

THE PEAKS OF THE BALKANS TRAIL

**MONTENEGRO, ALBANIA
AND KOSOVO**



About the Author

Rudolf Abraham (www.rudolfabraham.co.uk) is an award-winning travel writer and photographer specialising in Central and Southeast Europe. He is the author of over 10 books, including the first comprehensive English-language hiking guidebooks to Montenegro and Croatia, and his work is published widely in magazines. He first visited the mountainous borderlands of Montenegro and Albania in 2004, having already lived and worked in neighbouring Croatia in the late 1990s – and has been a frequent visitor to this little-known corner of Europe ever since.

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MONTENEGRO, ALBANIA
AND KOSOVO

by Rudolf Abraham

CICERONE

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For Tamara and Ivana

Updates to this guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/770/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly Javailable data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although naturally we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal LA9 7RL, United Kingdom.

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Front cover: Maja Kolata from the 4WD road above Çeremi, Albania (Stage 3)

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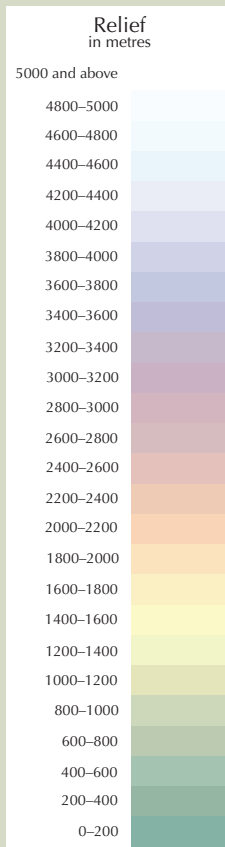
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Acknowledgements

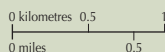
First and foremost I would like to thank Endrit Shima and Ricardo Fahrig at Zbulo and Vlatko Bulatović at Zalaz for all their help, support and enthusiasm during the time I researched and wrote this guide, for which I am extremely grateful. It's people like you who help make this such an amazing part of the world to visit, so a very sincere *faleminderit shumë* and *mnogo vam hvala* to all three of you. Thanks are also due to Ahmet Reković in Plav, Pavlin Polia and family in Theth, Vucija Martić in Plav, Armend Alija and family in Babino polje, Montor Bojku in Pejë, Emma and Ben Heywood in Virpazar, Hayley Wright in Herceg Novi, and Nicky Brown at Black Sheep and Germania for generously providing flights to Pristina on my last trip to Prokletije. And to my wife Ivana, with whom I first fell in love with Prokletije in the early noughties.

Symbols used on route maps

	route
	alternative route
	connecting route
	start point/finish point
	track
	4x4 vehicle track
	tarmac road
	woodland
	urban areas
	international border
	disputed border
	peak
	katun (shepherd's hut/ summer settlement)
	restaurant
	café/bar (drinks only)
	hotel/guesthouse
	building
	church/cemetery/mosque
	cave
	pass
	water feature/spring
	bus stop
	campsite

