

AZERBAIJAN

PREFACE

Azerbaijan is a country with impressive natural and cultural diversity. Its high mountains and flat plains have been home for human habitation for at least 200,000 years. During the last 1,300 years the territory has been successively controlled by Arabs, Turks, Mongols, Persians, and finally Russians. Independent since 1991, Azerbaijan is very much developing its future. Though hurt economically by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country looks to its large oil and gas reserves for a future boost to development.

Baku has an attractive old walled city, a multitude of restaurants and pubs, and many museums and cultural activities. Most food items can be found in one or more of the numerous grocery stores or bazaars. Outside of Baku lie all sorts of intriguing destinations. Some can be reached easily by car and offer reasonably good accommodations. Others require four wheel drive and an adventurous spirit. One should never be bored in Azerbaijan.

AREA, GEOGRAPHY, AND CLIMATE

The Republic of Azerbaijan is a country of great physical variety and complicated boundaries. Its territory of 33,774 square miles (about the size of Maine or Portugal), includes one autonomous region, Nagorno Karabakh (currently occupied by Armenian forces); one autonomous republic, Nakhchivan, which is separated from Azerbaijan proper by the Zangezur Region of Armenia; and several clusters of small islands in the Caspian Sea. Baku, Azerbaijan's capital, is situated on the northern shore of the Bay of Baku on the Apsheron Peninsula, which juts into the Caspian Sea "like an eagle's beak." The Caspian Sea borders the country on the east. Counterclockwise from there, it is framed by the Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Turkey (only 17 miles), and Iran.

Azerbaijan can be thought of as a dry trough between wetter mountain ranges. The Greater Caucasus Mountains, running south eastward along the northern border, rise in places to over 14,000 feet. The Lesser Caucasus and Talysh Mountains, somewhat lower in elevation, parallel them along the southern border. Deep and abrupt river valleys carve the rugged mountain terrain. Forests cover much of the middle elevations. The semiarid Kura Depression between these ranges occupies about half of the country. Toward the Caspian Sea coast, this mostly flat depression dips below the world sea level. The landscapes around Baku and to the south are dry and brown. As one travels northwest toward the Greater Caucasus, however, eroded hills give way to green hills and finally, in most seasons, to snow-capped mountains.

The country's rivers flow from Georgia, Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan's mountains. Most join to form the Kura-Aras river system, which empties into the Caspian Sea about 80 miles south of Baku. The Caspian is salty and subject to substantial changes in water level. Coastal flooding in the mid-1990s subsided several years later. Sandy beaches border much of the coastline. Some

250 lakes and several large reservoirs dot parts of Azerbaijan. Many ephemeral lakes and ponds form during rainy periods.

The climate generally follows the topography, temperatures falling and precipitation rising with increasing elevation, although the southeastern corner of Azerbaijan, including its lowlands, is the wettest part of the country. The mean July temperature in the lowlands is 77°–81°F, with temperatures sometimes exceeding 100°F in Baku. The average January temperature in the lowlands is 32°–37°F. Highland temperatures average around 40°F in July and below 14°F in January. Annual precipitation averages less than 11 inches along most of the coast and in most of the Kura Depression; 12–35 inches in the foothills and mid altitude highlands; 39–51 inches along the southern slopes of the Greater Caucasus, and 47–71 inches in the southeastern Lenkoran Region. These climatic variations produce wet subtropical conditions in the Lenkoran lowlands where citrus fruits are grown; temperate semidesert on the Apsheron Peninsula and Kura lowlands; temperate moist conditions at middle elevations; and subalpine and alpine environments at the highest. Baku is marked by mild winters and hot summers. Rain can be fairly frequent, though usually light, in fall and winter, but is infrequent in the summer. In winter, the city is subject to severe north or northwest winds, but snow is infrequent.

The country's vegetation is similarly varied, with sparse, low-growing plants in the semi-arid lowlands; forests (mostly deciduous and covering about 11% of the land areas) in the mountains along the upper Kura River and northernmost coast; and meadows and alpine tundra on the highest mountains. Marshlands have formed where water collects in the lowlands.

Animal life includes wild pigs in woods and marshes; roe deer, red deer and brown bears in forests; wild goats in the high mountains; and foxes, jackals and wolves in many habitats. Hunting is a popular pastime for many. Water birds gather in the lakes and marshes by the thousands in winter.

Fourteen nature reserves were established to protect samples of the country's flora and fauna. The Kizil-Agach Reserve, the largest at 217,000 acres, includes extensive wetlands on the southern coast. Half a million water birds, among them several thousand flamingos, winter here. Persian gazelles roam the Sirvan Reserve, farther north. Other reserves, such as Ismailly, in the Greater Caucasus Mountains, protect dense, diverse forests and rare trees, as well as other wildlife. Permission is required to enter the nature reserves.

Parts of Azerbaijan are subject to earthquakes, particularly the southern slope of the Greater Caucasus in the Sheki-Shemakha Region and the southern part of the Lesser Caucasus adjoining the Aras River. Baku itself is not in a high-risk area, although a moderately strong earthquake in November 2000 damaged several buildings.

POPULATION

The last official census, in 1999, recorded a population of slightly over 8 million, including 1.8 million people in Baku, 180,000 in Ganja, and 117,000 in Sumgait just north of Baku. The population growth rate is a low 0.7%.

