

# HEARTCYCLE BICYCLE TOURING CLUB

## SOUTHERN ALBANIA

- Dates:** **Session 1:** Arrival Sept 23, 2020. Tour Tirana Sept 24. Riding Sept 25 – Oct 3. Departure Oct 4. 2020 pm (after 3 hr transport). Lodging included Sept 23 – Oct 3.  
**Session 2:** Arrival Sept 28, 2020. Tour Tirana Sept 29, Riding Sept 30 – Oct 8. Departure Oct 9 (after 3 hr transport). Lodging included Sept 28 – Oct 8.
- Coordinator:** **Session 1:** Tina Vessels **Session 2:** Denise and Rob Weaver
- Miles:** 300 miles with about 20,000 feet climbing over 8 days of riding (plus 2 days off bike).
- Rating:** Advanced (Intermediate with an optional e-bike)
- Riders:** 19 plus the HeartCyle Coordinator
- Price:** \$1,660 (Double Occupancy). Single supplement is +\$220 (\$1,880 total), although on 2-3 nights, you will need to double up. \$500 is due at Registration. Balance is due 6/23/2020.
- Cancellation:** Standard Cancellation Policy applies. Travel insurance is recommended.

## OVERVIEW

In 2019, Tina Vessels and a few HeartCycle friends bike toured in Albania. It was so unique, historic and interesting that Tina has volunteered to return in 2020 and coordinate a formal HeartCycle tour. Tina has worked with Cycle Albania, the local tour operator, to enhance the tour based on her experience and to add more off-bike touring. Be advised that Albania is a developing country and you will be exploring – this is not a luxury, heavy-support tour.

Emerging in the early 90s from nearly 50 years of Communist rule, this wild and picturesque land of scenic beauty still feels suspended in time. Until a few years ago it was one of Europe's most secretive countries. Although gaining popularity with European travelers, unlike its neighbors —Croatia to the north and Greece to the south— it remains largely untouched by mass-tourism and Americans. Albania's endless coastline offers long stretches of white-sand beaches, clear spring waters, and charming Mediterranean villages. This 11 day/11 night tour takes us through unspoiled forests, UNESCO world heritage sites, archeological sites, lakes, valleys, and high craggy mountains. In the historic towns you will feel the traces of cultures long past.

This tour is rated advanced due to several days of substantial climbing (Days 4, 9 and 10). Daily distance averages 37 miles on hybrid bikes (included and highly recommended) with front suspension, low gearing and 28mm tires. This tour is ebike friendly (available at an extra cost of \$190, which allows intermediate riders the opportunity to come along. SAG support is limited, but available, so please be prepared to ride the majority of the route. Overall the roads are paved but substantial sections have rough pavement. There are limited services along the way and we will be dependent on the guides for support and communication. We will regroup at 2-3 stops per day, which gives us time for coffee, soft drinks, snacks and walking around the small villages. Albania is still a developing country which lacks our first world infrastructure. You may encounter some occasional power outages, limited trash pickup, lukewarm and unusual showers; however, this is the beauty of visiting now, before it becomes developed (and crowded). Internet is almost always available at hotels as European and Canadians have already discovered Albania.

You may wish to continue your travels after the bike tour with a visit to Corfu - see the Corfu notes at the end of this description.

## **INCLUDED:**

- 11 nights of lodging.
- All meals except: arrival night in Tirana, 9/23; lunch on 9/24, lunch/dinner on 9/30.
- 8 riding days + 1 day touring Tirana +1 day to rest and tour Gjirokaster.
- Local guides, at least one who speaks fluent English, a support vehicle for luggage and basic support, and the HeartCycle coordinator.
- Hybrid bicycle (Giant Hybrid Roam with front suspension). E-bikes are available for an additional \$190. Disposable type water bottle and panniers (to carry jackets, etc.)
- All museum and other entrance fees.
- Snacks and one beverage on the road.
- Tips for the local guides are included.
- Transportation at the end of the tour (10/4) back to Tirana (about a 3 hour drive, or Sarandë if you are going to Corfu.
- Daily ride sheet. We expect to provide GPS files for Garmins (but they really are not needed) .

## **NOT INCLUDED:**

- Transportation from Tirana airport to our lodging at the start of the tour (9/23). Expect to pay around 20 Euros.
- E-bikes or Single Supplement (see above).
- Drinks with meals.
- Bike helmet, shoes, and gear (bring your own flat tire change kit).

## **HOTELS AND MEALS**

We will stay in a variety of accommodations ranging from local hotels in prime locations to log cabins on a remote mountain trout farm. For approximately 2 to 3 nights, those selecting single supplements will need to share rooms.

Albanian gastronomy is excellent, fresh, organic and delicious. We will feast on gorgeous Mediterranean dishes in a variety of Albania's finest restaurants. Gluten-free and Vegan friendly are often available. Alcohol and soft drinks are extra (except where soft drinks are provided at sag stops). Happy hour - we pay for our own beverages- is usually 5:00-5:30, and dinner at usually 6:30 -7:00

## **WEATHER**

Albania is directly east of Italy and has a Mediterranean climate. Bring rain gear as showers are always possible.

