

Steep rocky mountains rise above narrow valleys in the North Albanian Alps.



recent past, roads were few and often in bad condition. Even today, most of the people live in the central part of the country.

Albania's lowland regions lie in the northeast and along the coast. The coastline is the most densely populated part of the country. It also has the best land for agriculture. But even in these low-elevation areas, some of the land is soggy and sandy, so it is not good for farming.

Albania's Biggest Cities

The largest city in Albania by population is the nation's capital, Tirana, with roughly 375,000 people. Durrës (below) is the second most populous city in Albania, with about 122,000 residents. It is located about midway on the nation's western coast and is the largest of all port cities. It is also one of the country's oldest cities, having been founded in the seventh century BCE. Its active shipping harbors make it economically vital to the nation. In recent years, the government has invested millions into fixing up the city, which in turn has attracted more tourists, more professionals, and more foreign investment.

Elbasan (right) is the next most populous city, home to just over 100,000 people. It sits almost dead center in the country, along the shores of the Shkumbin River. It began as a trading post along one of the key Roman



routes to the Adriatic coast. Because of its location, over the centuries it has been one of the first places where newcomers and invaders have stopped. As Albania became increasingly Muslim, Elbasan became an Islamic base, so many old mosques (Muslim houses of worship) stand there to this day.

Vlorë is Albania's fourth-largest city, with about 90,000 residents. Like Durrës, it is a busy and economically vital port town, also located along the western shoreline, but much farther south. It sits along the Bay of Vlorë, near Albania's Pasha Liman naval base. Vlorë is one of the most economically robust of Albanian cities, with a booming labor market and rapidly expanding neighborhoods.

Preserving Nature

Albania is a small country with a spectacular landscape and a complex history. To protect its landscape and fascinating past, the country has established fifteen national parks, as well as many other nature reserves, monuments, and archaeological parks.

Just outside Tirana is Dajti National Park (below), where people go to find a fantastic view of the city and to hike in beautiful forests. More rugged still is Theth National Park (above right), in northern Albania, where visitors can hike through the breathtaking mountain scenery to refreshing waterfalls.

Many parks also protect landscapes along the sea. Karaburun-Sazan National Marine Park helps preserve the plants, animals, and habitat on the Karaburun Peninsula, where the Adriatic and Ionian Seas meet,



as well as nearby Sazan Island. This park is home to caves, cliffs, and nearby waters where giant sea turtles, dolphins, and many other creatures live.

To protect one of its most important historical sites, Albania created Butrint National Park (below). The site includes ruins from many periods, including a large Greek amphitheater, Roman baths, and an early Christian baptistery.



Waterways

Albania has nearly 250 natural lakes, and about 800 more were created by damming rivers. One of the most prominent lakes is Lake Shkodër. It is located in the northwestern part of the country, where it crosses the border into Montenegro. It is the largest lake in all of southern Europe, with a surface area that ranges between 140 and 200 square miles (360 and 520 sq km), depending on the season. The lake is protected by the governments of both Albania and Montenegro, which

Fishing is popular on the still waters of Lake Shkodër. Carp and eel are common catches.

