

AZERBAIJAN – Advice from Fulbright Alumni

The following are extracts from Fulbright Grantee Reports and are not meant to reflect the views of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), its cooperating agencies, or the U.S. Embassy.

Interacting with Azerbaijanis

Azerbaijani's are known for their hospitality. They can be eager to know strangers and invite them to their homes. I made it a point, at least initially, to say "Yes!" to every invitation I received, and there were a lot of them. Attending different dinners, outings, and university functions allowed me to meet a variety of different people, forge friendships, and become more knowledgeable about local customs.

Many Azeris really like Americans. I found most people to be polite and considerate.

Visitors should be aware that outside of the capital city, few speak good English. Additionally, people STARE everywhere if you do not look Azerbaijani.

Do everything. Accept every invitation, but try to reserve time to recover and unwind as well. Walk around a lot. Shop at the rynek rather than at supermarkets when possible.

Local Government and Politics

There are few press freedoms. Azerbaijan has an authoritarian government that expresses itself during pro-democracy rallies, and protesters can be subjected to overwhelming, punitive and brutal treatment by military and riot police. If you want to go to a rally to observe, go ahead, but beware because it is possible to be questioned by police. Other than that -- unless you publish work critical of the government, which may be read and may prompt a complaint to the Embassy -- the government is unlikely to intrude on your day life

Most people do not discuss politics.

Local Culture

The society is male-dominated and many local women accept that, although women are employed everywhere, including high-level supervisory roles. It is a secular Muslim community, and relatively few people observe customs such as headscarves.

This is a culture that has very lax concepts of time. It is not expected for people to come to meetings or classes on time. They will make meetings and just not show up. Everything takes a little longer and with slightly more difficulty than we would expect as Americans

It was interesting to witness the growing pains of this Muslim country with roots in the Soviet Union. Religion, while prevalent, does not occupy all conversations or time. I rarely saw a woman completely covered, nor did I see the Mosque overflowing with activity

Relationships between the sexes is profoundly curious from a U.S. perspective. Young people spend a great deal of time with same sex groups"" which is not unusual in itself. However, they very often walk on the street arm in arm and kiss affectionately upon greeting""this includes the young men as well as women.

It is routine to greet people you know enthusiastically, but strangers on the street rarely exchange greetings. Some may find this cold, but I believe it demonstrates genuine affection and not fake salutations.

Older men seem to spend a great deal of time in small groups in the city playing games and just chatting. Older women are also often seen in small groups but just during the day, not at night.

Women wear more makeup than traditionally found in the U.S. and clothing is curiously less elaborate while more bejeweled and filled with sparkling additions""very much in the Russian tradition

I recommend that Americans moving to Azerbaijan get in touch with the local peace corps volunteers who can assist them with the language and cultural nuances

Things just begin later in the day in Baku. You will not find breakfast at a caf  before 10 a.m. and I noticed that traffic doesn't begin to build until after 9 a.m. You will also notice it is fashionable to be late to events and things rarely begin on the scheduled time.

Travel in this country is relatively easy and inexpensive, but uncomfortable. Generally, there is no air conditioning and people will not open the windows, even in stifling 100 degree heat. Get ready to become ill a number of times -- mainly digestive-related -- as you can't do much to avoid it. There are plenty of drug stores around. The weather here is similar to the East Coast or Midwestern U.S., long, cold winters, hot, sticky summers...

Baku and the Regions

Baku is quite pleasant and not a difficult place to live.. Traffic is very noisy, fast and potentially dangerous to pedestrians. Public transit is easy and cheap to use, such as the excellent underground Metro system. The city can be quite expensive, compared to the rural areas. Negotiating prices is very common, and be persistent when you negotiate. Baku is undergoing rapid, modern development in many ways. In many ways, Baku is like a large European city, and it's profile is rising.

Crime is virtually non-existent. I routinely walked into an Internet caf  to see laptops opened with one near them and a shop keeper ran across the street to return 50 (cents) to me.

Oil has changed many people, particularly in Baku, but outside Baku you can still see the same old Azerbaijan that sometimes seem to still be in the 18th century. Come without enormous expectations and this country will give you more than you need, through its culture, history, food, and natural beauty. Do plan to spend some time outside Baku. You will be enchanted.

Nice places to visit in Baku include the Old City; outside of town, Ganja (by plane, bus or driver)

Getting around in Baku

I rarely took a taxi. Generally the cost (about 5 manat to get anywhere) should be negotiated before you get in and not many of the drivers speak English. But if you have someone write down your home locale in Azerbaijani, you can always use that card. You should also invest in a local map in Azerbaijani (can be purchased at any Metro stop for 5 manat). I learned the bus routes rather quickly and rode the buses or muschukas (minibus). The buses are easy to figure out or you can have a local friend take you the first time. The best part is the cost is only 20 (cents) gopik.

University Teaching

The young, post-Soviet (after 1991) generation is quite different (more tech savvy, etc.) from the older, Soviet-influenced one. If you are teaching college students, beware of plagiarism in written work...

If you are coming here as a professor, it is important to note that students have no study skills to speak of. They do not do homework, they talk through class, they will even answer their cell phones. Your initial entry to this culture can be very very frustrating. It is ultimately rewarding if you come to accept that things absolutely WILL NOT happen as you expect and prefer.

Teaching can be challenging because the state universities follow the bureaucratic system established during Soviet times. Students are routinely graded on a scale of one to ten and these grades along with attendance are kept in a "journal" that one of the students keeps and delivers to the administration after every meeting. There seems to be little privacy when it comes to grades.

