

Azerbaijan

Neither Europe nor Asia, Azerbaijan is an incredible tangle of contradictions and contrasts. It's a fascinating nexus of ancient historical empires. Yet it's also a new nation finding its feet as it emerges from a war-torn post-Soviet chrysalis on a petroleum-funded gust of optimism. Surrounded by semi-desert on the oil-rich Caspian Sea, the nation's cosmopolitan capital, Baku, is a dynamic boomtown, where flashy limousines and mushrooming skyscrapers sweep around a picturesque Unesco-listed ancient core. Yet barely three hours' drive away lies an entirely different world: timeless villages clad in lush orchards from which shepherd tracks lead into the soaring high Caucasus mountains. Where Baku is multilingual and go-ahead, the provinces shuffle to the gently paced click of nard (backgammon) on tree-shaded tea-house terraces: women stay home, herds of cattle wander aimlessly across highways, and potbellied bureaucrats scratch their heads in confusion on finding that an outsider has wandered into their territory.

Visiting the country takes creativity and imagination, as the tourist industry is at best 'nascent'. Although there are plenty of rural 'rest-zones' for holidaying city folk, they cater mainly for locals who want to unwind with hefty feasts and family chats, so rarely provide any activities. To reach the most intriguing mountain villages will take initiative if you can't speak at least basic Azeri (or Turkish or Russian). Very few people outside Baku speak English, but the challenge is a great part of the appeal. With a positive attitude, and helped along by Azerbaijanis' deeply ingrained sense of hospitality, any visit is likely to be an enjoyable and highly memorable adventure.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 86,600 sq km
- **Capital** Baku (Bakı)
- **Famous for** Oil, saffron, caviar
- **Official Name** Azərbaycan Respublikası
- **Phrases** *Salam* (hello), *sağol* (thank you)
- **Population** 7,830,000
- **Ubiquitous face** Heydar Əliyev



AZERBAIJAN INDEX

- Litre of petrol 60q
- Litre of bottled water 40q
- Pint of draft NZS beer 60q
- Souvenir T-shirt – make your own!
- Street treat – döner kebab 80q, tea 20q–AZN20 (!)

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Baku** (p236) – With grand stone architecture, a medieval walled city centre and super-stylish dining, Azerbaijan's exciting capital is a dynamic boomtown that changes almost while you watch.
- **Şəki** (p274) – Cupped in beautiful wooded mountains with an 18th-century palace, picturesque old town and unforgettable caravanserai-hotel.
- **Qobustan** (p260) – Explore Stone- and Bronze Age petroglyphs, then move on to a nearby 'family' of wonderfully weird little mud volcanoes.
- **Laza to Xinalıq hike** (p265) – A glorious valley hike linking two of the Caucasus' loveliest mountain settlements.
- **Lahıc** (p270) – Copper beaters' and carpet weavers' workshops line the delightful cobbled main street of this unique Persian-speaking mountain village.

ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Soak up the atmosphere of bustling Baku and make trips to Qobustan and the Abşeron Peninsula.
- **One Week** Work your way between Tbilisi (Georgia) and Baku via Zaqatala, Şəki and Lahıc or head up from Baku to Quba and explore its mountain hinterland.
- **Two Weeks** Combine the suggestions above and consider adding a trip to the charming south, perhaps en route to Iran.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit lowland Azerbaijan is April to June, when skies are clear and the land is green and full of flowers. October is also lovely in Baku, with warm days and crisp nights, though much of the countryside is parched brown. Summer is unpleasantly hot in low-lying areas, with Baku unpleasantly humid. However, in the higher mountains

July is the ideal trekking season, although you might still need a decent jacket at night.

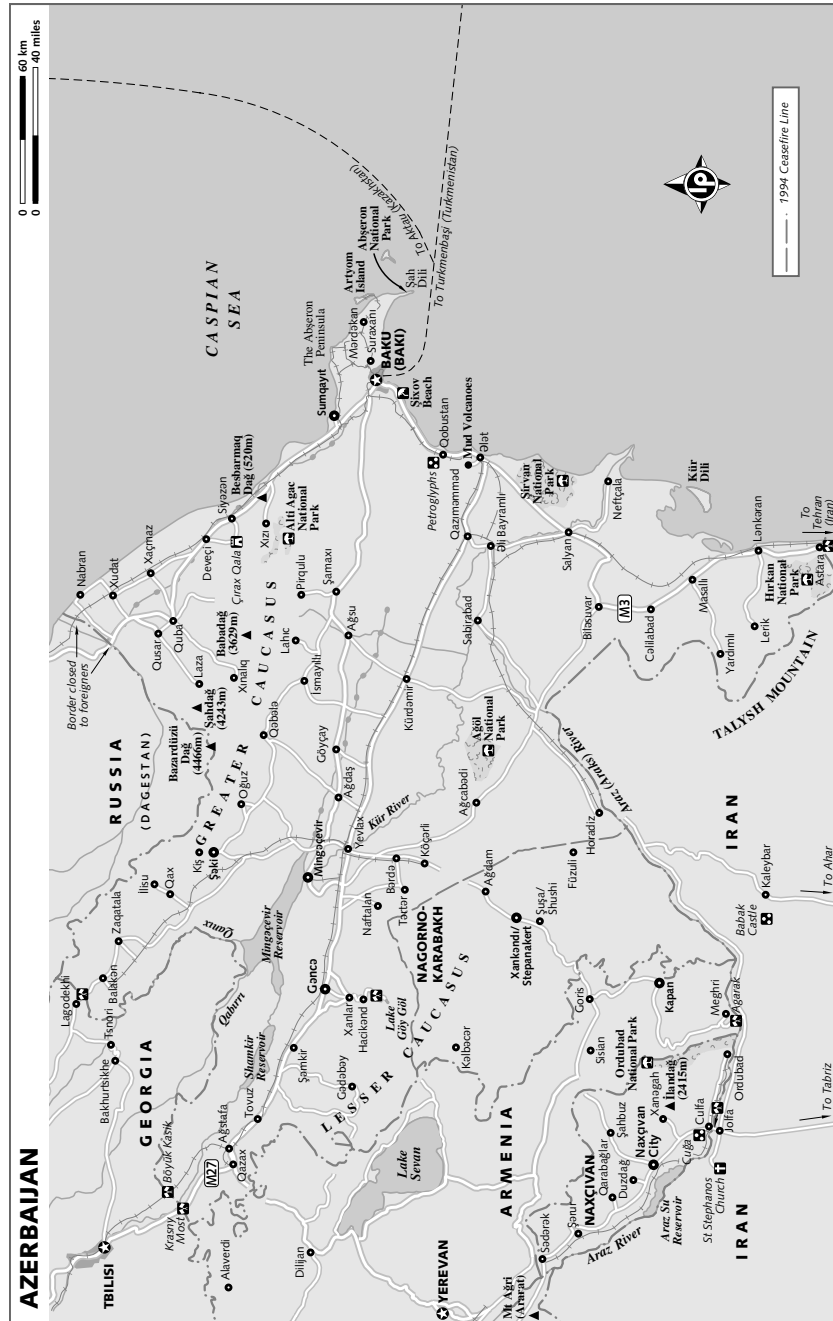
Winters are mild around the Caspian shores but can get strikingly cold inland. You'll need heavy sweaters in Şəki and the mercury can dip below -20°C in Xinalıq or Lahıc, with snow ploughs struggling to keep the roads open. See p312 for climate charts.

CURRENT EVENTS

Azerbaijan's almost deified father-figure, Heydar Əliyev, died in April 2003. A shamelessly dynastic handover then passed power to Əliyev's largely untested son İlham. İlham's new role was regularised by an election that he doubtless won, although probably not with the landslide margin that brought protests of irregularities and alleged ballot box stuffing. Pessimistic observers predicted chaos. So far they have been proved very wrong.

The İlham Əliyev years have been marked by Azerbaijan's dramatic economic recovery, albeit tinged by widespread reports of nepotism, corruption and press-gagging. Helpfully the US\$4 billion BTC (Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan) oil pipeline began pumping Caspian oil to Turkey just at the time that petroleum prices peaked. While Azerbaijan's oilfields have not proved quite the treasure-troves planners once dreamed of, they have been augmented by very important finds of natural gas. In 2006 GDP rose by a staggering 36.3%. And as money floods into state coffers there has been a building boom, especially in Baku. All across the country, roads are being upgraded, buildings renovated and parks studded with new Heydar Əliyev statues.

However, despite the economic progress many provincial folk look back fondly to the 'fairer days' of the USSR when everyone had work and there was not today's gulf between poor farmers and Mercedes-driving ultrarich biznizmen. Apart from the continued shortage of employment, the overwhelming political issue remains Nagorno-Karabakh. Few Azeris understand why the world isn't rallying to help restore Azerbaijan's territories occupied by Armenians since the early 1990s. Hundreds of thousands of refugees and IDPs (internally displaced persons) remain in makeshift accommodation and although their conditions have improved materially in the last few years, their plight remains very personally felt by all Azeris.



While many older Azeris privately retain fond memories of Armenian neighbours and friends (blaming Russian politics for the war), Armenians are frequently made a scapegoat for any national ill, however unlikely. Fortunately, those advocating a new war to reclaim the lost territories are not a majority. However, the idea is not entirely off the cards should Armenia fail to be 'reasonable' in coming years.

HISTORY

The area of today's Azerbaijan Republic has historically been known variously as Aran, Aghvan, Caucasian Albania and more recently Şirvan. Until the 20th century the ancient term Azerbaijan applied largely, as it still does, to the ethnically fraternal territory centred on Tabriz and Ardabil in Iran. Over the last two millennia it's not just the country's name and rulers that have changed but also its religion, language and even its predominant ethnicity. And having spent most of that time straddling the territories of competing empires, understanding this extraordinary saga really requires getting to grips with Persian, Arab, Turkish and Russian history. No wonder visitors (and even Azeris themselves) get confused. Even if all this seems dry and irrelevant to you, be aware that throughout the Caucasus, ancient history remains a point of day-to-day controversy and is constantly being re-remembered.

Early History

From the 6th century BC (and indeed for much of its later history) proto-Azerbaijan was part of the Persian Empire, with Zoroastrianism developing as the predominant religion. The area emerged around the 4th century BC as the ill-defined state of Aran or Caucasian Albania (no link to the present-day Balkan republic). Around AD 325 Albanians adopted Christianity, building many churches, the ruins of some of which still remain today. The history of the Caucasian Albanians is of great political importance to modern-day Azeris largely for the disputed 'fact' that they weren't Armenian. This, local historians consider, is important in asserting Azerbaijan's moral rights to Nagorno-Karabakh and beyond.

Islam became the major religion following the Arab advance into Albania in the 7th

century followed by later waves of Oğuz and Seljuk Turks. For arriving Turkic herder-horsemen, proto-Azerbaijan's grassland plains were much more inviting than the high mountains, so it was here that Turkic ethnicity became concentrated more than elsewhere in the Caucasus. Pockets of original Caucasian Christians lived on in the hills.

The Muslim Era

A classic era of Azeri culture bloomed in the 12th century. The cities of (old) Qəbələ, Bərdə and Naxçıvan were thriving. Şamaxı bloomed as the vibrant capital of Şirvan. Ganca's pre-eminence was symbolised by the classical 'national' poet Nizami Gəncəvi. However, from the 13th century these cities were pummelled into dust by the Mongols, Timur (Tamerlane) and assorted earthquakes.

It took two centuries and an improving caravan trade to get Şirvan blossoming again. In battle its rulers, the Shirvanshahs, scored a home victory against Arbadil (southern Azerbaijan, now in Iran) in 1462 only to lose in the 1501 rematch. Converted to Shia Islam as a result of that defeat, Şirvan bonded with (south) Azerbaijan, sharing its glory as the Azeri Safavid shahs came to rule the whole Persian Empire.

Greater Azerbaijan thereafter suffered in tussles between Persia and the Ottoman Empires. As Persian power declined in the early 18th century, a collection of autonomous Muslim khanates emerged across Azerbaijan. However, Persia rebounded and several of these khanates united, hoping to preserve their independence. They asked Russia for assistance but got more than they bargained for. The Russian Empire swiftly annexed many northerly khanates. Then Persia's bungled attempts to grab them back ended with the humiliating Gulistan Treaty (1813) in which it lost Şirvan, Karabakh and all navigational rights to the Caspian. A second war was even worse for the Persians, who were forced to additionally sign away the former khanates of Naxçıvan, Talysh and Yerevan in the 1828 treaty of Turkmenchay.

The Russian Era

To consolidate their rule over their new Persian conquests the Russians encouraged immigration of Christians, notably non-Orthodox religious sects from Russia, Germans from Württemberg and Armenians

THE ƏLİYEV DYNASTY

His photos are everywhere. Each town has a new museum and park in his honour. And he is still unblinkingly referred to as Azerbaijan's 'National Leader' even though he died in 2003, aged 80.

Born in Naxçıvan, the ubiquitous Heydar Əliyev (www.heydar-Aliyev.org) worked his way up through the KGB to become the first and only Azeri to be a member of the Politburo, the USSR's supreme body. He ran Azerbaijan in the 1970s as chairman of the Azerbaijan Communist Party. Then after a few years in the wilderness he staged a brilliant political comeback to reinvent himself in 1993 as the free-market president of independent Azerbaijan. While it's easy to retrospectively criticise his heavy-handed style and lack of concern for free speech, there's no doubt that his personal prestige and immense political savvy was a key factor in halting the bloody war in Karabakh. He also negotiated the huge production-sharing deal with Western conglomerates, which sowed the seeds for the current oil boom.

Given the importance of clan loyalties in Azerbaijan, it was no great surprise that Heydar shoehorned his son İlham into power before shuffling off to that great Politburo in the sky. While he lacks his father's almost limitless prestige, İlham's own photos and sayings are steadily multiplying on the nation's billboards. Meanwhile, media attention is increasingly being focused on İlham's glamorous wife, Mehriban (www.mehriban-Aliyeva.org). As head of the immensely wealthy Heydar Əliyev foundation (www.heydar-Aliyev-foundation.org), she has the enviable job of touring the country, handing out presents and grants, thus ensuring a growing groundswell of popular support. Some even tip her to take over from her husband in the distant future. But don't hold your breath.

from the Ottoman-Turkish Empire. This indirectly sowed the seeds of ethnic conflicts that broke out in 1905, 1918 and 1989.

In the 1870s, new uses for petroleum suddenly turned little Baku into a boomtown and, amazingly, by 1905 it was supplying half the world's oil. Immense wealth was created and a cultural renaissance bloomed. But appalling conditions for oil workers created a new, revolutionary underclass, exploited by a young Stalin. The result was a decade of revolutionary chaos that resulted in several horrific inter-ethnic clashes.

Independence & Soviet Reconquest

The Russian revolution of 1917 saw the end of the Tsarist empire. With WWI still undecided, Azerbaijan collapsed into internal conflict. Gəncə democrats declared Azerbaijan the Muslim world's first 'democracy' in 1918, but Baku remained under the control of socialist revolutionaries until they were driven out with the help of the invading Turkish army. The Turks rapidly withdrew, leaving the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (Azərbaycan Xəiq Cümhuriyyəti) independent. It was a forward-thinking secular entity of which Azeris remain intensely proud. However, the republic lasted barely two years. The Bolshevik Red Army invaded in 1920, creating the short lived Transcaucasian Soviet

Socialist Republic in 1922 (along with Georgia and Armenia) as a prelude to the USSR. A series of border changes during this era progressively diminished Azerbaijan's borders in favour of Armenia, and eventually left Naxçıvan entirely cut off from the rest of Azerbaijan SSR. The passionate insistence of Azerbaijan's 'father of communism', Nəriman Nərimanov, kept Nagorno-Karabakh within the nation, but for his pains Nərimanov was poisoned (on Stalin's orders) in 1925. His replacement, Mir Jafar Bağırov, unquestioningly oversaw Stalin's brutal purges, in which over 100,000 Azeris were shot or sent to concentration camps, never to return. Following the Khrushchev 'thaw' Bağırov was himself arrested and shot.

During WWII, Hitler made no bones about his priority of grabbing Baku's oil-wealth for energy-poor Germany. Luckily for Baku, the German army became divided and bogged down trying to take Stalingrad on the way. Nonetheless, realisation of Baku's potential vulnerability encouraged Soviet engineers to develop new oilfields in distant Siberia after the war.

Perestroika (restructuring) in the late 1980s was also a time of increasing tension with Armenia. Tit-for-tat ethnic squabbles between Armenians and Azeris over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh bubbled over into violent

ethnic cleansing, as minorities in both republics fled escalating violence. On 20 January 1990, the Red Army made a crassly heavy-handed intervention in Baku, killing dozens of civilians and turning public opinion squarely against Russia. Azerbaijan declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

Independent Again

Few moments have shocked the nation more than the massacre of Azeri civilians by Armenian forces at Xocalı on 26 February 1992. Public opinion turned against the dithering post-independence president, Ayaz Mütəllibov, who was ousted and replaced in June 1992 by Əbülfəz Elçibəy. He in turn fled a year later in the face of an internal military rebellion. This was come-back time for Parliamentary Chairman Heydar Əliyev, who had been Azerbaijan's communist party chairman in the 1970s and a Politburo member in the 1980s. Shoehorned into the presidency, Əliyev stabilised the fractious country and signed a cease-fire agreement with Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh in May 1994. However, around 13% of Azerbaijan's territory remained under Armenian occupation, with around 800,000 Azeris left homeless or displaced. Azerbaijan was faced with a tragic impasse. Rehousing the refugees would be seen as an admission of defeat in Karabakh. But renewed conflict would prevent investment and economic recovery. The compromise was to do relatively little, and in the meantime an entire generation of Azeri refugee children have grown up without a proper home or education.

PEOPLE

The National Psyche

The Azeri mindset deftly juggles many apparently contradictory influences: Muslim yet beer-loving, Turkic yet Eurocentric, overwhelmingly hospitable yet plagued by a strong vein of Soviet-era suspicion. A some-

what intrusive inquisitiveness towards foreigners contrasts with a resigned acceptance of various societal annoyances such as corruption and a devil-may-care driving style. Azeris have a very strong sense of family and display a total incomprehension at the idea of adults being voluntarily childless. If you're over 30 and haven't procreated be ready for these standard questions: 'How many children do you have? None? Why not? What do you live for?'

Daily Life

Life revolves around a web of family connections and commitments. Bosses will be totally understanding of any employee who is absent due to a funeral, engagement or wedding of even a very distant cousin. And again the next week.

Finding a job for a relative is considered an obligation rather than nepotism and clan solidarity is often more important than pure politics at upper levels of society. Especially in Baku, women appear very liberated, with their bright make-up and high heels, but in reality Azerbaijan remains very much a male-dominated society.

It's unquestioned that a wife should have food on the table whenever her husband appears. And no local woman would consider drinking tea at one of the *çayxanas*, where many of her male relatives might be happily gossiping and playing nard. The lack of any genuinely free press adds to the extraordinary undercurrents of rumour and misinformation that circulate.

