

# Geography of Albania

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Albania, with a total area of 28,750 square kilometers, which is slightly larger than the state of Maryland. It shares a 287-kilometer border with Serbia and Montenegro to the north, a 151-kilometer border with the Republic of Macedonia to the north and east, and a 282-kilometer border with Greece to the south and southeast. Its coastline is 362 kilometers long. The lowlands of the west face the Adriatic Sea and the strategically important Strait of Otranto, which puts less than 100 kilometers of water between Albania and the heel of the Italian "boot" (links Adriatic Sea to Ionian Sea and Mediterranean Sea).

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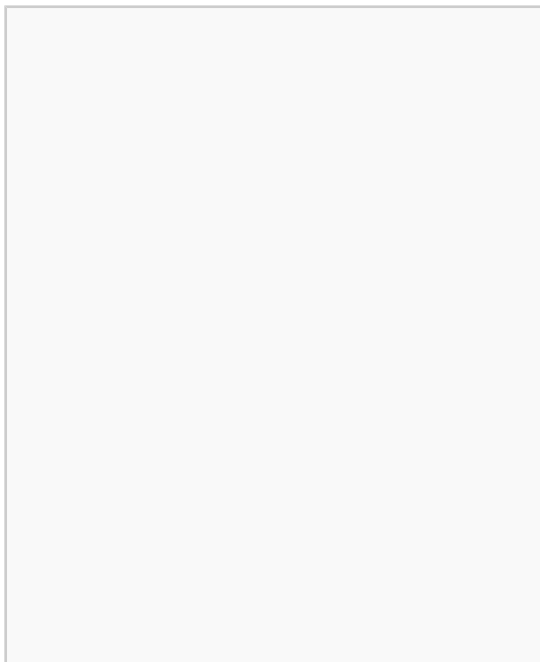
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## Borders





Satellite image of Albania.

With the exception of the coastline, all Albanian borders are artificial. They were established in principle at the 1912-1913 conference of ambassadors in London. The country was occupied by Italian, Serbian, Greek, and French forces during World War I, but the 1913 boundaries were essentially reaffirmed by the victorious states in 1921. The original principle was to define the borders in accordance with the best interests of the Albanian people and the nationalities in adjacent areas. The northern and eastern borders were intended, insofar as possible, to separate the Albanians from the Serbs and Montenegrins; the southeast border was to separate Albanians and Greeks; the valuable western Macedonia lake district was to be divided among the three states-- Albania, Greece, and Yugoslavia --whose populations shared the area. When there was no compromise involving other factors, borderlines were chosen to make the best possible separation of national groups, connecting the best marked physical features available.

Allowance was made for local economic situations, for example, to prevent separation of a

village from its animals' grazing areas or the markets for its produce. Political pressures also were a factor in the negotiations, but the outcome was subject to approval by powers having relatively abstract interests, most of which involved the balance of power rather than specific economic ambitions.

Division of the lake district among three states required that each of them have a share of the lowlands in the vicinity. Such an artificial distribution, once made, necessarily affected the borderlines to the north and south. The border that runs generally north from the lakes, although it follows the ridges of the eastern highlands, stays sixteen to thirty-two kilometers west of the watershed divide. Because negotiators at the London conference declined to use the watershed divide as the northeast boundary of the new state of Albania, Albanian population of Kosovo was incorporated into Serbia.

In Albania's far north and the northeast mountainous sections, the border connects high points and follows mountain ridges through the largely inaccessible North Albanian Alps, known locally as *Bjeshkët e Namunës*. For the most part, there is no natural boundary from the highlands to the Adriatic, although Shkoder Lake and a portion of the Buna River south of it were used to mark Albania's northwest border. From the lake district south and southwest to the Ionian Sea, the country's southeast border goes against the grain of the land, crossing a number of ridges instead of following them.

## Climate

With its coastline facing the Adriatic and Ionian seas, its highlands backed upon the elevated Balkan landmass, and the entire country lying at a latitude subject to a variety of weather patterns during the winter and summer seasons, Albania has a high number of climatic regions for so small an area. The coastal lowlands have typically Mediterranean weather; the highlands have a Mediterranean continental climate. In both the lowlands and the interior, the weather varies markedly from north to south.





