

Cultural Daily

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Azerbaijan: 5 Stolen Moments From An Adventure

Fatimah Zainal · Wednesday, October 1st, 2014

On my recent trip to Azerbaijan to receive an award from the Ministry of Youth and Sports, I was able to lay down inroads into experiencing the country and its splendor. A glance inside the annals of history would show that Azerbaijan is one of the most ancient nations in the world. I was privileged to witness that the nation is ripe and rife with a richly historical peoples, languages, traditions, arts, music, and religion. The Azerbaijani ages-old cultural heritage had been proudly and carefully preserved since time immemorial. Today, amid the ascending tenor of the 21st century, the culture heritage remains a pillar of national identity. Among many, here are five stolen moments from my trip:

1) The beauty of Baku

Dubbed as the City of Winds and famed for the immodest blue of the Caspian Sea, gorgeous sun-bleached buildings and historical ruins that echo a glorious past, Baku is the proud capital of Azerbaijan. And true enough, it did justice to its name. The seaborne wind will pull and push you, it will tickle your shins and rustle your dress, and it will run its fingers through your hair.



The Heydar Aliyev museum, dedicated to the country's third president.

A glance in any direction would show streets filled with eclectic architecture, arts, history, and culture. Walk down the cobblestone alleys at night and you will hear laughter spilling out of the open doors of cafes and bars. Have a few *manat* (Azerbaijani currency) at the ready and take a look inside the quaint and unique cafes, markets, and souvenir shops.

If you are into beautiful architecture and history, the Shirvanshah's Palace, the Maiden Tower, the Alley of the Martyrs, the Heydar Aliyev Museum, and Atashgah Temple will be sure to wake the sleeping fantails of your heart.



The adamantine walls of the Shirvanshah's Palace.

2) The legendary hospitality

The Azeris are known for their top-notch hospitality and their impassioned love for the arts and music, and hospitality is highly valued as a national characteristic. A guest in an Azerbaijani household can typically expect a warm welcome, food, and shelter. I experienced this first-hand, having been rewarded with 8 days stay in Azerbaijan by the generous Azerbaijani government.

Everything from my flights, accommodation at 5 star hotels, and excursions to different parts of the country were fully sponsored.

Other than being strongly characterized by their legendary hospitality, the Azerbaijanis are known for their strong tenets about martyrdom as well as fierce territorial ownership and integrity. The Azeris, who have looks on the cusp between European and Middle Eastern, speak a mix of Turkish and Russian languages and are known to greet others warmly with “Shalom”, for Jews, or “Salam”, for Muslims. Anyone from any cultural vortex can expect to be warmly welcomed here.



A man and his taxidermied wolf. The locals call him “The Symbol of Russia”.

3) The country’s nonpareil policies

Azerbaijan, whose economic mileage is rocket-fuelled by its oil and gas industry, offers a great policy on education. At the ADA University in Baku (formerly known as Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy), I learned that education in Azerbaijan is free and the government even offers scholarships to international students.



A tourist laying down a rose at the tomb of Heydar Aliyev, the former president of Azerbaijan who mobilized the country’s robust growth and development.

To note, it is also the only country in the world that grants 165 weeks of paid maternal leave, surpassing its Middle Eastern counterparts and Western countries by leaps and bounds!

What’s more, the law of the country, which declares “On freedom of faith,” has been acting as the country’s fountainhead of justice since 1992. The right grants autonomy for any Azerbaijani the freedom to practice religions and express their views as well as exercise their rights pertaining to religions.



Martyr’s Mosque in the Turkish Memorial, at the Alley of Martyrs.

4) Tolerance and respect

On my excursion to Ismayili City where I visited one of the most ancient villages in the world, Lahij, I had deeper insight into how the Jewish and Muslim communities live in peaceful harmony. The tradition of mutual respect is embedded in every aspect of the Azeri life. Traditions accompany Azerbaijanis from the moment of their birth up to the end of their life. From wooing, wedding, birthing ceremony, and national celebrations, the Azerbaijani traditions are rich and lively as its people.



Tourists at the ancient village of Lahij trying out ancient battle costumes.

In Lahij, flanked by mountainous terrains and a sun that gives my skin that Mediterranean tan, I saw how the country’s immodest beauty made a crucial impact on the aesthetic tastes and the creative skills of the Azerbaijani people. The houses and the museum analogously feature Azerbaijani applied arts such as folk arts, fine arts, material and cultural monuments, music, and literature.



A view of the entrance to Lahij

5) The land of many dreams

In Sheky, you will discover the marvel of a building that was built using only an amalgamation of egg whites and lime juice: the Sheky Khan's Palace of administration. You will discover castle walls and ceilings intricately covered with centuries-old drawings of miniatures, made by nonpareil master miniaturists. In Gobustan, you will find remnants of age-old civilizations, where the rock formations and petroglyphs carved into the skin of the caves serve as testaments to the existence of civilization since time immemorial. In Gabala, you will fall for the stunning mountain peaks, the legacy of Karvansaray, and the allure of an Azeri countryside.



The Sheky Khan's Palace, established in 1762. It is the administration building for the Sheky region. There was not a single nail used for the construction of this place. It was built using a mix of lime and egg whites in lieu of glue.

To say that it was an adventure of a lifetime would be an understatement. You will not be able to avoid getting your heart ripped out by the beauty of this country. You will never forget the terraced gardens, the sand-coloured buildings, the bright jewels of city lights, the mountains, the warm handshake of the locals, and even the bright promise of more glorious adventures waiting for you in the Land of Fire.



The gorgeous neutral-toned buildings of Baku.

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