

Texts and photographs
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Journey to Baku





Why Baku? I hardly know anything about this city, its history. The name calls to mind a stop on the Silk Road, caravansaries, and oil fields as far as the eye can see. I only have a vague image of it in my head. Baku is still just a destination on the screen at the airport that announces the planes' departures and arrivals. And yet, despite this giant screen's matter-of-fact typography and strictly functional character, the four letters that compose the name of Azerbaijan's capital exert a powerful hold on my imagination. What good would it be to travel, if we only discovered what we already knew?

The "Flame Towers" rise above the city. You catch sight of these glass and metal towers wherever you are. They form a residential complex designed by the American architectural firm HOK, skyscraper specialists. These three towers, in and of themselves, seem to symbolize the vast ambitions of this little country and its age-old history wedged between Iran and Russia.

Here and there, a mosque's cupola and minarets stand out against the sky, recalling that we are in the land of Islam. Nevertheless, in Azerbaijan, religion is kept a matter of conscience. The country is the first Eastern secular democracy, founded in 1918. Proselytizing is prohibited. Different communities live in peace: Muslim,

Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian. Women vote, choose not to wear the veil, go out dancing. One lives in Baku as one lives in Paris.

Thanks to Zaur, a diplomat friend, I visit the National Assembly. At the entrance, a statue of Heydar Aliyev. His paternal shadow still stretches across the land. A former high-level KGB officer (appointed by Andropov and dismissed by Gorbachev) he was elected President of Azerbaijan twice, from 1993-2003. An excellent strategic thinker, he had an oil pipeline built from Baku to Supsa,





Georgia, thus bypassing Russia and establishing his country's economic and political independence.

The Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center. Designed by the Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid (2004 Pritzker Laureate), it is one of the city's most elegant buildings. I stay a few hours, waiting for nightfall. Its shape reminds me of Ilandagh, a mountain in the Southwest of the country.

Baku is a port, like so many other cities I love: Nice, Beirut, Istanbul, Saint Petersburg... the Caspian Sea is strongly present: the scent, the breeze, the seabirds. In Soviet times, Russians used to come on holiday. Today, the beaches are beautiful, but empty.

A few strolls along random streets, fine restaurants, a club. It turns out I hardly saw Baku at night. I didn't have a reason for coming here; now I have one for coming back. 🌟

