

## ADVENTURE &amp; TRAVEL



**EMPIRE BUILDINGS** The historic center of Gjirokastra, where many dwellings date back to the Ottoman period. Below right: The garden at Taverna Kuka.

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# An Ottoman Time Capsule

Pashas and other iron fists once ruled this Albanian 'City of Stone.' Now preservationists are taking the lead

BY CATHRYN DRAKE

**GJIROKA STRA**, in southern Albania, may not be the most obvious destination for a late-summer European getaway. But this hill town of 66,000 is immensely charming and affordable and a two-hour drive from the fine beaches of the Albanian coast. Still not convinced? A veritable time capsule, Gjirokastra served as a trading hub for some 500 years under the Ottoman empire (1385 to 1912) and the setting for a real-life game of thrones. Throw in a medieval castle, a Communist-era underground bunker and a U.S. "spy plane," and Gjirokastra might just be the most intriguing small town you've never heard of.

The weekend I spent in Gjirokastra, I stayed in the Babameto House, set just beneath the hulking Gothic citadel. Although the accommodations are austere (even the private rooms have shared baths), the structure is anything but. A 19th-century Ottoman kullë ("tower") house, with elegant rows of windows and warm wooden interiors, Babameto is the latest of many historic restorations undertaken in the last decade by the nonprofit Gjirokastra Foundation.

I met the foundation's executive director, Sadi Petrela, upon my arrival at Babameto, and we took in the panorama beyond the garden walls: fairy-tale palaces arrayed on the surrounding hills, an 18th-century minaret hovering above a patchwork of slate roofs, and, farther off, stark mountain ridges. The foundation has spearheaded over 50 projects, including rehabilitation of the cobblestone streets and revitalization of the bazaar in the Old Town, nicknamed the "City of

Stone" for the hundreds of rock-hewn buildings. The grandest project may be the Zekate House, an 1811 mansion, now a museum, where visitors can wander the ornate period interior. As Mr. Petrela and I strolled over to Zekate, on the other side of town from Babameto, he felt compelled, per local custom, to chat with each person he knew along the way—which was nearly everyone. I noticed few foreign tourists during my visit to Gjirokastra. After a couple of days, even the women hanging out on stoops and the men nursing Turkish coffee at cafes greeted me like a local.

Zekate House originally belonged to a high official of the notorious warlord Ali Pasha. Ali seized Gjirokastra and made it a stronghold for his rebellion against the Ottoman regime, only to be executed by order of the Sultan. Built during this time of civil unrest and merciless banditry, Zekate was constructed like a fortress, with thick stone walls, massive reinforced doors and small windows. In the living quarters, on the top floors, sits a sumptuous reception salon with low-lying divans lining the walls, soaring carved-wood ceilings, and a grand fireplace adorned with an intricate floral motif echoed in the wall frescoes. After Mr. Petrela and I toured Zekate, we sat down for coffee with the Džekos, the elderly couple who inherited and manage the house. "The small building where they live now was for the servants," Mr. Petrela said. After the Communist regime nationalized the mansion, he explained, the Zekate family was reduced to poverty.

Indeed, the Communists took over many historic buildings in Gjirokastra; upon the party's fall, in 1991, all were returned to the families who owned them. The founda-

tion isn't just working to return these buildings to their former glory. Integral to each project is a business plan that will hopefully entice family members, many of whom have left to seek work abroad, to return to their hometown. The Babameto House, for example, will be turned over to the owners next year, once it generates enough income as a hostel to repay renovation costs. "We want to demonstrate to the owners that these houses can produce money and have a promising future," Mr. Petrela said.

Gjirokastra's Communist past is being preserved, too. The next day, Mr. Petrela invited me to join a tour of the Cold War Museum, which opened in 2014 after various bureaucratic struggles. The museum encompasses a labyrinthine bunker built in secrecy in the 1970s and only discovered decades later. This musty network of tunnels connects some 80 rooms, still labeled with their official functions and filled with corroded metal furniture.