Since Azerbaijan's ethnic tensions with Armenia erupted in 1988 and especially following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenian and Russian populations have declined precipitously. Many Azerbaijanis living in Armenia, Russia, central Asia and elsewhere have migrated to Azerbaijan. According to a 1995 estimate, the country's population was 90% Azerbaijani, 3.2% Dagestani peoples, 2.5% Russian, 2.3% Armenians (almost all in the separatist Nagorno-Karabakh Region), and 2% "other." The Dagestani peoples include Lezgins and Avars. Other ethnic groups living in Azerbaijan include Ukrainians, Tatars, Talysh, Turks, Georgians, Kurds, Tats, Udins, and Belarusians. There are also about 35,000 Jews, of whom 30,000 live in Baku. About 4,000 Jews identify themselves as Tats (also referred to as Mountain Jews), an ancient people mostly living near the northeastern town of Guba. Their traditions say that they came to this region in 500 B.C.E. from captivity in Babylon in present-day Iraq.

Azerbaijan's population is 52% urban, mostly skilled and semi-skilled industrial workers. People living in rural areas are primarily wheat, potato, vegetable and fruit growers, livestock breeders, and semi-nomadic shepherds living in mountainous regions. Most people engaged in traditional crafts are carpet makers and wood and stone workers.

Over 21 million Azerbaijanis live in Iran, and 2 million or more live in the other republics of the former Soviet Union. The Azerbaijani population living in the U.S. is difficult to estimate, since many that are ethnically Azerbaijani are often identified as Iranian or Turkish.

The official language of Azerbaijan is Azerbaijani (or Azeri), a southern (Oguz) Turkic language with four distinct but similar regional dialects. Russian is still commonly spoken among the urban population, although not as an official language.

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Azerbaijan, a country occupied and claimed by Persians, Arabs, Turks, and Russians over its long history, declared its independence on August 30, 1991. Under the 1995 constitution, Azerbaijan is ruled by a popularly elected president, with legislative powers resting in the hands of a unicameral parliament, the Milli Majlis.

Azerbaijan's history since independence has been dominated by the conflict with Armenians over Nagorno-Karabakh. Violence began as ethnic strife in 1988, but escalated into full-blown war after the collapse of Soviet power. Armenian forces made sweeping gains, and the May 1994 ceasefire left Armenians in control of the southwestern fifth of Azerbaijan. Fighting resulted in some 800,000 internally displaced persons, most of whom have yet to be resettled. As many as 120,000 ethnic Armenians live in Nagorno-Karabakh and other Armenian occupied territories of Azerbaijan.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the presence of armed militias in the country produced chronic instability in Azerbaijan's early years. In June 1993, Heydar Aliyev, a communist-era ruler of Azerbaijan and a senior figure in the Soviet Union, returned to power in Baku. He was reelected in 1998 to a five-year term in flawed elections.

The Azerbaijani Government consists of three branches:

The executive branch is made up of the President, his Apparatus, a Prime Minister, and the Cabinet of Ministers.

The legislative branch consists of the 125-member Milli Majlis. Members are elected for 5-year terms, 100 from territorial districts and 25 drawn proportionally from party lists. The current parliament was elected in 2000 in voting marred by widespread irregularities.

The judicial branch, headed by a Constitutional Court, is nominally independent.

ARTS, SCIENCE, AND EDUCATION

Azerbaijan has a rich and ancient cultural history. Poetry, the oldest form of written literature in Azerbaijan, predates the 10th century. However, until the 19th century most major works were written in Persian and Arabic. Notable exceptions were two 16th-century writers: the Safavid shah, Ismail I, writing in Turkish under the nom de plume Khatai, and the poet Fizuli who wrote in Turkish, Persian, and Arabic. Azerbaijan's greatest writer, the 12th century poet Nizami, wrote in Persian. His works are still popular in Azerbaijan, and his tomb in Gandja is a well-visited site.

Two ancient forms of oral literature, recounted and sometimes sung by *ashugs* (literally, lovers), survive today. These are the lyrical folk poems first written down as the "Dede Korkut Stories" in the 15th century and another more ancient form of oral literature, the dastans, which are pre-Christian, pre-Islamic epic poems recounting the history and traditions of the times.

Literature and music coalesce in the traditional poems of the *ashugs* who often accompany themselves on the *tar* (whence "guitar") or *ud*, a form of lute. Such ancient instruments are still produced to preserve and promote the musical heritage of the country. The oldest preserved instrument in Azerbaijan, the *gal-dash*, is a type of tambourine from the Stone Age. Cave drawings at Gobustan, just south of Baku, date from 5000 B.C.E. and provide early evidence of the significance of music and dance in the lives of tribesmen in Azerbaijan.

Mugam, a vocal-instrument song cycle that combines music, classical poetry, and improvisation, is a popular art form in Azerbaijan. The mugam opera, in which some of Azerbaijan's most famous narrative poems are set to contemporary folk tunes, was created in Baku in the early 20th century.

Baku has a recently restored Opera and Ballet Theater that offers a wide variety of performances each season; a Philharmonic Hall, where the Azerbaijani National Orchestra performs a wide repertoire of classical European, American and Azerbaijani music; and a Conservatory with 500 students. Baku has had a classical ballet company since 1908. The company performs 19th- and 20th-century Russian ballet, as well as contemporary Azerbaijani ballet set to folk themes.

Dance has always been an important part of Azerbaijani culture. The Gobustan cave paintings show scenes of men performing hunting dances. The early nomadic folk dances and women's circle dances continue to be performed today, although only in the past 70 years have men and

women begun to dance together in newly choreographed folk dances. Dance is not only a popular art form, but also a significant part of the social life of Azerbaijanis.

