

WELCOME

Baku

TO AZERBAIJAN



Baku – 2025

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Azerbaijan has long stood at the meeting point of major North-South and East-West routes, shaped and enriched by the diverse peoples and cultures that have passed through or settled here. This rich intermingling is one of the foundations of the country's enduring commitment to multiculturalism.

Whether your curiosity lies in education, history, geography, political economy, religion, culture, sport, or everyday traditions, this book offers a glimpse into the many layers of the Azerbaijani experience. Though modest in size, the country offers a wealth of impressions – from warm hospitality and diverse landscapes to a vibrant cultural life – all of which are brought together in these pages.

May this book serve not only as a practical guide, but also as a lasting memory of your time here, and a prompt to return for deeper discovery.

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Preface

To be sure, it is difficult to squeeze a quart of cultural experience into a pint-size book. However, knowing that a visitor's stay and reading time here are likely to be all too brief, the book is deliberately concise, with edited highlights of the experiences on offer.

However long your stay in Azerbaijan, and whatever the purpose of your visit, the book will help you point ever-open eyes and ears in interesting directions. Look and listen for the stories in every street, building, page, picture and, most importantly, person.

The book begins with the basics of the state and country: the **Geography** of an environment shaped by nine different climatic zones, the Caucasus mountain ranges and the world's largest lake opens the general theme of the tremendous variety to be found within these borders.

There follows a fascinating **History**, developed by contact (sometimes in struggle) and trade throughout the ages with some of the world's largest empires.

That history took one of its sharpest turns in the last decade of the 20th century with the collapse of the Soviet Union. A country known as the Land of Fire literally had to fight to consolidate its regained independence – a phoenix-like rebirth in flames. Miraculously, out of the chaos there rose a **Political Structure** that has ensured stability in a potentially volatile neighbourhood.

This stability was achieved in part by the establishment of a growing **Economy**. A strikingly bold and enterprising strategy for use of its resources of oil and natural gas brought the country record levels of economic growth. This, in turn, has been used to progress other sectors – trade, agriculture, tourism and trans-continental transport – into significant contributors to national wealth.

The most important investment that any country can make for continued development is in the next generation, i.e. into **Education**. As you will gather from contact with the Azerbaijan University of Languages, there is an ever-increasing desire to work with other countries for the mutual benefit of improved pedagogy and standards fit for a fast-changing world.

Religion has, unfortunately attracted a bad press in recent years, but Azerbaijan is a stand-out beacon of difference. Visitors to the country invariably have to shed preconceptions and stereotypes when they encounter this predominantly Islamic culture. They are surprised to find that, alongside the uplifting interiors of its mosques, there are Orthodox churches, a Lutheran church, the Roman Catholic church blessed by the Pope, as well as churches that reach back to the Caucasian Albanian Christianity of the 7th century and earlier. The synagogues in Baku and the large Jewish settlement of Qirmizi Qesebe also often come as a surprise to the casual visitor. "Tolerance" does not do justice here – these communities are not "tolerated" – they are simply regarded as integral parts of the Azerbaijani community.

The section on **Culture and Art** demanded indulgence in its size; one can only squeeze so much a range of creativity that seriously astonishes. Stand in wonder before a magical weave that was surely the inspiration for the legendary flying carpets of yore. The music, from folk to classical, opera, jazz and pop has produced world class musicians; and *mugham* and *ashiq* music are studies in themselves. Paintings and sculptures by artists old and young have brought down the hammers in western auction houses – they belong to a line of creativity at least 12,000 years old; its origins still on open display at Qobustan.

Classical writers and poets have become legends – you will find both beauty and sharp satire, and buds from the post-Soviet generation promise a new blooming. The architecture, whether medieval, 19th century oil boom, Soviet or ultra-modern, has been enough to inspire at least one expat to make his life here.

It's not necessary to visit during a national holiday (especially the springtime Novruz Bayram) to witness **Customs and Traditions** in full flight, but they are certainly lively occasions. If you are lucky enough to be invited into a home or to a family event, then you will enjoy the best of these traditions and **Way of Life**, of which the dominant feature is hospitality. Watch and listen wherever you go, even when relaxing with a traditional *armudu* glass of tea.

Combat sports, volleyball and gymnastics have brought many medals to Azerbaijan and **Sport and Leisure** are developing rapidly. If football is your sport, then Qarabag's recent European exploits have been a joy to watch. Try chovgan, a touch more exciting for some than polo, its more sedate successor. Fitness clubs, running, cycling and skateboarding are increasingly popular, and Baku's Boulevard can be a hive of activity but is still the focus of the ever popular evening stroll beside the Caspian Sea. Slightly more challenging are walks (hikes) in the Caucasus Mountains; which also offer two excellent ski resorts. International events abound: the European and Islamic Games, the annual Formula 1 Azerbaijan Grand Prix that races through Baku's streets, the 2019 Europa League Final and many gymnastic events are among tributes to the country's status in the world of sport.

In short, there is no shortage of sights, sounds or events to stimulate (or relax) the appetite. Positive venture will be rewarded....

Azərbaycana xoş gəlmisiniz!

Welcome to Azerbaijan!*

With eyes and ears open you are in for a wonderful adventure in a country that is larger than either life or its boundaries can suggest.

Azerbaijan's location has inevitably ensured a fascinating journey through history and an invigorating blend of cultures that guarantee variety and surprise wherever you care to look, listen.... or taste.

**Yaxşı yol!
Bon voyage!**

Where.... When.... What.... Who?

Still a mystery to many in the West, Azerbaijan is literally a crossroads of continents. Most of it lies south of the Caucasus mountain range that separates Europe and Asia, but the towns and villages in the mountains north of that line offer beach, pastoral and alpine resorts, as well as crafts, culture and orchards fruitful enough to tempt all tastes.

The Asian lands expand on the agricultural theme from the northern orchards to lush, sub-tropical tea and citrus plantations near the Iranian border. From semi-desert to glorious mountain lakes in the Lesser Caucasus, the country claims up to nine different climate zones; you may only imagine the variety of flora and fauna until you explore the many reserves. And of course the *Land of Fire* offers you its mud volcanoes, hillsides permanently aflame.... even spring water that burns.

The country only regained its independence in 1991 and visitors, especially from the West, will note Azerbaijanis' natural and particular pride in this independence and the cultural traditions that are part of their independent identity. The newly-defined neighbourhood is also intriguing: Russia to the north, Iran to the south, Georgia, Armenia and Turkey to the west and the world's largest lake – the Caspian Sea – on its eastern shores.

* Note that we have kept as close as possible to the Azerbaijani Latin script when transliterating names into English. An exception is 'Nagorno-Karabakh' (Mountainous Qarabagh) – the Russian form was used for the region occupied by Armenia. Properly known now as Karabakh. Qarabağ is the Azerbaijani name, as used by the champion football team.

Baku, the country's capital and probably your first stop, is the perfect overture to the musical theatre of any stay in the country. Your first sight will take in architecture from the medieval, walled inner city to the ultra modern and set the tone for a joyous journey through the traditional and contemporary, rural and industrial, the hustle and homeliness of life in Azerbaijan. And go just 60kms south to wonder at thousands of Stone Age rock engravings illustrating the lives of the region's earliest inhabitants.

Ears will soon tune to ballads from the *ashiq* bards; the sacred yearnings of *mugham* masters; the East's first operas, both tragic and comic; international laureate jazz musicians; Eurovision-winning popsters or underground rock, rap and electro.

Taste buds will delight in fresh, free-range meals accompanied by whole herbs and salads, warm clay-oven bread, followed by luxurious desserts and/or fruit that is picked and served with the full taste of the season.

Minds will marvel at the stories, history, culture and development of a country that has seen Roman legions, Persian Zoroastrians, Christian missionaries, Jewish settlers, Islamic Arabs, the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan and Timur (Tamerlane), Turkic settlers, Ottoman armies, Russian and British governors and Soviet commissars.

And who are these Azerbaijanis? Well possibly a mix of all the above. However, two main sources are generally accepted as being the roots of the main body of the population. The first mention of the indigenous Caucasian Albanians (no relation to the 'other' Albania) found so far was by the Greek historian Arrian. He mentioned them as part of the forces lined up against Alexander the Great at the 331BC battle of Gaugamela. Albania lasted until invasions by Turkic Khazars and the Arabs who brought Islam in the 8th century AD.

The influx of Oghuz tribes from the east in the 10th and 11th centuries was decisive in bringing Turkic language and culture to what is now Azerbaijan. The epic *Book of Dede Qorqud* (Korkut) with tales from those times is a treasured part of the literary heritage.

The present-day population includes other ethnicities. Some villages in the Caucasus have their own language; there are Udins who trace their descent and language back to Caucasian Albania and Quba city is home to a major settlement of Mountain Jews. In the south there are the Talysh, among many others.

Small in size, but not so in adventure, variety, culture and hospitality! So let's get into detail....

Acknowledgments

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THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

The Land of Fire

Why so called? Well, beginning with the obvious, the land (and sea offshore) has been yielding hydrocarbons, whether as oil, gas or flame, from time immemorial. And it has been put to many uses. Fire temples were built as centres of Zoroastrian worship, the 13th century traveller Marco Polo heard that it eased camels afflicted with scab and the gas is destined to help keep more European home fires burning.

More speculative are theories giving the country's name incendiary origins. Thus an early name for these lands was *Aturpatakan* – Persian for “a place where sacred fire is preserved”. Or there's *Azar* (fire) *Payegan* (protector), again from Persian. On the other hand, some say another early name may be the true ancestor – *Atropatene* probably stemmed from Atropates, who first commanded Caucasian Albanian troops in a losing battle against Alexander the Great, but who later served the conqueror as governor of the region.

Then there's the legend that Zeus chained Prometheus to a rock in the Caucasus as punishment for restoring the gift of fire to mere mortals – returning the tricky Titan to the scene of his crime?

State symbols

The Flag



The tricolour flag was first adopted by the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) on 9 November 1918, but was replaced following the Soviet takeover of 28 April 1920. As the Soviet regime teetered and the desire for renewed independence intensified, the Supreme Majlis of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic reclaimed the flag in November 1990. Members of the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijan SSR followed suit on 5 February 1991, some eight months before independence was finally restored. The flag has three equal horizontal stripes. The upper stripe is blue, representing the Turkic origin of the Azerbaijani nation; the middle stripe is red, for the modernisation of society and development of democracy; and the lower stripe is green, for membership of Islamic civilisation. The centre of the flag, on both sides, has a white crescent and eight-pointed star, representing the moon and the sun in Turkic lore

National Emblem



The national emblem of the Republic of Azerbaijan was formally adopted on 19 January 1993. The design is an adapted version of one first proposed for the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic but frustrated by the Soviet takeover in 1920. The emblem symbolizes the independence of Azerbaijan with an oriental shield resting on oak branches and ears of wheat for antiquity and fertility. The shield has an image of flames, that may also be read as Allah in Arabic script, at the centre of an eight-pointed star against a background of the colours of the national flag.

National Anthem

Also composed for a competition organised by the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and thwarted by the Soviet takeover, the "March of Azerbaijan" by celebrated composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov and poet Ahmad Javad was finally approved as the national anthem on 27 May 1992.

Composer: Uzeyir Hajibeyov

Text: Ahmad Javad

Azərbaycan! Azərbaycan!
Ey qəhrəman övladın şanlı Vətəni!
Səndən ötrü can verməyə cümlə
hazırız!
Səndən ötrü qan tökməyə cümlə
qadiriz!
Üçrəngli bayrağınla məsud yaşa!
Üçrəngli bayrağınla məsud yaşa!

Minlərlə can qurban oldu,
Sinən hər bə meydan oldu!
Hüququndan keçən əsgər!
Hərə bir qəhrəman oldu!
Sən olasan gülüstan,
Sənə hər an can qurban!
Sənə min bir məhəbbət
Sinəmdə tutmuş məkan!

Namusunu hifz etməyə,
Bayrağını yüksəltməyə,
Namusunu hifz etməyə,
Cümlə gənclər müştəqdir!
Şanlı Vətən! Şanlı Vətən!
Azərbaycan! Azərbaycan!
Azərbaycan! Azərbaycan!

Azerbaijan! Azerbaijan!
O glorious homeland of heroic youth!
All of us are ready to give our lives up for you!
All of us are ready to let our blood run for you!
Live happily under your tricolour flag!
Live happily under your tricolour flag!

Thousands have sacrificed themselves,
Your bosom was a battlefield!
Soldiers who gave up their own lives!
Every one of them a hero!
You'll be a garden in bloom,
Every moment's sacrifice!
A thousand-fold affections
Are held in my heart for you!

For the defence of your honour,
For the raising of your banner,
For the defence of your honour,
All the young are yearning now!
Glorious land! Glorious land!
Azerbaijan! Azerbaijan!
Azerbaijan! Azerbaijan!

Population*

10 million (10200013) at the beginning of 2024 (including the half million or so people who live in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic);

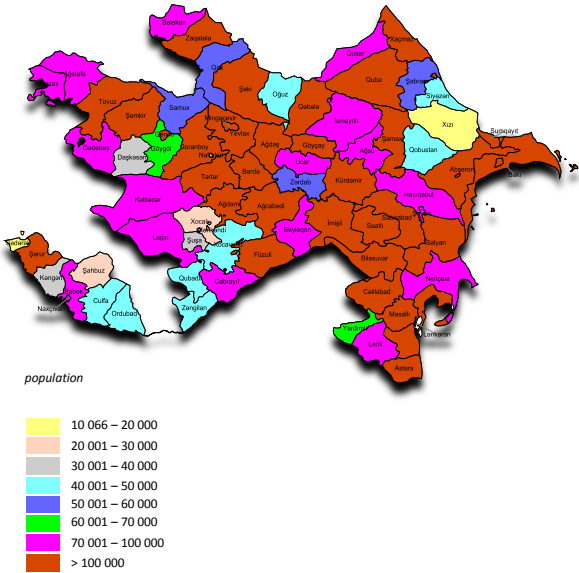
The urban-rural split is approximately 54:45, and more than two million people live in the capital city Baku, which is by far the country’s largest city. Əhalinin 54,5 faizini şəhər, 45,5 faizini kənd sakinləri

Ganja, Azerbaijan’s second largest urban centre, has a population of about 331,000

The country’s population levels have risen steadily over the last half century, from under four million in 1960.

Ethnic make-up*

Azerbaijan’s geographical position and its people’s cosmopolitan traditions have attracted various ethnic groups. Most of them being ancient Caucasian peoples. From the ethnic, physiological and cultural point of view they are kindred to the Azerbaijanis. From 1828 Armenians and, in the mid-19th century, Russians were resettled to territories in Azerbaijan. Ethnically, the majority of the population, around 94.8%, are Azerbaijani. The other main groups are listed here:



Ethnicity	Population
Azerbaijani	9436.1
Lezghin	167.6
Russian	71.1
Armenian	0.2
Talysh	87.6
Avar	48.6
Ahiska Turkish	30.05
Tatar	17.7
Tat	27.7
Ukrainian	13.9
Tzakhur	13.4
Georgian	8.4
Kurdish	4.1
Jewish	5.1
Qriz	2.1
Udin	3.5
Khinaliqi	3.5
Haput	2.5
Ingiloy	1.8
Others	5.1

* Azərbaycan Respublikasının Dövlət Statistika Komitəsi – State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan. AZƏRBAYCANIN DEMOQRAFİK GÖSTƏRİCİLƏRİ – DEMOGRAPHIC INDICATORS OF AZERBAIJAN. Rəsmi nəşr – Official publication. Statistik məcmuə – Statistical yearbook. Bakı – 2019 – Baku/

Languages

Many of the ethnic groups have their own language, which is sometimes restricted to the inhabitants of a single village (Khinaliq, Qriz), but most of the population speak Azerbaijani or, especially in the cities, Russian, and increasing numbers, again mainly in the cities, speak English to some level.

The Azerbaijani language is a Turkic language recognisable, but with significant differences in vocabulary and spelling, by natives of Turkey, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tatarstan. It has a modified Latin alphabet of 32 letters, and is agglutinative – suffixes are added to produce different grammatical forms.

Changes of alphabet over the last 150 years still have consequences today, as well as presenting challenges for research into history. From the 8th to the 19th centuries writing was in the Arabic script, until a Latin script was advocated in the mid 19th century by people including playwright Mirza Fatali Akhundov. Under the Russian Empire, Cyrillic was also used and the *Molla Nasreddin* magazine (see p.69) sometimes had all three scripts on its cover.

In 1923 the Latin alphabet was adopted by the Soviet authorities, and Arabic was banned in 1929. This was probably to discourage cross-border communications with the Azerbaijanis in northern Iran. In 1939, communications with Turkey were suspect, so the order was to write in the Cyrillic script. Following renewed independence, Azerbaijan adopted a modified version of the first Latin script and took measures to replace Cyrillic in public signage etc.

THE AZERBAIJAN ALPHABET

Pronunciation (some are approximate, not in English)

C = 'J' (jam)

Ç = 'Ch' (chop)

Ə = halfway between 'bed' and 'bay'

G = softer than in English

Ğ = soft 'gargle' at the back of the throat,

X = as in Scottish 'loch'

I, i = (undotted i) sounds like 'uh'

Q = 'G' (got)

Ö = 'word'

Ş = 'Sh' (shirt)

Ü = 'Feudal' (approximately like the u: sound in fju:dəl)

Printing	Handwriting	Name	Printing	Handwriting	Name
A a	A a	a	Q q	Q q	qe
B b	B b	be	L l	L l	el
C c	C c	ce	M m	M m	em
Ç ç	Ç ç	çe	N n	N n	en
D d	D d	de	O o	O o	o
E e	E e	e	Ö ö	Ö ö	ö
Ə ə	Ə ə	ə	P p	P p	pe
F f	F f	fe	R r	R r	er
G g	G g	ge	S s	S s	se
Ğ ğ	Ğ ğ	ġe	Ş ş	Ş ş	şe
H h	H h	he	T t	T t	te
X x	X x	xe	U u	U u	u
I i	I i	i	Ü ü	Ü ü	ü
İ i	İ i	i	V v	V v	ve
J j	J j	je	Y y	Y y	ye
K k	K k	ke ka	Z z	Z z	ze

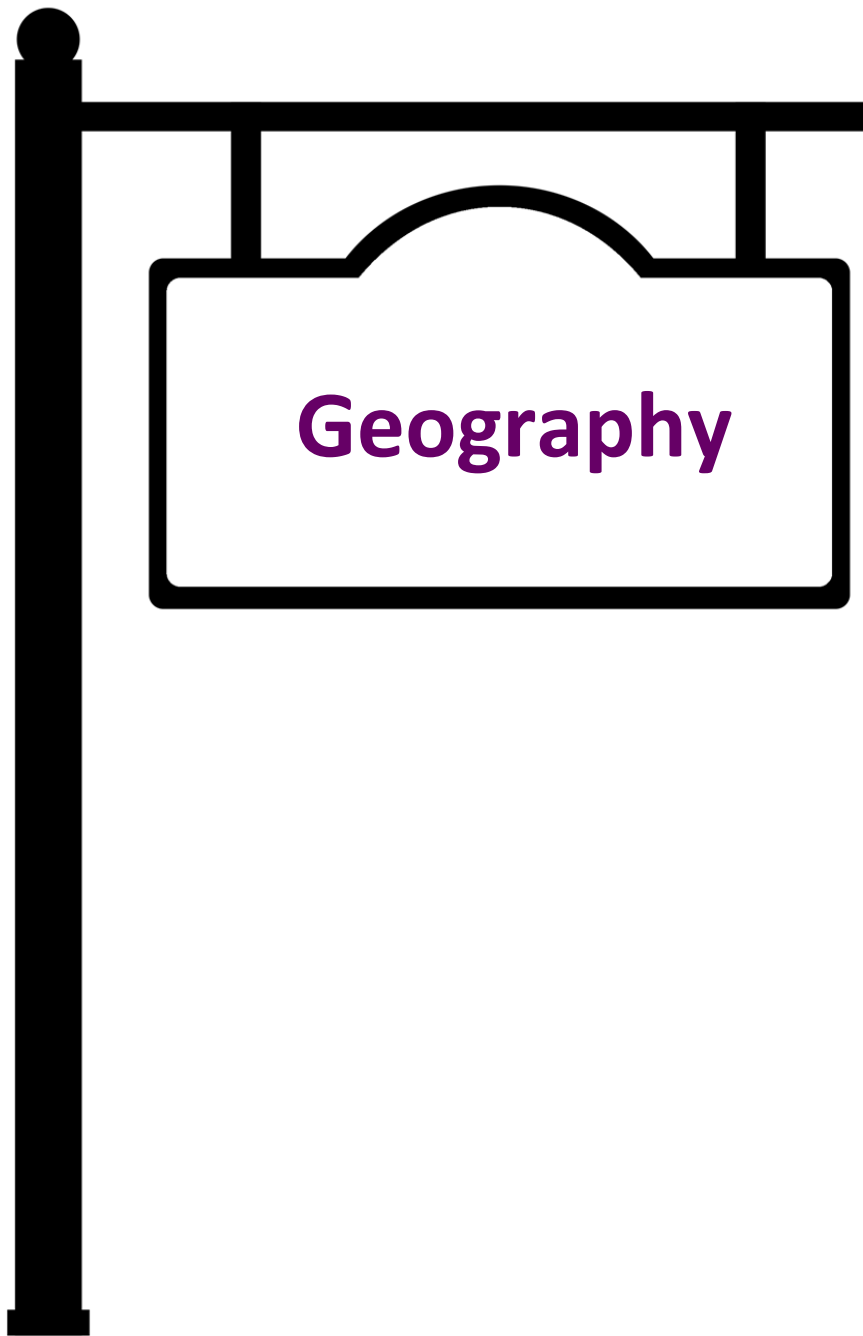
Currency

Azerbaijan's currency is the manat, or 'new manat', which is represented by the symbol ₼, but it is commonly abbreviated to AZN. One manat is divided into 100 gapiks. The front of each note features a significant image from Azerbaijani culture (such as musical instruments on the AZN1 note or a map of Baku's old city on the AZN10 note), while the reverse has a silhouette of the country's outline. The coins represent 1, 3, 5, 10, 20 and 50 gapiks.

Note that an increasingly popular 'currency' within the capital is a 'BakıKART', the only way to pay on the metro system and on most local buses. The cards may be bought and charged at machines in all metro stations and many bus stops.

Baku has plenty of ATMs for Visa, Mastercard and major debit cards; you'll also find them in most regional centres.





On the map – Centred on latitude 40° North and longitude 48° East, tucked in between the Greater Caucasus mountains to the north, before the border with Russia, the Lesser Caucasus in the West, the Talysh mountains near the southern border with Iran and the Caspian Sea (the world’s largest lake) to the East.

The Greater Caucasus range represents a geological division between Europe and Asia, thus while Baku teeters on that border, much of Azerbaijan is in Asia.

Area – 86,600 km² (slightly bigger than the island of Ireland)

Elevation – From 28 metres below sea level (Baku) to 4,466 m (Mount Bazarduzu). Baku is the only capital city in the world below sea level.

Main Rivers

– the **Kur** (Kura) rises in Turkey, passes through Tbilisi in Georgia (as the Mtkvari) before flowing through Azerbaijan, including the Mingchevir reservoir, to the Caspian Sea. Total length 1515 km.

– the **Araz** also rises in Turkey and passes through Armenia (as the Arax) before forming the border between Nakhchivan, then the rest of Azerbaijan, with Iran. It joins the Kur at Sabirabad on its way to the Caspian Sea. Total length 1072 km

Weather – With nine climate zones, it is difficult to give averages for the country. Generally, away from the mountains winters are cold, but not freezing, and summers are hot and sunny – humid in Baku; temperatures of 40°C are not unknown. Baku is also known for its winds, especially in winter and spring. A few days of snow are possible in the capital’s winter.

There is much more snow in the northern areas by the Greater Caucasus, hence the ski resorts in Qabala and north of Quba. And there is more rain in the southern areas around Lenkeran which, like the northern areas, are greener than the central semi-desert. Winters in the Nakhchivan exclave are colder and summers hotter, possibly ranging from -20°C to +40°C.

Good times to visit for mild weather are May, late September and October.

Average Temperatures and Rainfall in Baku

Month	Temperature Range (°C)	Rainfall (mm)
January	2 – 6.5	21
February	2 – 6.3	20
March	4 – 9.8	21
April	9.5 – 16.5	18
May	15 – 22	18
June	20 – 27	8
July	22 – 30	2
August	22 – 29.5	6
September	19.5 – 25.5	15
October	13 – 19.5	25
November	9 – 13	30
December	5 – 9.5	25

Location

Azerbaijan is the largest of the three republics in the South Caucasus region and shares borders with Russia to the north, Iran to the south, an eastern Caspian Sea coastline that stretches for over 800 kilometres, and Georgia and Armenia to the west. Also to the west an Azerbaijani exclave, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, has a very short border with Turkey. In total area, 86,600 km², the country is about the size of Ireland or the US state of Maine and it stands at a crossroads between Europe and Asia; influences of the two continents are evident in both landscape and heritage.

Within its borders, Azerbaijan has a surprisingly diverse geography. The Greater Caucasus mountain range runs across the north of the country, with its highest peak, Bazarduzu, climbing to 4,466 m; the Lesser Caucasus range (3,500 m) rises in the west; and the Talysh (2,500 m) mountains lie in the subtropical south, close to the border with Iran. In between lie the central plains, which are extensive, flat and desert-like in places. The agriculture there is irrigated by the Kur river with waters from both the Greater and Lesser Caucasus. The Araz river drains the southern side of the Lesser Caucasus and forms a good part of the border with Iran before joining the Kur late in its run to the Caspian Sea.

Baku is the country's capital, with a population of over 2 million – nearly a quarter of the nation's total. It lies on the Absheron peninsula, a spit of land that juts out, beak-like, into the Caspian Sea. It is a major regional centre of commerce, port and hydrocarbon production. Other major cities include Ganja and Sumgayit, while numerous towns and villages dot the plains and mountains. Politically, the country is divided into the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, 59 administrative districts and 11 cities.

Climate

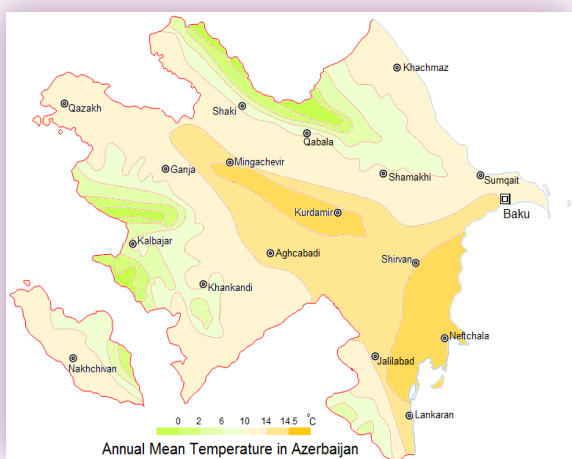
Given the geography, it's no surprise that the climate is equally varied. The two Caucasus ranges have alpine conditions – the green meadows in spring and early summer offer a refreshing break from lowland heat for daytrippers and shepherds alike. The Lesser Caucasus's mountain lakes near Ganja are popular and the climate in the range's heights in Nagorno-Karabakh is held responsible for the number of fine singers from the region that have embellished Azerbaijani musical culture. In winter two major resorts attract skiers and après-skiers alike to the Greater Caucasus; photographers and hikers also take advantage of the picturesque snowscapes.

The more temperate areas in the foothills of the Greater Caucasus are forested and famed in the north-eastern area around Quba for their fertile fruit orchards; around Qabala further west, nuts and vines are the favoured produce.

Moving further south and getting warmer, the explorer will encounter more vineyards delivering the stock for rapidly improving wine production, Goychay's pomegranates and Ivanovka's honey.

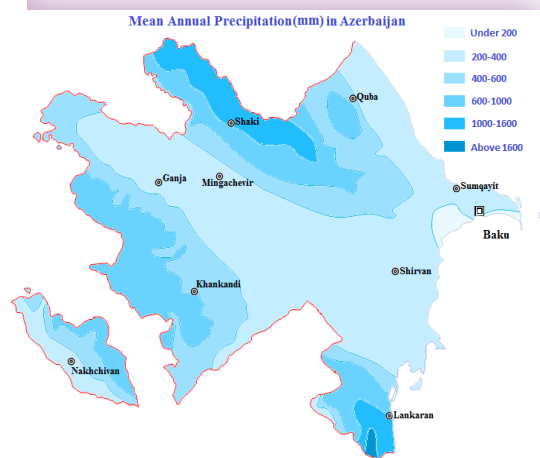
Eastwards, the beaches on and around the Absheron Peninsula (the 'beak' nosing into the Caspian Sea) are popular summer holiday attractions. The many *baghs* (dachas) there have gardens whose fruit trees and flowers are ample evidence of the area's warmth and fertility – although low rainfall encourages the digging of wells to tap the water table. Note that the *bagh* is in many cases an escape from the hot humidity of summer in Baku. Snow is an irregular feature of winters around the capital; temperatures rarely get much below freezing, but the Khazri north wind whistles in frequently from the Caspian – and it bites! The more welcome offshore Gilavar breezes in the summer support Baku's reputation as the city of winds.

