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BEYOND SANDY BEACHES

Discovering Albania's Cultural Treasures





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Beyond Sandy Beaches: Discovering Albania's Cultural Treasures

EU4Culture is one of the largest cultural heritage programmes funded by the European Union. It is implemented by the United Nations Agency for Project Services (UNOPS) in Albania in close collaboration with the Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation. Its budget is €40 million and its main focus is restoring and revitalizing 24 cultural heritage sites that were damaged during a devastating earthquake in 2019. The scope of the programme encompasses conservation and

infrastructure upgrades, as well as equipping ten sites with cutting-edge tools and multimedia resources. In addition to restoration, EU4Culture helps to transform museums and cultural heritage sites into contemporary educational centers.

This involves incorporating storytelling approaches and modern interpretation methods such as virtual and augmented reality tools, interactive projections, and other cutting-edge

technologies to enrich visitors' experience. These enhancements aim to make cultural sites more appealing and attractive to the visitors, boosting the local economy through a more vibrant cultural tourism sector.

Additionally, through developing cultural heritage management and business plans, the programme ensures the long-term income generation of the cultural heritage sites based on expanding

their functions and services. EU4Culture also supports the socio-economic development of local communities by promoting traditional crafts and cultural tourism initiatives through the grants programme. While some of the EU4Culture interventions are finalized, others are ongoing.

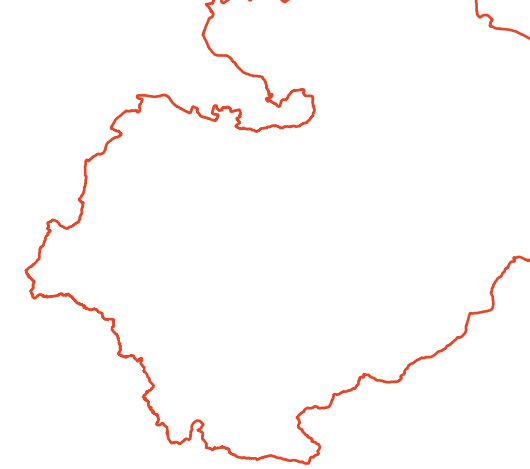
Sites are located in several cities including Tirana, Mirdita, Kruja, Durrës, Kurbin, Kavaja, Rrogozhina.



SITES ALLOCATION



► Tirana



Tirana, the vibrant capital of Albania, embodies the dynamic development that the country has been undergoing in the last 30 years. The city's lively streets showcase a captivating blend of historical and modern influences creating a unique and dynamic atmosphere. Tirana is home to several cultural heritage sites that have either undergone or are currently undergoing restoration under the EU4Culture programme.

THE NATIONAL PUPPET THEATER

Built in 1924, the current National Puppet Theater was initially intended to house the Officers Club. However, due to the absence of an alternative gathering space, the building hosted the first Albanian Parliament. After serving various functions over the years, in the 1960s, the building was transformed into the National Puppet Theater, a role it continues to fulfill to this day. The National Puppet Theater stands as a significant landmark in Tirana, serving as a children's cultural hub deeply ingrained in the memories of several generations of Albanians. The building is undergoing restoration works under the EU4Culture programme. Upon their completion, the National Puppet Theater will undergo a full upgrade, aligning it with contemporary audio-visual performance standards. It will feature a multifunctional stage and auditorium.



THE MOSAIC OF FAÇADE AT THE NATIONAL HISTORICAL MUSEUM

The iconic mosaic on the façade of the National Historical Museum is considered one of the finest examples of late Albanian Socialist Realism. Created in 1981, it showcases important milestones in the country's history, spanning from antiquity to the Communist era, across its 565 m2 surface area. The mosaic's intricate design was crafted by renowned artists of the time, including Vilson Kilica, Josif Droboniku, Agim Nebiu, Anastas Kostandini, and Aleksandër Filipi. It was restored during the period 2021-2023 by the EU4Culture team with the support of its original authors.



