

View of the surroundings of the Jidir-Duzu plateau. Shusha,

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In awe of **SHUSHA**



Shusha had long been some kind of wonderland in my head.

I'd heard and read for 20 years about a city fabled, not only for its natural beauty, but also because it had produced so many of Azerbaijan's most celebrated cultural figures, especially between 1880 and 1920, the country's Enlightenment. Literature and, especially, music flowed as abundantly from those heights as their mountain springs.

1920 was the year when the state's first period of independence was ended by Bolshevik invasion, but Shusha's cultural influence persisted until sovereignty was restored in 1991. Within a year, however, the city was lost, to invasion by Armenia. And so it remained unreachable through 28 years of UN impotence and OSCE Minsk Group mediation game-playing.

Until in September 2020, President Ilham Aliyev decided enough was enough and cut the Gordian Knot. The 44-day Patriotic War that followed continued until 8 November 2020, the day on which Shusha was liberated. The symbolism of its recapture was such that it



Ruins of poetess Khurshidbanu Natavan's house

View of the gorge from Jidir-Duzu



Fortress walls of the city of Shusha after restoration in 2023

resulted in an agreement that would return all the remaining occupied lands to Azerbaijan.

And so my hopes of visiting the city, some 400 kilometres by road to the west from my home in Baku, began to look more realistic. However as soon became clear, during those 28 years of occupation, Armenia had shown less interest in development than in either wanton destruction or, at best(?) the asset-stripping of minerals and materials. At worst, there was the matter of hundreds of thousands of Armenian mines lying in wait for unwary feet or wheels.

With territories and peace reclaimed, Azerbaijan followed its mine clearers and set to work with a will to rebuild infrastructure and utilities. I accepted, of course, that the many, many thousands of citizens who had been evicted from homes and lands by Armenia's original invasion, had priority claims to return and revisit. I waited, almost patiently, while still reminding friends that if ever there was a chance for an Englishman to get there...

All good things come to those who wait, they say, and so, in July this year, two of my reminders found fertile ground and Shusha shifted from dream to reality.

The first visit was with help from the Azerbaijan Writers' Union. It was for a celebration of Mollah Panah Vagif,

an 18th century poet and, respected for his wisdom and diplomacy, also vizier to Ibrahim Khalil, the second Karabakh khan. Vagif's use of vernacular and the realities of life as themes in his poems make him a very early contributor to the Azerbaijani Enlightenment that followed; his works were valued by 19th century drivers of that development like Gasim bey Zakir (also from Shusha) and Mirza Fatali Akhundov.

So the Vagif Poetry Days, from 14-16 July, were the perfect occasion on which to sample the city itself and begin to grasp its centrality to the country's culture.

The coach drive, with stops to refresh, took seven hours, but as we entered previously occupied territory in the Fuzuli region, a whole new vista surrounded us for the final 60 minutes or so. Even the newly-built Zefer Yolu (Victory Road) was impressive enough, A wonder itself, built in such a short time and winding up and down through the greenest scenery of the Lesser Caucasus mountains - lesser in height, maybe, but by no means in effect. It was nature's particularly beautiful display of the joys of colourful creation and growth. Photo buttons clicked enthusiastically the whole way. The only shadows on that sunny aspect were cast by the occasional abandoned trench and the scattered ruins of derelict buildings, unused for all those years.



Author of the article with the Karabakh carpet in the background

Karabakh carpet – invaluable heritage of Karabakh



As we approached the city, the scenic drama took on a different aspect. Rounding one of the seemingly endless bends we came in sight of the village of Dashalti. The name means 'Below the Rock', and for good reason. Behind it stands the vertiginous wall of rock that supports Shusha's celebrated plateau, Jidir Duzu (lit. Hippodrome Plain). The view evoked a mix of responses. On the one hand, that nature could fashion such a staggering insert to the greenery of the valley before it. On the other, recollections of the tales surrounding the retaking of Shusha on 8 November 2020. Desperate to avoid

Author of the article at the fortress gates of Shusha



any further damage to this cradle of Azerbaijani culture, the use of artillery was ruled out; the city had to be taken literally by hand. Those entrusted with the task had to climb those heights with light weaponry and trust that the element of surprise (who could expect such a direction of attack?) would see them through. It did and, getting closer to the rock with those thoughts in mind, my jaw dropped. Just how did they do that?

Once in the city and established in well-appointed hotels, the focus was on culture, especially music. An outdoor concert of traditional music played on national instruments with a backdrop including the remains of poetess and khan's daughter Khurshidbanu Natavan's home was the ideal introduction to the range of experiences to follow: nature, culture, history, occupation, liberation. And tradition... as we heard from the seven modes of mugham, seven poets, seven singers.

A visit to the carpet museum reinforced how (again, literally) homespun and ingrained cultural expression is to Shusha's history. The bright colours and fascinating motifs on Karabakh carpets stand one in awe of the creativity that produced them in Shusha homes. Then the cool beauty of the Saatli Mosque provided quieter moments of reflection on these impressions.



Monuments of composer Uzeyir Hajibayov, poetess Natavan and singer Bul-Bul returned to Shusha after its liberation

The following day took us along to the top of that wall of rock - to Jidir Duzu and views of a world of nature's wonders. Beginning with the air: to breathe it was to understand why so many of Azerbaijan's singers and musicians began their lives there. Awe and joy - how else to describe the impression of those heights and depths of both contour and colour?

