

Cruising Albania's rugged coast

Sailing from Greece, Chis Smith and Cocky Taanman took a tour of Albania and found a warm welcome on an inhospitable coast

As I looked across from Corfu, Albania was green, mountainous and surprisingly close. Memories of sailing in Greece 35 years ago rushed back: floodlights constantly patrolling the straits and reports of gunboats shooting anyone, Albanian or not, who dared sail their territorial waters. Back then, my appetite whetted, I had asked the Foreign Office what they thought about sailing there. Amazingly, I was told they had no problem with that, but my crew did: 'No way!' they had told me then. Now, at last we were coming back to Albania, as part of a voyage from Crete to Venice.

'I don't suppose we could go with you?' asked Sonja and Jan Luc, a Czech sailing couple we met at Kassiope. 'We're too frightened to go there alone.' Kassiope is the middle-class heaven in northern Corfu and the Albanian port of Sarandë is just six miles east. The weather was perfect, but pilot books still talk about

mines in Albania's coastal waters. In 2013, nearly 6,000 Albanian naval mines were destroyed in a clean-up operation, but the charts still show many large areas where anchoring is not recommended. This wasn't going to be for the faint hearted. Our little convoy, *Scube* and *Anja*, had a most pleasant sail from Kassiope with a south-westerly Force 3-4 to Sarandë, where we anchored stern-to the new, two-metre-high harbour wall and were

warmly greeted by an agent, Agim Zholi. He is the Cruising Association's local representative and was well worth his fee: he charged us 50 euros to get us through the entry formalities (effortless for us) and for first night, and then 15 euros for subsequent nights. A most charming young couple also came to offer us a trip to the UNESCO-protected site at Butrint, but were overcharging four-fold what we eventually paid the local travel office.

PHOTOS: CHRISTOPHER SMITH UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED



Kassiope is a pretty harbour in the north-eastern of Corfu

PHOTO: IMAGEROKER/ALAMY



Sarandë is a popular seaside resort for Albanians

PHOTO: PETER FORSBERG/ALAMY



CHART: MAXINE HEATH

Looking back to Corfu from Butrint, it's hard to imagine the recently-ended hostility



'6,000 mines were cleared, but anchoring is not recommended'

We were moored in the customs compound but friendly police happily let us in and out. Our first evening was an all-out success: a pretty waterside walk, large gin-and-tonics for just £2 each, big pizzas for £4 and late evening drinking to watch Holland win the World Cup quarter final on penalties. A dozen local policemen in uniform were drinking with us, so perhaps it was just as well that Cocky, who had promised a striptease on the tabletops if the Dutch team won, didn't even go a quarter of the way. Walking home through the backstreets showed a side of Albanian life far grimmer than the seafront development. Concrete buildings from the Soviet days never were a great success.

The ruined town of Butrint had been a settlement through Bronze-Age, Greek, Roman, Venetian and Turkish civilizations, and both a bread-basket and a military base for the fortifications of Corfu town. A bus trip from Sarandë to Butrint is necessary because it's at the end of a shallow, metre-deep passageway to an inland sea. Earthquakes have changed the level of the land, as an amiable Australian gent discovered when he fell into the flooded stage of the amphitheatre. Notable are the carved records of slaves freed after their term of service, the miles of city walls and the pleasure that UNESCO has required protection of the trees and plants, giving shady walks rather than the normal piles of baking-hot stones



The 4th Century amphitheatre, along with all the ruins at Butrint, now stands in a flooded lagoon

PHOTO: TRAVEL PICTURES/ALAMY

that characterise so many ancient sites. All told, it was a great introduction to Albania. Sarandë has made good use of the site with well-organised daytrips from Corfu on the old Greek 'flying dolphin' hydrofoil ferries. The council is even about to knock down many of the private houses that have been built along the seafront without planning permission, to create a grand parade.

After gaining exit papers from Agim, required from every harbour, we sailed next to Kakomea Cove. Just eight miles north of Sarandë, it's recommended in *777 Harbours and Anchorages* (Imray, £55) for its 'beautiful, sheltered bay'

and restaurant. Beautiful it was, and wonderfully deserted except for two Italian motorboats having a cosy lunch stop, and the ruins of a monastery, a pier and gun emplacements. We soon learned that these three are almost inevitable anywhere in Albania – in the 41 years of Hoxha's rule, more than 700,000 bomb shelters and gun emplacements were built to avert an invasion that never happened. Shelter was reasonable but laying a stern anchor helped reduce roll. The only company we had was a visit by some small birds who settled into *Scube's* rigging to share the sunset with us.

