

ALBANIAN ANTICS

Trip report from Albania : May 2007

Introduction

Ever since visiting the Balkan countries one of them in particular has remained tantalisingly different. Albania is off many cranks' radars as although it is connected to the European rail network by way of a line from Podgorica in Montenegro, this line is annoyingly freight only. This means either a road journey in and out of the country (which although done by Dave Unpronounceable seems only for the most committed crank) or a flight to the country's capital, Tirana.

Although the communist regime collapsed in 1990 a whole series of political protests and scandals tore the country apart in the following years. In 1997 months of rioting over collapsing pyramid schemes also caused the country to be in the news for all the wrong reasons. Albania was also in the news at the end of the last century when it became a base for the NATO attacks on Serbia following the Serb attacks on Albanians living in Kosovo. The country is peaceful now and making steps towards eventually joining the European Union. This chequered history in recent times may also put many enthusiasts off visiting one of Europe's poorest countries.

Undeterred by the above, we eventually got round to visiting the country after John Chapman (Chappy) and Craig Ryan decided to book a trip over the May bank holiday. Myself, Richard Lea and Suttu gate crashed the trip, although we flew with Austrian Airlines via Vienna, whereas the Yorkshire contingent flew via Italy with Alitalia. There remains very few airlines flying to Tirana, reducing the options available and unfortunately keeping air fares here high.

Credit at this point should go to the trip reports from Dave Unpronounceable and Shaun Wallace for providing both inspiration and gen to help us plan our trip effectively. We decided that the best course of action would be to cover each of the 3 arms of the HSH system on consecutive days, leaving the remaining half day to mop up any required locos which may still be gettable.

Thursday 24th May 2007

DATE	ADMIN	LOCO	WTTID	TIME	FROM	TO
24.MAY.07	Austrian	OE-LBP	OS462	1550	London Heathrow (LHR)	Vienna (VIE)
24.MAY.07	Tyrolean	OE-LFO	OS849	2225	Vienna (VIE)	Tirana (TIA)

An unusually late start to a bash! Limited flights in and out of Albania meant a 1550 departure from Heathrow. I met Suttu at New Street for the 1100 Pendolino to Watford Junction, Richard joining us at International. Gratis VT bus to Heathrow got us there just after 1300. After a fast check-in and leisurely meal in the Wetherspoons we boarded the Austrian flight. A 30 late start due to heavy traffic (when doesn't Heathrow get heavy traffic?!) was reduced to a 10 late arrival thanks to a slack schedule. Excellent but wedged flight. The "meal" was a hellfire sponge cake with hot cherry sauce. The at-seat audio had a surprisingly good selection, but award for the most inappropriate tune went to "Broken Wings" by Mr. Mister!

The 3 hour fester at Vienna was filled with a visit to the pizza restaurant and a few beers. Onwards flight to Tirana was empty with only 21 passengers aboard an 80-seat Fokker 70. The brand new terminal at Mother Theresa airport was in use and a speedy passage ensued (10€ entry visa payable after passport control). Fast taxi saw us in the centre of Tirana in 20 minutes along a newly built highway lined with car dealerships and motels, but then the taxi driver

revealed he didn't know where our hotel was. Using our own maps we directed Bert to the hotel and then the fun really started. We were told there was a problem and to wait. After 10 minutes an old guy arrived on a push bike and gestured us to follow him. A 10 minute walk later we arrived at some filthy looking apartment block. As they say in the 'News of the World' we made our excuses and left! Back at the hotel we ranted at the owner and he found us a room at the Hotel Ambassador (sic.), finally getting to sleep at 0130.

Friday 25th May 2007

DATE	ADMIN	LOCO	WTTID	TIME	FROM	TO	NOTES
25.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1051	12-09	0555	Tiranë	Durrës	
25.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1059	12-09	0713	Durrës	Pogradec	
25.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1059	26-31	1308	Pogradec	Tiranë	
25.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1055	26-31	1845	Durrës	Pogradec	Powering inside

The 0500 alarm was most definitely not welcome. 10 minute walk to the station where we met up with Chappy and Craig Ryan who were also meant to have been staying at the Hotel Alpin but had taken up the apartment alternative.

Bought our single tickets to Pogradec (day returns not sold to here due to the journey length - only crazy people would do it...ahem) with ease and boarded the train. The stock was 2 ex DB Regio opens which were in pretty good nick apart from the broken windows! At Durrës we expected our loco to run round, but instead a different loco backed on with 2 more similar coaches. We'd planned to do the longest most tortuous branch first and only expected one loco today, so this was a nice bonus. Rich and Chappy obtained some bread rolls from a station vendor and a Bert came through the train selling bananas so we obtained a bunch of these too.