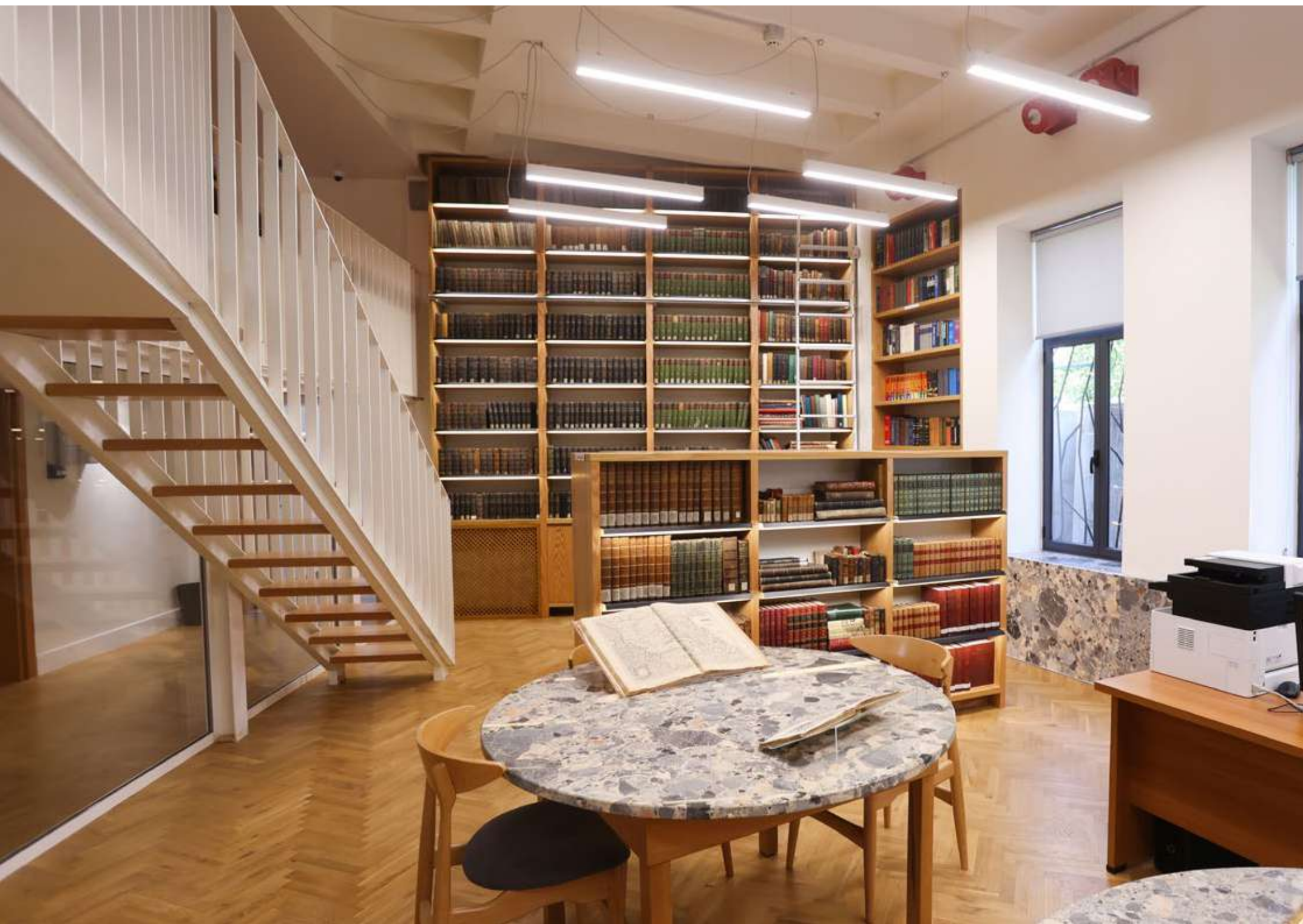
THE NATIONAL HISTORICAL MUSEUM

The upcoming museum renovation will focus on the newly developed design for its reconstruction, restoration, and musealization. The implementation of this design developed as a part of the EU4Culture programme, will be conducted in close collaboration between UNOPS and the Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation. UNOPS will take a leading role in tasks such as artifact packing, structural consolidation, roof repair, and facade restoration. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation. will concentrate on the reconceptualization of museum lines and the construction of a new pavilion within the courtyard.