Population

Officially around 90.6% of the population are ethnic Azeris. In reality the percentage is even higher if you discount the ethnic Armenians who inhabit occupied areas in and around Nagorno-Karabakh and thus have had no de facto link with the rest of Azerbaijan since 1994. A significant minority of Lezgins (178,000) live in northern Azerbaijan, notably in Qusar. Many ethnic Russians (now just 1.8%) left after independence, though Baku retains a small, active Russian minority. Some 77,000 Talysh people live in the southern region around Lənkəran speaking their own Iranian dialect. Tiny communities of Avars, Georgians, Udin, Tsakhor and other mountain peoples are dotted along the Caucasian foothills.

DRESS CODE

Unlike neighbouring Iran, there are no legally binding rules on what to wear, and women don't have to cover their hair. However, for men, wearing shorts for anything other than sport or beachwear is considered mildly offensive.

NARD, A NATIONAL OBSESSION

Playing nard will hugely enhance your social interaction with Azeris... well at least with Azeri men at a *çayxana* (teahouse). A variant of backgammon, nard is played on a board divided into four quarters of six slots each. The first aim is to get your 15 counters into the final quarter. Then, when that's achieved, use further dice rolls to remove them from the board. The first player to remove all their pieces wins: the loser buys the next round of tea and jams. Each turn normally allows two moves dictated by rolling two dice. However, rolling a double gets you twice as many moves. Moves are not allowed onto a slot already occupied by an opponent's piece (unlike backgammon where two of an opponent's pieces would be necessary to block a move). Tactical blocking is the main skill of the game because when a player cannot make a legal move he forfeits his turn. If one player has removed all his pieces before the opponent has even reached the fourth quarter, it counts as a double victory.

RELIGION

The nation is religiously very tolerant. Ethnic Azeris predominantly follow Shia Islam. Unlike the Sunni Islam of Turkey or south Asia, Shiism places great emphasis on Imam Ali, considering his descendants as honoured guardians of the message of the Prophet Mohammed. Although this is nominally the same form of Islam as practised in neighbouring Iran, you will see minimal religious fundamentalism in Azerbaijan. Indeed, in the antireligious Soviet days, the idea of being Muslim was more a blurred badge of Azeri nationality than a spiritual faith. Today the nation is effectively relearning Islam from scratch. The result is a fascinating blend of Islamic humanism and open-minded secularism, with elements of pre-Islamic animism and an added soupçon of Zoroastrianism.

As Western-style capitalism seems to be failing to deliver a fairer society, religious adherence is slowly growing. However, relatively few women cover their hair and the Azeris who follow the *oruçduq* (fast) during Ramazan (Ramadan) generally do so for the 'right reasons' (spiritual and physical purification) rather than through any perceived compunction. Less pious Azeris use Ramazan as an excuse to cut down on the vodkas rather than to actually stop eating during daylight hours. Restaurants stay open.

Azerbaijan's religious minorities include Sunni Muslims (mostly the ethnic Lezgins) and small groups of Russian Orthodox and Catholics. Official figures give around 2% as Armenian Apostolic, but these folk live in the occupied areas. There's a Georgian Orthodox community around Qax. Nic, near Qəbələ (p273), is the last bastion of the Albanian-Udin church, whose political

importance vastly outweighs the size of its tiny congregation. Krasnaya Sloboda near Quba (p263) is a unique mountain-Jewish village and there are small Jewish communities in Baku and Oğuz.

ARTS

Azerbaijan's cultural greats are revered across the country. Their busts adorn Baku's finest buildings, their names are commemorated as streets and their homes are often maintained as shrinelike 'house-museums' (*ev-muzevi*), where fans can pay homage.

Cinema

In the Soviet era, Azerbaijan had a decent film industry, with old Baku offering a tailor-made set for many historical epics. The country also has a strong history of animation films. Since independence, movie production has all but stopped, although Ayaz Salayev's *The Bat* (1995) was awarded the Grand Prix at the International Film Festival in Angers, France. Samil Əliyev's *The Accidental Meeting* (2002) was also critically acclaimed. The only cinema that regularly shows movies with English subtitles is the Çingis Klubu in Şəki.

Literature

Azerbaijan has a long and distinguished literary tradition. Best known is the Azeri 'Shakespeare', Nizami Gəncəvi (1141–1209), whose ubiquitous statues almost outnumber those of Heydar Əliyev. Nizami wrote in Persian rhyming couplets, but Mehmed bin Suleyman Füzuli (1495–1556) was the first to write extensively in Azeri-Turkish. His sensitive rendition of Nizami's classic 'Leyli and Majnun' influenced many later writers, including poetess Khurshudbanu Natavan

(1830–97), playwright Mirza Fatali Axundov (1812–78) and satirist Mirza Sabir (1862–1911), as well as inspiring Eric Clapton's 'Layla'. Azerbaijan's 20th-century star writer was Səmət Vurğun, whose popularity is particularly pronounced in his native Qazax district. One of the current deputy prime ministers, Elçin Efəndiyev, is himself a brilliantly creative playwright.

MUSIC MUĞAM

Azerbaijan's most significant contribution to world music is *muğam*, recognised since 2003 by Unesco as one of the world's great forms of intangible cultural heritage. Traditionally, a *muğam* master was a wandering vocalist known as an *aşıq*, who made his living by performing at weddings, typically accompanied by players of the plucked tar, bowed *kamança*, and oboe-like *balaban*. To some Western ears *muğam* sounds more like pained wailing than singing, but at its best it's intensely emotional, an almost primal release of the spirit. Listen to Alim Qazimov to get the idea.

Muğam allows a great range of expression and improvisation; traditionally *aşıqs* would compete with each other in contests similar to the bardic competitions of the Celtic world. Such competitions continue today in a more upbeat and light-hearted form known as *meyxana*, whose bantering lyrics and cantering synthesiser accompaniment create a wonderful atmosphere of general mirth.

JAZZ

In Baku, jazz grew popular in the 1950s and '60s and took a distinctive local flavour under Vaqif Mustafazadeh (1940–79), who created a remarkable fusion of American jazz and traditional Azeri *muğam* improvisation. His multitalented daughter Aziza Mustafazadeh (www.azizamustafazadeh.de; b 1969) has continued in her father's footsteps, taking a blend of *muğam* jazz and classical music to a large international audience. She dazzled the crowds at the 2007 Baku International Jazz Festival (<http://festival.jazz.az>) with an extraordinary performance of 'Shamans', during which she managed to perfectly harmonise with her own echo.

The latest jazz-*muğam* sensations are the Novrasli brothers, including pianist Shahin Novrasli, who returned triumphant from the 2007 Montreux Jazz Festival.

Painting & Sculpture

The emotional roller coaster of independence has inspired a decade of remarkable creativity in Azerbaijani painting, with artists who had been trained within the rigours of strict Soviet technical apprenticeship suddenly allowed a great deal of artistic freedom. Baku galleries are full of inspiring works, though prices are rising rapidly. Collectors are also starting to snap up some of Azerbaijan's brilliant Soviet realist works too, while even felt-tip scribbles by the remarkable neo-impressionist Səttar Bəhlulzadə now cost around US\$1000. Although the nation's sculptors have been kept busy recently with neo-Soviet statues of Heydar Əliyev, there are many vastly more imaginative public sculptures, notably by the great Omar Eldarov, whose deeply expressive statue of Hüseyn Cavid dominates Landau Sq.

ENVIRONMENT The Land

Azerbaijan is enclosed to the north by the mighty Caucasus Mountains that separate it from Dagestan in Russia. To the south the country has a border with Iran running along the Talysh Mountain range. The highest peaks are Şahdağ (4243m) and Bazardüzü (4466m; partly within Russia). The fertile lower slopes of the mountains are clothed in lush pastures and broad-leaved forests that give way to farms and orchards. Only the few 4000m peaks remain snow-capped year-round.

The broad plain of the Kür steppe occupies the centre of the country. This monotonous lowland is intensively irrigated for the cultivation of cotton and grain, but the central Caspian coast south of Baku remains a barren semi-desert. Lush wooded mountains rising to over 3000m occupy the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the west. The 2500m Talysh Mountains in the extreme south are cloaked in subtropical forests, much of which falls within the Hirkan National Park. Azerbaijan has six other national parks and two more are due to be recognised within the life of this book, once the president can get round to opening them.

Perhaps the world's most unexpected nominal 'national park' is Baku's seaside promenade, the Bulvar. There are a further 13 nature reserves, some of which are strictly closed to all visitors.

Environmental Issues

The Caspian Sea rose so significantly between the 1950s and 1990s that whole stretches of beach and coastal settlement have been submerged. Meanwhile overfishing and pollution led Caspian sturgeon populations to collapse catastrophically, virtually destroying the caviar industry. Much of the damage was done in Soviet days because of intensive, low-tech oil exploitation, excessive use of artificial fertilisers and pesticides and indiscriminate dumping of toxic industrial waste. Worst offenders were the chemical industries of Sumqayıt, which caused a high incidence of still births, birth defects and child mortality. Today, most of those factories have closed. Despite some considerable efforts, massive investment is still needed to decontaminate poisoned lands; some parts of the Abşeron Peninsula look like post-apocalyptic visions dreamed up for a *Mad Max* film.

FOOD & DRINK

Flavours from Turkey, Central Asia, Iran, Russia and the Middle East have converged to form a rich palate of Azeri cuisine. This lacks the unique garlic-walnut fascination of Georgian cookery but has great strengths in fruity sauces, wonderful fresh vegetables and mutton-based soups. The main problem can be getting beyond restaurants' obsession with *shashlyk* (shish kebab).

Staples & Specialities

The cornerstone of Azeri restaurant cuisine is the flame-grilled *shashlyk*. The 'standard' tika kebab consists of meaty chunks, often including a cube of tail-fat which locals consider a special delicacy. *Lülə* kebab is minced lamb with herbs and spices. Both will almost

BLESSED BREAD

If you look carefully behind any apartment block you're likely to see bags of bread hanging separate from the domestic trash. That's because bread is considered holy and can't simply be binned, leaving superstitious Azeris with a disposal problem.

Eating bread with someone is considered to seal a bond of friendship, while it's necessary to share sweets or pastries with strangers (or give it to a mosque) when a wish-prayer has been granted.

automatically be served with a series of fresh vegetables, fruits, salads, cheese and bread (all costing extra) unless you specify otherwise. Grilled vegetables are often available as a side dish, though vegetarians might be alarmed to find lurking morsels of lamb fat inserted into barbecued aubergines to make them more succulent. Pricier kebab types include *antreğot* (ribs) and *dana bastırma* (marinated beef strips), which are generally leaner.

The classic non-kebab dish is *dolma*, where various vegetables are stuffed with a mixture of rice and minced lamb, possibly infused with fresh mint, fennel and cinnamon.

Düşbərə is a lightly minted soup containing tiny bean-sized mutton ravioli and typically served with sour cream and garlic. At its best, *düşbərə* is divine, but cheap versions can be bland, despite the vast amount of work required to make them.

Various stews incorporating potato and soft-boiled mutton include *buğlama* (sometimes with cherries), *bozbaş* (with *köfte* meatball) and *piti* (with chickpeas). When eating *piti* don't just dig in. Tear up pieces of bread in a separate bowl and drain off the liquid onto the bread creating a filling 'first course'. Then grind the remaining solids into a mush, not forgetting the fat chunk, which adds an essential part of texture and flavour.

Rare outside southern Azerbaijan, deliciously fruity Talysh cuisine is best known for *ləvəngi* (chicken stuffed with walnuts and herbs), which is recently becoming easier to find in Baku where XVII Əsr restaurant (p250) is a Talysh specialist.

Azeris think of *aş* as their national dish. It's a splendidly fruity variation on *plov* (Central Asian style rice-and-meat) but you'll usually only find it served at major celebrations. Restaurants that offer it usually need a day's notice.

Typical breakfast foods (*səhər yeməkləri*) are bread, butter and cheese, maybe with some honey or sour cream, all washed down with plentiful sweet tea. Egg-meals can be terribly greasy.

QUICK EATS

Azerbaijan's foremost fast food is the döner kebab. Much as in Europe, a large cone of chicken (*tovuq*) or compounded meat (*ət*, essentially mutton) is flamed on a rotating grill then sliced into small morsels that are served

with mixed salad in *lavas* (thin flour tortilla) or *çörək* (bread). Cheap ones (around 70q) typically just use less meat than pricier ones (AZN1.20). Judge the quality by the queue. *Peraşki* are (very greasy) savoury doughnuts. They rarely cost over 10q but are worth avoiding, as the cooking oil is rarely fresh.

Drinks

The national drink is *çay* (tea) usually served in pear-shaped '*armudi*' glasses and sucked through a sugar lump for sweetness, or accompanied by jams and candies. Coffee is a pricey fad in Baku but little seen in the provinces. Azeri *şərab* (wine) is generally rather poor but the *konjak* (brandy) is decent and Xırdalan lager is a very acceptable *piva* (beer). Toasting with *arak* (vodka) remains an important social ritual especially between older men with significant social standing (and bellies) to maintain. However, it is less formalised than in Georgia and less compulsive than in Russia.

Water (*su*) is rarely drinkable from the tap. To save money on bottled water (*qazlı* means sparkling, while *qazsız* means flat), keep an empty bottle handy to fill when passing roadside *bulağı* (springs).

Where to Eat & Drink

SIMPLE EATERIES

The standard cheap eatery is a *yeməxana*, often aimed at providing basic lunches of *piti*, *buğlama*, *çığırtma* or *borş* to workers and small-time bureaucrats (almost always men). Unexotic options like *kotlet* or *sosiska* are also possible. You'll usually pay a little extra for the garnish of *qreçka* or *püre*. Don't expect a menu: simply ask what they've got.

RESTAURANTS

A provincial restoran is slightly more refined than a *yeməxana* but meal choices are often limited to kebabs (from around AZN1.60 a skewer) and accompanying salads, maybe also fish or *tabaka* (flattened whole chicken). For nonkebab food try asking what *qazan-yeməkləri* (plate foods) are served. Along country lanes many charmingly rustic restorans are tucked into the woodland clearings. They're usually called İstrahət Zonası ('rest zone', with attached accommodation) or İstrahət Guşası ('rest corner', without). Reckon on AZN2 to AZN3 per kebab plus around AZN1 to AZN2 per basic garnish.

Baku offers an incredible, ever-changing choice of alternatives, from Mexican to mushy peas via a selection of Georgian, European and oriental alternatives. Prices can approach European levels but 'biznis lunches' (from noon to 3pm Monday to Friday) are often a good deal.

TURKISH RESTAURANTS

In bigger towns, you'll generally find at least one Türk Restoran (Turkish restaurant). Various precooked meals are displayed in a heated glass-fronted cabinet. Point at what you want and choose a side dish of rice, mashed potato or *vermişel* (macaroni) all for around AZN4 to AZN6.

WEDDING PALACES

By far the most ornate and ostentatious eateries are known as *şadlıq sarays* (wedding palaces). Every town has one – often several – but as the name implies these are almost exclusively used for large, prebooked banquets. Getting invited to a wedding offers a brilliant insight into Azeri culture, but bring earplugs to combat superloud music.

Vegetarian & Vegan

Whether Naxçıvan melons, Göyçay pomegranates, Balakən persimmons or Gədəbəy potatoes, Azerbaijan's fresh fruit and vegetables remain marvellously seasonal and utterly packed with flavour. Perfect-looking but tasteless Western equivalents can't compare to the condensed sunshine of an Azeri tomato. *Çoban*, a green 'shepherd' salad of chopped tomato, cucumber, raw onion, dill and coriander leaves, is served as a preamble to most meals. Most Azeri main meals are squarely based around meat, but if you eat fish there's good *sudak* (pike-perch, available in autumn) or *balıq* (slices of sturgeon best smeared with tangy pomegranate or sour-plum sauce). *Dogram* and *dovga*, both dairy-based soups, are possibilities for non-vegans though hardly a meal in themselves. *Göyərtili qutab* (spinach-filled pancake-snacks) are sometimes available. Baku's Western, oriental and Georgian restaurants have meat-free options.

Habits & Customs

In Azeri culture, restaurants' roles are social rather than functional, typically serving large groups of Azeris feasting for hours amid vodka toasts. Therefore, you can expect to

feel rather out-of-place if eating alone in restaurants beyond expat-savvy Baku.

Eat Your Words

MENU DECODER

- aş** – fruity plov
bal – honey
borş – borscht, hearty cabbage-based soup
bozbaş – stew-soup usually featuring a meatball formed around a central plum
buğlama – mutton-and-potato stew slow-cooked to condense the flavour and soften the meat. Some chefs booby-trap the dish with sour cherries to give it an appealingly acidic tang
çığırtma – soft omelette often containing chicken and garlic
cız-bız – fried tripe and potato
çörek – bread
dograma – a cold soup made with sour milk, potato, onion and cucumber
dolma – mince-stuffed vegetables. Various dolması include *badımcan* (in aubergine), *bıbar* (green pepper), *kələm* (cabbage leaves), *pomidor* (tomato) and *yarpaq* (vine leaves)
dovga – a hot, thick yogurt-based soup
düşbərə – light broth containing tiny dumplings
düyü – rice
gurcu xinqal – Georgian spiced dumplings
kabablar – kebabs. Types include *antreğot* (lamb ribs), *badımcan* (aubergine), *baliq* (fish, usually sturgeon), *dana bastırma* (marinated beef strips), *kartof* (baked potato), *lülə* (minced lamb), *tikə* (lamb chunks, ie ‘standard’ shashlyk) and *toyuk* (chicken)
kotlet – meat patties
kuftə – köfte
kuku – thick omelette cut into chunks
lahmajun – wafer-thin ‘Turkish pizza’. Fill with salad and squeeze on lemon juice
lavaş – very thin bread-sheets
ləvəngi – Talysh-style *toyuq* (chicken) or *baliq* (fish) stuffed with a paste of herbs and crushed walnuts
qayğana – scrambled egg
qızıl baliq – salmon
qlazok – fried eggs
qovurma – mutton fried in butter with various fruits
qreçka – boiled buckwheat
qutab – limp pancake turnover half-heartedly filled with *göyartı* (spinach) or *ətla* (meat)
pendir – cheese
piti – two-part soupy stew
plov – various types of rice pilaf
püre – mashed potato
sosiska – frankfurter
tabaka – pricey, flattened whole chicken

- tava-kabab** – not a kebab but meat patties cooked into an omelette
xama – sour cream
xaş – heavily garlic-charged soup made from bits of sheep that Westerners prefer to avoid. Wash down with a hair-of-the-dog vodka
xinqal – meaty chunks served with lasagne-like leaves of pasta
yağ – butter

BAKU (BAKI)

📍 012 / pop 1.85 million

The Azeri capital is the Caucasus’ largest and most cosmopolitan city. Few cities in the world are changing as quickly and nowhere else in the Caucasus do East and West blend as seamlessly or as chaotically. Battered Ladas race shiny Mercedes past illuminated stone mansions, shiny glass towers and tatty old Soviet apartment blocks. Pedestrianised tree-lined streets in the elegant centre chatter with teahouses and buzz with expat pubs. Unesco World Heritage status tries to slow the corporate gentrification of the fascinating Old City (İçəri Şəhər) hemmed in by an exotically crenellated arc of medieval fortress wall. Romantic couples defy Islamic stereotypes by canoodling their way around wooded parks and handholding on the Caspian-front bulvar (promenade), whose greens and opal blues make a mockery of Baku’s desert-ringed location.

