



A BRIDGE TO SMART TOURISM  
FROM LEZHA TO GJAKOVA

# Tradition, Culture, Nature & Hospitality



**Bridging Tourism through Cultural Heritage  
and Smart Solutions in Lezha and Gjakova**

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creative business solutions

Lezha and Gjakova together form a rich cultural, historical, and natural itinerary that connects two cities with deep Albanian heritage, warm hospitality, and a strong shared regional identity.

This cross-border tourism product aims to promote a unique visitor experience, offering history, gastronomy, craftsmanship, agritourism, and breathtaking landscapes.

## **LEZHA – A JOURNEY THROUGH HISTORY AND CULTURE**

Lezha has existed since ancient times as an Illyrian settlement. The earliest construction walls date back to the 6th century BC. The city once had two gates: Nimpheum (Shëngjin) and Oldrin on the Drin River. In 48 BC, during the conflict between Pompey and Mark Antony, the fleet of the latter landed in Shëngjin. Meanwhile, the Castle of Lezha was built in the 8th century on the foundations of the old Acropolis.

Today, beyond its ancient history, Lezha represents an attractive tourist destination that blends sea, mountains, culture, and traditional gastronomy.

**Lezha Castle** The Castle rises at the eastern edge of the city, positioned atop a hill overlooking the Drin Valley and the coastal lowlands.

It has Illyrian origins and is documented among the reconstruction projects of Emperor Justinian the Great in the 6th century.

In 1440, the Venetians reconstructed the Castle, and in 1522 it underwent another rebuilding after the Ottoman conquest.

Within the Castle you can clearly identify Illyrian, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman architectural traces. Notable elements include Ottoman building remains, a mosque, the southeastern tower with its Roman arch, and the Illyrian tower on the southern wall.



**Fig. 1** View from the southern side of the Castle

**The Archaeological Museum** was built in 2025 at the entrance of the Castle area. It exhibits artifacts from different historical periods, from early antiquity to the Middle Ages, including amphorae, spearheads, engraved stone blocks, and many other findings that reflect the development of the region throughout history.

The museum also offers audio and video information related to other sites along the Lezha–Gjakova itinerary, including historical and cultural monuments, natural landscapes, and agritourism businesses where visitors can enjoy nature and traditional regional cuisine.

**Fig. 2 Limestone block** with a Roman inscription that provides information about Roman administrative and construction practices in the Illyrian provinces during the time of Julius Caesar.



**Fig. 3 Amphorae** from the 2nd century BC to the 1st century AD, used in the maritime transport of wine, olive oil, and other food products.



**Fig. 4 Spearheads** From left to right: A bronze spearhead from the Late Bronze Age (12th–9th century BC); an iron spearhead from the Archaic–Classical Period (7th–5th century BC); an iron spearhead from the Hellenistic Period (4th–2nd century BC).



## Skanderbeg Memorial – St. Nicholas Cathedral

“The journey through the history of Lezha continues into the Middle Ages with the Memorial of Skanderbeg – the Cathedral of St. Nicholas, one of the most important monuments of Albanian identity.

It was here, on March 2nd, 1444, that the League of Lezhë was founded, the defining event of the political and military unification of the Arbër. The Assembly of Lezhë brought together Albanian principalities from north to south, including the Kastrioti, Arianiti, Dukagjini, Balsha, Muzaka, Topia, Zaharia, Gropa, Spana, Dushmani, and the Prince of Montenegro.

This union constituted a remarkable example of solidarity among small principalities—something not achieved even in larger European states—and for 25 years it successfully resisted the powerful Ottoman armies led by Sultan Murad II and Mehmed II.



**Fig. 5 Skanderbeg Memorial**

**St. Premte Church – Balldren**, Officially known as St. Paraskevi, this church in Balldren is located 5 km from the city of Lezha. Built in a Romanesque-Gothic style, it is believed to have been constructed in the 12th–13th century. The church underwent a restoration thought to date to the year 1462, according to an inscription placed on the exterior side of the apse.



**Fig. 6 Church View**



**Fig. 7 The Last Supper Fresco**

## LEZHA – NATURE, PEACE & RURAL ESCAPE

“The Lezha area is known for its natural beauty, where in relatively short distances you can move from the sea to the mountains, from the lagoon to the river, and from the plains to the hills, and together with nature enjoy relaxation, traditional cuisine, and local products served with passion in agro-tourism farms or rural guesthouses.