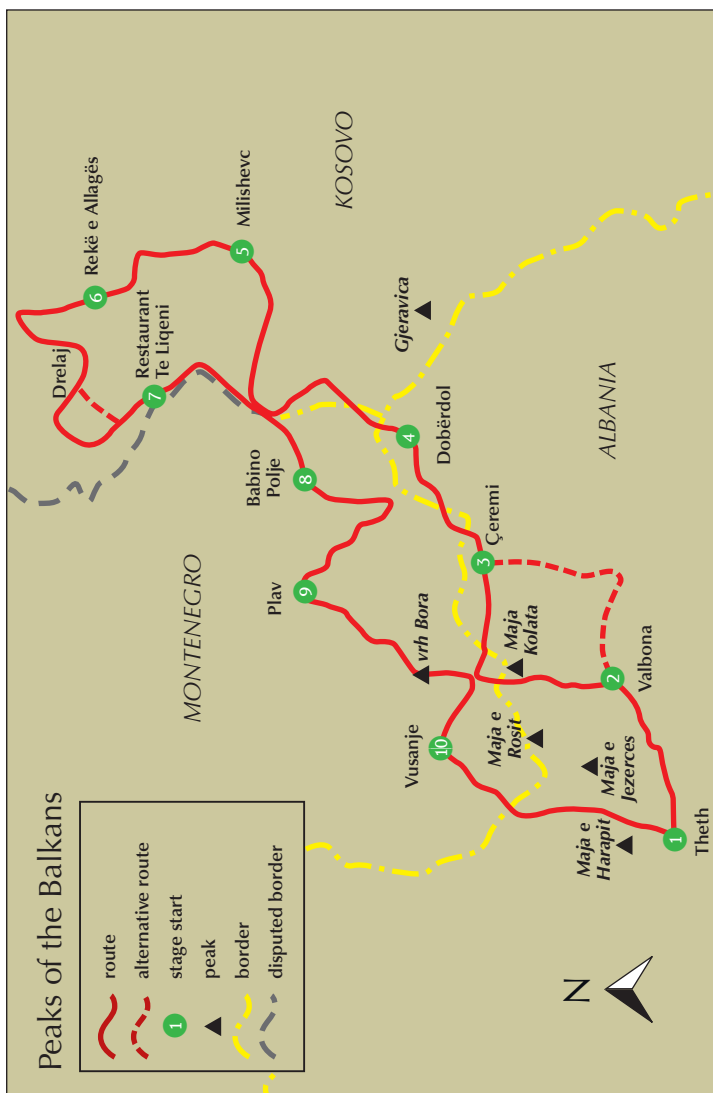


SCALE: 1:50,000



Contour lines are
drawn at 25m intervals
and highlighted at
100m intervals.







On the saddle above Liqeni i Kuçishtës, Kosovo (Stage 7)

ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

Stage	Start	Finish	Distance	Ascent/ Descent	Time
1	Theth (Albania)	Valbona (Albania)	19.5km	1070m/850m	8hrs
2	Valbona (Albania)	Çeremi (Albania)	14km or 11km	1200m/950m or 540m/380m	7hrs 30mins or 4hrs 30mins
3	Çeremi (Albania)	Dobërdol (Albania)	15.5km	1030m/440m	7hrs
4	Dobërdol (Albania)	Milishevc (Kosovo)	23km	1440m/1500m	8hrs
5	Milishevc (Kosovo)	Rekë e Allagës (Kosovo)	16km	860m/1270m	6hrs
6	Rekë e Allagës (Kosovo)	Drelaj or Restaurant Te Liqeni (Kosovo)	10km or 23km	530m/710m or 1260m/1140m	3hrs 45mins or 7hrs 30mins
7	Restaurant Te Liqeni (Kosovo)	Babino polje (Montenegro)	16km	1150m/1110m	7hrs 30mins
8	Babino polje (Montenegro)	Plav (Montenegro)	20km	720m/1250m	6hrs 30mins
9	Plav (Montenegro)	Vusanje (Montenegro)	27.5km	1140m/1080m	8hrs
10	Vusanje (Montenegro)	Theth (Albania)	21.3km	1110m/1440m	7hrs 30mins
Total	Theth (Albania)	Theth (Albania)	182.8km	10250m	69hrs 45mins



Maja e Boshit (Maja Bošit), a prominent 2416m peak southeast of the Valbona Pass (Stage 1)

INTRODUCTION



The Peaks of the Balkans is a recently developed cross-border long-distance trail through the spectacularly wild and rugged borderlands of Montenegro, Albania and Kosovo. A circular route of around 192km in length, it takes in remote valleys, lakes and mountain passes, winding its way through some stupendous mountain scenery and passing through traditional mountain villages which often feel like somewhere time forgot. It's a corner of Europe few people are familiar with, let alone visit. Food and accommodation are offered in traditional village home stays, so there's no need to carry camping gear, with delicious regional cuisine and genuine hospitality that is frankly a million

miles away from some of the more lacklustre tourist resorts on the coast. The route can be hiked in around 10 days or stretched out over a couple of weeks, with about a third of the whole trek lying in each country.

