

Faig GURBATOV
National Coordinator of the “Project for the
Development of Tourism in Azerbaijan”, UNDP

AZERBAIJAN AT A CLOSER LOOK

IF YOU HAVE VISITED BAKU AND EVEN LIVED IN THIS GREAT CITY FOR A FEW WEEKS, IT DOES NOT MEAN THAT AZERBAIJAN IS ALREADY A READ BOOK FOR YOU. CONSIDER THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW THIS COUNTRY PROPERLY YET. YOU CAN COME HERE YEAR AFTER YEAR BUT STILL, IT WILL PREPARE SOME PLEASANT SURPRISE FOR YOU EVERY TIME.



Start with the province

Upon arrival at Baku airport, try to avoid the temptation to drop into the city, because otherwise, you will not escape from the welcoming embrace of the Azerbaijani capital. It is better to go straight into the heart of the country, the ancient city of Sheki, which was once the center of a powerful khanate. On the way, you will have a chance to get acquainted with some natural areas of Azerbai-

jan. Your journey will begin in the desert plains of the Absheron Peninsula and end in the mountain forests teeming with chestnuts, hazelnuts and branchy oaks.

The ancient city of Sheki is the center of the Sheki-Zagatala region. It is located 300 kilometers northwest of Baku on the southern slopes of the Great Caucasus Range. Sheki was in the rapids of the Silk Road, through which many caravans



traveled for centuries. From here, merchants and travelers brought stunningly beautiful silk fabrics and scarves embroidered with gold. Sheki silk is light, durable and transparent as a veil and was valued no less than Chinese silk.

In the city and its environs, there are numerous unique architectural monuments, including one of the oldest Albanian churches in the world, which was founded in the first century A.D. But the main wonder is the 18th century Palace of Sheki Khans.

Winding streets covered with cobblestones lead to the walls of the fortress and the palace itself. It was built more than two centuries ago for Huseyn Khan - a poet and patron of arts and crafts. Through the efforts of architects and builders, a big precious carved fine casket emerged. All the walls are covered with exquisite paintings, while marvelous light

comes in through the magnificent stained glass windows that decorate the facade of the building. The art of creating these stained glass windows was not lost - local craftsmen are still ready to fulfil any order.

In the Sheki restaurant styled like a medieval caravanserai, you will be offered an excellent meal. Be sure to try the local crown dish – piti, a soup of lamb stewed with herbs and spices on low heat.

Be sure to visit the confectioners' quarter. Only here, can you taste and buy famous Sheki sweets - honey baklava, gentle halva and flour sticks that melt in your mouth. They are baked according to traditional recipes handed down from generation to generation. They get their unique taste from walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds and honey made from mountain herbs. Strict confectioners (here it is an exclusively male profession) allow you to taste fresh sweets

off a large knife blade. If they ask you to taste a juicy piece of baklava or halva, you cannot refuse – you will have to eat everything, or else you will strongly offend the host.

Wine tour

The Shirvan region has always attracted tourists with its picturesque mountains, green valleys and numerous monuments of Azerbaijani architecture. Shamakhi was visited by Alexandre Dumas during his journey to the South Caucasus. From here, he brought many Eastern recipes for his famous "Cookbook" he was proud of no less than the novel "The Three Musketeers".

The great French novelist was right: Shamakhi cuisine was, indeed, unusually rich: 46 kinds of pilaf, 14 types of dolma, 16 types of kebab and lots of other delicacies. All this should be washed down with red or white wine made in the neighbor -



IRS Focusing on Azerbaijan



ing region of Ismayilli.

Ismayilli is a large wine-making region situated at an altitude of 1,400 meters above sea level. The mild local climate makes it possible to make sorts which produce wonderful dry and sweet wines.

In the early 2000s, the Ismayilli winery lay in ruins. Its new owner - the Ismayilli Sharab Company - had to bring Saperavi and Cabernet

Sauvignon vines from Georgia and revive the ancient Azerbaijani sort of Matrasa. Today Ismayilli runs the most modern wine-making complex in the CIS. Production has been fully modernized and state-of-the-art French and Italian equipment has been installed here. The grapes are grown without chemical fertilizers, while the crops are harvested manually.

Each year, the factory produces hundreds of thousands of bottles of wine sold in almost every shop in Azerbaijan. At the same time, the winery itself recently acquired clear features of a resort. Near the wine bottling workshop, there are white two-storied cottages, and a swimming pool, tennis courts, a restaurant and a large tasting room are being completed.

Drinking wine where it is produced is the main principle of "wine" tourism. In Azerbaijan, pure mountain air and magnificent scenery have been added to it.

