

The reel deal

Hailed as ‘Europe’s Maldives’, the Albanian Riviera is all the rage on TikTok – but there’s much more to this coastline than just social media hype

Words by Suzy Pope

RG
LUXURY
REGINA GROUP



Regina Hotels

Discover the epitome of luxury and relaxation in our three coastal hotels in Vlorë, Southern Albania. With 250 rooms in total, spread along the picturesque coastline, our 4-5 star establishments offer pristine sandy beaches and modern amenities. Indulge in exquisite dining at our beachfront restaurants, unwind at our spa wellness centres, and enjoy exclusive access to private beaches. Elevate your experience with private boats and speedboats, exploring the beauty of Vlorë's bay. Immerse yourself in the essence of tranquillity with a boat tour in the Gulf of Vlorë.
Your unparalleled seaside escape awaits.

+355 69 20 65 399 sales@reginagroup.al www.reginagroup.al regina_hotels



The camera focuses on crystal-clear water through a mesh of fishing net. Sweeping up, it shows the seemingly endless denim-blue sea melting into the horizon.

"I made this reel right now. I'm going to send it to my friends," my 23-year-old guide Ana Koka tells me as we lounge luxuriously on fishing-net beds cast above the calm sea in the quiet village of Ksamil. She posts this 20-second moment of serenity and, in just a few seconds, it already has three likes.

I admire the scene before me. Three tree-laden islands that float in the Caribbean-clear sea, white sandy bays and wooden bars that wouldn't look out of place on the beaches of Bali. Add the quiet rush of waves and warmth of the sun on my face, and it's even better in person than the social media fantasy.

I'm not the only person to be lured to this idyllic coastline in the Balkans in search of holiday perfection. TikTokkers and Instagrammers have woken up to this undiscovered section of Southeast Europe – which has beaches as beautiful as those found in the Maldives, minus the 10-hour flight and €600-a-night hotel rooms.

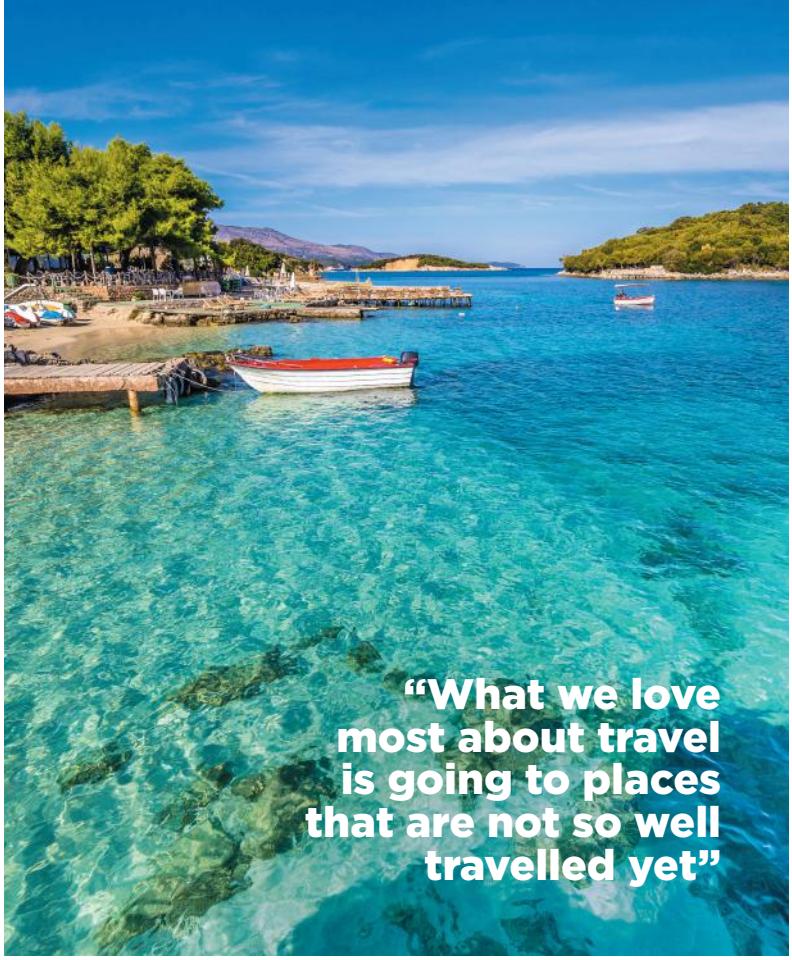
Previous spread Ksamil looks as picture-perfect as the Maldives
Above Paradise found at beautiful Ksamil

Albania is quickly becoming one of the hottest holiday spots in Europe as visitors are lured by a heady combination of stunning Instagram reels and bargain prices. The Albanian government records show a 30% leap in incoming tourists for the past two years, with a similar uptake predicted for 2024. Influencers Hannah Spelt and Nick Noordijk from travel blog Salt In Our Hair discovered the allure of the Albanian coast last year.

