

ALBANIA – Advice from Fulbright Alumni

The following are extracts from Fulbright Grantee Reports and are not meant to reflect the views of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), its cooperating agencies, or the U.S. Embassy.

Topics covered below include:

- Cultural notes
- Housing
- Travel
- Money
- Communication
- Safety
- Resources in Tirana
- Websites and other helpful resources

Cultural notes

Since Albanian (Shqip) is unrelated to any other language, an intensive course in it can be really helpful, though these are hard to find in the United States. Albanians are very interested in politics and in American views of democracy. Embrace the coffee culture. Women should be ready for a certain amount of non-confrontational sexism (vendors wouldn't sell my wife a man's hat, nor would they allow her to buy a black umbrella instead of a flowery one). Buy local fresh food regularly from bakeries, produce stands, cheese shops and meat shops (EHW). Art events are ubiquitous and free. Albanians like to grill things. Pizza (Pica) is delicious and cheap. Order something off the menu and be willing to eat whatever it is.

Housing

Seek advice from the US Embassy about where to live and how to use a reputable real estate agent. Housing is the most critical component since it is home away from home. Some alumni have suggested that one should start searching for a house prior to arriving and have a few options ready to pick from, and operate under the theory that the sooner one settles in, the faster one adjusts to the new conditions. However, some alumni have found it difficult to search for housing ahead of time, and suggest that, because real estate turnover is quick and contract systems can be complicated, Americans should avoid sending deposits ahead of time (which is the only way to “secure” an apartment). All alumni concur that contacting Adi prior to arriving is a great way to get plugged in to the real estate market and to know what is available. Note that being in touch with Adi ahead of time would also make traveling more comfortable, as when you are apartment searching, you will often find yourself lost and in a car with the real estate agent.

Travel

Travel in Albania is difficult. I wish we had taken more advantage of tour buses to visit Greece, Macedonia and elsewhere. We mostly relied on friends with cars to get us places. We took a planned tour with TWIG to Shkodra, which was good. We never learned to use the furgons, which is probably due to my caution regarding my family. We walked most everywhere around Tirana and I was very grateful for my new hiking boots. Be wary of the terrible state of the sidewalks – manhole covers can be missing and holes can appear at odd places, though we never saw anyone get hurt by falling in one.

Money

Bring both a Visa and a Mastercard; you can use either at ATM's (Bankomats). Discover is useless in Europe. We liked Raffeisen better than Intesa SanPaolo for banks. A lek is a cent. Remember that and you'll have no problem translating money value.

Communication

Some alumni have found that email is not a reliable form of communication within the country, and have found that between individuals in Albania, Facebook, Skype, and texting are much more likely to garner a response.

Safety

For women, it is helpful to know ahead of time that you will often be entering apartments and buildings with several men and little electricity—it is not unusual or a sign of danger if you get off an elevator and the hallway is pitch black.

Resources in Tirana

The list of resources presented to us in our arrival packet contained a list of souvenir shops and the names of some restaurants. While helpful, it would also be helpful to tell people the names of the major grocery stores: Conad, Euromax and Big Market. There is a discount store called Rossman and Lala next to the ERA restaurant in the blloku, and it is a German-run grocery that carries American and European brands of food and cosmetics that are authentic at a price much lower than the other markets. The Conad on the Lana River is the best source for gluten-free foods, for those who seek them. The best gym we found, which allows you to pay either by month or each time you enter (about \$3 and you can stay as long as you like) is located on Rruga Islam Alla between Myslym Shuri and Rruga Kavaja. It is clean and safe. Adrion Books on Sheshi Skenderbeg is the best source for books in English and Albanian literature (in all languages). There are also good shops on Myslym Shyri for those seeking literature in Albanian. Wireless internet is available through many companies. We used Abissnet; 100 Euro for four months.

Websites and other helpful resources

Tirana In Your Pocket: <http://www.inyourpocket.com/albania/tirana>

US Embassy website for travel and local alerts

Kult magazine (arts and culture happenings)

American language broadcast on local TV (when we could find it)

Google translator

Skype(Skype is cheap to use to call phones in the States and if you get people onboard early, you can video-call with them for nothing)