



*From the MixCache.com library*

SAMPLE COPY

# Visiting Azerbaijan

MixCache.com

SAMPLE COPY

## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Introduction to Azerbaijan
- **Chapter 2** Planning Your Trip
- **Chapter 3** Best Time to Visit
- **Chapter 4** Visa Requirements
- **Chapter 5** Getting There
- **Chapter 6** Getting Around
- **Chapter 7** Accommodation
- **Chapter 8** Currency
- **Chapter 9** Language
- **Chapter 10** Safety and Security
- **Chapter 11** Health and Insurance
- **Chapter 12** Packing Essentials
- **Chapter 13** Baku
- **Chapter 14** Absheron Peninsula
- **Chapter 15** Ganja
- **Chapter 16** Sheki
- **Chapter 17** Qabala
- **Chapter 18** Quba & Khinalig
- **Chapter 19** Lankaran & the South
- **Chapter 20** Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic
- **Chapter 21** Other Regions
- **Chapter 22** Culture and Customs
- **Chapter 23** Cuisine
- **Chapter 24** Music and Dance
- **Chapter 25** Practical Information

SAMPLE COPY

## Introduction

Nestled in the Caucasus region at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, Azerbaijan offers a unique gateway into a world of vibrant contrasts and rich history. This relatively small, yet culturally rich country boasts an impressive array of landscapes — from the vast Caspian Sea coastline to the snow-capped peaks of the Greater Caucasus Mountains. Each geographical feature not only delights the eye but also contributes to the diverse cultural tapestry that defines Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan's historical roots are profound and varied, tracing back through millennia of cultural exchanges and trade, prominently as a crucial node on the ancient Silk Road. This role facilitated the exchange not only of goods and luxuries but also ideas and traditions, crafting a unique blend of influences that permeate Azerbaijani culture today. Visitors are often entranced by the grandeur of historical sites such as the medieval walled city of Baku and the ancient petroglyphs of Gobustan, which testify to this rich past.

As one of the first nations to adopt Christianity in antiquity, before later becoming a predominantly Islamic society, Azerbaijan uniquely balances a secular, modern outlook with profound religious heritage. The country's array of architectural marvels — including ancient caravansaries, mosques, and Zoroastrian fire temples — is a testament to this blend of traditions and cultures. This meld of old and new is embodied perfectly in the capital city, Baku, where ancient history and futuristic architecture coexist in an intriguing dialogue.

Today, having gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan is a rapidly developing nation with a growing tourism industry. Fueled by significant oil and natural gas reserves, its economy has flourished, particularly in the capital Baku. This growth brings with it an exceptional dynamism, offering tourists a captivating mix of adventure, leisure, and discovery across both urban and rural landscapes.

In this guide, prospective tourists will find a wealth of practical advice, insights, and recommendations tailored specifically to enrich the experience of exploring Azerbaijan. From navigating visa processes and discovering the best times to visit, to immersing oneself in Azerbaijan's rich cultural nuances, this book aims to be a comprehensive resource for every traveler's needs. Whether you're fascinated by ancient history, curious about unique cultural customs, or eager to traverse breathtaking natural landscapes, Azerbaijan offers something unforgettable for every visitor.

Overall, visiting Azerbaijan is much more than a mere vacation; it's an exploration into

the depths of historical riches and a vibrant opportunity to engage with a culture that is both welcoming and endlessly fascinating. As you journey through the Land of Fire, let this guide illuminate your path and enhance your exploration, enabling a travel experience that is as rich and diverse as the land itself.

SAMPLE COPY

## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction to Azerbaijan

Welcome to Azerbaijan, a nation perched intriguingly at the geographical and cultural intersection of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. Known affectionately, and sometimes quite literally, as the "Land of Fire," this country offers travellers a complex and compelling tapestry woven from threads of ancient history, rapid modernisation, diverse landscapes, and the enduring warmth of its people. Often overlooked in favour of more trodden tourist paths, Azerbaijan presents a genuinely unique experience, blending familiar elements of Persian, Turkic, and Russian culture with something entirely its own. It occupies a space where continents collide, not just physically but also in terms of ideas, traditions, and historical narratives, making it a particularly fascinating destination for the curious traveller.

Geographically, Azerbaijan occupies a significant position in the South Caucasus region. It shares land borders with Russia's Dagestan republic to the north, Georgia to the northwest, Armenia to the west, and Iran to the south. Crucially, it also boasts a long coastline along the Caspian Sea to the east, the world's largest inland body of water. Adding a layer of geopolitical complexity and travel interest is the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, an exclave of Azerbaijan nestled between Armenia, Iran, and a small but strategically important border with Turkey. This geographical placement has historically made Azerbaijan a vital crossroads, a role it continues to play today, mediating influences from its larger neighbours while forging its own path.