"What we love most about travel is going to places that are not so well travelled yet," says Hannah. "Albania has stunning, unspoiled beaches, crystal-clear waters and a relatively low cost of travel compared to other European beach destinations."

Their Ksamil guide is dreamy, showing off platforms of sprawling day beds with billowing curtains over the water, villa-style hotels and seafood restaurants punctuated by bays of shimmering turquoise water and white pebble-and-grain sand.

The town is a must-see for those planning any kind of Riviera tour – and is the first stop on my three-day long Choose Balkans







Above Spectacular Butrint National Archaeological Park
Far left Hannah exploring the park's Byzantine ruins
Left Salt In Our Hair influencers Hannah and Nick

Albanian Riviera tour, beginning and ending in Tirana. The village has become the jumping-off point to explore local treasures – including a horizon full of uninhabited islands just waiting to be explored by boat (some are close enough to swim) and the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Byzantine ruins of Butrint National Archaeological Park, just a few kilometres away.

Most visitors, however, will do as the influencers do, and lounge on the fishing-net beds over the water, bronze themselves on the white-sand beaches, or sip a rainbow of cocktails at seafront bars beneath thatched umbrellas and admire the teal

PHOTOS: SALT IN OUR HAIR, ABODE STOCK



ALBANIA'S **NO.1 COFFEE ROASTING COMPANY** AND FASTEST GROWING COFFEE SHOP CHAIN.

WE MAY SEE YOU SOON IF YOU'RE VISITING:

ALBANIA · KOSOVO · NORTH MACEDONIA · EGYPT

info@mullirivjeter.com www.mullirivjeter.al





seascape. After a blissful couple of hours drifting around Ksamil, Ana takes me on to the next Insta-perfect village.

Searching for Lukova on Instagram, I'm met with pictures of paddleboards drifting on a glass-clear sea and influencers posing in the crystalline shallows of Lukova Cave. Despite the name, Lukova Cave is not actually a cave, but a grotto-like bay of white pebble and sand.

Arriving in person, I find a line of beach bars just waiting for me to while away the day on a lounger. I pick the prettiest – called No Name Bar – and enjoy having little to do but sip a cocktail, swim in the calm sea and snap some enviable photos for folks back home.

At Blue Paradise Beach Bar, a tiki-shack-style watering hole, the concrete expanse of a secluded Cold War bunker has been turned into a spot to dine, recline and slip from the rocks right into the azure water for a well-deserved dip. Only the window once used for artillery fire is visible from the deck of the bar.

White rocks sleek as marble cascade into the water, providing the perfect viewpoint to shoot epic shots of the bay here. I'm a little too nervous of clambering onto the rocks though, so Ana happily takes my phone to oblige. "I grew up in the mountains. My mother called me a wild mountain goat," she laughs.

Above left Exploring Himarë by boat
Above right The Insta-worthy Lukova Cave

Inspired by Nick and Hannah, I request Himarë for our next stop – one of their favourite secluded beaches. Their page on Himarë is a love letter to pristine stretches of sand, undisturbed by bars, restaurants and highrise hotels.

This section of the Albanian coast is less developed than Ksamil and nearby Sarandë. From here, hiking routes lead from the town into the mountains, and the famously beautiful Jale Beach is a 10-minute drive away. We find various coves where our footprints will be the only sets in the sand that day. And we don't have to wait around for other tourists to move for that 'secluded paradise' shot.

Further along the coast again, Ana introduces me to the most special destination of the lot. If Himarë is under the radar, Qeparo is completely off the map. Even the most savvy TikTokkers haven't found this coastal treasure yet.

