

ONE DAY TRIP

Castles of Albania's
Ionian Coast



Start: Vlora

End: Saranda

Total distance: 160 km

Trip length: 8-10 hours



❖ **CASTLE OF KANINA**

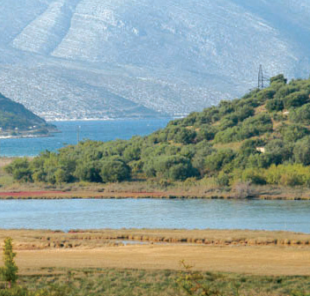
(Approx 7 km southeast of Vlorë – approx. 20 minutes on secondary roads)

Begin your journey by heading south from Vlorë, and turn off the Vlorë-Saranda National Road towards the village of Kanina. Originally constructed in the 3rd century B.C., the **Castle of Kanina** was later rebuilt by Emperor Justinian in the 5th century A.D. Climb to the top of the castle walls to enjoy the breathtaking views of Vlorë Bay. Visitors are advised to use caution when ascending or descending on the slippery stone. Admission is free.

❖ **CASTLE OF GJON BOÇARI**

(Approx 35 km south of Kanina – approx. 50 minutes on National, secondary and dirt roads)

Return to the National Road and turn off east, heading towards the village of Tragjas, away from Vlorë Bay. Continuing 5km past Tragjas village, you will reach the **Castle of Gjon Boçari**, an important fortification of the 16th-17th centuries A. D. This fortification features a characteristic “arrow loop” design for artillery openings in the walls, which began to be used in Albanian building construction in the 16th century. Typical of castles built along the southern Albanian coast during this period, the castle itself is a large fortification with towers on the northern and eastern corners of the building. Admission is free. Visitors are advised to exercise caution when walking on the steep slopes and often slippery stones surrounding the castle fortifications.



❖ HIMARA'S CASTLE AND CHURCHES

(Approx 60 km south of Tragjas – approx. 2 hours on the Vlora-Saranda National Road)

Continuing south along the National Road to the ancient city of Himara, take advantage of the natural beauty for a roadside picnic or photography on this untouched stretch of Albanian coastline. Upon arrival, one may visit the 5th century B.C. **Castle of Himara**, positioned prominently on the hill above the city which it once protected. Driving south from Gjipe, it is advised to park the vehicle in upper Himara, upon first entering the city as it is closer to the castle. Continue on foot to the castle, paying attention to the slippery rocks underfoot. A long-time stronghold of the local population, the castle was occupied until the 16th century A.D. and contains a number of houses and churches of the post-Byzantine period. Perhaps the most beautiful church within the walls is the **Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus**, overlooking Himara and the Ionian Sea. Also known as the Church of All Saints, this former seat of the archbishopric of Himara showcases church walls preserving its multiple phases of construction, part of them being built on top of earlier walls. Original construction is thought to have occurred towards the end of the 10th century. After enjoying this peaceful spot amongst the citrus and olive trees, continue on to lower Himara and its beaches, where most of the town's hotels and restaurants are located. Himara castle and its churches charge no admission.



❖ LUNCH IN THE ANCIENT CITY OF HIMARA

Inhabited for thousands of years, Himara's earliest known occupants were of the Illyrian Chaonians tribe. In the 5th century B.C., Himara was known by the name of Chimera and in the 9th-10th centuries chronicles mention it as an Episcopal center under the Ohrid Archdiocese. Today Himara is the largest town between Vlora and Saranda, a beautiful coastal town by the Ionian sea. The city's main earner is tourism, and visitors should have little difficulty in located a simple, yet well-maintained restaurant or café to dine in. As a seaside town, visitors are encouraged to try the local catch of the day: sea bass (*levrek*), snapper (*koce*), or red mullet (*barbun*), served either fried (*skuqur*) or grilled (*zgare*). Fried potatoes and a variety of salads make for great accompaniments, served family-style with homemade local wines.



