



NOBODY YOU KNOW HAS BEEN HERE

Can you identify Albania on a map? Its location, halfway between Italy and Greece, might come as a shock. Albania is not just unknown, it is unseen – a gap on the map of Europe. ONELIFE sets off to find the least explored valley in Europe

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PAVLIN POLIA WAS BORN IN THE THETH VALLEY. Four months a year, it's completely cut off by winter snows. "I love it here and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else," he says.

He is a mountain man, and it shows. He holds himself poker straight, avoiding any unnecessary movement. When you speak, he turns his head slowly toward you, but his eyes appear to look right through you. This is the unreadable Albanian stare – as though they are always keeping an eye on the mountain peaks beyond your head for signs of danger.

Winter is a time of hibernation. Stores of flour dwindle, dry-cured meat hangs from the kitchen ceiling and families gather together until the fire has burnt to embers, knowing that in all other corners, the deep chill of winter has penetrated every mattress, every pillow. It's the time of year when wolves prowl around homes, seeking lambs or kid goats.

Albania is a name that still draws blank stares from even the most seasoned travelers. While its neighbors Italy and Greece are familiar to the point of cliché, Albania is like a gap on the map of Europe.

The descent into Tirana International Airport gives the first glimpse of why this might be. Tirana sits on a dead flat coastal strip, but long before you land your window is filled by a looming mass – marching ridges fading into the gray-blue distances of the Balkan interior. Albania is 77 percent mountain in fact, and 100 percent mountain in the mind.

We pick up our LR4 in Tirana and head north, following the coastal plain past smallholdings, bulbous haystacks and farmers bent to their toil with scythe in hand. Even on the outskirts of the capital – where one in every three Albanians now lives – the scene is one of self-sufficient market gardens.

This road is the main artery of the country, yet it only has two lanes. This fact is easily questioned on your first half hour out of Tirana, however, by the very leisurely

art of overtaking in Albania. To execute the maneuver, one merely pulls into the other lane and drives. One continues until faced with oncoming traffic. When that traffic is within a few feet of a head-on collision, one nudges comfortably back into the right-hand lane again. It appears suicidal, yet at the same time strangely calming.

These roads were first laid under Enver Hoxha's dictatorship, and one of the many paranoia of his regime was a fear of imminent foreign invasion. Alongside over 700,000 concrete bunkers dotting the most remote mountain villages and heavily mined frontiers, he also chose to make the roads – especially the major roads – wiggly to prevent an enemy air force from landing on them.

When we leave the northern city of Shkodra, we are also leaving behind ATMs, reliable electricity and all trace of medical facilities. We are still in Europe, but not as you know it. As we watch the thunderclouds boiling on the horizon, we wonder why the mountains filling the skyline are named the Accursed. We are about to find out. ►



Clockwise from top right: our LR4 makes light work of our adventure in Albania; a goatherd in the Shala Valley en route to Theth in the Accursed Mountains; the serrated peaks of the mountain range that's also known as the Albanian Alps





Left: the hidden fertile valley of Theth in the Accursed Mountains

The road leaves the asphalt abruptly next to an old Catholic church on the Kiri River gorge. It is almost like a final benediction before the ride ahead. As soon as we hit the rough rocks, the track begins to climb and the gorge narrows. The LR4 is in its element, making light work of sharp rocks. Soon we are high above the turquoise waters, and realizing that this is a road only in name. More accurately, a ledge has been blasted out of the side of sheer cliffs that twist in and out of side valleys. The surface is either a cascade of loose rock or intact rock face.

A few hours in, we are now deep in the Kiri gorge, far from civilization, and apparently alone. Suddenly, improbably, two outer bends away, a small minibus lurches around the corner, swaying briefly over the abyss as it eases over a larger boulder. Where on a road that is only just wide enough for a vehicle do you pass oncoming traffic? We do the only sensible thing in the circumstances, and squeeze hard against the mountain wall, our wheels and noses against the rock. The driver of the minibus smiles. Surely not, we murmur. Yes, he is going for it. With loose stones tumbling from his wheels into the gorge below, he shudders around us and away. We drive on in awed silence.

As we come to another gut-churning outer bend, we pass a forlorn shrine. We count the names in silence. Seven. About a minibus load. We turn our eyes quietly back to the road and ponder the good fortune of sitting in a capable LR4.

The road finally leaves the Kiri gorge in long, winding switchbacks high onto the karst limestone peaks of the Accursed Mountains. Our altitude dial rises over 3,280 feet, the rain turns to snow. As we approach the summit, the track disappears under virgin snow and we plough on in zigzags. Occasional breathtaking glimpses of the massive



Clockwise from far left: a lock-in tower where men would wait out a blood feud in the village of Theth; local lad Françesko Harusha; homesteads in Theth; our LR4 tackled all manner of terrain, including loose rock, snow and steep, slippery inclines



presence of the mountains around us reveal themselves through the cloud. It is an unsettling experience.