The bulk of the mountain scenery on the Peaks of the Balkans Trail is provided by the Prokletije mountains (Bjeshkët e Nemuna in Albanian), whose name translates rather charmingly as 'the accursed mountains' – created, according to local folklore, by the devil himself, unleashed from hell for a single day of mischief. The biodiversity of the region is extraordinary. The Montenegrin side of Prokletije was recently designated a national park – the newest and still

the least visited of Montenegro's five national parks, a great glacier-scoured area (the glaciers themselves are long gone) bristling with spiky mountain peaks boasting suitably evocative names like Očnjak ('Fang') and Koplje ('Spear'). There are two more national parks on the Albanian side, and another in Kosovo.

The trail was developed by the German development corporation GIZ in conjunction with national and local tourism organisations and hiking clubs, in order to create a sustainable income for the local population in these mountainous areas of Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro, to encourage sustainable local tourism and to bring these parts of the region closer

together across political borders. Despite increasing visitor numbers – largely due to the growing popularity of the Peaks of the Balkans trail – the area remains incredibly underdeveloped and unspoilt, much of it having been off limits to foreigners until comparatively recently. This is the first English-language guidebook to hiking the Peaks of the Balkans.

Since it's a circular route, there are several points at which you can choose to start and finish hiking the Trail (the various merits of which are described in 'Where to start/finish') – and there are two points where the 'circuit' meets, like a figure of eight. Starting from the village of Theth in Albania, the route crosses a pass to



Katun Treskavička, on a hillside between Babino polje and Plav in Montenegro (Stage 8)

reach the Valbona Valley, and climbs to the Montenegrin border below Maja Kolata, one of the highest peaks in the area, before descending to the tiny settlement of Çeremi. Later it passes through the remote summer settlement of Dobërdol before crossing the border into Kosovo, and descends to the Rugova Gorge. Crossing into Montenegro it passes through Babino polje then climbs to Lake Hrid, before descending to the town of Plav and, after crossing Vrh Bora, to the village of Vusanje, before following the Ropojana valley up into Albania again, crossing the Pëjë Pass and descending to Theth.

The trail is well marked for much of its length, a reasonably good map is available covering the whole route, and access is relatively straightforward – sometimes extremely straightforward – to several points along the way by local buses. Good, knowledgeable local guides are available to accompany groups or individuals along the route. Hiking is along existing paths and 4WD tracks and is not technically difficult – however the surrounding mountains are high and the weather can change suddenly and dramatically, and for the most part the route is very remote. Exit points, should you need to break your trek short in an emergency, may be several days apart, and may not be in the country you arrived in.

It's possible to start and finish the Peaks of the Balkans in any of the three countries through which it

passes, however whichever starting point you decide on, you'll need to obtain a cross-border permit from the relevant authorities in Montenegro, Albania or Kosovo before setting off and actually walking the trail. Judging by the helpful and informative Peaks of the Balkans website (www.peaksofthebalkans.com), you would be forgiven for thinking this should be easy enough to do yourself, but in fact it's not quite as straightforward as you might expect, and it is worth simply getting a local agency to sort out the permit. See 'Cross-border permits' below for further guidance.

I first visited the Prokletije mountains back in 2004, staying a few days in a mountain hut in the Grbaja Valley in Montenegro. One day I walked along the Ropojana Valley – a broad ribbon of green framed by limestone peaks, their tops festooned with clouds – towards a lonely lake on the border with Albania. The Peaks of the Balkans wasn't yet born at that time, the Montenegrin part of Prokletije had not yet been declared a national park, and the only people we encountered on these well-marked trails through some of the most beautiful mountain scenery anywhere in Europe were a handful of Albanian children gathering wild strawberries. It all seemed fantastically, almost unbelievably remote and unspoilt. Returning to Prokletije in 2016 to research and write this guide, I was pleased to find that feeling of isolation little changed.