Puppet shows and medieval religious mystery plays are among the oldest forms of theatrical art in Azerbaijan. Professional theater dates from 1873 when comedic plays of the Azerbaijani dramatist Akhundov were first performed in Baku. Among the most popular theaters in Baku are the Azerbaijani Drama Theater, the Russian Drama Theater, the Marionette Theater, the Comedy Theater and the Youth Theater. These theaters perform a variety of plays in Azeri and Russian.

Azerbaijani feature and documentary films date from 1916. Movie theaters abound in Baku, showing contemporary European and American films. Most movies are dubbed in Russian and Azeri. A new, Western-style movie theater sometimes shows foreign movies in the original language with Russian subtitles.

Baku has several major museums — the History Museum with an extensive collection of Azerbaijani applied arts; the Fine Arts Museum with its collection of Azerbaijani, Russian, and Western European paintings; the State Museum, devoted to historical musical instruments and the Azerbaijani independence movement; and an excellent new Carpet Museum. A new folk craft museum opened in March 1993.

Azerbaijan's population is highly educated with claims of 99% literacy. As of 1990, over 56% of the population had completed secondary school and almost 13% had completed post-secondary school or university. In Azerbaijan, there are 4,542 primary and secondary schools, 107 vocational schools, 61 technical colleges, and 48 institutions of higher education, including over a dozen private universities. Baku State University has 15,000 students. Khazar University has 1,000 students, as does Western University, both private institutions with English-language programs. The Academy of Sciences has 30 research institutes employing 4,200 researchers.

COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

Azerbaijan sits on energy reserves estimated at up to 31 billion barrels of oil and 4 trillion cubic meters of gas. Its location gives it the potential to serve as a strategic hub for the transport of Caspian region energy reserves to international markets. The signing of the "Contract of the Century" in 1994 marked a turning point for Azerbaijan. This contract granted development rights to foreign oil companies over three large oil fields with a combined estimated total of 4.5 billion barrels of oil. Since then, 19 other production sharing agreements have been signed, and Azerbaijan has benefited from over \$2.6 billion worth of investment in the energy sector alone — an extraordinary boost to Azerbaijan's \$4.1 billion economy.

In 1998, low world oil prices and the Russian financial crisis presented new challenges to Azerbaijan's economy. Investments in the energy sector declined, and expectations of Azerbaijan's future oil wealth were pushed further into the future. Recovery of oil prices in late 1999 and continuing high prices in 2000 had a positive effect on oil sector revenues.

In November 1999, Azerbaijan signed an agreement with Turkey and Georgia to transport Azerbaijani oil to international markets via a Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main oil export pipeline to the

Mediterranean. In October 2000, the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) together with BP, Unocal, Chevron and other foreign oil companies formed a sponsor's group for the project. In March 2001, the presidents of Azerbaijan and Turkey signed a gas purchase agreement for Azerbaijani exports of gas to Turkey which will reach annual volumes of 6.6 billion cubic meters by 2007. Oil, gas and pipeline development contracts expected to be signed by the end of 2002 should total \$12 billion in new investment in Azerbaijan.

Growth in GDP continues to come mainly from the oil sector and related construction activities, which account for 70% of industrial production. Transport and communications were also major contributors to a reported 18% GDP growth in 2000. The Azerbaijani national currency, the manat (AZM), remained stable with an average exchange rate of AZM \$4.8/\$.

After almost 2 years of stagnation in privatization of state-owned enterprises, President Aliyev approved Phase II of the State Privatization Program in 2000 and issued decrees in 2001 detailing the enterprises to be sold. The government encourages foreign investors to participate in the privatization of state property. Agriculture, the country's second largest sector, has been privatized and recorded a 12% growth in 2000 compared to 1999 levels. The retail and construction sectors have also been privatized, but the non-energy industrial sector still operates at only a fraction of its capacity, and abandoned and closed factories are commonplace.

TRANSPORTATION

Automobiles

Roads are not well maintained and many have numerous potholes. City streets are narrow and overcrowded with parked vehicles and pedestrian traffic, and they are not well lit at night. Country roads are mostly in deplorable condition, and four-wheel-drive vehicles are recommended for most travel outside of Baku. Road signs are not always in evidence or are in disrepair. Many drivers ignore basic rules of the road, making driving an exciting and somewhat dangerous experience. This can also be hard on pedestrians as there are insufficient crossing lights and cross walks.

Unleaded gas is not available in Azerbaijan. There are two grades of leaded fuel, 93 and 95 octane. Supply has been stable and prices are set by the government. In 2009 the gallon was approx. 2.80 \$. Diesel fuel is also available.

Many parts for Western autos are now available, and there are a number of dealerships that can import hard-to-find parts. Prices are reasonable but more expensive than in the U.S. Vehicle repair is generally less expensive than in the U.S., but knowledgeable mechanics can be hard to find.

Local Transportation

Public transportation is available in several modes but not recommended. Baku has a Soviet-era subway system, but breakdowns occur, and crime is a problem. Buses and streetcars are available but are rundown, crowded and not normally used by Westerners. Taxis are inexpensive, easy to flag down and relatively efficient. Those with blue license plates are

“legal,” that is, registered with the government. There are a number of car hire firms, but prices are considerably higher than in the U.S.

Regional Transportation

Azerbaijan Airlines (AZAL) is a national carrier operating several domestic and international flights.

Domestic flights from/to Baku: Ganja, Nakhchivan.

International non-stop flights from/to Baku: Istanbul, Ankara, Dubai, London, Paris, Milan, Tbilisi, Tel Aviv, Urumchi (China), Moscow, Mineralnie Vodi, Kiev, Kabul and Tehran.

