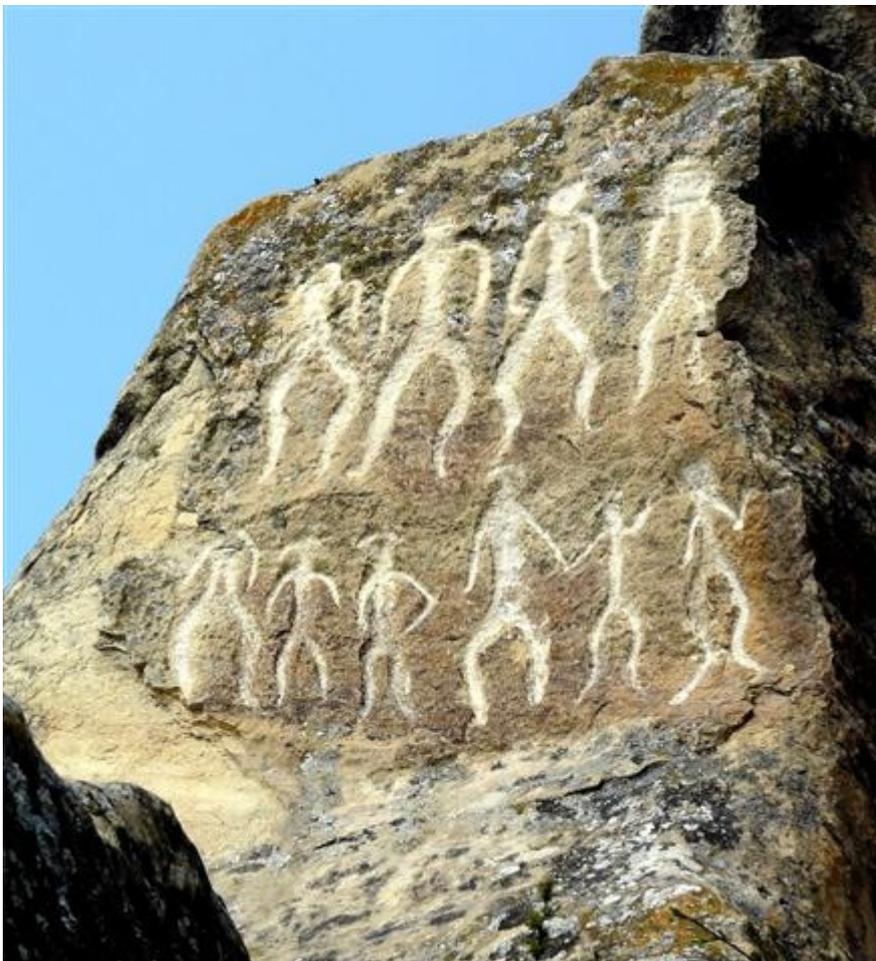


Gobustan Rock Engravings and Muddy Volcanoes

One of the most popular sites in Azerbaijan is definitely Gobustan and its ancient rock engravings.

Gobustan Dancers

Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape covers three areas of a plateau of rocky boulders rising out of the semi-desert of central Azerbaijan, with an outstanding collection of more than 6,000 rock engravings bearing testimony to 40,000 years of rock art. The site also features the remains of inhabited caves, settlements and burials, all reflecting an intensive human use by the inhabitants of the area during the wet period that followed the last Ice Age, from the Upper Paleolithic to the Middle Ages. The site, which covers an area of 537 ha, is part of the larger protected Gobustan Reservation.



Just 65km south of Baku Gobustan is an open-air museum littered with Neolithic rock drawings. Stone Age folks sporting loin cloths pose hunt and boogie down. Their dances are thought to have been accompanied by the melodious strains of the Gaval-Dashy (Tambourine Stone) - a rock that has a deep, resonating tone when struck.

The well-preserved sketches display ancient populations travelling on reed boats; men hunt antelope and wild bulls, women dance. The famed Norwegian anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl returned many times to Azerbaijan between 1961 and 2002 to study the site, which he argued to evidence that modern-day Scandinavians migrated north through the Caucasus in prehistoric times. He found

similarities in the drawings to those found in Scandinavia, particularly some in Alta, Norway. According to Icelandic Sagas, written in the 13th century, the Norse God Odin (Wotan) migrated from the Caucasus in the first century AD.

The rocks of Gobustan also retain the evidence of the presence of Roman legionnaires crossing this attractive region in the 1st century BC. A rock has been found here with the carved inscription in Latin written by Roman centurions of the XII Legio Fulminata. The inscription reads that the Emperor Domitianus Caesar Augustus Germanicus ruled in Rome at that time. In 2007 Gobustan was inscribed on the UNESCO List of World Heritage.