HISTORY

The name Baku might derive from the Persian *bad kube* (city of winds), fitting given the gale-force *xəzri* wind that comes howling in off the Caspian once or twice a month. Or perhaps it comes from the ancient Caucasian word *bak* (sun, or god), hinting at the area’s ancient role as a centre for fire worshippers millennia ago. Either way, Baku’s first burst of glory came when regional rulers, the Shirvanshahs, moved their capital here following an 1191 earthquake that destroyed their main city Şamaxı (p267). Wrecked by Mongol attacks, then vassal to the Timurids, Baku only returned to brilliance under Shirvanshah Khalilullah I (1417–65), who completed his father’s construction of a major palace complex. However, the Şirvan dynasty was ousted in 1501 when Azeri Shah İsmail I (remembered

as poet ‘Xatai’ in Azerbaijan) sacked Baku and then forcibly converted the previously Sunni city to Shia Islam.

When Peter the Great captured the city in 1723, its population was less than 10,000, its growth hamstrung by a lack of trade and drinking water. For the next century Baku changed hands several times between Persia and Russia, before being definitively ceded to the Russians with agreements in 1806, 1813 and 1828.

Oil had been scooped from surface diggings around Baku since at least the 10th century. However, when commercial extraction was deregulated in 1872 the city rapidly became a boomtown. Workers and entrepreneurs arrived from all over the Russian Empire, swelling the population by 1200% in under 30 years.

Baku’s thirst was slaked by an ambitious new water-canal bringing potable mountain water all the way from the Russian border, and the city’s desert image was softened by parks nurtured using specially imported soil. By 1905 Baku was producing around 50% of the world’s petroleum and immensely rich ‘oil barons’ built luxurious mansions outside the walls of the increasingly irrelevant Old City. Meanwhile, most oil workers lived in appalling conditions, making Baku a hotbed of labour unrest and revolutionary talk. Following a general strike in 1904, the Baku oil workers negotiated Russia’s first-ever worker-management contract. But tensions continued to grow.

In the wake of the two Russian revolutions Baku’s history became complex and very bloody with a series of brutal massacres between formerly neighbourly Armenian and Azeri communities. When the three south Caucasus nations declared their independence in 1918, Bolshevik-led Baku refused to join Azerbaijan’s Democratic Republic. In response Turkish and Azeri troops marched (very slowly) towards Baku. Before they arrived, Baku’s leadership was toppled by pro-Russian (but anti-Bolshevik) Mensheviks and a secret British force sailed in from Iran to help them ‘defend’ the city (well, OK, the oilfields) against the Turks (Britain’s WWI enemies). On 20 September 1918, 26 of the former Bolshevik leaders (the ‘26 Commissars’) were rounded up in Baku and shipped across the Caspian to Turkmenistan, where they were taken into the desert and shot. Russia held the British responsible for their deaths and later communist propaganda portrayed the Commissars as great Soviet martyrs, their

monuments appearing all across the USSR (there’s still one in Baku’s Sahil Gardens).

Whatever the reality, Baku’s Anglo-Menshevik defence crumbled and the British withdrew ignominiously, their ships slipping away in darkness. However, in the end-game of WWI, the Turks were forced to evacuate too. Less than two years later, on 28 April 1920, the Red Army marched into Baku.

In 1935 the search for oil moved into the shallow coastal waters of the Caspian. A forest of offshore platforms and derricks joined the tangle of wells and pipelines on land. Investment dwindled after WWII and only really resumed in earnest after independence in 1991. Since 1994, however, foreign oil consortia have spent billions exploring these resources and for reasons as much political as economic the world’s second-longest oil pipeline, BTC, was built to Ceyhan in Turkey, ensuring that Azeri oil could be exported safely and quickly to the West without transiting Russia or Iran. Especially since BTC went online in 2005, Baku has been booming. As property prices head for London-style highs, the skyline has been transformed by hundreds of new multistorey towers. But get-rich-quick attitudes have meant a shabby disregard for planning standards. Engineers warned that poor construction techniques, corrupt practices and cost-cutting would make many new buildings unsafe, especially given Baku’s seismic activity. These fears came horrifyingly true in summer 2007, when a half-finished 16-storey tower collapsed, trapping and killing dozens of people.

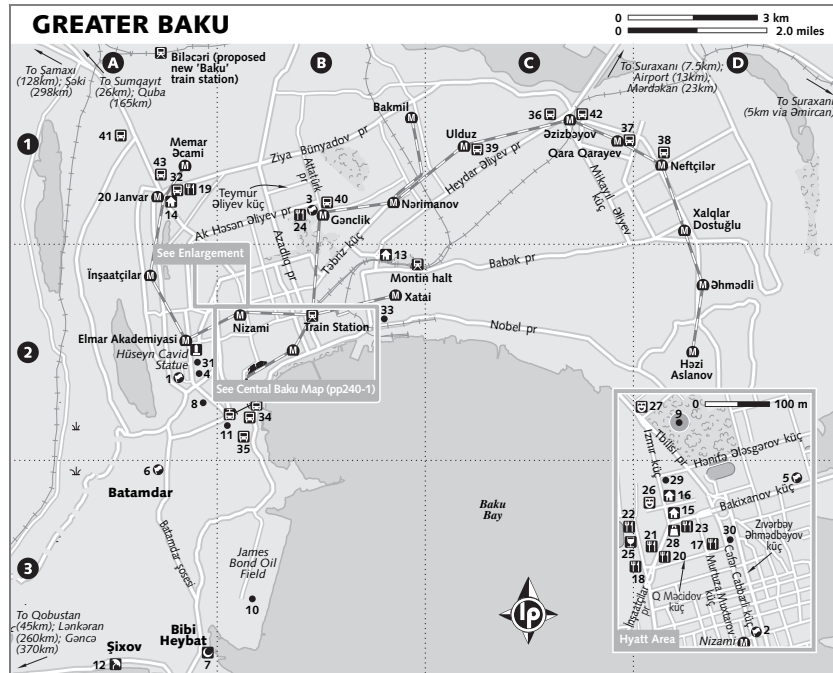
More positively, boom money has also paid for the cleaning and attractive lighting of many grand old buildings in the city centre along with the construction of a series of seasonal musical fountains.

ORIENTATION

From the walled Old City (İçəri Şəhər), Nef-tçilər pr follows the Caspian round to a vast, supremely Soviet edifice called Government House (Dom Soviet) paralleling a sea-front park that’s universally known as the bulvar.

STREET NAMES

In this book we abbreviate Azeri streets (*küçəsi*) as *küç* and avenues/boulevards (*prospekti*) as *pr*.



You'll find most of Baku's charming century-old "Oil Boom" architecture near a central piazza known as Fountain Square though there are plenty more fountains around town, notably in Heydar Əliyev Park.

The main shopping street, pedestrianised Nizami küç, is still more commonly known by its Soviet-era moniker of Torgovaya (Trade St).

Baku's rich and famous tend to live in the inner suburb of Gənclik, or on the Batamdar ridge overlooking town.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Akadem-Kitab (Map p242; İstiqlaliyyət küç 51;

☎ 10am-2pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat) Wide range but predominantly in local languages. Next door, Iranian Al Hoda focuses on Farsi literature.

Book Shop of the Presidential Administration

(Map pp240-1; N Rəfiyyəli küç 29; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat) Sells an amusing selection of hagiographic literature about both Əliyevs, as well as postcards and several guide-pamphlets that you could have got for free from the tourist information office.

Chiraq Books (Map p242; ☎ 4923289; Zərgərpalan küç 4) Baku's friendly English-language bookshop stocks a

decent range of classics, bestsellers, travel guides and locally relevant titles, along with plenty of Christian literature.

Kitab (Map pp240-1-00; Fikrət Əmirov küç 1; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) The most reliable place to find excellent 1:500,000 topographic maps of Azerbaijan (AZN4). They're rolled up amid other much poorer versions so ask to look at a few. No English spoken.

Qlobus (Map p242; Rəsulzadə küç) Sells intriguing 20-year-old postcards.

Emergency

Operators speak Azeri and Russian but not English.

Ambulance (☎ 103)

Fire (☎ 101)

Police (☎ 102)

Internet Access

Internet cafés are very common, though often hidden away in basements.

Castle VIP (Map pp240-1; Xaqani küç, Molokan Gardens; per hr AZN1; ☎ 24hr; ☎) The fastest (if priciest) of three options on the north side of Molokan Gardens. Price drops to 20q per hour after midnight.

@Z (Map p242; M Əfəndiyev küç; per hr 60q;

☎ 10am-2am; ☎) Vast subterranean internet club with Skype-phone options.

INFORMATION

Georgian Embassy.....	1	A2
Iranian Consulate.....	2	D3
Kazakhstan Embassy.....	3	B1
Milnaya Opera		
Laundry.....	4	A2
Russian Embassy.....	5	D3
Uzbekistan Embassy.....	6	A3

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Konsert Kompleksi.....	9	D2
James Bond Oil Field.....	10	B3
Şahidli Xiyabani (Martyr's		
Lane).....	11	B2
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SLEEPING

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Əmircan.....	37	C1
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of the Abşeron towns including		
Amburan Beach (72).....	42	C1
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Life Internet (Map pp240-1; Azadlıq pr; per hr 40q;

☎) Spacious, with decent connection speeds, above an Azercell dealership.

Virtual (Map pp240-1; Nizami küç; per hr 60q) Central.

Internet Resources

Bakupages (www.bakupages.com) Extensive, but the most interesting features are in Russian.

City Administration (www.bakucity.az/main/index_en.htm)

Window2Baku (www.window2baku.com) Interesting historical photos of the city.

Laundry

Typical charges are AZN2 per kilogram for smalls, AZN2 for shirts and AZN3 for trousers.

Mr Pak (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4986365; Azadlıq pr; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun)

Milnaya Opera (Soap Opera; Map p238; ☎ 4975767; H Cavid pr 8; per kg with ironing AZN1.90, without AZN1.50; ☎ 9am-9pm) Take marshrutka 106 to get here.

Savalan Express (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4989339; Səməd Vurgun küç 17; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat)

Left Luggage

At the train station, the most reliable of three **baggage rooms** (Saxlama Kameraları; per day AZN2) is in the tunnel-corridor behind the main ticket-selling concourse.

There's also left luggage in the toilet block behind the main bus station.

Medical Services

Aptek (pharmacies) are generally well stocked and relatively inexpensive. A regularly updated list of emergency medical services appears on the US Embassy's website at http://azerbaijan.usembassy.gov/medical_services.html.

Aptek Həyat (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4936161; Bülbül pr 30; ☎ 24hr)

HIV tests (☎ 4949924) You can organise anonymous tests via this number. No English spoken.

International SOS (German Medical Centre; Map pp240-1; ☎ 937354, 934089; www.sosinternational.com; Rəşid Behbudov küç 30; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Some expat doctors work here, but 15-minute consultations start at US\$103.

MediClub (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4970911; www.mediclub.az; Üzeyir Hacıbəyov küç 45) Doctors' consultations from AZN24.

Money

ATMs are common throughout Baku. Most accept foreign credit cards and many allow withdrawals in both AZN and US dollars. Exchange facilities don't charge commission and are nearly as ubiquitous. Rates are excellent for US dollars and pretty competitive for euros. For Russian roubles and pounds sterling, rate-splits are poorer (around 4%). Various other currencies (including Georgian lari) can be changed too, though on less favourable terms. Some exchanges open late into the evening while most banks shut by 4pm. The best rates are usually available on 28 May küç at Vurgun Gardens (Map pp240-1).

CENTRAL BAKU

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Castle VIP Internet Cafe.....	4	C4
Chinese Embassy.....	5	G3
French Embassy.....	6	C4
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Improplex Travel.....	7	D4
International Bank of Azerbaijan.....	8	C4
International SOS.....	9	D3
Life Internet.....	10	E3
Main Post Office.....	11	E4
MediClub.....	12	F3
Moneychangers.....	13	E3
Mr Pak Laundry.....	14	D3
Post & Telephone Office.....	15	F2
Savlan Express Laundry.....	16	D3
STI Travel.....	17	D3
Tourist Information Office.....	18	E4
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See Baku - Old City & Fountain Square Map (p242)

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Corner bar.....	69	C4
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ENTERTAINMENT

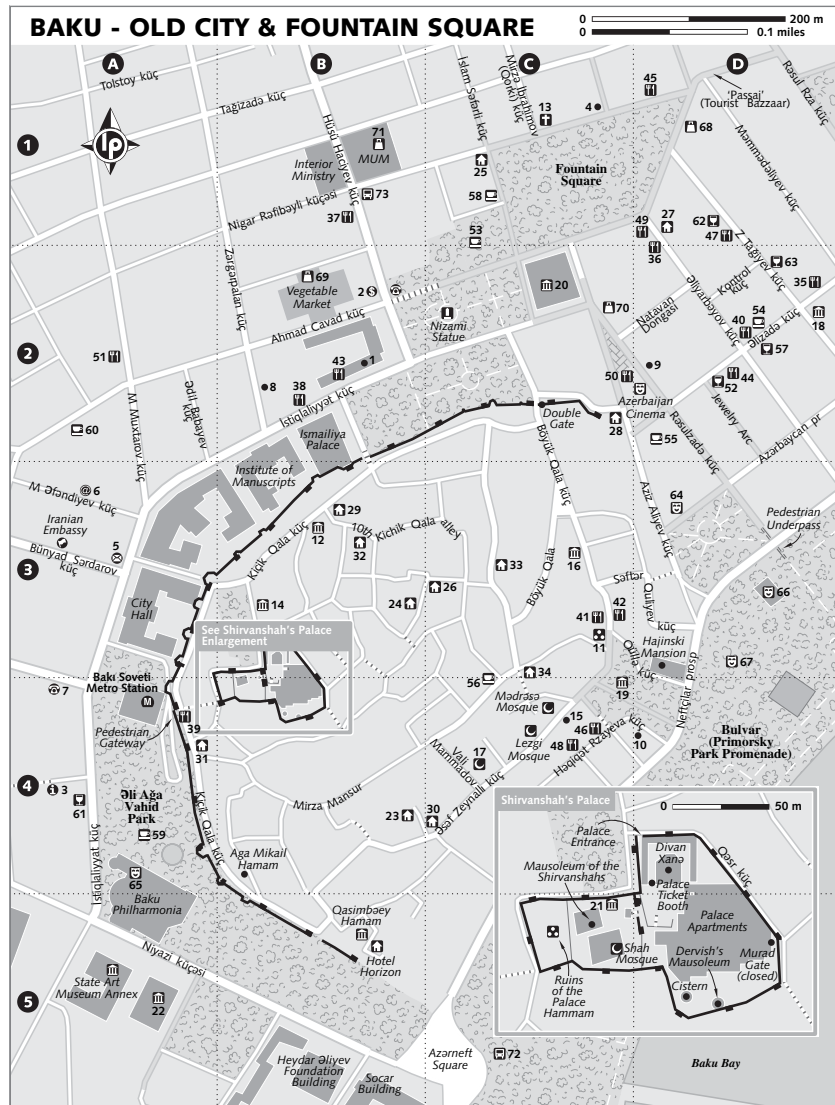
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Post
Main post office (Map pp240-1; Azərbaycan pr 41; ☎ 24hr)
Post office (Map pp240-1; Dilara Əliyeva küç)
Post office (Map p242; İstiqlaliyyət küç 35)

Telephone
 New AzEuroTel payphones are pretty rare but when you find one it takes coins or

cards and can call international (54q per minute), regional and local numbers. Old payphones are local-only and you'll need a ribbed *jeton* (token), sold from street vendors for 10q.

Look for *jeton var* signs. Post offices have phone-rooms. A small, cheaper **Call Centre** (Map pp240-1; Şeyx Şamil küç 1; ☎ 11am-8pm)

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Branch Post Office.....5 A3	Hotel Kichik Gala 98.....29 B3	Café Caramel.....54 D2
C@Z.....6 A3	Hotel Meridian.....30 C4	Café Mozart.....55 D2
Call Centre.....7 A4	Marco Polo Icheri-Sheher.....31 B4	Chocolate.....56 C4
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1000 Camels Hostel.....23 B4		

will charge only 9q per minute to provincial Azeri towns and 27q to most international numbers.

Tourist Information

Tourist Information Office (Map pp240-1; ☎ 5985519; www.tourism.az; Üzeyir Hacıbəyov küç 6; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) Gives away a range of glossy pamphlets and a full-colour guidebook.

Travel Agencies

There are foreigner-friendly travel agents. These include:

Improtex Travel (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4989239; www.improtex-travel.com; Səməd Vurğun küç 16) Long-established agency with a huge network of contacts.

Services range from visa support and hotel discounting to go hunting and extreme sports.

SI Travel (Map p238; ☎ 4970800; www.si-travel.com; Hyatt Tower 2, 1033 İzmir küç) Major agency and American Express representatives in Azerbaijan.

Skylife Tours (Map p242; ☎ 4925577; www.skylife-travel.com; Neftçilər pr 97/3) Well-run IATA agent.

STI Travel (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4980880; www.sti.az; Nizami küç 91) A few discounts available for ISIC student card-holders.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The crime rate is very low. Over inquisitive police are more likely to bother you than criminals. Keep at least a photocopy of your passport and visa with you in case of police checks. Avoid photography on the metro, near the Presidential Administration Tower and halfway up the funicular.

SIGHTS

Baku's historic heart is İçəri Şəhər, the Unesco-listed walled Old City. It contains the city's most accessible sights and its quieter back alleys are atmospheric minor attractions in their own right, as are the tree-lined streets of 'oil boom' mansions just beyond.

Maiden's Tower

This tapering 29m **stone tower** (Map p242; adult/student/child AZN2/60q/20q; ☎ 11am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) is Baku's foremost architectural icon. Its century of construction is the subject of much debate, though its present form is 12th century. The Azeri name, Qız Qalası, is usually rendered 'maiden's tower' in English, leading to plenty of patently fictitious fairy-tales. A popular version has a wealthy ruler falling in love with his own daughter. He asks the

girl to marry him. Revolted by the thought of incest but unable to disobey her father she stalls, commanding that he build her a tower high enough to survey the full extent of his domain before she decides. When it's finally complete she climbs to the roof and throws herself off.

A better translation of Qız Qalası would be 'virgin tower', alluding to military impenetrability rather than any association with tragic females. Historians agree that it has served as a defensive tower; beyond that some claim it was also a lookout post, a fire beacon, a Zoroastrian tower of silence or even an astronomical observatory. It was certainly an incredibly massive structure for its era, with walls 5m thick at the base and an unusual projecting buttress. Openings on the south side permit light to enter. The eight floors are linked by steps within the walls, except for the ground floor, where a retractable ladder has now been replaced by a modern iron staircase. A deep well descends from a recess in the 2nd-floor chamber. A mysterious doorway on the 3rd floor opens into thin air; its original function (possibly astronomical) remains unknown.

Today, the interior contains an interesting display of old photographs and a souvenir shop, but the highlight is the superb rooftop viewpoint surveying Baku Bay and the Old City.