Here, high in the mountains, there is the village of Ivanovka, which is home to descendants of Russian Molokan immigrants, and the village-reserve of Lahij, which is famed for its skillful craftsmen. Celebrations and festivals of crafts here are visited by hundreds of tourists to buy unique products valued by Great Silk Road merchants and known far beyond the Caucasus.

The main shopping street of La-

hij is densely lined with shops and workshops of coppersmiths, tanners, chasers, potters, workers of the garments industry, incrustation workers, wood and stone carvers and gunsmiths. In this remote area, you can obtain a nice souvenir and a real work of art at an affordable price.

Medical oil treatment

About a hundred kilometers south of Sheki, in the heart of Azerbaijan, there is a small town called Naftalan, which must definitely be visited. This is the only place on Earth where sources of medicinal naftalan oil have been found. It does not burn and cannot be used as fuel, but it cures dozens of diseases.

The story of its discovery is as follows. In 1890, the German engineer Jaeger was prospecting for oil near the present-day town of Naftalan. He rented a large plot of land, hired workers and drilled the first wells in anticipation of a quick profit. However, the samples he obtained nearly brought the entrepreneur to his grave - the oil did not contain gasoline fractions and therefore, it did not burn. Being on the verge of bankruptcy, Jaeger noticed that on hot days, the locals submerged into oil-filled pits, finding this procedure very useful.

Reassured, the German opened a factory to produce the naftalan ointment. It perfectly healed wounds, burns and frostbite. The new medicine from Azerbaijan created a furor in Europe. Jaeger's ointments, provided with the engineer's article and doctors' reviews, were sold as a remedy for almost all diseases, while their recipe was kept as a closely guarded secret.

Of course, you cannot get rid of all diseases by visiting Naftalan for only a couple of hours. But this is where you can buy ointments, creams



and solutions based on naftalan oil, which will certainly help you out if you have a health problem.

Today, oil procedures are used in the health centers of Naftalan to successfully treat skin diseases, musculoskeletal dysfunctions and a host of other ailments, the list of which takes more than just one printed sheet. In one of the local sanatoria, there is even a museum of crutches. They were left by terminally ill and almost disabled patients who began to walk after naftalan baths.

Studying the composition of naftalan, which looked like ordinary oil, chemists came to the conclusion that the curative properties of the liquid were primarily due to the naphthenic hydrocarbons it contained. Forming the basis of many biologically active substances - vitamin D, sterols and bile acids, they contribute to the stimulation of adaptive functions in the body.

During the "dead" period of the 1990s, Europe unexpectedly took the palm of naftalan treatment from Azerbaijan. However, Azerbaijan, which has practiced naftalan treatment for more than one hundred years, has no doubt about the

uniqueness and special effectiveness of its oil. Six of Naftalan's old resorts cannot cope with the load - the town already has four private medical institutions while three others are being completed.

Bringing the West and the East together

Arriving in Baku in the evening, you will see the city in the warm light of innumerable lamps and in the shining luxury of storefronts. The city is lit up so brightly and cleverly that the capital of Azerbaijan shines like a huge jewel today.

The palaces, which dictate the image of the city, go well with the lighting. At the beginning of the 20th century when Baku was rapidly getting rich from oil trade, Azerbaijan received the best architects of Europe, who built houses on the model of European capitals. And only the light Eastern veil lying on these buildings will remind you that you are on the shore of the Caspian Sea.

The city is best viewed from above, for example, from the viewing tower of the Hotel Radisson, which is located in the heart of the city. Here, you can have a dinner in

IRS Focusing on Azerbaijan

a restaurant with panoramic views . Start with gutabs and try the balig-bozbash (trout soup), and always leave some room for pilaf - the main dish of Azerbaijani cuisine.

The country's capital – Baku – is home to representatives of many nationalities, religions and cultures. It is home to Kurds, Russians, Ukrainians, Lezgins, Hindus, Jews, Georgians and Turks. They have all managed to maintain the traditions and customs of their people, which makes the capital of Azerbaijan a very interesting city from an ethnographic point of view.

The center of Baku is Ichari Shahar - "The Inner City". In the 12th century, it was surrounded by a double row of ramparts and a moat. The construction of defensive structures began during the reign of Shah Manuchehr II from the Yazidid dynasty.

The city could be entered through several gates, and the main Shamakhi gate still strikes with its grandeur. Homes tightly pressed to each other formed a maze of many narrow alleys and dead ends, while citizens' homes represented closed courtyards with low houses and deep porches.



Atashgah fire-worshippers' temple in Surakhani

This layout was fully justified: aliens could easily get lost in the web of streets, while their narrowness saved residents from the summer heat and cold winter winds.