The locals have various theories for the Accursed name – that it is the route the Turks invaded by, that a mother cursed them after her son married the wrong highland girl, but looking at them now through our windshield, the name appears obvious enough. These are surely the craggiest, most menacing peaks the world has ever known, designed specifically as the lair of an arch villain, designed to be impenetrable.

“The house of the Albanian belongs to God and the guest”

Law 602 of the Kanun of Lekë

The Theth valley is geographically astonishing. From the pass is revealed a flat-bottomed valley of remarkable fertility. After hours of windswept boulders, scarred mountainside and sheer gorge, it is an oasis, a hidden Shangri-La of Europe. The valley is long and thin, enclosed by walls of white limestone, with beech and pine clinging to its crevices.

The only route in or out, save for goat tracks and the snowbound Qafa e Thores pass, is by the ledge along the

Shala River gorge, where the river flows out of the valley. It is an extraordinary lost world. When it was discovered by Edith Durham, one of those irrepressible Edwardian travelers who set out to find the world, in 1908 she said simply: “No place where human beings live has given me such an impression of majestic isolation from the world.”

Thanks to the legendary isolationism of the 20th-century Hoxha regime, not many irrepressible explorers have followed her since, and what we find matches her description to a tee. The mountains appear to contain and hold up the whole world and the canopy of sky above. The sun does not appear until long after it has risen elsewhere, and sets long before. It’s life on the very roof of the world.

Our LR4 makes its way through the mist, and slowly we become aware of homesteads amid green terraces on precipitous slopes. No road leads to these homes. With steeply pitched roofs, these three-story stone buildings appear like mini-fortresses. Their existence seems improbable.

Here are the people of the Accursed Mountains, still living by their own rules – and what rules they are. This is a land that breeds men of heroic stature and key among them was Lekë Dukagjini. This 15th-century nobleman codified an ancient set of laws now known as the Kanun of Lekë, which to this day govern the lives of Albanians. ►



Left: Lule Gjeçaj
photographed in her
Theth home; right: the
Accursed Mountains



Long after nightfall, with the snow swirling in the yard, we reach the first homestead of the Theth valley. In a doorway illuminated by firelight a lady stands, arms outstretched. On her head is a pure white headscarf and over the starched embroidery of her blouse is wrapped a red-striped apron, its stripes denoting her married status.

Lule Gjeçaj welcomes us inside, replacing our shoes with footwear she provides. She seats us around an open fire and offers home-made *çaj mali* – mountain tea infused with oregano. We compliment her on her complexion – a wide, high-cheekboned face of the smoothest 60-year-old skin we’ve ever seen – and she smiles and points to the *çaj mali*.

These mountains contain at least 3,200 native plant species, some 400 of which have medicinal qualities. While mountain dwellers swear by *çaj mali* as a cure for all minor ailments, they also use wild chamomile for indigestion or nervous disorders, St. John’s wort for infections, sleeplessness or depression, and marshmallow infusions for coughs and upset stomachs.

Add to these pure mountain spring water, an entirely home-grown diet and what must be the most unpolluted air in the world, and no wonder Lule is looking good. There is a self-sufficiency to this hidden world that is quite breathtaking to those used to the realities of plucking their berries from low-hanging grocery store shelves.

“The guest must be honored
with ‘bread, salt and the heart’”

Law 608 of the Kanun of Lekë

The words “no thank you, I am full” are not translatable into Albanian. Which is fine for the first three helpings of thick corn bread, *börek* (phyllo dough filled with spinach and cheese) and a painstakingly layered pancake named *fli*. The trouble starts when the man of the house produces his home-made raki.

It is written in the Kanun that the guest must be the first to stop drinking raki and to stop eating. If only I had the heart and stomach of a fighting elephant, I could get my host into real difficulties, but as it is, his steady gaze and even steadier hand warn me not to test his mettle in a head-to-head raki-off. Such hospitality is not merely a politeness – it’s an obligation.

For an Albanian not to show a guest such courtesy would be a stain on their honor, and if there is one thing that binds this society together, it is the preservation of honor. The Kanun clearly states that “the guest occupies the place of honor at the table, and is thereupon under the protection of the house.” To be under the protection of the house in Albania means a whole lot more than a nice cup of tea. It means going under the *besa* (protection) of the home owner’s *fis* (extended family or clan). ►



Left: local farming equipment; right and overleaf: our driving expert Rob Clacy gently zigzags the steering wheel as he navigates the snowy paths

In a land where state authority has always felt a very long way away, *besa* is vital to life and limb. It beats travel insurance. As recently as the late 1990s, an unaccompanied traveler in these mountains would be viewed as fair game. Only the protection of a local *fis* will preserve your life, as your death will undermine the honor of your protector, an insult that only blood can expunge.