THE PEAKS OF THE BALKANS TRAIL



Looking south from the trail above Milishevc. The prominent peak is Marijash (Stage 5)

STAGE 1

Theth (Albania) – Valbona (Albania)

Start	Theth (728m, Albania)
Finish	Valbona (935m, Albania)
Distance	19.5km
Ascent/descent	1070m/850m
Time	8hrs
Terrain	Some 4WD walking between Theth and the start of the trail, and a 4km stretch on asphalt in the Valbona Valley; otherwise good, clear paths.
Highest point	1759m (Valbona Pass)
Maps	Valbona is also written Valbonë; Theth is also written Thethi
Access	Valbona can be reached by minibus or taxi from Bajram Curri, from where there are bus/ferry connections to Shkodër.
Food and lodging	Guesthouses and campsites in Valbona
Intermediate stops	Guesthouse at Rragami

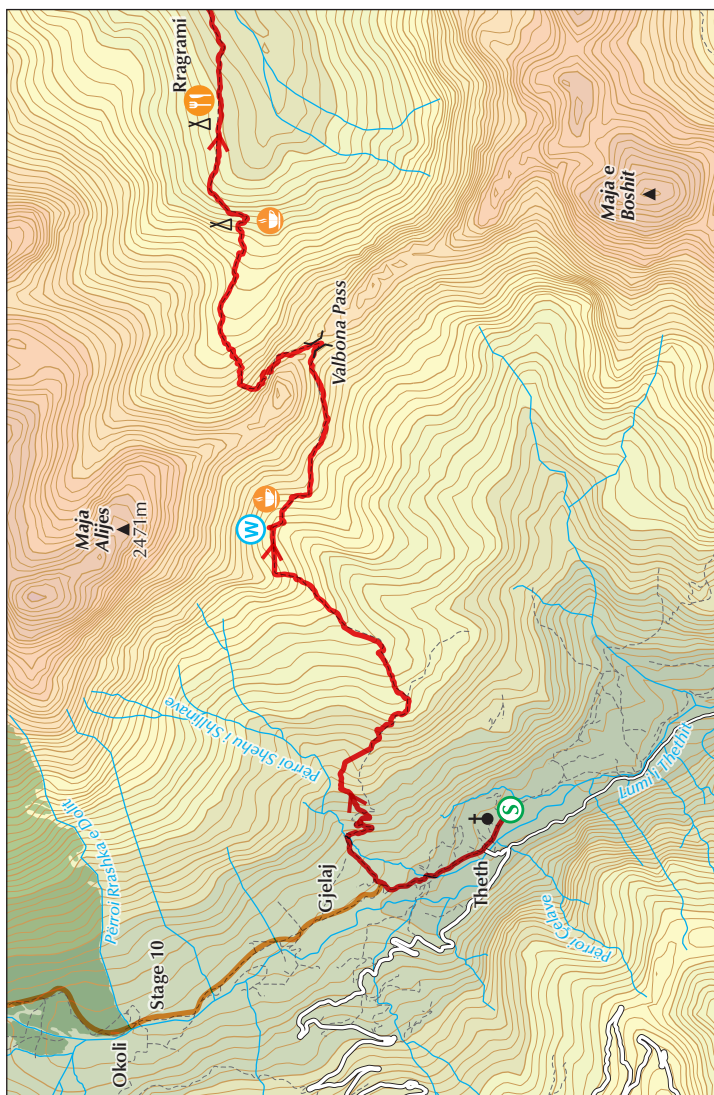
A beautiful stage, crossing the Valbona pass with spectacular views over the Valbona and Theth valleys. If possible, arrange a transfer back to the bridge at Okoli and start from there, to save hiking back along that section of 4WD from Theth. Valbona village is scattered over around 10km along the floor of the Valbona Valley, so the actual distance of this stage depends somewhat on where you choose to stay in Valbona.