THE BUILDING OF FORMERLY PERSECUTED

The “Building of Formerly Persecuted” in Tirana was constructed in the 1930s to house the Embassy of Italy to Albania. Later, the building was expanded to accommodate the Headquarters of the War Veterans and several international friendship associations with various countries. The proportions and decorations on the façade reflect the use of historicism, drawing inspiration for its design from classical architecture. The restoration of this important building was carried out by the EU4Culture team and finalized in 2023.





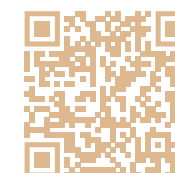
THE “SOTIR KOLEA” CENTER OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF ALBANIA

The “Sotir Kolea” center has long served as an “Annex” of the National Library, housing several hundred thousand books, particularly those confiscated during the Communist regime. It is named after an influential figure in Albanian culture, the head of the National Library from 1928 to 1937, who significantly contributed to establishing the foundations of librarianship in Albania. In 2023, the EU4Culture programme equipped the center with cutting-edge technology, enabling the preservation, restoration, and online accessibility of books.

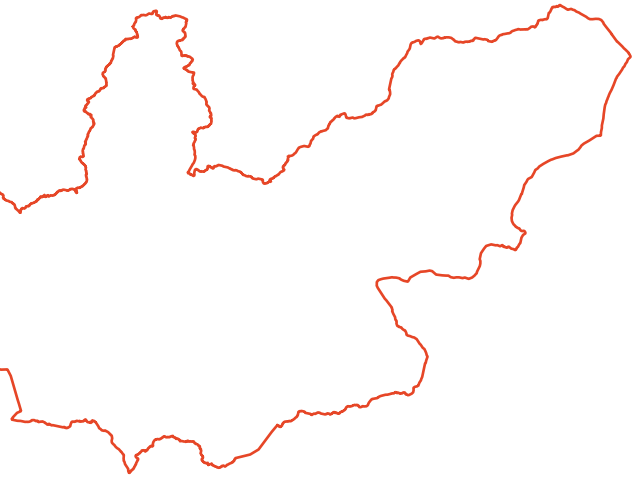
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The portal *AORTAS*, developed by *Smart Processes Institute* NGO with support from the EU4Culture grants programme, contains useful information about the monuments of Tirana, its artisans and craftsmen, and other valuable cultural tourism resources.

SCAN FOR WEBSITE



► Mirdita



Located in the north of Albania, Mirdita is famous for its picturesque landscapes, rich cultural heritage, centuries-old traditions and a distinctive cuisine.



THE MONASTERY CHURCH OF RUBIK

The Monastery Church of Rubik was the first of many Albania’s cultural heritage and historical treasures that has been restored under the EU4Culture programme. This remarkable church bears witness to a rich history, with some of its remaining portions dating back to as early as the XIII century. Following the successful

completion of the restoration work on the church, the conservation of its wall paintings will be the next crucial step, as they are currently in a rather poor condition. Notably, the inscriptions on these paintings, dating back to the year 1272, offer invaluable insights into the church’s age and significance.



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The website *Cultural Route of Mirdita*, developed by CEAPAL NGO with support from the EU4Culture grants programme, contains Mirdita itineraries, visitor tips, and information about cultural heritage sites, artisanship and religious festivals.

