

## Political, economic changes

Tucked into a mountainous coastal pocket of the Balkan Peninsula, on the Adriatic Sea, Albania's 11,000 square miles hold a population of 3.4 million, 400,000 of whom live in Tirana.

The country's national hero is Skanderbeg (real name: Gjergj Kastrioti), a military genius who won brilliant victories over the Ottoman Turks over 500 years ago.

In the heart of Tirana, Skanderbeg sits astride his horse, with sword poised, dominating the vast square that bears his name. Not far across Skanderbeg Square, a scar in the concrete marks the site where once stood the imposing statue of Enver Hoxha, the self-styled modern Skanderbeg.

His bronze figure was toppled and decapitated during a violent student demonstration that precipitated the overthrow of the Communist regime in 1991.

Determined to obliterate all signs of the Communist era, the Albanians are rushing headlong into the new capitalism.

Windows of newly opened shops flaunt goods unseen there in 50 years. Free enterprise has spilled over onto the sidewalks with vendors peddling everything from upholstered sofas to Colombian bananas, including "small scale" operators who weigh you on an antiquated balance for one lek (10¢ U.S.).

On a bigger scale, Albania is today generating the highest economic growth rate in Europe — a somewhat misleading statistic, since the country still ranks lowest in Europe in per-capita income. Contributing factors to poverty have been the highest European birthrate and the 50 years of total isolation.

But nowadays Albania's intense interest in the outside world is apparent in a forest of 350,000 satellite dishes tuned to TV channels across Europe and the Middle East. Like giant white mushrooms, the discs continue to sprout up overnight on the roofs and balconies of Tirana.

## Visitors welcome

Foreign tourists — not yet swarming in droves over Albania's cities, mountain villages, sparkling



Children use the soaring angular roof of the Hoxha museum today as a fun slide. The futuristic museum was built by the dictator in honor of himself.



lakes and white beaches — are being warmly welcomed and given special attention.

As for myself, I received many invitations to stay in private homes during my week's sojourn in Tirana. An artist, a clergyman and a stationery store owner, among

others, urged me to accept the hospitality of their homes.

I hardly believe I was invited for my scintillating personality but more likely because it would give

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