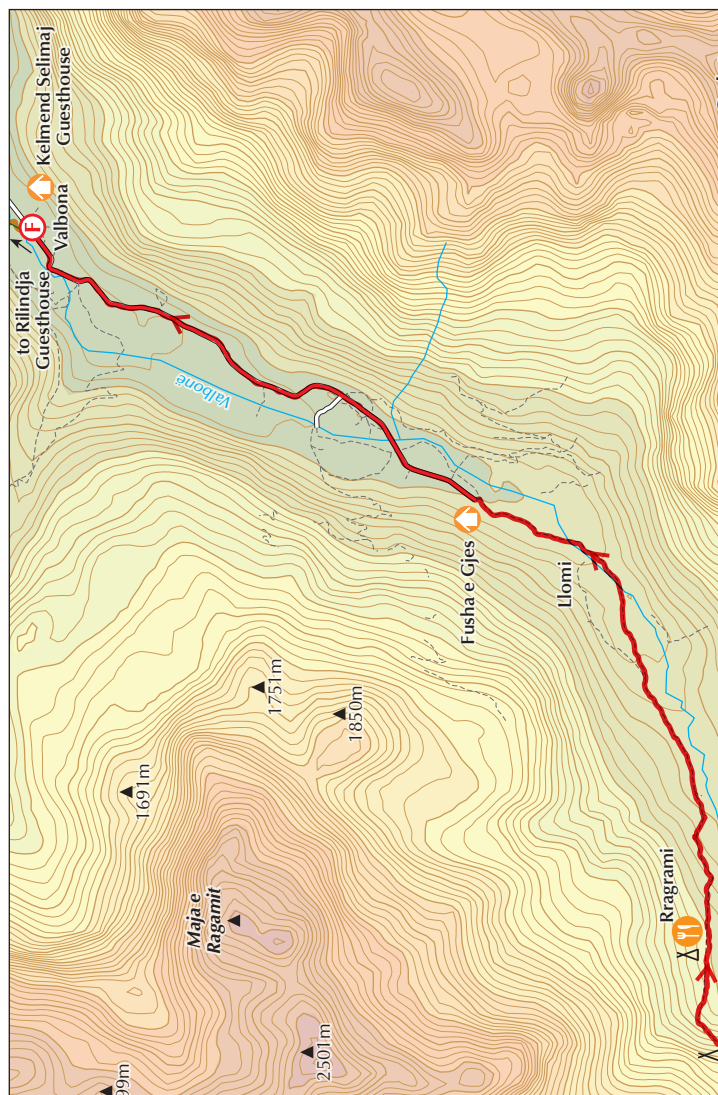
THETH

For more information on Theth, see the end of Stage 10

Food and lodging

Bujtina Polia (tel +355 (0)67 526 7526 or +355 (0)66 666 9944; food served). Wonderful guesthouse with lovely, welcoming hosts and heavenly food. The owner, Pavlin Polia, was involved in marking out trails in the area and spearheading sustainable tourism in Theth when the Peaks of the Balkans Trail was first





being developed, and is extremely knowledgeable about the surrounding region. Excellent English spoken, as well as Italian and German. The family house is around 300 years old and, tragically, was burnt to the ground in 2015, but the Polia family had quite amazingly managed to completely rebuild it by the summer of 2016. Quite simply one of the nicest village guesthouses the author has ever stayed at, anywhere.

Shpella Guesthouse (tel +355 (0)69 377 4851; www.booking.com/544379f048e939; food served).

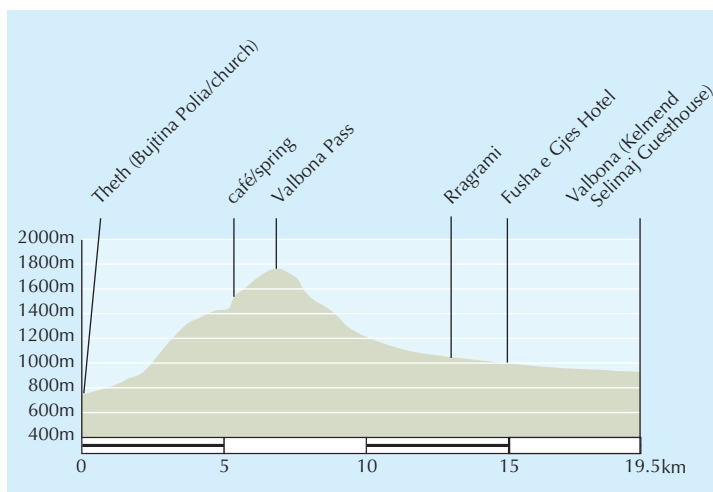
Info

For more information on Theth and its surroundings, see thethi-guide.com.

