

Food Tourism: Important Pillar for Tourism Growth along the Silk Road



Experts from the areas of tourism, culture and gastronomy meeting in Baku pinpointed food as an essential part of the tourism experience and an increasingly important percentage of overall tourist expenditure. The importance of food tourism was further confirmed by the UNWTO Global Report on Food Tourism, launched during the Conference.

On the occasion of the Conference, UNWTO Secretary-General, Mr. Taleb Rifai, met the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, H.E. Mr. Ilham Aliyev who emphasised the importance of tourism in today's world and the significance of its contribution to Azerbaijan's economy.

Opening the Conference, Mr. Rifai pointed to growing demand for 'experience-based' tourism over recent years, adding that in today's globalized world, consumers are increasingly seeking authentic experiences such as local culinary traditions. "Food tourism is also an important vehicle for development, with locally sourced produced ensuring tourist dollars are invested back into the community, allowing other businesses to thrive," he said.

The Silk Road, an ancient traveling and trading route which played a major role in the evolution of international cuisine, was the focus of the Conference which was also opened by the Minister of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Mr. Abulfas Garayev.

"We are especially proud to hold this conference because in Azerbaijan we care greatly for the traditions of our rich gastronomy stretching back to ancient times," said Mr. Garayev. "Tourism is a key sector for linking the countries along the Silk Road and we are pleased to support through this conference the World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue," to be held in Baku in May, 2013.

Speaking at the conference, the Vice President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, one of the countries of the Silk Road, Mr. Seyyed Hassan Mousavi, said: "The significance of the Silk Road is so great, as a crossroad of civilisations and as a road to peace. Iran, its culture and cuisine are an integral part of this."

Mr. Mousavi offered four key recommendations for fostering sustainable tourism development along the Silk Road, including the introduction of a Silk Road visa, modelled on the Schengen example, which would allow citizens of the Silk Road to cross borders more freely. The Vice President stated his commitment to hosting an international Silk Road conference in Iran, recommended the creation of a Silk Road Day, and proposed the development of a comprehensive Silk Road Atlas.

Further recommendations at the Conference, including from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO), included the need for Ministries of Tourism and Agriculture to work together to foster agro-tourism projects; the importance of safeguarding culinary heritage; and the need for more micro-financing for small and medium sized enterprises involved in rural food production and development.

Contacts:

Principal Media Officer: [Marcelo Risi](#)

Tel: (+34) 91 567 81 60

Vasif R. Eyvazzade

Chief International Relations and Cultural Programmes Department

Republic of Azerbaijan Ministry of Culture and Tourism

Tel: +99412 493 02 33

Fax: +99412 493 65 38

v.eyvazzade@mct.gov.az

vasifeyvazzade@gmail.com

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