

T6 | TRAVEL



CHRISTIAN BAUMGARTNER

The Vjosa, centrepiece of Vjosa Wild River National Park, winds through southwestern Albania to the Adriatic.

COVER STORY

DOWN BY THE RIVER

The recently created Vjosa Wild River National Park is drawing travellers to Albania's natural wonders

SUZANNE MORPHET
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Paddling into a calm stretch of water, I let my gaze follow the sound of tinkling bells.

A small herd of sheep is grazing the grassy bank above us, their

bellied heads creating a pleasing melody as they chew and move. Seconds later, I plunge my paddle back into the water to help negotiate the next set of rapids.

In mid-October, after a long, hot summer, water levels are low in Albania's Vjosa river, but the flow is



completely natural. While most other rivers in Europe have been dammed for hydro and straightened for the passage of ships, the Vjosa runs wild and free for 190 kilometres, from Albania's border with Greece to the Adriatic Sea.

Now, it's the first park of its kind in Europe: Vjosa Wild River National Park was created in 2023, after the decade-long "Save the Blue Heart of Europe" campaign, led by an in-

Writer Suzanne Morphet travels a calm stretch of the Vjosa while paddling with Active Albania.

GISEL DOLLANI/
ACTIVE ALBANIA

ternational coalition of environmental groups.

The park protects not just the Vjosa but also four major tributaries. The Albanian government is still consulting communities about how the park should be managed, but sustainable tourism and agriculture are the two main activities that will help ensure local communities prosper.

I'm here to explore the river and a few of the surrounding communities and historical sites on multi-day tours with two local companies, Zbulo and Active Albania. Both are pioneering sustainable tourism in Albania, and my activities range from bathing in thermal waters on the upper Vjosa to birding along the river's estuary. There will be time to meet locals who campaigned for the park, as well as explore archaeological sites that show the importance of this river since pre-Roman times.

I've travelled to other untamed rivers on past trips, canoeing the Nahanni in the Northwest Territories, for example, and the Big Salmon in the Yukon.

Up there in northern Canada, the surrounding forests and mountains are as wild as the rivers, and there are no human settlements in sight.

By contrast, the Vjosa river valley has been settled, grazed and farmed for centuries.

This provides an altogether different experience, as I quickly learn on my first tour, a four-day trek in the mountains high above the Vjosa and Albania's southernmost city of Përmet.

Mirjeta Shatri, a guide with Zbulo, leads our small group of travellers up the well-worn trails. These paths have been traversed for millennia by sheep and shepherds on their annual migration from sea-level pastures to alpine meadows.

By day, we cross Ottoman-era bridges and stop to admire Orthodox churches filled with colourful frescoes. At night, we stay with local families in villages that were largely abandoned after the collapse of the communist dictatorship in 1992.

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SUZANNE MORPHET PHOTOS

Hikers descend a steep slope above the town of Përmet. These paths have been traversed for millennia by sheep and shepherds on their annual migration.

Rustic, open-air pools are shaped out of stone walls

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“It’s the only guest house here,” Shatri says as we walk into our accommodations, the whitewashed stone house of a local teacher, in the village of Hoshtevë. Tourism is still in its infancy here, but hikers, cyclists and horse-riders are providing incentives to rural people to offer other services, including rest stops for coffee and raki.

A few days later, we summit the Dhembel Pass and can see the Vjosa winding its way through the valley 1,200 metres below. The long, steep descent is gruelling on our glutes, and the next day it’s a relief to submerge ourselves in the warm, therapeutic waters of Bënja. A village on the Langarica River (a Vjosa tributary), it’s home to multiple thermal baths. These rustic, open-air pools are shaped out of stone walls, holding the mineral waters flowing up from underground sulphur springs.

I return to Përmet on my second tour, this time a six-day private one with Active Albania and my guide Bled. After rafting the Vjosa near town, we cycle what’s known as the old Italian road, built by Italian troops who invaded Albania during the Second World War. Hopping off our bikes, we explore the artifacts at the Museum of the Antifascist National Liberation War. In 1944, Communist Party leaders met here before seizing power, which led to the brutal and paranoid dictatorship of Enver Hoxha.

Public reminders of that authoritarian past still endure, making Albania a uniquely compelling destination. I see some of the thousands of bun-

kers that Hoxha had built to protect people from an imaginary foreign threat, as well as roadside monuments to communist “heroes.”

Leaving Përmet, I head deep into the mountains again, this time to the Kurvelesh region, near the source of the Drino River, one of the Vjosa’s tributaries. In the village of Lekdush, we sleep in simple straw huts fashioned after traditional shepherds’ dwellings. In the morning, we’re served a traditional Albanian breakfast of *trahana*: wheat fermented with sheep’s milk.

“They used to think that *trahana* was food for us, because we were poor,” explains Bled, referring to Albanians who’ve opened businesses catering to foreign visitors. “Now, a shift is taking place,” he says. There’s a new understanding that visitors want to taste traditional food.

After breakfast, the owner of Camping Lekdush leads us by foot into a steep-sided canyon studded with waterfalls. On this morning, we have the place to ourselves, but Bled tells me the Peshtura waterfall has recently been discovered by outsiders, including rock climbers, arriving on the new highway into this remote region. And now, with the creation of Vjosa Wild River National Park, more visitors will enjoy it and the rest of the park. It’s a win not just for the river but also for the local people in need of income, and for all of us seeking adventures in new lands.

SUZANNE MORPHET TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF ZBULO AND ACTIVE ALBANIA; WHICH NEITHER REVIEWED NOR APPROVED THIS STORY.



Reminders of Albania’s past remain, including communist-era bunkers such as this one near the river delta.

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