The centre of the country is flat, hot and dry – semi-desert – and irrigated extensively to support the agriculture – wheat, cotton, Sabirabad's water melons – that is the staple industry there.



The Talysh mountains and Lenkeran lowlands are damp (annual precipitation around 1500 mm) and subtropical, producing forested landscapes and conditions suitable for the planting of fields of tea and rice, as well as citrus orchards.

Nakhchivan is separated from the main body of Azerbaijan and is accessible



from there only by air or by road transport through Iran. Apart from its historical, architectural, cultural and culinary delights, it is well worth a visit for its dramatically photogenic rocky landscapes. Rich in minerals and known for its spring waters (Badamli) and Duzdagh (salt mountain) therapy centre tunnelled into the mountain, it too has landscapes ranging from semi-desert to the fertile orchards of the south-east (Ordubad). The floating islands on Qanlı Göl (blood lake) at Batabat also attract summer visitors to the cooler surrounding mountain pastures.

Fauna

Over the centuries many travellers have remarked on the variety of animal life on these lands. The first local records were drawn on the rocks at Qobustan when Stone Age inhabitants depicted the beasts they encountered or hunted. There has always been hunting (recorded in medieval miniatures, stories and poetry) and it continues, but increased environmental awareness has led to greater protection, especially of species in danger of extinction. Since independence a number of reserves have been established for those whose pleasure is simply to view nature's beauties.

Of the 350 or so species of birds, perhaps the most fascinating are the raptors circling mountain skies, but the pheasants, snowcocks, herons and nightingales are also sought, as are winter visitors like the flamingos at Gizil Agach and, more rarely, pelicans. The water fowl on the country's many lakes are popular targets for hunters.

Goats, deer, wolves, bears and boars roam hills and mountains while the population of goitered gazelles is making an assisted comeback in plains reserves. The 23 species of snake (five are poisonous) make it wise to tread carefully in some areas, especially at the tip of the Absheron Peninsula, the site of a Soviet-era snake farm. Individual Caucasian leopards have been spotted by camera traps in the Zengezur (Nakhchivan) and Hirkan (Talysh mountains) National Parks.

Caspian seals inhabit that lake off the country's eastern shore along with the caviar-producing sturgeon and more than 90 other species of fish. Fishing is popular in the onshore lakes and rivers too. While stocks suffered in the Soviet era due to over fishing and pollution in the Caspian Sea and hydroelectric schemes inland, fish farms have worked to replenish the populations of fish like the sturgeon, salmon, bream, sazan and others. There have also been major projects to clean up historical oil industry waste.

Finally, mostly domesticated and for many the pride of Azerbaijan, is the Karabagh horse. Originally native to the region for which it is named, the main stud had to be evacuated in 1993 from Aghdam as it came under fire from invading Armenian forces. A dramatic overnight cross country ride quite possibly saved the breed from extinction. The horse is valued for its endurance and speed, domestically and for sports like polo's forerunner *chovgan* and its gorgeous golden colour is surely also responsible for the sentimental human response it provokes.

Flora

And of course the varied terrain and climate bring forth more than 4,000 species of plant life. Industries thrive on the wheat, cotton, tea, rice and tobacco grown, and Azerbaijanis will soon let you know where the best pomegranates, apples, figs, persimmons, citrus, olives, grapes and melons are grown – not to mention Gadabey's prized potatoes. Ask, too, for stories about Ordubad lemons. There are few berries not put to useful purpose: mulberries (*tut*) are just one of those used to flavour local vodka and the popular cornelian cherry (*zoğal*) features in cordials (*kompot*) as well as spirits. Being rich in

vitamin C it is also added to tea in winter as a cold cure. The custom here is still to eat fruits in season – staying in tune with nature and the land, as well as experiencing fullness of taste.

Late spring is the time to enjoy the countryside in full flower, whether the more delicate blooms in Alpine meadows or agricultural fields ablaze with poppies. The thick forests in many areas display particularly impressive autumnal palettes. For connoisseurs of the rare tree, a journey south to the Talysh mountains is necessary to see *Damirağac* – *Parrotia Persica* – the Ironwood tree, with wood so dense that it doesn't float in water.

National Parks

Nine National Parks have been established around the country, offering an excellent overview of the wide range of environment flora and fauna within the country's borders. 13 State Nature Reserves also protect wildlife and the environment, while providing for scientific research and leisure. Some 20 State Game Reserves service controlled hunting.

Absheron National Park
Altiagaj National Park
Hirkan National Park
Agh Gol National Park
Shirvan National Park
Zengezur National Park
Shahdag National Park
Goygol National Park
Samur-Yalama National Park



Natural Resources

Azerbaijan is well-known for its hydrocarbons – at the opening of the 20th century it was said to be supplying 50% of the world's oil and is soon set to extend its supply of gas to Europe. But the country has plenty of iron and other metals and minerals under its soil.

Indeed, even the oil that propels the traffic – and fuelled the Soviet Union's gigantic effort to combat Nazi forces in World War II – is not the only type to be found here; there is oil to bathe in. Neft is Azerbaijani's word for oil and a small town between the country's second city Ganja and Barda bears the name Naftalan; therein lies the clue. This is where you head for an original bath of healing oil that may not be as aromatically appealing as Cleopatra's preferred soak, but it was the choice of many from across the Soviet Union. Once again it is attracting increasing numbers of foreign visitors, as well as determined local bathers, to try its properties.

The Lesser Caucasus is the source of many metal ores, with Dashkesan well-known for its deposits of iron and neighbouring Zaglik for alunite (aluminium), as well as Gadabey Mine which also produces other minerals such as silver and copper. Copper, molybdenum, cobalt, gold and silver are among the other metals extracted from the region, which also quarries marble and granite. There are plenty of other resources for use in building: gravel, sand, limestone and brick clay abound in the Absheron area and Nakhchivan has limestone and travertine.

The exclave also has deposits of copper, gold and molybdenum as well as (literally) mountains of salt, popular mineral and thermal waters. There are many sources of such waters in the rest of Azerbaijan, too, especially in the Greater Caucasus and Talysh Mountains.

Caspian Sea

A sea, or a lake?

Whichever, it is the world's largest body of inland water, filled by some 130 rivers, of which the Volga contributes around 80% of the inflow from the north; Azerbaijan's main input is from the Kur river. The water's only way out is up – by evaporation. Thus, mainly depending on input, water levels have risen and fallen over the years, sometimes to the detriment of coastal settlements. There are legends of sunken

cities and now only the outline of Bayil Island, once a fortress in Baku Bay, peeks above the water. Paradoxically, the Caspian Sea is currently around 28 metres below sea level.



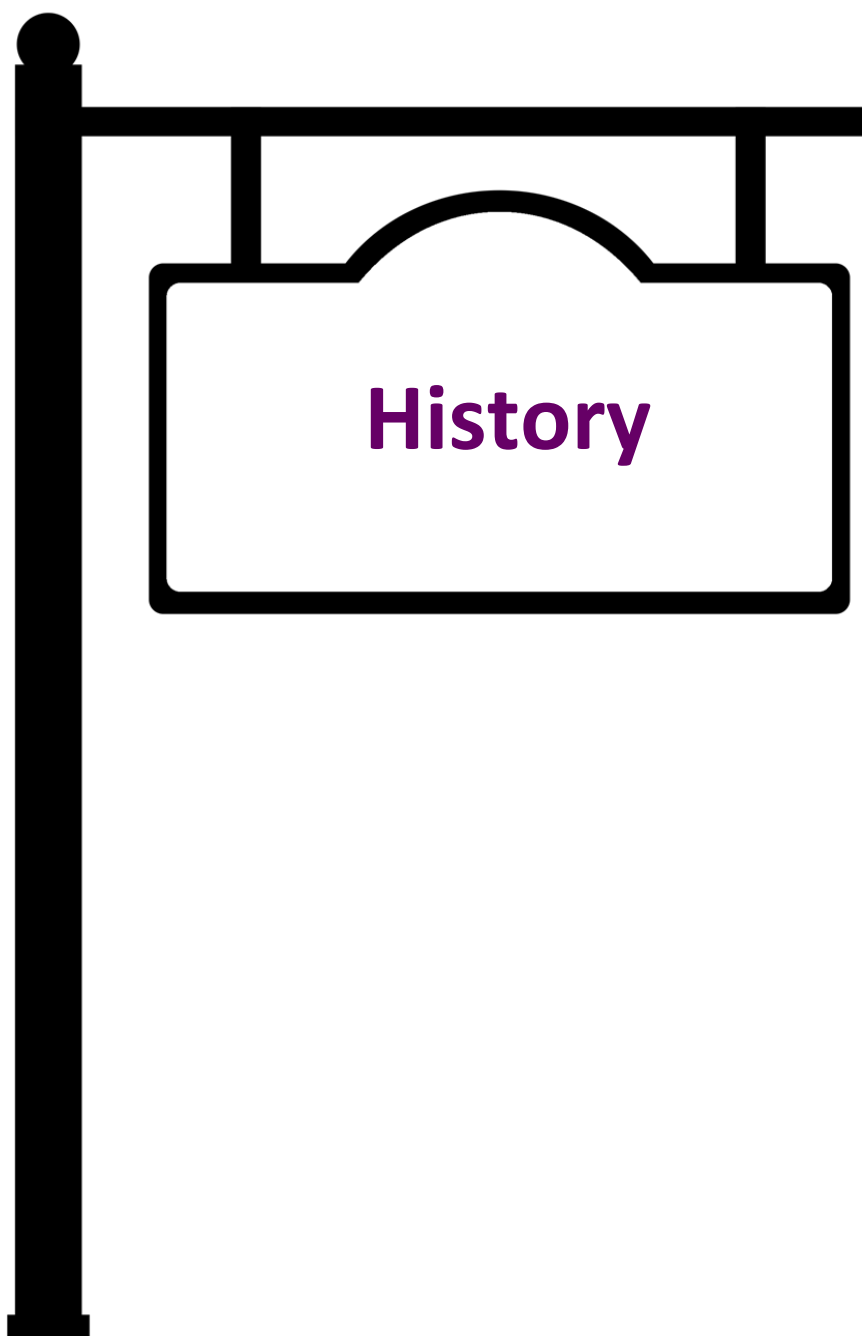
Constituting the country's entire eastern land boundary, it is naturally of huge geographical significance, but is much more than that to the five littoral states around it: Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran, as well as Azerbaijan. The matter of its identity, sea or lake, has still not been agreed by its neighbours, mainly because that definition determines how it is divided politically between those states. And that is particularly crucial given the huge hydrocarbon resources that lie beneath.

Azerbaijan's management of those resources, mainly from the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli (oil) and Shah Deniz (gas) fields, has been the basis of its breathtaking recovery and growth since reclaiming independence out of the collapse of the Soviet Union (see 'Contract of the Century' p. 49).

The other 'black gold' to be harvested from the Caspian has historically been beluga caviar from the sturgeon fish. This species is critically endangered due to historical overfishing, but there are now efforts to restore stocks, with restrictions on catches and the development of hatcheries. The Caspian seal has suffered from oil pollution, but post-independence industry regulation and waste removal provides an improved environment.

Resort beaches on the north-eastern coast (Nabran), the north coast of the Absheron Peninsula and the Shikhov area south of Baku contribute to the tourism industry by attracting increasing numbers of tourists to relax by the tideless waters.

Transport links across the Caspian Sea received a boost in 2018 with the development of the new Port of Baku at Alat, 65 km south of the capital. Linked to the 2017 launch of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and improved highways, the port is an important hub in a contemporary version of the Great Silk Road, a trade route eventually connecting Europe and China. Initially the new port connected via ro-ro vessels with the ports of Aktau in Kazakhstan and Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan.



Overview

The Caucasus Mountains form a geographical border between Europe and Asia, thus Azerbaijan bestrides the two continents. Politically and economically, too, it has been a bridge between East and West and has been crossed, conquered and visited by many traders, empires, refugees and explorers in its history. The lasting effect is seen in its population: predominantly Turkic Azerbaijanis, but also including multiple minorities speaking multiple languages in a remarkably harmonious mix.

Under the Median and Persian (Achaemenid) Empires many of the indigenous people in northern Azerbaijan, known as Caucasian Albanians, adopted Zoroastrianism. By the 4th century Christianity was the state religion and remained so until the 7th century arrival of Arabs with Islam.

Ethnically more significant were the Oghuz Turkic tribes; arriving from the east early in the 11th century they displaced the Arabs, established the Seljuk Empire and in essence Turkified the local population, who adopted their language and religion (Sunni Islam). 13th century raids by Chingiz (Genghis) Khan's Mongols and, in the 14th century, Tamerlane's armies were devastating in the short term, but through all this the local Shirvanshahs' state managed to retain some autonomy from the 9th-16th centuries.

The Safavid Shah Ismayil I (ruled 1501-24) was next to have a lasting effect on Azerbaijani culture. Born in the Iranian Azerbaijani city of Ardebil he spoke Azerbaijani and was an accomplished poet in the language, as well as in Persian. He imposed Shia Islam throughout the empire he established in opposition to the Sunni Ottomans.

Following the demise of the Safavid dynasty in the 18th century and the brief but devastating (for Azerbaijanis) rule of Nader Shah, these lands were divided between a number of khans ruling feudal style over their own patch. Naturally there were many feuds and alliances, but culture also flourished, especially in the Qarabagh khanate.

By the early 19th century, the Russian Empire was looking to expand its domains southwards, challenging and overcoming Iran's authority in the Caucasus region. The resulting 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay pushed Russian Empire borders south to the River Araz, dividing the lands inhabited by Azerbaijanis; the cities of Tabriz, Ardebil, Urmia and Zanjan remained within the Iranian Empire. A further effect of the treaty followed from Russia's insistence that its co-religionists should be allowed to migrate north of the Araz; many thousands of Armenians moved into the Irevan and Qarabagh khanates in a resettlement with tragic resonance to the present day.

With the collapse of the Russian Empire after more than 80 years of colonising the Caucasus, the first unitary independent Azerbaijani state, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, was established in 1918. The state was invaded by Soviet forces in 1920 and remained under Soviet rule until its collapse in 1991, at which point Azerbaijan regained its independence.

Prehistory

In 1968 part of a young female's jawbone, believed to be over 350,000 years old was discovered in the **Azykh cave** in the Fuzuli region and thought to be evidence of one of the earliest proto-human habitations in Eurasia. Unfortunately, as this is written,



Entrance to Azykh cave

the cave now lies in territory occupied by Armenia's military and cannot be visited.

But a must-see for any visitor to the country are the fascinating drawings cut into rocks in the Qobustan Reserve, 60km south of Baku, some dating back to the Late Stone Age, that illustrate scenes of hunting, fishing, work and dancing.

Many Chalcolithic (Copper period, 6th – 4th millennium BC) settlements have also been discovered in Azerbaijan, their carbon-dated artefacts are evidence of home building, copper tool and arrowhead making, as well as non-irrigated agriculture.

Antiquity

Caucasian Albanians are believed to be the earliest inhabitants of the lands of Azerbaijan. The South Caucasus, however, underwent several conquests: by the Medians and then by the Persian Achaemenid king Cyrus around 550 BCE. Persian influence may have been responsible for the Caucasian Albanians becoming known as fire worshippers, possibly an indication of their adoption of Zoroastrianism. The Achaemenid Empire lasted more than 200 years before meeting its end at the hands of Alexander the Great.

Following Alexander's death in 323 BCE, the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire took over in the Caucasus, but it soon faced pressure from Rome and, most adversely, the Parthians, another nomadic Iranian tribe from Central Asia. This did finally allow local Caucasian tribes to establish an independent kingdom in the 1st century BCE, for the first time since the Median invasion.

However, Albanian territories to the south were considerably reduced in the 2nd or 1st century BCE during fighting with Armenia, which conquered the territories of Qarabagh and Utik populated by the Utians, Gargarians and Caspians among other Albanian tribes. The border between Albania and Armenia then was along the Kur river.

<http://www.visions.az/en/news/93/961d50c8/>

Fighting with the Parthians brought Roman legions under Pompey to the region. Even with peace established, the Romans had legions here, as witnessed by graffiti cut into a rock at Qobustan by Lucius Julius Maximus of the 12th Fulminata Legion during the reign of Emperor Domitian (81-96 AD). The graffiti is still to be seen on the approach to the Qobustan reserve.



With the fall of the Parthian (Arsacid) Empire, Persian Sassanids ruled the region until the Arab invasion of 642, although Albanian kings retained a level of independence within the empire.

Christianity was the state religion by the 4th century, Albanian king Urnayr was said to have been baptised by Gregory the Illuminator in about 314, but medieval historian Movses Dasxuranci (aka Movses Kaghankatvatsi) told a story that the religion first arrived in Albania in the 1st century via St. Eliseus (Elisha) who

.... but the holy patriarch came to Gis he founded a church there and offered up bloodless sacrifices. This place was the original source of all the churches and cities and the conversion of us easterners. [The History of the Caucasian Albanians by Movses Dasxuranci, translated by C.J.F. Dowsett]

Thor Heyerdahl in Baku .Norwegian Archeologist Identifies .Azerbaijan as Early Cradle of Civilization. by Betty Blair //https://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/73_folder/73_articles/73_thorheyerdahl.html

built a church in what may have been **Kish**, near Sheki – an Albanian Church still stands there. However, Christianity was slow to spread in Albania and large numbers of Albanians remained Zoroastrian until the Arab conquest in 642 brought Islam to the state.

Middle Ages

The Arab invaders made Caucasian Albania a vassal state once resistance led by Prince Javanshir surrendered in 667. Resistance continued in some parts, most notably from folk hero Babek, as the Abbasid Caliphate went into decline, a number of dynasties came, controlled and went in these lands, by far the longest lasting being the Shirvanshahs' (9th-16th centuries). Shirvan lands were bounded by the Caspian and extended approximately north-east from the course of the Kur river between Sheki and the coast to the Samur river in the north. However, the early 11th century saw Oghuz Turkic tribes migrating in from Central Asia. The most significant were probably the Seljuks, a western branch of the Oghuz who conquered all of Iran and the Caucasus and had their own cultural traditions, eg. **The**

lasted being the Shirvanshahs' (9th-16th centuries). Shirvan lands were bounded by the Caspian and extended approximately north-east from the course of the Kur river between

A collection of chivalric stories probably written in the 14th century but clearly based on tales handed down from much earlier times. (See p. 67)

Book of Dede Qorqud (Korkut). The 12th and early 13th centuries were a period of blossoming culture in the region, producing classical literature, as well as architecture.

The arrival of Mongol hordes in the 1230s literally ground the classical golden age to dust; Ganja, the home of poets, and other major cities were destroyed. The Mongols held sway until the 1350s.

In the 1380s a further devastating force arrived from the East, the legendary **Emir Timur** (Tamerlane) added Azerbaijan to an empire that spanned much of Eurasia. Relatively short-lived, Timurid dominion was also a period of religious unrest, including by the **Hurufist Sufi** movement.

There is a story that the valley overlooked by the Girve restaurant in Vandam village (on the road to Qabala) was the site of a battle overseen from the same site by Timur. True or not, it's a fine view.

Hurufist Sufi movement - Founded by Fazlullah Astarabadi (Naimi) who was executed for his heresy at Alinja in Nakhchivan - his tomb stands at the head of another beautiful valley. Hurufism's most celebrated adherent was Nesimi (1369-1417), possibly from Shamakhi, whose fine philosophical poetry is his lasting legacy. For his heresy Nesimi was skinned alive in Aleppo. (See p. 68)

Equally brief, but far-reaching, were two 15th century Oghuz Turkic states that ruled south of the Kur river. The *Qara Goyunlu* (Black Sheep) conquered the south of Azerbaijan in 1410 and established their capital at Tabriz extending their territory into central Iran and as far east as Khurasan. However, they were in continual conflict with the *Agh Goyunlu* (White Sheep) under **Uzun Hasan**, who eventually prevailed in 1468 and ruled all of Iran, Azerbaijan and Iraq until his death in 1478.

There was diplomatic activity between the Agh Goyunlu and Venice and Uzun married Despina Khatun, daughter of Emperor John IV Trebizond; all this to counter the threat of rising Ottoman power (Mehmet the Conqueror). Their daughter Halima married Sheikh Haydar (killed by the Shirvanshah and the Agh Goyunlu!) and their son was Shah Ismayil I.

Meanwhile, the Shirvanshahs enjoyed a relatively peaceful early 15th century, except for a major earthquake in Shamakhi which persuaded them to move their capital to Baku. Shirvanshahs Khalilullah I and Farrukh Yassar built the **Shirvanshah Palace** complex there.



The Safavids

But winds of change were blowing. A Sufi order based in Ardebil (in Iranian Azerbaijan) and known as the **Safavids** had embraced Shia Islam and was a growing force.

Their followers were known as Qizilbash (Redheads) for their crimson headwear in twelve sections (for the Twelve Imams).

Advancing into Shirvan in 1460, however, their leader Shaykh Junayd was killed in a skirmish with the Shrivanshahs in the Caucasus.

Junayd's son Shaykh Haydar picked up the mantle and eventually found himself up against both the Shrivanshahs and their overlords, the *Agh Goyunlu*. He was defeated and killed in a

battle in the North Caucasus in 1488. The *Agh Goyunlu* also accounted for Haydar's son Ali Mirza Safavi six years later, leaving just his seven-year-old brother to carry Safavid hopes.

Unsurprisingly, the boy **Ismayil** went into hiding. He reappeared in Azerbaijan in 1499, aged 12, summoned around 7,000 troops to assemble in Erzincan, marched almost to Shamakhi and defeated and killed Shrivanshah Farrukh Yassar, avenging the deaths of his father and grandfather. Moving south the Safavid forces met and defeated the *Agh Goyunlu* army, even though outnumbered four to one according to sources. They then took Tabriz and in July 1501 Ismayil, now aged 14, was enthroned as Shah of Azerbaijan. It took him another nine years to become Shah of Iran, but he had founded a dynasty that would rule for more than 200 years, despite continual competition from and fighting with the burgeoning Ottoman Empire.



Shah Ismayil
1487-1524

Late 18th – early 19th centuries

By the early 18th century, the Safavids had moved their capital south to Isfahan and internal intrigues left the northern territories vulnerable. Peter the Great's Russia took control of the Caspian Sea coastline and the Ottomans made incursions into the Caucasus lands from the west. The Safavid Empire was also threatened by Afghan chieftains, who made huge inroads until repulsed by Nadir, a military leader from the Afshar tribe. In brief Nadir went on to drive the Ottomans out of the Caucasus and also persuaded the Russians to leave. He then had himself proclaimed shah in 1736, replacing the juvenile Safavid Abbas III.



The khanates

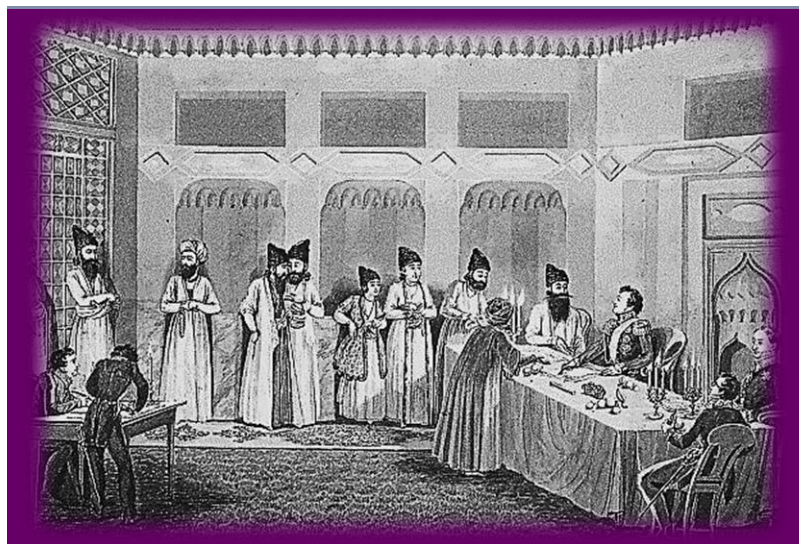
A brilliant but ruthless general, Nadir Shah was not wholly popular and was assassinated in 1747; the empire fell into chaos. In Azerbaijan the khanates, while nominally vassals of Iran, acted with a great deal of independence. They fought constantly between themselves for supremacy in the region and with their nominal overlords from Iran. The most celebrated were **Fatali Khan of Quba** (died 1783), Panah Ali Khan of Qarabagh and **Haji Chelebi of Sheki**.

Haji Chelebi Khan founded the Sheki khanate and challenged the might of Nadir Shah Afshar, ruler of Iran. When the shah demanded his submission, Haji Chelebi replied, "Gelersen Gorursen" (come and see). The outraged Nadir Shah set out to attack the Sheki fortress, but failed to take it. The ruins of 'Gelersen Gorursen' fort can still be reached by a stiff climb to the summit of a hill outside the city - the views are worth it!

Fatali Khan of Quba

A further flowering of culture centred on Shusha in Qarabagh, particularly on Molla Panah Vagif, vizier to Ibrahim Khalil Khan (Panah Ali Khan's son and successor) and realist poet. Also known for his poetic dialogue with Molla Vali Vidadi, a similarly down to earth poet from Shamkir.

In 1796, Shah Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar determined to reunite the empire and raided Azerbaijan and Georgia. However, Russian interest in the region was reviving and the khanates were caught between the two empires. By 1806 the Russians had control of most of the khanates in the Caucasus, however fighting continued until 1813, with Russia prevailing.



*Signing the Turkmenchay Treaty
(10 February 1828)*

Qajar Iran was forced to sign the **Treaty of Gulistan** in 1813, acknowledging the loss of territory to Russia. A further round of fighting ended in a crushing defeat for the Iranian army and with the 1828 **Treaty of Turkmenchay** Iran yielded all its lands north of the Araz river. This established the current borders of Azerbaijan and Iran and ended the rule of local khans. The treaty also allowed, and the Russians encouraged, Christians south of the border to move north. Thus many thousands of Armenians migrated, in particular to the lands of the former Qarabagh and Irevan khanates. This displacement of populations was to have disastrous consequences.

Russian rule and national identity

Following a further earthquake in 1859, political focus moved from Shamakhi to Baku and development of the oil industry saw the city's population increase from 13,000 in 1860 to almost 180,000 by 1900, with migration from the Russian Empire and Iran as well as from rural areas of Azerbaijan. By the turn of the century, Baku was producing around half the world's oil.

This was also a period of expanding social and national awareness in the region as a whole and many important Azerbaijani thinkers were active in the cultural development centred on Tiflis (now Tbilisi) in Georgia, inevitably taking those ideas into discourse at home.

Mirza Fatali Akhundov (1812-78) promoted the Turkic language and alphabet reform away from Arabic script and wrote six comedic plays in the early 1850s that commented sharply on local mores and urged enlightenment. Although he had to wait until 1873 for the first performance of one of his plays, he was hugely influential on following generations.

Hasan bey Zardabi (1837-1907) launched the first Azerbaijani language newspaper *Akinchi* (Ploughman) in 1875, (after helping to arrange that first performance of Akhundov's *Vizier of the Lenkeran Khan*). The strand of social satire in Akhundov's plays was taken up by other playwrights and by **Jalil Mammadguluzade** who, in 1906, launched the popular magazine *Molla Nasreddin*, again initially from Tiflis. Targets of the satire included reactionary clerics and those who opposed the emancipation of women. Cultural advance was also supported by oil industry philanthropists like **Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev**, who built theatres, schools (including for girls) and funded newspapers.

Tensions between ethnicities in the early 20th century, rising nationalisms, harsh working conditions, disparities in wealth and political crises exploded in 1905 as Armenians sought to expand their territory and clashed with Azerbaijanis (referred to then as Tatars) in



Mammad Amin Rasulzade
1884-1955

bloody massacres. Politics advanced as the situation in Russia developed and by 1911 there were Azerbaijani political parties like *Hummet* (Social Democratic) and *Musavat* (whose combination of pan-Turkism and Socialism took it to the forefront of Azerbaijani nationalism). The situation following the October revolution in Russia meant that deputies elected to the Russian assembly from the South Caucasus (now the states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) were unable to attend and they assembled in Tiflis in February 1918 and formed the *Seym* (Parliament) of the Transcaucasus Federation.

Meanwhile, Bolsheviks in Baku under the Armenian Stepan Shaumian combined with the fiercely nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dasnaktsutyun) to put down opposition to a Bolshevik takeover. This three-day

action, known as the **March Days**, killed many thousands of Azerbaijanis and is one of the events commemorated on 31 March each year.

In May the Transcaucasus Federation disintegrated in disagreements. The Georgians left and declared independence. The Muslim members formed themselves into the Azerbaijan National Council, led by **Mammad Amin Rasulzade**. On 28 May 1918, **the Council declared the independence of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic**; initially, because of the situation in Baku, they were based in Ganja.

"Notably, point 4 of the National Charter read:

The Azerbaijani Democratic Republic guarantees to all its citizens within its borders full civil and political rights, regardless of ethnic origin, religion, class, profession, or sex."