**Kune–Vain Lagoon** The Kune–Vain Managed Nature Reserve is the first protected area in Albania, designated in 1940. This natural complex, formed at the mouth of the Drin River, consists of several lagoons and includes marine, lagoon, marsh, forest, and meadow habitats. The reserve is known for its natural value and rich biodiversity, hosting more than 360 animal species, around 190 of which are listed in Albania’s Red List of threatened species.

An ideal place for walks, photography, and relaxation in nature — just a few kilometers from Lezha.



**Fig. 8 Lagoon**



**Fig. 9 Flamingos**

**Rana e Hedhun** It is a unique tourist attraction located at the foothills of Mount Renci, about 15 km from Lezha. This natural monument represents a sand dune approximately 600 meters long and 50 meters high, formed by the action of the wind on the rocky coastline. In addition to its popular sandy beach and clear waters, this landscape has made it one of the most photographed destinations in northwestern Albania.



**Fig. 10 Rana e Hedhun ( Thrown Sand)**



**Fig.11 Coastline at Rana e Hedhun (Thrown Sand)**

## **AGROTURIZM & GASTRONOMY IN LEZHA**

In Lezha, you cannot limit yourself to admiring only the historical, cultural, or natural values of the area. The full pleasure of visiting this region is inseparable from its well-known Mediterranean cuisine and its fresh local products. Seafood, artisanal cheeses, organic vegetables, and local wines are all part of Lezha's gastronomic identity.

The Hunting Lodge Hotel in Ishull-Lezhë has a special history beyond that of ordinary hotels. Built in 1936 by the Italians to promote tourism and serve enthusiasts of hunting, the hotel also includes a building connected to the name of Count Galeazzo Ciano, who served as Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs (1936–1943). In 1940, the area where the hotel was built was declared a hunting reserve, making it the first protected area in Albania.



**Fig. 12 Hunting Hotel**

**The rural area of Lezha** is experiencing the rise and development of agro-tourism and rural tourism. Traditional food is being transformed into an art through improved preparation quality, service, and especially the diversification of products.



**Fig. 13 Mrizi i Zanave (18 km from Lezha)**



**Fig. 14 Trendafilii Mistik (9.8 km from Lezha)**



**Fig. 15 Hylli i Drites (13 km from Lezha)**



**Fig. 16 Oazi (18 km from Lezha)**

## PRODUCTION AND TASTING OF WINE

The Lezha area is home to several wineries whose wine quality is steadily improving, with the largest being Atdheu Winery, Mrizi i Zanave Winery, and Kallmeti Winery in the village of Kallmet. In this region, you can find wine produced entirely from the Kallmet grape, an indigenous Albanian variety cultivated in its place of origin.



Fig. 17 Winery Kallmeti (13 km from Lezha)



Fig. 18 Winery Atdheu (12 km from Lezha)

## ARTISAN CRAFTS IN LEZHA

Rural craftsmanship has preserved the traditions of weaving, carpets, woodwork, and processing of agricultural products. The items designed and produced by local artisan studios—such as Artistike Zadrime, Colors of Zadrime, and Vasili Ceramic Studio—stand out for their simplicity and authenticity.

To better understand the value of the area's craftsmanship, you should not miss a visit to the city's Ethnographic Museum. After a long period of closure, the museum reopened on October 23, 2019. It exhibits 315 objects in a wide collection that includes, among other things, traditional clothing from various ethnographic regions such as Zadrime, Mirdita, Kallmet, Pllana, and parts of the city of Lezha.



Fig. 19 Handicrafts



Fig. 20 Ethnographic Museum



## GJAKOVA – THE HEART OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

“Gjakova is the center of artisan craftsmanship and one of the cities with the richest cultural and spiritual traditions in Kosovo.

The history of Gjakova and its surroundings traces back to antiquity, with archaeological discoveries showing evidence of early Illyrian settlements. However, the city’s greatest development occurred during the Ottoman period, when it transformed into an important economic and cultural center.

Gjakova itself was established as a city in the 16th century and became well known for its Grand Bazaar, which served as a major commercial hub in the Balkans.