Palace of the Shirvanshahs

This charming if entirely unfinished sandstone **palace complex** (Map p242; ☎ 4921073; admission/guided tour AZN2/6; ☎ 10am-6pm) was the seat of northeastern Azerbaijan's ruling dynasty during the Middle Ages. Mostly 15th century in essence, it was painstakingly restored in 2003.

Enter via the main ceremonial courtyard, dominated by a towering (if plain) portal leading into the main **palace apartments**, whose renovation has almost amounted to full-scale rebuilding. A small gateway on the left leads into the courtyard of the **Divan Xana**, an octagonal, open-sided stone rotunda where the court of Shirvanshah Khalilullah I once assembled.

The western portal is beautifully inscribed with intricate carving and calligraphic inscriptions.

Steps lead down from the ceremonial courtyard to an octagonal water **cistern**,

near which the incredibly sparse **ruins of the Keyqubad Mosque** lead into the so-called **Dervish's Mausoleum**. This empty, pointed-roof structure was the tomb of Seyyid Yəhya Bakuvi, an astronomer, philosopher and mystic at Khalilullah's court. Around the tomb are many carved stone blocks inscribed with Arabic calligraphy, animal figures and human faces. These **Bayl Stones** were recovered in the 1950s from the 13th-century ruins of Sabayıl Qala, a castle that once stood on an island that's now submerged near Baku's southern Bayıl Peninsula.

The next level down lies behind a battlement-topped stone wall. This encloses the small cubic **Shah Mosque** and the **Mausoleum of the Shirvanshahs**, which is largely unadorned within but has some carvings on the portal gateway.

A handful of photographs inside show archaeological finds from the site's 1940s excavations. Another gate leads down to the final terrace and the lumpy **ruins of the Palace Hamam**.

Art Galleries

The **State Art Museum** (Map p242; ☎ 4925789; Niyazi küç 11; admission AZN3; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is housed in two impressive oil-boom mansions. The main building houses a collection of rather staid 19th-century Azeri and Russian art. But there's a much more interesting overview of Azeri modern art in the annexe immediately up the hill. If that's closed, you can still see great modern Azeri art at several commercial mini-galleries with free admission, of which the most imaginative include **Qız Qalası** (Map p242; ☎ 4927481; www.qgalleri.net; Qüllə küç 6; ☎ 10.30am-7pm), **Center of Contemporary Art** (Map p242; ☎ 4925906; Qüllə küç 15; ☎ 11am-8pm Tue-Sun) and **Ali Shamsir's Gallery** (Map p242; ☎ 4977136; Kiçik Qala küç 84).

Carpet Museum

Formerly a Lenin Museum, this solidly neo-classical building now houses an interesting **Carpet Museum** (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4932019; Neftçilər pr 123; admission AZN5; ☎ 9.30am-5pm), which charts the history of Azeri carpet making and includes over 1000 rare and beautiful rugs from Azerbaijan, as well as Iran and Dagestan. A guided tour (AZN3 extra) helps to put the designs in context and to explain the significance of their symbols. In the same building are the far less compelling **Theatre**

Museum (☎ 4930229; admission AZN2) and **Museum of Independence** (☎ 4533017; admission AZN2).

Other Museums

Several of Baku's top museums were being very extensively renovated at the time of research but should reopen in 2008 or 2009. These include the **Nizami Museum of Azerbaijan Literature** (Map p242; ☎ 4927403; İstiqlaliyyət küç 53), whose exterior façade has ogive arched niches set with statues of the nation's literary greats. Less impressive from outside but truly stunning within is the **Historical Museum** (Map p242; ☎ 4933648; Z Tağıyev küç 4), housed in the 1896 former home of one of Baku's greatest late-19th-century oil barons.

Baku has many modern 'house museums' commemorating local cultural icons in the homes where they once lived. For foreign visitors a popular choice is the **Rostropovich Museum** (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4920265; Rostropoviçlər küç 19; admission/tour AZN1/3; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), given the international fame of the Bakuvian cellist and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich, who lived here as a child. However, it's of very limited interest to nonspecialists and no English is spoken.

Religious Buildings

Several blunt medieval **minarets** rise above the Old City but the intricate stone façade of the **Cumə Mosque** (Map p242) is only a century old. Amid an interesting warren of low-rise old homes that rises up the Yasamal Slopes lies the imposing **Təzə Pir Mosque** (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4923855; Sübhü küç). It was built between 1903 and 1914 but a 2007 renovation has added gilding to its minaret tips and stone cladding to the surrounding buildings, which house the **Centre for Islam in the Caucasus**. Overshadowed by vast new apartment towers is the fine **Imam Huseyn Mosque** (Map pp240-1; Təjizadə küç), featuring some attractive Moorish and Art Nouveau stone-design elements.

Hidden through the Vidadi küç archway off Hüsi Hacıyev küç, the modest **Archangel Michael Russian Church** (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4973596; Zərgərpalan küç 38) is the centre of Baku's Orthodox community. It's not geared towards tourists, but you're welcome to admire the icons and colourful ceiling murals.

The sturdy **Armenian Church** (Map pp240-1; Fountain Sq) remains disused for lack of Armenians, a reminder of the brutal cultural divide still caused by the war in Karabakh.

Şahidlər Xiyabani (Martyr's Lane)

High above the city centre's southwest corner lies this sombre **memorial** (Map p238) to Bakuvian victims of the Red Army's 1990 attack. Those martyrs were swiftly joined by many more Azeris who died in the Karabakh conflict. A small memorial to British and Commonwealth troops killed around Baku during WWI has been erected nearby, causing considerable controversy. After all, the British had been sent to prevent the Turkish invasion which most Azeris supported. A small police post above it dissuades vandals.

Even if graves are too maudlin to appeal, Şahidlər Xiyabani has a fine new **Turkish-style mosque** (Map p238) and at the edge of the gardens there's a viewpoint offering some splendid views across the bay and city.

Get here by **funicular** (20q, every 15 minutes) from thesea front, or **marshrutka** 39T or 177 from behind Bakı Soveti metro.

Nearby is **Faxrı Xiyabani Cemetery** (Map p238; Parliament pr), where Heydar Əliyev's grave is the first place that any dignitary is likely to be taken to on an official visit to Baku.

WALKING TOUR

After climbing the **Maiden's Tower** (1; p243) for some orientating views, wander randomly in the alleyways of **İçəri Şəhər**, making an active attempt to get lost. You're never more than a few minutes' walk from the fortified perimeter wall, and this way you get to absorb some of the atmosphere of the real Old City, small corners of which remain delightfully 'lived-in' despite the encroachment of neohistorical office buildings and multiplying **carpet sellers** (2). Don't miss the **Palace of the Shirvanshahs** (3; opposite) before exiting into grand İstiqlaliyyət küç, near the splendidly renovated **Baku Philharmonia concert hall** (4; p253). The white tower-block across the road from the **Art Museum** (5; opposite) guarded threateningly by soldiers is the **Presidential Administration** (6); photography is strictly forbidden, though were it not nobody would think of snapping a picture anyway.

Curving northeast you'll pass the noble, late-19th-century **Baku City Hall** (7) and the **Institute of Manuscripts** (8) which preserves a fine collection of mainly 18th- and 19th-century Korans. Beyond the lovely **Ismailiya Palace** (9) lies the Old City's sturdy, castle-style **Double Gateway** (10), while on your left is the beautiful façade of the **Nizami Literature**



WALKING TOUR

Start Maiden's Tower
Finish Fountain Sq
Distance 4km
Time 5 hours

Museum (11; p245). Behind that lies **Fountain Sq (12)**, Baku's pleasantly shady central piazza. It's a great place for people-watching, though the fountains themselves are only switched on during summer evenings. For refreshment consider a shady beer- or tea-terrace or perhaps the trendy **Azza café (13; p253)**. The surrounding tree-lined streets are full of pubs, restaurants and century-old 'oil-boom' mansions, including one that houses the **Historical Museum (14; p245)**. Having explored a little, backtrack via the historic if overrenovated **Jewellery Arcade (15)** to find the underpass beneath thundering Neftçilər pr. You'll emerge beside the dinky old **Puppet Theatre (16; p253)** on the bulvar. Join the smoochy young lovers strolling the seafront promenade or the families enjoying funfair rides. Notice the

open-sided **Mirvari Kafesi (17; Pearl Cafe)**, whose scallop-shell concrete roof is as archetypally Soviet as the pinafores babushkas who serve here. Nearby is the departure pier for short **pleasure-boat trips (18; adult/child 80q/60q; ☽ summer when calm)** into the bay, whose waters glint rainbow colours with the sheen of oil.

Cross back across Neftçilər pr to the colonnaded **Carpet Museum (19; p244)** – this can be challenging due to the constant traffic – then stroll through Baku's commercial centre to **Sahil Garden (20)**. The garden's focus is a now-wordless **memorial (21)** to the 26 Commissars, and there are several fine buildings nearby including the statue-encrusted national library, the **Akhundov Kitabxana (22)**. Around the corner the classically styled **Rəşid Rəşid Behbudov Song Theatre (23)** was once Baku's main synagogue (two newer ones still operate).

The city's fine **Opera House (24; p253)** welcomes you to Nizami küç, Baku's most cosmopolitan pedestrianised shopping street, whose many fine century-old mansions will lead you back to Fountain Square via the **Passaj Tourist Market (25)** and the old **Armenian Church (26; p245)**.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The city's vibrant theatre and concert season runs from mid-September to May, culminating with the world-class **Baku Jazz Festival** (<http://festival.jazz.az/>). Headline acts have included Herbie Hancock in 2006 and Aziza Mustafazadeh in 2007.

The **Caspian Oil & Gas Show** (www.caspianoilgas.co.uk) in early June is a week-long corporate shindig. While hardly a tourist draw, it brings in delegates from around the world, stretching the availability of top-end hotel rooms. Like other Baku trade fairs (http://caspiaworld.com/en/country_events/aze/) it's held at Baku's soulless **Heydar Əliyev Adına İdman Kompleksi** (Map p238; Moskva [Tbilisi] pr).

SLEEPING

Within the past five years most of Baku's sleazier accommodation options have been bulldozed, while throughout the city a rash of midrange minihotels is appearing. Prices are comparatively steep, as you might expect in an increasingly oil-rich boomtown. If Baku's hotel prices scare the moneybelt off you, it's possible to sit up all night in one of the 24-hour Internet Klubs. Or take a cross-country night train to anywhere for around AZN4.

Budget

HOTELS & HOSTELS

Station Hostel (Map pp240-1; main train station; dm/s/tw AZN3.60/6/12) By far the cheapest beds in town are in dorms within the ugly, roach-infested concrete tower above the central train station. Sometimes foreigners are refused a place and you're likely to be lodging with an odd collection of petty traders and down-and-outs. There are also a few single and double rooms though these fill very fast. It's all very hit and miss. Enquire (in Russian or Azeri) at the window marked 'İstirahət Otaqlarının İnzibatçısı' in the station's ticket concourse. Once you've paid you get a slip of paper allowing you to enter the guarded, very creaky lift. Good luck!

1000 Camels Hostel (Map p242; ☎ 4926331, 050 7212995; www.thousandcamels.com; Asaf Zeynallı küç 29/3; dm US\$20) Owned by inspiring young Azeri professionals, this small, brilliantly located hostel has just two four-bunk bedrooms off a shared kitchen-cum-sitting room in a typical thick-walled Old City house. The shared bathroom is OK though beds are rather uncomfortable and linen costs AZN1 extra (or use your

sleeping bag). The hostel is through the second door to the left in the tiny, dead-end alley directly west of the Hotel Meridian. A second, vastly less convenient branch is out in the suburbs, near metro Elmar Akademiyası.

Hotel Araz (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4905063; Yusif Səfərov küç 30; tw/tr from AZN20/30, with bathroom AZN40/60; ☎) Popular with backpackers and Iranian petty traders, the Araz has relatively well-maintained budget rooms, all with air-con, plus two receptionists who can speak OK English. Though clean, the shared facilities were designed with an all-male clientele in mind, so women will cause consternation in the communal shower room. From central Baku take marshrutka 1 from Vurgun Gardens, or 4 from the bulvar.

Cənub Hotel (Map pp240-1; ☎ 5981152; fax 4479488; Azərbaycan pr 31; refurbished/unrefurbished tw with bathroom AZN40/30; ☎) The Cənub's reasonable prices and superbly central location make up for inconsistent hot-water supply and lacklustre service. Refurbished rooms have air-con. Some guests report problems getting in after midnight.

Hotel Velotrek (Map p238; ☎ 4315187-9; Moskva [Tbilisi] pr 3007; per person AZN15) The Velotrek's clean, unfussy rooms with en suite bathroom are relatively new and a bargain when you're travelling alone. However receptionists can be hard to find, the doors lock early and priority goes to visiting sports teams, so you can't necessarily extend your stay. The location is far from central but handy for the main bus station and right beside (if hidden from) 20 Jan metro station. The next-door bicycle club can help long-distance cyclists fix their bikes.

APARTMENTS

Numerous rental agents focus on the expat market but can offer daily rates for short stays. Quality varies but many properties are central and all are likely to have hot water and a kitchenette. English-speaking agents include:

Alla Rakhmanina (☎ 050 3691569; <http://travelazerbaijan.land.ru>; 1-/2-room apt from US\$30/45, 5-night minimum)

Baku Services (☎ 4189661; www.bakuservices.com; from US\$78)

Marina Mednikova (☎ 050 4507740; www.bakurealestate.net; from US\$40, 3-night minimum)

Midrange

Abşeron Hotel (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4932056; www.absheron.com; Puşkin küç; 6th, 11th & 13th fl tw/ste AZN65/120, 9th, 12th & 14th fl AZN80/120, 5th, 7th, 8th,

BUSINESS IN BAKU: INTERVIEW WITH AN ANONYMOUS EXPAT BUSINESSMAN**So what's it like doing business in Baku?**

You have to have connections here. Even then there's a constant procession of inspectors to check building standards, fire precautions, tax certificate and goodness knows what. Even if you've followed all the rules there's always a 'sweetener' to pay if only to make sure they stamp your papers. So why bother following regulations?! It's a dangerous cycle. Of course, there's money to be made. But don't let anyone know you're doing well. Otherwise the landlord raises your rent to eat up all your profit. Your local business partner forces you out. Or a better-connected local sets up in competition and has his friends send round yet more inspectors to close you down. They can always find something!

Is it getting better?

It was. A lot of great, dynamic young Azeris were getting promoted into higher places. But in the middle ranks there's still a lot of self-serving bureaucrats who think only about skimming off whatever they can. And the sudden flood of oil money means that the good guys seem to have taken their eyes off the ball. If anything things are getting worse. Laws remain opaque and entrepreneurs, local and foreigner, are simply giving up and leaving town.

10th fl AZN120/140; ☎) This vast 1970s concrete monster has finally received a long-overdue renovation and the spacious lobby now looks rather hip. However, while rooms on some floors were entirely rebuilt to approximately Western standards, cheaper options have simply been redecorated and retain lacklustre Soviet bathrooms. Sniff carefully before accepting a room and bring mosquito repellent just in case. The top-floor restaurant isn't lovely but has superb views down onto Government House.

Old City Inn (Map p242; ☎ 4974369; www.oldcityinn.com; 10th Kichik Qala alley 16; s/d/tw US\$90/110/120; ☎) With just 12 comfortable (if oddly shaped) rooms, this friendly place has unusually high levels of service, as staff are students of the Western University's tourism courses. The roof offers fabulous 360-degree views if you can manage five flights of stairs.

Yacht Club (Yaxt Klub; Map pp240-1; ☎ 5981895; fax 5981886; s/d/ste US\$120/140/210; ☎) This 26-room glass arc is uniquely located on stilts above the Caspian and reached by golf-style electric buggy down a pier. Standards are acceptable, though colours don't always match and not all rooms get sea views. Breakfast included. Booking fee is a whopping 25%.

Azcot Hotel (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4972507; www.azcot.com; N Rəfiyyəli 20; d US\$129.80-177; ☎) In a superbly central 1885 mansion this friendly hotel uses period settees, large Chinese vases and tasteful art to make corridors feel homely. The comfortable rooms have kettles and minibars. Rates include breakfast and internet access.

Hotel Respublika Lyuks (Map pp240-1; ☎ 5981056; www.hotelrespublika.com; Xaqani küç 24; ste AZN150-320; ☎) This impressive latter-day stone mansion makes no attempt to advertise that it's a hotel, but standards are high, prices fair (by Baku standards) and the suave restaurant offers an incredible lunch deal.

Holiday Inn (Map p258; ☎ 4374949; www.holidayinn.com; Heydar Əliyev International Airport; d from AZN150; ☎) With many international flights arriving and departing at antisocial hours, this very comfortable, brand-new hotel offers a stress-free alternative to a 3am taxi ride to/from the city centre. Top-end quality for midrange prices.

our pick Sultan Inn (Map p242; ☎ 4372305; www.sultaninn.com; Böyük Qala küç 20; d AZN150-170; ☎) This luxurious 11-room boutique hotel hits a fine balance between opulent elegance, cosy comfort and trendy modernism. Its perfectly central Old City location is a great plus, with unparalleled views of the Maiden's Tower from the rooftop restaurant.

Metropol Hotel (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4926709; http://metropolbaku.com; Fikrət Əmirov küç 2; s/d from US\$171/183; ☎) The Metropol is a boutique hotel that pulls off that 'design-book' trendy feel with primary colours, bold modernist lines and showers that feel like starship transporter booths.

Park Inn (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4906000; www.baku.rezidorparkinn.com; Neftçilər pr; s/d from AZN176/189; ☎) This swish modern business hotel has been very impressively recycled from a once-terrible old Soviet dinosaur. Sea-view rooms cost AZN11 extra. Check out the guests-only top

floor where a 'secret' sushi bar will make your credit card wince. Officially the address is Azadlıq 1 but that's misleading as it's not on Azadlıq at all.

Other options include the following:

Altstadt Hotel (Map p242; ☎ 4933492; aae@box.az; Mammadyasov küç 3/2A; d US\$50-80; ☎) Simple eight-room homestay-style guesthouse that's about the cheapest you'll find in the Old City. Minimal English.

Guesthouse Inn (Map p242; ☎ 4371263; ascotinn2@azdata.net; Harbchilar küç 19-21; d AZN60-75; ☎) Fairly plain, simple Old City guesthouse. Two rooms lack natural light but top-floor rooms share a view terrace.

Red Roof Old City Guesthouse (Map p242; ☎ 4371263; office@redroofoldcity.az; Sabir küç 12; d AZN85; ☎) Decent Old City guesthouse with great rooftop views and a little basement pub.

Hale Kai Residence (Map pp240-1; ☎ 5965056; www.hotelhalekai.com; Mirza İbrahimov küç 18; d AZN90-140; ☎) Smart, central, American-owned guesthouse with Georgian art and small but pleasant lobby bar. Breakfast included. No lift.

Hotel Balion (Map p242; ☎ 4184329; Əliyərəyov küç 12; d US\$100; ☎) Rather functional but handy for the nightlife district.

Hotel Kichik Gala 98 (Map p242; ☎ 4371950; www.hotelgef.com/98.html; Kiçik Qala 98; s/d AZN80/100; ☎) More spacious and slightly more stylish than many of the Old City's mini-hotels.