Azerbaijan Democratic Republic

In Baku, the March Days had paved the way for the Shaumian-led 'Baku Commune' to take control. However, forces involved in World War I were about to intervene. By the end of May, the Ottoman general Nuru Pasha was in Ganja to organise the 'Army of Islam' and march on Baku, both for its much valued oil and to support fellow Turkic Azerbaijanis.

By July the combined Ottoman and Azerbaijani force was on its way to Baku. Rejecting Bolshevik objections, a combination of Dashnaks, Mensheviks and others invited a small British force (the 'Dunsterforce') to Baku to help resist the approaching army. The Bolsheviks resigned and were jailed; the 'Centro-Caspian Dictatorship' was formed in its place, but only held out until 15 September when the British fled and Baku was under Turkic control.



*First meeting of the ADR Parliament
7 December 1918*

As World War I drew to a close, the defeated forces of the Ottoman Empire had to leave the Caucasus and were replaced by a British occupational force until mid 1919. The Azerbaijan National Council reconvened in Baku on 16 November and decided on plans for a Milli Majlis (Parliament), which duly convened on 7 December 1918, with some 11 political factions among the possible 120 deputies, the Musavat party being by far the largest with 40 seats. In its short life of almost two years the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) struggled for maintenance of its independence in the midst of the Russian civil war, for international recognition and with its neighbours for recognition of its borders. But it also had time to establish a secular democratic structure, including suffrage for women, some years before many western countries, and the Baku State University, the first of its kind in Azerbaijan.

The struggle for international recognition was led by Alimardan Bey Topchubashov, who headed a delegation to the post-war Paris Peace Conference. In January 1920 the Supreme Council of Allied Powers gave *de facto* recognition of the ADR's independence. The uncertainty over Russia's future in the middle of the civil war made the Allies nervous of definitive moves in the region.

As it turned out, the ADR had only four months to live. The 11th Red Army invaded on the night of 27-28 April 1920 and effectively installed a sympathetic local leadership. For various political considerations, Azerbaijan's total incorporation was staged over two years; the establishment of the USSR on 30 December 1922 was the final stage in the loss of independence. In this process the borders between Azerbaijan and Armenia were redrawn a number of times, storing up trouble for the future.

Soviet Azerbaijan

Armenian claims on Azerbaijani territory were a feature of the early Soviet period. The Zengezur region became the Armenian SSR region of Sunik, which meant that Nakhchivan was separated from the rest of Azerbaijan. Some parts of Nakhchivan were also handed over, but Armenian demands for total control of the exclave were resisted by an overwhelming referendum vote of the population in 1921 and a short border with Turkey was achieved. Nakhchivan remained within Azerbaijani lands as an autonomous republic. Armenia's claims on Nagorno-Karabakh also resulted in the region being given autonomous status and remaining within Azerbaijan, but the matter has not rested there.

Azerbaijan was not spared the terror of Stalin's purges in the 1930s. Many thousands were killed, including Mammad Hasan Hajinski and Jamo bey Hajinski who had signed the declaration of independence, but also notable cultural figures like writers Huseyn Javid, Mikail Mushvig and Ahmad Javad. Many plaques on apartment walls *commemorate those who died in 1937-38*.

The Azerbaijan SSR lost about 300,000 of its people to the fighting in World War II. Hitler directed his forces towards Azerbaijan and its hydrocarbons that supplied much of the Soviet Union's gas and oil during the war. There is even a contemporary video of Hitler being served a slice of his Caspian-shaped birthday cake – his slice was marked 'Baku'. His army got as far as just north of the Greater Caucasus in July 1942 but no further, and there are stories of his soldiers retreating on bicycles and horses, having run out of fuel for their vehicles.



A plaque dedicated to the memory of Victims of Repression in the Writers' Union of Azerbaijan. Sculptor E.Shamilov [ayb.az]

Heydar Aliyev

Post-war Moscow looked to more secure sources of fuel – Siberia among other places – and by the 1960s Azerbaijan's economy had declined significantly. Then, in 1969 Heydar Aliyev was appointed first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan – effectively leader of the republic. This turned out to be a very significant elevation.

Born in 1923 in Nakhchivan, after his studies at the Industrial Institute were interrupted by the war, Aliyev had been directed towards the security services and rose through the ranks to become chairman of the State Security Committee before his elevation to prime position in the local party.

His leadership was marked by strong personal control of the economy, with a drive against corruption and promotion of productivity and diversification that produced impressive growth compared with trends in the rest of the USSR. He worked to raise the republic's status and promoted local personnel, leading by example and demanding similar levels of knowledge and responsibility from them.

His work on the republic's profile included promotion of its culture: in 1982 he organised the birth centenary return of the remains of Huseyn Javid, a celebrated Azerbaijani poet who fell victim to Stalin's purges and died in Siberian exile.

Aliyev's work was recognised centrally and in the same year he joined the Politburo in Moscow. He rose to the position of First Deputy Chairman of the USSR's Council of Ministers, unprecedented for someone of his origins.

Tensions rose in the Caucasus with resurfacing Armenian claims on the lands of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast of the Azerbaijan SSR, Heydar Aliyev was forced out of office in 1987 by Mikhail Gorbachev, and the following year saw open conflict break out as Azerbaijanis were forced out of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The inter-ethnic tension also gave rise to disturbances in Baku, protests against local officials, and demonstrations calling for independence.

Gorbachev ordered Soviet army tanks into Baku on 20 January 1990 (Black January). This action killed 131 unarmed civilians and wounded hundreds of others. From Moscow, Heydar Aliyev demanded that the organisers and perpetrators be punished. He then returned to his native land and in 1991 was elected Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.

Renewed Independence

Commemorated annually, the Black January suppression of local demonstrations was a crucial event on the path towards the renewal of independence. As Armenia continued its invasion of Azerbaijani territory and the Soviet Union crumbled, the question of national survival became more urgent. In August 1991 a first declaration of independence was made in the Supreme Soviet and on 18 October a constitutional act was passed to restore the independence of the Azerbaijan Republic. Confirmation came with the final collapse of the Soviet Union on 25 December 1991.

Ayaz Mutalibov (1991-92)

At first, while formal affiliations changed, government personnel remained the same. Ayaz Mutalibov became the first president of Azerbaijan. However, as its forces failed to halt Armenia's military invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh and other regions, discontent forced his resignation in March 1992. The Supreme Council was replaced by the National Assembly (*Milli Majlis*) and an election in June 1992 made the Azerbaijan Popular Front candidate Abulfaz Elchibey president.

Abulfaz Elchibey (1992-93)

Elchibey succeeded in getting Soviet troops out of Azerbaijan but he had the same problems with the Nagorno-Karabakh invasion as his predecessor, with disorganised and even rebellious factions among the defending forces failing to prevent Armenian advance into seven further regions of Azerbaijan. In June 1993 he invited Heydar Aliyev to help counter a mutiny as Speaker of the National Assembly. As Elchibey left for Nakhchivan, Aliyev constitutionally assumed his powers and signed a ceasefire. In August a referendum removed Elchibey from his post and a national election in October 1993 returned Heydar Aliyev as the third president of independent Azerbaijan.



Heydar Aliyev (1993-2003)

As in his previous position of leadership, Heydar Aliyev acted to determined effect. The ceasefire he signed achieved a level of peace in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh that allowed him to act to remove the mutineers. He also speedily initiated economic reforms and in October 1994 achieved the signing of the 'Contract of the Century' with a number of international companies to ensure efficient exploitation of the vast reserves of oil and gas. This was the baseline for the dramatic turnaround in the country's fortunes that followed, taking it from a decrepit and polluted backwater in the wreckage of the Soviet Union to a resurgent economy that presents an altogether more confident image to the world.

Re-elected for a second term in 1998, Aliyev argued, against strong opposition, for the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline to take Azerbaijani oil from the Caspian Sea to western markets – construction finally began in September 2002. In 1999 the huge Shah Deniz gas field was discovered, leading to the building of the South Caucasus Gas Pipeline.

Other features of Heydar Aliyev's presidency included strong promotion of local culture in-country (including public use of the Azerbaijani language rather than Russian) and abroad, extending international diplomatic relations and energetic lobbying for the return of the lands occupied by Armenia.

He fell ill in mid-2003 and after prolonged intensive care he died on 12 December 2003. Inheriting a state that was beset by the anarchy of war, mutiny, economic collapse and environmental degradation, Heydar Aliyev had employed his political acumen and force of personality to restore order and bring relative peace, bequeathing to his country a legacy of stability and impressive economic and social advance.

Ilham Aliyev (2003-)

Ilham Aliyev was elected president in October 2003 and re-elected in 2008, 2013 and 2018, and again in 2024. His leadership built on the foundations, especially economic, of his predecessor and the country has undergone a rapid process of modernisation.

Economically his presidency has seen the completion of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Southern Gas Pipeline to take gas from the giant Shah Deniz oilfield. The Southern Gas Corridor was also implemented to take gas to Europe via Georgia, Turkey, Greece, Albania and Italy. The country experienced record growths in GDP over the decade from 2004 and levels of poverty declined dramatically.

As part of government policy to diversify the economy, the country is developing its communications sector. It launched the Azerspace-1 satellite in 2013 and Azerspace-2 in 2018. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project and new international Port of Baku were built to develop rail, road and sea routes between East and West along the ancient Silk Road.

The North-South Transport Corridor saw road and rail infrastructure developed in Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran to connect Northern Europe with South-East Asia, as well as Central Asia, via the Port of Baku.

An indication of Azerbaijan's rising political profile was its election as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for a two-year term commencing 1 January 2012.

The drive to raise the country's international standing continued with the holding of a number of sporting and cultural events, including the Eurovision Song Contest in 2012; the first European Games in 2015; the Formula 1 Grand Prix, annually from 2016, and the Islamic Solidarity Games in 2017. Azerbaijan also hosted group games and a quarter-final match for the UEFA European Football Championship, which, due to the pandemic, was rescheduled from 2020 to 2021. Regular international festivals of classical, mugham and jazz music attract top musicians and large audiences. Also known for the positive multiculturalism of its society, the country holds a number of conferences to promote intercultural dialogue.



Despite intensive campaigns for international support to restore Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, Armenia remained in military occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and all or part of seven other Azerbaijani regions. This occupation and consequent displacement of around one million IDPs and refugees – some 11% of the country's population – remained the main obstacle to full social, political and economic progress in the region until the occupied regions were liberated by the 44-day Patriotic War that ended on 8 November 2020.

The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh^{*}

There is a long history of Armenians seeking to expand the territories they control in the Caucasus, especially since the population migration following the Turkmenchay Treaty between the Russian and Iranian empires of 1828. The modern phase of their attempt to take territory from the state of Azerbaijan dates back to 1988 with a unilateral declaration of independence by the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, prompted by declarations in Armenia. By this time, after successive waves of migration Armenians numbered over 138,000 compared to over 47,000 Azerbaijanis.

Nagorno-Karabakh had no border with Armenia, all the regions surrounding it were almost entirely Azerbaijan-populated. On 1 December 1989, the Supreme Soviet of Armenia adopted a resolution to unify Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia, effectively to annex it. Fighting broke out and the process began of expelling



the 300,000 Azerbaijanis who lived in Armenia. By the time of a cease-fire in 1994, Armenia with support from units of the Soviet army, had invaded and occupied Nagorno-Karabakh and all or part of seven other regions of Azerbaijan: Lachin, Kelbajar, Aghdam, Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Qubadli and Zangilan, amounting to approximately 15% of the country's territory. The fighting left 30,000 dead and one million Azerbaijanis robbed of all they possessed: land, homes and property.

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In 1993, the United Nations Security Council passed four resolutions (#822, #853, #874, #884) reaffirming the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, and demanding the immediate

^{*} Note that we have kept as close as possible to the Azerbaijani Latin script when transliterating names into English. An exception is 'Nagorno-Karabakh' (Mountainous Qarabagh) – the Russian form was used for the region occupied by Armenia. Properly known now as Karabakh. Qarabağ is the Azerbaijani name, as used by the champion football team.

withdrawal of occupying forces from Azerbaijani lands. The resolutions were never been obeyed or enforced. In 1995 the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) appointed the 'Minsk Group' to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan to seek a resolution of the conflict. The mediators were representatives from Russia, the USA and France – the countries with the three largest populations of Armenians outside Armenia. Their many meetings over the years since 1995 produced no concrete change have so far produced no concrete change in the status quo of military occupation by Armenia of ethnically-cleansed Azerbaijani territory.

Khojaly, 26 February 1992

At its peak, the city of Khojaly had a population of 7,000 people, mainly Azerbaijanis. Strategically situated in Nagorno-Karabakh, it stood by the region's only airport. During the war, the city was gradually surrounded and subject to an Armenian blockade until by late 1991 the only way in or out was by helicopter, until even that became too dangerous. By February 1992 food supplies, gas and electricity had all been cut. People slept in their cellars due to nightly bombardments.

At around 11pm on 25 February, the bombardment intensified and it was clear that the Armenian forces were determined to take the city. The only option was to flee towards Aghdam, which was still unoccupied. The townspeople broke the ice on the River Gargar, waded across and walked on during the night through the snow-covered forest. They emerged onto open ground near the village of Nakhchivanik as dawn broke on 26 February; they were a perfect target for the guns that awaited them. Men, women, children, from oldest to youngest were cut down. Some managed to survive and reach safety, but are haunted by their memories:

We crossed the road and turned back to see a horrible sight. You can't imagine what it was like; it was as if the snow had a red cover over it.... they killed us like cutting wheat in a field.

[Khojaly Witness Eds. Fiona MacLachlan, Ian Peart, Ithaca Press, 2014, pp.56-57]

An Armenian source described what happened after the shooting:

The Arabo fighters [an Armenian detachment] had then unsheathed the knives they had carried on their hips for so long, and began stabbing.

[My Brother's Road, Markar Melkonian, I.B. Tauris, 2008, pp.213-214]

Torture and rape awaited many of those captured and held hostage to be used as bargain counters in future negotiations.

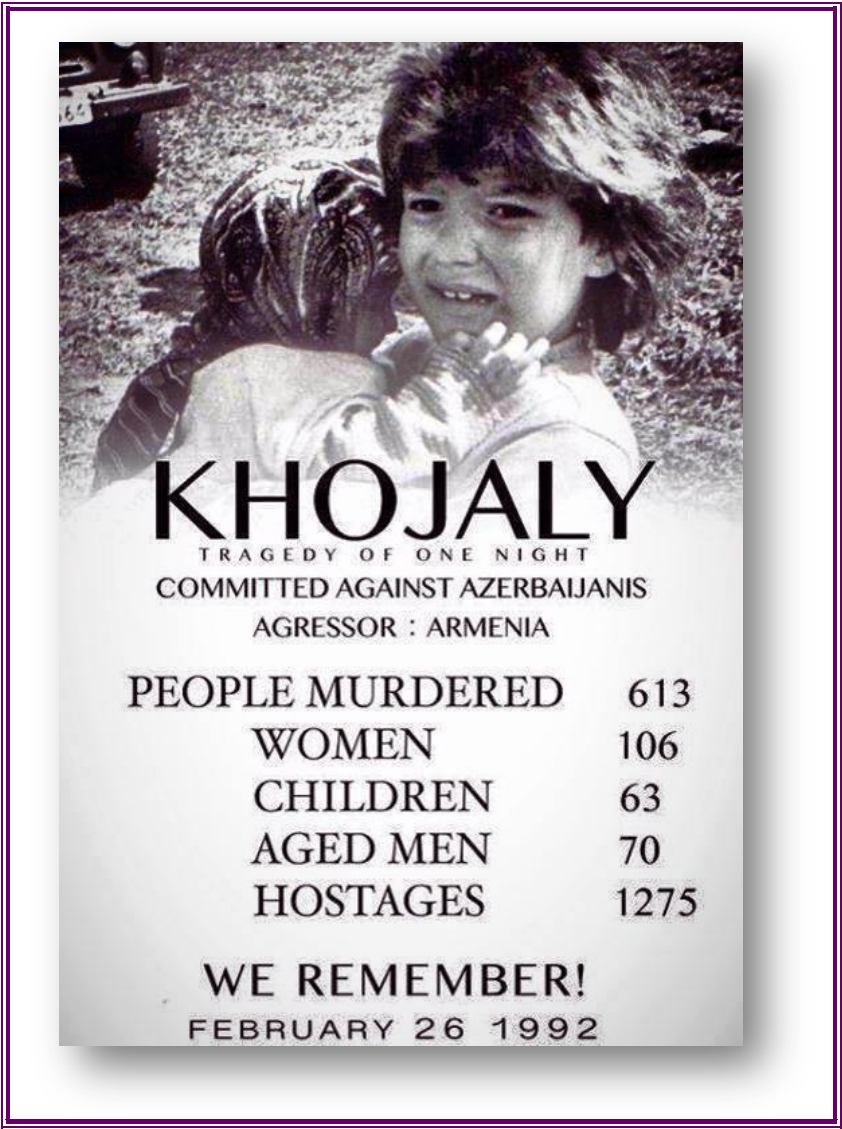
In total, 613 people were killed, among them 63 children, 106 women and 70 elders. 487 people were wounded, 1275 people were taken hostage and there were 150 people whose fates were unknown. Not only the worst atrocity of the war, it was a deliberate

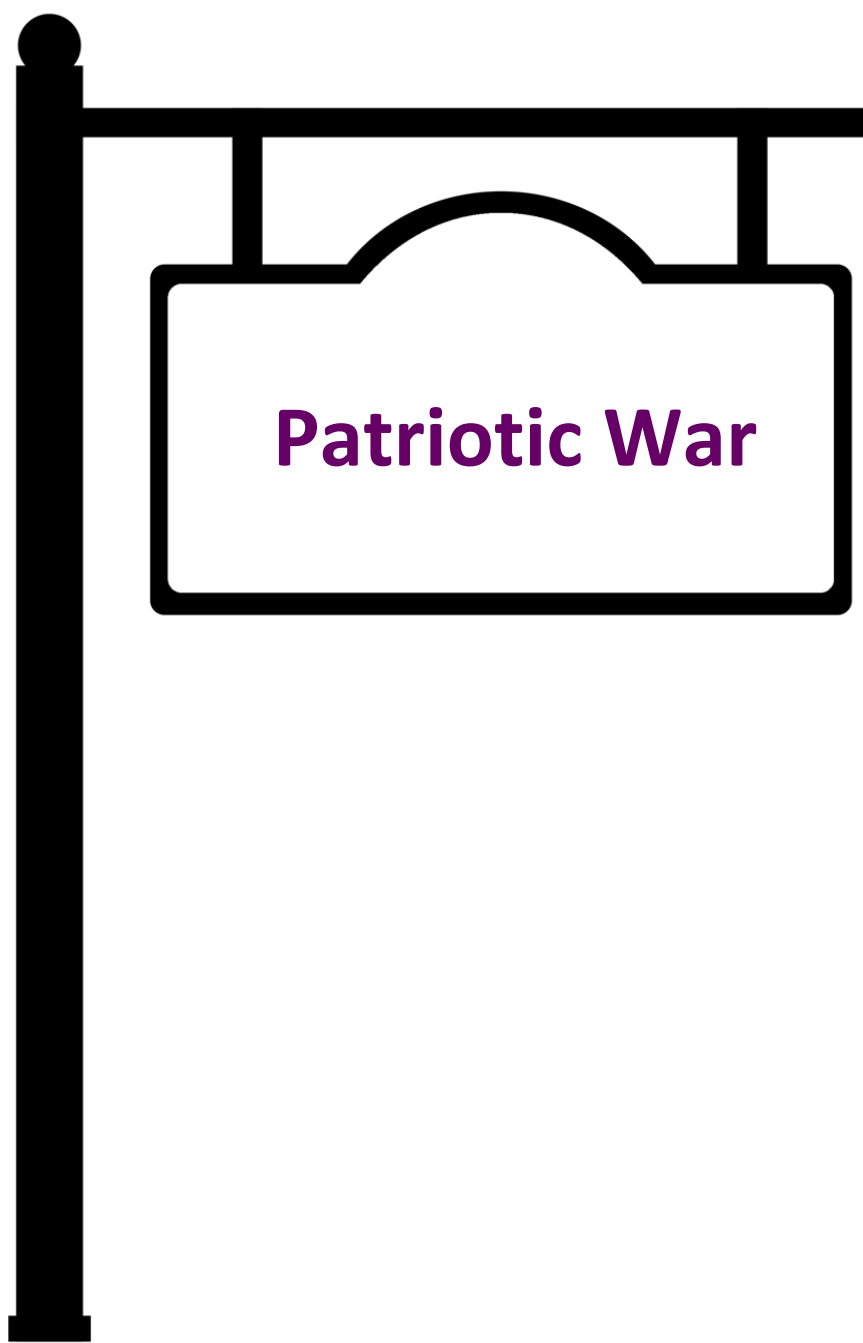
targeting of civilians, which is a war crime. Serzh Sargsyan, president of Armenia until April 2018, who was a commander of forces during the fighting told writer Thomas de Waal:

Before Khojaly, the Azerbaijanis thought they were joking with us, they thought that the Armenians were people who could not raise their hand against the civilian population. We were able to break that [stereotype]. And that's what happened.

[Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War, NYU Press, 2004, p.172]

As with the UN resolutions and the OSCE Minsk Group, no concrete action was taken to end the occupation or prosecute war crimes, until Azerbaijan itself liberated its occupied lands by the Patriotic War of 2020.





The Patriotic War

27 September – 10 November 2020

Over the years following Armenia's invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven other regions of Azerbaijan, there were frequent clashes across the line of contact surrounding the occupied zone, as the occupiers sought to entrench their position. In 2020, however, events took a much more serious turn.

On 12 July, Armenia launched artillery fire against the Azerbaijani region of Tovuz, far distant from the occupied zone of conflict and close to strategically vital Azerbaijani infrastructure: the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor pipeline to Europe. It appears that the attack had two aims, one economic, the other political. The threat to the railway and pipelines was clear. It was also apparent that in attacking across the border, rather than the line of contact, Armenia aimed to provoke Azerbaijan into retaliating. And if Armenia's territory was attacked, it would have called upon Russia to defend it under the terms of their membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Both sides of the line of contact were, of course, internationally-recognized Azerbaijani territory. Russia thus refused to be drawn in and the adventure failed on both counts.

On 27 September, attention returned to the line of contact and, in response to further provocations, Azerbaijan decided that after some 27 years of fruitless international diplomacy, the time had finally come to restore the occupied lands to their internationally-recognised status within Azerbaijan.

"Nearly 30 years of meaningless negotiations did not bring us any closer to the result... ... Every country has the right to self-defence... I said that if I see that the talks are completely ineffective, we will be left with no other option".

President Ilham Aliyev's televised address to the nation, 08 November 2020
<https://is.qd/q2yDx0/>

A major offensive from the south pushed Armenian forces back. As the advance continued, it became clear that throughout the occupation most of those lands had been left to fall into ruins, the devastation was a real shock, and not only to those with memories of the natural beauty of those regions. Clearing the southern regions of Fuzuli, Jabrayil and Zengilan, along the Araz River that is the border with Iran, Azerbaijani forces then turned north to take Gubadli and, on 8 November they captured the city of Shusha within Nagorno-Karabakh.

While Azerbaijan concentrated on its fight to restore its territorial integrity, Armenia once more attempted to draw a third party into the conflict. Launching rocket attacks from its own territory onto Azerbaijani cities beyond the conflict zone. Thus, apartment blocks in Ganja city were destroyed in four attacks that killed 26 civilians and injured 125 more. *"... what we have seen is already considered a war crime... This is an attack conducted against civilians. What really surprises us is the shelling of Ganja located far from the war zone".*

French lawyer Yassine Yakouti, in Ganja, 22.04.21 <https://is.qd/hK0tAq/>

Civilians in the similarly distant towns of Terter, Beylagan and Barda, and other settlements, suffered casualties from similar attacks. In Terter, 17 people were killed and thousands were driven out of their homes by successive bombardments.

The retaking of Shusha was, given its mountainous location, a hugely difficult operation, and news of the return of a city regarded by Azerbaijanis as a cradle of their culture, was greeted with enthusiastic celebrations throughout the country. President Ilham Aliyev decreed that 8 November would be added to the calendar as Victory Day, a holiday of celebration.

"Shusha, which was under occupation for 28 and a half years, has been liberated! Shusha is free now! We have returned to Shusha!.. 8 November 2020 will forever remain in the history of Azerbaijan..."

Televised address to the nation
<https://is.qd/q2yDx0/>

Shusha proved to be the tipping point in the fighting, with Armenian forces now demoralised and in full retreat. With Russian mediation, a statement was signed by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia on 10 November (<https://is.qd/uljibL>). There was an immediate cessation of hostilities and a timetable was agreed for the three remaining regions of Aghdam, Kelbajar and Lachin to be evacuated by Armenian forces and returned to Azerbaijani control by 1 December.

Another condition in the statement was that Russian peacekeepers would replace evacuating Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh, for a minimum period of five years. The peacekeepers were also to supervise a Lachin corridor between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. Transport links between the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and other regions of Azerbaijan would be unblocked and supervised by Russia's border service. It was agreed later that Turkish peacekeepers would join the Russians in the peacekeeping centre to be established in the region.

Most importantly, Internally Displaced People and refugees would return to Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions, under the control of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees.

As Armenians left those last three regions they did so while operating a scorched earth policy. Having asked for, and been given, extra time to leave Kelbajar, they loaded everything they could onto trucks, even stones and other items from historical monuments. What couldn't be loaded was laid waste: forests and homes were burned and cattle destroyed. They did, however, leave thousands of land mines intact. Despite an intensive clearance campaign, these ensured that casualties continued long after the official end of hostilities.

It was already known that the city of Aghdam had been destroyed following the original occupation, but the shock was redoubled once it was safe for Azerbaijanis to enter and review the true horror. Images of the cityscape were compared with those of post-A-bomb Hiroshima. *"I showed them a photograph from Aghdam. It was an 'Oh, mon Dieu...' moment for them. 'What's this? Hiroshima?' they asked me in surprise..."* **Reza Deghati, photographer, in the Regionplus magazine**

<https://is.qd/ixRQqB/>

Soon afterwards, however, President Aliyev was stating his determination that a rebuilding of the recovered regions would commence immediately, and he invited international companies to help in a programme of speedy restoration and development. He stressed in interviews that the end of occupation was an opportunity for cooperation and progress across the Caucasus. He also assured the civilian Armenian inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh that they would have the same rights and opportunities for participation in development as other citizens of Azerbaijan; he pointed out that living conditions were better here than in Armenia.

"I want to say again that all peoples living in a single Azerbaijani state have equal rights, including the Armenian people".

Televised address to the nation 20.11.20



Of course, Azerbaijan's "Patriotic War" attracted global attention, and the accompanying information war required an equally determined approach. Here the focus was on President Aliyev as he took on all-comers, particularly an often hostile western media. Continually highlighting Armenia's obstruction and negativity, the president offered instead a positive vision of the way forward, telling the BBC, for example:

I wish to see a day when the three South Caucasus countries would be working together I offered many times through the Minsk Group co-chairs, they can confirm it, financial assistance and social programmes in Nagorno-Karabakh, financed from our budget, if they liberated the territories. They said no. I offered autonomy, the highest possible autonomy in the world, to Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenians said no.

Shocked by the extent of devastation that the occupying forces left behind:

...in the liberated territories almost everything is destroyed. I have said many times that in the great city of Fuzuli, in which tens of thousands of people lived, we could not find any building on which to raise a flag.

He nevertheless focused the BBC on development and cooperation:

Welcome to Azerbaijan

... I, as President, say today and [have] said many times that we want to live side by side...

... Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh will live much better. They will have higher salaries, because the salaries in Azerbaijan are higher. Higher pensions, because pensions in Azerbaijan are three times higher than in Armenia. They will have all the social protection. We will invest extensively in those areas. They will be rid of poverty.

And a few days after the war's end, he was telling Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs:

But I am glad that we have managed to reach decisions that will allow both the people of Azerbaijan and the people of Armenia the opportunity to live in peace, to try to heal the wounds of war, to try to think about the future, about a common future, a safe future for us, for our neighbours, and thus contribute to the strengthening of security in our region.

But there was realism, too – firmness to go with the fairness. To repeated sceptical questioning by the BBC, President Aliyev maintained that the fighting would stop, but only if Armenia agreed to return the three regions not at that point retaken by Azerbaijan's forces:

So, for [the] Armenian prime minister..., for his own sake, the best thing now is to listen to me and to say publicly "We liberate Aghdam, Kalbajar and Lachin". And we stop, and there will be a ceasefire.

Despite the BBC's scepticism, that is exactly what happened four days later, on 10 November. So, firm, fair and true to his word, President Aliyev brought to an end a conflict that should never have lasted the 28 years that followed four UN Security Council resolutions instructing Armenia to end its occupation of Azerbaijani lands.