Money and Banking

I suggest that Americans bring cash in dollars, as ATMs are everywhere but the fees can add up. Mobile phones can be expensive and sometimes not reliable.

The currency, the manat, is strong against the dollar. Money is easily accessible through ATMs in most of the country.

ATMs work perfectly and are plentiful. You can get money out in manat or dollars. It's very unlikely to find a merchant that takes credit cards.

I have not opened a bank account in Baku, but I have had no problems using my ATM card (citibank) to withdraw money.

Housing

Try to get an apartment with wireless access, many have it along with cable or satellite TV, for about \$35 a month. Plumbing can be inconsistent. Water service can be off and on, and sometimes colored or with bits of rust. Most rents paid by Americans are high compared to those charged Azeris, so it's good to have a roommate if possible. Beware of people coming to your door claiming to be collecting for utility or other bills, just pay them yourself at a bank.

Housing is difficult to arrange in the regions. The program needs to insist that the host institution assist with this process. If you do not speak the language, it is impossible to negotiate for housing. If you do not have help from the institution, hire a translator. Things to make note of- how and when the water is supplied in the house or apartment. Who pays for the utilities. whether the landlord has the right to enter at will. i recommend changing the locks when you move in (it can be done with a screwdriver and a new lock is about \$3), and then you can change it back when you move out. Also, there is not a rental contract culture here. you can be comfortably settled in your home and they ask you to move out with one day's notice. you will have no recourse. It is important to find out how long they expect you to occupy the house and why it is vacant. Many sites in Azerbaijan now have internet available for home use. it is important to clarify your house telephone number and internet accessibility before you move in.

I recommend, if possible, that you arrive a few days before you are to begin your Fulbright work, to be a tourist and determine where you want to live. There are several English-language free newspapers that advertise furnished apartments. I emailed and called three of them and was escorted around to different locations for a couple of days. I ended up with a spectacular apartment for 900 US per month. And the landlady spoke English and handled any problems I had immediately. Utilities: Internet: My connections were fast. Landladies and colleagues will be happy to assist you in getting a connection. I paid about 40 US per month at the office. I had one problem where the Internet was out for a few weeks because of construction, but otherwise was extremely satisfied. I also found many WIFI (they said wiff-ee) in town that worked splendidly. Power: The power bill is paid directly to the power company, who comes to the door once a month. At my apartment it ran about 15 US per month. That was even in the cold months of February and March. Cable: The cable TV bill was also paid directly to the company representative who came to the door. It was about 15 US per month. Cable is curious. I had two different cable systems in my apartment and I noticed there were many TV cables running in and out of apartment windows.

If possible, do not pre-book an apartment. In one or two days you can find the most suitable located apartment for 400 Manats (single bedroom). Do not let the renter know you have any US embassy connection or the rent will be couple of hundred dollars higher.

Visas

Before arrival: Make sure you work on your visa at least one month before you leave. My visa was first lost in the mail and then I neglected to sign the next version, so I was just a bit stressed about getting it in time. When my husband came to visit me in Baku, he had a similar delayed operation and his visa arrived 12 hours before he was to take off. We both secured our visas through the Azerbaijan Embassy in Washington D.C. I have heard that the Azerbaijan Embassy in Los Angeles is more efficient.

Phones

Phone: I brought my old blackberry phone with me. I paid 60 US to have it unblocked and then just purchased a sim card from AZER CELL. It worked well, but I had to include international codes to make calls (but was not charged an international fee to make the calls). Texting was the most inexpensive and useful form of communication.

Food

Buy bread. Buy all kinds of bread. Savor it but never throw any of it away with the rest of the garbage. Put it in its own separate bag and hang it on the side of the dumpster. Supermarkets abound and there are several different sizes of supermarkets. The larger ones (of which there were about 4 in Baku) had everything from your favorite shampoo to peanut butter. The smaller "mom and pop" shops on every street corner, had water and yogurt and cookies and some high-priced household goods, but not much else. You can find just about any kind of restaurant you desire but I tended not to eat out because of the expense and lack of vegetarian options.

Shopping

Clothing and household goods are seriously overpriced. Bring everything you will need with you or try shopping at second hands stores. These stores had some great buys.

Clothing

People dress a bit more formally in Azerbaijan. They seem to take their dress code more from Europe. You will see many dark colors in the winter and a few light colors in the summer (when it's extremely hot). Women tend to wear skirts, but all of the young women also wore jeans. Boots are the style of all women in the winter. It seems like the men's dress code is white shirt, tie and dark suit. Young men: black jeans, white shirt, black leather jacket and black athletic shoes. Traditions: Please try to attend a wedding. It's spectacular and offers a wealth of understanding about culture and gender issues. Be aware of Muslim traditions. Be acutely aware of Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. Be aware of relationships with other countries beyond Armenia. Do not worry about things being stolen""this activity is almost non-existent in this culture. If you are a man""always offer your seat to a woman on the bus. If you are young, always offer your seat to someone older on the bus. Greet people you know enthusiastically, but rarely greet people you do not know.

Azerbaijani Language

More than anything else, knowledge of basic Azerbaijani would help future Fulbright fellows prepare for life in Azerbaijan outside the capital. Unfortunately, in the United States there are very few resources available to study the language. The best book I found is called "Elementary Azerbaijani" by Kurtulus Oztopcu; it's available on Amazon.

I highly recommend getting in touch with at least one person who will meet you at the airport and help you get situated upon arrival.

Web sites or other helpful resources:

azerireport.com, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty
Baku Post (Bakupost.org)
CIA Factbook (online)
"Ali and Nino" (novel)