

Greater Baku: The Beak of Flying Bird

If the shape of Azerbaijan on a map is similar to a bird flying towards the sea then the bird's "beak" would be the Absheron peninsula with an ancient and ever young city situated on its southwest coast. The city is Baku - the capital of Azerbaijan.

The population is 2-2,5 million. Even though administratively Baku is separated from Absheron suburb settlements (in a total number of 32), historically they are indivisibly linked to the capital both in cultural and economical as well as in geographical terms. Due to this, the whole Absheron peninsula including the capital is called "Greater Baku".



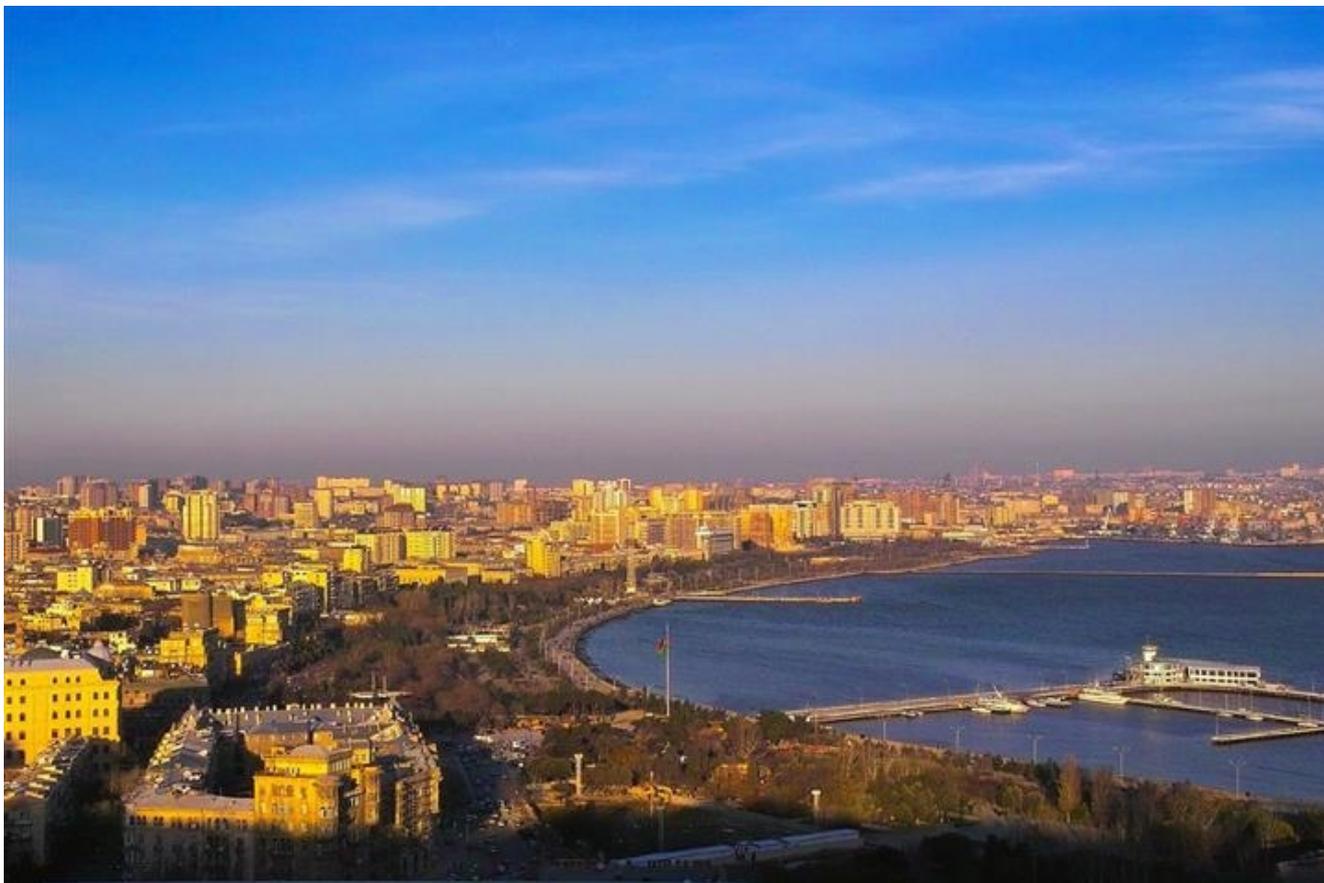
Absheron and Baku feature major transport lines: International Airport n.a. Heydar Aliev, a big port in the Baku Bay (the biggest on the whole Caspian Sea), Baku Railway station and highways connecting the capital with the rest of the country. Major oil and gas pipelines also originate on the peninsula. Baku is a key point of the international transport corridor (Europe-Caucasus-Asia) TRASECA, in the framework of which Azerbaijan participates in restoration of a historical route, the Great Silk Road.

The Absheron Peninsula

Favorable climate, geographical and geological conditions contributed to the fact that Absheron was already inhabited 20.000 years ago (e.g. an ancient human settlement site near the village of Yeni Surakhany). The whole peninsula is studded with ancient settlement sites and mounds dated to the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. There are types of burial complexes with burials of anthropomorphic figures made of stone accompanied by plot pictures (villages of Dubandy, Turkani, Hashahuna,

Mardakan, and Shuvelan) that are restricted only to the Absheron. More settlement sites have been found in Pirallakhi, on the lake of Zikh, in Binagadi and in Amiradzhani. This evidences that the whole Absheron was inhabited in the ancient times. However, geostrategic position of the peninsula attracted various invaders as well.