The trip was a stagger, with power only really applied departing stations. At least two people walked up and down the train selling drinks and snacks. Two policemen were on the train throughout, but didn't bother us. Scenery was great, the line clinging to the valley sides and for the last section running along the coast of Lake Ohrid - the lower part of the line reminded me of the Niš-Zaječar line in Serbia. I expected Albania to be a total dump. True the towns were a bit run down but it wasn't too bad. I've seen worse in parts of Bulgaria and Romania. Everywhere were old buildings in various states of dereliction and new buildings under construction.

At Prrenjas we passed the loco dump. Left to decay here are 23 Cmelaks, 6 Hectors and a solitary Warship. All the locos looked pretty intact and there was no evidence of cutting-up taking place. We were surprised that the Albanians hadn't taken the opportunity to make a few Euros by selling the Warship to a German private operator.



Two shots of the loco dump at Prrenjas.

We were about 10 late into Pogradec which just left us 10 minutes to buy tickets back(!), some drinks and get the obligatory branch-end photos. The return journey was just as tedious as the outward, with the loco being started up at each shack then shut down on departure and coasting to the next.



T669.1059 having run round at Pogradec.

We had to be really quick here as we only had the time it took the loco to run round before we headed back to Tiranë. One thing that the traincrew in Albania don't do is mess about, with trains frequently departing just seconds after the locos are attached. Don't ask about brake tests!

At Durrës the HSH 'train set' came out again and winner 1055 was put inside 1059 when it ran round. We weren't hopeful of scoring it and this was confirmed when the loco was shut down. However it was started up at Sukth and both locos worked in tandem through to the capital.

Back at Tirana we made our way to the Hotel Alpin as we had been told to. Our rooms were ready and were fine - there was evidence of recent painting which was presumably the 'problem' last night. After a supermarket sweep we had chicken, chips and several Birra Tiranas in a nearby grill.

Saturday 26th May 2007

DATE	ADMIN	LOCO	WTTID	TIME	FROM	TO	NOTES
26.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1059	12-09	0555	Tiranë	Vorë	T669.1049 DIT
26.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1041	10-07	0655	Vorë	Durrës	
26.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1046	10-07	0745	Durrës	Vlorë	
26.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1046	18-19	1155	Vlorë	Golem	
26.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1042	18-19	1307	Fier	Golem	Powering inside
26.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1053	28-27	1556	Golem	Kavajë	
26.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1054	34-23	1633	Kavajë	Lekaj	
26.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1051	26-31	1737	Lekaj	Tiranë	

0500 alarm call again! Nedded the Podgradec train to Vorë as it had a pair on with the loco inside being required. However we weren't as lucky as last night and it remained shut down.

Stepped back onto winner 1041 behind. Load on this train being 2 ex ÖBB opens with no broken windows, but they were all fixed shut. Was quite surprised by the relative tidiness of the interiors considering they have been in the country much longer than their German counterparts. The toilets were rancid though - only a hole in the floor and clear glass windows!

Richard, Suttly and myself were glad when 1046 backed on. It was the one loco that Chappy and Craig had scooped before we arrived on Thursday. A good run to Vlorë ensued, although due to

waiting for a late runner to cross we arrived 20 late, after we were booked to depart on the return journey. The line was very flat and uninteresting - a stark contrast to yesterday's run.



*T669.1054 arrives at Kavajë working train
04-11 0550 Vlorë-Tiranë.*



*T669.1046 stands at Kavajë working train
10-07 0630 Tiranë-Vlorë.*

On the way back the loco came off at Fier and coupled up to 1052 which had been stabled there since we went down. The two locomotives then went back onto the front of the train, the winner dead inside! We were well pleased when it was started up at Rogozhinë and assisted out of the station.

We worked out a neat leap to cover 3 more trains, of which 2 more were scoops. This took us to 5 new engines for the day, 8 overall. At Lekaj the station chief proudly showed off his signalling panel, radio equipment and even thrashed up the standby generator for us to bellow at!



*T669.1053 arrives at Golem working train
28-27 1420 Tiranë-Elbasan.*



The NX panel and radio equipment at Kavajë.

At Durrës the loco just ran round, so no more scoops. On arrival at Tirana headed straight down the main boulevard across from the station and found a reasonable restaurant.