The president and the armed forces had the nation's full support, and many individuals and organisations offered whatever assistance they could. The University of Languages joined the information war with its campaign to promulgate "Karabagh Truth" to as many interested parties as possible. [View its campaign at https://is.gd/yEb7xW](https://is.gd/yEb7xW)

As this update was printed, a massive project was well underway to clear military debris and those thousands of landmines (albeit with Armenia still refusing to hand over maps of their mine laying) as was installing the basic infrastructure needed to implement the rebuilding of a land that has been the beating heart of a culture for centuries. Plans for the 'Great Return' were in progress.

May 2021

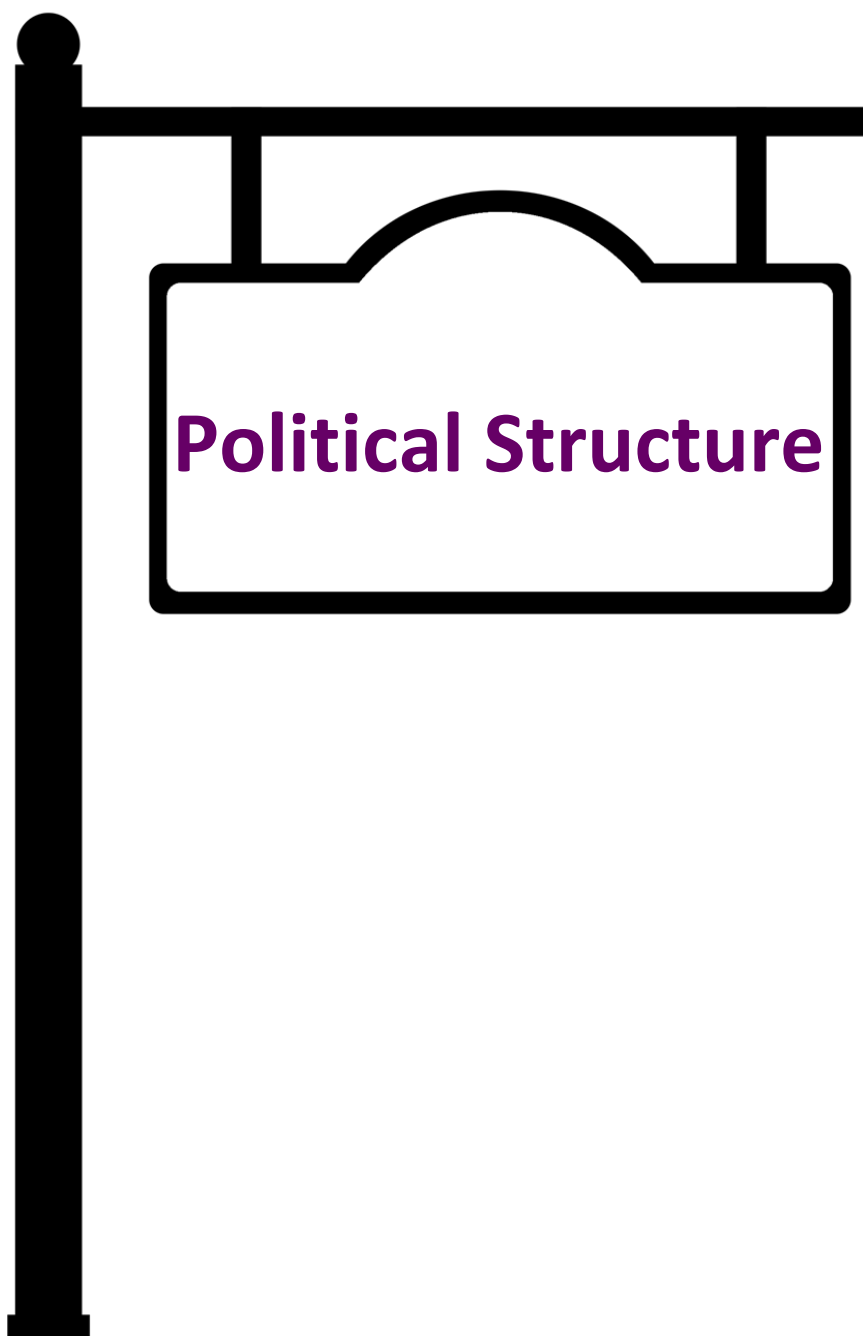


Among the first steps toward revitalizing the region was the **revival of Karabakh University**, reestablished in the city of **Khankendi**. This symbolic and practical move represents a commitment to restoring intellectual and cultural life in the liberated territories.

Officially founded by presidential decree on November 28, 2023, the university is set to commence its inaugural academic year in 2024/2025, welcoming approximately 1,120 students across 27 specialties. The institution aims to serve as a beacon of intellectual growth and harmony, contributing to the healing process in a region scarred by prolonged conflict. <https://president.az+1Caliber.Az> | [Новости Азербайджана и мира+1Caliber.Az](#) | [Новости Азербайджана и мира](#)

The campus comprises multiple educational buildings and residential facilities, designed to support a comprehensive academic environment. With a focus on fostering innovation and excellence, Karabakh University aspires to become a cornerstone in the broader efforts to rejuvenate the region's social and cultural landscape.





The Political System of the Republic of Azerbaijan

The Constitution

The constitution of independent Azerbaijan was adopted by referendum on 12 November 1995 and came into effect 15 days later, on 27 November. Azerbaijan's first period of independence, as the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, which lasted only 23 months, from 1918 to 1920, did not produce such a document. Thus the history of the republic's constitution begins with its time as part of the USSR. The All-Azerbaijan Soviet Congress adopted its first constitution on 19 May 1921. Several adjustments followed to ensure compliance with the Soviet Union's constitution. With renewed independence a new constitution had to be developed. To this end, a commission was established under the guidance of former president Heydar Aliyev, a draft document was submitted to the referendum and 12 November has been celebrated as Constitution Day ever since.

Embodying human rights and the division of power as priorities, the constitution laid the basis for the republic's future development as a democratic, legally-governed, secular state. [\[For its wording see http://www.constcourt.gov.az/laws/26\]](http://www.constcourt.gov.az/laws/26)

The division of power in Azerbaijan is such that executive authority lies with the president of the republic, who is elected directly by majority vote of the whole electorate for periods of seven years and supported by his administration, the vice-president, prime minister and the Cabinet of Ministers. Legislative authority is with the single-chamber *Milli Majlis* (National Assembly), whose 125 deputies are elected for five-year terms by majority vote from territorial districts. Judicial authority is held by the independent courts whose judges are appointed by the *Milli Majlis* following recommendations from the president.

There are special provisions within the constitution for Nakhchivan, which is an exclave of Azerbaijan, having no contiguous border with the rest of the republic. It is an autonomous republic within Azerbaijan, having its own constitution approved by the *Milli Majlis* of Azerbaijan in December 1998, and its own *Ali Majlis* (Supreme Assembly). Subject to the constitution of Azerbaijan, executive authority in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic lies with its Cabinet of Ministers, legislative authority is exercised by the *Ali Majlis* and judicial authority is with the courts. The chairman of the *Ali Majlis* is the republic's highest official.



The President

The president is the head of state and acts as the guarantor of the independence and territorial integrity of the state, thus he/she is Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and appoints and dismisses the General Staff. As the state's representative in external and internal affairs, the president has the authority to:

- appoint and dismiss the prime minister with Milli Majlis approval;
- appoint and dismiss diplomatic representatives;
- conclude international treaties;
- make recommendations to the Milli Majlis on the appointment of judges to the courts;
- establish internal executive authorities;
- present legislative proposals to the Milli Majlis;
- present a state budget to the Milli Majlis for confirmation.

The president also establishes the Cabinet of Ministers to act as his/her principal executive body. Included are the prime minister, deputy prime ministers, ministers and heads of other central executive authorities.



Vice-President

By referendum on 26 September 2016, the constitution was amended to provide for the presidential appointment or dismissal of persons to the post of vice-president. In the case of the president resigning or being incapacitated, an extraordinary presidential election will be held within 60 days. The first vice-president will assume the powers of the president until a new president is elected.

On 21 February 2017, President Ilham Aliyev appointed First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva to be first vice-president.

The Milli Majlis

Elections to Azerbaijan's unicameral legislative body take place every five years. The 125 deputies then elect chairs and vice-chairs, set its programme and establish commissions to discuss policies on the various social, political, economic, regional and environmental issues as well as forming the Chamber of Accounts, which is the main body of state budgetary and financial control, providing financial advice and monitoring of budgets, legislation and state finances.

As well as approving legislation, the Milli Majlis approves the state budget, appointments of the prime minister and judges, and authorises the Cabinet of Ministers.



The Judiciary

The basis of the judiciary of the Azerbaijan Republic is formed by the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, Courts of Appeal, specialist and courts of first instance. All judges are appointed by the *Milli Majlis* on recommendation by the president.

The nine members of the Constitutional Court ensure that laws, presidential decrees and orders, resolutions and acts by the *Milli Majlis*, state bodies and officials, as well as executive authorities, are consistent with the constitution. It also ensures the separation of powers between the executive and judiciary. The Supreme Court rules on criminal and other cases, while the Economic Court tries cases involving charges of economic wrongdoing.

Foreign Policy

On 18 October 1991, as the Soviet Union disintegrated, Azerbaijan declared its independence, taking inspiration from its first period – the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic of 1918-20. Consolidating this renewed sovereignty was no easy process and the early years were troubled.

The principal threat to independence was, and remains, Armenia's claims on Azerbaijani territory which developed into the war over Nagorno-Karabakh. It was also two years before the last of the Soviet armed forces left Azerbaijan and Russia was still making clear that it regarded former Soviet republics as being within its sphere of influence.

The economy, once part of a highly centralised infrastructure was, with the removal of 'the centre', in a state of disorganised collapse.

Early governments, the first hidebound by Soviet ideology, its successor led by weak and inexperienced idealists, failed in the face of a mountain of problems. In 1993, the country returned to the political experience of Heydar Aliyev, who exerted his strength and acumen to turn the situation around, prioritising political stability and economic growth. Negotiating a ceasefire to reduce the chaos of war, his strategy on the economy concentrated on efficient extraction of the wealth of hydrocarbon resources under the Caspian Sea. The 'Contract of the Century', signed in September 1994, was not only economically efficient, it was also politically astute. The international companies involved were from the UK, the USA, Russia, Norway, Turkey and Saudi Arabia; this created a spread of influential nations with a profitable stake in Azerbaijan's development.

That early combination of economic and political interests is an ongoing feature of Azerbaijani foreign policy, which aims for independence and balance in the national interest. While drawing international attention to the damage and dangers of Armenia's continued illegal occupation of its lands, Azerbaijan has continued to attract foreign investment in projects with international potential, seeking also to diversify its own economy with a number of projects in transport infrastructure, IT and telecommunications, agriculture, sport, leisure, tourism and other spheres, thus reducing dependence on oil and gas.

In political terms, these projects reflect the country's aim to develop productive relations with states and organisations both West and East: the USA, the EU, NATO, Turkey and Russia, the CIS and Iran. While maintaining its policy of independence and balanced international relations with respect to international law, Azerbaijan also acts in due recognition of the sensitivities of the region. It undertakes a number of mutually beneficial projects with neighbouring countries, preferring constructive cooperation, peace and stability to conflict. However, it is also mindful of the interests of international powers and, principally, of the need to defend its own sovereignty and to protect and develop its own resources and projects. It has been in active membership of, or cooperation with, many international organisations and operations, as follows.

Azerbaijan and the United Nations (UN)

The newly-independent Republic of Azerbaijan was admitted to the UN on 2 March 1992 and opened its permanent representation there on 6 May 1992.

Of course the country's priority has been to raise awareness and seek support for a just resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and resolutions #822, #853, #874 and #884 were adopted by the UN Security Council in 1993. They all confirmed Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and demanded the immediate withdrawal of occupying military forces from that territory. Those resolutions were not fully implemented. In the same year the UN General Assembly recognised the plight of the more than one million refugees and IDPs and with resolution A/RES/48/114 appealed to its members to provide emergency assistance.

Active within many of the structures of the UN, Azerbaijan has, for example, been represented on the Executive Board of UNESCO and Vice-President Mehriban Aliyeva is one of its Goodwill Ambassadors. The country was also elected to non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council for the years 2012 and 2013. During its two stints of presidency, Azerbaijan convened a session on strengthening international cooperation against terrorism and the first session focusing on UN cooperation with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to foster inter-cultural ties in the quest for peace and security.



Azerbaijan and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

The OSCE is a group of 57 northern hemisphere countries that, despite the name, extends across North America, Europe and Asia. *It is the world's largest regional security organization....and.... works for stability, peace and democracy.... through political dialogue about shared values.* [<https://www.osce.org/who-we-are>]

Azerbaijan joined its predecessor, the C(Conference)SCE, in January 1992 and this organisation took on the task of resolving the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

On 24 March 1992, the CSCE Council of Foreign Ministers requested the Chairman-in-Office to convene *as soon as possible* a conference on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict involving Armenia and Azerbaijan. This event was to take place in Minsk and provide a forum for negotiations towards a peaceful settlement. *Two and a half years later*, in December 1994, the OSCE Budapest Summit directed the Chairman-in-Office to name co-chairmen of the Minsk Group and establish their mandate to create the conditions for such a conference.

The 15-point mandate (almost 600 words) was produced *three months later*, on 23 March 1995. The co-chairmen from 1995-97 were firstly from Finland and Russia, and then Sweden and Russia. Since January 1997 the three co-chairmen are from Russia, the USA and France. Is it coincidence that these are the three countries with the largest populations of Armenians outside the Caucasus?

The three Minsk Group co-chairmen (with many changes of personnel) consulted, discussed, coordinated, and observed for the years. They were instructed to be guided by



UN Security Council resolutions. All those resolutions demand the immediate withdrawal of occupying forces from Azerbaijani territory. That is never publicly mentioned by the co-chairmen.

The post of Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office (CiO) on the Conflict dealt with by the Minsk Conference was created in August 1995. Ambassador Andrzej Kasprzyk (Poland) has held the position since 1 January 1997 and is based in Tbilisi. Thus, as with the co-chairmen, the OSCE made clear its priority is to prevent fighting, not the re-establishment of international law in the region by ending the military occupation of Azerbaijan's territories.

He represents the CiO in issues related to the conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, assists the CiO in achieving an agreement on the cessation of the armed conflict and in creating conditions for the deployment of an OSCE peace-keeping operation.

[<https://www.osce.org/cio/andrzej-kasprzyk>]

Despite this, Azerbaijan continued to participate fully in discussions at ministerial and presidential level organised at intervals by the co-chairs and in other OSCE activities.

Azerbaijan and the European Union (EU)

In line with its broad-ranging approach to international relations, Azerbaijan, standing at the junction of Europe and Asia, naturally decided to engage with the European Union. A Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was signed in 1996, and Azerbaijan is party to the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative.

The EU has provided aid to overcome the damage caused to Azerbaijan by the war over Nagorno-Karabakh and technical advice as the country developed its state and economic structures. It has also supported Azerbaijani initiatives like the Southern Gas Corridor and the diversification of its economy, including transcontinental projects reviving the ancient Silk Road.

Much has changed since 1996, and in 2015 Azerbaijan drafted a document seeking to update the relationship with the EU. Negotiations on a new agreement began in February 2017, during which the EU recognised that:

Azerbaijan is an important partner for the European Union, whose independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity the EU supports. The EU is Azerbaijan's single largest partner, representing 48.6% of its total trade and providing the largest share of foreign direct investment.

[http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-5353_en.htm]



Azerbaijan and NATO

Azerbaijan joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in March 1992 and NATO's position on the situation in the South Caucasus was outlined in a Declaration adopted by a ministerial meeting of the Council on 10-11 January 1994. Paragraph 21 confirmed the position of respect for territorial integrity, opposed the occupation of lands and cites respect for other states' lands:

1. The situation in Southern Caucasus continues to be of special concern. We condemn the use of force for territorial gains. Respect for the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia is essential to the establishment of peace, stability and cooperation in the region.

[\[https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c940111a.htm\]](https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c940111a.htm)

Following this, President Heydar Aliyev signed a framework document on the Partnership for Peace at NATO headquarters in Brussels during an official visit to Belgium on 3-4 May 1994.

Azerbaijan has since 2002 contributed to ISAF, the Nato-led security mission to Afghanistan, with a military presence, training, overflights and other transit assistance. NATO seminars and conferences have been hosted in Baku, as have meetings under the auspices of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council.



President Heydar Aliyev signing the framework document on the Partnership for Peace at NATO headquarters.

The Council of Europe and Azerbaijan

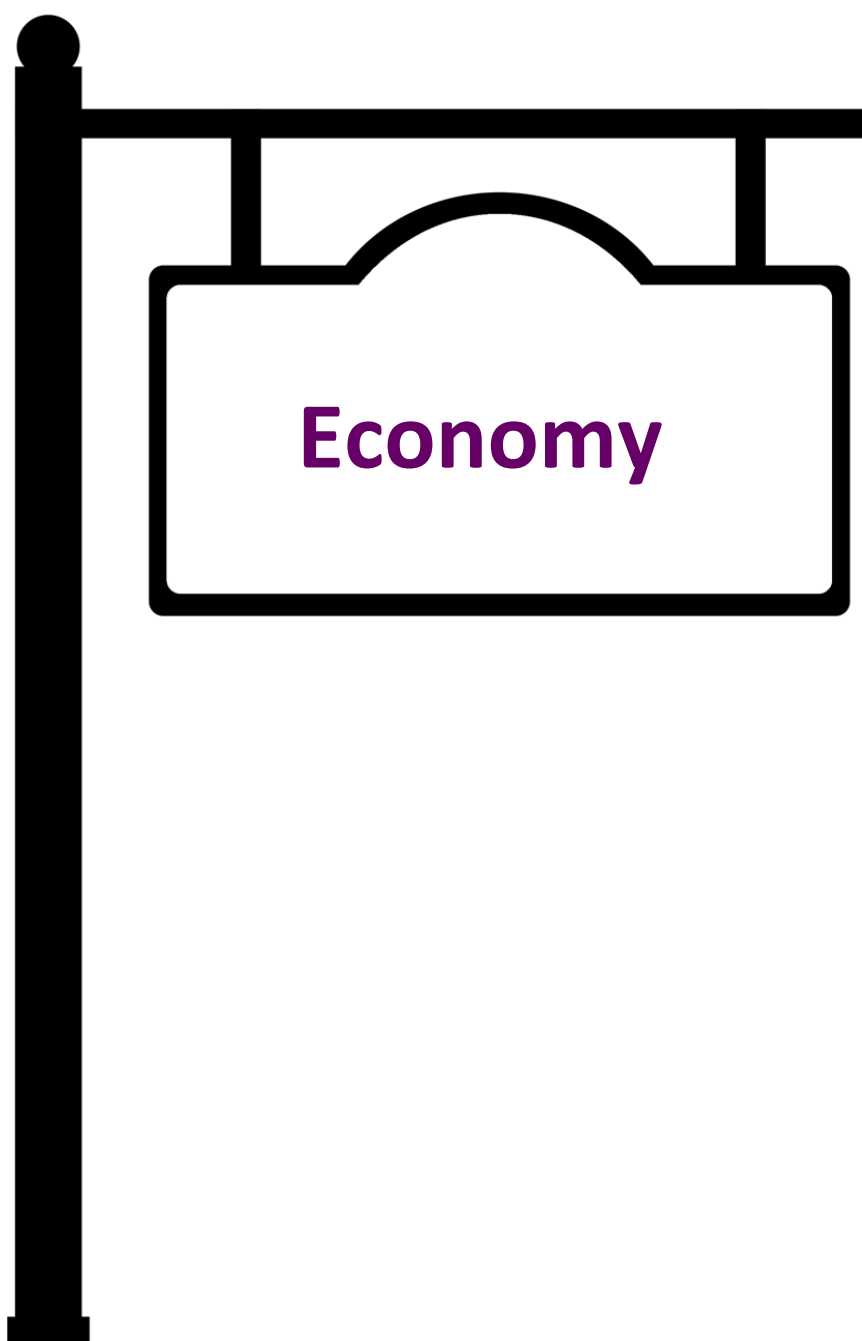
Azerbaijan was admitted to full membership of the Council of Europe on 25 January 2001, ending a process that had begun in 1992. Its delegation attended its first session of the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) from 24-27 April 2001 and has been an active contributor since then.

Resolution 1416, adopted by PACE on 25 January 2005, included the following:

1. The Parliamentary Assembly regrets that, more than a decade after the armed hostilities started, the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region remains unsolved. Hundreds of thousands of people are still displaced and live in miserable conditions. Considerable parts of the territory of Azerbaijan are still occupied by Armenian forces, and separatist forces are still in control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

2. The Assembly expresses its concern that the military action, and the widespread ethnic hostilities which preceded it, led to large-scale ethnic expulsion and the creation of mono-ethnic areas which resemble the terrible concept of ethnic cleansing.... The Assembly reiterates that the occupation of foreign territory by a member state constitutes a grave violation of that state's obligations as a member of the Council of Europe and reaffirms the right of displaced persons from the area of conflict to return to their homes safely and with dignity.

[\[http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=17289&lang=en\]](http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=17289&lang=en)



Introduction

As far as Azerbaijan was concerned, its economy within the USSR was geared by and towards the centre. Thus the republic's principal economic sectors: fossil fuel extraction and agriculture, as well as much of its industrial production, were confined to supplying the internal Soviet system with raw materials and parts, rather than end products. Then, with the USSR's collapse, came wars across the Caucasus that engendered social chaos, diverted resources and blocked markets.

This continued until Heydar Aliyev became president in 1993 and within months had negotiated a ceasefire in the conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, creating the stability necessary for economic recovery to begin. Turning outwards for support from the IMF and World Bank, reforms were implemented to instil greater discipline in management of the economy while gradually liberalising and encouraging broader production and trade agreements. Programmes of privatization, beginning especially in agriculture in 1996 – the handing over to villagers of many thousands of hectares of previously collectivized land – have seen many advances in agricultural quality and production, in a sector that is now almost totally in private hands.

The 'Contract of the Century', signed in September 1994, kick-started the effective exploitation of the country's resources of oil and gas that was to power a dramatic upsurge in the economy and also sealed economic and political partnerships with a number of important players in the international arena.

By 2004 significant revenues began to accrue from the flow of Caspian oil and President Ilham Aliyev decreed a five-year state programme on the socio-economic development of the regions. Two further programmes have followed, improving infrastructure, boosting business credits and investment and reducing regional unemployment. By 2006 the annual growth rate of GDP was registering record levels, exceeding 40%.

The sudden drop in oil prices of 2015 was a global economic shock and Azerbaijan was inevitably affected, being forced to float the manat (₼, AZN) into devaluation. The State Oil Fund, established in 1999 to support economic stability, fund national projects to support socio-economic progress and accumulate funds for future generations, helped to ease the shock.

Of course, hydrocarbons are still at the heart of the economy; in addition to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Southern Gas Corridor to Italy ensures the flow of the Caspian Sea's resources to Europe and beyond. However, the setback in 2015 gave further impetus to the drive for further diversification of the economy and the pipelines represent an East-West connection that is being developed in other sectors, too.

The very fertile land ensures that agriculture will always be fruitful here and it has largely recovered from the whimsical distortions of the Soviet era to offer a tasty cornucopia.

Azerbaijan aims to be a central hub in the development of transport and passenger links between Europe and China, in effect helping to revive the historical Silk Road. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, inaugurated in October 2017, is a major link in this East-West trade route. The Baku International Sea Trade Port continues the route as the trans-Caspian connection with Central Asia. And new north-south rail links connect Russia with South Asia via Azerbaijan.

Mutually advantageous international communication and cooperation are also the themes underlying the country's venture into satellite technology (two Azersat satellites),

its holding of major sporting events and the many international conferences hosted in Baku on scientific, cultural and humanitarian issues.

The promotion and rapid growth of tourism to the country serve similar aims.

Contract of the century

Once the ceasefire had been signed and some semblance of political order had been restored in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, the priority was to ensure that the country had an economic future. There had been some three years of negotiations with international oil companies to develop its oil and gas reserves, but in 1993 incoming president, Heydar Aliyev, dissatisfied with the terms, set new discussions in train. Finally, on 20 September 1994, Baku's Gulustan Palace hosted the elite of the oil world and an *Agreement on the Joint Development and Production Sharing for the Azeri and Chirag Fields and the Deep Water Portion of the Guneshli Field in the Azerbaijan Sector of the Caspian Sea* was signed. So important was the agreement for Azerbaijan that it was soon hailed the Contract of the Century; its impact on the economy, employment and associated industries supports that claim. The investment implied amounted to \$7.4 billion.

SOCAR (Azerbaijan)

BP (UK)

Amoco (USA)

Lukoil (Russia)

Pennzoil (USA)

Unocal (USA)

Statoil (Norway)

McDermott (USA)

Ramco (UK)

TPAO (Turkey)

Delta (Saudi Arabia)

11 companies signed the agreement, with BP taking the role of operator. These companies, forming the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC), were from countries that were strategically important in global and regional terms. President Aliyev had negotiated with political, as well as economic, benefits in mind. Major economic investment naturally leads to increased interest in the development and security of a project.

The first oil came ashore from the *Chirag* platform in 1997 and was exported via the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline to the Black Sea. Two years later the Baku-Supsa pipeline was in operation. But both of these required tankers to pass through the congested Bosphorus to world markets. An alternative route, with greater capacity, was required...

Oil and gas pipelines

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline project ranks second only to the Contract of the Century in importance for the early reconstruction of Azerbaijan's economy.

Getting the increased volumes of oil safely to world markets was a major project, with political considerations added to the already daunting physical and economic challenges. The state of war resulting from Armenia's continued occupation of Azerbaijani land ruled out the most direct route to a southern Turkish port, which was necessary if the Bosphorus was to be bypassed. A route through Iran also had its political problems and an alternative to Russian-based supply lines was also desirable for European consumers. So President Aliyev pushed hard for the pipeline to cross the Caucasus and pass through Georgia; his view prevailed in the face of huge scepticism about the cost, logistics and level of reserves under the Caspian.



Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline

Construction of the 1,768 km pipeline began in April 2003 and the tanker *British Hawthorn* left Turkey's port at Ceyhan with the first delivery of oil on 4 June 2006. Subsequently, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have both sent oil through BTC. Normally transporting one million barrels (160,000m³) each day, BTC is of very significant regional benefit to the economies of Georgia and Turkey in providing transit fees and employment. The effect on Azerbaijan's economy can be seen on the streets of every town and village.

This area of the economy has been further developed following the confirmation of major reserves of gas in the Shah Deniz field under the Caspian Sea. The South Caucasus Pipeline, shadowing BTC as far as Erzurum in Turkey, first delivered gas in December 2006. Initially intended to supply Georgia and Turkey, the project has expanded into the Southern Gas Corridor, to provide Europe with alternative supplies of gas and reduce the continent's dependence on Russian sources.

In a \$40+ billion project, the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) will take gas the 1,805 km from Erzurum across Turkey to Edirne on the Greek border. From there the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) continues the gas's journey for 878 km across Greece and Albania, and under the Adriatic to Italy. Existing pipelines are used to transport gas further into European grids.

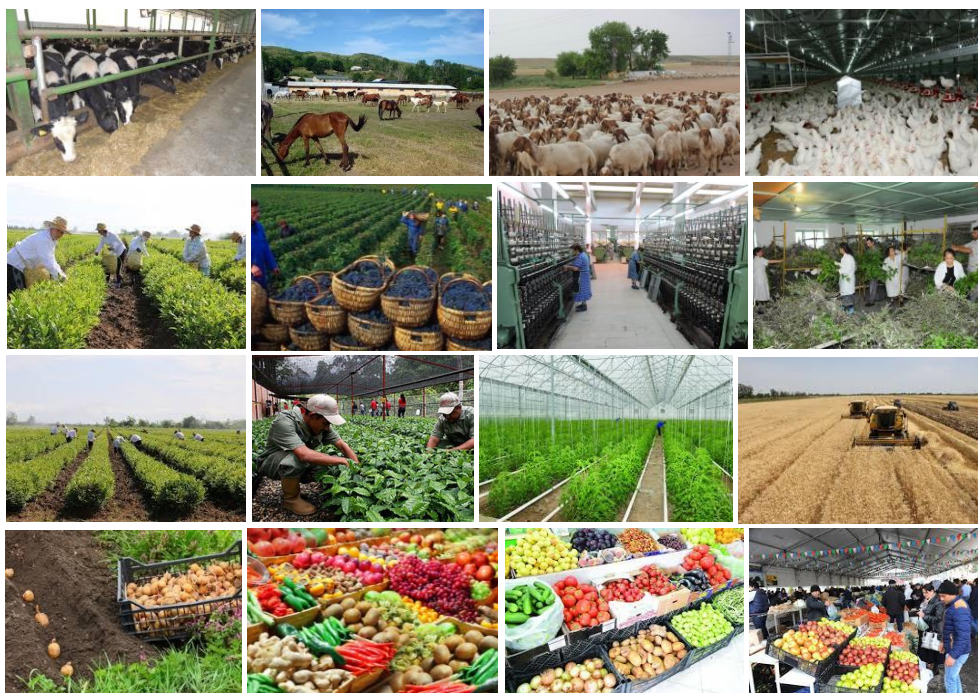


Southern Gas Corridor

Agriculture

Agriculture ranks second in the economy, after the oil and gas industry, and has the largest workforce. This is not surprising given the variety of climate – nine distinct climatic zones have been identified – the extensive network of irrigation developed over centuries and wonderfully fertile soil. As with other sectors, however, it has taken time to recover from the imbalance of requirements determined by Soviet governments to satisfy the whole USSR.

