

these amiable Albanians an opportunity to speak English, a chance to form a relationship with a foreigner or perhaps a way to earn a few dollars providing bed and board.

Cultural offerings

The wealth of cultural facilities in Tirana is impressive. In the city center, a vast Palace of Culture houses a concert hall, national library and a national theater, with frequent drama, music and ballet performances. Tirana also boasts a national museum and a folklore institute.

The most glittering piece of architecture in Tirana is a futuristic

pyramid, built as the Enver Hoxha Museum, a flamboyant shrine of memorabilia and archives glorifying the dictator's life.

The building, with grandiose pylons and dazzling exterior mirrors, reflects the narcissism of the man apotheosized as a living god in his lifetime. Presently, it serves as a hall for international exhibitions.

Optimism and religion return

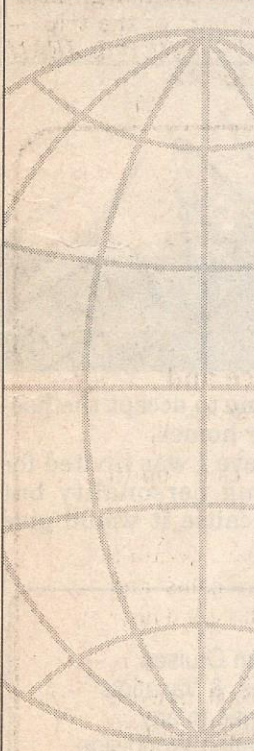
Today, Albania's fledgling democracy struggles with a 30% unemployment rate and an economy largely dependent on currency remittances from emigrants abroad. But a youthful optimism prevails in a land where 33% of the popu-



Vestige of Communist-period frieze remains on Albania's National Museum but with Communist symbols expunged.

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lation is less than 15 years old.

Albanians are quick to offer a smile and a belief that "times will get better." A recent poll indicated 72% are convinced the country is "on the right path" — the highest percentage of confidence in government among the ex-Communist nations of Europe.

Majestically rising on Skanderbeg Square, the 200-year-old Etehem Bey Mosque with its soaring minaret reminds visitors that Albania is predominantly a Muslim country.

An estimated 70% of the population is Muslim, 20% Eastern Orthodox and 10% Roman Catholic (the most famous of whom is Mother Teresa, born in the town of Prizren, today situated inside Serbia).

Although Hoxha banned all religions in 1967, proclaiming Albania "the first atheist country in the world," nowadays worshipers are again crowding the mosques and churches.

"We Albanians never ask a man his religion," Mihal, a professor of philology, told me. "Tolerance of religious differences is our tradition. In fact," he added, "many of us prefer a kind of 'composite religious identity'."

Mihal's grandmother was one of