Sunday 27th May 2007

DATE	ADMIN	LOCO	WTTID	TIME	FROM	TO	NOTES
27.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1051	12-09	0555	Tiranë	Sukth	
27.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1060	03	0709	Sukth	Tiranë	
27.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1060	16-17	0820	Tiranë	Shkodër	
27.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1060	24-25	1215	Shkodër	Vorë	
27.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1051	34-23	1519	Vorë	Durrës	
27.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1054	34-23	1610	Durrës	Golem	
27.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1059	26-31	1808	Golem	Tiranë	

The usual 0500 alarm, but alas both the early departures were dud. We crossed the first arrival at Sukth and that was dud too but we leapt anyway and covered the one behind which was fortunately a winner.

Today's aim was to complete our Albanian track with the Shkodër branch. This was flat but quite scenic with lots of mountain ranges to view. At Milot on the way up the train was besieged by loads of ethnic Albanians who had been to the market. There was a big riot between some young people and the gripperess when one of them threw all their used seed shells on the coach floor!



Two views of T669.1060. Arriving at Sukth on train 03 (left) and having run round at Shkodër (right).

As usual we ended up getting to Shkodër just after we were meant to leave on the return journey, so after a quick run round and photos we were on our way back. The train was thankfully less wedged. On the approach to Milot the train came to an abrupt stop. We soon realised it couldn't be a signal check as there aren't any signals! A group of youths had placed a large tree on the line which the driver had to remove.

We went in search of required locos during the late afternoon but there were none to be had anywhere. To console ourselves we spent an hour and a half in the bar opposite Golem station drowning our sorrows.

Monday 28th May 2007

DATE	ADMIN	LOCO	WTTID	TIME	FROM	TO	NOTES
28.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1059	12-09	0555	Tiranë	Sukth	
28.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1041	10-07	0713	Sukth	Durrës	T669.1027 DIT
28.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1059	06-13	0815	Durrës	Vorë	
28.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1055	16-17	0857	Vorë	Budull	
28.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1048	02-05	0915	Budull	Vorë	
28.MAY.07	HSH	T669.1053	08-15	1105	Vorë	Tiranë	
28.MAY.07	Tyrolean	OE-LVF	OS848	1420	Tirana (TIA)	Vienna (VIE)	
28.MAY.07	Austrian	OE-LBC	OS455	1715	Vienna (VIE)	London Heathrow (LHR)	

Our total standing at 9 locos we were desperate to try and make double figures today. Same old suspects on the early trains, but we knew that required 1048 had been on the out based Shkodër diagram for the last couple of days and figured this should be a safe bet to cover. We did the out and back to Budull, the driver on the way out being a bloke we'd seen every day and chatted to about our jobs. He invited Richard and Suttly for a cab ride. At the crossing shack the other train was late, so we decided to have a seminar. The driver wanted to get in the picture and the secondman was roped in to take it! After we'd taken the first photo the grippers also wanted to get their photos taken so we had a second seminar, followed by a ceremonial photo of the station chief handing over the ticket for ticket working to the secondman!



*Seminar at Budull.
On loco (L-R) Chappy, myself,
Richard Lea and Craig Ryan. In
front are some random member
of staff, the secondman,
grippers 1, Suttly, gripperess 2
and the driver.
Below the station chief hands
over the ticket to the
secondman.*



After all these shenanigans 1048 rolled in and we said our goodbyes, pleased that we were now onto double figures. There was a slim chance that 1057 might be on one of the remaining arrivals in Tiranë, so we festered at Vorë on the off chance. Typically the greedy move didn't pay off and we got to Tiranë with our total still standing at 10.

As we walked off the station the heavens opened and we witnessed the most torrential rain storm. We took shelter under the large station roof next to the ticket office, but after 10 minutes had to make a dash to the hotel or we risked missing our flight.

The return taxi to the airport took nearer 30 minutes due to the density of traffic in central Tiranë. The people drive like nutters and at the major junctions it is like from an episode of Wacky Races!

Both flights on the way home landed ahead of schedule and we were hopeful of making an earlier train home. We ran onto the platform for the Heathrow Connect at 1855 and the doors of the 1856 train closed in our faces. As a result we had nearly an hour to kill at Reading (the WCML being shut for the usual bank holiday engineering works), so rounded off a good weekend with a couple of pints in the Three Guineas.

Reflections

For anyone into bashing in dubious Eastern European countries then Albania should be high up on your 'to do' list. It's debateable how long it will last in its current state. There's very little investment in the infrastructure or rolling stock and what remains is in very poor condition. I would imagine some EU money will be pumped into the system in the future and this will doubtless result in some shiny new Desiro units to ruin things!

