

IRS Focusing on Azerbaijan



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DISCOVERING AZERBAIJAN



THE TRIP TO AZERBAIJAN ORGANIZED RECENTLY BY DAR EL ATHAR AL ISLAMIYYAH HAS BEEN A GREAT DEAL OF FUN. WE HAD A VAGUE IDEA ABOUT THE COUNTRY'S HISTORICAL PAST BUT WERE EAGER TO DISCOVER THIS NEW DESTINATION.

After arrival at the hotel, we were offered a beautifully printed program, listing each event of the next nine days we were about to share with three members of the AzDipServis staff. First, we were taken for a short drive along the main road discovering, with the help of our guide, the old and new Baku, public gardens, the Government Palace, a string of different styles of architecture, medieval walls, luxurious buildings and the magnificent view of the Caspian Sea. The planned program was intriguing. Azerbaijan, known to us as a crossroads along the Silk Road, has been embellished from the Muslim Era to the modern times. Several political changes, some painful, have affected the country since the break-up of the spices road trade. Different types of architecture spoke silently of past occupations. Friends or foes, those contributions gave us a hint of their impact. Today we were in a free country, ready to absorb all the information given to us.

After a copious breakfast on the first day, a coach took us to the Alley of Martyrs and the Alley of Honor, where celebrated figures are buried. We were given red carnations before entering a garden filled with colorful tulips, daisies and magnificent pine trees. Our guide explained the role of important men and women who have dedicated their life to arts, sciences or freedom of the country. We were overwhelmed by the peaceful effect of the site and took many photos. A walk up the hill brought us facing the silver looking Caspian



Sea and an Ottoman mosque with its typical slim minarets.

The roads in Baku, which means a City of Winds, are filled with olive, maple, pine and eucalyptus trees. A couple of centuries ago, the Nobel brothers decided that the bare land has to be covered with soil and plants brought here in exchange for low tax. With the rise of the oil trade, wealthy entrepreneurs started to build houses in the European and modern style. Despite the changes, the old city still stands proudly, recognized by UNESCO as part of the World Heritage List and a major tourist attraction. We walked through the 12th century ancient wall to discover the Shirvanshah Palace built for the 35th Shah. Our feet got to sample the cobbled pavement before reaching the gracious courtyard of the palace. From the garden, we could see below a private mosque with a modest minaret and a mausoleum before entering the dwelling made of sand stone. Enriched with 52 rooms, each one was embellished by pointed arch windows, protected by wooden lattices and allowing natural light

to enter through their geometrical framework. Although they were empty, we easily imagined the lavish rugs, silk cushions and finest curtains described by our guide. Built between the 15th and 16th centuries, the property was used as family quarters and as an important official residence. The architect included a bath-hammam and an underground reservoir. In those days water was a scarce commodity, so the system was a practical contribution for the needs of a huge household.

The nearby miniature book museum exhibits unusual items composed by artists, mostly anonymous, who wrote verses of the Koran, history or poems in tiniest letters as small as a dot! We were curious to get a close look at such a working dedication. A hundred meters away, in a caravanserai restaurant, we were welcomed by a group of musicians playing traditional Azerbaijani music as we entered. We sampled our first meal made of fresh herbs, vegetables and grilled meat – delicious!

We carried on with a walk into the old city. We loved those first floor



dwelling ranged next to one another along narrow streets. We could see, above our heads, balconies built in the Ottoman style and incredible carvings on the top of some windows. We were allowed to have a look at an indoor courtyard which was shared by occupants of flats. We stopped at a fruiterer to look at his tiny shop selling a plenty of down-to-earth goods. We admired the care and love with which local residents have treated this location surrounded by modern Baku. The 12-centuries-old city was, after all, the heart of Baku. Small mosques and five bath-houses provided all that was needed. The mysterious Maiden Tower kept us intrigued. Judging by its share, it must have served as an enormous observatory. The medieval site carries so many centuries of history! The city was well defended with its powerful walls appearing like strong pro-

tective shields seen from far away.

