

COVER FEATURE

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Combining natural beauty with historical interest and a centuries-old way of life, **Peter Elia** extols the virtues of the Zagoria Hidden Valley trek in southern Albania...

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Limar bridge, a stone high arch bridge built in the time of Ali Pasha



“This lesser-known route through Albania’s south promised Ottoman-era bridges, ancient caravan trails, and a glimpse into a way of life unchanged for centuries.”

Leaving Peshtan at the start of the trek



Doshnica waterfall

Very few first-class European trails offer breathtaking scenery, ancient villages and complete solitude along its path. The Hidden Valley Trek in southern Albania provides all this – and locals are keen to see hikers discover this long-overlooked region.

Albania has quietly emerged as one of Europe’s most compelling hiking destinations. Its landscapes – wild, unspoiled, and steeped in history – offer a rare sense of discovery. This was more evident than in the Accursed Mountains along the Albanian-Montenegrin border, home to the renowned Peaks of the Balkans trail, which I have also hiked. I loved every moment – the high passes, the alpine meadows, the warmth of remote guesthouses – but popularity can sometimes come at a cost, and what had once been a secret among intrepid hikers

was now a well-marked route, drawing large guided groups and increasing commercial infrastructure. Overtourism had started to become a concern.

Yet Albania’s reputation as a trekking haven means that there are still trails where solitude reigns – if you know where to look, of course! That search led me to the Zagoria Hidden Valley Trek, a 48km journey over four days from the village of Pesthan to the town of Përmet, staying in traditional guesthouses along the way. This lesser-known route through Albania’s south promised Ottoman-era bridges, ancient caravan trails, and a glimpse into a way of life unchanged for centuries.

My journey began in Tirana, where my guide, Menduh Zavalani (Mendi for short), greeted me with a wide smile. He introduced me to the three other hikers in our group – two from Germany, one from

Switzerland – before we set off on the long drive south.

We travelled inland from Albania’s coast for four hours, watching the flat plains gradually give way to hills. Roadside stalls selling tomatoes and olives lined parts of the route before the Vjosa River appeared – wide and pale blue – winding through the valley. We would follow its course for the rest of the trek. As the terrain steepened, mountains rose ahead, and the road climbed towards Pesthan, a quiet village in the foothills where our hike would begin. That night, we started our first family-run guesthouse stays, eating dinner on a small patio with views of the valley below.

INTO THE HIDDEN VALLEY

The hike began just beyond the guesthouse. A narrow path wound through dense woodland, gaining elevation

gradually. The morning light dappled through the trees while birds hopped and sang between the branches; their calls and our footsteps were the only sounds we could hear. As we ascended, the landscape opened up. The valley came into view from a high pass – a stretch of terraced fields and steep mountain slopes, with the Vjosa River tracing a slow path along the valley floor.

Further down, we reached the river, where an Ottoman stone bridge built during the rule of Ali Pasha of Tepelena spanned the water. Over two centuries old, the bridge was part of a network linking settlements across the region. Moss now covered its stones, but the design had remained intact and builders had constructed a high arch to carry pack animals and traders between the coast and the highlands.

Ali Pasha, who had commissioned roads, bridges and fortresses across Albania and northern Greece, ruled this region with autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. His legacy was complex; people remembered him as a ruthless leader and a shrewd strategist. The structures he built – often weathered and strikingly beautiful – stand as some of the last visible traces of that period.

Beyond the river, the path climbed steadily towards Limar along a worn cobbled track once used by traders hauling timber and textiles. The valley narrowed before opening onto a dramatic view of Mount Strakavec, its jagged summit rising to 2137m. It was one of the highest and most imposing peaks of our trek. Just below it sat the village of Limar, with its stone-built homes scattered across the hillside. A few families remained, preserving

their way of life despite the region’s gradual depopulation.

Our hosts for the night were teachers working with the few children who still attended the village school. As evening approached, we walked through the village, taking in its laid-back atmosphere before gathering for dinner. A lavish spread covered the table: grilled lamb, slow-cooked to tenderness, served alongside fragrant rice pilaf; crispy, golden petulla (Albanian fried dough) drizzled with honey; and a fresh salad of tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers, bursting with the sweetness of homegrown produce. Rural Albania, it seemed, was all about locally-sourced food, big portions and generous hospitality, where every meal felt like a celebration.

The low morning mist lingered in the valley as we set out from Limar, moving along footpaths that had linked these

Ali Pasha's bridge

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villages for centuries. There were no roads here. A horse and rider carried our extra luggage while we walked with only our daypacks.

In this section, the route wound through a series of hamlets, where life felt unchanged for generations. Farmers tended their land, women gathered herbs for teas and remedies, and beekeepers checked their hives. As we descended toward the river, the rushing water grew louder. The Doshnicë Waterfall soon came into view – a vast cascade spilling over sheer rock, its torrents carving through the valley. One of the trek’s natural highlights, it crashed into a deep, clear pool, sending up a fine mist. The air here was noticeably cooler, and the shockingly cold water made it a swim for only the bravest of our group.