## **TRAVEL LOGISTICS**

Tirana International Airport (Mother Teresa Airport - TIA) is about 11 miles from Tirana city center. If you want to arrive early or stay late, accommodations can be arranged through Cycle Albania.



Tirana with Dajti Mountains

**ITINERARY** Distances and climbing are approximate. Small changes in the itinerary may occur. (Dates in parentheses are for Session 2)

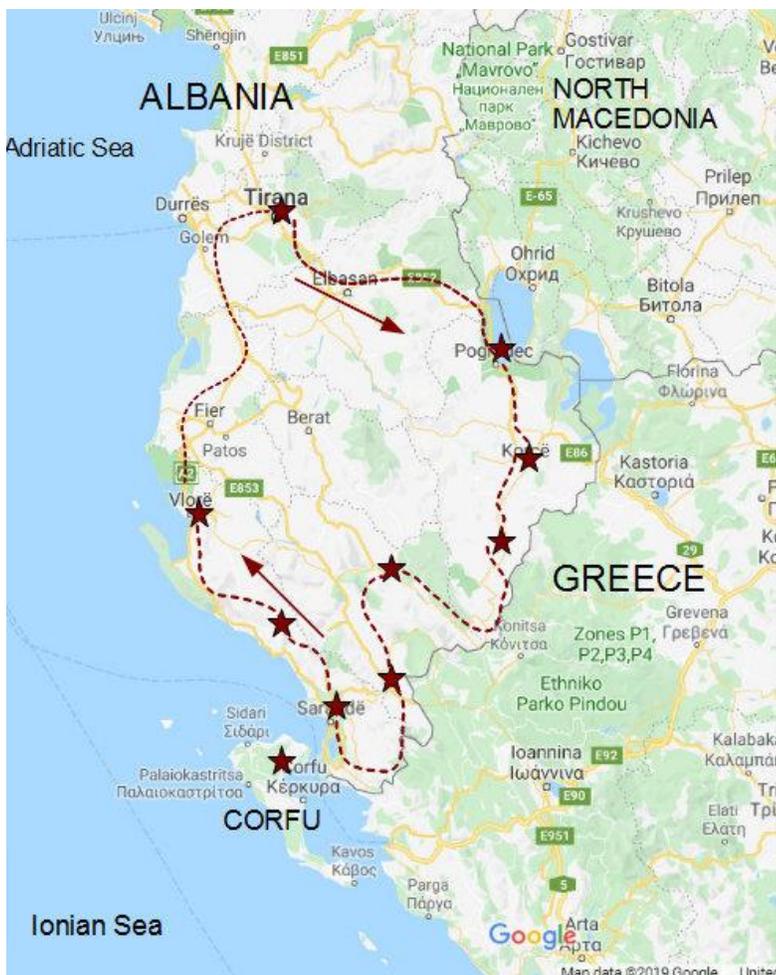
Day 0: Wednesday, September 23. (Session 2: Monday, September 28)

Arrive in Tirana on your own, taking a taxi to the lodging (location provided later). Dinner is on your own, but we will try to coordinate going together. We will gather briefly at 8pm to go over our plan to tour Tirana the next day.

Day1: Thursday, Sept 24. (S2: Tue, Sept 29). Touring Tirana.

Tina will lead a walking tour through the vibrant capital of Albania, where old communist leaders statues have been relegated to the back of the museum. We'll visit the National Historical Museum, then take the city bus to Bunk'Art 2, and other sites. Bunk'Art 2 is one of the 173,000 bunkers built during the rule of Enver Hoxa to protect against the possible foreign invasions. This bunker is now a unique Albanian history museum inside a preserved communist era nuclear pit bunker. Lunch is not included.

The group dinner and the orientation for our bicycle tour will be at 5:00 pm this evening.



Day 2: Friday, September 25. (S2: Wed, Sept 30) Tirana-Pogradec. 25 miles, 600 ft. climbing.

We start the morning with a two hour transfer to the northern side of Lake Ohrid, one of the oldest lakes in the world. With its 212 known endemic species of flora and fauna it is one of the largest biological reserves in Europe. We will unload and fit the bicycles and start cycling along the scenic shore of Lake Ohrid towards Pogradec. After reaching our hotel in the town of Tushemisht, just east of Pogradec, lunch will be at a waterfront restaurant in Drilon national park. After checking in at our hotel, we continue cycling in the afternoon, crossing into Macedonia to visit the monastery of St Naum, a UNESCO World Heritage site.



Day 3: Saturday September 26. (S2: Thurs, Oct 1) Pogradec-Korcë. 32 miles, 1,400 ft. climbing.

We climb the high plateau bounded by mountains following a gorge that continues through colorful patchwork of individual farms. The day ends with a short walking tour of Korçe, the Paris of Albania.