Coastline in southern Albania

(Photo by *Marc Morell* (<http://2ie.mpl.ird.fr/mm/albania>))

The lowlands have mild winters, averaging about 7°C. Summer temperatures average 24°C, humidity is high, and the weather tends to be oppressively uncomfortable. In the southern lowlands, temperatures average about five degrees higher throughout the year. The difference is greater than five degrees during the summer and somewhat less during the winter.

Inland temperatures are affected more by differences in elevation than by latitude or any other factor. Low winter temperatures in the mountains are caused by the continental air mass that dominates the weather in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Northerly and northeasterly winds blow much of the time. Average summer temperatures are lower than in the coastal areas and much lower at higher elevations, but daily fluctuations are greater. Daytime maximum temperatures in the interior basins and river valleys are very high, but the nights are almost always cool.

Average precipitation is heavy, a result of the convergence of the prevailing airflow from the Mediterranean Sea and the continental air mass. Because they usually meet at the point where the terrain rises, the heaviest rain falls in the central uplands. Vertical currents initiated when the Mediterranean air is uplifted also cause frequent thunderstorms. Many of these storms are accompanied by high local winds and torrential downpours.

When the continental air mass is weak, Mediterranean winds drop their moisture farther inland. When there is a dominant continental air mass, cold air spills onto the lowland areas, which occurs most frequently in the winter. Because the season's lower temperatures damage olive trees and citrus fruits, groves and orchards are restricted to sheltered places with southern and western exposures, even in areas with high average winter temperatures.

Lowland rainfall averages from 1,000 millimeters to more than 1,500 millimeters annually, with the higher levels in the north. Nearly 95% of the rain falls in the winter.

Rainfall in the upland mountain ranges is heavier. Adequate records are not available, and estimates vary widely, but annual averages are probably about 1,800 millimeters and are as high as 2,550 millimeters in some northern areas. The seasonal variation is not quite as great in the coastal area.

The higher inland mountains receive less precipitation than the intermediate uplands. Terrain differences cause wide local variations, but the seasonal distribution is the most consistent of any area.

## Terrain



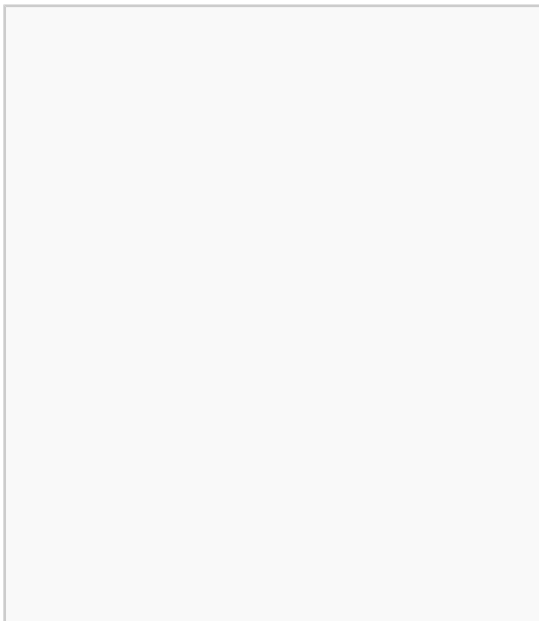
Shaded relief map of Albania.

The 70% of the country that is mountainous is rugged and often inaccessible. The remainder, an alluvial plain, receives precipitation seasonally, is poorly drained, and is alternately arid or flooded. Much of the plain's soil is of poor quality. Far from offering a relief from the difficult interior terrain, the alluvial plain is often as inhospitable as the mountains. Good soil and dependable precipitation, however, are found in intermontane river basins, in the lake district

along the eastern frontier, and in a narrow band of slightly elevated land between the coastal plains and the interior mountains

In the far north, the mountains are an extension of the Dinaric Alps and, more specifically, the Montenegrin limestone plateau. Albania's northern mountains are more folded and rugged, however, than most of the plateau. The rivers have deep valleys with steep sides and arable valley floors. Generally unnavigable, the rivers obstruct rather than encourage movement within the alpine region. Roads are few and poor. Lacking internal communications and external contacts, a tribal society flourished in this area for centuries. Only after World War II were serious efforts made to incorporate the people of the region into Albanian national life. A low coastal belt extends from the northern boundary southward to the vicinity of Vlorë. On average, it extends less than sixteen kilometers inland, but widens to about fifty kilometers in the Elbasan area in central Albania. In its natural state, the coastal belt is characterized by low scrub vegetation, varying from barren to dense. There are large areas of marshlands and other areas of bare, eroded badlands. Where elevations rise slightly and precipitation is regular--in the foothills of the central uplands, for example--the land is highly arable. Marginal land is reclaimed wherever irrigation is possible.