The next day was again a short



Anchoring in Kakomea Bay made a lovely overnight stop



'Kakomea Cove was beautiful and deserted, save for the ruins of a monastery, a pier and gun emplacements'

afternoon sail, this time to Palermo, where high cliffs beautifully protect a circular bay with a central castle, the not-to-be-missed Ali Pasha fortress. Until very recently, access to the empty bay was restricted by the military, but tying onto the pier beside the fortress is now allowed, though we were twice visited by police. In the evening we showed them our crew list, which they absently perused before moving on to more important business: 'Do you have a beer?' Next morning, another policeman came with two friends and a more rudimentary demand: 'Give us beer'. The pier had many gaps and crumbling concrete, with exposed rods to tie our lines onto. An early morning wind loosened one of our rods so we woke to find *Scube's* stern had come adrift. The fortress attracts just enough visitors to support a restaurant, strongly (but wrongly) recommended by a toothless local who acts as an unofficial master of

the bay 'because nobody else has looked after it for 30 years', though nor had he! 18 more miles took us past the pleasant but exposed town of Himare to what our guide book called 'one of the most beautiful and striking bays in Albania', Grama Bay. We agree about the 'striking'. It's just 40m wide with sharp, craggy cliffs plunging from an unknown height towards the anchorage. We thought two stern lines and the bower anchor would hold our position, given that there were underwater rocks 15metres away all around. But the afternoon wind refused to die down and a Force 3-4 kept us awake all night, looking at the rocks. Grama is certainly pretty, suitable for a smaller boat than ours, but only on a quiet night. When we left in the morning, the sea was still choppy but infuriatingly, having endured an uncomfortable night, the wind promptly failed, leaving us to motor the 25 miles to the commercial harbour of Vlore.

Albania's only marina, a small one at that, is six miles inside Vlore Bay, but we decided instead to stay in the city harbour. Perhaps we should have read the *Adriatic Pilot* (Imray, £39.95) more carefully: 'a number of wrecks within the harbour... shelter is poor... condition of the piers... unsuitable for yachts'. All true, but at least we managed to avoid the wrecks in the approaches and in the harbour.

Agim had phoned ahead and we were met by the agent, who directed us to berth alongside



PHOTO: PAUL CARSTAIRS/ALAMY

Albania is peppered with thousands of communist-era concrete gun emplacements

the end of the main west pier, which was easily done in the calm morning sunshine, despite the high walls. The only problem was a group of boys who were very insistent on being fed biscuits until the harbour police helped us shoo them away.

Two hours later, we returned to find the pier totally unprotected from the prevailing southerly wind, which had now piped up to Force 5. *Scube* was bouncing hard and we soon had 10 fenders out. Help arrived in the form of the agent, some Italian yachties on holiday (we were the only yacht at Vlore) and other bystanders. The agent told us to move, as the waves would soon get worse. In the melée of helpers the bow was set free before we were ready, knocking a chunk of glassfibre from the stern quarter – *Scube's* first real damage. We moved alongside the pilot boat and behind the tug to gain some plausible shelter, though we were now scarily close to one of the wrecks and the harbour's 2m depth contour. Vlore town itself was surprisingly well-developed and easy-going, with relaxed coffee shops. Shopping seemed to be a way of life and even we succumbed, buying a

new computer printer for *Scube*, and at a bargain price.

It was time for an anchorage again and the shallows behind Cape Porto Nuovo, at the silted-up entrance to the Narte Lagoon seemed a fair suggestion in *777 Harbours and Anchorages*. The weather was calm but the place was bleak, with rollers still coming in from yesterday's wind. Wherever we set the stern anchor, *Scube* picked up a roll from waves reflected off the headland, so again we were off at dawn for the 50-mile passage to Durres, Albania's second city. Between harbours, there is no shelter and the shore 'is shallow and insidious', the pilot said. We motored the entire way under a cloudy but windless sky. Durres is the main commercial harbour for Albania and it is secure, though warnings of 'four sunk ships piled on top of each other' just off the entrance was not reassuring. The agent, Arben Ninga, took the now-customary 50 euros for handling entry and exit paperwork, but also 10 euros per day for berthing, with one night counted as two days.

Albania's capital, Tirana, is less than 25 miles from Durres, so the town was busy with local holidaymakers sampling the sea and bars, many of which are on a long street where late Venetian houses happily break the rule that Albania is made of concrete. Drinks at the rooftop bar of the tallest building showed the scale of the harbour, almost a mile long, and the town with its central 20,000-seat Roman amphitheatre. Amazingly, this had been lost until 1900 and most of it was only recently dug out, revealing the underground chambers that had been adapted as an early Christian church. It was a worthy target for next day's sightseeing. During the walk back to prepare for supper the sky darkened, a circular wind swept by, followed by stiff rain and then lightning, which was far too