The country's landscape is remarkably varied for its size. The dominant feature is arguably the Greater Caucasus mountain range forming a natural northern border, home to Azerbaijan's highest peak, Bazardüzü Dag, and offering dramatic alpine scenery, deep canyons, and remote villages. To the west lie the foothills of the Lesser Caucasus mountains, while the centre and east are dominated by the expansive Kura-Aras Lowlands, drained by the country's two main rivers. Along the Caspian coast, the Absheron Peninsula, where the capital Baku is located, juts out into the sea, historically significant for its oil fields. Further south, towards the Iranian border, the landscape transitions into the humid subtropical climate of the Lankaran lowlands, famed for its tea plantations and relict forests. This geographical diversity means that in a relatively short space of time, a visitor can journey from semi-desert environments dotted with mud volcanoes near Baku to verdant hillsides around Sheki, or the high-altitude landscapes near Khinalig.

The evocative moniker "Land of Fire" is deeply rooted in Azerbaijan's identity and history. It stems partly from natural phenomena: the country is rich in oil and natural gas reserves, which sometimes seep to the surface and ignite. The most famous example is Yanar Dag, the "Burning Mountain" near Baku, where natural gas has been

burning continuously for centuries, possibly millennia. Similar occurrences historically fuelled flames at sites like the Ateshgah Fire Temple, a place of worship for Zoroastrians, Hindus, and Sikhs drawn to the eternal fires. Beyond the literal flames, the name also connects to the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism, which revered fire as a holy element and was prevalent in the region before the arrival of Islam. This fiery heritage is embraced in modern Azerbaijan, perhaps most spectacularly symbolised by Baku's iconic Flame Towers, skyscrapers shaped like tongues of fire that illuminate the city skyline each night.

Azerbaijan's history is a long and intricate saga, reflecting its position as a bridge between empires and cultures. Archaeological evidence, notably the prehistoric petroglyphs at Gobustan, points to human habitation dating back tens of thousands of years. In antiquity, the region was home to Caucasian Albania (no relation to the Balkan country), an ancient kingdom that played a significant role in the Caucasus before eventually being absorbed by larger powers. Over the centuries, Azerbaijan fell under the influence or direct rule of successive empires, including the Achaemenids, Sasanids, the Arab Caliphate (which introduced Islam in the 7th century), Seljuk Turks, Mongols, and various Persian dynasties. Each left an indelible mark on the culture, architecture, and genetic makeup of the region.

One particularly important local dynasty was the Shirvanshahs, who ruled Shirvan in northern Azerbaijan from the 9th to the 16th centuries. Their magnificent palace complex within Baku's Old City stands as a testament to their power and cultural sophistication during the medieval period. Further west, regions like Sheki developed their own distinct Khanates, contributing unique architectural gems like the Palace of the Sheki Khans, renowned for its exquisite stained glass, known as *shebeke*. The legacy of the Silk Road also permeates this history; towns like Sheki and Baku flourished as vital trading hubs, complete with caravanserais where merchants could rest and exchange goods, fostering a cosmopolitan atmosphere.

The modern era brought profound changes. Starting in the early 19th century, the territory of modern Azerbaijan was gradually annexed by the Russian Empire following wars with Persia. This period saw the beginning of large-scale oil extraction, particularly around Baku, towards the end of the century. Figures like the Nobel brothers and the Rothschilds invested heavily, transforming Baku into a booming industrial centre, attracting workers and entrepreneurs from across the empire and Europe, creating a unique architectural blend often referred to as the "Oil Baron" style. This first oil boom funded opulent mansions that still adorn central Baku.

Amidst the turmoil following the collapse of the Russian Empire after World War I, Azerbaijan seized a brief window of freedom. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) was declared in May 1918, headquartered initially in Ganja before moving to Baku. Significantly, the ADR was the first successful attempt to establish a secular, parliamentary republic in the Muslim world, and notably, it granted women the right to

vote in 1919, ahead of many Western nations. This independence, however, was short-lived. In April 1920, the Soviet Red Army invaded, and Azerbaijan was incorporated into the Soviet Union, initially as part of the Transcaucasian SFSR, and later as the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (Azerbaijan SSR).

The Soviet period, lasting over seven decades, left a deep and complex legacy. On one hand, it brought widespread industrialisation (beyond oil), improvements in literacy and healthcare, and the development of infrastructure like railways and the Baku Metro. On the other hand, it involved the suppression of national identity, religious practices, and political dissent, along with collectivisation and periods of harsh repression under Stalin. The alphabet was changed multiple times (from Perso-Arabic to Latin, then to Cyrillic), impacting cultural continuity. Russian became the lingua franca of administration and interethnic communication, leaving a lasting imprint on language use. The Soviet era also saw the redrawing of borders in the Caucasus, sowing seeds for future conflicts, most notably concerning the Nagorno-Karabakh region, an area predominantly populated by Armenians but placed within the Azerbaijan SSR.