❖ ALI PASHA'S CASTLE

(Approx 10 km south of Himara – approx. 20 minutes on the Vlora-Saranda National Road)

Continue south from Himara towards the castle at Porto Palermo, a small tectonic bay that is also home to one of Albania's military marine bases. The **Castle of Ali Pasha** at Porto Palermo is a small castle located on a lovely peninsula in the middle of the bay, which was also known as Panorama Bay in ancient times. The castle has a triangular shape of 150 x 400 meters with the walls reaching as high as 20 meters. Ali Pasha of Tepelena, the 18th century ruler over the eastern part of the Ottoman Empire, built the castle in honor of his wife Vasiliqi. The peninsula on which the castle is located has evergreen Mediterranean bushes while from its walls one can enjoy a great view of the bay. Porto Palermo is also home to great diving opportunities, as this natural bay has been used as a safe harbor for ships since ancient times. Contact Blue Sub Diving (based in Tirana) at 0692079663 to make arrangements. There is an admittance fee of 200 lek for foreigners and 100 lek for Albanians at the castle, and it is open from 09:00 – 16:00 daily.





❖ CASTLE OF BORSH

(Approx 8 km south of Ali Pasha's Castle – approx. 25 minutes on the Vlora-Saranda National Road)

From Ali Pasha's Castle travelers may continue southward to the **Castle of Borsh**, home to the only mosque along the Riviera. Be prepared for a 15-20 min steep walk uphill to reach the castle from the main road. Borsh Castle is an ancient fortification originally built in the fourth century B.C. by the Epirote-Illyrian tribes. The castle was heavily damaged during the barbarian invasions of the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., and it was rebuilt in the Middle Ages at which time it took the name of Sopot Castle, before becoming known as Borsh Castle. In 1417 the castle was seized by the Ottomans who later restored it in the 18th century. The castle occupies a surface area of 5 hectares and is surrounded by large stone blocks which are three meters wide. The **Borsh Mosque** is the only monument of the castle that is almost fully preserved. In 1769, the commander of the castle, a supporter of Ali Pasha's, conducted massive works that enabled people to live inside the castle. The inhabitants then erected a mosque near the main gate of the castle.



❖ FINE DINING IN THE SEASIDE RESORT TOWN OF SARANDA

(Approx 40 km south of Borsh – approx. 1 hour 15 minutes)

Continue on from Borsh for dinner and overnight in Saranda, Albania's southern-most city and a primary entry-point for visitors arriving from the Greek island of Corfu, five miles away. With its lively Mediterranean atmosphere, Saranda has something to offer all visitors, from high-end hotels and dynamic discotheques, to ancient ruins and peaceful beaches. Travelers will find little difficulty locating a place to stay, although rooms may be harder to come by during the summer high season in July and August. Influenced by Greek, Italian and Turkish cuisines, Saranda's culinary traditions are well-known amongst Albanians. Fresh seafood is abundant, as well as recipes from the surrounding areas' pastoral traditions, such as roasted lamb, pastry pies (*byrek*), and stews. Local wines and homemade brandy (*raki*) will help finish off any course as visitors to Saranda take advantage of the scenic setting to watch the sun set over nearby Corfu.

Travelers who sojourn this itinerary will be able to capture the sense of what it was like to live in Albania's medieval past. Castles and other militarized fortifications from the past illuminate a dramatic and romantic history of the Albanian Riviera.

Please note that travel and visitation times are approximate and may vary depending on the season, weather, and/or vehicle used. As of January 2008, the Vlora-Saranda National Road has only been improved as far south as the village of Dhermi. Travelers should be cautioned that the road is in the process of being improved and road construction may delay their journeys. Travelers are advised to travel these segments by daylight if the driver is unfamiliar with these winding, secondary roads. Public transportation will only provide access to locations on the main Vlora-Saranda National Road; private transportation is recommended. Walking shoes in good condition are also advised. No sites on this itinerary are handicapped accessible.

For more Information:

www.albaniantourism.com

www.tirana-airport.com.al; www.bashkiavlore.org;

www.himara.eu; www.saranda-guide.com

Celesi Tourist Guides; e-mail: opinion@celesi.com

Car Rental Companies: Sixt; EuropCar; AVIS; HERTZ



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