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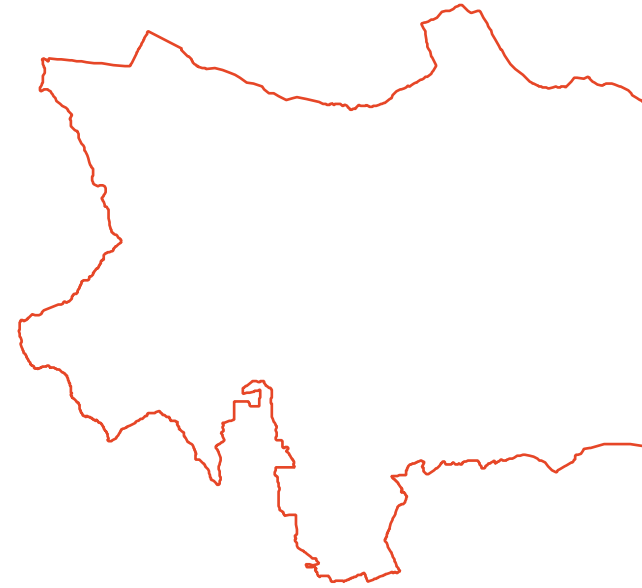
The platform, developed by the *Tek Bunker* NGO with support from the EU4Culture grants programme, features recordings of stories told by former political prisoners from Spaç, Albania, during the communist regime. These recordings complement an exhibition of 49 portrait sculptures of former political prisoners, created by young artists.

SCAN FOR WEBSITE





► Kruja



Nestled 600 meters above sea-level, between steep mountains and Ishmi river, the centuries-old town of Kruja quietly narrates the nation's vibrant history and enduring spirit. Renowned for its medieval castle, a religious shrine and bustling bazaar, Kruja invites visitors to discover an inspiring blend of rich history, architectural legacy and cultural tradition.



KRUJA ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM

The National Ethnographic Museum in Kruja unfolds the narrative of Albanian customs and traditions across centuries. Housed in an original XVIII century Ottoman residence and adorned with original frescoes from 1764, it was once owned by the affluent Toptani family.

The museum reveals the household's self-sufficiency and luxury, crafting its own food, drink, leather, and olive oil. It is currently undergoing restoration under the EU4Culture programme, aimed at not only preserving the historical dwelling where the museum is located but also to enhance its resilience against potential natural disasters.

All the artifacts were carefully handled throughout the entire conservation process in line with contemporary museum standards. The museum displays have been reconceptualized, with narratives behind the artifacts expanded through a range of integrated multimedia products, including audio guides, interactive walls, virtual reality experiences, and more.

KURCAJ BRIDGE

In the absence of definite historical resources, scholars believe that the Kurcaj Bridge was built in the XVIII century, when many new bridges were built across Albania to connect major trade centers. It is located on the Zeza River in the village of Kurcaj and was a part of an early caravan route between Kruja and Tirana through Mukje and Zallherri. In 1984 the bridge was declared a national monument of the first category and is protected as a historical

evidence of engineering achievements of its time. Today, the bridge is a historical and cultural heritage site connecting local hiking routes and can be visited on foot only. The bridge has suffered a vast damage in the earthquake of 2019, and its restoration through the EU4Culture programme was finalized in early 2023.



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The digital platform *Artisans Between Past and Future*, developed by the *Progress Foundation* NGO with support from the EU4Culture grants programme, contains information about local artisans and their crafts.

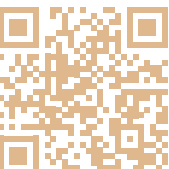
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The website *Kruja COOLtour*, developed by the *Partnere per Femijet* NGO with support from the EU4Culture grants program, features a hiking map that includes ten points of interest. It also offers an Augmented Reality (AR) experience for these sites.