Day 4: Sunday, September 27. (S2: Fri ,Oct 2) Korçe-Sotirë 44 miles. 3,840 ft. climbing

We leave behind the agricultural plateau of Korçe, climbing steadily into the border mountains through a landscape of barren rock interspersed with wild flowers. Numerous cols and valleys lie ahead. We will climb the Grammoz Mountains over the Barmash Pass, about 3800 feet. We will stop for lunch in the town of Ersekë, the highest city in Albania at about 3,450 feet above sea level. Our overnight is at the Sotirë family farm, nestled in its own tranquil valley with all kinds of animals. After checking in one of the wooded bungalows, relax by the fish ponds with a glass of special red wine made from locally grown grapes.

Day 5: Monday, September 28. (S2: Sat, Oct 3) Sotirë-Bënjë. 41 miles, 2,200 ft. climbing.

We climb out from Sotirë to a high Pine forest plateau surrounded by soaring peaks, before reaching the source of the River Vjosa and descending through its spectacular gorge to Leskovik. The 10.5 mile long descend to Çarshovë is both a pleasure and a thrill to cycle, and is one of the most scenic rides of the tour. We follow the corniche route high above the river to Përmet, famed for its cuisine and strong raki. After arriving at our guesthouse for lunch, in the village of Bënjë, we will continue cycling for another 2.5 mi to the thermal pools of Langarica and its canyon. A 16th century ancient ottoman bridge marks the spot and the end of the road.



If you feel adventurous and want to swim alone in one of the more secluded pools, built every spring by the locals, hike upriver through one of the most magnificent canyons in Europe.

Day 6: Tuesday, September 29. (S2: Sun, Oct 4) Bënjë-Gjirokastrë. 43 miles, 1,400 ft. climbing.

We continue along the valley towards Këlcyrë, the distant shark's tooth peaks, which guard a further gorge. Ride between them to the confluence of the Drinos, following yet another gorge. This opens out into a wide plain with the town of Gjirokastrë (city of 1,000 steps) high above on the right. Gjirokastrë, a 'museum' town, is perhaps the most beautiful city in Albania.

Day 7: Wednesday, September 30. (S2: Mon ,Oct 5) Rest day in Gjirokastrë

We'll take a guided tour to explore the charming cobbled alleyways between the white-walled buildings and the fascinating traditional houses of Skenduli and Zekateve, then visit the city of Gjirokastrë nestled on the cliff, with its amazing views. Lunch and dinner are on your own.

Day 8: Thursday, October 1. (S2: Tues, Oct 6) Gjirokastër-Sarandë. 43 miles, 1,700 ft. climbing. We start the day with a brief transfer to start our cycling at the top of Muzina pass towards Sarandë, the gateway to southern Albania on the Ionian coast, sandwiched between the high mountains and the sea. A short ride on a rustic ferry brings us to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Butrint, one of the country's most important archaeological treasures, where the influences of various ancient people are clearly visible. After a guided tour in Butrint, we will make our way along the coast heading north with the island of Corfu in view. Inhabited since prehistoric times, Butrint has been the site of a Greek colony, a Roman city and a bishopric. Following a period of prosperity under Byzantine administration, then a brief occupation by the Venetians, the city was abandoned in the late Middle Ages after marshes formed in the area. The present archaeological site is a repository of ruins representing each period in the city's development.

Day 9: Friday, October 2, (S2: Wed, Oct 7) Sarandë-Himarë. 32 miles. 3,500 ft. climbing. Today will be a rollercoaster ride. We leave as the early morning mist is burnt off by the sun, climbing steeply out of Sarandë to a rocky plateau. Then it's over cols into bays and around headlands, always with the stunning mountain scenery to the right and coastal views to the left, before descending to the long beach and the bay of Himarë, where there's plenty of time for a swim in the clear blue waters of the Albanian Riviera. Along the way we will pay a visit to Porto Palermo Castle, a Venetian castle shrouded in historical mystery.

Day 10: Saturday, October 3. (S2: Thurs, Oct 8) Himarë-Vlorë. 40 miles. 5,200 ft. climbing.

Today's ride is not only the most challenging but also the most spectacular. You will gradually climb from sea level up to 3,300 feet through forests, gorges and hairpin bends. After lunch in the beautiful national park of Llogara we will descend towards Vlorë for an afternoon's relaxation by the Ionian coast. In 48 BC during the Roman Civil War, Julius Caesar landed with his legions at the nearby beach of Palase. He soon crossed the mountains over at Llogara Pass in a place later named as Caesar's Pass to chase his adversary Pompey. For centuries, this spectacular mountain range has almost completely isolated this part of the coast from the rest of the country. That's why the local inhabitants had easier connections by sea with Corfu and Greece than by land with inland Albania.



Day 11: Sunday, October 4. (S2: Fri, Oct 9) Transfer and Departure.

From Vlore, in the morning we take a three hour transport back to Tirana and the end of our HeartCycle tour (or if you are going to Corfu, you are transported to Sarandë. Lodging is not included this evening. Please do not flight reservation that depart before 5pm.

## **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

Please remember, the coordinator is a volunteer and the success of this tour depends on participants providing much of their own support and all of your own arrangements to/from Tirana. Please contact the ride coordinator if have any questions, concerns or special requests.

Tina Vessels [tina.vessels@gmail.com](mailto:tina.vessels@gmail.com); Denise Weaver [Dweaver1200@hotmail.com](mailto:Dweaver1200@hotmail.com)