One of the most famous and in the same way, mysterious monuments of Baku is Giz Galasi – the Maiden's Tower. As a symbol of the city, the tower is perhaps unparalleled in the entire Middle and Near East. It offers a beautiful view of the Baku Bay, and the tower itself was built on a ledge of a rock that jutted

out into the Caspian Sea.

Scientists are still continuing to argue about the age of the tower. There is a theory that it was built no later than the 10th century, but most likely, it was built in several stages, and the construction of the tower lasted several centuries.

The base of the tower dates back to the 5th-6th centuries, while the upper part – to the 12th century. The purpose of Giz Galasi is also the subject of heated discussions. Some researchers believe that it was originally built as a fire temple, and its height is due to the fact that the Zoroastrians practiced very exotic funerals - the body was not buried, but was exposed to be devoured by birds of prey.

In the 12th century, the Maiden's Tower was one of the most powerful fortresses of Shirvan Shahs, and later in the 18th-19th centuries, it was used as a lighthouse. Excavations carried out near the tower revealed the ruins of an ancient Christian basilica, whose age is estimated at 1,700-1,800 years. It is believed that it was erected at the site of the execution of Saint Bartholomew, one of



the 12 apostles of Jesus Christ, who preached Christianity among local pagan tribes in the first century A.D.

The heart of the Old Town

Most of the fortress is occupied by the palace of the Shirvan Shahs - the rulers of Shirvan, built in the 15th century. The architectural complex that includes a Divan-Khana, the Shirvan Shahs' tomb, a mosque with a minaret and a palace bath, stands on three levels and is visible from the sea for many kilometers.

Its construction began after the capital of the Shirvan state was moved from Shamakhi to Baku. Legend has it that the site for its construction was chosen very carefully: pieces of meat were hung in different parts of the city, and the palace was founded where it got spoiled later than all.

The oldest building in the ensemble is the palace itself, which occupies the top of the hill. It has two floors. On each floor, there are 25 rooms. The ground floor was occupied by servants and was used for storing food reserves, while the top floor was occupied by the sheikh and his entourage.

Next to the Divan-Khana, which housed the then government, there is a tomb. Its interior, decorated with magnificent finest ornaments, is one of the finest examples of the architecture of medieval Azerbaijan.

Under the floor of the funeral hall, archaeologists discovered a burial crypt - 14 graves of members of the Shirvan Shah dynasty.

No less interesting from an architectural and historical point of view is the Shah's mosque, which was built in the early 15th century and differs with its severity of architectural expression and carefully designed proportions made without any artistic frills, except for a striking 22-me-



Rock engravings in Gobustan

ter minaret topped with an original cornice.

And, of course, it is impossible to imagine the East without traditional bathhouses. The palace complex includes a modest-looking bath, but as they say, do not judge a book by its cover. In Baku, the correct proportions of the interior and a technical solution to a complex set of engineering structures have been preferred over the external decoration since ancient times.

The bath contained a great soap room with a pool and rooms for various procedures, and pure water was supplied from a nearby artesian well. A large ventilation shaft was connected to the deep underground reservoir. With the help of an extensive system of heat-conducting channels, couches and walls were heated in a natural way.

As Baku was seized by Safavid troops in 1500, the palace was looted. Many of its treasures were taken to Tabriz as booty, and nowadays they are kept in museums in Russia, France, Turkey, Iran, UK and USA. Ancient tomes from the palace library are kept in book depositories in the

Vatican, Tehran, Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Outside the 12th century walls, there is the "boom town", which emerged in the period of the rapid development of the oil industry in the late 19th century. Then, Azerbaijan provided half of global oil, and rich oil magnates invited the best architects of Europe.

With the oil boom, cultural life flourished as well - theatres were opened and singers and musicians were invited from Europe. They say that an opera theater was built by a wealthy man on a dare. Baku was visited by a prima donna from Italy, who was very surprised that there was no theater in the city. She did give a concert, but said that she was unlikely to come here again - there is no theatre and no place to sing. In response, a worthy man said that a year later, Baku will have its own opera theater. He kept his word and the theater was built...

For true connoisseurs of history and identity of the Azerbaijani people, Baku offers a variety of museum complexes, in which you totally immerse yourself in ancient history.

IRS Focusing on Azerbaijan



Khan's Palace, Sheki

In Baku, you can find museums of history, literature, music culture, the carpet, Azerbaijani theater and a unique museum of miniature books.

Since ancient times, the main feature in the traditions of the Azerbaijani people has been hospitality, respect for elders, help to the weak, peacefulness and tolerance. You can experience all this by visiting Baku, walking along its beautiful streets and just chatting with passers-by. It is believed that anyone who visits Baku once is sure to return there. Therefore, the answer to the question of whether to visit Baku or not should only be positive, with an eye for vivid impressions, with which you will return from there.

