry, making some beautiful, original pieces. Film stars caused them to achieve global fame, and of course now Bulgari is known all over the world for creative, innovative, expensive jewels, inlaid with precious stones, dazzling the eye. Louis Vuitton now owns the business, but a Bulgari descendant is still chairman - and now it is spelt Bvlgari.

We spent only one night in Greece, and moved on to Macedonia the next day where we drove by Lake Ohrid (which happens to be connected by underground channels to Lake Prespa and straddles the mountainous border between these two countries) where it has Managed Nature Reserve status. It is one of Europe's deepest (288 metres) and oldest (4 million years) lakes, and the water is very clean with more than 200 species of wildlife. This lake has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site as well as a UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves. We stopped at St. Naum (Sveti Nahum) Monastery which was built in the Middle Ages, then destroyed by the Ottomans in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, then rebuilt in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Byzantine style; frescoes that had remained hidden for many years were discovered in the late 90's. The site has tranquil gardens with fountains and roses, and one can see many peacocks strutting around. Lee told us about Pece Atanasovski (1927-1996) a Macedonian Folk Dance teacher who would arrange for an annual festival on the grounds. People would come with sheep and goats around their

shoulders and walk three times around the church in a circle going to the right. Of course there would be dancing and feasting (the animals were the offering).

After lunch (where a local band was playing and we got up to dance for a bit) we drove to the Bay of Bones Museum. This is a small village that had been built on piles standing in the water of Lake Ohrid; it was constructed in this way as protection against invaders and it dates back to 1200 BC to 700 AD. In 1977 archeologists discovered 6,000 wooden stakes underwater plus bones of domestic animals, deer horns, tools, ceramics, wood and stone artifacts; based on their findings they pieced together what had previously been built there: what is in place now is a reconstruction, displaying different houses from that time, bedrooms with animal skins to sleep on, common areas, cooking areas, etc. From the artifacts left behind one assumed that the inhabitants dealt mostly with fishing (through holes in the floors), but also with agriculture and hunting. The whole village was connected to the mainland by a bridge.

The city of Ohrid is called the City of Light, with many Byzantine churches and magnificent architecture; the Old City is on a high hill 700 metres above sea level (our driver took us up in the van, and then we walked down) and originated in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD many Slavs came to live here and in the 10<sup>th</sup> century it was the capital city. Czar Samuel of Bulgaria (997-1014) was in power in this area; he lived in Ohrid for 30 years and built a large fortress. Previously it was called Lychnidus because the city has about 300 days of sunlight in a year, but the Czar renamed it Ohrid which it means “What a nice hill!” (However when walking up to the top one might say “What a hill!!!”) It is believed that there are 365 churches in this city – one for each day of the year. Some are very small, just for one family; others are large and ornate, some are on private lands, some are just symbolic. The amphitheatre in the city is from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century; it has very good acoustics and a great view because it is in a valley and overlooks Lake Ohrid; when the Romans arrived they added areas for gladiators and the executions of Christians. After the Romans left people found this spot distasteful and buried it; it was unearthed by accident in the 1980’s, and was found to be very well preserved because it had been covered over. Nowadays it is a great venue for concerts given by performers such as Jose Carreras, The Bolshoi or Ennio Morricone.

Ohrid is the site where the Cyrillic alphabet (43-45 letters) was first devised in the 9<sup>th</sup> century by St. Cyril and St. Methodius; St. Naum and St. Clement, disciples of the first two men, are also mentioned in this endeavour. The purpose was to educate the masses, and this city’s University was instrumental in this task: students from all over came here to study, and then would return to their homes to teach the local populations. About 250

million people still use this alphabet today in 12 countries, but there have been many modifications over time with variations in different countries.

We stopped at St. John Kaneo Church – a very famous edifice, jutting out on a cliff near the lake; it was built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and in 1964 frescoes were uncovered in its dome. It is in the Byzantine style and was built in honour of St. John the Theologian. Many of us climbed the small hill near the church to get a better view of the building and its surroundings; many photos were taken. Then we passed by another church: St. Sophia, built as a cathedral in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, then during the Ottoman Empire it was used as a mosque. Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the building “reconditioned” as a church, and its hidden frescoes were uncovered. It now displays a very large collection of architecture and art from the Middle Ages. With its symbols from cross to minaret and back to cross, its frescoes also reveal an interesting mix of Catholic and Orthodox imagery. It is now a museum and a service is held in it only once a year, on the day of its founding.