IMAIR is a private domestic airline that services flights to Tashkent and Almaty.

Four major western airlines operate services to and from Baku, though these services change frequently, and current schedules should be checked before making travel plans.

Austrian Airlines: Vienna-Baku-Vienna - five times a week

British Mediterranean: London (Heathrow)-Baku-London (Heathrow) - seven times a week.

Lufthansa: Frankfurt-Baku- Frankfurt - three times a week.

Turkish Airlines: Istanbul-Baku-Istanbul - seven times a week.

Besides these companies, several regional airlines operate to and from Baku:

Aeroflot, Aerosvit, Domodedovo Airlines, Pulkovo Airlines, Siberian Airlines, Uzbekistan Airways, Donbassaero, SCAT Airlines

Scheduled train services operate between Baku and the following cities: Moscow, Kiev, Kharkov, Tbilisi, Astrakhan, and many domestic cities.

COMMUNICATIONS

Telephones and Telecommunications

Baku’s telephone system is modernizing, and mobile telephones have become popular and widespread throughout the country. Telephone credit cards are not used in Azerbaijan, but with U.S. calling cards it is easy to place direct calls to the U.S. via access numbers.

Internet

Internet access has greatly improved in Baku over the last several years. There is a wide range of packages and prices available.

Radio and TV

Reception of English-language short-wave radio is a good means of staying in touch with world news. BBC, VOA, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty are broadcast locally. VOA broadcasts in English several times throughout the day on FM 101.7 (a frequency they share with the Azeri language RFE/RL). BBC broadcasts on 103.3 in English throughout the day and evening, with some Azeri, Russian and Turkish in the morning and evening.

Eleven television stations currently service Baku — six Azerbaijani (one state operated, one public television, and four independents), two Russian and two Turkish stations. American films are available on DVD, however most of them are pirated copies.

Cable and satellite dish services provide access to CNN, MTV, Discovery, ESPN, TV Land, BBC World, Euro Sport, TMC, Cartoon Network, CNBC, National Geographic and certain other channels. Satellite dishes are available for local purchase. Most of the apartments and houses in the Embassy housing pool are already equipped with satellite dishes.

Television sets produced in the former Soviet Union are available, but are not considered safe due to their tendency occasionally to self-combust. Imported TVs, VCRs, and DVD players are available locally but at a markup from U.S. prices.

Newspapers, Magazines, and Journals

A number of websites, including <http://www.today.az>, posts local news items in English.

Baku has only a few bookstores that stock a very limited amount of English language books.

HEALTH AND MEDICINE

Medical Facilities

Azerbaijan's public health care system remains centralized and well below western standards. Hospitals lack trained public and motivated staff, up-to-date equipment, and the modern technology required for western-style care. Recently there has been some trend toward privately funded medical facilities with newer equipment and modern health delivery systems.

There are numerous drug stores with supplies of common over the counter medicines. Newer or uniquely American drugs may not be available locally.

Community Health

Current community health conditions, particularly sanitation levels, are below U.S. standards..

Common sense care must be taken with food. Large supermarkets provide adequate refrigeration for meats and dairy products, but cannot guarantee that the required refrigeration during transport from source to store has been maintained so it is wise to rinse and cook meat thoroughly. Fruits and vegetables should be washed with potable water.

Toilet facilities in western hotels and restaurants are usually clean and adequate. Public toilets in markets, gas stations, etc., seldom meet the standards most Americans would accept.

Preventive Measures

Distilled or treated water should be used for drinking in the home. Fluoride supplementation is advised for children. Out of the home drink bottled water, sodas, juices or tea or coffee that has been made from boiled water. Long-life dairy products, available in the supermarkets, are recommended for home consumption. Wash all fruits and vegetables with potable water.

Bring insect repellent for areas with mosquitoes and sunscreen. Stray dogs and cats are a regular occurrence in Baku .

Driving can be a challenge in the busy streets of Baku. Having working horns, mirrors and brakes are a must and of course seatbelts are mandatory. Children should always wear helmets when riding a bike.

UTILITIES AND EQUIPMENT

Electricity is 220v, 50-cycle, single phase. Some U.S. electrical equipment, such as clock radios, will not operate properly in Baku because the electrical current is 50 cycles or hertz rather than the standard U.S. 60 cycles or hertz. Power failures occur, and the voltage fluctuates.

FOOD

Shopping for food in Baku can be both fun and frustrating. The open bazaars are colorful and full of excellent fresh fruits and vegetables in season. Bargaining is part of the culture. In the summer and fall there are plentiful supplies of fruit: apricots, peaches, apples, grapes, pears, figs, pomegranates, strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, persimmons, lemons, melons, quince, etc. A variety of fresh vegetables are also available in summer and fall (tomatoes, peppers, squash, carrots, cucumbers, beets, cabbage, onions, potatoes, eggplant, and radishes). Fresh greens such as parsley, dill, cilantro, scallions, sorrel, fennel, watercress, basil and indigenous greens are available year round during winter and early spring. The selection of fresh fruits and vegetables declines and expensive during the winter months, however. Recently, imported fruits and vegetables, such as bananas, kiwis, pineapples, mangos, and iceberg lettuce have been available in some of the western style grocery stores and in the bazaars.

The bazaars also have an abundance of locally pickled cabbage, onions, cucumbers, tomatoes, and olives. Dried fruit, nuts, and beans (apricots, figs, prunes, raisins, walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds, peanuts, lentils, yellow split peas, kidney beans, and pinto beans) are plentiful year round in the bazaars, but must be cleaned well before using. There is an abundance of local spices. Bring a supply of your favorite spices, as western-style grocery stores have a limited selection of spices familiar to most Americans.

