

## EASTERN EUROPE



Zbulo hikers outside the home of the village teacher and his wife (in stripes) in the village of Limar.

# Mountain treks are villagers' lifeblood

SUZANNE MORPHET gets off the beaten track in Albania

**O**ur small group of hikers has settled into a quiet walking reverie when there's a sudden commotion on the trail ahead of us.

A man leading two packhorses comes around the corner and it's apparent that we need to quickly move out of his way.

Without slowing down, he passes us by, going about his business in this secluded mountainous region of southern Albania, perhaps wondering who these people are and where they're going.

We're seven tourists from Germany, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Canada, ranging in age from our mid-40s to mid-60s and we're on a guided hike with local tour operator Zbulo.

The company specialises in sustainable, community-based tourism and its Hidden Valley Trek will take us deep into the Zagoria River valley, to villages that were largely abandoned when Albania's communist government collapsed in 1991.

But while this trek is new, created about 10 years ago, the trail we follow for the first four days is old, part of an ancient trade route between Rome and Istanbul during the Roman Empire and later improved on by the Ottomans, who built impressive stone bridges.

The route has also been used seasonally for centuries by semi-nomadic shepherds moving



Goats (and sheep) live a good life in the Zagoria River Valley.

their herds from their winter grounds on Albania's Mediterranean coast to the fertile pastures high above the Zagoria River in summer. It's their journeys that have kept the trails open.

Arriving in the village of Limar, a cobblestone path from the days of trade caravans leads us to our simple but comfortable guest home for the night. At one time, 120 families lived in Limar. Now, there are only a dozen.

The guest home is owned by the village schoolteacher and his wife, who decided to remain after most people left years ago for an easier life elsewhere. "Everything they need is here," explains Mirjeta, our guide, translating for the couple over a dinner of spanakopita, stewed okra, tomatoes, cheese and French fries. "Their sheep, their family and, now, tourists for their guest house."

Creating hiking itineraries with homestays has worked remarkably well in northern Albania to bring much-needed income to some of the poorest people in Europe, the co-founder of Zbulo tells me.

Ricardo Fahrigr says he's beginning to see the same thing in southern Albania.

"They're starting to come back. We see now that people, even from abroad, from the cities, they return to their original villages because they can have income-based tourism in their homes."



Locals with horses are sometimes hired to carry hikers' luggage. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

Almost 90 per cent of the revenue from Zbulo's tours ends up in the hands of rural, family-run businesses, which Mr Fahrigr points out, "changes the narrative by creating a sense of pride and place, and with it a perspective to stay, return and invest."

From our perspective, there's much to enjoy — dark, starry skies at night and days that bring unexpected delights. We can't walk through a village without being invited by someone to stop for tea or coffee and often raki, Albania's favourite alcoholic drink.

One day we're standing under a tree waiting out a thunderstorm when an elderly man with a donkey comes by and invites us to his home. As he and his wife serve us coffee and raki on their deck overlooking a walled garden, they tell us they miss the communist era. "The doctor was always there," they explain wistfully.

Something I didn't expect to see in this remote valley were churches with amazing frescoes, yet somehow, they've survived both communism and rot. In Hoshteve, the owner of our guest home opens the carved door of an 18th-century church with a key bigger than his hand. Inside, we marvel at biblical scenes painted on the walls in brilliant shades of red, gold and blue.

Perhaps my favourite moment comes one morning when we hear bells ringing. They're not from a church, but from dozens, maybe hundreds, of sheep and goats.

Soon, the animals flow past us, a river of white, brown and black, their assorted bells creating a symphony of sound.

When I ask the shepherd if I can take his photo, he pulls out a phone and asks if he can take mine. Shepherds these days!

## fact file

- Zbulo's seven-day Hidden Valley Trek is offered from April to early June, and September to late October. A reasonable level of fitness is required.
- [zbulo.org](http://zbulo.org)

On our final day of village-to-village hiking we climb a narrow trail leading to a broad valley flanked by steep slopes. This is where shepherds in the old days would pasture their sheep all summer. Some still do and guard dogs warn us not to come close.

Reaching the Dhembel Pass at 1450m, our view extends to Greece, just 35km away, and the city of Permet in the "outside world", far below.

That evening, at a restaurant known for "slow" food, we're served something special.

Shepherds in this region traditionally made salce shakullit to preserve yoghurt by pouring it into the hide of a sheep and letting it hang, drain and ferment. It tastes earthy, nothing like a commercial dairy product. But with fewer shepherds these days it's in danger of being lost.

On subsequent days we visit a natural thermal spring and spend a day exploring the "stone city" of Gjirokastra with its UNESCO-designated old town. But it's our leisurely days of walking in the Zagoria Valley that will stay with me.

That kind of solitude is a rare treat these days — almost as much as tasting salce shakullit.

**In tomorrow's Sunday Travel:**  
Albania's Tirana is taking off



People relax in the thermal water at Benje.

