

MEDITERRANEAN CRUISES DISCOVER ALBANIA



Twenty-five years after the fall of the communist regime, Albania, for the first time, has been included in the itinerary of Mediterranean cruises.

Last week, a MSC ship with 3,000 passengers on board arrived to the port of the city of Saranda, in the southern part of the country. The mayor of Saranda, Florjana Koka, welcomed guests from Japan, Mexico, Argentina, Norway, Austria, France, Germany and Spain. The great length of the ship, 294 meters, prevented it from docking at the port, so it had to dock at bay.

Koka asserted that **the cruise arrival is an “important event” for this small city of 20,000 people.** The cruise line plans the stops in Saranda until November this year. It is expected that the tourist revenue of the city will increase which will boost local economy as well as improve the image of the country internationally.

Mediterranean cruises have never included Albania in the itinerary. The new route is expected to draw the attention of many travelers.

A group of guests enjoyed the splendid view of the Albanese Riviera, where there is an abundance of coves and unspoiled islands bathed with the crystalline waters of the Ionian Sea.

The Saranda coast, known for its antiquity as Onquesmo -in Greek “Agiou Saranta” and in Italian “Santi Quaranta,” in reference to the Byzantine monastery of the same name, is one of the main touristic destinations for beach and sun in Albania.

Other guests strolled through the ruins of the Fifth Century Temple and the medieval castle of Lekures, where musicians, dressed in traditional garb, surprised them with a concert of Albanian songs and dances.

A third group of cruise passengers, passionate for history, preferred to visit the old town of Butrint, an open air museum that preserves Hellenic, Roman, Byzantine and Venetian ruins in the middle of nature, and the ruins of Gjirokastra, both declared as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO.

The Port of Saranda has been selected this year as a stop of this Mediterranean cruise together with Venice and Bari; and the Greek cities of Mikonos and Katakolon, and the Croatian city of Dubrovnik, classic destinations of tourist routes.

Albania, a Mediterranean country of three million people, was visited last year by 4.7 million tourists who brought to the economy of one of the poorest countries in Europe 1,500 million Euros, 7% of their gross domestic product.

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