“Blood is never unavenged”

Law 917 of the Kanun of Lekë

The blood feud – *gjakmarrja* – runs through the heart of the Kanun of Lekë. It requires that the murder of a member of your *fis* be avenged by the death of any male over the age of eight who belongs to the *fis* of the murderer.

This may all sound like the romance of history books, but the difference is that this is a living tradition. Today, in a downtown café in Tirana or Shkodra, a man can find himself the victim of an act of revenge for a crime committed by a distant cousin in a far-off highland village. It is believed that the soul of the dead man will not rest until revenge is exacted.

Mria Polia is an old lady with an angular gait and bright blue eyes in a face like lined parchment. She knows men who have shut themselves into the stone lock-in tower that stands in the center of Theth. They would spend months inside waiting for a blood feud to end while taking parcels of food from their womenfolk.

Women are exempt from the blood feud. It is the reason why, in long running blood feuds, families have run out of men, requiring a woman to swear an oath of celibacy and take the role of the male patriarch – the famed sworn virgins of Albania.

“Are you a Catholic?” I ask Mria, for these valleys were too inaccessible for conversion to Islam to ever have ►







become necessary. “I am a Christian, *inshallah*,” she replies. A more oxymoronic reply could not be imagined in the multicultural hubs of the early 21st century, and yet here in the highlands of Albania it’s a natural response.

The accretions of history rest lightly in a land where the only real law is that imposed by nature. To live in this high, wild fastness makes the realities of a snowstorm, an avalanche, a flash flood or the death of a cow all the more visceral. All precious things, from your baby to your prize cow, carry colorful tassels, metal triangles or a sheath of red cloth. They ward off the *syri i keq* – the evil eye.

Pavlin has one last view he wants us to see, from the top of the 5,807-foot Qafa e Thores. Working our way up icy rocks, the track soon vanishes beneath a blanket of new snow. Our LR4 cuts deep tire tracks until the snow banks on either side dwarf the vehicle. At last we hit a wall of white, the summit out of reach.

Pavlin stares up at the clouds dragging like torn clothing on the airy peak and then turns his resolute mountain eyes upon us. “We walk,” he says, matter of factly. So we walk.

The snow grows deeper as the gradient increases. With dusk descending, Pavlin indicates that we must avoid the switchbacks and head directly up the side of the mountain. He sets off, the snow rising to his waist. On hauling ourselves through the drifts onto the summit, the last rays of light illuminate the brooding peaks, home

to Europe’s southernmost glaciers. Far off on the other side, a snowplow is attempting the impossible.

Pavlin looks down at it. He allows himself a half smile. The magic of the Accursed Mountains is that they are not for day trips. Only those who really want to get here will make it. In the distance we can hear the low bass note of an engine in first gear, working its steady progress up the mountain track toward us, getting in the only way you can, with perseverance and the desire to discover. ■



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Watch our Albanian adventure movie and learn a few technical driving tips from expert Rob Clacy in the ONELIFE app. Available to download now for both iPad® and Android™.

DRIVING IN ALBANIA'S ACCURSED MOUNTAINS

It might be March in northern Albania, but at over 3,280ft, it is still very much winter in these mountains. We are experiencing rough mountain tracks, loose rock, mud and some very deep snow on the passes. Here's how to handle them...

ROCK
“The LR4 has five Terrain Response®* settings – Everyday Driving, Grass/Gravel/Snow, Mud and Ruts, Sand, and Rock Crawl. On these types of mountain tracks, it is important to judge your surface. Sometimes you may need Grass/Gravel/Snow, at others, Rock Crawl.

The key thing to remember is to go slowly, keep your revs up on steep inclines and watch for sharply protruding rocks.”

FOREST
“Some of the rough forest tracks around the Theth valley are very steep and slippery, covered in snow with hidden boulders. On a particularly tricky section, I am negotiating a large protruding root system on a very steep initial incline. For this, I use Rock Crawl because we have big articulation movements going into it, so I want the diff locks coming in quickly. I also manually select second gear so I’ve got the momentum to carry on up.”

SNOW
“When driving in deep snow, it is better to be equipped with either off-road or standard tires, rather than snow tires. Strange as this may sound, snow tires are essentially a slightly softer winter tire for dealing with icy asphalt roads. On these rough tracks, a tougher tire is needed. When driving into deep snow, I use a zigzagging action of the wheel to push the snow aside, allowing the vehicle to move forward.”
Rob Clacy, Senior Instructor, Land Rover Experience

We would like to thank Elizabeth Gowing, Political Tours and Land Rover Hungary. Each played a key role in our exploration of the Accursed Mountains.

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