Marco Polo Icheri-Sheher Hotel (Map p242; ☎ 4925315; www.icherisheher.net; Mammedyasov küç 1/34; d AZN120; ☎) Cosy, comfortable six-room Old City hotel whose private rooftop offers great views of the Shirvan Shah Palace Complex.

Top End

High prices aren't always an assurance of high quality. Some options are shockingly overpriced at walk-in rates but online brokers and travel agencies often offer discounts. Even the best hotels can suffer from a level of service that is friendly and willing but overfamiliar and sometimes incompetent.

Hotel Meridian (Map p242; ☎ 4970809; www.meridianhotel.az; Əsəf Zeynallı küç 39; s/d US\$212/224, ste US\$271-401; ☎) Stylish, understated rooms are comfortable and the location behind a neo-antique stone façade at the entrance to the Old City is magnificent. Don't miss the bar and billiard room hidden in a warren of 17th-century subterranean caverns beneath the hotel.

Radisson SAS Plaza (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4982402; http://baku.radissonsas.com; 14th-17th fl, İSR Plaza; sea view/city view AZN283/330, presidential suite AZN800; ☎) Soaring above Fountain Sq, this tower of blue glass

and anonymous grey-pink marble offers wonderful city views but the experience is more like renting a luxurious studio than staying in a hotel. Seek out reception in an office in the 17th floor. Guests have free use of the Plaza fitness centre on the ground floor.

Hotel Boutique Palace (Map p242; ☎ 4922288; www.boutique-palace.com; Əziz Əliyev küç 9; d AZN348; ☎) The unique feature of this somewhat self-indulgent little place is that it's actually built like a limpet onto the ancient old-town wall, as you'll see in the bar. Rooms do have personality but aren't enormous and rack rates are shamelessly expensive.

Excelsior Hotel (Map p238; ☎ 4968000; www.excel.siorhotelbaku.az; Heydar Əliyev pr 2; d AZN250-350, ste AZN650-2450; ☎) The Excelsior appeals to the nouveau super-riche, with a Las Vegas sense of no-expense-spared pseudo-classical grandeur. Rooms are impeccable and the fitness centre is superb, but it's a little isolated – 3km east of the centre.

Hyatt Hotels (Map p238; ☎ 4961234; www.baku.hyatt.com; 1033 İzmir küç; d from US\$295, ste \$390-1062; ☎) Together this pair of professionally run international hotels form Baku's most reliable business option. Rooms at the Park Hyatt are somewhat larger but those in the Hyatt Regency have a trendier feel and the Regency's fine 1950s building has a certain Stalinist grandeur. Facilities include three swimming pools, a pair of squash courts and a very extensive gym. Numerous good restaurants lie nearby.

EATING

Baku is a culinary treat, where good local restaurants jostle with equally impressive foreign eateries catering for the sizable expatriate community. Typical restaurant hours here are 11am to 11pm (exceptions are given in the following listings).

Azeri

There's a selection of ultra-cheap if entirely uninspired, male-dominated *yeməxanalar* around the train station, notably on the south side of Vurğun Gardens. **Qoç** (Map pp240-1; 28 May küç 50; meals AZN1-3; ☎) 24hr is typical and opens all hours. **Yeni Bakı** (Map pp240-1; Dilara Əliyeva küç 25; mains AZN1-3; ☎) 10am-11pm is less off-putting for women.

Dərviş (Map p242; meals AZN2-5, beer 80q; ☎) 10am-11.30pm This friendly and refreshingly unpretentious, locals-only place serves simple meals

in an ancient stone cavern that's photogenic but prone to overheating.

L'Aperté (Map p242; İstiqlalıyyat küç 51; mains AZN2-7, beers from AZN1.40; ☎ 24hr) Open all-hours with a phenomenally wide-ranging menu and surprisingly plush décor given the incredibly modest price range.

Similar great-value equivalents include **Art Restoran** (Map pp240-1; Xaqani küç 51; ☎ 24hr) and **Restoran Port** (Map p242; Əliyərbaýov küç; ☎ 10am-11pm).

Tarelka (Map pp240-1; off Azərbaýcan pr; bizniz lunch AZN3, mains AZN3.50-7) Calm, bright and run by women for women, this narrow little café-resto has décor based around the owner's modest porcelain collection. Food is Russo-Azeri with an AZN10 salad buffet on Sundays.

Pancora (Map p238; ☎ 5103700; A Şaiq küç 245; meals AZN4-15, beer from AZN1.80; ☎ 10am-1am) The upstairs dining room has a wild-west wooden décor and live piano music. Ground-floor wooden booths emulate the streamside ambience of Azeri rural dining. The menu stretches from local standards to ostrich steaks. Wines from AZN6 a bottle.

Bəh Bəh Club (Map p242; ☎ 4988734; www.bah-bahclub.com; Əliyərbaýov küç 9; mains AZN4.50-10) Kilims on walls, heavy wooden tables and an excellent selection of regional food including *saj* (sizzler-roast) dishes and *fisincan* (Azeri-Iranian walnut-chicken). The live music is low-key.

Fayton Club (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4988101; Rəşid Behbudov küç 17; meals AZN5-20, beers from AZN2) This upmarket yet rustic stone-vaulted basement is decorated with handicrafts, *şəbəkə* (intricately carved, wood-framed, stained-glass windows) and an old cart in an almost-successful attempt to create a feel of 18th-century Azerbaijan. Classic Azeri foods are well made but unless you want the full-blast music show (AZN4 cover), get out before 8pm.

Karvansara Restaurant (Map p242; ☎ 4926668; Böyük Qala küç 11; mains AZN5-15) Choose from two 14th-century caravanserais, one offering atmospherically gloomy private stone cells, the other an intriguing cellar dining room. Prices aren't outrageous but watch out for 'extras'.

XVII Əsr (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4932034; Başır Səfəroğlu küç 215; meals AZN7-20) Decorated with old hunting weapons, this cosy mid-market restaurant offers Talysh cuisine that goes well beyond the predictable nut-stuffed *ləvəngi* dishes. Delicious starters (AZN3 to AZN4 per plate) include *XVII əsr qalyanaltısı* (stuffed dried fruit and walnut-coated chicken balls), *qoz küküüsü*

(a patchwork of omelette-like morsels) and *inca salati* (layered egg-salad with cheese and fruit topping). There's also an AZN7 bizniz lunch.

Muğam Club (Map p242; ☎ 4924085; Haqiqət Rzayeva küç; meals from AZN20, beers from AZN4) A wonderfully atmospheric two-storey caravanserai offers alcove and courtyard dining options accompanied by impressive cabaret shows demonstrating tasters of various Azeri musical and dance styles. The Azeri food is excellent, but prices can be exorbitant (kebabs AZN12!). Often closed for private functions.

Tonqal (Map p238; ☎ 4499198; www.tonqal.com; Ak Həsən Əliyev 82; kebab meals AZN15-25) Ivy-draped carts in overgrown patches of woodland create a delightfully rustic garden atmosphere that's incongruous for the suburban setting. However the only menu is on its website and the many extras can be extremely pricey (plate of fruit AZN20!); plus the only drinking water served is imported.

Many glitzy and relatively overpriced local restaurants feature high-volume Azeri pop music (see Entertainment, p253).

Turkish

Baku's numerous Turkish restaurants serve comparatively inexpensive precooked meals in pleasantly semi-grand arch-vaulted premises. Point at what you fancy from the heated display of precooked meals (AZN4 to AZN6 including side dish) or order pricier made-to-order dishes. Popular choices include **Anadolu 1** (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4980102; www.anadolu.az; Puşkin küç 5), **Anadolu 2** (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4986804; Rəsul Rza küç 3/5), **Star** (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4987625; Bülbül pr 5; 9am-11pm), spacious **İskəndər** (Map pp240-1; Xaqani küç; ☎ 7am-11.30pm) and stylish **Divan** (Map p242; İstiqlalıyyat küç).

Georgian

Apart from the Georgian Home, none of the Georgian places listed here speak English, but who cares with flagons of rustic Georgian house wine at AZN6 per litre?

U Dalı (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4949356; Mirzə İbrahimov [Qorkil] küç 7; mains AZN4.40-8; ☎ 10am-11pm) Misleadingly signed 'Café Napoli', U Dalı serves tasty Georgian home-cooking at candlelit basement booths. It's sweetly unsophisticated, the mushroom dishes are excellent.

Similarly priced but less cosy options include **Imereti** (Map pp240-1; Xaqani küç 13) and the very functional **Kavkasioni** (Map pp240-1; Dilara Əliyeva küç) whose double-decker Megruli

khachapuri (Georgian cheese pie) are superb. **Kafe Tbilisi** (Map pp240-1; Hüsi Hacıyev küç 80; mains AZN3-5) has a tetchy manager but the prices are very reasonable (if double what the English menu says!). Try the scrumptious eggplant strips topped with walnut paste (40q each).

Georgian Home (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4944385; Mirzə İbrahimov [Qorkil] küç 18; mains AZN10-25, beers from AZN3.50) A quantum leap in style, this suave choice makes wonderfully eclectic use of homemade pottery to give the fashionable interior a real sense of personality. Food is excellent but with prices to match. The cheapest bottle of wine costs a thumping AZN35, plus 10% service charge.

Russian & Ukrainian

Yolk Palki (Əlik Palki; Map pp240-1; ☎ 4942492; Qoqol küç 15; mains AZN3-7) This jolly if cramped log-décor cellar-restaurant fills with whooping live gypsy music many an evening. There's another branch at M Hüseyn küç 88, while the similar **Xutor** (Map p242; ☎ 4372223; M Muxtarov küç 9/3; mains AZN3-6; ☎ 11am-11pm) specialises in Ukrainian food. All menus are in Russian.

our pick Kalinka (Map pp240-1; ☎ 5962470; Qoqol küç 7; mains AZN3.50-6) Calm and remarkably suave, with soaring high ceiling vaults yet very modestly priced and with a menu in English. The 'black pearls' (stuffed prunes; AZN2) are particularly delicious.

International

You can eat most world cuisines in Baku.

Bibi (Map p238; ☎ 5102632; A Şaiq küç; mains AZN4-10, kebabs AZN2-7; ☎ noon-11pm) By far the nicest place in Baku for Persian cuisine, the Bibi offers live but unobtrusive music in its spacious double dining hall with olde-world tulip-chandeliers and rush-matting to soften the ceilings. Try the *kaşki badımcın* (eggplant with Iranian whey; AZN4).

Great Wall (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4937672; Üzeyir Hacıbəyov 26; mains AZN5-9, rice AZN1.50) This unpretentious Chinese eatery represents good value.

Asiana (Map p238; ☎ 4368367; Q Məcidov küç; mains AZN6-12, rice from AZN2) Chopsticks balanced on pebbles give a zenlike low-key appeal that's amply complemented by fine Malaysian and Singaporean food.

Mado (Map p238; ☎ 4975544; İnşaatçılar pr 33; nigirizushi for 2 AZN3-6, for 6 maki AZN5-13) Designer-hip Japanese restaurant where sushi comes with beautiful ceramic soy sauce jugs and luridly over-pink sushigari. Sadly, the limp *maguro* tastes somewhat bland.

Sunset Café (Map p242; ☎ 4922292; Əziz Əliyev küç 9; sandwiches AZN7-10; ☎ noon-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-10.30pm Sun) The ugly plexiglass-fronted building is an eyesore, but the very agreeable cinema-themed interior is perfectly pitched and the generous salads, giant burgers and excellent sandwiches are ever-popular with expats.

Pancho's (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4985700; Xaqani küç 14/16; mains AZN9-15; ☎ noon-3pm & 6-11pm) is the most authentic for Mexican food, while **Mexicana** (Map p242; ☎ 4989096; Z Tağıyev küç 17; mains AZN8-11) does a decent AZN9 lunch deal, offering soup, burrito, soft drink and garlic bread.

Mediterranea (Map p242; ☎ 4929866; Haqiqət Rzayeva küç 11; mains AZN7-12, beer from AZN3.20) The garden area is superbly located for summer dining in the shadow of the Maiden's Tower while the sleekly modernised caravanserai-covered courtyard interior is a tempting choice on colder nights. The mostly European main dishes aren't especially memorable but mezze starters are excellent and drinks arrive with complimentary cheese and olives.

Al Fresco (Map p242; ☎ 5981124; Əlizadə küç 9; pastas AZN8-12, mains AZN10-17) Upmarket Mediterranean food in a modern, distinctively feminine, Laura Ashley-style atmosphere, with pastel colours, lacy tones and several round tables.

Scalini's (Map p238; ☎ 5982850; www.scalini.baku.az; Bakıxanov küç 2; pastas AZN9-14, Italian mains from AZN12) Speedy, waistcoated waiters deliver perfect pastas with bucket-loads of parmesan and a selection of home-cooked breads in Baku's most congenial Italian restaurant. The décor is upmarket bistro-style with a relaxed buzz, soaring high ceilings and great movie and Martini posters.

Lai Thai (Map pp240-1; ☎ 050 5785394; Səməd Vurğun küç 21; mains AZN9-18, rice AZN2) The food is lip-smackingly authentic Thai but prices seem steep, given the somewhat unrefined décor.

Shanghai (Şanxay; Map pp240-1; ☎ 4954510; Rəsul Rza küç 31; mains AZN10-12, rice from AZN3; ☎ noon-11pm) For good, authentic Chinese food, the Shanghai scores highly despite an un-lovely green-box interior.

Hong Kong (Map p238; ☎ 4369001; İnşaatçılar pr 38; mains AZN9-18, rice from AZN2; ☎ noon-11pm) In a fine Stalinist stone corner-block near the Hyatt, pricey oriental food is served in an elegantly modern, mood-lit environment, beneath lamps shaped like abstract squid.

Taboo (Map pp240-1; ☎ 5981761www.taboo-baku.com; Üzeyir Hacıbəyov 33; teppanyaki AZN17-45) Flex your credit card for cook-at-the-table teppanyaki

or wide-ranging Eurasian delicacies at this 'm'as-tu-vu' palace of low-voltage uberchic.

Maharaja (Map p242; ☎ 4924334; Əlizadə küç 6; mains AZN8-12) is the best of several appealing, upmarket Indian restaurants. Its AZN10 weekday lunch deal is a bargain, with soup, two delicious curries, rice and tea. **Taj Mahal** (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4930049; Xaqani küç 18; mains 7-9, rice AZN1.50, lunch AZN7) also exudes an elegant designer orientalism.

Quick Eats

BAKERIES

Many bakeries offer stand-bars at which to eat snacks (15q to 40q) and cheap if long-stewed cups of tea or cocoa (20q). The Çudo Peçka (Map p238) chain is ubiquitous, and its branch near Hotel Velotrek has seating.

However, the system of pre-paying can be awkward if you don't speak Azeri. **Həyat** (Map pp240-1; Azadlıq pr; ☎ 24hr) is more user-friendly. **Aslan** (Map pp240-1; Cəfər Cabbarlı Sq), near the metro station, has particularly good Pəndirli Xaçəpuri (cheese-filled flaky-pastry squares).

FAST FOOD

Throughout the city you'll find windows selling döner kebabs for around AZN1: **Inter Grand** (Map p242; Z Tağıyev küç 5) is especially popular.

It's fun to visit **McDonald's** (Map pp240-1; Fountain Sq) if only to giggle at spellings such as Bıq Mak and Çizburqer.

DRINKING Bars

As well as those listed there are numerous cheaper lacklustre local places. Many teahouses also serve beer from around 50q.

Corner Bar (Map pp240-1; Rəsul Rza küç; beers from AZN2, snacks AZN2-6; ☎ 3pm-late) The most happening of Baku's many Anglo-Irish-style pubs, the Corner has very competent live music. '33' beer for AZN2 and a decent range of pub grub.

Other reliable expat choices include Finnegans (Map p242) or Adam's (Map p242) for televised sports, plus O'Malleys (Map pp240-1) for its tree-shaded summer terrace.

USSR (Map p242; Z Tağıyev küç; Xırdalan beer AZN2; ☎ 4pm-late) This basement Soviet-nostalgia bar is decidedly downmarket and a little musty, but has some fun photos of politburo stars and a Red Army coat and general's cap that you can don for souvenir photos.

Black City Pub (Map p242; ☎ 4901890; Yusif Səfərov küç 22; efes beer AZN2) Although it's not worth a special trip, this Germanic wood-interior bar

is a handy choice if you're staying at Hotel Araz. No spoken English, no menu.

Konti Pub (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4989191; Nizami küç 117; snack meals AZN2-8) This medieval-style *biertübe*-cavern offers the novel concept of letting you pour your own draught beers. Be careful where you sit: some metered taps dispense Xırdalan at AZN3 per litre, others Bavaria at AZN7.20. It's mostly for locals.

Brewery (Map p242; İstiqlaliyyət küç 27; beers AZN2.50, meals AZN8-13) In a spacious, stone-vaulted basement with heavy wooden furniture, Baku's only brew-pub turns out very acceptable dark ales and less successful lagers. Germanic meals and pricey beer snacks are available.

Ocean Deck (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4930223; Molokan Park; small beer from AZN2.50) Plonked in the middle of a duck pond, the terrace of this American café-bar makes a delightful people-watching perch in the summer. However, its small interior is rather lacklustre.

City Lights Bar (Map pp240-1; ISR Plaza, 17th fl, Nizami küç 340; beers from AZN4) This hip, upmarket lounge-bar offers some incredible views of the city from its outdoor terrace.

Teahouses

In Baku, you're likely to pay AZN1 for a pot of tea at one of the open-air male-dominated summer *çayxanas* like those behind the Nizami Cinema, near the train station or a block north of Bibi restaurant in the greater Baku area.

The same tea will cost around AZN2.50 if a 'compulsory' cut-up Snickers bar arrives with your teapot. This will happen at most places on the Bulvar and at the well-located **Kafe Fəvvarələr** (Map pp240-1; Fountain Sq).

It's almost always cheaper to order a beer, which can cost as little as 50q a pint for unpasturised NZS, or AZN1 to AZN2 for a more palatable Xırdalan lager.

A much more upmarket *çay evi* (teahouse) can charge entirely ludicrous sums (AZN6 to AZN20) for a pot of tea with samovar of water and a range of jams and fruit. The best such places tend to be indoors, with comparatively exotic interiors, *qalyan* (hubble-bubble water pipes) to smoke and possibly a belly dancing show, as at **Şarq Əfsanəsi** (Map p242; Eastern Legend; Ahmad Cavad küç 4; tea AZN20, beer AZN5, vodka AZN10; ☎ 3pm-late).

Cafés

Great coffee aromas and hissing cappuccino nozzles entice many a visitor into central

Baku's suave new cafés. Expect to pay around AZN3 for an espresso and at least AZN4 for one of those scrumptious cakes to accompany it.

Azza (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4370111; www.azza.az; İslam Səfərlı küç 1A) Three floors of coffee-and-cream minimalism within a historic pavilion right on Fountain Sq. Excellent food including decent pastas (AZN7) is served by self-consciously handsome, slow-motion waiters.

Aroma (Map pp240-1; ☎ 5980707; www.aromacafe.az; Üzeyir Hacıbəyov küç 18; coffees AZN3-6, mains AZN9-24; ☎ noon-11.45pm Mon-Sat, 3-11.45pm Sun) Baku's best combination of comfort, fashionable décor and great coffee. Pod lamps and electro-retro feel downstairs, street-view sofa seats above. It's also a wi-fi hot spot.