Besides the settlements there are also monuments from later periods - Bira Argutai mosque (1414), a mosque dated to the 13th-14th centuries with a 40 m tall minaret built later, a bath of 17th century, Ovdan (a lodgment dated to the 19th century), several mausoleums.



Attracting a great interest among guests of Baku is the **temple of Zoroastrians - Ateshgah** (the house of fire) in the village of Surakhany (17th century). It is situated on a rock where natural emergences of gas on the surface have been burning for thousands of years. Near the village of Muhammedli one can observe an interesting natural phenomenon - the emergence of burning natural gases at the bottom of the mountains. The place is called Yanar Dag (The Burning Mountain"). In ancient times there were many such places in Azerbaijan.

Landmarks in Baku

Among the historical monuments of Baku the most exciting is the **Old City - Icheri Sheher** (UNESCO World Heritage site), surrounded by large fortress walls from three directions. There is a **palace of Shirvanshahs** with a complex of various structures: a burial vault, palace, mosque, Divan-khane, the Mausoleum of Seyd Yakhya Bakuvi (mausoleum of a dervish) - a court scientist. The palace was built by Shirvanshah Khalilullah I (1417-1462) and his son Farrukh Yasar (1462-1501). An interesting monument of antiquity is Juma Mosque with the inscription of Sultan Oldzhaytu (13th century). In the narrow streets of Icheri Sheher where the width of passages between houses are often reduced to the width of stretched arms, there are many little shops where one can buy ancient and modern wares of local craftsmen: carpets, ceramics, copperware etc. Here in Icheri Sheher, in the buildings of the ancient caravanserais there are restaurants where one can

taste the meals of Azerbaijani national cuisine.

Viewing the city from above, from the Upland Park or from the direction of the sea it is easily seen that the city's shape resembles an amphitheater on the slopes of rocky hills, it is like a bowl on the sea coast. Rising above at the edge of Icheri Sheher, near the big Baku Boulevard is one of the most famous historical-architecture monuments of the country, a symbol of Baku, **Giz Galasy (Maiden's Tower)**.



Giz Galasy is dated to the 12th century, researchers maintain that the Tower was of military and defensive importance and was a part of the whole complex of defensive structures originating on the northern borders of Azerbaijan (at Derbent Fortress), Gilgichai Defensive Structures (a long wall, originating in the sea with many fortresses along its extent and ending in the mountains with a big tower called Chirag-Gala).

However, not all secrets of Giz Galasy have been revealed. For instance, there are facts supporting the view that the Tower was built in much earlier times. For many residents of Baku the Tower, a unique example of the history and architecture of the country, possesses not only cultural, defensive (astronomic) but also esoteric importance. City folklore contains many legends both about the Tower itself and about its name.

Modern City

Nowadays Baku is a modern city with a delicate charming of the East and features of a modern megapolis. Here, in the capital, there are museums of History of Azerbaijan, Literature, Music Culture, Carpets, and Theater. There are also memorial museums of U. Hadzhibekov, the founder of modern Azerbaijani music, a renowned Azerbaijani composer Niyazi; composer and jazz performer

V. Mustafazade, Baku-born world-famous musician M. Rostropovich, writers and playwrights G. Javid, Jabbarli, M.S. Ordubadi and a unique museum of miniature books.

There are also a number of exhibitions, concert halls, art galleries, theaters, sport complexes, stadiums, swimming pools, numerous hotels and restaurants.

Around Baku, along the whole perimeter of the Absheron peninsula there are a number of beaches. One can bathe and tan on the Absheron five months a year since there are many warm and hot sunny days. When the sun goes down and the heat of summer days fades away discos and night clubs begin their work on the beaches. At the service of tourist and vacationers are plentiful of hotels, resorts and health centers on the Caspian Coast.

Oil Industry

Baku, Azerbaijan's capital, is located directly on the Caspian Sea. It has been home to a vibrant oil industry since the late nineteenth century. At one time Azerbaijan produced more than half of the world's oil. Industrialists from around the world have been drawn to Baku because of the large supply, making it one of the most international cities in the Caucasus. To this day, the oil obtained from the Caspian Sea makes Azerbaijan a highly desirable trading partner.

Baku as the World's Dirtiest City

In February 2008, the city of Baku was named the world's dirtiest city by Forbes: "Surrounded by Iran, Georgia, Russia and Armenia on the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan has long been an oil hub. As a consequence, Baku, the capital, suffers from life-threatening levels of air pollution emitted from oil drilling and shipping."

Maiden's Tower

Baku's landmark symbol is believed to date to 12th century. The name of the Tower "Maiden's" is explained by numerous legends concerning a determined young lady pursued by a despotic local king (sometimes identified as her father), who reportedly imprisoned her in this Tower. According to the legend, rather than becoming his lover, she committed suicide by throwing herself from the Tower into the Caspian Sea.

Photos: TR, Flickr

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