Azerbaijani authorities have worked wonders in creating many museums to preserve their national legacy. The country offers more than a hundred of them. We met a group of children as we entered the State Museum of Azerbaijani Carpets and Applied Arts. On the first floor, we were taken aback by the wealth of woven rugs carefully hung on the walls. Weavers are usually unknown but the patterns remain often identical according to the region. The curator kindly explained the meaning of piles, colors, motifs and techniques, pointing out differences between Kilim, Tabriz and basic rugs. In the olden days, people used them daily in their households. We were told that one lived on a carpet and died on one too! Decorated costumes, jewelry and objects of daily life were a feast to our eyes. We did not miss





The Bibi-Heybat mosque

The State Philharmonic Hall



the Theatre Museum upstairs which deserved recognition for the artists who were inspired by stories, poetry or local and international music. Leyli

and Majun is a love story hugely recognized as a masterpiece.

We completed our day by an agreeable dinner on a boat in the

Baku harbor. The proximity of the long boulevard to the Caspian Sea was so inviting that some of us walked back to the hotel. We were not tourists but people who enjoyed a night sea breeze – it felt like home.

On Friday, we were already looking forward to more discoveries. This one, the 13th century Bibi-Heybat Mosque, has been restored to the highest standard. We walked through a huge courtyard before entering this mausoleum. Golden and silver decorations along the walls covered with green tiles contrasted with the gentle atmosphere of the well-wishers praying in silence. Above the mausoleum, under its enormous dome, the dark green tiles shone softly. The Islamic stylistic genre of the décor reminded us of



how small a world could be when art travels.

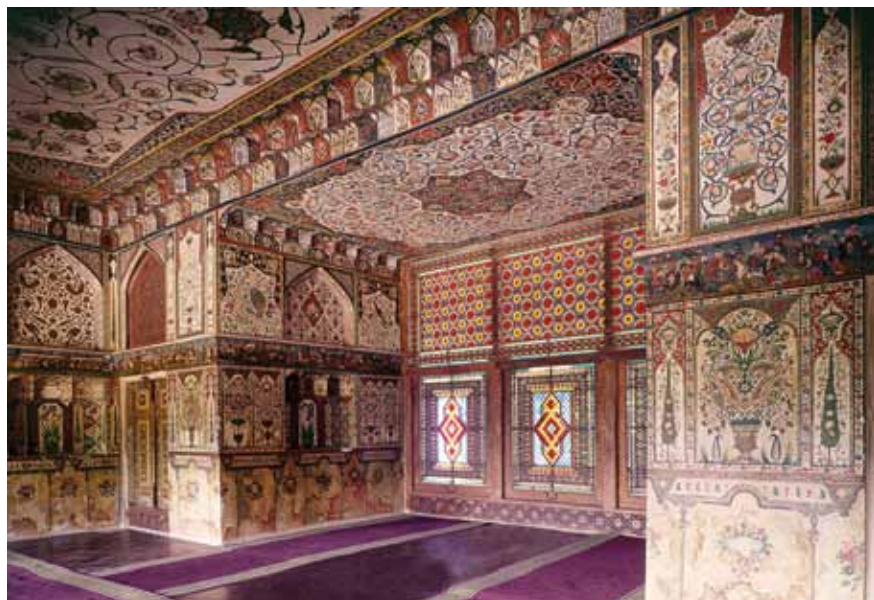
We were then taken to the Gobustan archeological site located at the foot of the Caucasian mountains and recognized as one of the oldest settlements in history. It surprised us immensely. The sight of huge uneven rocks justified the explanation of their age of a million years! We watched different engravings depicting men and animals at different periods. Further up, there were Roman and Arabic inscriptions. Our guide showed us important findings like bones, remains of food tucked in a corner and the amazing close up of a graffiti reflecting a dance or collective hunting. We were all impressed.

In the evening we were invited to the State Philharmonic Hall to attend a folk performance. This hall, built in the renaissance style in 1912,



surprised the onlooker with the silver dome set between two narrow towers. Inside, we walked into a concert hall with an elaborate gilded roof and seats cleverly positioned in a semicircle. As soon as the dances started, we were engulfed in an artistic pleasure, admiring the long floating dresses and head scarves of the girls moving with gracious gestures. As for men, their different costumes made them look both fierce and handsome. Their battle with real swords required a lot of dexterity. What a skill! We appreciated the performance of musicians playing traditional instruments. Many of us tapped their feet on the floor while the music was played. Needless to say that our group joined the crowd wanting to take pictures of the superb artists.