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► Durrës



As the second largest city in Albania, Durrës effortlessly combines history, culture, and the natural beauty of the Adriatic coast. As one of the oldest and most important port cities in the Balkans, Durrës provides a variety of experiences for travelers and history enthusiasts. With a history dating back nearly 3,000 years, the city offers a number of cultural heritage monuments and sites. Several of them have been restored or are currently undergoing restoration under the EU4Culture programme.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

The Archaeological Museum of Durrës is the largest archaeological museum in the country, boasting an extensive collection of over 3,000 artifacts unearthed from numerous archaeological excavations in and around the ancient site of Dyrrhachium.

This collection provides a comprehensive view of the development of the city during Late Antiquity and the Medieval period. Currently, the Museum is undergoing renovation under the EU4Culture programme and will be transformed into a modern educational hub.

The redesigned museum will enable visitors to immerse themselves in and experience ancient history through classic and high-tech storytelling, virtual reality, and multimedia tools. Visitors will navigate redesigned exhibition routes, marvel at new treasures discovered during recent underwater archaeological expeditions, and gather for cultural events and performances in a completely revamped outdoor urban space.





VENETIAN TOWER

The Venetian Tower stands as one of the most interesting and beautiful historical defensive structures in Durrës. It is an integral part of the Byzantine fortress of Durrës, declared a first-category cultural monument. It was once regarded as one of the most formidable defense structures along the western coast of the Adriatic Sea. The present-day fortress traces its roots to the initial construction efforts of Byzantine Emperor Anastasius I (491–518), a native of Durrës (ancient Dyrrhachium). Built atop the remains of the Byzantine tower around the XV century, the Venetian Tower was fortified with cannons to protect the city from the sea. Specifically designed to be armed with artillery, it served as a crucial observation point for monitoring the surrounding area.

In 2022-2023 the Venetian Tower was renovated and transformed into the first Albanian Heritage Interpretation Center and now offers visitors the chance to explore historical events and places through state-of-the-art digital and multimedia tools. These include VR headsets, audio guides, dome multimedia projections and other activities, which combine entertainment with a more in-depth look at the city's ancient history.





THE HAMMAM

The Hammam of Durrës is one of the ten surviving hammams in Albania, reflecting the heritage of the five-century-long Ottoman rule in the country. Constructed in the XVIII century, it is situated in the southeast corner of the medieval city, near the modern Epidamn Boulevard. Positioned just a few hundred meters from its ancient predecessor, the Roman baths, the hammam served its original function until the late XIX century.

In the early 2000s, it underwent modifications to house a café, which operated for several years. Subsequently closed, the Hammam faced severe damage during the 2019 earthquake, making it a priority for intervention under the EU4Culture programme. The ongoing restoration aims to revive this historical site. Once restored, it will offer visitors the opportunity to explore and comprehend the importance and functionality of these unique structures.



CASTLE OF ISHMI

Constructed between 1572 and 1574, the Castle of Ishmi once served a key role as a strategic Ottoman defense stronghold. Positioned to overlook the Ishmi plain, Kruja-Dajti mountains, Ishmi river delta, Cape of Rodon, and part of the Adriatic Sea coast, the castle played a crucial role in monitoring roads and preventing unauthorized trade with the Venetian Republic. The renovation works at the castle under the EU4Culture programme were conducted in 2023.





ST. ANTHONY'S CHURCH ON CAPE RODON

St. Anthony's Church on Cape Rodon stands as a rare architectural example, blending regional and Byzantine styles. Originally associated with a Byzantine Monastery dedicated to St. Mary, located nearby according to records dating back to 1418, the church initially exhibited a Romanesque-Gothic architectural style. Later documents from 1599 indicate that the monastery's dedication shifted to St. Anthony of Padua, influenced by the Holy Roman

Catholic Church, particularly the Franciscan Order. Both the church and the monastery were in use until 1852 when a powerful earthquake destroyed the complex, leaving it in ruins until 1978.

The restoration, conducted in 2000, resulted in a partial reconstruction of the church. However, the structure did not withstand the effects of the 2019 earthquake, leading to its restoration under the EU4Culture programme in 2022.