At the bottom of the waterfall we saw a woman clearing branches from the trail. Mendi introduced us to Dallandshe Hyso – a shepherdess. With a smile, she said, “I’m also the mayor of Doshnicë.” Mendi translated for the group, explaining that the village had just ten inhabitants left and that Dallandshe received €50 from the local government for her role. “My mayoral duties?” she said proudly. “Keeping the village clean,” and then added with a chuckle, “maintaining the peace.”

We followed the river bend before

beginning the ascent to the village of Hoshteve. The climb was steady, winding through meadows before reaching the village where the signs of Albania’s changing demographics were evident. Like Doshnicë, emigration had left its mark – many houses stood empty, their occupants having left to seek better opportunities in Tirana or abroad.

We arrived a little weary but in good spirits. As our hosts prepared dinner, we could enter Hoshteve’s historic treasure: the Church of the Holy Apostles. A fine example of Orthodox heritage, its frescoes weathered but still told vivid biblical stories. Inside, the scent of aged wood and candle wax lingered. The dim light caught the faded gold detailing on the iconostasis; the craftsmanship remained striking – a trace of the village’s past when this church was a focal point of worship and community life. Surprisingly, this church had withstood the harsh years of communist rule, when authorities banned religion and either closed or repurposed places of worship. Like many in Albania, it stood as a testament to the resilience of people’s faith in a time of mass repression, which made the building’s current condition all the more remarkable.

Day three offered a slower pace and a chance to appreciate the landscape. Views

of Mount Cajupi stretched ahead as we traversed between villages – Vithuq, Koncka, Nivan, and Sheper. Roads now connected these settlements, unlike the earlier isolated hamlets, signalling modernity creeping into the valley. Albanians living in the cities had built newer buildings – often weekend homes – that contrasted with the old stone structures.

This didn’t diminish the warmth of the hospitality we received from locals, whether we met them on the road or in their front gardens. Locals often invited us into their homes for food, tea, or something stronger. We had to turn down many home invitations as we would never have finished the trek.

However, we stopped with friends of Mendi, mother and daughter Lumturi and Silvana Vaka, in their backyard for yoghurt, fruit, and homemade raki. They spoke about their dream to convert their house into a bed and breakfast. With the help of Silvana’s brother Melsi, they were about to begin building two guest rooms and hoped that trekkers would come and stay. As Lumturi said, “It’s not just a business idea; it’s a way of sustaining village life. Perhaps the younger generations who left will want to return.”

Her sentiment was a recurring theme of



The author enjoying the mountainous terrain

optimism that I would hear along the trek – a quiet determination to keep village life alive, despite the odds. As if to reinforce that sense of tradition, the raki kept flowing until one of our group admitted she couldn't continue the hike if she had any more. I think she spoke for the whole group.

We continued along the trail and arrived at Nivan. This village bore the remnants of its military past, with abandoned storage depots and rusting installations scattered around its main square. It also held a surprising tribute: a dedication to Bill Tilman, the famed British mountaineer and explorer. During World War II, Tilman had operated from Zagoria, fighting alongside the Albanian resistance against German occupation. A seasoned adventurer long before the war, he had already cycled across Africa and pioneered Himalayan expeditions. In Albania, Tilman had worked closely with local partisans, navigating the remote terrain with the same skill he later brought to his mountaineering expeditions. His legacy lingered here, a reminder of the valley's strategic and historical significance – and of a man who had felt just as at home in wartime mountain camps as he did on the world's highest peaks.

As we climbed toward Sheper, the

landscape began to soften, the sharp mountain ridges giving way to more gentle slopes. In this tranquil village, Aroman shepherds, once nomadic, had been forcibly settled during the communist era, and their presence remained an integral part of the community today. Sheper still held traces of Albania's socialist past, with washed-out Marxist slogans on some buildings, an echo of a time when ideology had shaped the country's landscape and everyday life

THE FINAL PASS

Our last day marked the crossing of the Dhembel-Nemercke range – a final challenge before we left the valley behind. The alternative, a long drive around the mountains, takes nearly as much time as the trek itself, reaffirming why locals still prefer the traditional route.

The ascent began near Enver Hoxha's infamous bunkers, relics of a paranoid regime that had seen threats from every direction. After World War Two, Hoxha had effectively sealed Albania off from the outside world for four decades, banning religion (making it the world's first atheist nation), forbidding travel, and enforcing isolation so extreme that Edi Rama, the country's current prime minister, once

described Albania as "the North Korea of Europe." Convinced that foreign powers sought to overthrow his communist state, Hoxha had filled the country with up to 500,000 concrete bunkers – grim reminders of a regime ruled by fear.

