



ONE DAY TRIP

Ancient Cities, Fortified Castles
and Byzantine Churches of
the Southern Vlora Region:
Cultural Heritage Along
the Southern Adriatic
and Northern Ionian Coasts

This itinerary highlights the most interesting and accessible monuments of Albanian cultural heritage in the Vlora coastal region. From well-preserved castle fortifications, to intact Byzantine church frescos, to underwater ancient cities, this itinerary will allow the visitor to appreciate much of coastal Albania's 2,500-year cultural history.

Please note that travel and visitation times are approximate and may vary depending on the season, weather, and/or vehicle used. 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.



Start: Vlora

End: Himara

Total distance: 101 km

Trip length: 8-10 hours





❖ CASTLE OF KANINA

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

Begin your journey by heading south from Vlora, turn off the Vlora - 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 Vlora Bay. Visitors are advised to use caution when ascending or descending on the slippery stone. Admission is free.

❖ TOWN OF ORIKUM

(30 km south of Vlora – approx. 40 minutes on the Vlora-Saranda National Road)

From Kanina, return to the Vlora - Saranda National Road and continue south to modern-day **Orikum**. About 2,500 years ago, Greek colonists settled and established a small city, Orikos, which lies at the southern end of Vlora bay. The Hellenistic and Roman period ruins of this ancient city can still be seen and can be visited at leisure. From modern Orikum, look south across the Bay along the Karaburun Peninsula – weather permitting, visitors can view the **Pashaliman Army Base** in the distance, which was a strategically important military installation for the Warsaw pact in Albania. The oldest known Albanian port, Pashaliman dates back to the Roman Empire and has been in near continual use since. The Pashaliman military base is

still operational and no visitors are allowed; however, interested visitors can read about the port and base during the Soviet era in “The Long Winter of Loneliness”, written by Albania’s National poet and author, Ismail Kadare.

Orikum is the largest town visitors will pass through until reaching this itinerary’s end in Himara. Travelers are advised to use this opportunity to purchase any fuel, water, or snacks needed for their journey. Local products, such as honey, olive oil, and fresh seasonal produce are usually available for purchase from roadside stands on the National Road, depending on weather and the time of year. Local cafes or “lokale” and restaurants will be open year-round as well.



❖ CASTLE OF GJON BOÇARI

(8 km east from Orikum – approx. 20 minutes on secondary and dirt roads)

From Orikum, turn east off of the National Road, heading towards the village of Tragjas, away from Vlora 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 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.



❖ **ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK OF ORIKUM**

(4 km west from modern Orikum – approx. 10 minutes on secondary and dirt roads)

Returning to the National Road, follow the signs towards Vlora Bay and Pashaliman Army Base to the **Archaeological Park of Orikum**. According to Pseudo-Scymnos, an anonymous Greek author and geographer, the city of Orikum was settled by the lost Euboeans, who were blown off course by strong winds on their return voyage from the battle of Troy, in the 12th-14th centuries B.C. Today preserved in a national park, the ancient Greek city sits on a favorable geographical position where the Adriatic and Ionian Seas meet. As well as its proximity to Italy and Greece, this made Orikum an important harbor on the Adriatic coast. Orikum was later occupied by the Romans as a defensive base in their wars against the Illyrians and the Macedonians in the 3rd century B.C. Archeological evidence shows that Orikum was a developed urban center, with an amphitheater that could hold around 400 spectators. Submerged under the Orikum lagoon, the city's elaborate network of roads can be still seen today. Cost of admission ranges from 200 lek for Albanian visitors to 700 lek for foreign visitors. No guided tours are currently available, though locally-produced guidebooks are available for sale at the park entrance. An average visit lasts 30 – 90 minutes. Park hours are 09h00 – 16h30 daily.



❖ **MARMIROI CHURCH**

(3 km from the Archaeological Park of Orikum – approx. 15 minutes on dirt roads)

On the outskirts of the Archaeological Park of Orikum is the **Marmiroi Church**, located on the primary access road to the park. Dating back to the time of Byzantine Emperor Theodorus, around the 13th century A.D., the church walls still contain fragments of Byzantine wall paintings and frescos. Traces of the church's narthex are also still intact.