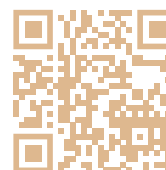
THE ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM OF DURRËS

The Ethnographic Museum of Durrës is located in the residential dwelling where the prominent Albanian actor of the early XX century Alexander Moisiu spent his childhood years. Constructed in the XIX century, this building stands as the sole remaining example of a historical two-story dwelling with an open porch in Durrës. While operational, the museum showcased traditional household items, elaborately embroidered fabrics with golden thread, and copper artifacts, illustrating enduring Albanian traditions. A dedicated section of the museum honored Aleksandër Moisiu. Unfortunately, the structure endured significant structural damage during the 2019 earthquake. The building is planned to be restored under the EU4Culture programme, and its future function will be determined by the Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation and the Municipality of Durrës.

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A website dedicated to the cultural trail *Old Doors of Durrës* was developed by *Durrësi Aktiv* and *MuZEH Lab* NGOs with support from the EU4Culture grants programme. Originating from the XIX and XX centuries, each door unveils a unique family story, contributing to the rich narrative history of the ancient city.

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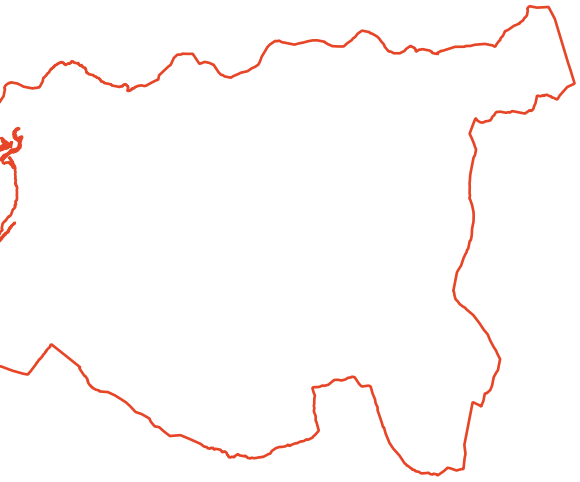


The online portal *Youth Cultural Heritage*, developed by the *TED Center* NGO with support from the EU4Culture grants programme, offers manuals, brochures, and information on archaeological artifacts and cultural heritage sites in Durrës.

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► Kurbin



Kurbin region, framed by the River Mat to the north, Droja river to the south, Trodhna mountain to the east, and the Adriatic Sea to the west, is characterized by a wealth of cultural traditions. Notably, the region is marked by distinct patriotic, wedding, and folk songs, as well as unique traditional costumes.



FORMER ARCHBISHOPRIC OF DURRËS, DELBNIŠHT

According to currently available historical records, the building was originally constructed in 1905 and served as a monastery. Throughout its history, it hosted notable figures, including priests and patriots Dom Nikollë Kaçorri, Rafaelo D'Ambrozio, and Prend Bardhi.

The building underwent several transformations over the years. In 1914, it suffered a fire, leading to its abandonment for nearly three decades. Subsequently, it briefly served as a local primary school, followed by years of neglect and decay. In 2015, the building received the designation of a second-category cultural monument and underwent partial restoration, although the work was never completed. In 2019, the building suffered severe damage from a devastating earthquake. It was restored under the EU4Culture programme in 2023.