One item we noticed about the houses in this old section of town: they are from the Ottoman era, and the upper floors overhang the ground floor; this was because as a family grew, more space was needed, and instead of building a bigger house, the upper floors were built out. In the market Ohrid pearls were sold in many jewelry stores. They are not the kind that are found in oysters, but are formed by grinding and shaping shells into balls of various sizes. Then using a secret recipe (held by only two families and passed down from one generation to the next) which incorporates the scales of a silvery-coloured Plastica fish, the ball is painted with eight coats of this emulsion; each layer has to dry before the next is applied. Contrary to the usual pearls that are meant to last for 150 years, they say that Ohrid pearls last forever.

While walking through the mall in this area, we came upon a young man and woman – street musicians- she was singing a Macedonian melody and beating a small drum and he was playing the accordion. About six of us heard this music and soon joined hands and formed a small flash mob, dancing to their melody; they were very surprised, and even more surprised to learn that most of us were from the USA! We learned that she was Polish and he was Macedonian. At one point Lee joined us, and sang with them, using his mobile phone to read the words. It was an unintended and amazing interlude – and people were taking videos of us; some even joined in the dance! That evening at the restaurant we were treated to a small group of dancers – four boys and four girls – who performed some Macedonian dances, and then asked the patrons to join – again, some fun moments!

The next morning we drove through Struga (Strugë) on the way to Albania; 34% of the population of this Macedonian town is Albanian, but within the Struga Municipality the majority of citizens is Albanian. One of its main and well-known activities is the

International Poetry Festival, held in late August since 1961. The Drin River, flowing into Lake Ohrid is the longest river in Albania and its tributaries cross through both Kosovo and North Macedonia. At one point we drove by the highest railway bridge over the river built during the Communist era; the work had been done by forced labour or prisoners. We were taking a famous route: the Via Egnatia, a continuation of the Via Appia, connecting Rome and Byzantium. We stopped in Elbasan and visited Elbasan Castle set within the town; it was built as a fortification during the 4<sup>th</sup> century with three meter thick walls, and the Via Egnatia went right through it. It still has a Turkish bath, popular with tourists. We did not go there, but went inside the walls where we enjoyed the intoxicating fragrance of lindens - and also did a bit of folk dancing in one area of the castle grounds - of course!

Then we crossed back into Albania and arrived in Kruja (Krujë) – the Medieval capital of Albania where the national hero, Skanderbeg had put up a serious resistance against the Ottoman invaders in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The castle was built by Mehmet the Conqueror and the museum (built in 1976-82) dedicated to Skanderbeg (1405-1468) is situated within its walls. It documents his exploits and battles, with many artifacts, maps, paintings, frescoes, statues, etc. Definitely worth a visit. He is an historical, but also mythical figure, and many cities have statues of him on horseback, etc.; there is even a bust in Bayswater, London where there is a large Albanian community. In the foyer of the museum there is a huge plaster rendering of him – looking very glorious and fierce, along with his fellow-warriors, but in the style of socialistic realism. Skanderbeg was originally Orthodox, then converted to Islam, and finally became a Christian. His sister, also fearless, was a leader in the battles. The castle itself had a rather narrow two-door system with only one entrance. Invading soldiers would enter through the first door which would close behind them, and since the second door was closed, they would be slaughtered within that small alleyway. (The other door out of the fortress was hidden, known only to the Albanians).

Kruja itself is known for its many springs and was a stopping point for caravans passing through; this led to the trading of goods and exchange of information, and many aspects of the lives of various travellers were shared and incorporated. The Old Bazaar (begun 400 years ago and currently with about 150 shops) near the castle reflects this richness of goods, crafts, foods, etc., and we had a chance to shop there, trying our best to navigate the slippery cobblestone walkway. In downtown Kruja there is a cafe named after George W. Bush, and in front of a bank the Albanians have erected his statue: they have a special affection for the United States, which they credit with ending their country's Cold War isolation and spearheading NATO's 1999 bombing offensive that halted the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians by the Serbs. The USA was also a staunch supporter of Albania's push to join NATO, which accepted it in 2009. (During our participation in the folk festival parade in Vlorë an Albanian man came over and kissed the US flag – very touching!)