Walking back, we stopped at the grave of Mir Mohsun Navvab (1833-1918) to pay respects to another contributor to the city's cultural versatility: he was a poet, artist, music historian, teacher, publisher, founder of literary and music societies. We were looking at a restored gravestone. And I wondered - which of Mir Mohsun's attributes had caused Armenian occupiers to destroy the original? Some question. Already forming in my mind was the theme of creation vs. destruction. This was enhanced by impromptu, open-mic-type late evening performances of poetry dotting the square before the hotel.

And the final evening was all for Mollah Panah Vagif (1717-1797). Although the name of this khan's vizier might give the impression of dour religiosity, he was not afraid to express many different aspects of his humanity

and he was important to the development of realism, as well as spirituality, in Azerbaijani poetry. For example, in one poem, he expresses the joy he would get from seeing a girl dance at a wedding, and misery if she doesn't...

...Molla Vagif shall call for help with bitter cries.

Not tears, but blood shall spurt from his lamenting eyes

Unless that lovely girl to show her grace will rise.

Although it breaks my heart, beguile us with a dance!

In another, he is aware that life is not all a bowl of cherries. It can be hard, even at a holiday (*bayram*)...

Although Bayram, the feast, is on its way, I sigh.

At home there's not a sack that holds a thing to eat.

The jars that held the oil are empty and quite dry,

There's not a whiff of cheese and not a shred of meat...

...In this wide world of ours we've not a groat to show,

And ne'er a pretty lass to set the heart aglow.

Vagif, don't ever boast about the things you know.

God knows our store of wisdom's poor and incomplete.

(Both from *Azerbaijan Poetry*, Progress Publishers, USSR, 1969. Trans. Tom Botting)



Mausoleum of 18th century poet M. P. Vagif. Left: during the occupation. Right: after restoration in 2022

Minarets of the Yukhari Govhar-agma mosque



So, a worldly man, who helped his khan negotiate the tricky political environment of his times, being especially involved in establishing relations with the Russia of Catherine the Great and Agha Mohammad, the rampaging Qajar Shah of Persia.

In the warm, open evening air - before Vagif's mausoleum, restored after being stripped to the bare bones during occupation - there was a presentation of music and theatre imagining Vagif meeting and discussing with predecessors and successors to his literary line. A

fascinating way to trace the links and help this foreigner towards a sense of the continuity and development of Azerbaijani literature in a truly stimulating environment.

One week later, I was back again, for the International Media Forum, and this time a flight from Baku to the newly-built Fuzuli airport, not only cut journey-time, it still gave us the best part of the road section - Zefer Yolu - to enjoy once more, as we did the five-star Shusha Hotel we were billeted in.



The Khari-Bulbul International Music Festival is being held in Shusha again after years of occupation

Shusha has become a venue for major international forums

There was a major surprise on the first day - the initial session was to be led by President Ilham Aliyev. Even more refreshing was the format. The president gave a brief, friendly welcome to the assembly of 200 or so international journalists and then opened up to some three hours of questions. With responses both detailed and to the point, the session left a couple of journalists, Asian and South American, expressing to me the wish, "to have a president like him." I won't list here the topics covered, but I can hardly think of an issue, either domestic or international, that was not frankly raised or dealt with, with much focus on the need for regional peace and development.

The following day's session revealed many journalists' concern with the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI); the concern that, with social media, "everybody is a journalist", often anonymously, so issues of ethical and moral responsibility, fact checking etc. Azerbaijan had suffered from its position being under-represented or misrepresented in the international media. A proposal was made for international journalists to prepare a Non-Aligned Movement project to counter fake information.

A further (for me) visit to Jidir Duzu was another refreshing must-do, but Mehmandarov's House gave a

glimpse into another side of Shusha artistry. After the music and poetry of the Vagif Days, now the work of Usta Gambar Karabagi, Shusha-born muralist and ornamentalist painter, was on display, albeit in fragments following the occupation. Also responsible for the murals in Sheki Khans' Palace, Usta Gambar clearly had a colourful vision to accompany his great skill and it was interesting to see another side to his artistic personality, this one recalling motifs from Karabakh carpets.

Free time to wander the city took me past the square presenting bullet-riddled statues of La Scala-trained operatic singer Bulbul (trans. nightingale); composer of the first opera in the East, Uzeyir Hajibeyov; and poetess Khurshibanu Natavan. Statues that the occupiers were selling for scrap metal before being retrieved and stored in Baku, awaiting their return home. On to Shusha's iconic Ganja Gate, taking in a closer look at what remains of Natavan's House, built for the poetess, benefactress and organiser of a literary society, later housing a music school, an art school and the Natavan House Museum until the occupation, after which it was left to fall into ruin. A walk through the residential streets went past derelict buildings posted with sobering notices:



Yoxlanilib Mina Yoxdur
ANAMA

The mine-clearing agency (ANAMA) informing passers-by that the building was clear of mines. I also took note of the beauty that had survived the occupation, and the work continuing to restore beauty that had been neglected or disfigured.

I left Shusha in joy and in awe of the natural beauty surrounding it, in awe of its people's historical contributions to the arts and culture of Azerbaijan, in awe of those who took it back from the hands of those who had destroyed so much and in awe of the efforts of those celebrating and restoring both culture and infrastructure. Creation over destruction every time! 🌱



Only after mine clearance does reconstruction in liberated areas receive the green light