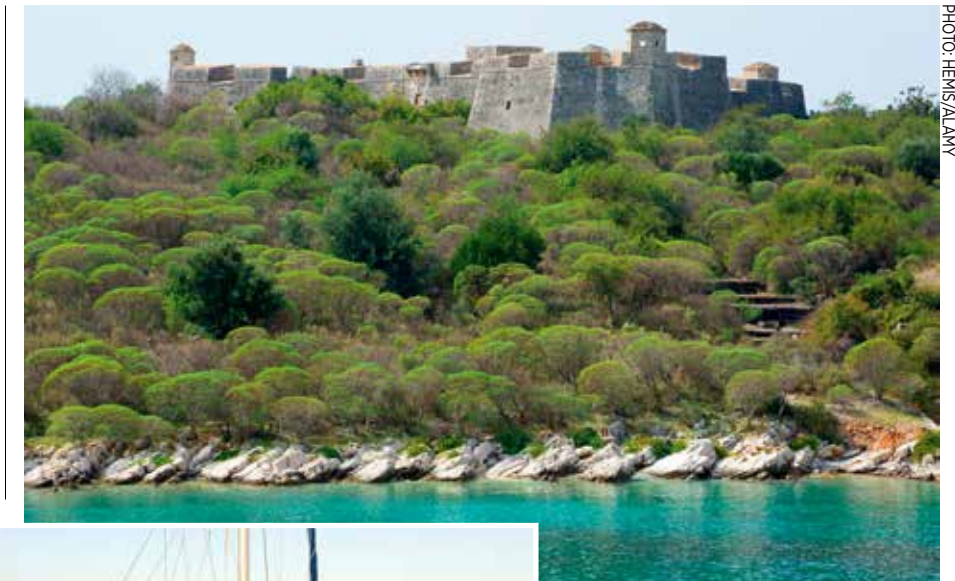


PHOTO: HENIS/ALAMY

ABOVE: The Ali Pasha fortress in Palermo Bay is not to be missed



Durres was surprisingly pretty ashore, while the weather held

rather sad-looking agent delightfully named Frrok Frroku. It was a dirty quay again, with many tonnes of steel reinforcing rods being landed just behind us, but it was well protected and the weather was sunny. Here our 50 euros did the paperwork, plus two nights' stay and the passport stamps. We later found out part of the reason for Frrok's sadness: his family had left to find work in Canada but had failed, so

close for comfort. Worse still was the pile of black grit near our berth. In minutes, *Scube* had changed from white to black all over. Many buckets of seawater were needed to get even a grey boat and a month later, black grit was still appearing from hidden crevices. The moral is, if you go for a real harbour, you get reality.

Shengjin is another 37 miles and is the customs harbour for north Albania. We moored alongside the commercial quay, the inner fishing harbour being crowded with small boats, and were met by a

he'd been hit with a double whammy – no work in Canada and no family at home.

Shengjin has a long beach-front development (the steep hills behind it prevent much else) with an odd, 1950s feel: a campsite with canvas tents, new hotels with a mud slick between them and the sea, and fast food promoted as something to be proud of. Go inland two streets (the limit) and you are back to decaying concrete blocks, garbage and broken windows. For a mile northwards from the harbour was an



Durres harbour is truly huge, but there is plenty to explore

PHOTO: REUTERS/ALAMY



An old submarine tunnel in Porto Palermo



We moored alongside, opposite the assorted fishing craft in Shengjin

‘Two hours of sailing brought us to Montenegro and the beauty of Kotor. What a huge change!’

PHOTO: JACK MALIPAN/ALAMY



The beauty and shelter of Montenegro’s Gulf of Kotor was in direct contrast to Albania

Christopher Smith and Cocky Taanman

Christopher, 72, was born in a Thames boatyard where the job of the boatmen was to pick him out of the water. Rowing gave way to sailing in Chichester Harbour in his teens and then in Greece from his late 20s until now. Having retired from academic life as a physiologist at King’s College London, he can at last go sailing all summer long. Christopher cruised the Adriatic with his regular crewmate, Cocky Taanman, 63, from the Netherlands.



Cocky and Chris enjoyed the very reasonable food and drinks in Albania

unintentional museum of the Albanian navy. Huge enclosed chambers have been built into the cliff to house the torpedo boats – Hoxha was proud to claim that after a world nuclear war, Albania would still come out fighting. Tattered gunboats ashore on rotting prows, a frigate looking as if she were trying to steam out of an enclosure but had somehow got her ropes in a tangle, defused (we hoped) mines waiting for something.

Along the dirt track, I was twice stopped and stiffly ordered to put my camera away, perhaps because of a still-active radar station. Surprisingly, there was a fair traffic of beach walkers and cars, because beyond the naval station are two modern beach hotels.

Two hours of sailing on a close reach in a northerly Force 4 brought us to Montenegro. What a startling change! The beauty of the fjord of Kotor, the brash extravagance of Bar. Twelve days in Albania had been enough. We were tired of limited facilities, a largely hostile coastline and grim towns. Even the wonderful parade of old Mercedes (other cars being deemed incapable of surviving the roads and new Mercedes bought by the nouveau riche soon succumbing to complexity failure) was a reminder of work needing to be done. We were jaded with the endless, decaying military projects. In contrast, our Czech friends on *Anja* had promptly gone looking for a flat to buy: excellent value and good future prospects, they reckoned.

Albania is certainly beautiful and you find both nature and sailing as it was many years ago. Go there, if the weather is nice, and adventure is at your wheel. ▲