Meat is cut differently here, and it is sometimes frustrating to try to find traditional American cuts. Fresh mutton is readily available, as are beef, pork, chicken, turkey, and other fowl. Sturgeon and limited varieties of other fish are available. It is best to purchase caviar and fish in the fall and winter months. All local meat must be cooked well to ensure safety. Some western-style grocery stores have butchers on their premises with a better selection of lamb, mutton and beef and smaller packaged cuts of meat. Increasingly, imported bacon, canned hams, salami, hotdogs, and frozen poultry, meat, and fish are available regularly.

Local dairy products (milk, yogurt, cream, and local feta-like cheese) are available everywhere. Imported powdered and long-shelf-life milk from Turkey, Russia, Germany, and Denmark are readily available, as are yogurt, cheese, sour cream, and whipping cream. Fresh local eggs and eggs imported from Turkey are also readily available.

Frozen foods (meat, poultry, fish, bacon, dairy products, vegetables, fruits and processed foods) are available regularly.

Azeri, Georgian, Turkish, European, and American wines are available in many shops but tend to be pricey except for wines made from Azeri. Vodka, scotch, gin, and some liqueurs are available, but expensive. Local cognac and champagne are also available. Increasingly, imported wines and liqueurs, although expensive, are available in western-style grocery stores. Beer, including western beer, and American soft drinks from several different sources are readily available, but supplies cannot be depended upon.

Many small shops called “dukani” carry items brought from Turkey, Russia, the U.A.E., Pakistan, and Western Europe. Several western-style grocery stores are now open in Baku and carry a wide variety of imported goods. Prices are expensive in these stores; supplies and availability fluctuate.

CLOTHING

The choice of shoes and clothing in Baku shops is limited. Overall, garments are expensive, often of inferior quality, and may be counterfeit. Purchase clothes in the U.S. or elsewhere. Clothes for all seasons are necessary even though the winters are mild compared to parts of the U.S. Since Baku frequently experiences harsh winds, sometimes combined with rain, warm boots and rain gear are highly recommended. Bring clothes for recreational activities. Azeri public dress mores are closer to European than Middle Eastern customs, but do require that people dress conservatively in public places. Adults in Azerbaijan do not wear shorts, especially for men. Cotton blends and hand washable garments are recommended because of the need to launder clothes frequently.

Men

Lightweight cotton suits are appropriate for late spring and summer months. Winter clothing is required for the cold months of November through March. Although it only snows a few days during the winter in Baku, visitors are recommended to bring hats, gloves, and boots for snowy, rainy and cold days. It is culturally inappropriate for men to wear shorts during the summer months.

Women

Washable cotton-blends are advised for the summer months. Summer nights can get cool, so bring a variety of lightweight sweaters and blazers.

Bring wool clothes for the cold winter months and outerwear that protects against Baku’s cold, damp, chilly, piercing wind. Rain boots are recommended.

Shoe styles and sizes are limited. Shoes are expensive, but of lesser quality than those found in the U.S. Bring a good supply of shoes.

Children

Children need washable, sturdy cotton, corduroy, and winter clothing. Although there is an increasing number of children's clothing shops in Baku, quality inferior and prices usually very high. Bring children's clothing for all seasons, particularly warm rain gear and boots for the windy, wet winter months. Bring a good supply of socks, shoes, underwear, and swimming suits.

SUPPLIES AND SERVICES

Basic services are available in Baku, but not necessarily up to U.S. standards. Laundry and drycleaning services, even at the best hotels and outlets, are hard on clothing and of inferior quality. Many foreigners bring home drycleaning kits for the dryer but drycleaning quality is improving but remains expensive.

Local hair stylists and barbers are plentiful, but like anywhere, quality of service and price vary. Some hair care products are available in western-style grocery stores.

Religious Activities

Azerbaijanis are predominantly Islamic though religious affiliation is weak due to seven decades of official atheism under Soviet rule. Since the country regained its independence, religious faith is slowly being revitalized. About 75% of Azerbaijan's Muslims are Shia and 25% are Sunni. The majority of the country's Christians are Russian Orthodox. Lutherans have a fine church, which is used for religious services and concerts. Other Christian denominations include Catholics, Baptists, and a wide range of Protestant faiths. There are several Jewish communities and a small number of Bahai.

Below is a list of places of worship in Baku:

Baku Eparchy at Caspian Russian Orthodox Church
205 Shamil Azizbeyov St.
Tel.: 440-43-52, 440-04-43

Baku International Fellowship
Non-denominational English-speaking church, meets every Sunday at 10:30 at Baku International School.
21 Ashirm Street
E-mail: www.bakuchurch.org

Christ the Redeemer Roman Catholic Church
69 "b" Teymur Aliyev St. (near the Polish Embassy)
Tel: 462-36-15
Tel/fax: 462-22-55
Mob: 855-771-15-64
Mass on Saturday night at 6pm in English, and Sunday at 9:30 and 12:30 in Russian and 11:00 in English.

Greater Grace Church (Protestant, Evangelical Church)
Service in Azeri and Russian with English translation

Sundays: 12:00

Tel: 494-9142

New Apostle Lutheran Church

17 28th May Street

Sunday morning services at 10am in Russian and German at the German Lutheran Church

Azhdarbey Mosques

Tel.: 494-69-16, 494-80-71

100 Sambaed Vurghun St.

Sephardic Synagogue

39 Shemsi Badalbeyli Street

Saturday morning services at 9am in Hebrew

Seventh Day Adventist Church

17, 28th May Street

Tel: 465-0253 or 464-6514

Bible study in English, Russian and Azeri on Saturday mornings at 1000 at the German Lutheran Church. Divine Worship Hour in Russian on Saturdays at 1100.