RUINS OF ST.MARY CHURCH

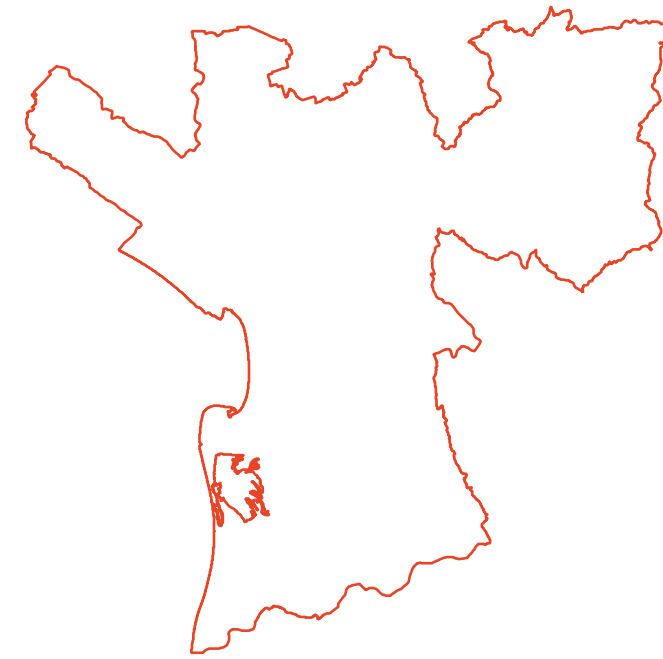
Historical records from Theodor Ippen, an Austrian diplomat, who explored the region in the XIX century, indicate that the Church was one the largest and most distinguished during the medieval period in Albania.

The precise construction date of the church is uncertain due to the absence of reliable historical or inscriptional records. Ippen's records suggest that the Church was already in a state of ruin at that time. It is currently undergoing restoration works under the EU4Culture programme.





► Lezha



From a geographical and environmental standpoint, Lezha constitutes a wonderful kaleidoscope of nature, where mountains, fields, forests, archaeological and historical monuments, lagoons, and the sea form a remarkable unity.

CASTLE OF LEZHA

Lezha Castle is located in the city of Lezha, in the northwest of the country, and is one of the oldest castles in Albania. Positioned on top of a hill, the castle offers a breathtaking view of the surrounding fields.

Archaeological data and restoration works on the fortification walls of the city provide ample evidence confirming that Lissus (Lezha) bears traces of civic life dating back to the IV century BC, with undisturbed continuity until the Middle Ages.

The fortress, in its present form, reflects a combination of many layers of construction over thousands of years. While the fortress is quite vast and requires continuous conservation, a portion of the northern wall has suffered damages in recent decades, which were exacerbated by the 2019 earthquake. This specific section is set to be consolidated under the EU4Culture programme.

In the vicinity of the castle, visitors can explore some of the city's most popular attractions, including the Historical Museum, the Skanderbeg Monument, and more.





► Kavaja



The Kavaja region boasts an ancient history and has been recognized since antiquity as a center for artisans and commerce, a character that has endured through the centuries. According to local legends, in ancient times, the territory was inhabited by the Illyrian tribe of Taulantes, who held a significant role in the history of the Illyrian state. Kings of Taulant origin, like Glaukia, Monuni, and Mytili, left their mark on the region, as attested by historical accounts.

KAVAJA ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM

The Ethnographic Museum in Kavaja embodies the architectural design, lifestyles, and economies of the region through a unique example of a traditional XIX century house, preserved in nearly authentic condition. Unfortunately, the dwelling suffered severe damage in the 2019 earthquake and is currently undergoing restoration under the EU4Culture programme. Alongside the restoration of the building, the museum displays are being reconceptualized, featuring the museum’s 810 artifacts from the entire region. These artifacts were securely packed and stored during the conservation process. The museum will provide visitors with a unique experience, allowing them to explore history through reconceptualized displays and engaging narratives, enriched with contemporary multimedia tools and content.



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The digital booklet *Fije Balte*, developed by *Help in Albania and Gjirokastra Foundation NGOs*, with support from the EU4Culture grants programme, encompasses Kavaja’s history of artisanship and provides practical information on current artisans businesses, as well as details about the Ethnographic Museum.

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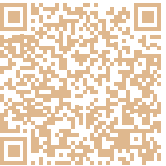
The webpage *Promokult*, developed by the *Albanian Centre for Family Development (ACFD) NGO*, with support from the EU4Culture grants programme, offers visitors a 360-degree tour of the cultural sites of Kavaja.