We climbed steeply, each step rewarded with sweeping views of Mount Cajupi. High pastures opened up, their green expanse dotted with flocks of sheep. As we continued, we entered fields of Paeonia Saueri, their crimson petals glowing against the slopes. At their heart, bright yellow stamens flared like bursts of sunlight, alive with the hum of bees. The breeze rippled through the blooms, their silken edges trembling like tiny flames. Unlike their cultivated cousins, these wild peonies thrived in solitude, a secret of the Albanian highlands. Their brief season made the moment feel fleeting, almost dreamlike – a rare flourish of colour and the trek's most unexpected sight.

At 1450m, the trail's highest point, the Dhembel Pass, offered one final spectacular panorama before the path began its long descent. Beyond the Eastern Mountains, Greece shimmered on the horizon. Below, the city of Përmet came into view, signalling our journey's end. But the descent was long and rocky,



Walking guide Mendi (left) with the author's fellow hikers

Knowledge: Zagoria

What you need to know before you go

Where is it?

The Zagoria Valley lies in southern Albania, within the remote heart of the Përmet region. Nestled between the Nemerçka and Lunxhëri mountain ranges, the valley is a lesser-travelled route through traditional stone villages, Ottoman bridges, and wild, untamed landscapes. This is Albania at its most untouched. The valley's ancient mule tracks, once vital trade routes, now serve as rewarding hiking trails with far-reaching views, river crossings, and encounters with isolated hamlets. The area is known for its pastoral beauty, traditional guesthouses, and rare glimpses into Albania's rural culture.

When to go?

Spring (April–June) and autumn (September–October) are ideal, offering mild temperatures, clear skies, and blooming wildflowers or golden autumn hues. Summers can be intensely hot, while winters bring snow and impassable routes in higher elevations.

How to get there?

Direct flights from the UK to Tirana operate from London, Manchester, and other major cities, with carriers

including British Airways, Wizz Air, and Ryanair. From Tirana, it's about a four-hour drive to the Zagoria Valley. The nearest city is Gjirokastër (1.5 hours away), a helpful and rewarding stop-over before reaching the valley. Public transport is limited, so hiring a private transfer from Gjirokastër or Përmet is the most reliable option.

How hard is it?

The trek is moderate, with daily walks averaging 10–15km over uneven terrain. Some sections involve river crossings and steep ascents, but overall, it's accessible to those with a reasonable fitness level.

Where to stay?

Guesthouses in villages like Sheper, Nderan, and Limar offer home-cooked meals and insight into local life. Many are family-run, with simple yet comfortable rooms and traditional dishes such as byrek and mountain honey. Përmet, the nearest town, has a few hotels for pre- or post-hike stays.

Who to go with?

I undertook my trek with Zbulo! www.zbulo.org which took care of multi-day hike logistics, guide, accommodation with meals included and transport.

demanding full concentration to maintain steady footing. We reached our final destination by late afternoon: a hotel in Përmet's centre. Tired but satisfied, we settled in for a well-earned meal, raising glasses of local wine and raki to four days of discovery, history, and the untamed beauty of the Zagoria Valley.

REFLECTIONS

Spending four days hiking, the Hidden Valley Trek offers a perfect window into Zagoria's diverse landscapes – from towering peaks to cascading waterfalls and fields of wildflowers to sweeping meadows. Equally memorable are the family-run homestays, where warmth and hospitality are as abundant as the homemade food. Here, the personal connections with locals leave a lasting impression, as the people of Zagoria take immense pride in their traditions and culture. Albania's unique history is ever-present on the trail, from Ottoman-era stone bridges to Hoxha's

bunkers, creating a richness to the journey that unfolds on many levels. Every corner of the valley feels like a step back in time, where the past and present intertwine seamlessly.

We often hear the phrase 'hidden gem' thrown around, but Albania's Zagoria Valley is precisely that. Zagoria eagerly welcomes trekkers, unlike many remote places that prefer to remain undiscovered. The locals welcome visitors to experience the valley's untouched beauty, but they hope to balance the influx of tourism in a way that sustains their community. The hope is that more visitors will appreciate the valley's untamed beauty and contribute to preserving a way of life at risk of fading away. This is where life has moved slowly for generations, and the valley's future hinges on the delicate balance between development and preservation.

For now, the trails remain quiet, and the stone villages remain essentially

unchanged. The people of Zagoria are not looking for mass tourism, just enough hikers to keep the old paths walked, the guesthouses occupied, and the rhythms of life intact. They value the land and its traditions far more than short-term profit. The balance is delicate – too few visitors and traditions slip away; too many, and the valley could lose its unique essence. The region's charm lies in its peacefulness and authenticity, which over-tourism pressures could easily overwhelm.

Whether Zagoria will find that balance remains to be seen. However, for those who come now, there's a rare opportunity to step into a world that still moves to the rhythm of the mountains, where hospitality is genuine, and the landscape speaks of centuries past. The journey here is not just about physical exploration but about experiencing a way of life disappearing in many parts of the world. It's a chance to preserve memories of the valley's wild nature and a piece of its soul. [T.M.](#)



Sunrise from the village of Hoshteve