The republic's large, collectivised state farms were geared towards the production of fruit, vegetables and wine (until the last was destroyed during a Soviet anti-alcoholism campaign). Meat, dairy and grain production was neglected locally in favour of imports from other republics. With independence much land was distributed to villagers who, in return, began to farm those traditional products once more. Azerbaijanis' taste for kebabs – especially when barbecued at a summer home – ensure that lamb, beef and chicken are produced for flavour. The many sheep mowing the landscape also provide wool for the stunning rugs produced by a resurgent carpet industry, as well as milk for some deliciously tangy cheeses – goats also make a contribution here.



The range of fruit grown is truly impressive: apples, apricots, cherries, cornelian cherries, cucumbers, feijoa, figs, grapes, kiwi, kumquats, lemons, melons, mandarins, mulberries, nectarines, nuts, olives, peaches, pears, persimmons, plums, pomegranates, quince, raspberries, strawberries, tomatoes, watermelons.... Much agricultural produce, including the range of vegetables, still appears in markets according to season, in full, fresh flavour, and the regions take pride in their tasty speciality: Quba for its apples, Goychay pomegranates, Gadabey potatoes, Samirabad watermelons, Ivanovka honey, Qabala nuts, Ordubad lemons, Lenkeran tea etc. Larger scale farms produce the grains – wheat, maize, barley – and rice in the south.

Many of the industries depressed during the Soviet Union or by its collapse are well on the road to recovery. Vines were replanted and are producing some very palatable wines and by 2017 cash crops like cotton and tobacco were being incentivised.

Towards the north-west, around Sheki, sericulture produces the raw material for *kelaghayi*, the traditional silk scarves undergoing a fashionable revival.

Overfished in the Soviet era, stocks of sturgeon in the Caspian Sea fell so drastically that bans and limits have been imposed on fishing for the famed black caviar they produce. Fish farms have been established in efforts to replenish numbers and sturgeon and other fish from the Caspian and the many rivers are generally available for the table.

Silk Road revival – transportation, communications

It's something of a cliché by now, but Azerbaijan really is at a crossroads of continents, north-south and east-west, and is ideally placed to serve as a major hub for transport and trade. As China develops into a global economic presence, the revival of the ancient Silk Road to connect with the West more quickly than by sea is a natural consequence, and this is the context for key projects in the Caucasus taking advantage.

On 30 October 2017, the presidents of Azerbaijan and Turkey, and the Prime Ministers of Georgia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan drove in symbolic final spikes to inaugurate the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway (BTK). In connecting the three countries by rail, BTK also completed a rail link between Europe, Central Asia and China, which will provide faster access than sea routes. Trade and tourism are the targets of the venture, aiming at 17 million tonnes of cargo and three million passengers per year.



The New Silk Road

It was no coincidence that the inauguration took place at Alat, an hour's drive south of Baku, for a little over two months later, President Ilham Aliyev was back there for the opening of the roll-on roll-off (ro-ro) terminal at the newly-built Baku International Sea

Trade Port [\[http://portofbaku.com\]](http://portofbaku.com). This state-of-the-art port is the hub for trans-Caspian road and rail transport, connecting with Aktau in Kazakhstan and Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan. As of 2018, a Free Trade Zone was also planned near the port to encourage business investment and innovation in the region.

The potential for north-south trade links is by no means neglected and road and rail lines between Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran have been thoroughly upgraded as part of the International North-South Transport Corridor, which connects northern Europe with India and South-East Asia. Both road and railway also go through Alat and the corridor targets an annual throughput of up to 20 million tonnes of cargo.

The Heydar Aliyev airport serving Baku is the busiest in the Caucasus and was completely refurbished by 2013, as was the highway into the city. It is the main base of the national airline, Azerbaijan Airlines (AZAL). There are four other airports with international connections.

Most of the inter-city highways and rail lines have also been effectively upgraded.

Space has not been exempt from Azerbaijan's drive to aid global communication. The Azerspace 1 telecommunications satellite was launched on 7 February 2013 to offer TV, radio and internet transmission over Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. It is controlled by the state-run Azercosmos company, which launched Azerspace 2 on 25 September 2018.

Construction

Anyone visiting the country since 2005 cannot have failed to notice the major boom in construction that has transformed many of its cities, towns and villages. Now, alongside the architectural treasures of the past stand monuments to 21st-century creativity. Residential conditions, including for the million or so people who had been ethnically cleansed from their homes in the occupied territories and Armenia, have been significantly improved. The narrow and often pitted inter-city roads of the past have been replaced by broad highways. New factories, malls, hotels, hospitals and offices; homes, schools, sports centres, stadiums and museums – as well as massive construction work for the oil and gas industries – continue to transform the landscape.

In parallel with this expansion, sustainability has become an increasing focus. Azerbaijan is set to host the **29th UN Climate Change Conference (COP29)** in November 2024, underlining the country's commitment to green growth and global climate objectives.

Tourism

The capital of any country ensures it has facilities to attract visitors there for business or leisure, and Baku lacks for nothing in that respect. However, developments in the regions help to ensure that their local economies benefit, too, from the drive to promote tourism. The capital has staged major international events in athletics – the very first European Games – and music (festivals of pop, classical, traditional and jazz) as well as the annual Formula 1 Azerbaijan Grand Prix. It has the fascinating medieval walled city, Icheri Sheher and the sensationally contemporary Heydar Aliyev Centre and the whole range of shopping, leisure and entertainment facilities that you would expect of a capital. It has accommodation from hostels at prices to suit backpackers to pampered five-star luxury.



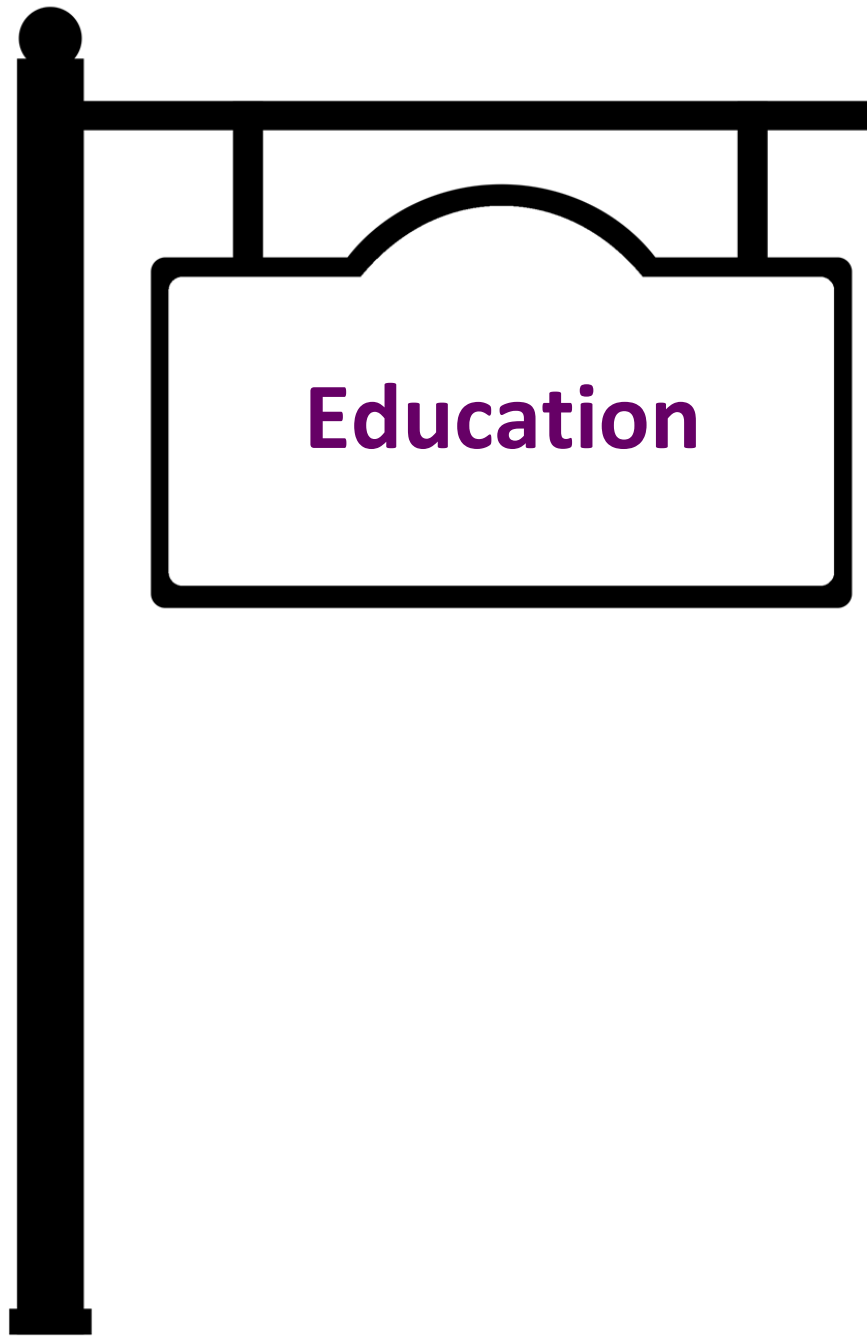
This is also true of the regions which, however, offer alternative attractions. The ski resorts at Shah Dag near Quba and Tufandag near Qabala are fully professionally equipped and have accommodation to match. Qabala also attracts visitors to its free, outdoor international music festival as well as intriguing insights into a history being revealed at an archaeological dig. Head south to the Hirkan forest, home to Caucasian leopards, or across to Nakhchivan, a landscape photographer's dream world. These and more explain the current rapid increase in numbers of tourists visiting the country.

Other industries

There are, of course, many other sectors operating within the economy: related to the oil and gas industries are downstream refining and petrochemicals, as well as equipment construction up to platform level.

Metals including gold, silver, copper and aluminium are produced from natural resources.

The development of the cotton fields promises to boost further the raw materials available to a textile sector already being supported by the opening of carpet workshops around the country and the influx of tourists checking the silk products of Sheki and Basqal.



The Education System

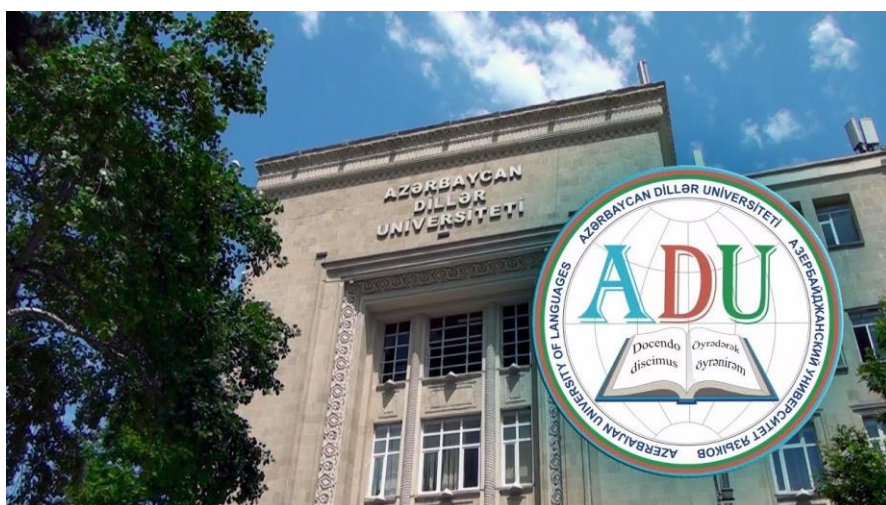
Introduction

Building a system of education has necessitated constant struggle through every phase of Azerbaijan's striving for independence. The Russian Empire that dominated through the 19th century served the people here poorly, showing little interest in education for the general population. The main focal points of higher education were in and around the regional vice-regal administration based in Georgia. Nevertheless, a number of Azerbaijani intellectuals benefited from the Gori seminary and life in Tiflis (Tbilisi) and used their learning to support the development of culture, education and national awareness among their compatriots. Some did this directly by teaching, others lobbied on a broader level, through publications like *Molla Nasreddin*, whose satire savaged those who held back educational progress. Their efforts were supported by enlightened businessmen like oil magnate Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev who, despite being illiterate himself, established technical schools and the first school for Muslim girls

Thus, by the time the empire collapsed and the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic was established in 1918, education was already high on the social agenda. As well as laying the foundations of Baku State University, the country's first, the republic also sponsored education abroad for 100 students, mainly in western universities. The Bolshevik takeover in 1920 ended the enterprise of the ADR and brought with it a further change of alphabet. As if they didn't have enough problems, students and teachers of the early 20th century had to deal successively (and often simultaneously) with Arabic, Latin and Cyrillic alphabets.

The Soviet era saw the opening of a number of universities and the need for higher education in foreign languages was recognised in 1937. Education was thorough and detailed, but strongly ideological and autocratic. The inclusion of local history and culture in the curriculum was similarly weighted or, at times, suppressed.

With renewed independence from 1991, as in other areas of life, Azerbaijani education found itself in a different world and has had to adjust rapidly. The state has invested heavily in educational infrastructure, modernising often crumbling structure with upgrades and opening many new buildings. Like the ADR it has also taken advantage of the international opportunities available and invested in youth by sponsoring their studies abroad. There are also increasing numbers of international students and academics taking advantage of the opportunities and facilities for study here. Of course, the Azerbaijan University of Languages (AUL) has a particularly important function in facilitating exchange between the country and the much bigger world in which it is rapidly making its mark. AUL organised an international conference in 2018 on *Heydar Aliyev: Multiculturalism and the Ideology of Tolerance* as well as other events and presentations to promote positive intercultural relations within the country's fascinating ethnic mix and with cultures abroad.



see: www.adu.edu.az

Schools

As with other aspects of society, education in Azerbaijan required significant changes to method and content once it was free of the Soviet system, which was a heavily ideological and top-down institution. This is an ongoing process. The move from Cyrillic to a modified Latin alphabet for the Azerbaijani language, as well as the promotion of Azerbaijani in place of the previously favoured Russian language, presented further challenges. Since oil and gas revenues began to flow in the mid-2000s, there has been huge investment in school buildings and other educational infrastructure.

The basic system, compulsory, free of charge and regulated by the Ministry of Education, has children starting primary school at six years old, although increasing numbers attend the kindergartens and pre-school classes that have emerged. After four years of primary education, children move on to begin fifth grade in secondary school. After ninth grade, pupils may leave with a certificate to continue vocational or technical training; there are more than 100 technical/vocational institutions. Pupils who complete tenth and eleventh grades receive certificates allowing them to enter examinations for entrance to higher (eg. university) education. There are also specialist schools for children talented in, for example, art, music or dance.

The growing numbers of fee-charging, private schools may offer alternative curricula, especially the International Baccalaureate (IB), but also cover the Azerbaijani curriculum to ensure pupils are equipped to enter local universities. As Azerbaijan continues to develop its own system, the government has sponsored numbers of able students to study abroad on condition that they return for some time to ensure that the state benefits from their experience. Many of the country's educational institutions have also fostered links with foreign schools and universities in pursuit of cooperation and exchange.

Classes are taught mainly in Azerbaijani or Russian, with English, German, French, Arabic and Persian among the tongues taught as foreign languages.

Higher education

The university system here originated in the first period of independence under the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, which founded Baku State University in 1919. The ministry now regulates some 20 state universities and higher institutions, some with branches in the various regions. One of these is the Azerbaijan University of Languages, whose origins can be traced back to 1937, when a School of Foreign Languages was opened by the Azerbaijan Pedagogical Institute. In 1948 this became the Azerbaijan Institute of Foreign Languages, in 1973 it was the Azerbaijan Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages, in 1996 the Azerbaijan State Institute of Languages and finally achieved university status in 2000 as the Azerbaijan University of Languages. Around 6,500 students currently study here.

There are institutions affiliated to other ministries, including the ADA University (formerly the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy), established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and eight private universities. Education in the universities may progress through three levels: Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, and Doctorate.

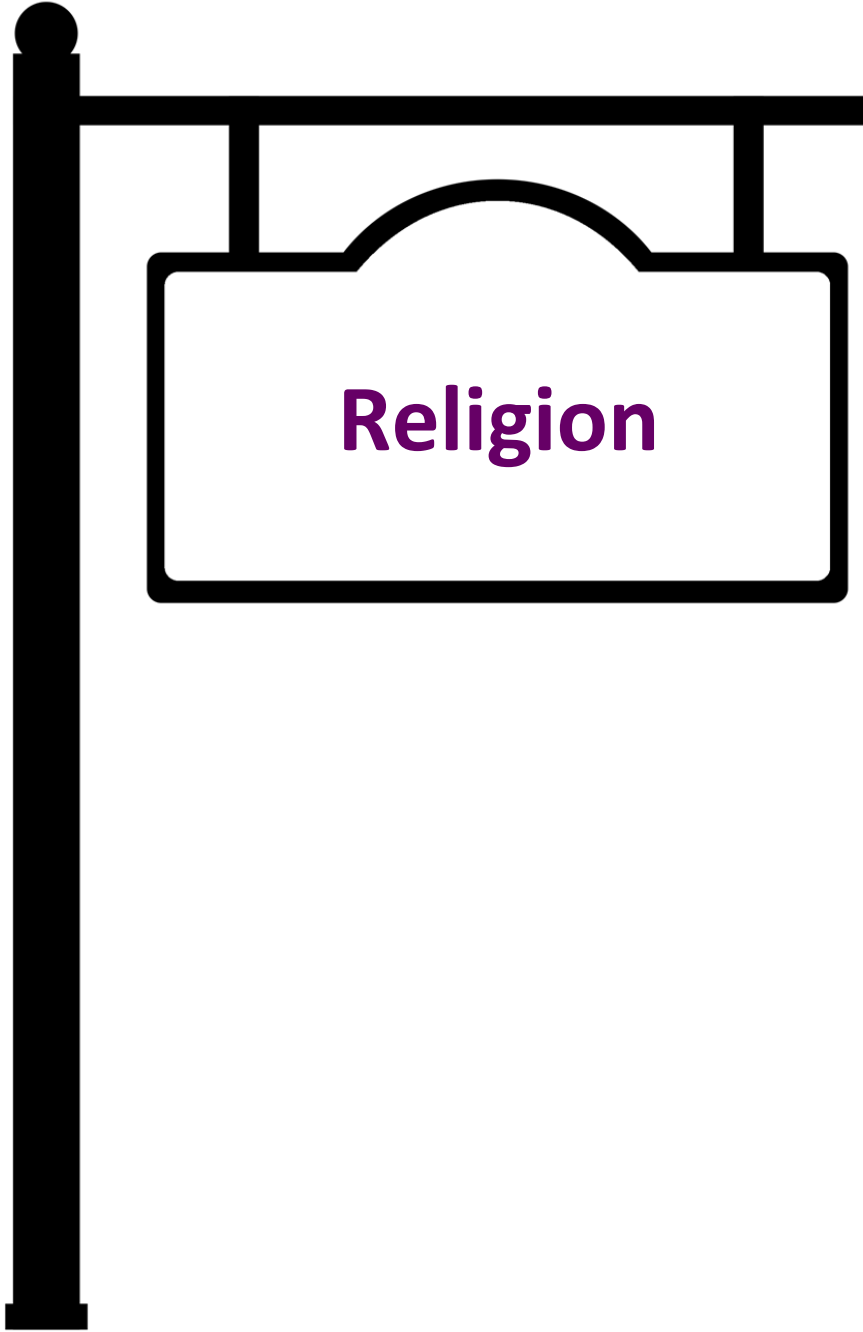
In 2005, Azerbaijan committed itself to the European Union's project to create a European Higher Education Area, the "Bologna system", and has implemented reforms to comply with the system's requirements.

To support the development of highly qualified specialists, the government has initiated a range of **State Programs** that provide scholarships for young people to study abroad. Administered by the Ministry of Science and Education, these programs prioritize fields that align with national development goals, including education, technology, and engineering. Selected students are supported at undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels to study at leading universities around the world, with the expectation that they return and contribute to the country's future.

Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences (ANAS)

Founded in 1945 as an affiliate to the USSR Academy of Sciences, this is the principal scientific institution in Azerbaijan. It coordinates scientific research across all state research and educational centres, with responsibility for the study and development of Azerbaijan's natural resources, economy and culture through its divisions.

<https://science.gov.az/en>



Religion

Introduction

As indicated earlier, throughout its history Azerbaijan has been, and still is, a staging post in the movement of peoples between east and west, north and south. These peoples have inevitably brought with them their own cultures and beliefs, including religions. So it is today that here there is still evidence and in many cases, still practitioners, of those religions.

There is evidence, too, that the different beliefs received and adopted over the centuries have often been adapted to existing practices. Pagan anthropomorphic statues are to be found in the museums and a surviving animist regard for natural phenomena – water, rocks, trees and others – can be seen in *pirs* (shrines), ribbon-festooned trees and on any present-day trip to Besh Barmaq mountain. The Ateshgah temple at Surakhani recalls Zoroastrianism, probably the first prophetic religion to be followed here. The lively Jewish community in Quba's Qirmizi Qesebe settlement continues to worship in its synagogues. Christians of different persuasions built the practising Caucasian Albanian Chotari church in Nij, near Qabala. The Orthodox church of the Archangel Michael, the German-Lutheran church, the Armenian church of Gregory the Illuminator and the Catholic church of the Immaculate Conception are all to be found in Baku. Of course, the predominant religion is Islam and followers of both Shia and Sunni persuasions attend the many mosques that distinguish the landscape throughout the country.

This variety of ethnicities and religions tends to support Azerbaijanis' pride in the mix of peoples settled and living here in multicultural respect, harmony and community.

Pagan beliefs



The evidence is sparse, but it seems that the early inhabitants of these lands had similar beliefs to other pagan peoples. Monuments unearthed by archaeology, like the three-metre-high Bronze Age female figure from Khinisli (left), possibly indicate some form of deity worship.

Strabo recounts the Albanians' worship of Sun, Sky and especially the Moon (the Azerbaijani flag reflects the continuing fascination with heavenly bodies). The well-known petroglyph of a boat at Qobustan seems to have the sun or a star shining at its prow.

The epic tales of the Turkic Oghuz tribes in *The Book of Dede Qorqud* (Korkut) certainly have a mix of traditions from pagan to Islamic.

One of Azerbaijan's highest mountains is named Babadagh (Grandfather Mountain) and can be climbed by a pilgrim's path to the *pir* at its summit. And the rites carried out at the summit of Besh Barmaq mountain, north of Baku are further testament to the longevity of attaching spiritual significance to prominent natural features.

Zoroastrianism

For its early inhabitants and travelers, one of the most startling natural features in these parts was the tendency of the landscape to spit fire. And since fire is considered by worshippers at the hearth of Zoroastrianism to be a medium through which spiritual insight and wisdom is gained, then it was equally natural for believers to gravitate this way. In fact, the Ateshgah temple



at Surakhani on the Absheron Peninsula was built by believers from India. 'Fire worshippers' is not a strictly accurate description, as the duty of those who followed Zoroastrianism was to protect all four elements: earth, air, fire and water. Indeed, water was held to be the source of the wisdom sought.

The main holiday in Azerbaijan is Novruz Bayram (New Year Holiday), celebrated nowadays for five days around the spring solstice, 20-21 March. The four preceding Tuesdays in the run-up to the holiday are dedicated to water, fire, air (wind) and earth respectively. Many other elements and traditions associated with Novruz clearly predate Islam and are much more reminiscent of the religion founded by Zardusht (Zarathustra, Zoroaster) in Iran around the 7th century BCE. The religion survived in Caucasian Albania until the arrival of Christianity, after which its adherents were persecuted. The 7th century CE arrival of the Arabs with Islam sealed its final decline.

Judaism

Qirmizi Qesebe (Red Settlement) has been described as the only all-Jewish town outside Israel and, standing across the river from the city of Quba, it is home to Mountain Jews, one of three distinct groupings in Azerbaijan. Ashkenazy and Georgian Jews also contribute to the country's multicultural make-up. There is much debate about the origins of the Mountain Jews, who constitute the majority of the Jewish population.



One version is that they are the descendants of Jews deported by Nebuchadnezzar to the northern reaches of his Babylonian domain following his destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Practical evidence of an early Jewish presence in the region was provided by the remains of a 7th century synagogue uncovered by archaeologists near Shabran city in 1990.

Persecution of Jews in the Persian Empire at different times led to periodic flights to the Quba region for sanctuary and Fatali Khan, ruler of Quba (1758-89), is especially remembered for his benign protection, while his khanate benefitted from their skills. The main street in Qirmizi Qesebe is named after him.

Many Ashkenazy Jews were attracted to Baku around the turn of the 20th century, providing finance and, as with the Rothschilds, were involved directly in production. Well integrated, they were represented among the ministers during the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. From Soviet times many are remembered for their contributions to education and science, including Lev Landau, Baku-born winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1962.

Following renewed independence, productive relations developed between Azerbaijan and Israel, helped by the fond memories held of the land of their birth by numbers of émigrés in Israel.

There are currently two synagogues in Qirmizi Qesebe. A new synagogue opened in 2003 in Baku, housing one prayer hall for Ashkenazy Jews and one for Georgian Jews. In 2011 another one, for the Mountain Jewish community and financed by the government, opened in the capital.

Christianity

Christianity arrived in what was then Caucasian Albania within the first century, brought at first by the disciples Bartholomew and Thaddeus. Legend has it that Bartholomew, having converted some of the local ruling family of the time, was martyred



by a non-convert member of the family in a city called Albanopolis in the Caucasus, and some historians believe the coincidence of the names Albania and Albanopolis suggests that what is now Baku was the site of the saint's death. There used to be a chapel on the presumed site, near Maiden Tower. The chapel itself fell foul of a Soviet campaign against religion and was demolished in 1936.

Another version is that St. Eliseus (Elisey, Elisha) was the first missionary in the region.

According to a 10th century history of Caucasian Albania, possibly by Movses Kaghankatvatsi, the saint built a church in a place called Gis. This fits well with local belief that the church in the village of Kish, near Sheki, probably built around the 12th century, stands on the site of the first church in the region (*see p.26*).

The first king of Caucasian Albania to accept Christianity was Urnayr in the 4th century. At its peak in the 5th century, the church was unable to withstand the influence of the 7th century Arab invaders and went into decline. Many of those who held onto their religion were eventually subsumed into the Armenian Church and finally, by decree of Tsar Nicholas I in 1836, the Albanian Church was effectively dissolved. Today, the Udi community in Nij village near Qabala, descendants of the Caucasian Albanians, have revived their traditions and re-established their religious practices in the Chotari church dedicated to St. Elisey.

Russia's 19th century conquest of the South Caucasus brought with it the Orthodox Church. Molokan dissenters from Orthodoxy had sought sanctuary here from persecution in the previous century; they are notably still present in the Ismayilli region village of Ivanovka, producing popular dairy products, wine and honey.

Another of Russia's early post-conquest moves was to entice German immigrants from their famine-ravaged lands in Wurtemberg. Many eventually settled in the town of Helenendorf (now Goygol) and established a thriving wine industry. The Lutheran Church of the Saviour in Baku owed its consecration in 1899 to German architect Adolf Eichler, with support from the Nobels.

Roman Catholics in Baku had lost their church to the Soviet drive against religion in 1937. Following a visit to the capital by Pope John Paul II in 2002, President Heydar Aliyev allocated land for the building of a new church. The Church of the Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception was consecrated in 2007.

Islam

In terms of religion, Azerbaijan can fairly claim to be among the most secular of Islamic nations. The constitution declares Azerbaijan to be a secular state and that all religions are equal before the law. There may be debate about why this is so, but surely the frequent historical contact with peoples of different beliefs and the 70 years spent within the atheistic Soviet Union, when religion was officially discouraged, are contributory factors.

Islam arrived in the region with the Arab expansion that followed within 20 years of the consolidation of the Muslim community in 622 CE that initiates the Islamic calendar. Initially conversion appears to have been by establishing settlements of believers and setting different rates of taxation, rather than by physical enforcement; there was a tolerance of other religious beliefs, especially those of 'people of the book'.

Pockets of resistance to the Islamic caliphate included the ill-fated 9th century Khurramite rebellion led by Babek, originating in the parts of Azerbaijan now within Iran. Elements of Islam and Zoroastrianism were combined in him with something of a nationalistic desire to return to pre-Arabic Sassanid rule. Thus Babek has been variously celebrated as rebel against the oppressor and national hero.

