

Azerbaijan: The Land of Fire

Azerbaijan is a country with unlimited natural resources, centuries-old culture, history and ancient people, whose lifestyle presents a unique and harmonious combination of the traditions and ceremonies of different cultures and civilizations.

Geography

Azerbaijan is a region with unique geographical, climatic and geopolitical characteristics. The present Republic of Azerbaijan has rather small territory (86,6 thousand sq km) but it is possible to experience here 9 of 11 basic climate zones. For example, on droughty and hot Absheron the climate was improved by parks and gardens planted for centuries, but the natural landscape consists of prickles, rocks, saline soils and steppes that become covered by grass only in spring. In other areas of the Republic, you can see numerous sources of spring water ("bulag"), and the pure underground waters are brought on a surface by construction of special systems kagreze. There are Alpine zones, and woods with relic types of trees, where the climate is rainy even in the summer. There are vast steppes and high mountain ranges with the peaks attracting climbers, tourists and those interested in wild nature.



Ancient Culture

Azerbaijan is one of the most ancient sites of humankind. There were settlements in Azerbaijan even at the earliest stages of mankind. Azerbaijan made its own contribution into the establishment of the current culture and civilization, progress and dialectics.

The time kept a range of ancient archeological and architectural monuments for the tourists. The ancient headstones, manuscripts and models of carpets, preserved to the present times from the

ancient ages, can provide much information to those who can and want to read them.

Azerbaijan is a country of ancient culture. The Oguz tribes which moved here and stayed for ages found a deeply rooted culture and in their turn enriched it with Turkic national traditions. The talented and creative powers of the nation are personified in such epic monuments as "Kitabi-Dede Gorgud", "Oguzname" "Keroglu" and many others.



Travelers

Azerbaijan encapsulated between Russia, Iran, Georgia and Armenia is not visited a lot by tourists – for many people visa is a bit difficult to get and hotels are expensive. For this reason, tour agencies which visit the Caucasus often avoid the country. However, things are getting easier since Azerbaijan is making efforts to boost its tourism.

The country is, although unknown, worth visiting. There are many things to see. The capital Baku has a wide variety of parks, statues, shops. People on the streets are friendly, always ready to help a stranger, to point out directions, or just to offer playing a boardgame or drink tea. The hassle of tourist scams and bargaining just doesn't exist in this country, perhaps because of the lack of tourists.

Also outside Baku there are things to see: which country can offer a unique phenomenon of cold "mud volcanoes", petroglyphs, or where else than here can you discover one of the only remaining temples of the Zoroastrians? How about visiting Yanar Dag, the "Fire Mountain", a mountain filled with natural gas, which is on fire all the time.

Dark Spot: Oil Industry

Over the decades, the local industry was successfully represented by oil production, petrochemical and oil processing enterprises. If one compares the economy of Azerbaijan with a living body, it becomes evident that oil flows in the veins of Azerbaijan. The oil and gas resources of Azerbaijan have made this place famous in every part of the world.

For travelers however the oil industry and how it is managed is an obvious downside. The industry destroys nature and makes Azerbaijan the most polluted country in the world. Local scientists consider the Absheron Yasaqligi (Apsheron Peninsula) (including Baku and Sumqayit) and the Caspian Sea to be the ecologically most devastated area in the world because of severe air, soil, and water pollution; soil pollution results from oil spills, from the use of DDT pesticide, and from toxic defoliants used in the production of cotton.

Shipwrecks are resting in the sea, oil is often floating on the water, plants and soil are covered with dust. Further inside the country, unique graveyards, mountains, rivers and a paradise of nature can be discovered - a complete contradiction of the pollution of oil business.



Nature

In Azerbaijan one can find plenty of curative, mineral and thermal waters, mud and oil for medical treatment. They are spread throughout Guba, Shamakhi - Ismayilli, Balakan - Gabala, Sheki - Zagatala, Nakhchivan, Ganjabasar regions. There are 6 national parks, 12 reserves and 17 protected areas occupying 2,4 % from the total territory of the country and cover all basic climatic landscapes in Azerbaijan. Today, the plans for extension of area of protected nature territories up to 10 % of the total area of the republic are in progress.

Azerbaijan has always been famous for its sources of eternal fires - the atashgehs. There is a place

called Yanardag (blazing mountain) in Absheron and thermal springs in some parts of Nakhchivan, Kelbejar, Masali, Lenkoran, Babadag.

In Surakhani, there is an eternal fire place. From the ancient times the fire worshippers from remote places and even the Indian priests were coming to Absheron in search of fire. They built their main temples here in Surakhani and Ateshgah.

Dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh

Azerbaijan's most important domestic and foreign policy issue remains the resolution of the dispute over the region known as Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflict began in 1988 when Armenia made territorial claims against Azerbaijan. Armenian armed forces have occupied 20 percent of Azerbaijan since 1992, including the Nagorno-Karabakh region and 7 surrounding districts. Azerbaijan and Armenia signed a ceasefire agreement in 1994. The co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group - Russia, France, and the U.S. - are currently holding the peace negotiations.

Economy of Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan's high economic growth during 2006-08 is attributable to large and growing oil exports, but the non-energy sector also featured double-digit growth in 2008, spurred by growth in the construction, banking, and real estate sectors. However, the current global economic slowdown presents some challenges for the Azerbaijani economy as oil prices have plummeted since mid-2008 and local banks face a more uncertain international financial environment.

Azerbaijan shares all the formidable problems of the former Soviet republics in making the transition from a command to a market economy, but its considerable energy resources brighten its medium-term prospects. Baku has only recently begun making progress on economic reform, and old economic ties and structures are slowly being replaced. Several other obstacles impede Azerbaijan's economic progress: the need for stepped up foreign investment in the non-energy sector, the continuing conflict with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, pervasive corruption, and potential for a sharp downturn in the construction and real estate sectors.

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