

A wide-angle landscape photograph showing a winding asphalt road on a hillside. The road curves from the bottom left towards the center. The hillside is covered in sparse, low-lying vegetation and small trees. In the background, a large body of water (the sea) stretches to the horizon under a clear blue sky. The overall scene is bright and open.

Poetry in motion

BELOVED BY THE POET LORD BYRON, ALBANIA
IS THE HIDDEN GEM IN THE MEDITERRANEAN CROWN.
ZOOM-ZOOM TAKES A TOUR IN A MAZDA MX-5 RF

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➤ **A group of old men in suits and flat caps play dominos in the shadow of Albania's Monument of Independence.**

One lays the winning slate and sits back, satisfied, before a new game begins. It's a peaceful scene in a country that has suffered mixed fortunes, and in the face of adversity is now being touted as Europe's most exciting undiscovered destination.

After gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, which the statue in the southern coastal town of Vlorë celebrates, Albanians lived under a frequently changing series of rulers until the end of WWII, when almost four decades of isolation under the rule of dictator Enver Hoxha was foisted upon them. Since the fall of the Communist regime in 1992, Albania has been rebuilding itself with its eye now on European Union membership.

The sense of potential in the country is palpable – cranes dot the skyline of Albania's capital, Tirana, and a new airport is currently being built in Vlorë. This will help to open the southern coastal strip up to tourists looking for jagged mountains and azure seas – and some of the most exciting driving roads in the region.

It's for this reason I'm in Albania, to take the Mazda MX-5 RF on a spin on the fabled SH8; a spectacular 75-mile route from Vlorë to south to Sarandë, taking in vertiginous mountain passes – just the sort of hairpin bends this car was made for.

I leave the domino players to their game and head over to the Soul Red Crystal Metallic MX-5 RF, which glitters invitingly against the grey backdrop of Vlorë's main square. The two-litre engine purrs into action and I'm off, snaking through the busy streets with the snow-capped mountains ahead indicating the promise of what's to come. The Ionian Sea reveals itself to my right as I drive down the city's seaside boulevard, the expanse of shimmering water punctuated by the Karaburun Peninsula and Sazan Island – the latter rumoured to be a former chemical weapon's factory that's now open to tourists keen to learn more about Albania's chequered past.

As I begin to climb the Ceraunian Mountains, I shift the MX-5 RF into manual mode to navigate the bends with more control. The first segment of the SH8 is the Llogara Pass in the Llogara National Park. The pass, built in 1920, has become the most celebrated segment of the SH8 for drivers and cyclists after it was opened to the public in the 1990s. At its peak, the pass reaches 2,020 metres above sea level.

Up and up I go, through pine-forested slopes, tackling dramatic switchbacks which come thick and fast. I use the paddle shifts to make my manual gear changes, keeping my hands glued to the steering wheel. It's high-octane driving, this, and the MX-5 RF nimbly accepts the challenge.

I crest the summit and the sea reveals itself again, twinkling in the distance. The landscape changes too, as the trees thin to ➤

Mazda MX-5 RF shown not to UK specification



From the city to the countryside, the Mazda MX-5 RF turns heads wherever it goes

reveal craggy limestone rockfaces, bleached in the sunshine. I pull over to admire the scenery – and, by retracting the MX-5 RF's hard-top, make the most of the weather. A small boy runs over to take a selfie with the car. I show him how to put the roof up and down again – simply holding a switch on the centre console and in just 13 seconds it's in position – before he waves me off with a big smile. It won't be the first time this car turns heads on the trip.

In fact, only minutes later, as I drive past a collection of yellow and blue beehives stacked against the side of the mountain, I pull over to sample some local honey. Bee-keeper Fili Elezi, dressed like an astronaut, comes over to greet me and raises his eyebrows appreciatively at the MX-5 RF. He's been running the family apiary business for ten years now, he tells me, and offers a jar of honey from his stall by the side of the road.

"The nature here is perfect for bees," he says, gesturing at the profusion of wild flowers that carpet the ground. The honey tastes like the landscape – fragrant and complex. Elezi gently shoos me away as a cloud of bees swarms above an open hive.

