



climbing, fishing, excursions and trekking throughout the valley and streams (Cerremi, Kukaj), and canoeing along certain parts of the river. Valbona may also serve as a starting point if you wish to climb the Jezerca Mountain, the second highest mountain in Albania.

The National Park of Thethi

In the park people often amuse themselves by hiking, mountain climbing, skiing (especially on the eastern slope), fishing, even mountain biking and spelunking. Almost 90% of the park area is covered by beech trees, providing shade for many different types of flowers such as the Wulfenia Baldacci, discovered by the Italian botanist Baldacci. Fascinatingly, this flower is found only in Thethi. The fauna is just as rich as the flora, distinguished by the famed Golden Eagle and Rriqebulli (lynx). In the waters of the Stream of Thethi, marble trout make their home. While in Thethi you can stay in local hostels designed to display traditional alpine architecture. The characteristic dish of the area is fërliku (baked meat) or sample one of a large varieties of local trout. If time permits, many travelers enjoy a short excursion to the valley of the Shala River which brings them close to the heart of the Alps. Another interesting spot of the Western Alps is Vermoshi, part of the northern-most mountains of the country, located 95 km from Shkodra in the region of Kelmendi (from the Roman word "Clemens," meaning gentle, simple, and good). The first striking attraction along the journey is Qafa e Rrapshit, where you can

see the crystal-clear waters of the Cemi River which create a beautiful contrast with the surrounding landscape. During summer, the ponds of the river are perfect for sunbathing and many visitors stop to enjoy the sun. Vermoshi stands in an alpine field 1,100 m above sea level surrounded by high slopes. You can enjoy trekking, mountain climbing, skiing, or you can also go fishing for the mountain trout. The locals pride themselves that their cuisine is only truly enjoyable for visitors when prepared with their own dairy products. The zone is also known for its characteristic regional cooking, with specialties such as "mazja", "flija" (a many layered pancake-like dish cooked outdoors over open coals and steamed, often served with local honey), and "pitja". The Valbona River Valley lies in the eastern part of the Albanian Alps. A national park of 8,000 hectares, it is one of the most beautiful natural areas in Albania. The park lies about 22 km away from the alpine city of Bajram Curri.

Before entering the valley you will find the spring (vrellen) of Shoshan, located only 3 km away from Bajram Curri. This spring rushes through limestone fissures on its way to the Valbona River creating an attractive canyon 2-3 m wide and 50 m deep. After entering the valley, you will pass several picturesque villages. The first one, with alpine style houses, is called Dragobia, and it is here that the valley narrows. Past Dragobia, at the foot of the mountain where the Cerremi stream joins the Valbona River, there is the famous cave

where the national hero Bajram Curri was besieged and killed. It was after this event that the city took his name. Valbona (or Selimaj) is located 25 km away from the city of Bajram Curri and it is the most important inhabited center of the valley. It is full of traditional houses that create a picturesque view in symmetry with the natural wonders of the valley, which widens again at this point. In Selimaj, there is a comfortable and traditional hotel for the tourists to accommodate, or you have the opportunity to stay at a village home, as the inhabitants' generosity and hospitality are well known. Beyond Selimaj, the road continues through the valley among marvelous views of nature with rich colors of both springtime and of the snow that covers the peaks of the craggy mountains. The final village before you arrive at the source of the Valbona River is Rrogam. Rrogam is a remote village surrounded by the virgin and intact nature. The entire valley is resplendent with rare colors and beauty. On one side, you see the crystal clear waters of the Valbona, and on the other the sharp but verdant mountain edges. Until May you can enjoy the contrast of the clean white snow on the treetops against the blue sky. The rest consists of beech woods, walnuts, chestnuts, and wild apple trees. There are also many forest fruits such as blueberries and strawberries.