Chocolate (Map p242; ☎ 4923526; Böyük Qala St, Old City; coffees AZN2-5; ☎ 11am-midnight) A classy, high-ceilinged café with pseudo-1920s touches, weighted hanging lamps and tasselled tablecloths on small wrought-iron tables. However, macchiatos are far too milky.

Café Mozart (Map p242; ☎ 4981925; Əlizadə küç 2; espresso AZN3; ☎ 9am-11.30pm) With Klimt inside and a super-popular street terrace outside the Mozart remains a long-term favourite for AZN8 Turkish breakfasts, AZN10 lunch buffets or decent steak dinners.

Café Caramel (Map p242; ☎ 4989353; Əlizadə küç 7) Good espressos come with complimentary cookie and glass of chilled drinking water. Small, with modern décor including a bridge-like upper level offering street views down through century-old vaulting.

Public (Map p242; ☎ 4938725; Z Tağıyev küç 17) More comfy sofa seating is hidden away in the back room behind the sparse front bar area. Excellent espressos are comparatively inexpensive (AZN2) and there's an AZN6 lunch deal.

ENTERTAINMENT

Live Music

AZERI

Many top-end restaurants, notably the Muğam Club (see p250), include a cabaret of traditional music and dancing to accompany your meal.

Others, typically in large suburban gardens, offer top Azeri pop stars singing at full blast. Many Westerners consider this more like punishment than entertainment, but if you're interested, a classic venue is **İzmir** (Map p238; ☎ 957373; İzmir küç 5; mains from AZN8, cover AZN30)

where Manana, a sort of local Kylie Minogue, enjoys a bizarre Vegas-style residence.

JAZZ

At its best, Baku's small jazz scene can be one of the most creative anywhere, but quality is variable.

Baku Jazz Center (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4936196; www.jazz.az; Rəşid Behbudov küç 19; cover AZN3; ☎ live music from 9pm) Nightly live performances in a large, somewhat staid dining-room atmosphere.

Karavan Jazz Club (Map p242; ☎ 4971139; Əziz Əliyev küç 4; cover AZN4, beers from AZN2.40; ☎ live music 9-11pm) For years this intimate and brilliantly atmospheric basement club was the heart of Baku's jazz scene, though recently performances have been sporadic and of rather variable quality. Bring mosquito repellent.

Hazz (Map pp240-1; ☎ 5982978; www.hazz.az; Landmark Bldg Lobby, Xaqani küç 45A) Choose from a vast range of designer coffees at this sedately hip businessman's café-cum-wine bar which has low-key live jazz after 8pm.

Belly Dancing

Customers at some restaurants and several upmarket teahouses are subjected to belly-dancing displays of very unreliable quality. Better than most is the show (after 10pm) at the atmospheric, Arabic-themed cellar-restaurant **Xəlifə** (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4989296; Rəşid Behbudov küç 17; mains AZN6-10, beers AZN4, waterpipes AZN12; ☎ 5pm-2am), 'guarded' – in questionable taste – by costumed African 'slaves'.

Theatre & Classical Music

As with all artistic establishments across the ex-Soviet countries, the theatre season runs from mid-September to late May. It's worth seeing a performance at Baku's 1910 **Opera & Ballet Theatre** (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4931651; Nizami küç 95), if only to admire the grand interior. Most productions are lavish and even less exciting repertory performances have the advantage of transcending language barriers.

The brilliant **Philharmonia** (Map p242; ☎ 4972901; İstiqlaliyyət küç 2), originally built as an oil-boom-era casino, has an even grander interior and offers an eclectic (if unpredictable) concert programme.

It's also worth checking the **Musical Comedy Theatre** (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4938837; Azərbaycan pr 8) for operettas, while kids might enjoy marionette shows at the **Puppet Theatre** (Map p242; ☎ 4926425; Neftçilər pr 36).

Nightclubs

Most of the city-centre basement dives marked 'Disko Klub' are effectively prostitute pick-up spots. However, there are some (partial) exceptions, where groups of revellers will feel comparatively comfortable. **Key Club** (Map pp240-1; Qoqol küç) is relatively professionally run. **X-ite** (Map pp240-1; Bulvar), above the Red Room bar, frequently changes name and format but usually operates as a weekend disco. **Le Chevalier** (Map p238; Grand Hotel Europe, 1025/30 Tbilisi pr; admission AZN5, weekends AZN15, beers from AZN4; ☎ 10pm-late Tue-Sun) is the nearest thing to a full-blown nightclub.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

While homosexual acts were decriminalised in 2000, very conservative attitudes still prevail (at least in public) and there is no visible gay and lesbian scene in the city. Discretion is key. Azerbaijan's nascent gay-rights movement has a website at <http://mavi-oglan.chat.ru/>, but don't hold your breath for any public acceptance or even consciousness of homosexuality in Azerbaijan.

SHOPPING

Also known by its Russian acronym TsUM, Baku's oldest department store is **MUM** (Map pp240-1; Hüsi Hacıyev küç) with four floors of stalls selling everything from cheap electronics to wedding dresses. The big new Sahil Mall above Sahil metro offers all manner of tacky clocks, tasteless ornaments, shimmery clothes and over-glossy gold. Classier boutiques are found on Rəsul Rza küç, 28th May küç and Atatürk pr.

The **central vegetable market** (Map pp240-1; Ahmad Cavad küç) is loveably dilapidated. For more photographically piled fruit and illicit caviar (beluga around AZN50 for 113g), head to **Təzə Bazar** (Map pp240-1; Səməd Vurğun küç).

Souvenirs & Carpets

Traditional Azeri hats, copperware and carpets are widely sold though they can generally be obtained more cheaply in the provinces. Nonetheless the Ali Baba-esque shops around Baku's İçəri Şəhər are atmospheric places to nose around and, although prices might not be the most competitive, dealers here will be familiar with the annoying carpet-export procedures. A free tour of the impressive **Azər-İlmə Carpet Factory** (☎ 4659036; www.magicalknots.com; Şəmsi Rəhimov küç) is well worth the 20-minute drive, even if

you don't buy. Take marshrutka 99 from the Bulvar and get off beside Kral Wedding Palace on Ak Həsən Əliyev küç.

The colourful **tourist bazaar** (Passaj; Map pp240-1), along with various souvenir and 'antique' shops, mostly sells tacky rubbish, though the old Soviet-era badges are cheap and fun. **Ziya** (Map p238; İnşaatçılar pr 44; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) is well stocked, but overpriced, and aimed at Hyatt guests who can't be bothered to shop around.

Discs

In Baku you'll find a vast array of cheap, DVDs (AZN7) and music CDs (AZN3) of dubious legality. **ABC** (Map pp240-1; Fountain Sq) and especially **Grand** (Map pp240-1; Əziz Əliyev küç), with another branch on Nizami küç, offer a surprisingly wide left-field selection of Western music, as well as Azeri and Russian music. Some staff are remarkably knowledgeable.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

Baku's Heydar Əliyev International Airport (Map p258) is the busiest in the Caucasus, with flights to/from plenty of European, Russian and Central Asian cities, plus Dubai, Tehran, Tbilisi and Kabul. For more information see p319.

AIRLINE OFFICES

In Central Baku

Aeroflot (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4881167; Üzeyir Hacıbəyov küç 25)

Air Union (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4935751; Nizami küç 135)

Ariana Afghan (Map pp240-1; ☎ 5981268; Rixard Zorge küç)

AZAL (Azerbaijan Airlines; Map pp240-1; ☎ 4934004; www.azal.az; 28 May küç 66-68; ☎ 8am-8pm)

China Southern (Map pp240-1; ☎ 5981165; www.csair.com/en; 28 May küç 54; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 11am-6pm Sat)

Domodedovo (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4986150; www.akdall.ru/eng; Nizami küç 66)

ImAir Airlines (Map pp240-1; ☎ 5984587, 5982376; Səməd Vurğun küç 16; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5.30pm Sat & Sun)

Iran Air (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4985886; 1 Xaqani küç)

Rossiya (Map pp240-1; ☎ 5982931; www.rossiya-airlines.ru/en; 28 May küç 29/11) Formerly Pulkovo Airlines.

S7 (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4983077; www.s7.ru; Zorge küç) Formerly Siberia Airlines.

SCAT (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4935751; www.scat.kz; Nizami küç 135)

Turan Airlines (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4989431; www.turan-air.com; 28 May küç 64-68)

Turkish Airlines (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4975352; Hüsi Hacıyev küç 11)

Uzbekistan Airlines (Map pp240-1; ☎ 5983120; www.uzairways.com; Nizami küç 98)

Other

AeroSvit (Map p238; ☎ 4368785; www.aerosvit.com; Hyatt Tower 2, 1033 İzmir küç)

Air Baltic (www.airbaltic.com) Book online.

Austrian Airlines (Map p238; ☎ 4368785; www.aua.com; Caspian Plaza, Cəfər Cabbarlı küç)

Lufthansa (Map p238; ☎ 4907050/1; 5th fl, Hyatt Tower 2, 1033 İzmir küç)

DOMESTIC FLIGHTS

Internally, AZAL flies five times daily to Naxçıvan (US\$100 each way for non-Azeris) and up to thrice weekly to Gəncə (US\$50 each way). Domestic tickets are only sold at the often-chaotic 'Naxçıvan office' within the **AZAL Building** (Map pp240-1; 28 May küç 66/68; ☎ 8am-8pm) or, for last-minute departures, at the airport (beyond security check!).

Try to book at least a week in advance, especially in summer.

Boat

It's not jazz, not culture, not the great art and not the Abşeron's offbeat curiosities that keep most backpackers hanging around in Baku.

Most are simply waiting for a Caspian ferry. In principle ferries run to Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan (passenger US\$50, several weekly) and Aktau, Kazakhstan (passenger/motorbike/vehicle US\$60/137/55-per-metre-length, a few times monthly). But they are primarily rail-cargo ships and don't care a jot about their passengers, and timetables don't exist. Ships leave virtually without warning as soon as the cargo is loaded. Or wait days if there isn't enough.

Be prepared for extreme frustration even once aboard and ask other prospective travellers (often to be found thumb-twiddling at the 1000 Camels Hostel) as to the latest ticket-purchasing procedure: it seems to change all the time. The ticket office (Map pp240-1) is a tiny, sporadically open window on the port access road, around 15 minutes' walk from Government House. Although it won't sell you anything till the night before departure, still go there, put your name on the list and get the mobile phone number of whoever is the duty agent. Then keep calling!

Bus & Marshrutka

A vast new bus station (Map p238; Sumqayıt Şosesi) is under construction 2km north of Şamaxinka. When it opens (probably 2009) most bus services will leave from there. Until then this table will be useful.

AVTOVAĞZAL (MAIN BUS STATION)

The busy **main bus station** (Map p238; Rövşən Cəfərov küç), a short walk east from 20 Yanvar

BUSES DEPARTING BAKU

Destination	Duration (hr)	Cost	Departure point	Notes
Gəncə	6½	AZN5	Avtovağzal	
İsmayilli	4	AZN4	Şamaxinka	
Lənkəran	5	AZN4	Avtovağzal	
Mərdəkan	1	50q	Vurğun Gardens	bus 36, frequent
Qax	8	AZN7	Avtovağzal	
Qobustan	1	80q	İdman Sarayı	bus 105, regular
Quba	4	AZN3	Şamaxinka Marshrutka	
Qusar	4½	AZN3	Şamaxinka Marshrutka	
Krasny Most (Qırmızı Körpü, Red Bridge)	10	AZN9	Avtovağzal	
Salyan	2	AZN3	Bayıl Highway	for Şirvan NP
Şamaxı	2	AZN3	Şamaxinka	
Şəki	6½	AZN6	Avtovağzal	
Sumqayıt direct	1	50q	20 Yanvar Metro	very frequent
Sumqayıt via Novxani	1½	80q	Gəndlik Metro	bus 998, regular
Tbilisi (Georgia)	12	AZN20	Avtovağzal	9pm, kassa 2

metro station, handles most longer journeys. Departures are commonest in the mornings and late evenings (to arrive early next day).

Between the two main platforms is a row of 16 plastic kiosk-cubes containing money changers, minishops and several *kassa* (ticket booths). Ask the *dispetçer* (first booth) when the next bus is due for your destination and at which *kassa* to buy the ticket; various companies operate the same routes. There's usually no reason to book ahead. If no bus is due to leave take one of the untimetabled, faster (but more cramped) minibuses. These cost slightly more and leave when full from the fringes of the bus station. Touts for shared taxis gather at the eastern exit. That's also where you can jump aboard a southwestbound marshrutka 52 to reach Baku city centre.

Buses supposedly leave most evenings at 10pm for Tehran via Tabriz. Ask **kassa 6** (☎ 4080929) for the latest details. However, it's much more comfortable to do the trip in stages starting with the night train to Astara.

ŞAMAXINKA

The chaotic **Şamaxinka bus station** (Map p238; Moskva [ex-Tbilisi] pr) is 400m north of 20 Janvar metro station. It serves northern towns, plus Şamaxı and İsmayilli. Marshrutka 57 takes you to the centre.

ISTANBUL BUSES

Several companies, including **Öz Gülhan** (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4188256; Istanbul 0212-5881268) and **Öz Nuhoğlu** (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4447203; Səməd Vurğun 94) run buses to Istanbul (US\$60 plus AZN10, 48 hours).

All of them depart at around 3pm on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday from the respective company offices around Sahil Gardens.

Car

Cars and 4WD self-drive vehicles can be hired through many travel agencies and through

international franchises like **Hertz** (Map p238; ☎ 4978757; Hyatt Regency Hotel; from AZN75) or **Avis** (Map p238; ☎ 4975455; www.avis.az; H Cavid pr 528; from AZN70). Getting a driver adds only around AZN10 per day. To rent more cheaply through **Ayla** (Map p238; ☎ 981415/585; http://ayla.az; Fəzail Bayramov küç 8; from AZN40) you'll need to give an AZN300 deposit. No English is spoken.

It's necessary to get an Azeri-language copy of your licence. Avis can organise this.

Train

Conditions aren't luxurious, but overnight trains give you a sleeping berth, including sheets (handed out once the train is underway), making rail travel preferable to the faster (but less comfortable) buses for longer distances.

You'll need your passport both to buy a ticket and to board the train. Especially for weekend travel it's worth prebooking at least a day or two ahead. Useful overnight trains are shown in the table.

Trains also run regularly to many Russian and Ukrainian cities but at the time of writing the Azerbaijan–Russia border remained closed to foreigners, making such routes impractical for travellers.

Very run-down suburban elektrichky (local trains) serve Sumqayıt and the Abşeron Peninsula towns for a flat 20q fare (paid on board). However, frequency keeps dropping and the system has been threatened with complete closure.

According to press reports the main train station might eventually move way out of town to Biləcəri.

GETTING AROUND To/From Heydar Əliyev International Airport

The cheapest solution from Baku is to take Mərdəkan-bound marshrutka 36 from Vurğun Gardens to the airport approach road

BAKU BUS STOPS

To use the marshrutkas, learn key stops as they appear on sign boards. 'M xxxx' suggests a stop near xxxx metro station. Other key names to learn:

- **28 May** Loosely interpreted to mean anywhere near the train station (Map pp240–1).
- **Axundov Bağ** (Map pp240–1) A triangular garden close to the Rostropovich Museum.
- **Azneft** (Map p242) The big traffic circle directly southwest of the Old City. Almost all routes marked 'Azneft' or 'Bayil' (a suburb further south) including 4, 88, 99 and 288 will pass the GPO, Carpet Museum and Maiden's Tower.
- **Beş Mərtəbə** (Map pp240–1) Füzuli Sq.
- **Çimərlik** 'Beach', usually implying Şixov.
- **MUM** (Map pp240–1) Handy for western side of Fountain Sq.
- **Təzə Avtovağzal** (Map p238) Main Bus Station, near 20 Janvar metro (will change!).
- **Vurğun Bağ** Anywhere around Vurğun Gardens (Map pp240–1).

(50q, 40 minutes). From there, the terminals are a 1km walk north or 50q by passing shared taxi (if any will stop).

Ironically, you should not take marshrutkas marked 'Aeroport': these don't go to the airport itself but to a vast *yarmarka* (bazaar) from which airport access is painfully difficult.

Taking a cab all the way from Baku shouldn't cost more than AZN15. From the airport drivers ask AZN20, but during daylight it's often possible to pay less by walk-away bargaining if you start outside the domestic terminal.

Public Transport MARSHRUTKA

A dauntingly vast network of marshrutkas (minibuses) run from virtually anywhere to anywhere else within Baku for just 20q. Pay as you get off.

The main challenge is ascertaining the route number you need before trying to wave one down: few are stationary long enough to decipher their route boards.

Don't be shy asking for help from passers-by and remember to check which direction to head in – the complex one-way system sometimes results in surprises!

Except in a very few central areas where there are fixed *astanovki* (stopping points), the driver can squeal to a halt just about anywhere.

Simply shout '*sakhla*' (stop) or more emphatically '*sakhla burada*' (stop here) to be let out.

METRO

For visitors the Baku metro system is most useful for connecting to the bus station and Velotrek Hotel (20 Janvar metro station) from the Old Town (Bakı Soveti), the Cənub Hotel (Sahil) or Baku train station (28 May). Marshrutkas to many Abşeron towns claim to leave from Əzizbəyov metro station but most currently depart from Gənlik, Nərimanov, Ulduz, Qara Qarayev or Neftçilər metros (depending on destination) since building works have closed the Əzizbəyov bus station.

The flat fare is just 5q per ride. But to use the system you'll need to get a plastic fare-card (deposit AZN2) that you charge up with credits (minimum 20).

TAXI

You can flag down a taxi anywhere at almost any time but agree on a price in advance, as metered taxis are a rarity. Very short hops cost AZN2, but most rides start from AZN3.

AROUND BAKU

SUMQAYIT

☎ 018 / pop 280,000

Fans of the truly grim might enjoy Sumqayıt, Azerbaijan's third-largest city. With a wide sand beach it was once projected as a resort town. Instead it became a dystopian industrialist nightmare when much of the Soviet chemical industry was plonked here after WWII. Hauntingly awful acres of rusty

TRAINS DEPARTING BAKU

Destination	Via	Departs	Arrives	Kupe Fare
Balakan	Şəki	10.20pm	10am	AZN4.40
Astara	Lənkəran	11.55pm	9.30am	AZN3.10
Gəncə	Ələt	11.20pm	7.40am	AZN3.20
Ağstafa	Gəncə	9.50pm	7.35am	AZN6.50
Tbilisi	Gəncə	8pm	around noon	AZN26

pipe-workings factory chimneys and are all too visible as you speed past along the Baku–Quba road.