Ashkenazi Synagogue

171 Chingiz Mustafayev Street

Friday evening services at 7pm in Hebrew

EDUCATION

Dependent Education

The Baku International School, a private institution that opened in September 1994, offers American curriculum, English-language instruction from preschool through secondary (high school) graduation. It is operated by Quality Schools International (QSI), a private, nonprofit organization that runs similar schools in Yemen, Albania, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and elsewhere. The school moved into its new facility during the summer of 2003. Baku International School is fully accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

The school term is from early-September to mid-June. The curriculum includes English, mathematics, cultural studies, science, art, music, physical education, and Azeri, French, and Russian as foreign languages. Soccer, ballet, and other activities are available after school.

For further information contact:

QSI Baku International School (BIS)
Baku International School,
Darnagul Qasabasi
Ajami Nakhchivani Str.
Block 3097

Baku, Azerbaijan AZ1108

http://www.qsiweb.org/azb/http://www.qsi.org/azb_home/azb_home.htm

The International School of Azerbaijan, provides an international curriculum taught in English and is authorized by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) to offer the Primary Years Programme (PYP) for ages 3-10, the Middle Years Programme (MYP) for ages 11-15, and the Diploma Programme (IBDP) for ages 16-18. Enrolment has now risen to 470 students from 3-18 years old. An extensive building construction program has been completed and will be enhance in the coming year. TISA is an IB World School, and is fully accredited by the Council of International Schools (CIS).

The IB Diploma is an examination-based two-year course that is widely recognized around the world by competitive universities. All students also work towards earning a TISA High School Diploma. The Primary and Middle Years Programmes were developed specifically for younger learners and aim to provide high quality common learning experiences for students moving between international schools world-wide.

The school term is from late-August to mid-June. The European-based curriculum includes English, mathematics, science, art, French, Russian, Spanish, history, geography, music, physical education, and computer technology. There are extensive after school activities.

For more information contact:

The International School of Azerbaijan (TISA)

Mail: c/o BP Azerbaijan

Chertsey Road,

Sunbury on Thames

Middlesex TW16 7LN

U.K.

<http://www.tisa.az/index.htm>

RECREATION AND SOCIAL LIFE

Recreational and social activities for westerners are increasing in Azerbaijan. Many opportunities to meet Azeris and nationals of other countries are afforded through official contact, service groups, sports clubs, and other associations. The International Women's Club offers several activities and opportunities for women to participate in social activities and charity work, as does Rotary International, the American Chamber of Commerce, church and school groups.

Recreation and social activities for children are limited. A small zoo, an aqua park, and several public parks with amusement rides, including the walkway along the Baku waterfront, offer popular outings for children. During the winter months, visiting circuses and puppet theatre groups provide afternoon entertainment. Several beaches near Baku are good for day excursions (do not swim the water). Currently, there are many tot playgroups for preschool age children and younger organized by expat moms.

Sports

Soccer is the national sport. Soccer is played mostly outdoors or in stadiums. The Embassy has its own soccer team that practices weekly and has participated in a yearly diplomatic community soccer tournament. BIS and TISA offer after school soccer programs, as well as programs in other sports depending on interest and the skills of teaching staff and organizer-volunteers.

Other national sports include wrestling and tennis. Outdoor clay tennis courts are scattered throughout Baku, but are poorly maintained. Tennis instructors are easily found and charge reasonable rates for lessons. Other sports activities include: Aikido, Cricket, Basketball, Cycling Club, Fishing Trips, Fencing Instruction, Baku Ultimate Frisbee Club, Hash House Harriers, Diving, Trekking and Hiking, Tae Kwon Do Federation, and Adult Rugby.

Sport complexes and Western hotels' private clubs offer memberships for their facilities. Although expensive, these clubs have a selection of state of the art workout equipment, aerobic classes, tennis courts and indoor/outdoor swimming pools. Many Embassy employees belong to the Oasis Sports Club at the Hyatt Hotel, which offers world-class workout facilities, an indoor and an outdoor swimming pool, tennis, squash, and a host of other facilities.

Fitness Centers

Baku Entertainment Center

Location: 1130/33 F. Bayramov Street (down the street from Mr. Tibot Shop)

Tel. 490-22-22; Ext. 135 for English Speaking Receptionist

General Director: Javanshir A. Khalilov

Membership at the Fitness center includes use of the gym, sauna, indoor swimming pool, aerobic classes, aqua aerobic classes and facilities. They also have a fitness exclusively for women only. You do not need to be a member to use the bowling alley.

Club Oasis at the Hyatt

Location: 1033 Izmir Street

Tel.: 490 12 34

Hours: 6:30 22:30 week days, 7:30 21:30 weekends

Membership includes use of the indoor and outdoor swimming pools, gym, aerobics studio, spa areas. Members receive a 15% discount at all the Hyatt's restaurants and bars and a 10% discount on all laundry, dry cleaning and pressing from the Baku Laundry Shop.

Aura Wellness Center

Location: 2, Haydar Aliyev Avenue

Tel: 496-8 00 ext. 3060

Hours: 7 days a week from 06:00 till 22:00 hrs

Website: www.aurawellness.az

Membership includes free use of swimming pools (indoor and outdoor), strength equipment area, cardio vascular area, jogging track, fitness studio, locker rooms with steam rooms & saunas, relaxation rooms, and table tennis.