I have attached my message to European Rail Gen as an appendix to this trip report as it includes some suggestions for anyone making a visit to Albania in the future. Plus it gives a summary of the loco workings during our trip.

Matthew Reeves,
Birmingham, U.K.,
May 2007.
www.onthebash.co.uk

APPENDIX – Message sent to the European Rail Gen Yahoo! Group on 30/05/2007:

Hi all,

Just back from a long weekend in Albania with Sully, Richard Lea, Chappy and Craig Ryan. A full trip report should be available on my homepage in the next 24 hours or so, but in the meantime here are the loco workings viewed:

THURSDAY 24.MAY.07

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T669.1060 22 2005 Tiranë-Durrës
T669.1055 14 1615 Tiranë-Durrës
T669.1046 18-19 1155 Vlorë-Tiranë
T669.1051 26-31 1308 Pogradec-Tiranë

FRIDAY 25.MAY.07

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T669.1051 12-09 0555 Tiranë-Pogradec (to Durrës)
T669.1059 12-09 0555 Tiranë-Pogradec (from Durrës), 26-31 1308 Pogradec-Tiranë (to Durrës)
T669.1059+1055 [both powering] 26-31 1308 Pogradec-Tiranë (from Durrës)
T669.1046+1041 10-07 0630 Tiranë-Vlorë
T669.1055 01 0610 Durrës-Tiranë
T669.1060 03 0645 Durrës-Tiranë
T669.1053 06-13 0535 Elbasan-Tiranë, 28-27 1420 Tiranë-Elbasan
T669.1032 04-11 0550 Vlorë-Tiranë
T669.1057 08-15 0450 Pogradec-Tiranë, 32-29 1155 Tiranë-Pogradec
T669.1054 34-23 1455 Tiranë-Vlorë

SATURDAY 26.MAY.07

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T669.1059+1049 [DIT] 12-09 0555 Tiranë-Pogradec
T669.1041 10-07 0630 Tiranë-Vlorë (to Durrës)
T669.1046 10-07 0630 Tiranë-Vlorë (from Durrës), 18-19 1155 Vlorë-Tiranë (to Fier)
T669.1046+1042 18-19 1155 Vlorë-Tiranë (from Fier)
T669.1060 01 0610 Durrës-Tiranë
T669.1055 03 0645 Durrës-Tiranë
T669.1053 06-13 0535 Elbasan-Tiranë, 28-27 1420 Tiranë-Elbasan
T669.1054 04-11 0550 Vlorë-Tiranë, 34-23 1455 Tiranë-Vlorë
T669.1057 08-15 0450 Pogradec-Tiranë, 32-29 1155 Tiranë-Pogradec
T669.1051 26-31 1308 Pogradec-Tiranë

SUNDAY 27.MAY.07

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T669.1051 12-09 0555 Tiranë-Pogradec (to Durrës)
T669.1055 01 0610 Durrës-Tiranë, 20 0930 Tiranë-Durrës, 21 1305 Durrës-Tiranë, 22 2005 Tiranë-Durrës
T669.1060 03 0645 Durrës-Tiranë, 16-17 0820 Tiranë-Shkodër
T669.1046 10-07 0630 Tiranë-Vlorë
T669.1048 02-05 0640 Shkodër-Tiranë, 24-25 1215 Shkodër-Tiranë
T669.1048+1027 30-33 1318 Tiranë-Shkodër
T669.1053 06-13 0535 Elbasan-Tiranë
T669.1051 34-23 1455 Tiranë-Vlorë (to Durrës)
T669.1054 34-23 1455 Tiranë-Vlorë (from Durrës)
T669.1041 18-19 1155 Vlorë-Tiranë
T669.1059 26-31 1308 Pogradec-Tiranë

MONDAY 28.MAY.07

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T669.1059 12-09 0555 Tiranë-Pogradec (to Durrës)
T669.1060 01 0610 Durrës-Tiranë, 20 0930 Tiranë-Durrës (to Vorë), 02-05 0640 Shkodër-Tiranë (from Vorë)
T669.1055 03 0645 Durrës-Tiranë, 16-17 0820 Tiranë-Shkodër
T669.1041+1027 [DIT] 10-07 0630 Tiranë-Vlorë (to Durrës)
T669.1046 10-07 0630 Tiranë-Vlorë (from Durrës)
T669.1048 02-05 0640 Shkodër-Tiranë (to Vorë) 20 0930 Tiranë-Durrës (from Vorë)
T669.1053 06-13 0535 Elbasan-Tiranë (to Durrës)
T669.1059 06-13 0535 Elbasan-Tiranë (from Durrës)
T669.1041 04-11 0550 Vlorë-Tiranë (from Durrës)
T669.1053 08-15 0450 Pogradec-Tiranë

T669's seen working:

1026, 1027, 1032, 1041, 1042, 1046, 1048, 1049, 1051, 1052, 1053, 1054, 1055, 1057, 1059, 1060.

