

The Gjirokastra Museum
A New Museum for the UNESCO World Heritage Site



The Gjirokastra Museum's archaeology display cases

The new “Gjirokastra Museum” at the Gjirokastra Castle was officially opened on September 28th, 2012 to widespread acclaim by Gjirokastrites and the national media. The opening brings to an end a three year project to restore the castle galleries, and to create a modern visitor attraction that tells the rich history of the UNESCO World Heritage Site. The museum was opened by the Gjirokastra Member of Parliament, Arta Dade, the Mayor of Gjirokastra, Flamur Bime, the Gjirokastra Prefect, Mimoza Çomo, and Minister of Labour, Spiro Ksera.



Left: Gjirokastra Member of Parliament, Arta Dade, the Mayor of Gjirokastra, Flamur Bime, Gjirokastra Prefect, Mimoza Çomo, and the Minister of Labour, Spiro Ksera, cutting the ribbon. Right: The tour of the Gjirokastra Museum during the opening.

The new museum relates the history of Gjirokastra from a prehistoric fortified settlement to an important administrative centre for the Ottoman Empire, and more recently the birthplace of the Communist leader, Enver Hoxha. It also tells the story of the neighbouring archaeological sites in the Drino valley. This is done through a combination of historical objects, archive material, photographs, film and oral histories.



The Gjirokastra Museum's arms display case

Reaction to the new museum from visitors has been very enthusiastic. Former Director of the Institute of Monuments, Vladimir Qiriaqi, said, "It is a big event, we want to extend a thank you to all those involved, it is a new window onto our cultural heritage, and it is very big incitement for us to study our history even more..."

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The Gjirokastra Museum's costumes display case

The national newspaper *Panorama* congratulated the inclusion of the Communist period, reporting, "This new museum has had the courage to tackle a period of our history that has been taboo for twenty years... the museum is the first of its kind in Albania and the lighting is of a very high quality."



The Gjirokastra Museum's 'Life under Communism' display

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Meanwhile a Comment Book placed in the new museum has provided an opportunity for many visitors to express their opinions. A teenage Gjirokastrite writes:

“This is one of the best and most beautiful and amazing projects done to date in Gjirokastra. For some moments we are able to walk back in history and understand what our parents have been through. Every part of this museum generates special emotions...”

The museum is the culmination of an extensive two year research programme through national and local archives involving many people. Over sixty Albanian and specifically Gjirokastrian specialists were consulted individually or through focus groups to help create a compelling chronological narrative that forms the thematic spine of the museum. The museum also includes many local oral histories as well as portraits of everyday citizens that help to merge the past with the present.

The UNESCO town has been in need of an attraction where the history of the town can be told in a colourful and appealing way. As tourist numbers increase annually, the new museum will play a very important role in raising the profile of the town, as well as encouraging efforts to conserve the historic buildings. The Gjirokastra Castle now has approximately 20,000 foreign visitors every year, making it one of the most popular historic monuments in Albania.

The museum is notable for the following:

- It is a multi-media museum – the first of its kind in Albania – using objects, photographs, oral histories, sculpture, paintings and film to create an exhibition of a high international standard.



Local artists contributed to the Gjirokastra Museum, such as Mihal Andruso's sculpture of Princess Argjiro (left), and Stavri Cati's paintings of the region's traditional costumes (centre and right)

- There are seven large display cases exhibiting finds from the important archaeological sites of Antigonea and Hadrianopolis; recently conserved firearms from the Ottoman period; recently conserved traditional costumes from the Gjirokastra region and artefacts from the Communist period.



Conservation training program for costumes and arms, which took place in early 2012

- As part of the communist display, the museum includes a film room where visitors can see a compilation of newsreels about Gjirokastra from 1948 to 1992.



The Gjirokastra Museum's Film Room

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- The museum is lit entirely by environment-friendly LED lighting - over 100 LED spotlights with a combined power-draw of just over 1000 watts (the equivalent of ten incandescent bulbs) illuminate the galleries and display cases. This means energy costs will be minimal. Furthermore, the lights have a life-span of thirty years.
- The creation of the museum has been a three-phase project. The first phase saw the replacement of 5,000 square metres of roof above the gallery space (\$200,000 paid for by the Government of Albania); the second phase saw the restoration of 450 square metres of galleries to their original early 19th century interior, and the installation of new doors, windows and services. The third and final phase of the project saw the research, design, and installation of the museum exhibition.
- The combined cost of the Museum has been approximately Euros 500,000. This has covered the cost of all restoration works of the building (including repair of the roof), design and construction of the museum exhibition, conservation of objects and LED lighting.
- The Museum has been funded by a wide variety of donors: the Packard Humanities Institute (USA), The US Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, the Headley Trust (UK), The Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund (USA), Vodafone Albania, and the Government of Albania.

The museum was created by the Gjirokastra Foundation with an Albanian-International team. In addition many international volunteers including specialist conservators from the USA, the UK, Italy and Bulgaria travelled to Albania to assist Albanian conservators with the conservation of weapons and costume exhibits that were in a very poor condition owing to years of inadequate storage. These objects are now in display in the new museum.

For further information, contact: Director Sadi Petrela, the Gjirokastra Foundation (spetrela@gjirokastra.org; Tel: [+355 6920 78767](tel:+355692078767))



Gallery II- The Ottoman Period



Gallery III – The 20th Century

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The Photo Gallery



The Hall of Foreign Travellers

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Children from the Koto Hoxhi school visit the Gjirokastra Museum