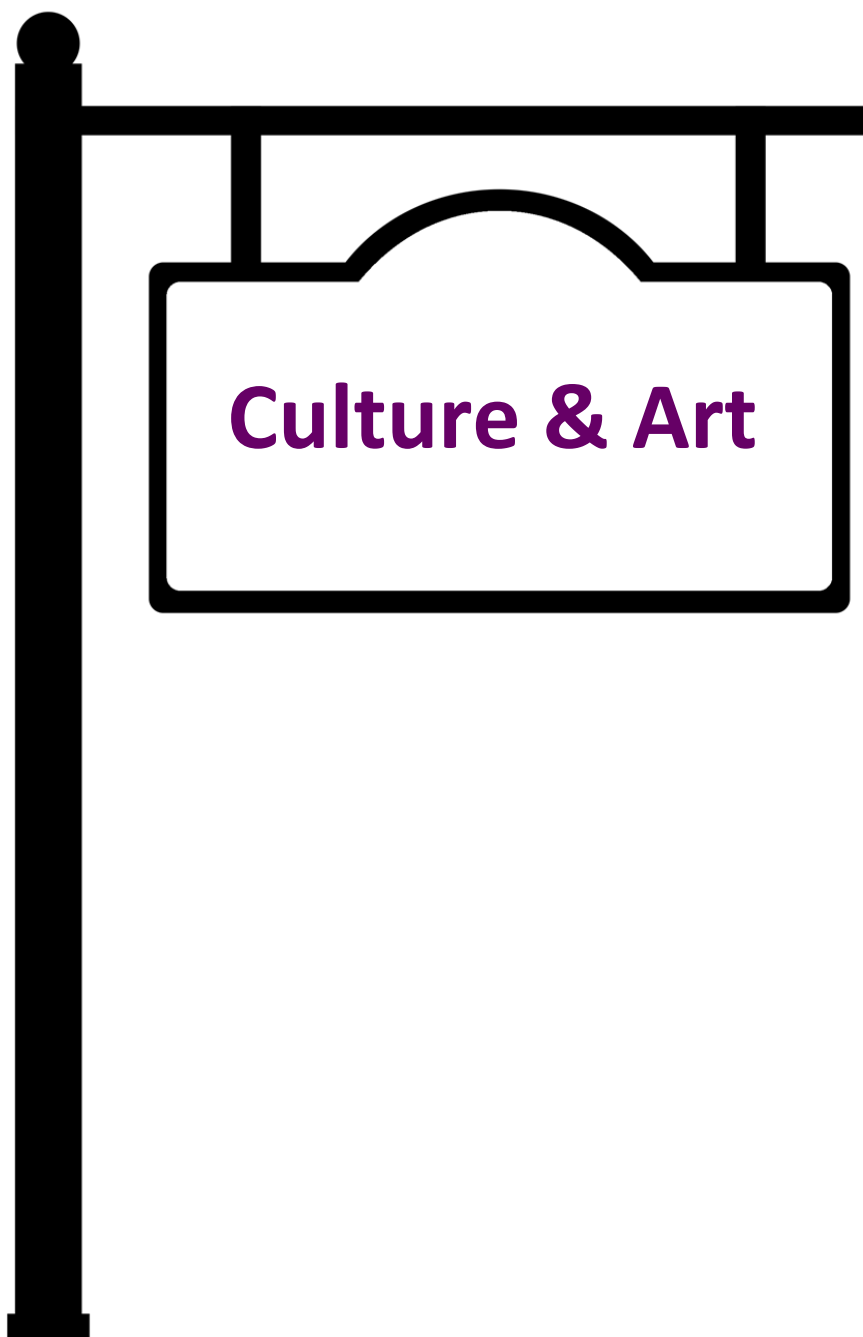
Later another leader with Azerbaijani origins was to radically influence the direction taken by Islam in the region. Shah Ismayil I (Khatai) founded the Safavid dynasty that was to rule for two centuries an area finally extending from Eastern Turkey through Iraq into part of Pakistan and along the Caucasus, even parts of Turkmenistan. One of his earliest acts after enthronement in 1501 was to proclaim the Shia form of Islam as the state religion. This led to conflict with the Sunni Ottoman Empire, but that part of his legacy has survived (as has his poetry, written in Azerbaijani under the pen name *Khatai* [one who has done wrong]).



Heydar Mosque overseen by a Shia Akhund and a Sunni Imam

Following the conquest of the part of Azerbaijan north of the River Araz by 1828, the Russian Empire instituted bureaucratic controls of the Islamic structures. Alongside the Azerbaijani national consciousness that developed from the late 19th century period onwards there was increasing intellectual criticism of corruption among the clerics and the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic made some attempts to bring the religion into line with modern conditions. However, the imposition of Soviet rule in 1920 was followed by the closure of mosques and persecution of clerics until 1944 when the state decided it needed Muslims to encourage maximum support for the war with Nazi Germany and an administration for Muslims in the Transcaucasus was established. The late Soviet-era regimes eased restrictions somewhat and Islam was tolerated within limits.

Naturally, unofficial informal religious structures and practices survived the Soviet era and since independence, especially following the inflow of oil revenues, old mosques have been refurbished and new ones built. The Islam practised nowadays in Azerbaijan is in a more relaxed and tolerant form than in many other countries.



Culture & Art

Carved in stone

In its culture, Azerbaijan presents something of a spatial illusion. For outsiders it is all too easy to overlook a small country at the far eastern end of Europe, merging into Asia and dwarfed by its hugely dramatic neighbours to the north and south. But for the visitor with eyes and ears open, the range and quality of the culture here far exceeds expectations and arouses both excitement at the treasures to be discovered and despair of getting close to experiencing them all. Indeed, where to begin? A difficult question. Timewise, back 12,000 years to the rock engravings and Qaval Dash tambourine stone at Qobustan? On the floor, with carpets of magical design? The walls hung with paintings exquisite or expressionist? With Sheki silk or Lahic copper?

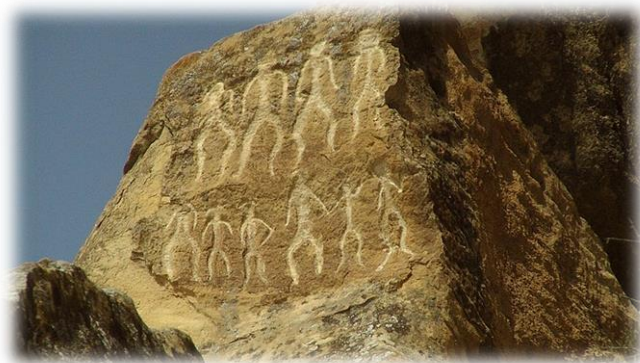


As well as the dramatic landscapes and natural fiery phenomena, the settlers, invaders, traders and travellers who have criss-crossed these lands over the millennia have inevitably, one way or another, stirred the imaginations of those who remained to build a culture that is endlessly fascinating. Stories ancient and modern abound and are told, developed and remodelled in every form of artistic expression. Archaeology is still turning up the artefacts of the ancients, and their jewellery, textiles, ceramics and weaponry tell us much about the lives they led and their beliefs, as well as the skills of their potters, weavers and smiths.

The superb petroglyphs at Qobustan are the most direct line of communication we have with the land's prehistoric inhabitants and it's not difficult to connect with the tales their drawings tell. Some of those themes are eternal to humanity and naturally appear also in *The Book of Dede Qorqud* (Korkut) one of the earliest written records we have of the legends of the Oghuz Turks, nomads from the East who were here by the 11th century and are the ancestors of many of today's Azerbaijanis.

The culture's major classical poets were writing shortly after that and inspired generations of writers to follow them into rhyme and rhythm. Great satirists, dramatists, journalists and novelists have all had their say on social development over the ages since then.

The Qobustan drawings are the earliest, too, in the line of Azerbaijani painting, and they have been referenced style-wise in the works of modern artists. As for the Qaval Dash, a two-metre-long stone that produces sounds of different pitch depending on where it's hit by a smaller stone, well that has inspired modern contributors, too, to a strong Azerbaijani music tradition that embraces folk, ashig, mugham, classical, opera, jazz, rock, pop and rap. And one particular petroglyph appears to show people at the *Yalli*, a communal line or circle dance that still almost inevitably breaks out at parties and celebrations.



As most of the caves originally decorated by the artistic talents of the Qobustan Stone Age people have since collapsed, it's not possible to track the architectural tradition back that far, but it's still well worth a look at the products of its practitioners in many of the towns and cities. Baku has everything from medieval alleys to early oil-boom European with touches of Renaissance and Gothic, to Soviet classical grandeur, with surprisingly imaginative detail, and jaw-dropping 21st century panache. Sheki, Ganja, Quba and Nakhchivan are among the other towns that have architectural delights in store.

Literature

Antiquity

The Book of Dede Qorqud (in Turkish 'Korkut') is referenced a few times throughout this book, and this is an indication of its importance to Azerbaijanis' identity with their Turkic tradition. The book consists of 12 tales of the Oghuz Turks, supposedly told by Dede (Grandfather) Qorqud, the wise elder and bard of the tribe, who is usually depicted with a qopuz, a stringed instrument related to the lute or saz. According to Geoffrey Lewis, producer of an atmospheric English translation (Penguin, 1974) the Oghuz Turks began migrating west from the Altai mountains (the western edge of today's Mongolia) in the 9th century and had reached west of the Caspian Sea by the 11th century. There is a strong argument that they comprise a substantial element in Azerbaijanis' ancestry. Lewis's translation is based on two, separate 16th century manuscripts (found in Dresden and the Vatican), although he dates the original compilation to no later than the early 15th century. The tales are entertainingly epic, with battles and chivalric romance a-plenty. There are women characters who are no less determinedly heroic than their men – see Princess Saljan in the tale of Kan Turali – and also interesting detail of the daily lives and customs of these nomads on their way across Asia.

Eastern Renaissance

The 12th and early 13th centuries were evidently a kind of cultural renaissance in these parts, judging from the evidence of the literature and architecture that survived even the Mongol hordes that followed, and the city of Ganja was especially blessed with talent. Not much is known of her life, nor is there a great collection of her poetry, but **Mehseti Ganjavi** (1089-1159) was clearly a spirited poetess, with a sharp wit as well as romance in her soul.

For an intriguingly post-modern approach to the Dede Qorqud epic and to Shah Ismayil as poet, see Kamal Abdulla's novel *Incomplete Manuscript*.

*No force can bind us: pull of moment, arrows flying home,
Nor any wild nostalgia that seized our hearts whilom.
Though my soft braids turned chains of steel and anchored in your heart,
Could any chain keep me at home if I should wish to roam?*

(From a rubai by Mehseti Ganjavi/ Trans. Gladys Evans)



Mehseti was followed by **Nizami Ganjavi** (1141-1209), generally acclaimed as the country's greatest poet, principally for his *Khamse*, a collection of five long poems, much imitated, referenced and transformed. The best known is the tragic romance *Leyli and Majnun*, but the best English translation so far is of *Haft Paykar* (The Seven Beauties) by Julie Scott Meisami (Oxford, 1995), with a very accessible text, but prohibitive price. The *Iskender-Nameh* (Book of Alexander) similarly imagines episodes from the life of a monarch (Alexander the Great) to highlight the moral duties of life and leadership. This is a theme of other poems too; in *The Story of Sultan Sanjar and the Old Woman*, the woman complains:

*You were made king to keep your folk from harm,
To treat their wounds with vivifying balm.
To what your subjects say, oh Shah, give ear,
To what their hearts demand, give heed sincere.*
(Trans. Olga Moisseyenko)

Nesimi (1369-1417) was a Hurufi (a form of Sufism) poet, believing that the individual consists of both the spiritual (God) and the material, and his poems, written in Azerbaijani, Persian and Arabic, reflect the beauty and deep philosophy of being. His teacher, Naimi was executed as a heretic at Alinja in Nakhchivan, where his tomb can be seen today. Nesimi himself was executed by being flayed in Aleppo.

Fuzuli (c.1494-1556) is ranked alongside Nizami as a great Azerbaijani poet. Living in what is now Iraq, he also wrote in Azerbaijani, Persian and Arabic and he is regarded as the first major contributor to literature in the Azerbaijani language – especially for his *Leyli and Majnun*, which was the version used by Uzeyir Hajibeyov for his pioneering opera. Fuzuli also embodied the Sufi tradition of writing about love as the essence of God.

Shah Ismayil I (1487-1524) Born in Ardebil (Iranian Azerbaijan) founded the Safavid dynasty that ruled an empire for over 200 years. He also wrote significant poetry in the Azerbaijani language under the name Khatai.

Molla Panah Vagif (1717-1797) and **Vidadi** (1709-89), the former a vizier to the Khan of Qarabagh, the latter from Shamkir, are remembered for their poetic correspondence in language and content that is more realistic and down-to-earth than previous Sufi-influenced verse.

Towards Independence

Khurshidbanu Natavan (1832-97) was born in Shusha, the daughter of the last khan of Qarabagh. Practically philanthropic, she also promoted the poetry, music and art in which she was well-versed. She assembled the poets and writers of her day into literary societies, thought to be the first in Azerbaijan, and some sources record them as being mixed (male and female) assemblies. Natavan wrote her own poetry, ghazals and quatrains, of which some were descriptive of nature but others reveal an overwhelming sadness and resentment of Destiny for the loss of her young son to tuberculosis. Alexandre Dumas records meeting her in Baku when invited to visit by her husband.

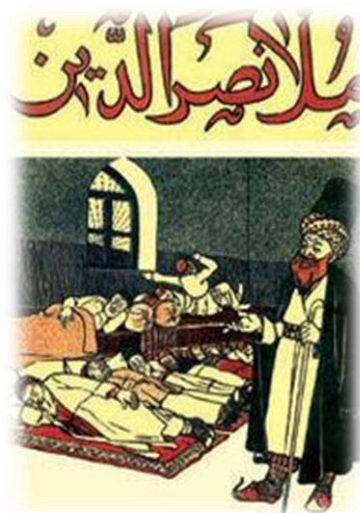
If the 12th century was a renaissance, then the late 19th century was an Azerbaijani enlightenment. It has to be said that the Russian Empire played a role in bringing European culture to the Caucasus and opened new cultural vistas. Much of this took place through Tiflis (now Tbilisi) and the Gori seminary as centres of the empire's Caucasus viceroyalty and education, and Azerbaijanis took advantage.

Among the first to do so in literature was **Mirza Fatali Akhundov** (1812-78). Born in Nukha (now Sheki) but working for much of his life as a translator in Tiflis, he began writing poems, but his major work began in the 1850s when he wrote six plays, that marked the beginning of modern, realist Azerbaijani theatre. Clearly influenced by Moliere, his plays were comedies with satirical comment on the superstitious old ways and urging new ways of thinking towards social advance.

Of course there was resistance and the first performance of one of these plays, *The Adventures of the Vizier of the Lenkeran Khan*, did not take place in Baku until 1873. But a course had been set in realism and a national consciousness that culminated in the founding of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918. Promoters of that first performance included **Hasan bey Zardabi** (1837-1907) who, two years later founded *Akinchi* (Ploughman) the first independent Azerbaijani language newspaper and **Najaf bey Vezirov** (1854-1926), who was later to write his own take on reactionary society in the play *Heroes of Our Time* (1900). **Mirza Jalil Mammadguluzade** (1869-1932) and **Abdurrahim bey Hagverdiyev** (1870-1933) followed in Akhundov's footsteps with their own dramatic critiques and **Huseyn Javid** (1882-1941) broadened the scope to take in the Europe of World War I with his 1918 play *Iblis* (The Devil).

Mirza Jalil Mammadguluzade wrote stories and plays (*The Dead*) that are still in the repertoire, but he is especially celebrated for founding and editing a magazine that travelled beyond Azerbaijan into Iran and across the Caspian into Central Asia. **Molla Nasreddin** took its name from the folklore 'wise fool' hero of a legion of jokes told across Central Asia and the Caucasus.

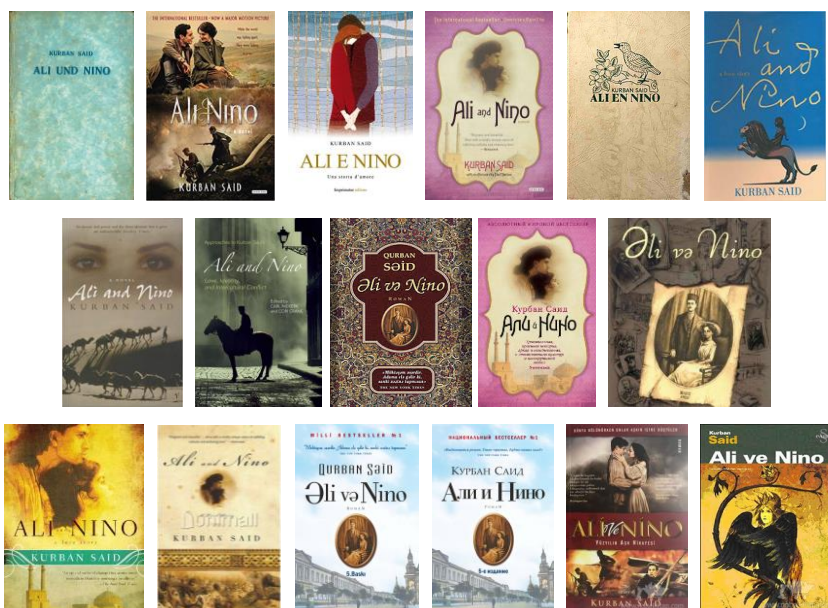
Launched in Tiflis in 1906, the satirical magazine attracted the best writers and cartoonists of the day to help prove that the pen could be mightier than the sword. It targeted especially the restrictions imposed on women and the general backwardness of the clerics. Frequently banned and forced by social upheavals to relocate, first to Tabriz and then to Baku, it kept going until 1931, when Mammadguluzade, tired and disaffected by Soviet pressure on content, ceased production in the year before his death. The memoirs written by his equally activist wife **Hamideh khanim Javanshir** have been translated by Hasan Javadi (*Awake: ...*) and provide a fascinating insight into their lives and struggles in a crucial period of history for the Caucasus and Iran.



Other magazines and newspapers were also produced, sometimes in competition with *Molla Nasreddin*. The first newspaper for women, *Ishiq* (Light) was launched in 1911 by **Khadija Alibeyova**. Soon afterwards another woman to make her mark in journalism was **Gulara Köylü qızı Qadimbeyova**. Born in 1903 in the Sheki region she trained as a teacher, but was soon writing for the *Şərq Qadını* (Eastern Woman) first published in 1923. Later appointed editor-in-chief of the magazine, her advocacy of freedom of speech and women's rights, as well as friendship with independent members of the intelligentsia, made her a victim of Stalin's repression and her early death in 1942 was in Siberian exile.

Ali and Nino – a classical literary mystery

In 1937 a book called **Ali and Nino** was published in Vienna. It was written in German by 'Kurban Said'. Arguments have raged about who Kurban Said really was. Most opinion seems to go with **Lev Nussimbaum** (1905-42) who left Azerbaijan aged about 14 with his family to flee the violence in the streets. Others argue that the author was **Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli** (1887-1943) a writer who fell victim to Stalin's purges and died in a Gulag camp. Whoever wrote the book, it is a richly rewarding read. The tale of the love between traditional high status Azerbaijani Ali and Georgian princess Nino is set in the early decades of the 20th century; the very atmospheric context is Azerbaijan's struggle for independence.



The Soviet Era

The independence and national awareness of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was submerged by the Bolshevik takeover in 1920; it actually became dangerous to show pride in the nation. When a decree was issued in 1929 that banned the playing of the tar, and a loyal poet wrote in support of the ban, the lyrical poet **Mikayil Mushfig** (1908-39) was moved to write a long poem in its defence:

*Sing, Tar, sing, Tar sing!
Who can forget you who once heard you sing?
Grief of the people, the tears of their heart -
This is their music, their fiery heart.*

Attacked by the official writers' organisations for being a 'chauvinist' and 'anti-Soviet', Mushfig was arrested in 1937 and executed in 1939.

Even **Samad Vurghun** (1906-56), one of the most loyal and decorated poets in the USSR, was not immune to criticism and was accused of nationalism and saved from arrest, it is said, only by Stalin's death and succeeding changes in policy.

Ilyas Efendiyev (1914-96) left a legacy of stories and plays that explore social relationships and psychology and are still popular in performance.

Renewed Independence

Samad Vurghun's sons, novelist **Yusif** (1935-98) and poet **Vaqif** (1939-2015) Samadoghlu, continued their father's profession, albeit with quite individual styles. Vagif was also a jazz aficionado.

Ilyas Efendiyev's son, and deputy prime minister from 1993-2018, **Elchin** (1943-) has been similarly prolific in writing novels, stories and plays that are keen and witty observations of social life, sometimes with a gentle, satirical edge. His short stories and novels have been filmed (*The First Love of Baladadash*, *Mahmut and Meryem...*) and translated into many languages. His plays are a staple of Azerbaijani theatre repertoires and have been staged in London and New York (*Shakespeare*, *Citizens of Hell*) among other prestigious centres.

Anar Rzayev (1938-) has written novels, screenplays and is a prolific writer of short stories, especially effective in illustrating the tensions of social life. Many are in a Soviet setting, but the focus is on individual psychology and feelings which, he says, are the same whatever the political system. Anar has chaired the Union of Azerbaijani Writers since 1987.



Sandro Teti Editore Stand
The New Silk Road Conference.
Rome. 19.10.2017
Photo: Rustam Mammadov

Kamal Abdullayev (1950-) is a professor and academic in the fields of linguistics and literary studies. Under the pen name **Kamal Abdulla**, he is also a noted writer of fiction. Particularly acclaimed is his novel *The Incomplete Manuscript*, which intertwines the *Dede Qorqud* epic with the life of poet and ruler Shah Ismayil I, all within a contemporary metafictional narrative. The result is daringly successful in an excellent English translation.

Chingiz Abdullayev (1959-) turned to writing detective fiction after a brief career for the Soviet intelligence service. He is probably the bestselling contemporary Azerbaijani writer and one of his character heroes, Drongo, is almost a folk legend. Abdullayev is secretary of the Union of Azerbaijani Writers.

In addition to the above established writers, many of the younger generations are testing their skills, sometimes in blogs and then launching into print – **Sayali Bahar**, **Narmina Mammadzadeh** – soon to be in English?

And expatriate Azerbaijanis may be looking back to their homeland. **Elchin Safarli** (1984) is well on his way (but only in Azerbaijani and Russian) and **Ella Leya**, born in Azerbaijan but now a jazz singer in the USA, produced the excellent *Orphan Sky* in 2015, an evocative novel of a young woman's struggle to overcome the obstacles of Soviet life to come of musical age in '70s and '80s Baku.

Art



There really is so much, and energetic exploration will reap rewards. In Sheki, the murals in the 18th century Khans' Palace should not be missed.

The modern era is often said to begin with the more modest, realist work of **Bahrüz Kengerli** (1892-1922). The museum dedicated to his work is in Nakhchivan city.

The early years of the 20th century were enlivened by publications like *Molla Nasreddin* which featured sharp cartoons by **Azim Azimzade** (1880-1943), who was equally at home in more traditional forms. A statue to him and his work stands in the garden just off cobbled Qulle Street in Baku's old city – Icheri Sheher.

The village of Amirjan on the Absheron Peninsula has produced a number of personalities, including the distinctive figure of **Sattar Bahlulzade** (1909-74) whose bold impressionist landscapes of his homeland are equally unmistakable and energetic. **Qeyyur Yunus** (1948-) from the same fertile village works in a different, almost naïve, tradition, somehow reminiscent of Qajar art.

Tahir Salahov (1928-) was for 19 years First Secretary of the USSR Union of Artists and was instrumental in opening up to artists from the West. However, it is for his 'Severe Style' paintings that he is rightly highly regarded and can be seen at his house museum in Icheri Sheher. The heartbeat that he pumped into the impositions of 'Socialist Realism' give his paintings a quiet energy and humanity that surely make him one of his era's greats. His 1950s paintings of life on Oil Rocks – 200 kms of causeways and oil platforms built out in the Caspian Sea off the end of the Absheron Peninsula – are examples of the challenge he set to the conventions of Soviet art; see *The Shift is Over*. **Maral Rahmanzade** (1916-2008) was actually out there with the oilmen first and her paintings are also worth checking.

The paintings of **Toghrul Narimanbeyov** (1930-2013) demand attention for their sheer energy and verve. His mural in Baku's Puppet Theatre is a fine example. The canvases of **Mir Javad Mir Javadov** (1923-92) are fierce in colour and application, often with grotesque figures that defied Soviet convention in blasting contemporary social mores and asserting the basics of human relationships.

Zakir Huseynov (1961-2010) was one of the many artists captivated by the open land of the Absheron Peninsula. His individual approach to the land- and sea-scapes, and the characters, animals and myths associated with them are painted in bright tones that create a yearning for the warmth, air and character of the Absheron coast.

Yusif Mirza (1959-) also invokes the tales and legends of his native land, often using Qobustan motifs but he has also referred to his home village in Lachin that is now under occupation and out of reach. The romantic warmth of his old city nocturnes and lamp-lit interiors are pleasing to eye and mind. His studio is opposite the Russian Drama Theatre.

The keen eye will take in some of the excellent sculptures that stand on the capital's streets, and the great sculptor **Omar Eldarov** (1927-) is often responsible. Notable in the city centre are his statues of the poets Fuzuli and Natavan, as well as the endearing wall plaque of jazz pianist Vagif Mustafazade that points the way to his house museum in the old city and the tribute to artist Azim Azimzade mentioned above. The Fakhri Khiyabani (Avenue of Honour) cemetery is almost an outdoor gallery itself, with some of Eldarov's grave statues standing in tribute to the great and the good buried there. His wonderful statue of Sattar Bahlulzade is on the artist's grave in Amirjan. For other sculpture seek out the works of the **Rustamov family**: Aslan, Teymur and Mahmud. Or **Ibrahim Rustamov** (1953-) whose son **Ruhulla Hasanzadeh** (1993-) is a fine representative of the rising generation of artists.

Western influence has made inroads in recent years and the **Yarat** ['create'] **Contemporary Art Space** promotes contemporary and conceptual art. Its centre at the southern end of Baku's Boulevard hosts frequent exhibitions and events by Azerbaijani and international artists.

The **National Art Museum** on the central Istiqlaliyyat Street in Baku holds a large collection of works – the lower building mainly displays its international collection, with Azerbaijani artists in the upper building. The **Museum of Modern Art**, on the corner of Uzeyir Hajibeyov and Yusif Safarov Streets, is dedicated to contemporary art. There are seven or eight art galleries in Baku's old city, Icheri Sheher, from traditional to contemporary, all worth a visit.

Music

Traditions of making music, especially traditional and classical music, seem to have survived more firmly among the Azerbaijani population than with the people of many other countries. This may be partly due to the strong Soviet emphasis on children learning to play, with many homes possessing a piano as a matter of course.

There is a tradition of folk music that arose out of a largely agriculture-based economy; the variety of pipes in the local musical inventory may be due to shepherds' need to fill their long hours watching over their flocks. The tales of legendary heroes and the necessity of marking festivities and ceremonies, lulling babies to sleep, bewailing misfortune or declaring happiness or love have all driven Azerbaijanis to sing or compose folk music.

Mugham

This is probably the music most closely associated with the national spirit. To the western ear, the wailing tones suggest that its origins may have been with the Islamic *azan* call to prayer and while there are witty mughams, a live performance often has a certain spiritual aspect. Without speaking the language, the only



Toghrul Narimanbeyov
Mugam. 1966

way to have any appreciation of the music is from a live performance by a good singer. Thus a performance by **Alim Qasimov** and/or his daughter **Fergana**, should not be missed. Although he has been criticised by purists for certain quirks and innovations, Alim takes his music seriously and is hugely popular with the public and most aficionados. Other well-regarded current singers include **Sekina Ismayilova**, **Mansum Ibrahimov** and **Nazaket Teymurova**. Alim and Fergana sing *Getme, Getme* (Don't Go) with the Kronos Quartet at [\[https://bit.ly/2qFU1nq\]](https://bit.ly/2qFU1nq)

A mugham singer (*khanende*) often uses a *def*, a tambourine-like drum, to provide percussion and amplify the voice and in a typical trio is accompanied by musicians playing a *tar* – a plucked, 11-string instrument with a figure-of-eight soundboard and a *kamancha* – a bowed 4-string instrument with an almost spherical body and a cello-type spike that rests on the thigh. The trio may be supplemented by a *balaban*, a straight pipe that produces a low, mournful sound, sometimes acting as a drone, and a *naghara*, a tom-tom drum played with the hands. Mugham is a complex form of music, modal with microtones, and does not play in the scales familiar to western music. It is structured but allows for improvisation within the structure. There are seven different modes of mugham, each with its own tone that may influence the mood. The words sung are often taken from the classical poets (Nizami, Fuzuli...).

Tradition has it that the best singers came from Qarabagh, especially Shusha – the mountain air was credited with helping to produce the voice. Hence the 19th and 20th century heroes of mugham like Sadigjan, who developed the modern Azerbaijani tar and legendary singer **Khan Shushinski** – both from Shusha, since ethnically cleansed of all Azerbaijanis and still under Armenian occupation.

The International Mugham Centre on the Boulevard, has regular concerts.