3 freight trains viewed during our visit, one rake of ZS grain wagons, one rake of MÁV vans and a rake of ZCG box wagons. In almost all cases the trains with pairs of locos on were getting a loco to/from working a freight train, and the loco for the freight was ALWAYS put inside the train engine (even if this meant doing a pointless shunt move to enable this to happen!). In the time frame of our visit it would appear that certain locos are used for the freights (1027/1032/1049) as the rest of the time they sat doing not a lot whilst the other locos worked all the passenger trains, but of course this may just be a coincidence on these particular days.

Whole system is controlled by ticket working. There are no functional signals on the entire network, although some of the stations on the route towards Pogradec still have the colour light signals in place (permanently displaying red aspects). Although it vaies most stations still have working electrically operated points. Stations communicate with each other by radio.

Speed on the whole network is 40km/h, with the exception of the "main line" between Tiranë and Durrës which is a whopping 60km/h!

Durrës avoiding line noted to be OOU and completely overgrown.

Depot is at Shkozë, just outside Durrës. A handful of derelict steam locos here as well as one withdrawn Hector and a seemingly unserviceable T669.1039. The loco "dump" is at Prrenjas on the Pogradec branch. In the station yard here are two long lines containing 23 Chmelaks, 6 Hectors and a solitary Warship. All locos looked intact with windows boarded over. All over the country stations are littered with demic wagons and coaches, mostly burnt out and with any valuable parts missing, presumably stolen.

Police officers ride with every train, but no problems with photting. Almost without exception all staff and locals were friendly and hospitable, although of course they couldn't understand why you'd ride a train for nearly 7 hours up a branch line only to go all the way back again on the same train after only 10 minutes there! A "trolley" (well alright, a plastic box actually) service of drinks and snacks is provided on both the Pogradec and Vlorë trains by some enterprising individuals. The box seems to get filled up at major stations so it is possible to obtain cold drinks whilst on board. At Durrës station two men get on most trains peddling bunches of bananas and bags of popcorn!

One thing to be aware of - most of the passing shacks have very long loops and it did not appear uncommon for the train going the opposite way to be moving before the other train came to a stand. Seemingly safe plusses would not have made. On the positive side timekeeping was pretty good, although on the Shkodër line most trains lost up to 20 minutes due to poor track condition.

Stock was a mixture of decrepit FS compo coaches, acceptable OBB open coaches and comparatively luxurious DB opens. The ex SNCF and Chinese built coaches are no longer in service. Toilet facilities on trains were basic to say the least. Many of the toilets were completely missing, had clear glass in the windows or no window at all! The DB stock had all windows in place but most had broken glass. The other coaches varied from having been completely reglazed to having no glass in most of the windows. Most of the spare coaches seem to be stabled at Shkodër and Mjedë (one shack down from Shkodër), presumably as they don't get vandalised up there.

Despite what it says in all the guidebooks the trains were very busy, in many cases standing room only. However the grippers were very efficient. Tickets are not generally sold on board the trains, but we had no problem obtaining what we wanted at any station we leapt at. Day return tickets are obtainable for all journeys except to/from Pogradec, presumably due to the distance involved.

Managed to score 10 locos in the 3 and a half days we were there. This would seem to be the optimum amount of time to have spent there as by the end of the trip we had covered all the track and were struggling to score any further locos. My advice to anyone planning a trip here is to stay in Durrës rather than Tiranë. If we had done this we would have had shorter, less grueling days (14 hours up and back to Pogradec at 40km/h is a bit of an ordeal) and would have probably had the same amount of locos. The ultra modern Rinas airport which opened only a few weeks ago, is between the two cities so a taxi to Durrës should cost about the same as that to Tiranë (20€ being the going rip-off here). Vorë station is even closer to the airport. Chappy and Craig landed mid-afternoon so got a taxi here but it took the driver some time to find it, and even then he didn't drop them right at the station.

A very interesting and enjoyable country to have a bash in, but not one that I'll be going back to as there's very little to do once you've done all the track.