With the weakening and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan declared the restoration of its independence in October 1991. The early years were marked by political instability and the outbreak of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-1994) with neighbouring Armenia over the disputed territory and surrounding districts, resulting in significant casualties, territorial losses for Azerbaijan, and a massive displacement of Azerbaijanis from the conflict zone and Armenians from the rest of Azerbaijan. This conflict profoundly shaped post-Soviet Azerbaijan's politics, economy, and national psyche for decades.

Since the mid-1990s, particularly following the signing of the "Contract of the Century" opening up Caspian oil fields to international consortia, Azerbaijan has experienced a second oil boom. This influx of wealth has fuelled dramatic economic growth and funded large-scale construction and infrastructure projects, most visibly transforming Baku into a hyper-modern capital with ambitious architectural projects like the Heydar Aliyev Center and the Flame Towers. This rapid development contrasts with many rural areas, which retain a more traditional pace of life, offering visitors a glimpse into different facets of Azerbaijani society. While oil and gas remain the backbone of the economy, efforts are underway to diversify into sectors like agriculture, technology, and, importantly for readers of this guide, tourism.

Modern Azerbaijan presents itself as a secular state with a constitution guaranteeing religious freedom. While the majority of the population identifies culturally as Shia Muslim, adherence is often moderate, and society is largely secularised, a legacy of both the brief ADR and the longer Soviet period. The government actively promotes multiculturalism and religious tolerance, highlighting the co-existence of mosques, Russian Orthodox churches, Catholic churches, and synagogues, particularly in Baku.

This secular identity is a key aspect of the country's image both domestically and internationally.

The people of Azerbaijan, known as Azerbaijanis or Azeris, form the majority ethnic group. Their language, Azerbaijani (or Azeri), is a Turkic language belonging to the Oghuz branch, making it mutually intelligible to a degree with Turkish and Turkmen. Culturally, Azerbaijanis share traits with both Turkic and Iranian peoples, reflecting centuries of interaction. Hospitality, or *qonaqpərvərlik*, is deeply ingrained in the culture. Guests are treated with immense respect, and invitations for tea (*çay*) or even a full meal are common, especially when travelling outside the main cities. Accepting such invitations is considered polite and offers a wonderful opportunity to experience local life firsthand. It's customary to bring a small gift, such as sweets or pastries, if invited to someone's home.

Beyond the majority Azeris, Azerbaijan is home to various ethnic minority groups, each contributing to the nation's cultural mosaic. In the northern mountains reside communities like the Lezgins and Avars, sharing cultural ties with peoples in neighbouring Dagestan. The south is home to the Talysh people, who speak an Iranian language distinct from Azerbaijani. Villages like Ivanovka preserve the unique culture of Molokans, Russian spiritual Christians exiled here by the Tsars in the 19th century. There are also smaller communities of Tats (including Mountain Jews), Ukrainians, Kurds, and others. This diversity is often reflected in local cuisines, crafts, music, and traditions found across different regions.

Azerbaijan's unique position is also reflected in its foreign policy, maintaining relationships with its powerful neighbours Russia, Turkey, and Iran, while also pursuing ties with the West, Israel, and international organisations. It walks a careful diplomatic line in a complex region. The resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through the Second Karabakh War in 2020, which saw Azerbaijan regain control over most of the previously occupied territories, has significantly reshaped the regional dynamics and national focus, ushering in a new era focused on reconstruction and reintegration, though sensitivities remain.

So, what makes Azerbaijan stand out as a travel destination? It's the captivating blend of the very old and the startlingly new. It's the chance to explore a UNESCO-listed medieval walled city in the morning and marvel at gravity-defying contemporary architecture in the afternoon. It's the encounter with unique natural wonders like perpetually burning hillsides and bubbling mud volcanoes, phenomena intrinsically linked to the land's identity. It's the legacy of the Silk Road, tangible in ancient caravanserais and the enduring skills of craftspeople in mountain villages like Lahij or Sheki.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan offers experiences that feel authentic and less commercialised than many popular destinations. While Baku is increasingly

cosmopolitan, venturing into the regions allows for interactions with traditional ways of life, encounters with genuine hospitality, and exploration of landscapes that range from the unexpectedly lush to the starkly beautiful. For those seeking a destination that challenges preconceptions and rewards curiosity, Azerbaijan delivers. It provides a rich cultural immersion, historical depth, culinary delights combining familiar Middle Eastern and Mediterranean flavours with unique local twists, and the opportunity to witness a nation dynamically shaping its future while honouring its multifaceted past. Prepare to be surprised by the contrasts, charmed by the people, and intrigued by the stories etched into the land itself. The Land of Fire awaits, offering far more than just flames.

SAMPLE COPY

---

*This is a sample preview. Purchase the book to read the full content.*

Visit [MixCache.com](https://MixCache.com) to purchase the complete book.

SAMPLE COPY