

# The Fire Temple Ateshgah

In early history Azerbaijan was called the “land of the sacred fire”. Although the “everlasting fire” mentioned by early travelers such as Alexander Dumas was caused by the gas and oil deposits erupting from the earth, it became surrounded by legends and mystery. Some 2,600 years ago, Zarathustra formulated Zoroastrianism, one of the first major monotheistic religions. His idea to use fire as a metaphor for the mysteries of God probably came from witnessing the spontaneous flames that rise so eerily from Azerbaijan's Absheron Peninsula. Today the fires still burn. Most notable is Yanar Dagh near Mammedli, where a small hillside is constantly and naturally aflame.



On Absheron there were many temples of fire as well. The most famous is the well-preserved Hindu temple **Ateshgah** ("the Fire Place") in Surakhany, located 20 kilometers east of the town center. This rare temple is dedicated to 'Jwalaji or the goddess of fire', forgotten for decades but now catching the attention of tourists. The temple was built over a pocket of natural gas that fuelled a vent providing an 'eternal' fire. This kind of use of fire in Zoroastrian temples led to the followers of Zoroaster (Zarathustra).

Historians, archaeologists, and theologians have argued over the construction date of the temple. Some state that there was a Zoroastrian temple in Surakhany since the 6th century; others delay that event for another seven centuries. As the introduction of Islam to the region to the area resulted in the destruction of almost every Zoroastrian temple and documents, these claims are hard to assess.

After Azerbaijan was islamised some Zoroastrians escaped to India. But trade links with India in later centuries, led to renewed contacts with the fire-worshippers, who had migrated from to Northern India. During 17th and 18th centuries, the site was rebuilt by Indian merchants and masons, who had established in Baku their settlement.



What you can see today dates mostly from the 18th and 19th centuries, built over the crumbling remains of the previous temple, by active Zoroastrian worshipers from India (know there as 'Parsees', for their Persian origin). This fire temple, with a mixture of Indian and Azerbaijani architectural styles, is a surviving proof of age old relationship between the two countries. The pentagon shaped building is surrounded by a wall with a guest room over the gate ('balakhane').

There are still some wall inscriptions in Sanskrit and Gurumukhi, including poems. Cells for pilgrims line the wall inside and surround the main altar in the center of the temple – a quadrangular pavilion with the fire on the altar inside.



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plaques describing who built them and in which year. There are over 20 stone plaques, of which 18 are in Devanagari, one in Gurumukhi and one in Farsi (Persian), Sanskrit text with which begins in Hindu tradition with "Om Shri Ganeshaye Namah."

Surakhany remained a popular destination for Indian pilgrims until the end of 19th century. The natural gas vent has been exhausted and in 1880 the last pilgrim returned to India. The temple was last restored in 1975. Today low, dark cells for monks and pilgrims in the Ateshgah Temple at Surakhany house represent an interesting museum, intended to introduce the rudiments of Zoroastrianism to the visitors.

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