The following facilities and services are charged at a nominal fee: tennis court, squash courts, massage therapy and SPA rooms, racket rental, personal locker rental, aerobics and lessons.

Booking is advised for these facilities & services.

Crescent Beach Hotel Leisure Center

Location: Salyan Highway, Shikhov

Tel. 497 47 77

Contact: Darren Blanchard

Hours: 7:30 22:00 daily

Crescent Beach Hotel has a variety of leisure sport activities and equipment rental (billiards, snooker, tennis, squash, motor boat, jet ski, water ski, sailing, wind surfing, crazy golf, cricket, camping, etc.) for hour and day rates. It's a great weekend get away for the whole family.

Grand Hotel Europe's Club Olympus

Location: 1025 30 Tbilisi Avenue

Tel. 490 70 90

Membership in Club Olympus includes use of the gym, sauna and plunging pool, and outdoor swimming pool. A separate small swimming pool is available for children. There are membership packages available for long and short term rates.

Health & Fitness at the ISR Plaza Hotel

Location: 340 Nizami Street

Tel: 498-24-02 Fax: 497-24-51

Opening hours daily from 7.00 22.30

Aqua Park

Location: 59 Rashid Beibutov St.

Tel: 447-03-03

Hours: from 7 am to 11 pm

Two fully equipped fitness centers from progressive resistance to cycles and steppers, saunas and Jacuzzi. Indoor swimming pool with a 24 hour water disinfecting system, relaxation chairs, water slides and computer games for children, beauty salon and a children's playroom.

Iron Man Gym

There are two halls; one for gym, another for aerobics.

Time: from 8am to 11pm, on Sunday from noon to 3pm

Address: across metro Sahil (in the Officers' House)

Mob. 050-353-93-63, contact Vugaf

Other activities include billiards (many public parks feature multiple tables) and *nard*, an Arabic board game played mostly by men in local parks and teahouses. Chess is also a national pastime and can be very competitive. Several Soviet champions were from Baku. Every year a national chess championship is held in Baku.

Bring all your own sports equipment and clothing, as items are difficult to find, and, when available, expensive.

Touring and Outdoor Activities

Baku possesses many historic and interesting sites. The Old City is surrounded by a medieval stone wall and houses the city's oldest minaret, "Synykh-Kala." While walking down the cobblestone streets, you come upon the medieval Caravansaray, the traditional inn travelers

stayed in during long caravan trips by horseback and camel. It is now a restaurant where musicians dress in ethnic costumes and play traditional Azerbaijani music. Eating there is truly a cultural experience. Within walking distance of the Caravansaray is the legendary Maiden's Tower. The Tower is nearly 800 years old and serves as the perfect spot for a bird's eye view of the city. Handmade Azerbaijani carpets can be found in the Old City and in many other parts of Azerbaijan.

The modern section of Baku boasts beautiful, ornate architecture, and its wide populous streets adorned with large trees are reminiscent of Europe at the turn of the last century. There are many parks with monuments of famous Azerbaijanis such as Nizami, the national poet. Those interested in Azerbaijan's culture and history will find many museums in Baku.

The cultural richness and natural beauty of Azerbaijan are not limited to Baku. Weekend excursions provide an interesting get-away from the Baku city life. Quba, Gandja, and Lenkoran are cities that represent three distinct regions of Azerbaijan. Quba is situated 2½ hours north of Baku. It is a wooded, hilly area with pleasant scenery and wildlife. The city of Gandja (Kirovobad in Soviet times) is about 500 kilometers west of Baku. Many Azerbaijanis maintain summer homes in the mountains south of Gandja. The city of Lenkoran lies near the Iranian border on the coast of the Caspian Sea. It and the area around it are filled with cypress trees, vineyards, orange groves and tea plantations. Other popular weekend excursions include the villages of Lahich and Sheki in northern Azerbaijan.

Sightseeing outside Baku

Temple of Fire Worshippers (20 km from Baku)

The elaborate pre-Muslim traditions of the Caucasus and Middle East are on full view in the village of Surakhany, 30 kilometers from Baku. The temple, called Atashgah by Azeris, was originally built by followers of Zoroaster from India seeking to revive local traditions violently expunged many centuries before by the advancing forces of Islam.

Gobustan and Mud Volcanoes (69 km from Baku)

Caves and rock outcroppings surround this village. Settled since the 8th millennium BC, the area contains thousands of petroglyphs and rock carvings depicting hunting scenes, people, animals and even 2,000-year-old graffiti left by Roman legionnaires. Visit Gobustan Museum (features models of prehistoric dwellings and cave paintings). 10 km from Gobustan mud volcanoes.

Quba (100 mi/165 km northwest of Baku)

While a 16th-century fortress dominates this town, most people go to Quba to see the hundreds of apple orchards. In the spring, the area is fragrant with the scent of apple blossoms. The town is also a center of carpet making -- tour a plant or do some shopping (Azerbaijanis will tell you that Quba's rugs are the best in the region). Along with Sumgait, Quba is generally seen as part of a long day trip from Baku. Pleasant accommodations are available in the countryside nearby.

Sheki (235 mi/380 km northwest of Baku).