For a more detailed explanation of this music see [\[https://bit.ly/2qGN2v8\]](https://bit.ly/2qGN2v8)

Ashiq

The term is believed to have originated in the 15th century with the Safavid poet Shah Ismail, it means 'in love' or 'devoted', referring to the performer's commitment to the art. Ashiq music may be compared with the bards or minstrels of the west, telling tales of love or heroism, and life in lyrical or satiric mood. It's easy to imagine an ashiq reciting the tales from *The Book of Dede Qorqud*. The singer usually accompanies him/herself on a saz, a kind of 8-string, long-necked lute. The full repertoire contains a daunting 200 songs, 150 literary-musical epics known as "dastans," nearly 2,000 poems in different traditional poetic forms and numerous stories. An ashiq is often judged, and sometimes challenged in competition, on how many of these works can be performed – there are legends of ashiq 'duels' ending with the defeated singer having to give up his saz, or even his life. Apart from formal concerts, ashiqs are a familiar sight in their papaq hats at weddings and parties.



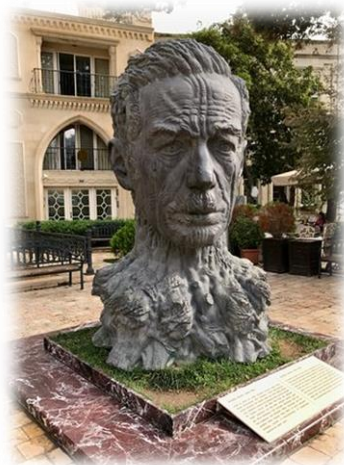
Performances can vary; there are some who pride themselves on their dance moves, for some the saz provides basic accompaniment to their upbeat stories, while others prefer to display their dexterity and expression in a wholly instrumental performance. Among the latter is **Nemet Qasimli** (1972-) from Gadabay in west Azerbaijan, where the tradition

favours solo rather than group performances. See and listen here for a taste of his playing: [\[https://bit.ly/2ETGldy\]](https://bit.ly/2ETGldy)

Other ashigs to look out for include **Ashiq Ali**, a big guy who occasionally adds dance to his performance and **Ashiq Samira** (1981-), among the best of the modern women ashigs.

Meykhana

Literally translating as ‘winehouse’ gives some idea of the origins of this form of generally competitive music. Comparable in some ways with rap music, it is popular nowadays as a duel, in which two (almost always) men compete with each other to quickly and spontaneously produce rhymed verse in ‘call and response’ fashion to an insistent, driving 6/8 rhythm. The verse is often topical commentary on social life, laced with satire and wit. With a natural tendency to be subversive, it was often suppressed in Soviet times, but was allowed some space during 1941-45 to raise wartime spirits with anti-Nazi sentiment. One of meykhana’s early proponents, possibly its founder, was the poet **Aliagha Vahid** (1895-1965), whose imaginative statue is in a small square in the old city behind the Icheri Sheher metro station and who popularized the poetic ghazels of the classical poet Fuzuli.



Classical



Uzeyir Hajibeyov (1885-1948) is the composer largely credited with bringing classical music into the Azerbaijani tradition – indeed into that of the Middle East. Growing up in Shusha, ‘the cradle of Azerbaijani music and culture’, he was still only 22 years old in 1908, which marked the premiere of the first opera to be written in the Muslim world – his opera, *Leyli and Majnun*. The libretto was closely based on the poem of the same name by the 16th century poet Fuzuli. The theme is the nature of love as the two lovers struggle to be together in the face of family and social opposition. Hajibeyov’s music combined classical western operatic forms – a chorus singing in harmony and a symphony orchestra – with improvised mughams and traditional Azerbaijani instruments.

Finding sponsorship and suitably voiced actors (no women were allowed on stage in those days) was hard enough, but somehow Uzeyir and brother Jeyhun (co-writer of the libretto) pulled it off and Uzeyir went on to write six further operas and three musical comedies, including the popular *Arshin Mal Alan* (The Cloth Peddler), a light-hearted view of the problems of finding a wife when women were veiled and social convention denied the chance of meeting before marriage.

As well as being the first to document many folk songs with notation, Hajibeyov was also behind the founding of a music school that was to train his successors in classical music, and jazz.

Among the best of those successors was **Qara Qarayev** (1918-82) who, after graduating from the Baku school went on to train under Dmitry Shostakovich in Moscow.

As rector of the Azerbaijan State Conservatoire Qarayev continued to promote the use of folk music in teaching, as well as other genres, including jazz. His own most notable works included the ballets *Seven Beauties* (1952, based on Nizami's poem) and *Path of Thunder* (1958) about the issue of race in South Africa. The waltz from the former is especially popular: [\[https://bit.ly/2qCPanMI\]](https://bit.ly/2qCPanMI)

Fikret Amirov (1922-84) was the son of a well-know mugham singer from Shusha and grew up surrounded by traditional music. Taught by Uzeyir Hajibeyov, he became a prolific composer, including in a new genre he called symphonic mugham, as well as popular film music and the opera *Sevil*. His *Azerbaijan Capriccio* can be heard here: [\[https://bit.ly/2IZXPamJ\]](https://bit.ly/2IZXPamJ)

The great classical opera (and folk) singer was Murtuza Mammadov, better known as **Bulbul** (1897-1961). His stage name translates as nightingale and, La Scala trained, he was the first to play the lead role in Hajibeyov's acclaimed heroic opera *Koroghlu*. He also studied, taught and wrote on traditional music and instruments.

Of the current composers **Firangiz Ali-Zadeh** (1947-) is best known. She studied under Qara Qarayev and developed her own way of combining the traditional with western modernism in her compositions, giving free range to contrasts in colour, mood and culture as, she says 'the new' arises from these contradictions. She is much honoured in her homeland and her works have been performed by the likes of Mstislav Rostropovich, the Kronos Quartet, Yo-Yo Ma with the Silk Road Project and Alim Qasimov. Her *Mugham Sayagi* is here: [\[https://bit.ly/2qGCc7N\]](https://bit.ly/2qGCc7N)

Jazz

Many visitors are surprised to learn that there is also a long tradition of jazz here, in fact Baku was known as a jazz city within the USSR. Not that it had an easy ride. All jazz aficionados remember the fate of **Parviz Rustambeyov (1922-49)**. A brilliant saxophone player – so good the 22-year-old was invited to join a Moscow-based band – he was called the Soviet Benny Goodman. A couple of years after he returned to Baku he was arrested and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment for being 'pro American'. His major crime being to play an instrument strongly identified with 'corrupt' American culture. He was reported to have died in unknown circumstances shortly afterwards, aged 27.

However, jazz and its musicians managed in difficult conditions and in different guises. Bandleaders **Tofiq Guliyev** and **Tofiq Ahmedov** were sometimes described as Estrada (Variety) or Popular Music bands to avoid the label. Qara Qarayev brought it into the music school's teaching and classical composer and conductor **Niyazi** (1912-84) joined Guliyev in developing the jazz band.

Recovering from the crackdowns in the 1940s, jazz appeared in cinemas and jazz programmes from Voice of America were picked up on radios. The 1950s and 60s were boom times. Among those squeezing their ears to the radio was one who was to become the most influential jazzman of the era: **Vaqif Mustafazadeh** (1940-79). A brilliant pianist, whose compositions are still very much part of the repertoire, he is credited with creating jazz-mugham, a fusion of two very different traditions. As we have seen, there had long been cross-pollinations of musical genres, whether by choice, as with Uzeyir Hajibeyov, or by force of circumstances as jazz musicians disguised their music for reasons of personal safety. Both mugham and jazz have space for improvisation, and the mix has been successful. **Rafiq**



Babayev (1937-94) was equally productive as he worked in jazz and in more popular genres, especially with the popular singer Rashid Behbudov. His groups became a graduation school for many musicians who went on to carry the flame to the end of the millennium and beyond.

Vagif's early death of a heart attack, aged 39, is attributed by many to the pressures he was subjected to by authorities still antagonistic to the music. Rafiq was killed on his way to his studio by a terrorist bomb placed on a Baku metro train. Vagif plays his composition *Mart* (March month) here: <https://bit.ly/2vnQhMV> and Rafiq sings his *Alvida* (Farewell) at <https://bit.ly/23xE4x1>

The first Jazz Festival was in 1967 and the 1969 'Golden Autumn' festival is still recalled, but festivals were sporadic until 2002, since when they have been held every year in Baku, attracting the likes of Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Al Jarreau and many other international stars. They have also given space for young local musicians, especially pianists, of whom **Shahin Novrasli** (1977-) and **Isfar Sarabski** (1989-) have since also shone at the Montreux Festival and many others. Their concerts should certainly not be missed. Shahin plays his version of the traditional *Elinde Sazin Gurbani* (I'd die for the Saz in Your Hands) <https://bit.ly/2qDAKny> and Isfar plays his *The Edge* with tar player **Shahriyar Imanov** (1989-) at <https://bit.ly/2J4tlnN>

Pop

Azerbaijani pop music has its origins in the post-war years when variety and classical (opera) singers alike took folk and popular songs into their repertoire, with huge success. **Rashid Behbudov** (1915-89) followed by **Muslim Magomayev** (1942-2008) and **Polad Bulbuloghlu** (1945-). All were highly popular, Rashid first making his name as lead in the film of Hajibeyov's *Arshin Mal Alan* and taking his rich tenor voice and ability to sing in at least nine languages on extensive tours. Muslim's operatic baritone was equally at home in popular romantic songs, as can be heard in his voicing of the cartoon *Bremen Musicians*: <https://bit.ly/2H8DOLK> Polad composed film music and wrote songs, as well as following his father Bulbul as a singer. After a period as Minister of Culture he was appointed ambassador to Russia in 2006.

Among the most powerful female voices of Azerbaijani pop were **Zeynab Khanlarova** (1936 -), famed for blending mugham with estrada, and **Flora Kerimova** (1941 -), whose rich voice spanned genres from classical to romantic songs.

The 'senior' pop generation of the new century is led by showbiz stars like **Aygun Kazimova** (1971-), **Brilliant Dadashova** (1965-) and **Faiq Aghayev** (1971-) and the rising generation have kept the country on Europe's radar with strong performances in the Eurovision Song Contest and victory in 2011 by Ell & Nikki, **Eldar Qasimov** (1989-) and **Nigar Jamal** (1980-) with the song *Running Scared*.

There has been a strong undercurrent of rock since the 1970s with a series of bands forming and reforming, but only **Coldunya** made an impact 'above ground'. Rap has also attracted a fan base, with Ibrahim Ibrahimov, known as **Uran** (1983-), among the leading lights. The electronic band **Dihaj** have a keen following in the capital's underground for their 'doom pop', played with fine musicianship. Singer Diana Hajiyeveva, trained in jazz vocals, increased exposure when she represented Azerbaijan in Eurovision 2017. **Dihaj** can be heard with **Isfar Sarabski** here: <https://bit.ly/2r7BFwz>

Dance

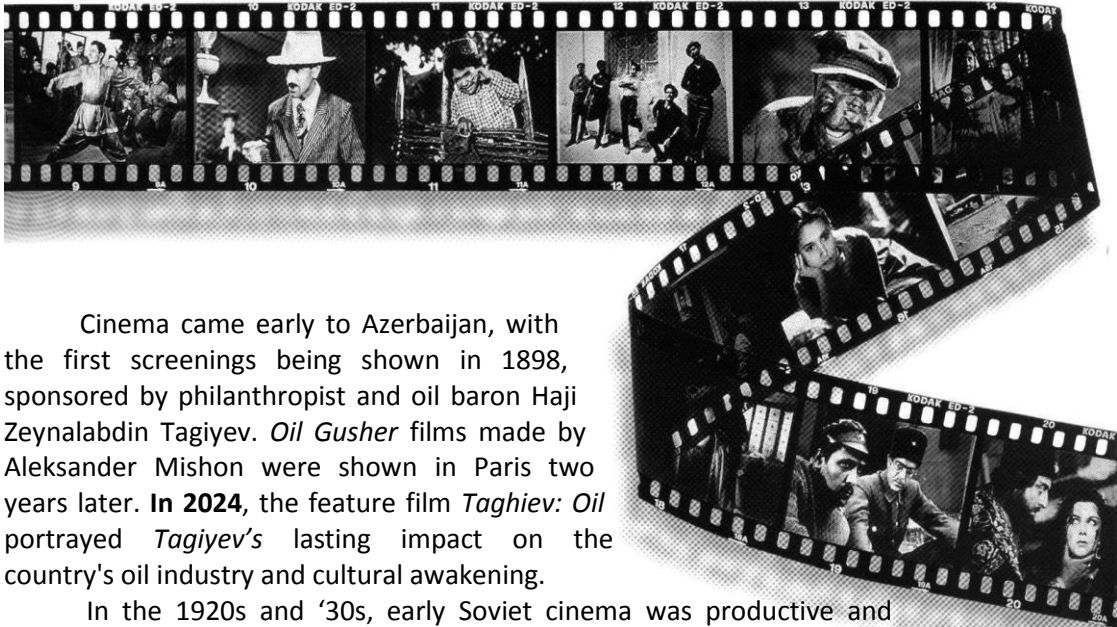
Traditional dances are still popular at weddings, holidays and festivals. Western-style disco dancing is also popular but, especially at weddings, everyone joins in at some point in the traditional dances. As seen in the picture, the standard position for both men and women is upright with arms held out to the side. While women express their grace with sinuous movements of hands and arms, men's movements are stiffer; other than held hands, contact is rare. The *lezghinka* dance is a chance for the men (and occasionally women) to show their speed and stamina as the music becomes faster and faster; often a circle is formed and one or two men leap in, demonstrate their speed of foot for a few minutes then return to the circle and clap in time as others take their place.

Professional dance groups are popular in concerts and at holidays like the spring *Novruz Bayram*; they also bring in the traditional flaming *plov* (pilaf) that is served to the bride and groom towards the end of a wedding party.

The Azerbaijan State Song and Dance Ensemble had been promoting the national culture across the former Soviet republics and internationally since 1936 to great acclaim. And when the great dance master, People's Artist Alibaba Abdullayev, saw that the time was right for Azerbaijani dance to develop new teams of teachers and dancers, **the Azerbaijan State Dance Ensemble** was founded in 1970. Successful from the outset, both domestically and abroad, the Ensemble has a repertoire that combines customs and traditions with a wealth of folklore, music and national costumes. The many traditional dances are equally varied: among them the ancient collective circle dance *Yalli*, to the comical shepherds in *Chobanlar*, the energy of a dance with *Nagara* drums and the flowing grace of the *Uzundere*.



Cinema



Cinema came early to Azerbaijan, with the first screenings being shown in 1898, sponsored by philanthropist and oil baron Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev. *Oil Gusher* films made by Aleksander Mishon were shown in Paris two years later. In 2024, the feature film *Taghiyev: Oil* portrayed Tagiyev's lasting impact on the country's oil industry and cultural awakening.

In the 1920s and '30s, early Soviet cinema was productive and marked by films written by playwright **Jafar Jabbarly** (1899-1934) regarded as the founder of Azerbaijani screenwriting; the films *Sevil* and *Almaz* dealt with the liberation of women from the veil and patriarchal domination. In the 1940s and 50s Uzeyir Hajibeyov's plays *Arshin Mal Alan* and *Mashadi Ibad* (If Not This One, That One) were filmed; the former made a star of Rashid Behbudov.

The 1960s are remembered for films that took on serious social issues: *In a Southern City* and *The Wild Kur*. The 1970s saw productions of historical epics: *Nesimi*, *Dede Qorqud* and *Babek*. While the interest in social themes continued with *Mother-in Law's* serio-comic take on family relationships.

The struggles of the early years of independence were the subject of *The 40th Door* (2009) and psychological drama was provided by *Sahe* (Precinct, 2010).

Architecture

There have been major additions to the country's architecture since the Contract of the Century began to deliver significant income from 2005. Many cityscapes have changed dramatically, with new buildings, as well as cleaned up classical architecture. Naturally the capital has historically been the main focus of attention, but there are many other pearls of an architect's inspiration dotted around the country. It should, however, be remembered that over the centuries tectonics have removed some of the earliest examples of their work – this is an active earthquake zone.

Baku displays the greatest variety of ages and styles – from medieval to early oil boom, to Soviet and modern. Icheri Sheher, the old walled city, is the place to start chronologically, with the 12th century Maiden Tower, 15th century Shirvanshahs' Palace, caravansarays and mosques, especially the Lezghin mosque. Also note the *hamams* (bathhouses), which were strategically placed at the gates to the medieval city to encourage visitors to wash away the dust and sweat before they made their way to the caravansarays to rest up. There are other atmospheric working *hamams*, eg. Tezebey, in the wider city, that are worth experiencing.

Also outside the walls, the oil-boom architecture was built by newly-enriched oil magnates who sent their (often Polish) architects to Venice, Paris and other cities of choice for inspiration – see the History Museum (Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev's home), the *Saadat Sarayi* (Palace of Happiness, ie. wedding palace) home of Murtuza Mukhtarov and much of Istiqlaliyat Street, including the Ismayilli Palace (Academy of Sciences Admin) built by Musa Naghiyev. Soviet-era architecture has a bad reputation, but many of the dullest examples have gone and some jewels remain, for which we should mostly be grateful to architect **Mikayil Useinov** (1905-92). The Nizami Literature Museum, Akhundov Library, Nizami Cinema and the residence on the corner of Vurghun and Nizami (opposite Nesimi's statue) are fine examples of his work. The *Dom Soviet* (Government House) building opposite the Boulevard also intrigues.



Other religious buildings in the capital include many mosques, *Teze Pir* being the most impressive, synagogues, Orthodox churches, an Armenian church, a German Lutheran church and a modern Roman Catholic church

As for modern architecture, must-sees include the stunning white curves of Zaha Hadid's Heydar Aliyev Centre, passed on the way in from the airport, and the three Flame Towers, best seen from the Boulevard when illuminated at night.

On the Absheron Peninsula there are complete castles at Mardakan and Ramana; the former town also has a pleasant arboretum, *Dendro Park*, once the summer home of Murtuza Mukhtarov.

Elsewhere in the country, Sheki has the impressively colourful 18th century Khan's Palace and lower down the street a caravansaray that still operates as a hotel. In Kish nearby, are the 12th century Caucasian Albanian church and further on the ruins of *Gelersen*, *Goresen* castle. Near Qabala is an archaeological dig that has unearthed the gates, foundations and pipework of the ancient city. There are three Udin churches in the nearby village of Nij; one has been restored and brought back into use.

Chirag Qala castle's ruins near Siyazan also provide good views after the climb. The synagogues in the Jewish settlement of Qirmizi Qesebe, across the river from Quba, are impressive. The architectural solution to building a village on the sharp slope of a hillside is intriguing and worth a visit to Khinaliq.

Ganja has Nizami's tomb and fine city buildings, as well as the quirky bottle house.

Nakhchivan was home to 12th century architect **Ajemi Nakhchivani**, who was responsible for the impressive tombs of Momine Khatun and Yusif ibn Kuseir in Nakhchivan city. A visit to Ordubad and a wander through the back streets of courtyard houses may bring you to an *ovdan*, a channelled underground stream that serves as a refrigerator as well as source of irrigation – that is, if you've worked out which of the gate's two door knockers to use.

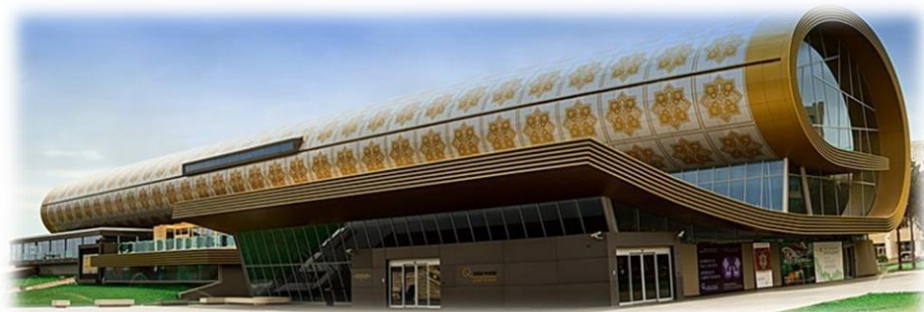
There are many more sights for open eyes!

Carpets

The tales we have heard of magic carpets all make sense when we stand before one woven in Azerbaijan – this is a craft that truly developed into an art and one can only wonder at how such intricate and tale-telling patterns emerged from this 'cottage industry'. The patterns vary according to region and here there are generally recognised to be eight 'schools' of Azerbaijani carpet: Baku, Quba, Shirvan, Ganja, Qazakh, Qarabagh, Nakhchivan and Tabriz. Individual patterns within a school can also be named after their village of origin or motif. The Quba carpet *Pirebedil* is named after a village near Shabran, while the 1539-40 Tabriz school carpet *Shaykh Safi*, now in London's Victoria and Albert Museum, was commissioned for the shrine to the 14th century Sufi leader after whom it is named.

Carpets were made to warm the house and were as often hung on the walls as laid on the floor. They were also woven flat weave (without a pile) and made into saddle bags, saddle cloths and bags for grain etc. Somehow similar to the Qobustan petroglyphs, carpet patterns often reflect the weavers' ways of life and associated elements – the *Pirebedil* motifs look very like symbolic ram's horns and scissors – or runic symbols handed down over the ages. Many are more abstract, but their depth of colour and patterning surely indicates that for the weaver there is much more to a carpet than a mere floor or wall

covering. Many visitors to the country are seduced by the richness, in all senses, of these demotic works of art.



State Museum of Azerbaijan Carpet and Applied Art, Baku

Foundations

There are many NGOs, foundations and voluntary organisations in the country - too many to list in this brief introduction - but, as examples we offer two foundations that are having an impact both domestically and on the international stage.

The Heydar Aliyev Foundation

The foundation is the country's leading NGO and works to support the development of independent Azerbaijani society across the spectra of education, public health, culture, sports, science and technology, environment and social issues. It has made major, large scale contributions in all these areas within the country, and has also done much to raise Azerbaijan's social and cultural profile internationally.

Founded in 2004 and named in recognition of former president Heydar Aliyev's massive contribution to the establishment of a strong and stable newly-independent Azerbaijan able to build on its social and cultural heritage, the foundation's president is Mehriban Aliyeva, First Vice-president of Azerbaijan and its First Lady.

[\[https://heydar-aliyev-foundation.org/en/\]](https://heydar-aliyev-foundation.org/en/)

Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation

In August 2012 a summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Turkey, agreed to establish the Turkic Heritage and Cultural Foundation to "protect, study and promote the Turkic culture and heritage through supporting and funding activities, projects and programs." The Foundation is hosted by Azerbaijan, based in Baku and is active both within the member countries and in cooperation with other countries to generate interest in the breadth of Turkic culture.

<https://www.turkicstates.org/en/partners-detail/turkic-culture-and-heritage-foundation>



Holidays and Commemoration Days

Below is a list of the holidays and other *non-working days* in Azerbaijan, some political, some traditional and some religious. While in English 'holiday' can apply to any kind of non-working day, this is not the case here. Sensitivity is required: 20 January commemorate a tragic event in the recent past and is not referred to as a holiday. If a non-working day falls on a Saturday or Sunday, the following weekday usually becomes a non-working day. The religious holidays are celebrated according to the Islamic lunar calendar, usually moving 11 days earlier year to year by the Gregorian calendar.

- 1 and 2 January – **New Year**
- 20 January – **National Day of Mourning** (See opposite)
- 8 March – **International Women's Day**
- 20-24 March – **Novruz Bayram**. (The year's main holiday)
- 11 April – **Presidential Election day** (2018 only)
- 9 May – **Victory Day** (Defeat of Fascism in 1945)
- 28 May – **Republic Day** (Proclamation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, 1918)
- 15 June – **National Salvation Day** (Heydar Aliyev's return to power, 1993)
- 15 and 16 June – **End of Ramadan holiday** (because holidays overlap, 18 and 19 June are non-working days, 2018 only)
- 26 June – **Armed Forces Day**
- 22-23 August – **Qurban Bayram** (Islamic Eid al-Adha, dates are for 2018 only)
- 8 November – **Victory Day** (Zəfər Günü)
- 9 November – **State Flag Day**
- 31 December – **World Azerbaijanis Solidarity Day**

National Days

1 and 2 January – New Year`s Day

The New Year celebrations in Baku are elaborate, with a giant New Year tree, a fireworks display and a late-night party on the central Fountains Square, featuring performances by many of the country's celebrities, from around 9pm on 31 December into the small hours of 1 January. It is customary to wish each other, *Yeni iliniz Mubarek!* (Happy New Year!)



20 January – National Day of Mourning

On 20 January 1990 Soviet troops were ordered into Baku by Mikhail Gorbachev to suppress demonstrations for independence.

People had been infuriated by Armenia's territorial claims and acts of aggression against Azerbaijan, as well as by the anti-nationalist behaviour of the local authorities. Azerbaijanis were being expelled from Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories, lands they had lived on for centuries. A national movement had been developing since 1988 in favour of independence from the USSR, with thousands of people protesting for days in *Azadliq* (Freedom) Square and the streets of Baku.

On the night of 20 January a large contingent of Soviet Armed Forces was sent onto the streets of Baku and appeared in tanks with guns blazing. According to official sources, 131 people died, 774 were wounded, 400 imprisoned and four went missing.



Massive processions buried the dead in the hilltop park overlooking the city, the highest spot in Baku. Since then this place has been called *Shahidlar Khiyabani* (Martyrs' Avenue) and people mark 20 January as a National Day of Mourning. Every year thousands of Azerbaijanis visit the avenue and lay flowers on the graves until they become a sea of carnations.

8 March – International Women`s Day

Azerbaijan adopted this day in 1917. The USSR first marked 8 March as a non-working day in 1965 and, after gaining independence, Azerbaijan continued to celebrate it as a national holiday.



It is customary for men to compliment women and present gifts and/or flowers to women relatives, friends or colleagues as appropriate.

20-24 March – Novruz Bayram



Novruz Bayram (New Day Holiday) celebrates the arrival of spring at the Vernal Equinox and is the main holiday in the Azerbaijani year. It almost certainly dates back to times when Zoroastrianism was the prevailing religion and has survived despite periods of official disapproval, including Soviet-era attempts to prohibit celebrations.

The connection with nature is confirmed by the importance given to the four Tuesdays prior to 20 March. These days are celebrated successively as Water, Fire, Air/Wind and Earth Tuesday. Each element contributing in turn to revived growth and blossoming. Bonfires are still lit on these days and it is a tradition to jump over the fire, which burns up all your accumulated problems and purifies you for a fresh start.

At Novruz, a laid table is even more important than at other times. As seen in the picture, a *khoncha* (tray) with *semeni*, a plate of sprouted wheat, is central as a symbol of new life. The *semeni* is surrounded by traditional sweets: the crescent-shaped *shekerbura*, pastries filled with ground almonds, walnuts, and sugar, represents the moon; the diamond-shaped *paklava*, layered buttery pastries filled with walnuts, sugar and cardamom and coated with honey syrup, represents the stars and

the circular *goghal*, a savoury, flaky pastry filled with fennel, caraway, turmeric and pepper, stands for the sun.

If you are not at home on the first day of Novruz, you won't see your home for seven years...

...and so the holiday is a time to be home with the family. However, children are allowed out to throw down a cap at neighbours' doors, knock and then hide round a corner, returning to pick up the cap, now filled with goodies. And there are plenty of street events on surrounding days, with music, dance, *zorkhana* 'strongmen', tightrope walkers, the tale of Kosa and Kechel's search for a stolen chicken (find out...) and, of course, food!



9 May – Victory Day

The sacrifices made during World War II are commemorated on this day when fascist Germany signed the act of surrender. Azerbaijan lost some 300,000 of the 680,000 citizens who joined the armed forces, and it contributed over 80% of the fuel for Soviet planes. The latter was a major reason for Hitler marking Baku as a vital prize. Fortunately, his forces marching south ran out of fuel before they could cross the Caucasus.



28 May – Republic Day

On 28 May 1918, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) was proclaimed, the first independent democratic republic throughout the Muslim East. It was a progressive, parliamentary republic with its own coat of arms, anthem and flag. However, ADR was destined to exist only 23 months. In 1920 Bolshevik forces marched in to overthrow the government and enforce admission to what was to become the USSR. It has been celebrated since 1990 when Azerbaijan was on its way to restored independence. Of course celebrations were particularly important in 2018, its centenary year.

15 June – National Salvation Day

Azerbaijan regained its independence in October 1991. However, the first years of independence were troubled and chaotic. Following the demise of the Soviet Union the economy was in collapse and Armenia threatened and attacked from the west. The government lacked strength and experience; there was a crisis of authority that, by summer 1993 threatened civil war. On 15 June 1993 Heydar Aliyev was invited from Nakchivan to Baku to help resolve the crisis. He was elected Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Azerbaijan Republic and later became president. History tells of the remarkable turn around he effected in the country's fortunes.

26 June – National Army Day

Once the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was proclaimed in the circumstances of 1918, an army to defend itself against covetous neighbours was a vital priority and the decision was made on 26 June 1918. As the country prepared for renewed independence, on 9 October 1991 the Supreme Council of the Azerbaijan Republic passed a law to recreate its own armed forces.

8 November – Victory Day (Zəfər Günü)

A national day of pride and remembrance, marking the liberation of Shusha in 2020. Celebrated across the country, it honors the memory of those who served and symbolizes the revival of Karabakh.