Albania is a nature lover's paradise, especially in regions like the Llogara National Park. Untouched vistas extend for miles. As I set off again, an eagle coasts along the thermals in the sky above. The golden eagle is Albania's national symbol and a double-headed version appears on the country's red flag. There's a real sense of national pride here – the flag is ubiquitous, even appearing on the logo of Elezi's honey.

The road weaves down into the coastal village of Dhërmi and around the next corner I meet a herd of goats on the tarmac. The Mazda's responsiveness proves invaluable in encounters like this. I wait patiently, listening to the bells around the goats' necks jangling as their owner ushers them off the road. Then it's a herd of sheep around the next bend, and between the gnarled branches of olive trees, I see Dhërmi's old town nestled on a slope of the Ceraunian Mountains.

Even though the Llogara Pass is the SH8's highlight, my favourite stretch of road is the section that runs from Dhërmi to Himarë. It's a slightly gentler journey, the road cutting a neat swathe into the side of the mountain, but there are enough kinks to keep it interesting. The MX-5 RF hugs the tarmac as I ease it along the side of the mountain. The snug cockpit means I feel in complete driving control and the car responds with alacrity.

Aside from the villages and towns that dot this coastal stretch, nature has been left to its own devices and it feels like a place time has forgotten. Cerulean waters lap gently at rocky beaches and the hum of bees hangs in the air. It's no wonder Albania's southern stretch has intoxicated intrepid visitors for decades. In fact, one of its biggest champions was British poet Lord Byron, who visited the country in 1809 as part of his Mediterranean tour. One of Lord Byron's most remarkable encounters was with Ottoman Albanian ruler Ali Pasha of Tepelena. This formidable character created the largest territory ruled over by a Pasha >

"It's no wonder Albania's southern stretch has intoxicated intrepid visitors for decades"





MAZDA MX-5 RF

Able to switch from cool closed coupe to convertible in just 13 seconds, the Mazda MX-5 RF is *the* sports car for all seasons

ENGINE 2.0-litre 160ps

TRANSMISSION 6-speed auto

TOP SPEED 134mph



in the Ottoman Empire and one of his castles, Porto Palermo, lies along the SH8. The castle, which some historians say was built by the Venetians, is positioned on a small promontory that reaches into the sea, and inside the thick-walled fortress is a portrait of rakish Lord Byron himself.

Up on the ramparts, I gaze down on the milky sea below. To my right is a military base built by Hoxha, and on the hills beyond is a mushroom-like bunker – another of his creations. He apparently built more than 750,000 bunkers during his rule. Albania certainly has a story to tell.

Back in the Mazda, I continue south towards Sarandë, passing groves of lemon, orange and olive trees. The town's buildings echo the colours of fruit trees – brightly painted art deco-style hotels, reminiscent of South Beach in Miami, line the beach and spread densely up the mountainside. Sarandë is one of Albania's fastest-growing tourist districts, unrecognisable, I'm told, from even five years ago. Cruise ships now dock here regularly in the summer, and just over the water the hulking mass of Greece's popular island Corfu rises up out of the sea.

Sarandë may signal the end of the SH8 but I still have more to see. I pass slowly through the town and put my foot down as the roads clear and I'm out in nature once again.