PHOTOS: SALT IN OUR HAIR, ABODE STOCK

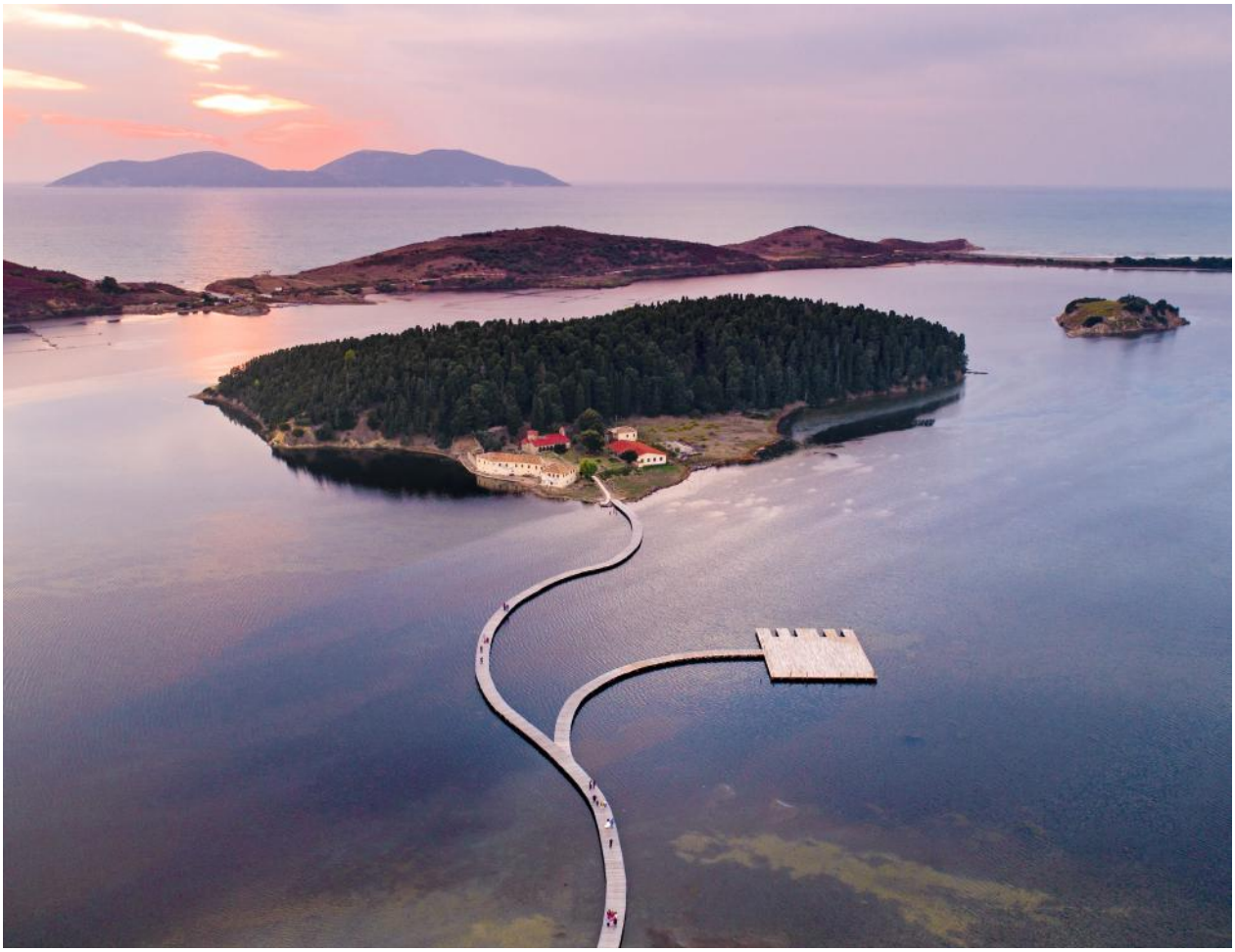


There are plenty of places to stay on neighbouring Borsh Beach, from deluxe small hotels to wooden cabins for families. You can walk barefoot from room to beach lounger in a matter of seconds and wake to the sun sparkling over the ethereally blue Ionian Sea.

I opted to stay in Qeparo at a family-run La Casa di Nonna where breakfast of kulac – fried parcels of dough served with honey and cheese from the local farms nearby – is dished up by host Krisa's grandmother.

In the morning, Ana and Krisa take me to the 700-year-old upper Qeparo village, 10 minutes from the beach. Here cobbled streets and wooden shuttered houses look like they date back to the 14th century. Many of the houses have been abandoned as villagers moved down the hillside towards the beach, no longer seeking sanctuary from pirate attacks. As well as looking like a fairytale village, this is one of the best spots to snap photos of the fabulous sunsets over the rugged Albanian coast.





Finally, we head to the coastal city of Vlorë. Albania's third-largest metropolis, Vlorë hums with life throughout the year and summer sees the biggest crowds flock here to enjoy the plentiful Caribbean-esque beaches.

On TikTok, the beach suburb of Orikum is favoured for those pristine beach shots. There's a Miami vibe along the long stretch of sand lined with towering palm trees.

What the videos don't show is that this is *the* place for fresh seafood – an abundance of taverna-style restaurants display the glistening catch of the day. A man in traditional Albanian dress invites us into his restaurant and we dine on perfectly charred octopus and fat, juicy shrimps.

The simple meal will never make it to my Instagram grid because a phone can't capture the warmth of Albanian hospitality, accompanied by a complimentary shot of homemade rakiya.

Like the influencers before us, Ana and I have spent our days on the Albanian Riviera making reels and snapping photos to show off our best lives to the envy of everyone back home. Yes, the stretch of sand at Orikum looks like the shores of Barbados (having been to both, I can confirm it) and the beaches at Ksamil are named Bora Bora and Tropicana for their resemblance to utopias thousands of kilometres and hundreds of euros away.

But TikTok and Instagram simply don't capture the sweet stickiness of beehive-fresh honey for breakfast, the feel of sunshine on your face with a day of nothing but lounging ahead of you, or the quiet intake of breath as Ana's car rounds a mountain bend, revealing another turquoise-and-teal bay. For that, you have to visit in person.

choosebalkans.com; saltinourhair.com

Wizz Air flies to Tirana

Above Vlorë looking dreamy at sunset