Just east of the lowlands, the central uplands, called Çermenikë by Albanians, are an area of generally moderate elevations, between 305 and 915 meters, with a few points reaching above 1,520 meters. Shifting along the faultline that roughly defines the western edge of the central uplands causes frequent, and occasionally severe, earthquakes.





Mount Çikë in the south

(Photo by *Marc Morell* (<http://2ie.mpl.ird.fr/mm/albania>))

Although rugged terrain and points of high elevation mark the central uplands, the first major mountain range inland from the Adriatic is an area of predominantly serpentine rock (which derives its name from its dull green color and often spotted appearance), extending nearly the length of the country, from the North Albanian Alps to the Greek border south of Korçë.

Within this zone, there are many areas in which sharp limestone and sandstone outcroppings predominate, although the ranges as a whole are characterized by rounded mountains.

The mountains east of the serpentine zone are the highest in Albania, exceeding 2,740 meters in the Mount Korab (*Mali Korabit*) range at Korabi's Peak (*Maja e Korabit*). Together with the North Albanian Alps and the serpentine zone, the eastern highlands are the most rugged and inaccessible of any terrain on the Balkan Peninsula.

The three lakes of easternmost Albania, Lake Ohrid (*Liqeni Ohrit*), Big Prespa Lake (*Prespa e Madhe*), and Small Prespa Lake (*Prespa e Vogël*), are remote and picturesque. Much of the terrain in their vicinity is not overly steep, and it supports a larger population than any other inland portion of the country. Albania's eastern border passes through Lake Ohrid; all but a small tip of Prespa e Vogël is in Greece; and the point at which the boundaries of three states meet is in Lake Prespa. Each of the two larger lakes has a total surface areas of about 260 square kilometers, and Prespa e Vogël is about one-fifth as large. The surface elevation is about

695 meters for Lake Ohrid and 855 meters for the other two lakes.

The southern mountain ranges are more accessible than the serpentine zone, the eastern highlands, or the North Albanian Alps. The transition to the lowlands is less abrupt, and the arable valley floors are wider. Limestone, the predominant mineral, is responsible for the cliffs and clear water of the coastline southeast of Vlorë. Erosion of a blend of softer rocks has provided the sediment that has caused wider valleys to form in the southern mountain area than those characteristic of the remainder of the country. This terrain encouraged the development of larger landholding, thus influencing the social structure of southern Albania.

- Islands
- Lakes
- Mountains
- Rivers
- Seas

## Drainage



River in the south

(Photo by Marc Morell (<http://2ie.mpl.ird.fr/mm/albania>))

Nearly all of the precipitation that falls on Albania drains into the rivers and reaches the coast without even leaving the country. In the north, only one small stream escapes Albania. In the south, an even smaller rivulet drains into Greece. Because the topographical divide is east of the Albanian border with its neighbors, a considerable amount of water from other countries drains through Albania. An extensive portion of the basin of the Drini i Bardhë River (*White Drini*), called Beli Drim by Serbs, basin is in the Metohia area, across Albania's northeastern border. The three eastern lakes that Albania shares with its neighboring countries, as well as the



streams that flow into them, drain into the Drini i Zi River (*Black Drini*). The watershed divide in the south also dips nearly seventyfive kilometers into Greece at one point. Several tributaries of the Vjosa River rise in that area.