❖ **TRADITIONAL CUISINE IN LLOGARA NATIONAL PARK**

(17 km south from Orikum – approx. 30 minutes on the Vlora-Saranda National Road)

Return to the National Road and head south towards **Llogara National Park**. As the road turns away from the sea and climbs up into the mountains, roadside vendors sell honey, beeswax, carrots and persimmon to passersby. Watch for a small sign indicating the **Flag Pine National Monument** or "*Pisha Flamur*" near the top of the mountain pass. A marvel of nature, this 100 year-old pine tree, 20 m high and 75 cm in diameter, is shaped by the strong winds blowing north from the Ionian Sea through the Llogara Pass to the Adriatic Sea, shaping the tree's limbs into the form of a flag. Just a few kilometers past the Flag Pine, at the top of the Llogara Pass, is a wide selection of **traditional Albanian restaurants**, featuring southern Albanian cuisine. All restaurants are open year-round, with some offering lodging at attached tourist villages, hotels, and campgrounds. Even though the restaurants are located so close between the two seas, locals will advise you instead to try the freshly roasted lamb, served family-style with fried potatoes and a variety of mixed salads. Fresh pastas, vegetables, and a variety of fish and meats are also readily available. If you are looking for a lighter fare, try the traditional Albanian travelers' menu of rice pilaf and beef stew or "*tasqebap e pilaf*".

As you exit Llogara pass (910m above sea level) to the south, brace yourself for the breathtaking views of the Ionian Sea. A few wise investors have built cafes and restaurants for travelers to enjoy the view over coffee or a traditional snack of yoghurt with honey and walnuts "*kos me arra me mjalt*". On a clear day, visitors may be able to see the Greek island of Corfu in the distance.



❖ CHURCHES AND MONASTERIES OF DHERMI

(16 km from Llogara Pass – approx. 25 minutes on the Vlora-Saranda National Road)

Winding down the precipitous mountain pass, you will come to the quaint coastal village Dhërmi, home to 31 churches and monasteries. Many local vendors sell their produce and honey on this stretch of highway leading into Dhermi. Park carefully on the roadsides in Dhermi, and begin the steep 15-minute climb from the National Road to **Saint Mary Church and Monastery**, a basilica with a Byzantine-style wooden and tiled dome with a single nave. The Archbishop Ioannis of Himara and Delvina commissioned frescos to decorate the church in 1781. This is a beautiful place to watch the sunset if visitors chose to remain in one of the numerous guesthouses in Dhermi Village or Dhermi Beach, further down the mountainside. **The Church of Ipapandia** is situated very close to the beach and can be reached via a 5-minute drive on secondary roads. The church has a large, semi-circular shaped atrium, which is divided by the narthex. The narthex features two entrances and a stone iconostas, the screen or wall dividing the sanctuary from the nave in traditional Orthodox and Catholic churches. Another interesting characteristic of the church is the high, elegant bell tower erected on the western facade. Admission is free to both churches, although a small donation for their upkeep is encouraged.

❖ ANCIENT CITY OF HIMARA

(16 km south from Dhermi – approx. 45 minutes on the Vlora-Saranda National Road)*

Continuing south along the National Road to the ancient city Himara, take advantage of the natural beauty for a roadside picnic or photography on this untouched stretch of Albanian coastline. 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 locating a simple, yet well-maintained hotel or guesthouse.

Upon arriving in Himara, 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 Dhermi, it is advised to park the vehicle in upper Himara, upon entering the city which 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 several medieval churches. Perhaps the most beautiful church within the walls is the **Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus**, overlooking Himara and the Ionian Sea. After enjoying this peaceful spot to watch the sun set 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.

For more Information:

www.albaniantourism.com

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

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

Celesi Tourist Guide

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Car Rental Companies: Sixt; EuropCar; AVIS; HERTZ