To touch history

Connoisseurs of traditional Azerbaijani carpets can enjoy plenty of trips to carpet factories and plunge into the range of quality products woven by hand that have no analogues in the world. Beautiful carpets made by Azerbaijani craftswomen decorate the Hermitage, the Louvre, the Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul, the Victoria and Albert Museum

in London and the Textile Museum in Washington.

Why do the Azerbaijanis have such a tender attitude to carpets? To understand this, one must go to an open-air museum on the outskirts of Baku - the village of Gala. Here, archaeologists found the remains of an ancient fortress and settlement at the site of which they laid out a historical and ethnographic park with hundreds of exhibits from different eras - from rough Stone Age tools and plates covered with petroglyphs to fine 19th century phaetons.

In this museum, you can literally touch history: guests can try their hand in traditional crafts or participate in ancient festivals and rites. For Bakuvians, Gala is a kind of entertainment center that whole families love to visit.

In a craftsman's restored home, a couple of old carpets lie on the floor, a couple of others are on the dastarkhan - a dais in front of the fireplace. There is also a wooden loom here - similar units are still used by weavers at Azer-Ilma. There is no furniture inside since carpets

served people as a bed, desk and workplace.

Such an unpretentious situation is an echo of the days when the ancient nomadic Turks, ancestors of Azerbaijanis, regarded only the endless steppes as their home and did not confine themselves to walls and roofs. Later, settling between the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, they retained their love for cattle breeding, discovering in parallel extraordinary abilities for fine crafts and trade - Azerbaijani khanates settled just at the crossroads of major caravan routes.

From the window of the museum semi-dugout, you can see strong two-storied houses of the current residents of the village of Gala. Half of the buildings seem to have been built from the same hewn stones that serve as exhibits in the museum. Shaggy sheep are running through the narrow streets, cows are mooing and dogs are barking in the yards. It may seem that time froze here 200 years ago. But the forest of oil derricks, which begins immediately behind the houses and stretches on the surrounding hills to the horizon, quickly returns visitors to the 21st century.

Bow to the fire

In the vicinity of Baku, in the village of Surakhani, there is one of the most famous sights of Azerbaijan - the Atashgah temple of fire worshippers. In former times, there existed burning natural gas sources here.

The "Land of Fire" became a place of worship for pilgrims - Zoroastrian Hindus. They built a temple altar, prayer houses and cells here. The whole complex remains intact to this day, and the austere conditions have been restored in many cells, while fire is sometimes lit on the towers of the temple and on the altars.



A tip for gourmets

Azerbaijan is a paradise for gourmets and all lovers of Caucasian and Oriental cuisine. Kebab, lula kebab, gutabs, sweets and pickles – a starving tourist can try all this in any restaurant or cafe. But in each region, you will definitely be offered something very special as well.

In Sheki, it will be the “dushbara” soup with tiny dumplings and lamb, and scrambled eggs with honey, in Zagatala – pilaf with chicken, and in Ganja - sherbet and creamy gaymag. In Azerbaijan, there are a lot of delicious dishes that have yet to become an export product, and they can only be tasted at home. Potatoes and apples stuffed with lamb, sturgeon with tomatoes and olives with the Absheron sauce, potato dolma with meat and mutton khash are traditional Azerbaijani dishes that you are unlikely to try anywhere else.

But keep in mind that, despite all

its charm and spices, local cuisine is heavy enough for people whose stomach is not used to such a huge amount of meat. Accepting yet another invitation to lunch or dinner, compare the size of the treat and your forces.

Vegetarians, too, will find something to eat. In the fruit paradise, fruit and berries of the east and south ripen: red pomegranates, currants, amber persimmons, cream cherries, peaches, pearl plums, turquoise fig, feijoa, walnuts, olives, honey melon, sugar melons, juicy apples and grapes of all sorts.

Facts and Figures

- In Azerbaijan, there are 65 monuments of global importance (the Old Town of Baku is on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites), 15 natural and historical reserves, 20 game reserves and hunting grounds.

- Of the total area of the country

(86,600 sq. km), more than half – 47,000 sq. km are oil and gas deposits. Experts claim that underground oil deposits in Azerbaijan total nearly 3 billion tons.

- The capital of Azerbaijan has many unusual, one-of-a-kind museums, including:

- The Museum of Carpets and Applied Arts with the world’s largest collection of rugs;

- The State Museum of Musical Culture, which keeps more than 35,000 exhibits, including the world’s oldest instrument – the “gavaldash” stone tambourine;

- The Museum of Miniature Books – unique in the world, which has more than five thousand baby books in all languages. Some of them can only be read under a microscope;

- The Museum of Baku Oil, which is popular among specialists of international oil companies. ■