With the exception of the Drini i Zi River, which flows northward and drains nearly the entire eastern border region before it turns westward to the sea, most of the rivers in northern and central Albania flow fairly directly westward to the sea. In the process, they cut through the ridges rather than flow around them. This apparent geological impossibility occurs because the highlands originally were lifted without much folding. The streams came into existence at that time. The compression and folding of the plateau into ridges occurred later. The folding process was rapid enough in many instances to dam the rivers temporarily. The resulting lakes existed until their downstream channels became wide enough to drain them. This sequence created the many interior basins that are typically a part of the Albanian landform. During the lifetime of the temporary lakes, enough sediment was deposited in them to form the basis for fertile soils. Folding was rarely rapid enough to force the streams into radically different channels.

The precipitous fall from higher elevations and the highly irregular seasonal flow patterns that are characteristic of nearly all streams in the country reduce the economic value of the streams. They erode the mountains and deposit the sediment that created the lowlands and continues to augment them, but the rivers flood when there is local rainfall. When the lands are parched and need irrigation, the rivers usually are dry. Their violence when they are full makes them difficult to control, and they are unnavigable. The Buna River is an exception. It is dredged between Shkodër and the Adriatic Sea and can be negotiated by small ships. In contrast to their history of holding fast to their courses in the mountains, the rivers constantly change channels on the lower plains, making waste of much of the land they create.

The Drini River is the largest and most constant stream. Fed by melting snows from the northern and eastern mountains and by the more evenly distributed seasonal precipitation of that area, its flow does not have the extreme variations characteristic of nearly all other rivers in the country. Its normal flow varies seasonally by only about one-third. Along its length of about 282 kilometers, it drains nearly 5,957 square kilometers within Albania. As it also

collects from the Adriatic portion of Kosovo's watersheds and the three border lakes (Big Prespa Lake drains to Lake Ohrid via an underground stream), its total basin encompasses about 15,540 square kilometers.

The Semani and Vjosa are the only other rivers that are more than 160 kilometers long and have basins larger than 2,600 square kilometers. These rivers drain the southern regions and, reflecting the seasonal distribution of rainfall, are torrents in winter and nearly dry in the summer, in spite of their length. This variable nature also characterizes the many shorter streams. In the summer, most of them carry less than a tenth of their winter averages, if they are not altogether dry.

Although the sediment carried by the mountain torrents continues to be deposited, new deposits delay exploitation. Stream channels rise as silt is deposited in them and eventually become higher than the surrounding terrain. Shifting channels frustrate development in many areas. Old channels become barriers to proper drainage and create swamps or marshlands. It is difficult to build roads or railroads across the lowlands or otherwise use the land.

## Statistics



Geographic Coordinates:

41° 00' N, 20° 00' E

Map References:

Europe

Area:

- Total: 28,748 km<sup>2</sup>
- Land: 27,398 km<sup>2</sup>
- Water: 1,350 km<sup>2</sup>

Area comparative:

- Australia comparative: about a third of the size of Tasmania
- Canada comparative: about half the size of Nova Scotia
- United Kingdom comparative: slightly larger than Wales
- United States comparative: slightly smaller than Maryland

Land boundaries:

- Total: 720 km border
- Greece 282 km
- The Republic of Macedonia 151 km
- Serbia and Montenegro 287 km (114 km with Serbia, 173 km with Montenegro)

Coastline:

362 km

#### Maritime Claims:

- Continental shelf: 200-m depth or to the depth of exploitation
- Territorial sea: 12 nm

#### Elevation extremes:

- Lowest point: Adriatic Sea 0 m
- Highest point: Korab's Peak on Mount Korab (*Maja e Korabit* on *Mali Korabit*) in Golem 2,753 m

#### Natural resources:

Petroleum, natural gas, coal, chromium, copper, timber, nickel, hydropower

#### Land Use:

- Arable land: 21%
- Permanent crops: 5%
- Permanent pastures: 15%
- Forests and woodland: 38%
- Other: 21% (1993 est.)

#### Irrigated land:

3,400 km<sup>2</sup> (1998 est.)

#### Natural hazards:

Destructive earthquakes; tsunamis occur along southwestern coast

#### Environmental issues:

Deforestation, soil erosion, water pollution from industrial and domestic effluents

#### International Agreements:

- Party to: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Hazardous Wastes, Ozone Layer Protection, Wetlands
- Signed, but not ratified: none of the selected agreements

## References

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*Much of the material in this article comes from the CIA World Factbook 2000 of Albania.*

## See also

- Tourism in Albania
- List of cities in Albania

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