The evolution of the vast fortress looming above the bunker embodies the vicissitudes of Balkan history. Ali Pasha and King Zog, Albania's ruler in the early 20th century, expanded the structure during their reigns and used it as a prison, as did the Nazis and Communists, who also used it as torture chambers, until as late as 1963. Now the National Armaments Museum, it houses an impressive collection of World War II artillery, including a U.S. Air Force "spy plane" captured in 1957. "When we built the museum up in the castle, we were accused by the government of corruption and being nostalgic of Communism," Mr. Petrela said. "But it is a very important part of our history, absolutely."

The castle serves as a festive space too. The evening I was there,

the outdoor stage hosted a concert by the raucous brass band Fanfara Tirana and popular singer Hysni Zela—a fusion of syncopated Balkan and rock rhythms accented by flourishes of clarinet. I joined in on the exuberant circle dances that erupted spontaneously among the youthful audience and faked it rather well.

The flutter of lace curtains

greeted me as I awoke at Babameto the next morning. Looking out at the Ottoman palaces dotting the hills, I remembered a passage written in 1933 by British travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor. Gjirokastra, he wrote, was "immeasurably old and at the same time brand new and totally unknown." Nearly 100 years later, the description still holds true.



## THE LOWDOWN // TOURING GJIROKA STRA, ALBANIA

**Getting There** Fly into Albania's capital, Tirana, and rent a car or take a furgon (minibus) for the four-hour drive south.

**Staying There** Babameto House, a restored Ottoman palace, functions as both hostel and hotel with double rooms and a dorm room (from about \$30 a night for a double room, facebook.com/BabametoHouse). In the Old Town, Kalem 2 occupies a recently converted building that's more than 300 years old; it offers splendid views and spacious rooms (from about \$54 a night, kalemihotels.com). The simpler Kalem Hotel, farther uphill, is in another restored centuries-

old structure (from about \$41, kalemihotels.com).

**Eating There** Taverna Kuka serves excellent local specialties such as the midhje (fried mussels) and qifqi (herbed rice balls fried with an egg) in a trellised garden (Rruga Astrit Karagjozi).

**Shopping There** At GjiroArt, on the main street of the bazaar area, you can find embroidered homewares, handwoven carpets and blankets, and other items made by local artisans, many of whom cooperate with the Gjirokastra Foundation's artisan training program (gjirokastra.org/gjiroart/design.html).



## SOUVENIR

**GOLDEN ARCHES** The Una Storia ring from Florence's Aika Fushimi boutique.



QUARANTOTTO

## FLORENTINE FLOURISHES TO-GO

Traveler keepsakes from artisan jewelers inspired by Florence's medieval past

**FOR A GOLDEN** memento of Florence, head for the jewelry shops that famously line the Ponte Vecchio—and don't set foot in any of them. Bypass the bridge, the tour groups and the flashy international brands for an austere stone building tucked into an alley across the Lungarno degli Acciaiuoli (the street along the Arno's north bank). The medieval walls of 2 Vicolo Marzio, once a convent, now enclose the workshops of more than 20 *orafi* and *incassatore*—traditional Florentine goldsmiths and engravers.

On the ground floor is Nerdì Orafi, a family-owned outfit whose modest atelier turns out custom jewels—artfully mismatched emerald earrings, engraved signet rings—for connoisseurs and Italian aristocrats. But Nerdì also fashions ready-to-wear pieces, including Etruscan-inspired hammered chains and flowery Renaissance-influenced bracelets. Their most popular pieces are the understated florin pendants. Replicas of the Florentine gold

coins that dominated European trade for centuries, the necklace charms have the city's fleur-de-lis badge on one side, and its patron saint, John the Baptist, on the other. The large 18k gold version—sized between a nickel and a quarter—costs about \$322; silver costs a tenth the price. *Vicolo Marzio, 2, nerdiorafifirenze.it*

For a more whimsical take on the past, cross the river to the Oltrarno quarter, where locals outnumber tourists and where Japanese jeweler Aika Fushimi opened her Quarantotto boutique two years ago. Ms. Fushimi's signature piece, the Una Storia ring (about \$2,050), mimics the arches of the hushed courtyard of the Basilica di Santa Croce. A man and a woman stand between tiny gold columns. It could be a tryst, it could be a first encounter. Or maybe they're just two more tourists, falling in love with Florence. *Via Maggio, 6, www.quarantotto.co.jp.*

—Sara Clemence