A visit to the modern museum



planned for the next day was something we didn't know what to expect from. On the outside, this ordinary construction did not appear very appealing. But as soon as we entered, the modern building embraced us. The rooms seemed disconnected from each other but still united in white, a color of purity! The center court, covered with a glass roof, had definitely an Oriental touch many of us were used to. We loved it! We admired the works of art on display. We may not have understood all the different styles but international masterpieces always teach us something new. We noted a coffee shop decorated like a Van Gogh café. A visit to the bookstore gave us a chance to buy some English editions which will make perfect gifts.

We carried on with a visit to the home of the Nobel brothers. In the late 19th century, over a period of 10 years, they built factories on oil fields, creating a real boom in Baku. Their restored mansion is filled with delicate furniture of the time, photos, documents and a prime garden as if they were still living here.

The coach then took us to a Zoroastrian fire temple Atashgah a few

kilometers away the city. Arab geographer Ibn Ilyas wrote in the 16th century "... a mile from Baku there is a place with fire burning without torches...". Azerbaijan used to be known as a country of fire. Naturally, it attracted a group of Indian visitors who built a caravanserai as a pilgrimage site in the 15th century, introducing Zoroastrian religion. We entered the site composed of 26 rooms for guests. In the middle of the courtyard, an altar projects a small flame, which is nowadays lit by gas. In Zoroastrian religion, fire is a sacred symbol. The information displayed in some rooms highlighted the different steps of this religion and the way pilgrims lived. There were also symbols, poems and formulas written in Sanskrit and illustrating genuine beliefs of the time. According to the old tradition, one who jumps over the fire cleanses his health. In those days, pilgrims lived in frugality and simplicity, sharing a shelter like a family. This ancient religion united people of two countries. Today, this historical place is open to visitors.

Shaki, our next destination, is located at the foot of the Caucasus mountains. We took an overnight

train from the delightful architectural railway station in Baku. After settling in our cabins, we were excited like a bunch of schoolchildren. We were offered drinks by a female attendant before falling asleep under the soothing motion of the train. Our guide awoke us around 6 a.m. the next morning. Some of us immediately glued their nose to the windows, admiring the spectacular scenery of the green land with early morning shepherds and flocks. How refreshing it was to look at acres of hills and a narrow river! We were in the heart of a country which has kept its landscape in a prime condition, almost untouched by civilization.

On our arrival, we were welcomed by a local mayor and driven to the hotel. A rich breakfast was waiting for us, followed by a visit to the silk manufacturer. The provider of silk breeding, threads, fabric and carpets, this industry is highly respected because of its links with the Great Silk Road. Naturally it was no surprise to hear that Shaki still carries on the old tradition. Sitting in an area filled with magnificent trees and backed by a mountain, Shaki is also a pretty place. Its industry maintains a complete set of environmentally friendly products. Once we entered a shop, we observed workers, mostly women, checking tiny threads on the bobbins. We also watched different steps of weaving silk into delightful rugs. We could not help swarming their exhibition room!

Along the road, we noticed many lilac trees filled with their purple flowers and magnificent irises before reaching the Shaki Khan Palace. The two story residence was erected in 1761. Inside the main rooms, we admired the artistic decorations on the ceiling and walls. The south-facing stained glass and geometrical panels forming the windows were letting

the light enter like a rainbow of colors. Around us, we noticed that flowers decorated on panels resembled those we saw at the entrance of the town. Plants, fruits and birds were not forgotten. The woodwork and structures of each room reminded us of those seen in Iran and India. We took time to have a closer look at the details of each work of art. Our local guide explained the function of each room and described the illustrations with their historical background. She described the philosophy behind a pomegranate, which was perceived as a symbols of the world, while the inside of it is associated with people (seeds) and society (skin divider). Below the ceiling, all around the room, a battle scene depicted men at war but each with unique features.