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Check out videos about Albania’s first female sculptor, Ms. Kristina Koljaka, as well as the traditional songs and dances of Kavaja, produced by the Community Development Center (CDC) NGO with support from the EU4Culture.

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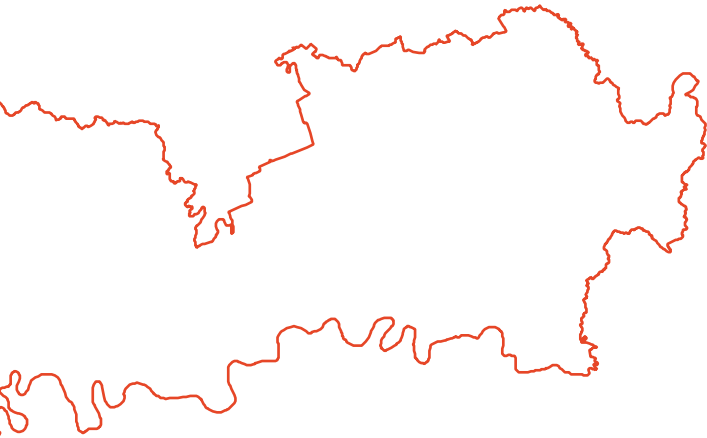


Check out videos developed by the Urban Research Institute, Kube Studios, Help Albania, and the Gjirokastra Foundation, supported by the EU4Culture grants programme. These videos showcase traditional crafts from Kavaja, including pottery, copperware, needlework, and carpet making.

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► Rrogozhina



Nestled in the Western Lowlands, Rrogozhina is home to the magnificent Castle of Bashtova. This tranquil coastal region offers tourists an opportunity to explore its natural beauty, immerse themselves in the traditional way of life and explore the nearby Divjakë-Karavasta National Park.



CASTLE OF BASHTOVA

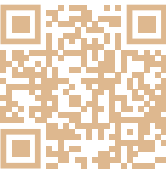
The Bashtova Castle was built in the XV century to facilitate trade under Venetian rule. Further modifications were made in the same century following the Ottoman conquest, continuing until the early XVI century. These included the addition of extra floors for the military and the construction of a mosque, among other alterations. One of the major interventions involved the reconstruction of the western section of the castle, heavily damaged by terrain erosion caused by water overflows. Positioned on entirely flat terrain,

approximately 2 km from the village of Vilë-Bashtova, 400 m north of the Shkumbin River, and around 3-4 km north of the Shkumbin River estuary, the castle offers visitors panoramic views of the coastline from the bay of Durrës to Divjaka from its walls. The fortification walls sustained damage during the 2019 earthquake and are currently undergoing restoration under the EU4Culture programme. Upon completion, designated sections of the walls will be accessible, and visitors will be able to see new discoveries from archaeological excavations within the castle walls.

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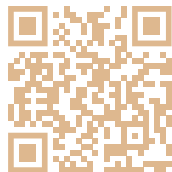
The web platform *Routes4Culture*, developed by *AULEDA - the Agency of Local Economic Development NGO*, with support from the EU4Culture grants programme, promotes four new routes with interesting cultural and natural points (cultural tourism, eco-tourism, agro-tourism, hiking, etc.) in Kavaja and Rrogozhina.

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The website *3E Cultural Routes*, developed by the *Institute of Public and Private Policies (IP3) NGO*, with support from the EU4Culture grants programme, promotes the area of Durrës, Kruja, Kavaja and Rrogozhina, providing an attractive destination for cultural tourism by highlighting the values of cultural heritage, rich history, local traditions, unique handicrafts and traditional food.

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EU4Culture supports the socio-economic development of local communities by promoting traditional crafts and cultural tourism initiatives through the grants programme.

To learn more about our upcoming activities and events, visit our website and follow us on our social networks.





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REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA
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