



Promoting a Lasting Partnership Between Azerbaijan and America

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Baku offers one gem after another



In Baku, schoolchildren visit the eternal flame on Marytrs' Lane, a memorial to war dead.

October 5, 2014 - BAKU, Azerbaijan (The Boston Globe) — The risk of getting lost seems to lurk around every corner. Through the narrow, maze-like alleys of Baku's Old Town, one finds a mysterious mosque half-hidden here, a slim minaret looming there. The medieval houses appear in different shades of ocher, with early-evening shadows sneaking up their exteriors. Rough brick walls still radiate the heat of the day, as the sun's last rays add a glow of warm orange light to the setting. This is doubtless the best time for a stroll — but on cobblestone streets known to take unexpected twists and turns, one better have a good map at hand.

The first stars dot the sky above the Caspian Sea, when a curious structure suddenly appears. Wide and windowless, the Maiden's Tower rises 95 feet. It is one of the most important national icons in this capital city of over 2 million. Considered the Big Ben of Baku and popular amongst tourists, the landmark dates to the 12th century. Part of the city wall — which surrounds most of the medieval town to this day — this formidable lookout post was part of the city fortifications. Throughout history, with varying degrees of success, Baku's inhabitants tried to defend themselves against a series of Persian, Russian, and Ottoman invasions. It is easy to imagine those Bakuvians hiding behind

the embrasure, trying to get a good shot at the aggressors with a bow or blunderbuss, all this history adding to the city's evocative atmosphere.



Evening strollers on Nizami Street in downtown Baku.

Rise of the oil magnates

The Old Town of Baku is the setting for much of Kurban Said's famous 1937 novel, "Ali and Nino." Considered a national epic, the gripping story offers insight into Azeri culture. It is an intriguing account of Baku around the time of the Russian Revolution and features a young Muslim Azeri nobleman who courts a Georgian princess from a Christian family.

As the love story progresses, readers learn of Baku as a place where East and West, Asia and Europe, clash. The city is depicted as a sizzling melting pot of different traditions and lifestyles, its society facing immense changes as the Bolsheviks arrive to make Azerbaijan a Soviet socialist republic in 1920.

In the decades leading up to that fateful year, Azerbaijan experienced its first oil boom. In the late 19th century, fields just outside of Baku produced more than 50 percent of the world's supply, and foreigners flocked to get a piece of the action. Among them were members of the Rothschild dynasty and the Swedish Nobel brothers.

Right next to the Maiden's Tower this fascinating part of the city's history comes alive in the 1912 residence of oil baron Isa Bey Hajinski. Judging by its heavily decorated facade, the architectural style seems a curious mix of Art Nouveau and Neo-Gothic, with hordes of mythical creatures on its five stories overhanging occasionally scared passersby. Trolls stick out their tongues and show their claws. The tails and wings of majestic cherubs twist and turn. A jumble of balconies, arcs, bay windows, and small towers are beautifully fitted together.

Eager to show off their immense wealth, the oil barons tried to outdo one another by erecting ever more lavish mansions. The more oil, the more extravagant, ornamented, and luxurious their homes became. Besides the Hajinski residence, many still stand today, highly interesting sights for visitors.



Maiden's Tower, part of the antique Old Town wall.

Unquenched national traumas

Leaving the medieval town and late-19th-century oil barons behind, an ascent to the hill above Baku is essential to seeing what has shaped Azerbaijan's national psyche in recent years.

Martyrs' Lane offers spectacular views over the city and the Caspian, but this is not why most people come up here. People come to commemorate those Azeris who lost their lives in the events of Black January, the violent crackdown on local protesters by the

Red Army in 1990, and those killed in the Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-94) between ethnic Armenians in that Azerbaijan enclave and the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Part memorial, part cemetery, along Martyrs' Lane is where about 15,000 people have their final resting place. A long row of tombstones in black marble decorated with beautiful and innocent-looking faces of the dead makes a stark impression. The line of graves leads to a huge eternal flame. Behind it the contours of a visiting school class blur slightly from the radiating heat as the teacher gesticulates and explains. Under the small chapel-like structure, which hosts this yellow and orange genie, the children become quiet and attentive. Almost hypnotized, they look deep into the meandering flames. Reading the facial expressions in this young crowd and feeling the heat, one can begin to understand the depth of these national traumas and that the bitter enmities of the Caucasus region are by no means forgotten.

A bustling playful oasis

Considerably more life-affirming than the necropolis on Martyrs' Lane, small



Domino players in Akhundov Square.

Akhundov Square is bustling and vibrant. After wandering around the city for many hours, here are comfortable benches for resting under lush acacias. And weary travelers can buy a tasty doner kebab close by. Arguably the most popular dish in town, and a common fast food throughout the Middle East and Turkey, the doner kebab consists of pieces of grilled chicken with a generous mix of fresh tomatoes, cucumber, and onions, with some vendors offering french fries on the side. All the ingredients are conveniently

wrapped in lavash, the flatbread common throughout the Caucasus, an ideal package for tourists on the go.

People-watchers taking an interest in how local life unfolds won't come to this small oasis in vain, as Bakuivians of all ages mingle in the square in the evenings. Near a statue of the poet who gave the square its name, young mothers try to prevent their children from running too far. Gathered around small tables, older men slam down domino tiles with loud clacks, occasionally accompanied by shouts of excitement. They sip from small glass mugs tinted amber with tea. Between games they are not shy to engage in conversation with strangers strolling by. They hand out some of their golden drink in a welcoming gesture and talk proudly about the prosperity of Baku, due to another oil boom of recent years. The domino players are curious to hear a foreigner's impression and content to be told that Azerbaijan and its capital are indeed worth a visit.

The Working Group of the U.S. Congress on Azerbaijan which has operated since 2004, plays a special role in the development of relations between Azerbaijan and the United States. For more information, please visit the Alliance website at www.azerbaijanamericaalliance.org

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