9 November – State Flag Day

As described on p. 10 the tricolour flag was first adopted by the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic on 9 November 1918 to represent the first independent state of Azerbaijan, with one of the ADR's founders, Mammad Amin Rasulzade investing it with a nation's belief in independence, declaring:

A flag once raised will never fall



Under Soviet rule other banners were imposed, but the tricolour was raised at various points in protest; Jahid Hilaloghlu raised it on Maiden Tower on 28 May 1956, in support of the aims of the ADR and in protest at Soviet rule. On 17 November 1990 Heydar Aliyev ensured it was raised in Nakhchivan and on 5 February 1991 the Supreme Soviet adopted it as the state flag of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

31 December – World Azerbaijanis Solidarity Day

On 31 December 1989, with the drive for independence underway, people in Nakhchivan tore down the fences separating them from their fellow Azerbaijanis in Iran. In 1991 the day was adopted to promote and celebrate relations

between Azerbaijanis living in different countries. The division of Azerbaijan in 1828 between the Russian and Persian Empires means that some 20 million plus Azerbaijanis live in Iran. The largest diaspora is in Russia, but solidarity celebrations are held in up to 70 countries.

Religious Days

Ramazan Bayram (Eid ul-Fitr)

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and is a period of fasting (*oruj*) during daylight hours to commemorate the revelation in this month of the Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad. *Eid ul-Fitr* is a festival on the first day of the following Islamic month of Shawwal and marks the end of the fast. Many, but not all, Azerbaijani Muslims keep the fast and will not eat or drink between sunrise and sunset. During Ramadan it is a mark of respect to host an *iftar* (the first meal after sunset) for someone who is fasting.

Qurban Bayram (Eid el-Adha)

A religious festival celebrated across the Muslim world, *Qurban* (sacrifice) commemorates the test of faith in which Ibrahim (biblical Abraham) was asked to sacrifice his son Ismayil (biblical Isaac) to God. At the last moment, Ibrahim's hand was stayed and a goat was sacrificed instead.

The tradition is that meat from the sheep (usually) sacrificed at this holiday is divided between people in need, relatives and close family.



Family Traditions

Weddings

The family tends to be a stronger unit in Azerbaijan than in many western cultures and the significant stages in anyone's life are an affair for relatives far and near. Parents constantly have their children's future in mind and, while women are increasingly more present and active at work and in society, a good marriage for their children of both sexes, but especially girls, is still a very significant priority for most mothers. Visits to the public *hamam* (bathhouse) were once opportunities for women to spy out potential matches for their own, or a friend's, son. Their husbands, meanwhile, might seek contact with good, ranking business acquaintances who had an eligible son or daughter – an eventual match would enhance their own family's status. Elements of this approach still exist, albeit conducted over coffee rather than a soak and with their offspring demanding more of a say in matters of their matrimony, and much of the ceremony remains.

Girls are still expected to preserve their virtue until marriage and are generally under the watchful eyes of extended families. Whenever serious interest arises in a potential match, women from the boy's family are expected to visit to introduce themselves to the girl's family. If all goes well then it's the turn of the men from the families, with a few close relatives, to meet and the boy's family formally asks for the girl for their son. It is generally expected at this stage that the boy's family can provide the home in which they will live. The girl's family is responsible for furnishing it.



If everyone, including the girl, agrees then the boy's family again visits for a small 'Hari' (yes) party, this time bringing a ring, a shawl or scarf and some sweets for the girl; the ring is placed on her finger, the shawl around her shoulder and sweet tea (for agreement and harmony) is drunk.

The formal engagement follows later. The girl's family arranges the party, usually with a meal in a restaurant, for members of both families. The boy's family brings a full set of clothes for the girl and also a *khoncha* (tray, as on the Novruz table) with smaller gifts and engagement rings are exchanged.

The date of the wedding is discussed and decided; sometimes there are two weddings: first one organised by the girl's family, with some of the boy's family invited, followed by the boy's wedding, with some of the girl's family invited. Nowadays, there is usually just one, joint wedding.

Shortly before the wedding the girl has her all-women henna party, usually held in a restaurant where the bride's hands are 'painted' with patterns in henna and there is singing and dancing. The boy may visit briefly with more gifts. The boy also has a party (all men) in a restaurant.

On the day of the wedding, the boy goes to pick up the girl from her home. He is accompanied by a group of musicians: typically, a clarinet, accordion and *naghara*, with a *zurna* – a loud, high pitched, piercing woodwind instrument – to play *Vagzali*, the lively melody traditional for such occasions.

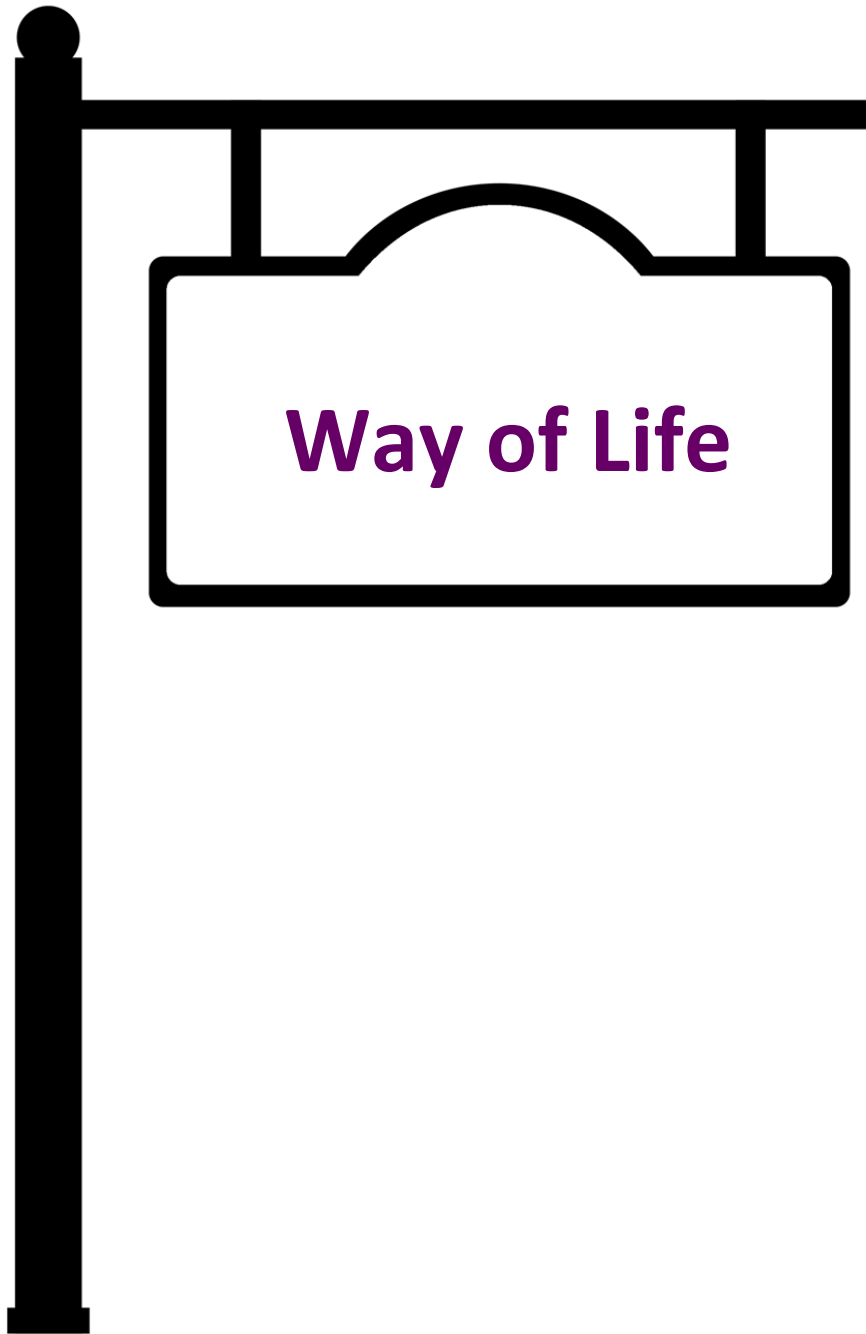
In the cities, weddings are held in one of the many glitzy wedding halls. They are big events, with invitations going to the extended families, and the wide circle of friends and colleagues. Guests do not usually bring gifts, they place money in envelopes into boxes at the wedding – this covers the cost of the wedding party. The bride and groom arrive after the guests and sit at a raised table, which is visited in turn by guests for photographs with the couple. A lengthy meal of several courses is interspersed through the evening with (loud) professional singers, dancing and speeches. The final courses include *plov* (pilaf) – the couple's flaming plov brought in by ceremonial dancers – and cake with tea.



Funerals

By Muslim tradition, the dead must be buried before sunset, either on the same or the following day. On the day of the burial relatives and friends of both sexes may assemble around the home from which the body will be taken, however only men accompany the body to the cemetery. Condolences are offered to the bereaved with the expression “Allah Rehmet Elesin”, (May God accept his/ her soul). On the third and seventh day afterwards, people gather in a marquee or mosque where prayers are said for the departed; men and women attend at different times. Visitors are offered tea and sweets as well as a special funeral dish (halva), made from flour, sugar, and butter. It is usual to taste it as a mark of remembrance. Visitors are not expected to offer gifts, but many will take tea, sugar etc. as a gesture to offset expenses. On each Thursday afterwards, people visit the family of the deceased at home. This continues until the 40th day, when there is a final gathering in a mosque or marquee. Women visit the grave after the 40th day, with heads covered; by this time a gravestone, often illustrated with an engraving of the deceased, is in place. For mourning, an even number of flowers, usually carnations, is laid on the grave.

Christian and Jewish families, of course, follow their own traditions.



Family Life and Traditions

The family is still the foundation of Azerbaijani society – and family really is an extended network, such that there are different names for maternal and paternal relatives. For example, your *bibi* (aunt) is your father's sister, while your *khala* (aunt) is your mother's sister. Especially in rural areas, a group of houses may in effect be a family compound. City life in multistorey apartments, of course, tends to work against this, but family ties remain very strong, and newlyweds often buy an apartment close to their parents or begin life together with the husband's parents. Grandparents have a strong and proud interest in the family line being continued, reminding the new couple of their responsibility in this direction, and are keen to share in the upbringing of their grandchildren. Young children are adored and treated with great affection by all relatives, and even well-meaning strangers may offer children a kiss and cuddle, for example as they help a mother get them on a bus.



Such family closeness ensures that there is always a firm network of support in times of trouble, but it can sometimes create sparks between strong personalities; thus the popularity of the 1978 film *Qayinana* (Mother-in-Law), in which a young newlywed stands up to her mother-in-law's traditional ways, often to comical effect.

In general, there is a great respect for age and seniority. Elder men (*agh saqqal* – white beards) are often deferred to when decisions are to be made. Younger men will often give up a seat on a bus to an elder man, as well as to a woman.

Azerbaijanis are house-proud; homes are kept immaculately clean and as well-ornamented as possible, palatial if funds run to that, while the exteriors (of older apartment blocks) may still be less prepossessing due to the lack of Soviet-era maintenance staff. Homes in villages may be older in style, with carpets and cushions more prominent in the décor, and are the cosier and homelier for that.

Hospitality

As strong as the belief in the family here, is the tradition of hospitality. The guest really is king (or queen) in an Azerbaijani home; a foreign guest even more so, if that is possible. Everything possible will be done to make sure the guest is well looked after.

Visitors to a family usually take a token gift – flowers (always an odd number – even numbers are for funerals), chocolates or, if they are sure the host drinks, vodka (for a man) or wine. Most Azerbaijanis wear indoor slippers rather than shoes in their home, and guests normally remove their shoes once inside and put on

the slippers offered.

When men meet for the first time that day they will shake hands; close friends will kiss (touch) on both cheeks. The usual greeting among Azerbaijanis is “Salaam Aleykum” (Peace be with you) and the reply “Wa Aleykum Salaam” (And peace be with you). Women will also kiss both cheeks. A man meeting a woman for the first time may shake her hand if she offers it (more likely in a city than a village, where women are likely to be more reserved). The formal address to a woman is by her first name and *khanum* – eg. “Sevda



khanum" (Mrs Sevda). For a man use *bey* (mister) or for an academic/professional *muellim* (literally: teacher) – "Elchin bey" or "Elchin muellim".

A guest will always be served tea with sweets or pastries, usually in an *armudu* (pear-shaped) glass with lemon, not milk; if the visit is for a meal then it is likely to be over several courses and filling, and interspersed with several toasts. A response by the guest with thanks for the meal and hospitality will be much appreciated, as will the sight of the food being enjoyed to the full. The host will often select the choice cuts of meat etc. and put them on the guest's plate. The sharing of food is very natural. Even in an informal environment people will not eat alone, i.e. they will share the food they have with anyone in their company.

Curiosity is another tradition and questions can be searching, as Azerbaijanis want to know all about a new friend and the country they're from.

Hospitality also extends beyond the home. There is seldom sharing of a bill in a café or restaurant, and it is a matter of honour for the inviter to pay.

Given this hospitality the best advice to a visitor is to be aware of the tradition and accept it in the spirit offered, but to be aware of the host's position and not to exploit the tradition.

Summertime, and the living....

In summer Baku's streets become a little easier to negotiate, as children don't have to be driven to school and many families depart to their *bagh* (Azerbaijani) or *dacha* (Russian) their summer house, usually on the Absheron Peninsula and close to the sea. Any visitor invited to one is advised to accept for a truly relaxing experience. *Bagh* literally means garden and most will have an orchard, great or small, with trees: fig, mulberry, pomegranate, pear, peach and perhaps a vine, as shade from the heat while the host fires up the samovar for tea and grills marinated lamb on skewers over a *mangal* (charcoal barbecue). For afters, chill out with a healthy slice of sweet watermelon. Equally delightful is a *bagh* out in the countryside calm.



Dress

Especially in the capital, dress has become much less formal than it was even 10 years ago, but business still usually demands a suit and tie for men and formal dress for women. Western influence is ever more present, but the emphasis here is still to look smart, even in casual dress. The centre of Baku can resemble a fashion parade at times in spring and summer with some daring designs.

Outside the major cities, customs are more conservative, especially in women's dress, and visitors should bear this in mind when travelling to the regions. There is great acceptance that foreigners have their own rules, but they too should have due regard for the customs of the people who are hosting them. In certain places: mosques, cemeteries etc. all women may be asked to cover their hair (scarves are often provided), and short skirts or bare arms will be seen as showing lack of respect. Shorts for men are a relatively recent sight outside a beach or *bagh* (summer house) and again would not be welcome in a mosque.

Colourful traditional dress appears at the *Novruz* holiday in particular, and at festivals and concerts by mugham and ashiq singers, as well as in theatre productions. Items still to be seen on winter streets include the *papaq*, a circular, tightly-curved lamb's wool hat worn by *agh saqqals*, some mugham singers and players of *chovgan* (see Sports). For women the traditional *kelaghayi*, a patterned silk scarf, is making a fashionable comeback. Sheki still produces the silk and makes the scarves too; the village of Basqal is another traditional source of these beautiful handcrafted adornments. Traditional items are sold in Baku's Icheri Sheher and many of the regional towns. Popular items with tourists – at least for a selfie or two – are the shaggy wool shepherds' hats, perfect for a long winter's day vigil with the flock (see p.93).

Work, time

The centrality of the family makes many demands, and both men and women are driven to provide. The man is still regarded as the main breadwinner in most families, but many women work too, as well as having prime responsibility for maintenance of home and children. Thus there is a strong work ethic, a determination to find some way to earn a living. Occasionally this can mean a resort to the unorthodox and, as with people everywhere, once a position is attained some will rest content, but most work hard.

Azerbaijani time, however, can be a puzzle to some visitors; it is more elastic than in other parts of the world, and matters fairly often arise that become a higher priority than the hands or digits of a clock. On the way to an appointment, for example, a chance encounter with a friend may delay arrival, as it would be unforgiveable to pass by without a sociable exchange of information about life, the family and even work. The same applies to phone calls: "I'm busy, I'll call back later" is not commonly heard unless in the presence of a respected superior. However, long working days, and six-day weeks are not uncommon.

With this qualification, office hours are generally 9am-6pm. Shops work from 10am-8pm or later, seven days a week.

Superstitions

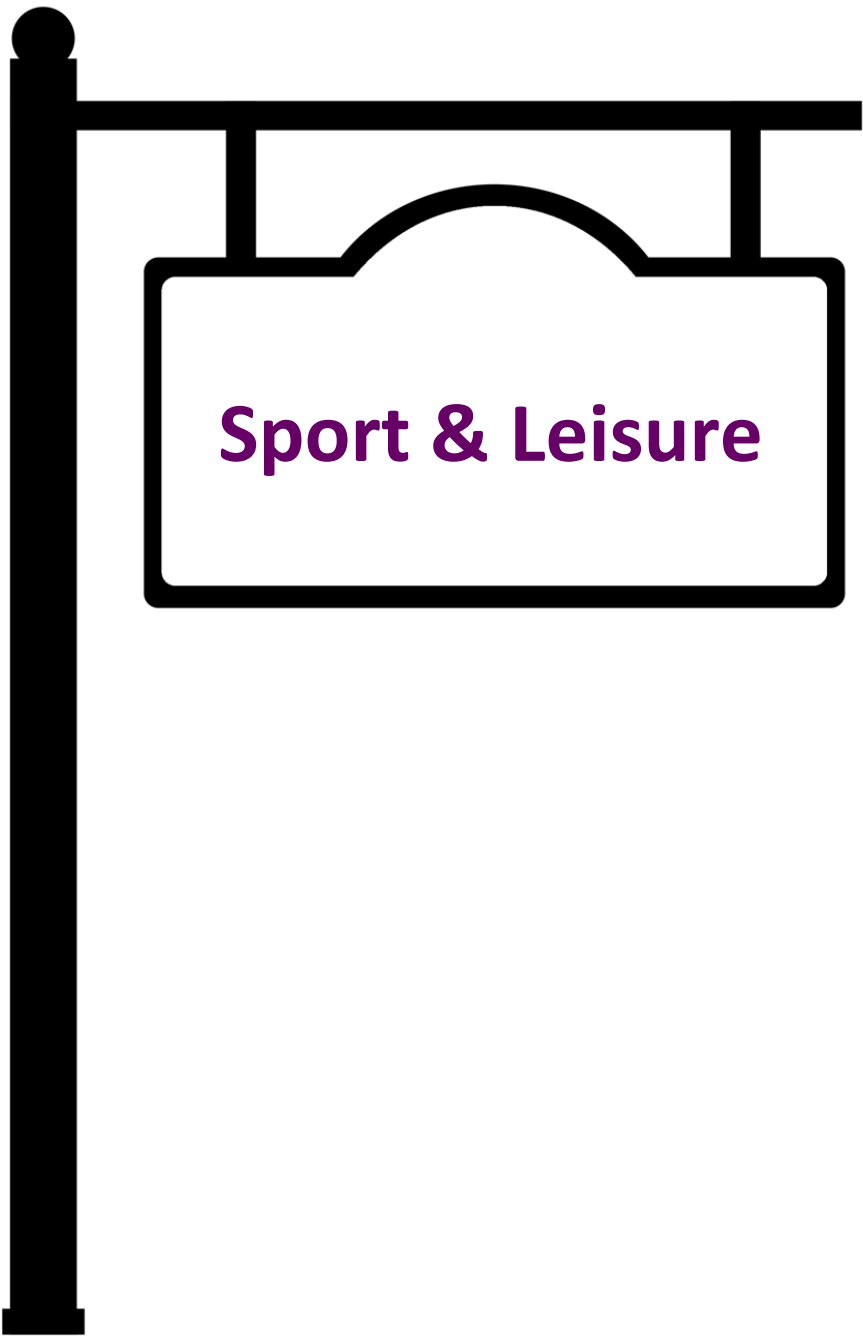
As mentioned earlier, most Azerbaijanis take a relaxed approach to religion and some daily practices and beliefs, like *Novruz*, the main holiday, have pre-Islamic origins. A blue 'Evil Eye' pendant and a sprig of camel thorn are to be found in many a home and car – both ward off a bringer of bad fortune. Just in case they fail, an occasional wafting of the smoke from smouldering rue seeds will do the trick. Someone thought to be possibly in danger may have the smoke wafted over their head.

Never shake hands across the threshold of a door, an argument is sure to follow. If your foot accidentally touches another's foot, then you should touch their arm to avoid the argument that could ensue.

Leftover bread should not be thrown out with the rubbish. It should be placed on a raised surface above the ground. If bread is accidentally dropped, it should be picked up, kissed and placed on a high surface. This may come from the Zoroastrian belief in the sanctity of the Earth, such that in ancient times a dead body would be left on a raised rock, not buried in the ground.

Waiting too long for a bus or a friend to turn up? Then tie knots in a piece of thread or a tassel on your scarf; this twists the Devil's tail, he releases his grip on whatever you are waiting for and your bus or friend will arrive.

Someone leaving on a long trip will have water thrown after them, so that their journey flows as smoothly.



Sport



Traditionally, sports of combat and strength have been popular; *zorkhana* sports centres in which men developed their strength and courage date back to at least the 16th century (see <https://bit.ly/2HTvbv2>) and freestyle wrestling is still keenly followed. The stories in *The Book of Dede Qorqud* have many descriptions of sporting contests – and women are as active as men.

However, these days football and volleyball have the largest fan bases; gymnastics and the eastern martial arts are developing rapidly. The sports centres built around the country, as well as the Olympic stadium and other facilities built for the 1st European Games in 2015 and the Islamic

Solidarity Games in 2017 have helped to generate greater interest in recreational swimming and jogging. Health and fitness centres are also increasingly popular among young women. Horse racing, *chovgan* and polo attract enthusiastic audiences.

Other major sports events held in Baku include the annual Formula 1, the first race held in 2016. The capital will host three group games and one quarter-final in the UEFA EURO 2020 football championship.

There are arguments about whether chess is a sport, but it is recognized as such by the International Olympic Committee, and it is certainly popular here and many children attend chess centres. Former World Chess Champion Gary Kasparov, rated by some as the greatest player of all time, learned the game in Baku. In April 2018, Shakhriyar Mamedyarov was second in the FIDE world rankings.

While traditional *zorkhana* only emerges into public view during *Novruz* and other festivals, Azerbaijan continues to enjoy success on the world stage in combat sports, the country's boxers winning six of the 10 gold medals available at the 1st European Games held in Baku in 2015. Another gold medallist there was Ilham Zakiyev, a Paralympic heavyweight judoka, he is a double Olympic champion. Blinded at 19 by a sniper's bullet that went through both temples while he was on reconnaissance near the contact line with occupied Fuzuli, he turned his life around by concentrating on the sport.

Football probably owes its origins here to the influx of foreign personnel eager to cash in on the oil boom of the early 20th century. During the Soviet era, *Neftchi* (Oilman) established themselves in the strong USSR championship and ended the 1966 season in 3rd place. One of their key strikers was Anatoliy Banishevsky and that summer he played for the USSR national team that came 4th in the World Cup in the UK. The winners that year were England after a dramatic final against West Germany in which the hosts' crucial and



Baku Olympic Stadium

contested third goal was awarded by linesman Tofiq Bahramov, from Azerbaijan.

In recent years, *Qarabag* have come to the fore. Originally from Aghdam, a city that now lies in ruins under Armenian occupation, the team has come to represent the hopes of the million people also expelled from their homeland. In the 2017-18 season they reached the group stage of the Champions League competition and thrilled huge crowds in close games with Roma and Atletico Madrid. Local rivals Qabala made headlines when they brought in former Arsenal and England captain Tony Adams as coach. Recent successes have encouraged clubs to develop football academies, so fans expect more.

The two ski resorts are also providing an alternative way to enjoy the winters. Surprising for some, perhaps, but recall that the Caucasus mountains run along the northern border, and that's where to find Shahdagh, near Quba in the north-east, and Tufandagh, in Qabala, further to the west.

A less familiar sport for visitors is *chovgan*, and this precursor of polo – a little tougher and more exciting than the game played by princes – is well worth seeing. There are annual competitions in May/June and December between teams from the various regions. The Arena Polo World Cup and other international polo competitions are also played here in June.



To see and do

For most visitors to the country, Baku is the first port of call, and there is plenty to fill their time. The architecture, from medieval to ultra-modern is stunning. A chronological trip would take in first the old walled inner city, *Icheri Sheher*, with its mix of bathhouses, mosques and monuments: atmospheric caravansarays, Maiden Tower and the Shirvanshahs' Palace. Around the city's central Fountains Square are the buildings that housed the oil barons of the early 20th century as well as the solid classicism of the Soviet era. Alongside the airport road curves the hugely impressive Heydar Aliyev Centre, possibly even more jaw-dropping inside. At night the illuminations on the three Flame Towers and other buildings, ensure that an evening stroll along the *Bulvar* (boulevard) next to the Caspian Sea is a delight. Theatres abound: Puppets, Drama – Azerbaijani and Russian, Musical Comedy, Opera & Ballet. Restaurants for every international taste; clubs, coffee shops and bars; art galleries and museums. Traditional music at the Mugham Centre, classical music at the Philharmonia, rock and electro in downstairs joints.

For beaches, head out south to Shikhov for western-style beach facilities, pools and bars; head to the northern coast of the beaky Absheron Peninsula for less developed beaches with local families and better sea (also with some large, outdoor-concert-holding resorts). The peninsula is where many Bakuvis have their *bagh* (summer house); the Surakhani *Ateshgah* (fire temple) and *Yanar Dag* (burning mountain) – a naturally flaming hillside – are also within an hour's drive of the city.

Venturing some 60km south of the capital will take you to the Stone Age cave petroglyphs at Qobustan and, just a little further, to the moonscape of bubbling mud volcanoes. Both are well worth visiting.

Head north towards Quba for the Shahdagh ski resort, the Jewish settlement of Qirmizi Qesebe and, in autumn, the area's fruit. On and into the foothills of the Caucasus for the unique hilltop shepherding village of Khinaliq (summer only), where walking out of one house takes you onto the roof of a lower one and the people speak a language not heard anywhere else.

The road west passes the old capital of Shamakhi and its observatory at Pirguli, past Basqal and its silk *kelagayi* scarves; Lahij, with its scary cliffside entrance road and traditional copper workshops. Stop for tea at one of the open-air teahouses in the scenic roadside forests above Aghsu and Goychay (pomegranate-land).

You could turn off at Ismayilli to Ivanovka, stronghold of the Russian religious dissident Molokans and taste their honey, cheese and wine. Or head on to Qabala, for winter skiing or the free, open-air midsummer classical music festival [<https://www.qabalamusicfestival.com/>], or the Udi village of Nij, or excavations of the old city.

On again to Sheki, where must do's include visiting the Sheki Khan's Palace, the Caravansaray and tasting *piti* (a meat dish speciality cooked in a clay pot) and Sheki *halva* (very sweet). Visit the nearby village of Kish with its untouched air and Albanian church.

For one-upmanship visit the exclave of Nakhchivan (by air) – a landscape photographer's dreamworld – the jagged *Ilan Dag* (snake mountain) – the cleft in its peak caused by Noah's Ark as the waters receded – they say. The southern road along the Araz river (the border with Iran) to Ordubad, home of the world's most aromatic lemons, is impossibly photogenic.

Lake Goygol, past Ganja, was long a hidden natural treasure, but no more – and stop off at the mausoleum of the great poet Nizami on the way.

Head south from Baku to the Shirvan Park to view the gazelles. Further towards Lenkeran and the border town of Astara for some good beaches, the ancient Hirkan forest (home to Caucasian leopards and ironwood) and tea and citrus plantations before turning into the scenic Talysh mountains.

Wherever you go, keep eyes and ears open for the many smaller wonders and foibles of a fascinating land.

And now, Karabakh – a rediscovered treasure

Since 2020, following the restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereignty over large parts of Karabakh, this historic region has reemerged as one of the country's most evocative destinations. Begin your journey in **Shusha**, known as the cradle of Azerbaijani music and poetry, where the khan's palaces, the restored Yukhari Govhar Agha Mosque, and panoramic views of the canyons below captivate visitors. Cultural life is returning to the city, with concerts, art festivals, and the reconstruction of heritage buildings in full swing.

[\[https://azerbaijan.travel/trip-to-shusha\]](https://azerbaijan.travel/trip-to-shusha)



A short drive takes you to **Fuzuli**, with its brand-new international airport – a symbol of renewal and openness. The region also includes **Aghdam**, once called the 'Hiroshima of the Caucasus,' now being reborn with modern planning and historic preservation.

Nature lovers should head to **Lachin and Kalbajar**, rich in alpine meadows, mineral springs, and cool summer air – ideal for hiking and eco-tourism. The ancient **Tugh village**, the waterfalls of **Istisu**, and the hot springs that once hosted famous sanatoriums are now opening up again to visitors.

Visiting Karabakh is not only a visual and emotional journey – it is also a testament to resilience and cultural revival.

[\[https://airport.az/en/press-release/fuzuli-international-airport-karabakhs-air-gate-and-symbol-of-development\]](https://airport.az/en/press-release/fuzuli-international-airport-karabakhs-air-gate-and-symbol-of-development)

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