The urban development of Gjakova is also described by the Turkish traveler Dervish Mehmed Zillî, known as Evliya Çelebi, who passed through the city in 1663. According to him, during that time Gjakova had, among other things, 2,000 houses, two monumental mosques, and 300 shops.

## GJAKOVA – A JOURNEY INTO MEDIEVAL HERITAGE

Gjakova cannot be understood without the Grand Bazaar, also known as the Old Bazaar, the oldest bazaar in Kosovo. It was burned and destroyed during the 1999 war but was later reconstructed. The bazaar covers an area of approximately 65,000 m<sup>2</sup>, and along its length there are around 500 shops.



Fig. 21 Carshia e Madhe



**Fig. 22 The Hadum Mosque**, built in the 16th century, renowned for its artistic decorations and spiritual significance.



**Fig. 26 Hani i Haraqisë Complex** is located near the Hadum Mosque. Ami Boué mentioned in 1835 the beautiful inn of Haraqia and that of Islam Aga in Gjakova.

Meanwhile, in 1838, Müller referenced the inn and the large caravanserai of Gjakova, which accommodated up to 100 guests—merchants along with their animals. Today, the inn serves as a hotel facility and is used for various events.



**Fig. 24 The Church of St. Paul and St. Peter** was built in 1917. It was completely destroyed during the 1999 war. A new cathedral was constructed on the same site.



**Fig. 25 The Clock Tower**, built after the Hadum Mosque. This tower, which was destroyed during the Balkan Wars, was later reconstructed. Built mainly of stone, with a wooden observation section and lead-covered roofs, the clock tower is unique of its kind



**Fig. 23 Tabakëve Bridge** - An iconic bridge 127 meters long and 4.03 meters wide, built in the 17th century with carved stone over the Erenik River.

## NATURAL BEAUTIES

Like many other Albanian regions, Gjakova offers a diverse range of natural landscapes that attract not only for their unique features but also for visitors who enjoy outdoor sports.



**Fig. 27 The Kusar Cave** is located in a rugged terrain in the Pashtrik Mountains, near the village of Kusar, which is believed to be one of the earliest settlements in the Gjakova area



**Fig. 28 Shkugza Park** is a recreational area and protected landscape in the southern part of Gjakova, stretching between two hills separated by the small Shlepica River, at an elevation of 410–460 meters above sea level.



**Fig. 29 The White Drin Canyon** is relatively short, about 900 meters long, with a depth of 45 meters. At the entrance of the canyon stands the Fshajt Bridge, an old Ottoman bridge.

## ARTISAN CRAFTS IN GJAKOVA

Gjakova is known for its filigree work, wood carving, traditional textiles, copper crafting, and musical instruments. Artisan craftsmanship dates back to the very beginnings of the city. Visitors can admire these works along the shops of the Old Bazaar. For those who wish to connect the historical tradition of craftsmanship with its modern-day continuation, the Oda e Zejtareve Museum located in the Grand Bazaar offers this opportunity.



**Fig. 30** Traditional costume of Reka e Keqe, reworked in 2010.



**Fig. 31** working knives from iron



**Fig. 32** Bridal head ornament made of filigree – 1960.



**Fig. 33** Bridal lira (coin) holder – 1950.



**Fig. 34 Old wall clock from the 19th century.**



**Fig. 35 Wall tapestry – handcrafted embroidery on canvas – 1990.**



**Fig. 36 The Craft Museum 'Oda e Zejtareve'.**



**Fig. 37 Ethnographic Museum.**

## AGROTOURISM IN GJAKOVA

Gjakova is known for several of its signature dishes, such as flija, pitet, Gjakovar kebab, Gjakovar casserole with vegetables and meat, samuna with suxhuk, and syrup-based desserts. Traditional food can be enjoyed both in the city and in the surrounding rural areas. The fatigue that comes from visiting historical sites or hiking in nature will fade away after a good meal of traditional dishes and the warm Gjakovar hospitality.



This document has been prepared by the project 'Connecting the tourism bridges between Lezha and Gjakova through cultural heritage and smart solutions', supported by the IPA 2014–2020 Albania–Kosovo Cross-Border Cooperation Programme.