Scenic surroundings and a spectacular gorge setting are among the main attractions of this city. Originally sited lower down the hill, Sheki was moved to its present location after a devastating flood. Long famed as a silk center, it's the site of a huge factory that was once the Soviet

Union's largest silk plant. Sheki also has a khan's summer palace (with a fresco, 80 ft/24 m long), a reconstructed Persian caravansary which doubles as a modern hotel, and a fortress. Northwest of Sheki is Zaqatala, which is dominated by an early 19th century Russian fortress, which was used after the 1905 Russian Revolution as a prison for the mutinous crew of the battleship Potemkin.

Shemakha (130 km west of Baku)

Once an ancient capital and major trading center, Sheamakha was nearly destroyed over the centuries by repeated earthquakes. Some old buildings have survived, however, and are worth seeing. Notable among them are a royal mausoleum, a fortress and a 10th-century mosque. Visitors can tour carpet factories and local vineyards (which produce overly sweet fortified wines).

Lahij (3 hours from Baku)

Lahij is a popular, if lengthy day trip from Baku. It is an ancient village with small cobbled streets overlooked by blacksmith workshops and carpet weavers. There is a small museum with an Azeri caretaker who speaks English. There is no hotel in Lahij but grassy areas nearby are suitable for camping.

Beaches in Azerbaijan

Despite sewage, pesticides, and oil pollution, as well as natural vents leaking gas and petroleum from the seabed, many people still like to swim in the Caspian Sea. The beaches of the north coast are generally cleaner and the most popular amongst vacationers. However, it is not recommended that you swim in the Caspian Sea.

Barbados Beach in Novkhanu (15 minutes from the Embassy). A nice beach. Lounge, chairs, shower and bathroom are available for a small fee.

Entertainment

Baku is a center for the performing arts. Opera, ballet, drama, and classical music are favorite pastimes. Throughout the winter season, programs are held around town, with programs changing every week. Performances are good, and the prices are low. The Baku State Conservatory also sponsors an active program of concerts for its students. Azeris have a great fondness for jazz, which is frequently heard in concert and in nightclubs. Many Azeri restaurants feature floorshows with fine local singers and entertainers, both modern and traditional.

Baku has many, good quality restaurant that offer a wide variety of foods. Azeri cuisine is most similar to Turkish, with Russian and central Asian influence. Azeri restaurants and cafés range from simple teahouses to caravansarays. On the international side, excellent Europeans, American, Chinese, Japanese, French, Italian, Indian, Lebanese, Russian, and Turkish restaurants are all found in Baku. There are three McDonalds throughout the city. Bars and nightclubs are numerous.

The Azerbaijan Cinema is open at the south side of Fountain Square and screens Russian-dubbed films every day. It also has English-language films on Sunday evenings at 7pm. Fountain Square is an outdoor shopping center.

NOTES FOR TRAVELERS

Four major western airlines fly to Baku on a regular basis. Most incoming visitors use Lufthansa (co-share with United) with flights three times a week. British Mediterranean (subsidiary of British Airways) operates seven times a week, Turkish Air has flights seven times a week from Istanbul, Austrian Airlines flies five times a week from Vienna to Baku.

CURRENCY, BANKING, AND WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

The unit of currency is the new manat (AZN), which was introduced in 2006. The exchange rate as of February 2007 was AZN 0.87 to the dollar.

Baku has a fledgling banking system. Credit card acceptance is very limited in Baku. Travelers' checks are generally not exchangeable in Azerbaijan. There is no restriction on bringing in foreign currency but non-diplomatic travelers must declare these amounts on the Customs Declaration documents when entering the country.

Azerbaijan uses the metric system of weights and measures.

RECOMMENDED READING

These titles provide a general indication of the materials published on this country. The Department of State does not endorse unofficial publications.

Aghai-Diba, Bahman. *The Law & Politics of the Caspian Sea in the Twenty-First Century: The Positions and Views of Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, With Special Reference to Iran*. Ibex Publishers, 2003.

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Masters, Tom and Richard Plunkett. *Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan (Lonely Planet Travel Guides)*. Lonely Planet Publications; 2nd edition , 2004.

Nelson, Kay Shaw. *Cuisines of the Caucasus Mountains: Recipes, Drinks, and Lore from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Russia*. Hippocrene Books, 2002.

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Wright, Richard E. "On the Origins of Caucasian Village Rugs," *Oriental Rug Review*. Vol. 10, No. 4 (April/May 1990).

Wright, Richard E. *Caucasian Carpets and Covers: The Weaving Culture*. Hali Publications, London. 1995.

Yergin, Daniel. *The Prize*. Buccaneer Books, 1994.

Below is a list of recommended internet sites:

<http://azerbaijan.usembassy.gov> - U.S. Embassy website.

www.today.az- News from Azerbaijan.

www.citylife.az/index.php?lang=en- Baku entertainment guide.

<http://www.azerb.com> - The A to Z of Azerbaijan.

www.azer.com -Closest thing to an Encyclopedia on the Web about Azerbaijan - includes nearly 1,000 articles and 2,500 photos from all issues of Azerbaijan International Magazine since 1993. Strong SEARCH Engine for Site.

www.azgallery.org -Featuring world class art from Azerbaijan - 1,000 works of art from 100 of Azerbaijan's artists.

<http://www.bakupages.com/>- information about Baku and Azerbaijan, including news and weather, economics and business, politics, entertainment and culture, history and travel.

www.azerbaijannews.net- updating Azeri news on regional Central Asia news headlines, weather, global news and financial market.

www.azerbaijan.az - website on history and culture of Azerbaijan

<http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/music/musicindex.html> - Azerbaijani music

www.zerbaijan.com - broad information about Azerbaijan

www.karabakh.co.uk - UK based web-site on conflict

<http://www.azlink.info> - best search engine for web-sites in Azerbaijan