Transport

During summer there's a minibus from Theth to Shkodër. A taxi to Tirana costs around €120.

From the church and Bujtina Polia in Theth, go N along the 4WD road towards Okoli, (on the R bank of the river), then after going uphill opposite the bridge turn R where the 4WD road splits.



Looking south from the Valbona Pass



Follow this 4WD road uphill for an hour, then turn L off the 4WD just before a house (there's a sign pointing to a café/bar) and follow a path steeply uphill, through forest. Where the path scatters, keep straight ahead.

An hour after leaving the 4WD road, enter a meadow, bearing R where the path splits. At the far (upper) side of the meadow, re-enter forest. The path contours the hillside before reaching a small stream in 30mins, and immediately after this a **café/bar** with a wooden terrace. Pass the café/bar on your L then go straight uphill and R through the forest again.

As the path emerges from the trees there are jaw-dropping views of Maja e Boshit (Maja Bošit, 2416m), the peak on your R. Continue up to the **Valbona Pass** (1759m), 3hrs 45mins after leaving the 4WD road. [The pass gives unrestricted views north to Maja Jezerces, at 2694m the highest mountain in Prokletije, as well as east along the Valbona Valley, and west back towards Theth.](#)

As you admire the view of the Valbona Valley, consider that there are plans – approved by the Albanian government, despite attempts by locals, the WWF and other organisations to oppose them – to construct a series of **hydroelectric power plants** along a 30km stretch of the Valbona River, several of them within Valbona National Park itself. See 'Valbona River hydroelectric power plants' in this book's introduction.

Turn L from the pass and descend gradually NW, below crumbling cliffs (watch out for falling rocks) the base of which are carpeted with flowers. Follow the trail as it zigzags steeply downhill, passing a huge boulder then crossing a boulder-strewn dry stream bed, the trail marked by an occasional cairn.

Go along a clear trail through forest, then an hour from the Valbona Pass bear R to reach a small stream and a **café/bar** which also offers camping spots. Bear L above the café/bar, go steeply downhill (slippery) to reach another **café and campsite** by a stream, near **Rragami**, 90mins from the Valbona Pass.

Follow a 4WD track downhill for a further 10mins to reach the broad, gravelly valley floor, by a signpost pointing back to Theth. Continue along the valley floor on a 4WD, initially faint then clearer, to arrive at the end of an asphalt road beside the large **Fusha e Gjes Hotel** in 45mins.

Go straight ahead along the asphalt road to reach the scattered houses of **Valbona** – the village is spread along the valley floor for around 10km. It takes 45mins from the start of the asphalt road to the Jezerca Guesthouse, which is on your R soon after a large ruined building, shortly before the trail to the Prosllopit Pass (this central part of Valbona is called Valbona Qender); and a further 20mins to the Rilindja Guesthouse (an area of Valbona called Ququ i Valbonës).

Peaks above the Valbona Valley, from the Valbona Pass



VALBONA

Valbona village stretches around 10km along the valley floor and is on an asphalt road to Bajram Curri. Valbona National Park covers an area of 8000ha in the surrounding valley, walled in by peaks such as Maja Jezerces, Maja Rosit and Maja Kolata. For information on the current, potentially disastrous proposals to build 30 hydroelectric power plants on the Valbona River, eight of them in the national park itself, see 'National parks and nature reserves'.

Food and lodging

Rilindja Guesthouse (tel +355 (0)67 3014 637; www.journeytovalbona.com; food served). Beautiful guesthouse run by an American/Albanian couple who have been at the forefront of establishing local, sustainable tourism in the area.

Kelmend Selimaj Guesthouse & Jezerces Restaurant (tel +355 (0)67 3093 406; food served). Large rooms with several beds in an old stone house, conveniently located almost opposite the start of the route up to the Prosllopit Pass.

For further accommodation options see www.journeytovalbona.com (select 'Where to Stay')

Info

The best source of tourist information in Valbona is the Rilindja Guesthouse.

Transport

A minibus leaves Valbona early in the morning for Bajram Curri.