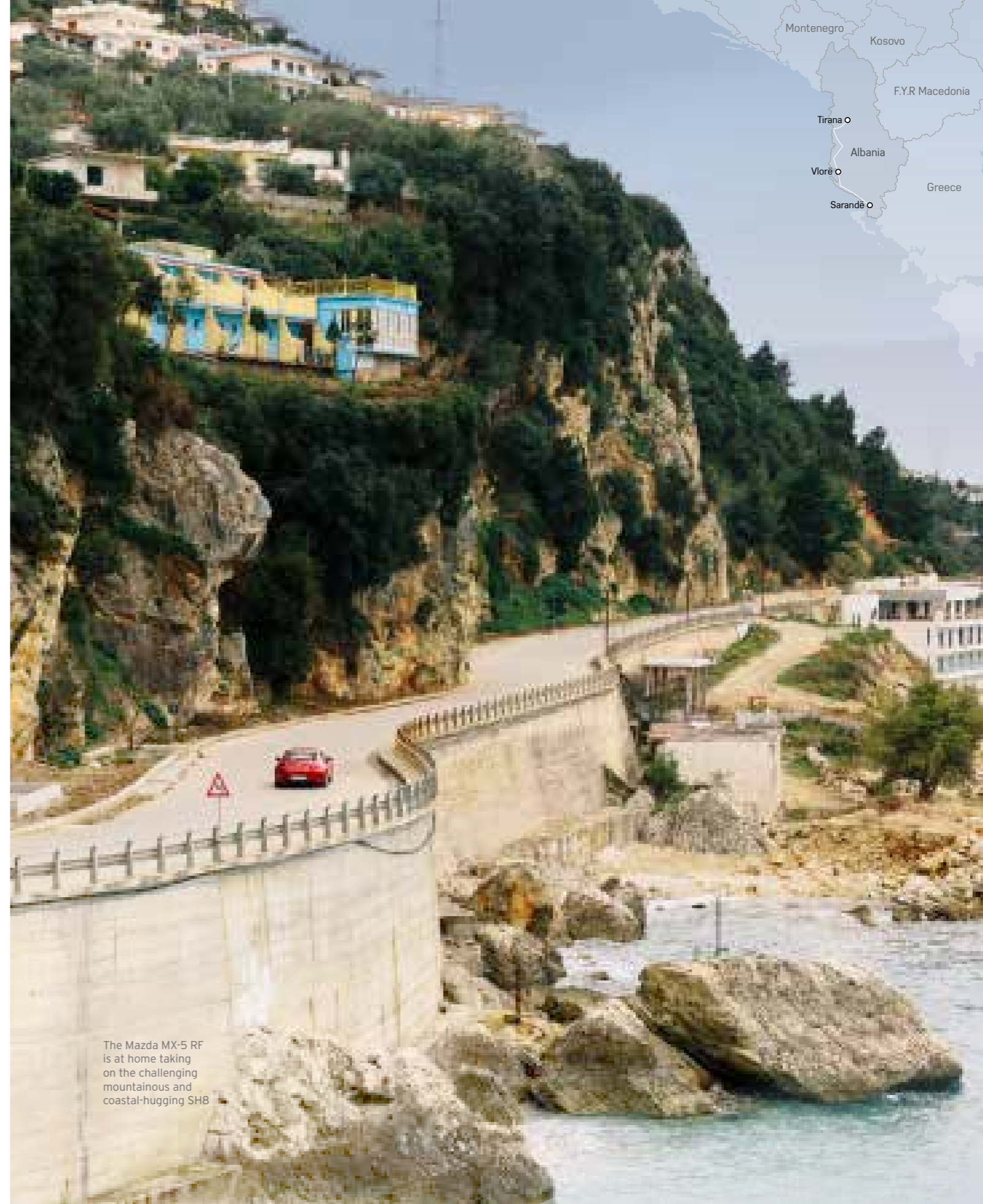
My final destination is Butrint National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that was once an ancient Greek colony and then Roman city. It's 30 minutes south of Sarandë so hardly a detour, and another opportunity to enjoy some more of Albania's twisting coastal roads in the Mazda MX-5 RF.

En route to Butrint, I stop off at Ksamil – by far the most beautiful beach on this route. The water is remarkably clear and the sand is soft underfoot. There are three islands just a short distance across the water, easily accessible by boat.

Butrint is one of Albania's finest historical monuments; a vast complex of ancient buildings that once comprised a port city abandoned in the Middle Ages. There's a particularly well-preserved Greek amphitheatre, the remains of Roman baths, and a reconstructed Venetian castle dating back to the 14th century. The city sits alongside Lake Butrint, a salt-water lagoon surrounded by densely forested hills. It's a magical place, and I spend a few happy hours immersing myself in its stories.

Butrint serves as a reminder of Albania's rich and varied cultural heritage, and its people's resilience in the face of change. As the country rises once again and opens its arms to international tourists, it has all the ingredients for an inspiring visit. Not to mention all those hairpin bends that beg to be driven. ◯

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The Mazda MX-5 RF is at home taking on the challenging mountainous and coastal-hugging SH8