ABŞERON PENINSULA

☎ 012

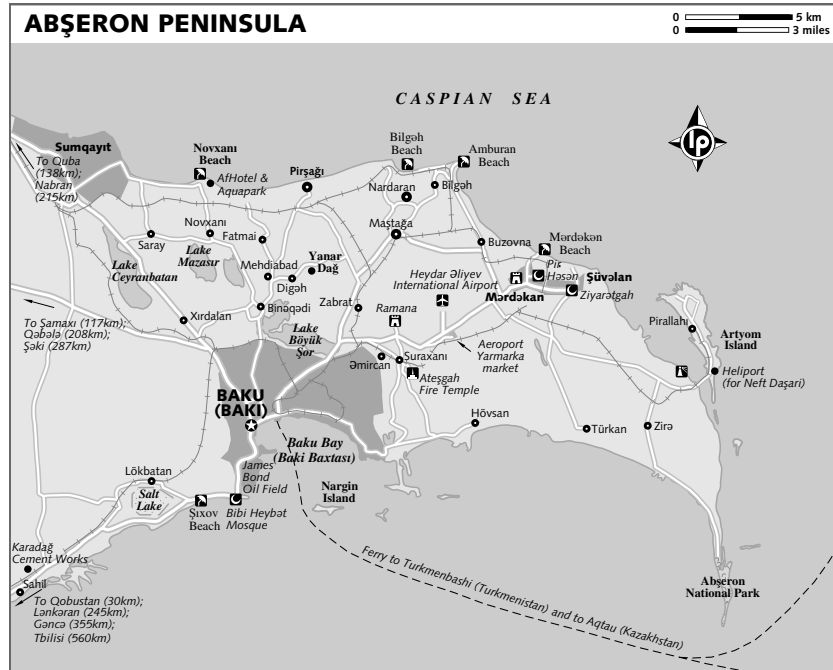
The Abşeron confounds easy definition. Agricultural land is blanched by salt lakes, sodden with oil-runoff and poisoned by pesticide abuse. Platoons of rusty oil derricks fill horizons with intriguing, abstract sculptures. Yet despite mesmerising ugliness and a traditionally conservative population, the Abşeron still manages to be the seaside playground of Baku's playboy elite. Meanwhile several historic castle towers peep between the dachas, fires that inspired Zoroastrian and Hindu pilgrims still burn, and beneath the cultural surface lie some of Azerbaijan's oddest folk beliefs. It's a perversely fascinating place.

Suraxani

The unique **Ateşgah Fire Temple** (☎ 4524407; admission/camera/guided tour AZN2/2/6; 🕒 10am–6pm) is one of Azerbaijan's most remarkable sights. It stands on the site of a natural gas vent that was

sacred to Zoroastrians for centuries, though this temple was actually built by 18th-century Indian Shiva devotees. They lived in the surrounding pentagonal caravanserai and performed extreme ascetic practices such as lying on hot coals or carrying unbearably heavy chains. Such eccentric behaviour is depicted by a number of mannequins in the museum section. But the temple's centrepiece is the flaming stone hearth with four stone side flues that also spit dragon breath. At least when the caretaker bothers to turn on the gas. The original natural vent has long been exhausted, so today the flame comes courtesy of Baku's main gas supply.

From Baku take the cruddy old *elektrichka*, marshrutka 84 from Nərimanov metro station or less direct marshrutka 231 from Qara Qarayev metro via the intriguing town of Əmircan. From Mərdəkan take marshrutka 77. All of the above stop near Suraxani train station. From the south side of the station, walk southeast parallel to the rail tracks for three minutes, then curve right to find the Ateşgah's entrance just beyond. There are some intriguingly decrepit old oilfields nearby.



Mərdəkan & Şüvəlan

Sprawling **Mərdəkan** sports two sturdy medieval **castle towers** (admission free; ☎ sporadic) hidden away in some vaguely interesting back streets. The pleasant but overpriced **Arboretum** (Mərdəkan Dendrarisi; <http://dendrary.in-baku.com>; foreigners/locals AZN4/AZN1; 🕒 8am–8pm) has a cactus garden, boating pool, minizoo and fine century-old **oil-boom villa**. Elsewhere, oil baron Zeyalabdin Tağıyev is buried beneath a splendid egg-shaped stone pavilion surrounded by unexplained heaps of architectural fragments. Right behind is **Pir Həsən**, where superstitious locals queue up to have bottles smashed over their heads. Honestly. It's considered a cure for nervousness of spirit. Many more pilgrims visit the **Ziyarətəgh** in **Şüvəlan**, 4km further east. That's one of Azerbaijan's most impressive new mosques, replete with beautifully patterned Central Asian-style domes. Most Azeris believe that a wish made here will be granted. And when the wish comes true they return (in droves), offering donations in gratitude.

Marshrutka 36 from Baku's Vurgun Gardens runs to the Ziyarətəgh via Mərdəkan, passing within walking distance of all of the sites, though none are easy to find unaided. Marshrutka 77 runs to Suraxani.

Nardaran

The scene of religious rioting in 2002, Nardaran is the closest that Azerbaijan comes to having a centre of conservative Islam. Women are scarf-clad (if visible at all) and high-walled private houses bear religious slogans in a style reminiscent of workers' banners under communism. The town's spiritual heart is the awesome 1990s **Rehime Khanım Mosque**, built above the grave of the 7th Shiite Imam's sister. A two-minute walk beyond is a modest medieval **castle tower**. Marshrutka 89 from Baku's Qara Qarayev metro terminates at the mosque's gates.

Abşeron Beaches

In summer, fearless local swimmers ignore the peninsula's infamous pollution and crowd the grey-brown beaches of the northern Abşeron coast. The waters do often look temptingly turquoise and there are well-manicured sections of sand near **Mərdəkan** (marshrutka 341 from metro Neftçilər) and on the pay-beaches of **Amburan** (marshrutka 72 from metro Əzizbəyov). Good alternatives lie north of **Novxanı** (marshrutka 998 from metro

NEFT DAŞLARI

Built in 1949 Neft Daşları (Oily Rocks) is the world's first and only offshore 'town'. It's constructed entirely on stilts out in the Caspian with some 210km of roads, a cinema, a bakery and even a neat little Heydar Əliyev Park. High-rise Soviet tenement blocks accommodate the rotating population of around 2100 workers, of whom around 300 are women. Although potentially one of Azerbaijan's more intriguing tourist attractions, visiting Neft Daşları remains an invitation-only affair. Even with great contacts, an invitation can take months to arrange at the discretion of Socar, the national oil company. For invitees, access is by 15-minute helicopter hop from southern Artyom Island or six-hour ferry ride from central Baku.

Gənclik) where you'll find the new **AfHotel** (☎ 4483030; www.afhotel.az; s/d AZN100/150; 🏨 🚿), whose **Aquapark** (day-use for nonresidents AZN15; ☎ summer only) is a major complex of swimming pools and waterslides. Nearby are several sets of well-built en suite beach cottages such as **Ləman** (☎ 050 5217188; r AZN60; 🏠) whose prices halve in the low season, making an interesting budget alternative to staying in Baku in winter (if you don't mind an hour's commute).

Artyom Island & Abşeron National Park

If you're looking for a nightmare vision of leaky small-scale oil detritus and rusting old boats set against the contrasting opal brilliance of the Caspian, a classic vantage point is the north tip of Artyom Island. But it's an awfully long way to go for relatively little. Marshrutka 50 from Ulduz metro (AZN1, 80 minutes) terminates in depressing Pirallahı town, from which the nastiest area is 2km north. Police might question your motives for coming here.

The highly unexciting **Abşeron National Park** consists of a few ragged sand dunes and islands down a potholed lane at the Abşeron's windswept south tip. Don't bother.

Yanar Dağ

In the 13th century Marco Polo mentioned numerous natural gas flames spurting spontaneously from the Abşeron Peninsula. Most, as at Suraxani, burned out when the drilling

of oil wells reduced underground pressure. However, **Yanar Dağ** (Fire Mountain; admission free) lives on, making for one of the Abşeron's stranger sights. Locals claim that a natural gas vent on this modest hillock was accidentally ignited by a shepherd's cigarette back in the 1950s. A 10m-long wall of fire has been blazing away ever since. It's best viewed at dawn or dusk. There are plans to gentrify the site but for now the only 'facility' is a semiderelict concrete *çayxana* offering very pricey tea and jam (AZN8).

Mehdiabad-bound marshrutka 47 from Gənclik metro sometimes continues to Digəh. Yanar Dağ is around 1km beyond. Taxis from Baku want around AZN25 return.

BAKU TO QOBUSTAN

The most popular day trip from Baku takes visitors to the mud volcanoes and petroglyphs around Qobustan, 60km south of the capital (see Map p284). En route is a fascinating collage of beaches, oil workings, dazzling seascapes, spirit-crushing Soviet townships and intriguing semi-deserts plus a dust-billowing cement works thrown in for good measure. At Baku's southern limits lies an incredible 'forest' of 1930s nodding-donkey oil pumps. It has been nicknamed the **James Bond Oil Field** (Map p238) since featuring in the opening scenes of the movie *The World is Not Enough*, but hurry to see it before a long-overdue clean-up operation sanitises the whole area. The scene is best surveyed from near **Bibi Heybət Mosque** (Map p238), which was for centuries the region's holiest shrine. However, the original 13th-century building was demolished by the Soviets in 1934 and today's Ottoman-style structure dates from 1998.

Just beyond is **Şıxov Beach** (Map p238), fascinating for photographing bathers gambolling on the 'sand' with a romantic backdrop of giant offshore oil rigs. There are hotels, restaurants and disco-beaches here should you wish to stay a while.

Qobustan

PETROGLYPHS

Behind depressing Qobustan town, barren rocky hill-craggs rise from the semi-desert. But it was not always thus. Around 12,000 years ago the Caspian Sea level was some 80m higher. The Caspian foreshores were lush with vegetation and Stone Age hunter-gatherers settled in caves that were then just a short walk

from the waters. The remnants of these caves remain etched with around 6000 fascinating petroglyphs (simple stone engravings). Even if you have no particular interest in ancient doodles, Qobustan's eerie landscape and the hilltop views of oil-workings in the turquoise-blue Caspian are still fascinating.

The **Qobustan Petroglyph Reserve** (☎ 5444208; admission/camera/tour AZN3/2/6; 🕒 10.30am-4.30pm) is run by helpful English-speaking staff and it's well worth paying for a guided tour: deciphering or even spotting the petroglyphs can be pretty tough for the casual visitor. Common themes are livestock, wild animals and human figures, notably shamans. Especially notable is a spindly **reed boat** sailing towards the sunset. Comparing this with similar ancient etchings in Norway led controversial ethnologist Thor Heyerdahl to suggest that Scandinavians might have originated in what is now Azerbaijan.

Seek out the fascinating **tambourine stone**. This resonant rock was played like a primitive musical instrument accompanying a ritual chain-dance (*yallı*) that features in some petroglyphs and was performed to ensure a successful hunt.

The reserve's simple **museum section**, slated for eventual reconstruction, offers some interesting conjecture on daily cave life, setting the scene with mannequins eating and hunting. Tools and weapons found on the site are also displayed.

ROMAN GRAFFITI

Around 2km from the petroglyphs at the bottom of Böyük Dash Mountain, a fenced-in rock sports the easternmost Roman inscription ever discovered. It was chipped out by Julius Maximus, a centurion of the 12th Legion, probably on a reconnaissance mission from Roman Syria during the reign of Emperor Domitian (AD 51-96).

Guides know under which stone the key to the surrounding fence is hidden.

MUD VOLCANOES

On top of otherwise unremarkable Daşgil Hill, some 10km south of Qobustan are an astonishingly weird collection of baby **mud volcanoes** (*palçık vulkanlar*). Here a whole family of 'geologically flatulent' little conical mounds gurgles, oozes, spits and sometimes erupt with thick, cold, grey mud. It's more entertaining than it sounds – even when activity is very modest

you get the eerie feeling that the volcanoes are alive. And normally the place is delightfully peaceful, if not completely deserted.

If driving, easiest access is from the Ələt junction, 15km south of Qobustan. Follow 'Şpal Zavodu' signs, but keep straight ahead after crossing the railway. Keep to this unpaved track for 3km then climb the hill to your right.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Taxis from Baku want at least AZN40 return to see all of the above. Beware that they might not know the mud volcano site. Alternatively, take Ələt-bound bus 105 (80q, one hour) from opposite Baku's İdman Sarayı. Get off before the overpass bridge at the south end of Qobustan town. From here the petroglyphs site is 5km, signposted by a mock rock carving. Savvy local taxi drivers ask a steep AZN10 return to see the petroglyphs reserve and Roman graffiti site, or AZN20 including the mud volcanoes.

ŞIRVAN NATIONAL PARK

Around 100km south of Baku, this **park** (Map p284; Ələt-Salyan highway km33; admission incl guide foreigners/locals AZN4/2; 🕒 9am-6pm) is outwardly just a featureless flat plain but it provides Europe's last remaining natural habitat for wild Caucasian antelopes (*ceyran*). To stand any chance of seeing these loveable creatures you'll need a vehicle. If you don't have your own 4WD it's possible to rent the park's bus (for petrol money) but making necessary arrangements is farcically awkward, as the park has no phone. Salyan- and Lənkəran-bound buses pass the park gates where there's a small reception hut.

NORTHERN AZERBAIJAN

Most of Azerbaijan's scenic highlights lie in the spectacular, snow-capped Caucasus mountains or their luxuriantly forested foothills. Some of these zones are accessible from the delightful Baku-Balakən road (see p267), others from the Quba-Qəsar region, where Laza and Xinalıq are Azerbaijan's most magnificently set mountain villages. Both northern and northwestern Azerbaijan offer truly extraordinary contrasts with the semi-desert landscapes around Baku. However, unless

you're prepared to walk for a couple of days across high passes, there's no way to cross between the two.

BAKU TO QUBA

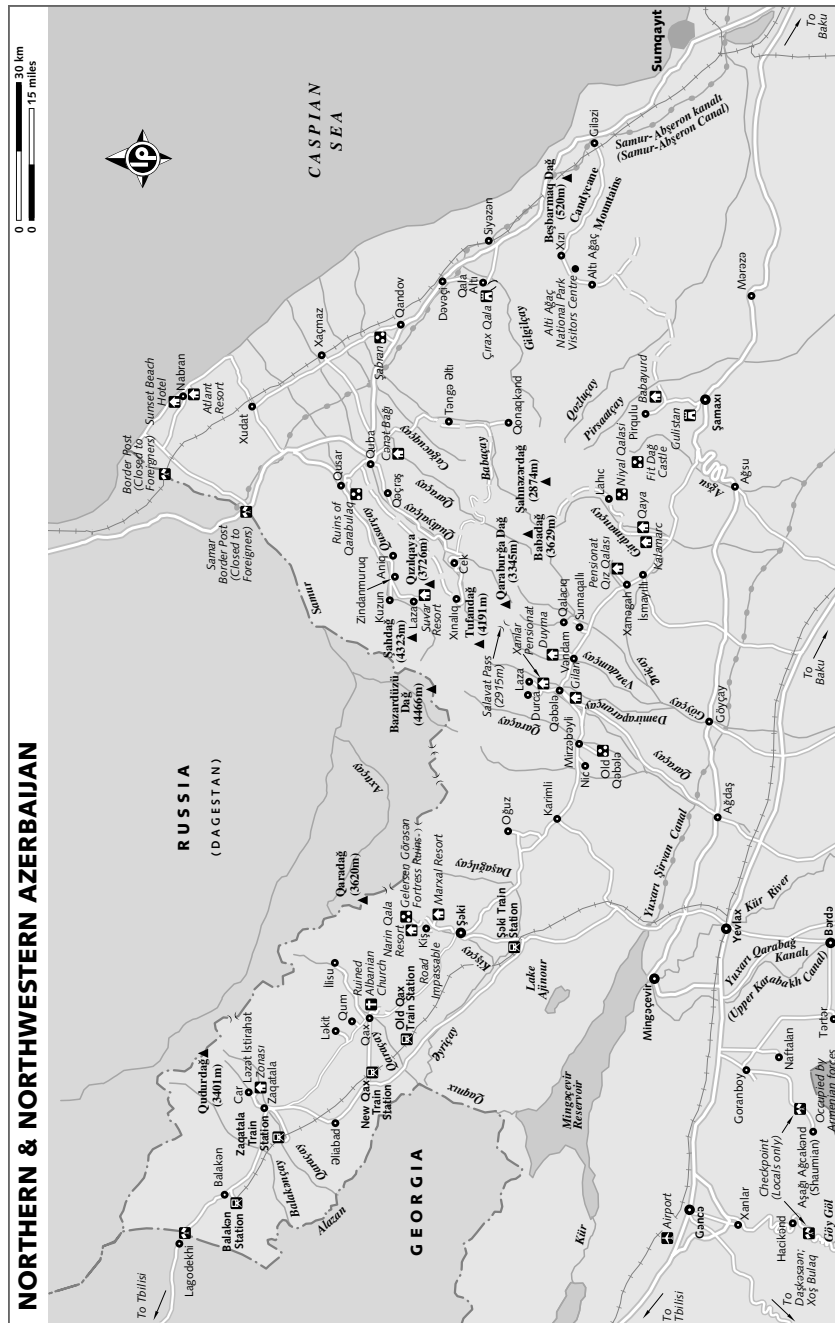
The region's real highlights start beyond Quba. Nonetheless there are some interesting diversions en route, best suited for those with a vehicle. At Giləzi, a newly asphalted side lane runs west towards the gently attractive woodland of the **Altı Ağaç National Park** (foreigners/locals AZN4/2). It passes an eye-catching area nicknamed the **Candycane Mountains**, where vivid pink-and-white striped hills are full of little conical fossils.

North of Giləzi the coastal plain narrows. In past times a series of walls and fortresses would have controlled travel along the ancient trade route between Derbent (Dagestan, Russia) and Baku. Today sparse fortress remnants remain on dramatic, spiritually fascinating Beşbarmaq Dağ with a more sizeable castle ruin at Çirax Qala.

Beşbarmaq Dağ

The dull scenery north of Baku gets an unexpectedly abrupt and dramatic boost with the looming silhouette of 520m Beşbarmaq Dağ (Five Finger Mountain). This mystical peak brandishes a rocky fistful of phallic crags atop a super-steep grassy ridge top. It's well worth climbing to the summit, not just for the fabulous Caspian views, but also to observe first hand Azerbaijan's unique take on 'Islam'. Crowds of locals come here seeking good fortune, a child, or the answer to their problems using a mixture of prayer, sacrifice, chanting and very animist kissing of rocks. Everything comes in threes: take three small stones to the top, sip thrice from a cup of holy water, kiss the sacred rock three times then incant your wish...guess how many times. To assist, assorted white-capped holy men lurk in rocky nooks, their pitches marked by a samovar, a few blankets and some photogenically fluttering votive ribbons. Meanwhile a few old crones, snotty children and various hangers-on try to cadge money.

Climbing to the summit from the ridge-top parking area takes around 15 minutes via a wobbly set of metal staircases: start on the southwest side above some tea sheds. Reaching the car park requires a steep 10-minute drive leaving the Quba highway 2km north of a very obvious new stone mosque



that's amid roadside stalls immediately below the peak. Most Baku–Quba buses make a refreshment stop beside the mosque but although you could walk up Beşbarmaq directly from this point it would take (at least) a very sweaty 90 minutes.

Çirax Qala

☎ 0115

Peeping out from a thickly wooded ridge high above Qala Altı (Under the Castle) sanatorium, this stone keep is very ruinous but nonetheless about the best preserved of Azerbaijan's ancient fortresses.