THE ALPS



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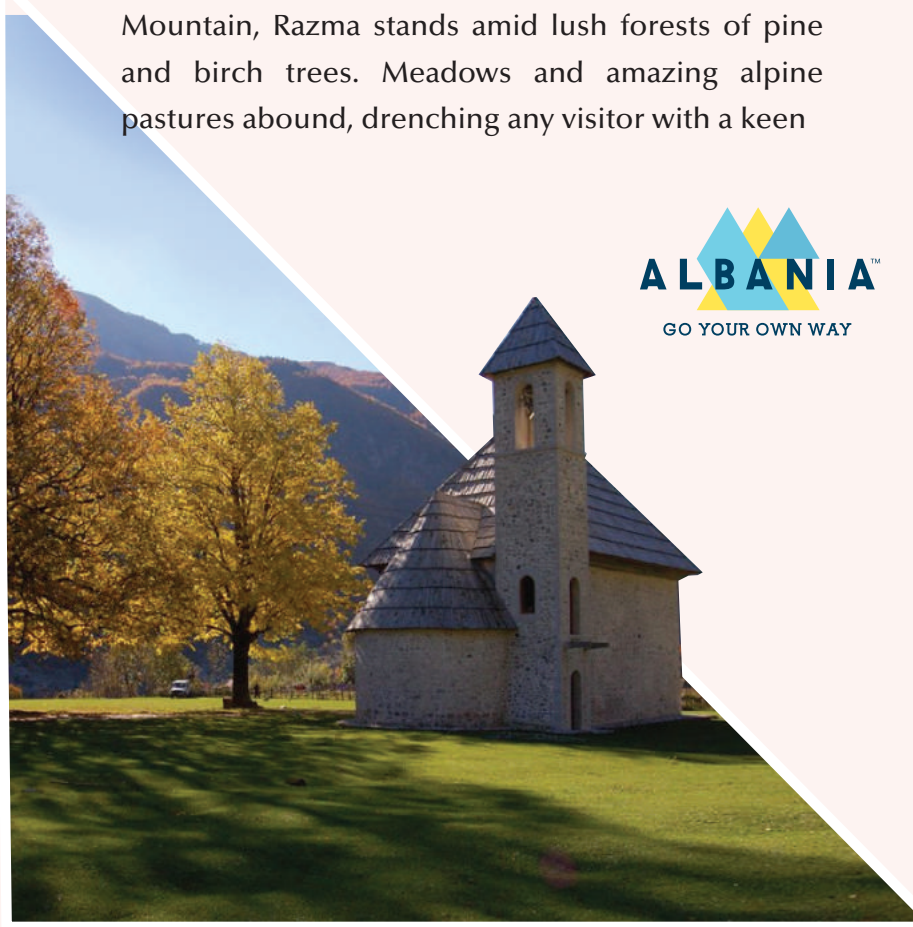
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An alpine tour of Albania isn't complete without a stop at the famous Western Alps, (or Alpet Perëndimore). Here you will enjoy the unique opportunity to walk, breath, sleep, and eat amidst the legends dating from Homer and through modern tales of our majestic mystery and intrigue. This tour gives you the rare chance to enjoy the heart of the Albanian Alps, Gropa e Thethit. The journey begins from the cultural capital of Shkodra and wanders 41 km away to the village of Razma. Situated on a blackberry hill at the feet of the Veleçik Mountain, Razma stands amid lush forests of pine and birch trees. Meadows and amazing alpine pastures abound, drenching any visitor with a keen



eye in the beauty of the Balkans. Even in the depths of winter when the snow drifts to its highest level of the season, adventure tourists visit Razma. Several hotels already exist and others are being completed. Common activities on the excursions are mountain climbing, skiing, and, weather permitting, camping. The road turns from Razma to the village of Dedaj and then towards Boga, a village surrounded by the Alps and described by Edith Durham in her book, "The Burden of the Balkans." It is here that the wealthy families of Shkodra built their houses and villas to rest and escape the city before the Second World War. Boga is the perfect place for mountain climbing, skiing, and cave spelunking. Among the most famous caves, visitors often delve into the Cave of Mulliri (Mill), Akulllore (Ice Cream), and Njerëzve të lagun (Wet People). The Cave of Puci is one of the most attractive, situated 1,087m above the sea level and 5 km deep. This cave is rich in stalactites, stalagmites, and wall veils, and branches into many different levels, five alone at the center. Passing through its curved galleries you can walk into the next cave, the Cave of Husi. After Boga, you can find one of the most popular tourist spot of the entire area, Thethi. Located 70 km from Shkodra, you have to pass Qafa e Tërthores at 2,000 m. above the sea level before descending to "Gropa e Thethit" by



crossing a stream bearing the same name. It is a journey you will want to have your camera ready for, full of long views from the mountains, with water cascading down craggy hillsides and trees struggling for sunlight on the rocky slopes. The area is rich in attractive sights like the waterfall of Grunas, 30 m high,

the amazing cold-water sources of Okol, and the caves of Birrat me Rrathë (Round Holes) and Arapi. The animals in the park include bears, wolves, wild cats, and even herds of wild goats climbing on the rocks. The marble trout, a rare fish, can be found in the crystal-clear waters of the Valbona. It has a special and exquisite taste. The valley, the park, and all the surroundings are known for the heavy snowfall, which starts in early November and lasts almost until May. The average amount of snow in this region during the year is 100 cm. There are many outdoor activities organized in the national park, such as skiing, mountain