That evening we were back in Tirana for our last stop and a chance to explore this city one last time. It became the capital in 1920 because it was in the centre of the country. King Zog (1895-1961) began his political career as Prime Minister in 1922, then became President in 1925, and finally King in 1928 until 1939, running the country as a military dictatorship. He married an Austrian princess, but in 1939 he was deposed by the Communists, and eventually fled to Europe where he died in exile in France. During this latter era many changes took place in the capital. Previously there had been about 3,000 cars in the city; now there are about 3,000,000. Skanderbeg square near our hotel was once a traffic circle, now it is a vibrant meeting place. We had a chance to dance with Genci Kastrati once again, as his studio is inside the Palace of Culture facing this same Square, where the National Theatre of Opera and Ballet are located, along with a bookstore and restaurants. (And the cornerstone of this complex was laid by Krushev.) Genci is the principal dancer and a choreographer of the National Ensemble of Albania. In the summer he and his troupe go around the country in a large truck that has a built-in stage performing in various cities and towns – something like a travelling circus, but better! We spent a pleasant afternoon with him, reviewing the dances he had taught us earlier, enjoying his styling and grace – and smile!

June 1 was our last full day in Albania, and as it happened it was also the last day of school and designated Children's Day. In the park near our hotel we came upon some performances by dancers in national costumes, also some enchanting little girls in pink tutus going through their routines – a pleasure to watch! That afternoon we visited an establishment called Albanian Night; there was an excellent Bazaar with locally made crafts, clothing, soaps, liquor, etc. In addition, there was a display of many Albanian folk costumes throughout the ages, (in total there about 500 different ones) and in villages many accessories of the costumes had symbolic importance and reflected the wearer's life: whether a woman was married, how many children she had, how rich she was, etc. Since villagers often revered nature, the snake was an important symbol of communication between earth and sky. The "guna" was a thick, sleeveless cloak, sometimes made of goatskin worn by shepherds to protect against bad weather; it also symbolized their closeness to their flock, also the fact that the animals provided them with their warmth and their livelihood. "Oda" traditionally refers to a room in a house, mainly used for welcoming and entertaining guests, especially by the patriarch of the household who controls matters such as who a girl might marry, financial matters, who attends school. The matriarch controls the inner workings of the household: looking after children, preparing food. The oda can be very large and is a space for socializing, storytelling, and the transmission of cultural knowledge.

We were told about Robert Elsie (1950 – 2017), a Canadian linguist who was a translator, interpreter and specialist in Albanian studies. He fell in love with Albania and spent over 35 years focusing and internationally promoting the "culture, language, literature and history of this country"; for his efforts he was awarded the Medal of Gratitude by the President, and he is recognized by UNESCO for his anthology of modern Albanian poetry called "An Elusive Eagle Soars"; in addition he has written over 60 books, plus many translations and articles. Although he was gay the Albanian milieu in which he lived did not make an issue of this because he loved their country. When he died he was buried in Theth; a "weeping" song and dance (a lament) was performed at his funeral.

After our visit to the Albanian Night venue, we went for our final supper and Genci was able to join us. He told us a bit about his next tours, and about the history of his family. His uncle, a leatherworker, had been put in jail for about six months because he was outspoken during the Communist regime, but was released because of his expertise in working leather and was needed to run the local factory. His father was a dancer like him, but his son is not. His family name is Kastrati, and there is a large oil company called Kastrati in Albania, but that is a different branch of his family from many generations ago; this last name is very prominent in this area of Europe. (FYI: "Kastrati" can mean fortress from the Latin "castrum" or it can mean "castrated" in the Italian, meaning "coward"; it's all in the perception.)

Before supper we met with Lee and had a discussion about our memorable moments during this trip. I believe we came to be a very cohesive group, we helped and looked after each other, we enjoyed all our dances, we had great chats and we learned a lot about this country. Our guide Mili was with us all the way, looking after any details or issues that arose. I was happy to visit and learn about a country that was quite foreign to me, its language, its history, its culture, and I got a glimpse into this nation that had been through so much strife and struggle, and hopefully now was more or less at peace and could look forward to some prosperity. It was definitely a worthwhile trip, and I have many cherished memories of my time spent there.