The lack of furniture highlighted the eastern use of low tables, numerous rugs and cushions, more comfortable than a stiff chair! The architects of this jewel knew how to bring the best, combining a healthy measure with natural elements, low entrances for privacy and large wooden windows overlooking the outside garden. Many photos were taken – otherwise how else can one remember such detail of a place that will never be copied?!

Outside, we were offered a concert by local musicians who used amazing stringed instruments (Ud, Saz and Kamancha) backed up by singers and lovely dancers. Some of us danced too. The atmosphere was friendly. We all enjoyed the offer of tea and sweets.

At night, dinner was hosted in the caravanserai, a 17th century old hotel complex. It has around 300 rooms which used to house merchants centuries ago. Inside, there is an area that used to serve as a shelter for camels and horses, as well as a lovely garden and a fountain. We could see the bal-



conies of individual rooms that accommodate tourists today. Our meal was served in an long room with a ceiling looking like a vault, perhaps to keep the heat away. The table was filled with various dishes. We enjoyed everything that reflects local cuisine. Our host spoke about Shaki and its role in present-day society.

Before leaving the town the next day, we were presented with gifts in an informal reception. As our coach drove away, we could not help stopping by a local shop selling silk, velvet, woodcarving and handmade goods. We bought something to remember this delightful location.

Then a trip was organized to Kish, a small village nestled away from the main road. After crossing a rugged road, we discovered a 400-year-old Albanian church hidden among traditional houses. Its internal architectural features and faded wall drawings show the early stage of Christianity. On the ground, a glass protected a burial settlement. Recognized as very ancient with giant skeletons, it has been studied and

recorded. This historical location has been looked after by the family who offered this precious monument to the state. We were welcomed in their garden with tea and some sweets.

We reached Gabala and checked in the Caucasus Resort Hotel after enjoying a traditional meal in a nearby leisure centre where hot bread was baked for us. This resort befuddled us completely. Built in a luxurious architectural style, it almost seemed to be out of place. The sheer perfection of the service, rooms, restaurants and the sports center are intended for tourists. The privilege of hearing a gentle tickle of a water spring outside our windows would certainly enchant the overseas visitors seeking a remote location, peace and an enjoyable environment.

We returned to Baku, stopping in a local restaurant for lunch. Each restaurant, even in the middle of nowhere, could accommodate many visitors. We considered each restaurant as yet another cultural discovery. Centuries of trades along the spice road did spread culinary talents on



to remote destinations. The amazing diversity of appetizers in the form of fresh herbs, olives and vegetables, pilafs, garnished chicken, grilled meat and fish were always tasty. Sweets and tea gave us agreeable breaks! Each town visited had something special to tickle our curiosity.

As we reached Baku, we realized that our journey was over. As usual, a lovely dinner was organized for us. Our comfortable hotel was close to the center. In the evening, we were invited to the Opera and Ballet Theatre to watch Don Quixote. A crowd was already queuing when we arrived. Inside, the décor resembled that of the early 20th century French decoration with gilded features and big figures. We watched classical dancers moving like butterflies under the spell of music. After the ballet, we went to a beautifully deco-

rated restaurant where three young musicians played with utmost talent.

We had time in the morning to visit the Carpet Palace. This Oriental-type house has been turned into a gallery selling magnificent rugs. The workshop was filled with weavers. We were shown natural pigments used in their modern machines. Outside, many traditional objects were laid out by the fountain, illustrating the craft that is slowly disappearing. The gallery floor was covered with priceless rugs – unique pieces of workmanship no machine can beat. We were offered a glossy catalogue containing detailed explanations.

We had lunch at the Galereya Restaurant where lavish art was present everywhere from candelabras and piano floor to paintings and statues. This unusual setting did not change the quality of the food. Some of us

went shopping in the modern part of Baku.

In the evening, we gathered in the lobby of the hotel to say goodbye to our guides. There were 31 of us, members of the Dar El Athar El Islamiyyah, sharing this incredible experience. Behind the trip to Azerbaijan, there were people in Kuwait who deserve our words of appreciation for their hard work and help in coordinating all the minor details. A visit to this part of the world filled us with pleasant and delightful surprises. For us, Azerbaijan was a missing thread linking this historical route to other countries visited previously. Was the experiment interesting? Yes, we loved it! 🌟