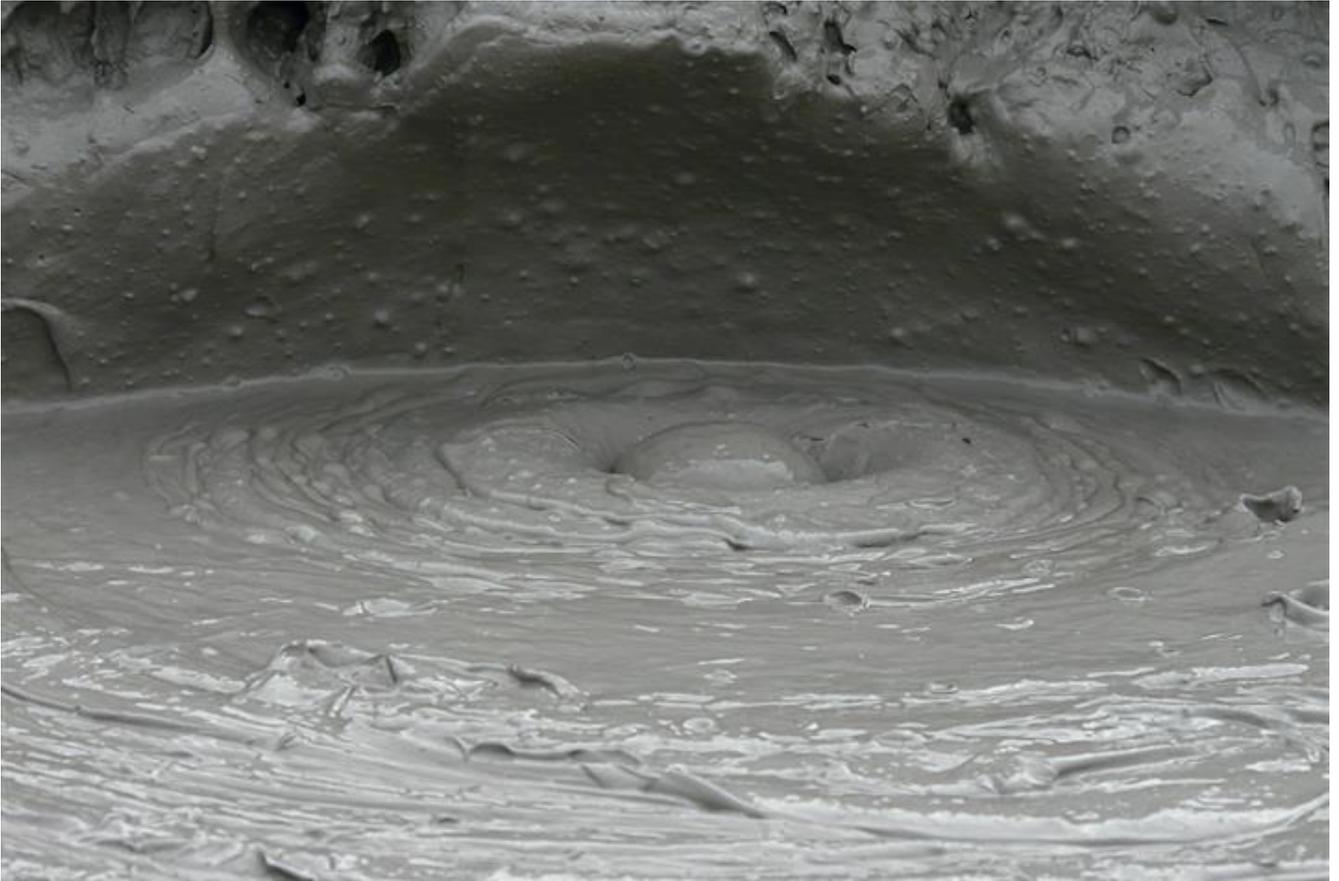
Mud Volcanoes

In the region you can also visit quite a unique site with cold mud volcanoes. Azerbaijan is the first among the world's countries by quantity and diversity of mud volcanoes. Out of the 800 mud volcanoes that can be found in different countries 400 are located within the boundaries of the South Caucasus oil-and-gas basins and among the latter 300 are located in Azerbaijan, within its Caspian area of water and on numerous islands.

Many geologists as well as locals and international mud tourists trek to such places as the Firuz Crater, Gobustan, Salyan and end up happily covered in mud which is thought to have medicinal qualities. In 2001 one mud volcano 15 kilometers from Baku made world headlines when it suddenly started spewing flames 15 meters high.

In the Spring of 2001, volcanic activity under the Caspian Sea off the Azeri coast created a whole new island. In October 2001 there was an impressive volcanic eruption in Azerbaijan at Lokbatan, but there were no casualties or evacuation warnings. Mud volcanoes are the little-known relatives of

the more common magmatic variety. They do erupt occasionally with spectacular results, but are generally not considered to be dangerous.



Mud volcanoes come in a variety of shapes and sizes, but those most common in Azerbaijan have several small cones, or vents, up to about four metres in height (13 feet), sometimes topping a hill of several hundred metres. These small cones emit cold mud, water and gas almost continually - an amazing and even beautiful sight, which has become part of the tourist itinerary for foreigners visiting Azerbaijan. But sometimes even mud volcanoes have their day.

Every twenty years or so, a mud volcano may explode with great force, shooting flames hundreds of metres into the sky, and depositing tonnes of mud on the surrounding area.

Photos: TR, Flickr

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