Originally built by the Sassanid Persians (5th century AD), the surviving tower dates from the 18th century when it was part of the southern defences of the khanate of Quba.

Visiting the castle is most interesting for the sweeping views towards the Caspian and for hikes in the pretty surroundings.

There are rough access roads to Qala Altı sanatorium from Dəvəçi (taxi AZN10/12 one way/return) and from Siyəzən with a bus (80q, 1¼ hours) leaving at noon, returning from Qala Altı at 5pm. A minibus leaves the sanatorium gate at 6.45am for Baku (AZN3, three hours) returning from Baku's Şamaxı terminal around noon or whenever the driver feels like it.

There are several ways to reach the castle from the sanatorium gates. An unpaved rutted track passes the decaying concrete cube of **Qala Altı Hotel** (no phone; per person AZN4) after 800m, then divides twice. On both occasions take the right-hand fork and you should emerge at the top of a grassy clearing just 15 minutes' woodland stroll from the ruins. You can reach the clearing by Zhiguli (dry weather only, AZN2, 15 minutes) or by horse (sporadically available in summer if you ask around at the sanatorium gates).

Alternatively, on foot you can hike through the forest directly to the castle crag in about 40 minutes, starting opposite the Qala Altı Hotel. The path is fairly easy to spot but has two slightly dangerous slippery scramble sections.

Below the sanatorium are several summer restaurants. Some rent rooms and cottages, including **Zaur** (☎ 050 7197517; d AZN30) and smarter **Göyça** (☎ 050 4518841; d AZN30-40), are 1km beyond.

QUBA

☎ 0169 / pop 55,000

Famous for carpets and apple orchards, the low-key town of Quba sits on a cliff top overlooking the Qudiyalçay River. It was founded in the 18th century as the new capital of local potentate Fatali Khan but rapidly became a quiet provincial backwater once the khanate had been absorbed into the Russian Empire (1806). A fair scattering of modestly historic buildings remain from that period and today Quba's wooded hinterland is becoming a popular spot for Baku weekenders, thanks to its distant horizon of snow-topped mountains and a comparatively cool summer climate.

Information

Eltac Internet (☎ 50555; Qöbələ küç; per hr 40q;

☎ 9am-midnight)

International Bank of Azerbaijan (Fətəli Xan küç) Has an ATM.

Telephone office (☎ 50555; Fətəli Xan küç 59;

☎ 9am-1pm & 2-10pm) International calls 80q per minute.

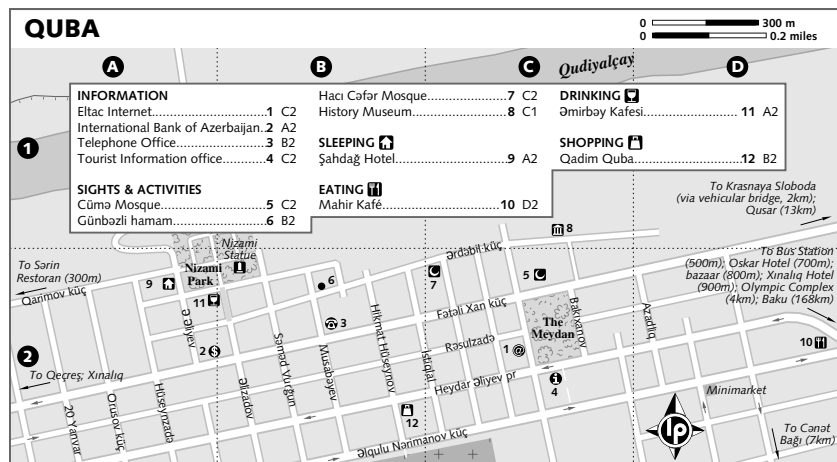
Tourist Information Office (City office complex, Heydər Əliyev pr) Never seems to be open.

Sights

There's a little **History Museum** (☎ 52554; Ərdəbil küç 93; admission AZN1; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sat) but the main attraction in Quba is just wandering its orderly grid of quiet leafy streets and admiring the 19th-century Russian houses and distinctive mosques, notably the colourful **Hacı Cəfər Mosque** and the unique, octagonal **Cümə Mosque** with its distinctively pointy metallic dome. Notice also the decrepit century-old **Günbəzli hammam** with its big beehive dome.

Nizami Park is a pleasant tree-shaded retreat overlooking the broad gravel bed of the Qudiyalçay River. A long flight of steps lined with statues of Adonis-like Soviet youth leads down to the old bridge, which links Quba to the town of **Krasnaya Sloboda**, home to a unique Jewish community with two active **synagogues** (☎ 54519).

You can watch Quba's famous carpets being made at **Qadim Quba** (☎ 53270; qadimquba@box.az; Heydər Əliyev pr 132; ☎ 10.30am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat), which also has a delightful boutique selling them along with handicrafts and *pax-lava* (alternating layers of chopped nuts and white, stringy, fried pastry, all saturated in a sickly sweet syrup).



Sleeping

If nothing suits there are many bungalow resorts along the road to Qəçrəş and others around a little canyon at Təngə Əlti.

Şadağ Hotel (Əliyev küç; s/d AZN3/6) This Soviet-era establishment is the only central option. It could have style if it were renovated but for now it's a very basic crash pad with shared 'toilets' and a dribbling tap. If you're lucky.

Xinalıq Hotel (☎ 54445; s/d/tr/q AZN10/7/8/10) Although recently repainted this trader's guesthouse remains basic and dauntingly male-orientated. It's perched above the chaotic market area. The single room has a private bathroom; others share a squat toilet and two downstairs shower booths.

Oskar Hotel (☎ 51516; contact@cannatbagi.com; s/d AZN20/40; summer ☀) Between the bus station and bazaar, this is not so much a hotel as a set of rooms above a pleasant kebab restaurant. They're cosy and new with en suite hot showers and fresh linen, though the whole place feels slightly jerry-built.

Olympic Complex (☎ 51517; www.gubaolympic.az; Baku Hwy; d/tr/ste AZN50/60/80; ☀) The complex's bright airy new rooms are great value with good bathrooms, wood-effect floors and plentiful art prints. Rates include breakfast and use of the superb 50m-long indoor swimming pool. It's 3km east of the bazaar.

Cənət Baği (Map p262; ☎ 51415; contact@cannatbagi.com; d/ste AZN70/160; summer ☀) Neat, if less upmarket, than first impressions might suggest, this popular rural complex has two buildings in a woodland clearing 7km

south of Quba. Rooms in the old building are slightly more worn but have bigger bathrooms. In the ostentatious three-storey new building, odd-numbered rooms overlook streamside picnic tables. There's an extensive restaurant (kebabs AZN3, beer AZN1.20) and (almost uniquely for Quba) some English is spoken.

Eating & Drinking

Mahir Kafé (Heydar Əliyev pr; snacks 10q-AZN1.50; ☎ 9am-11pm) A very plain place with just two sit-down tables, but serving perhaps the best *lavaş döner* (döner kebab in *lavaş* bread) in all of Azerbaijan (AZN1.20).

Sərin Restoran (Qarımov küç; mains AZN3-7; ☎ 10am-11pm) A selection of inside dining styles and an appealing summertime lawn area make Sərin the nicest place in town. There's no menu but prices are reasonable.

There are several cheap beer-and-tea places around the bazaar area, the Meydan and Nizami park. **Əmirbəy Kafesi** (Əlizadov küç) is typical. Nicer forest kebab places stretch for miles along the Qəçrəş road.

Getting There & Away

Quba's bus station is 2km east of the town centre. For Baku there are painfully rickety buses (AZN1.80, five hours) at 10am, 11.30am and 2pm while the more frequent marshrutkas (AZN3, four hours) and shared taxis (seat/vehicle AZN6/20) depart when full from outside. Marshrutkas/shared taxis cost 40q/AZN1 to Qusar (20 minutes).

Jeeps to Xinalıq depart when completely full from outside Hotel Xinalıq at the back of the bazaar. That's two blocks south, then one east from the bus station. If you get a fair price (AZN8) this is the cheapest way to reach Xinalıq, but the situation is chaotic and very confusing, especially if you don't speak local languages. It's wise to bring a Russian or Azeri-speaking friend to help you negotiate (see right).

Getting Around

By day, marshrutkas marked Otovaqzal-Poliklinika run up Heydar Əliyev pr from the bus station roundabout (20q) returning via Əliqulu Nərimanov küç.

XINALIQ

pop 800 (1700 in summer)

An undisputed highlight of all Azerbaijan, this fabled mountain village speaks directly to the soul. Its timeless stone houses are often wrapped in spooky clouds, giving it a haunted medieval feel.

Then, when the clouds lift, you realise that you're perched on a mountaintop with stunning 360-degree views of the Caucasus. Xinalıq's hardy shepherd folk have their own distinct language (Ketsch) and still live much of their lives on horseback. Nowhere in Azerbaijan offers a more fascinating glimpse of mountain life nor a better opportunity for inspirational hiking.

However, you should hurry to get here. A new road was built in 2006, tourists are starting to discover this gem and already some homes are starting to sprout corrugated metal roofs.

Apart from examining the one-room museum (admission 40q; ☎ on request) and gazing at the hypnotic views, Xinalıq's most popular tourist activity is hiking to **ateşgah**, a small ever-burning natural fire-vent. The walk takes about two hours (towards Laza then up a side valley) but finding the site without help is pretty much impossible.

Charming **Xeyrəddin Gabbarov** (☎ 050 2259250; www.xinaliq.com) works in Quba but comes from Xinalıq, speaks OK English and for a relatively modest profit can tailor-make a homestay-tour or hiking holiday in Xinalıq.

Note that there are proposals to declare the whole Laza-Xinalıq area as the Şahdağ National Park. If this happens expect to pay an AZN4 entry fee to access the area.

HALT!

Since a new army/customs post was built across the valley from Xinalıq, some travellers have reported soldiers preventing hikers from exploring the nearby valleys including the route to Laza. To avoid problems ask your guide to forewarn the military post before you set off.

Hiking

A delightfully rewarding hike links Xinalıq to Laza (p266) in 10 to 12 hours. Two routes are possible, around the base of Mt Şahdağ or past the fire-vent and over a shoulder of dramatically crag-topped Qızılqaya. A local guide (around AZN30 per day) is particularly important for the latter, as fog can descend suddenly even on an apparently clear day, totally hiding the path. If you have luggage it's also a good idea to hire packhorses (AZN20 to AZN40). In Xinalıq-Ketsch language *dzhim onogondəh pshii i hadmə isheləh Laza guisu* means 'where can I find a horse and guide to take me to Laza?'

It's also possible and incredibly exhilarating to hike to Vandam (p273; two days). This requires camping en route, as there are no villages in between. As with any hike, sheepdogs can be vicious.

Sleeping

As yet there's no hotel, but several families can offer informal homestays for around AZN10 to AZN20, including plenty of tea and *ktap* (freshly fried *lavaş*, filled with cheese and green herbs). Such a homestay is likely to be a highlight of the trip. Despite the biting night-time cold, houses are kept cosily warm, their ultrathick walls decorated with richly coloured carpets. Like everything here, finding a place is just a matter of asking around. If you turn up without a guide you'll need at least basic Russian or Azeri. Or try asking in Ketsch '*asir yedemə xinalıq'r giyeh yetində*' (I would like to stay overnight in Xinalıq).

Getting There & Away

There is no bus to Xinalıq. Shared jeeps (AZN8 per person, 1½ hours) go sporadically from the chaotic bustle outside Hotel Xinalıq in Quba but ascertaining who is leaving when can be very confusing without an Azeri friend to help out. Turning up alone as a foreigner

can induce a feeding frenzy among the drivers, who will inevitably try to charge more than the going rate. Getting a fair price from a taxi is similarly difficult, with many drivers demanding a ludicrous AZN100 tactically appearing unaware of the road's recent renovation. **Xeyraddin** (www.xinaliq.com) can organise a transfer from Quba by Niva jeep for about AZN40. The route is very dramatic in itself so allow time for several photo stops at various canyons and passes en route.

QUSAR

☎ 0138 / pop 80,000

Pleasant if unremarkable Qusar is Azerbaijan's Lezgin capital. There's a **museum** and impressive new Turkish-style **mosque** but the **ruins of Qarabulaq** offer its only really intriguing sight. Don't expect medieval history. Qarabulaq was a 21st-century holiday retreat, designed with lots of brilliantly idiosyncratic Tolkein-esque twiddles, including concrete knights brandishing flame-throwing weapons. Then in 2005 authorities discovered that the location had been used as the lair for a brutal gang of kidnappers.

The resort was promptly closed down and now creepers are slowly overrunning its eclectic buildings. This adds further to the already bizarre atmosphere. By road, reaching the site requires a 10km loop from central Qusar. Without a car take a city marshrutka towards the trio of river-view restaurants at the western edge of town. Descend an obvious track to the long footbridge and walk the last 1.2km west.

There are a couple of less wacky but still functioning *istrahət zonası* (rural bungalow resort) here too, but most Westerners head straight on to Laza.

AROUND QUSAR

Laza (Qusarçay Laza)

☎ 0138 / pop 150

The soaring mountain valley surrounding Laza is one of the most stunning sights anywhere. Dramatic grass-clad slopes descend from noble Şahdağ (4243m) and craggy Qızılqaya (3726m).

A series of ribbon waterfalls drop over perilous cliff edges and carpets of wildflowers add to the vivid greens throughout late spring and summer. Tiny Laza village is diffuse and its banal houses lack the striking austerity of Xinalıq's dark stone architecture. However a

rocky pinnacle beside the rusty-roofed little mosque adds foreground for photos of the mind-blowing mountain panorama. And the one-day walk to Xinalıq (p265) is a highlight of any trip to Azerbaijan. Laza also makes a great base for climbing Azerbaijan's highest peak, Şahdağ. It's not technically difficult but does involve some ice walking and requires ropes and crampons.

Note: Laza is sometimes called Qusarçay Laza to differentiate it from Qebelinsky Laza (p273). In coming years its slow-paced shepherd life might change radically if, as planned, a vast new **ski resort** is built 3km to the east along the road to Qusar.

SLEEPING & EATING

The **Azizov family** (☎ 57035) run the village shop and can offer well-kept if simple homestay rooms for around AZN10 to AZN15 per bed. There's a shared shower. **Mevlud Azizov** (☎ 050 6844374) speaks some English and acts as a guide (AZN35/50 per day for hiking/mountaineering).

Suvar Resort (☎ 53671, 57033; www.suvar.az; s/d/ste AZN60/100/150) Occupying a fabulous mountain pasture 2km west of the village, Suvar's bungalow rooms survey one of the finest panoramas in Azerbaijan. Its buildings incorporate rustic design features in well-appointed rooms with decent bathrooms and satellite TV. Prices increase during peak weekends and holidays. The delightful restaurant has stone fireplaces, wood-mosaics and big picture-windows to enjoy the views. Chefs from India can rustle up an amazing range of meals given some warning.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Qusar–Laza currently takes 1½ bumpy hours by car. However, the road is being asphalted for the ski-resort project so transport details will change. For now, if a vehicle is leaving anyway, locals hitch a ride for AZN3/5 per person in a Zhiguli/Niva. Chartering costs at least AZN20, often double. Suvar charges AZN50 for pick-ups.

There's no bus to Laza (yet). A crushed-full bus to Kuzun (AZN1) departs Qusar at 4.30pm (returning at 7am next day). From Kuzun, Laza is an attractive two-hour hike away: first climb a fairly steep curl of tractor path (for around 20 minutes), then turn right onto the main Laza road. It's not overly taxing but there are a few ambiguous

path-turnings and there's nobody to ask en route. Excepting the month of June, it's likely to get dark before you reach Laza so you'd be wise to carry a tent just in case.

Beware of sheepdogs and don't take the more direct Kuzun–Laza route along the riverbank without an experienced guide.

NABRAN

Azeris often recall summers of love in Nabran with a fondness that may lead you to expect a Soviet Ibiza. Don't get carried away. It certainly has the party vibe and people-watchers might find interest observing the tidal wave of Azeri holidaymakers at play in July and August. But with sand like topsoil, the beach is far from idyllic.

Sleeping

Over 30 resorts are extremely spread out along 20km of coast and into the woodlands behind. These range from ragged hut camps and sleazy Soviet sanatoria to po-faced gated complexes for the BMW-driving classes. Booking ahead is essential in summer but out of season you can shop around for real bargains. Unless you find a homestay/apartment in minuscule Nabran village you'll really need a vehicle.

Sunset Beach Hotel (☎ 25375; d AZN50–100, low season AZN30–40; ☎ ☎) Facing the sea, this is one of very few real hotels and is virtually unique in having a restaurant with an English-language menu. Thumping music makes the summer-only swimming pool less than relaxing.

Atlant (☎ 050 3754747; www.atlant-az.net; d Jun/Aug from AZN45/55; ☎ ☎) Set 1km back from the beach, this is Nabran's Butlins, a full-blown holiday camp with comfortably new if functional rooms, a vast range of activities and a big summer swimming pool complex into which someone has sailed a Spanish galleon. Pool use costs AZN6 for nonresidents.

NORTHWESTERN AZERBAIJAN

The spine of this truly charming region is the Balakən–Baku highway, a misnomer for what is mostly a quaint country lane traversing everything from desert to verdant forest. It offers by far the most interesting

way to transit between Baku and Tbilisi. In most cases the attractions (timeless villages, ancient Albanian church-ruins and very ruined castle remnants) lie to the north of this road in the thickly wooded foothills of the high Caucasus Mountains. The glorious scenery gets particularly impressive between the towns of İsmayilli and Şaki, especially in spring, when wildflowers and fields full of poppies add majestic splashes of colour to the woodland foreground. However, while the area is great for admiring the white-tops, if you really want to get among the highest peaks you'd do better to start from Quba (p263) or Qusar (opposite).

Note that by public transport it's easier to travel from west to east. That's because from any town there will be fairly regular Baku-bound marshrutkas, but coming the other way vehicles tend to be full on arrival at any intermediate town.

ŞAMAXI

☎ 0176 / pop 32,000

For centuries, Şamaxı (Shemakha) was one of (northern) Azerbaijan's most prominent cities, an important cultural and trading centre and the royal seat of the Shirvanshahs (9th to 18th centuries). Sadly, earthquakes, fire and invasions have left virtually nothing visible to remind the visitor of Şamaxı's past importance.

In the Soviet era the surrounding hills produced famous wines and cognacs but that industry was decimated by Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaign and has never fully recovered. These days the town is best seen as a staging point for reaching Pirqulu rather than as a destination in itself.

Orientation & Information

The bus station commands a roundabout on the Baku highway, southeast of the town centre. From here Şirvani küç slopes uphill into town passing the Cümə Mosque, behind the usually closed tourist information booth on the left after 1km. After another kilometre the road starts to curve uphill much more sharply, reaching the centre after around 800m at a colourfully mosaic-muralled theatre. Straight ahead is Nərimanov küç leading towards Pirqulu; to the right Şahriyar küç passes within a block of the Hotel Şamaxı, an Internet Klub and the post office.

Sights

Apart from some historic **tomb towers** across the valley from the ring road, Şamaxı's only real sight is the big, sturdy **Cümə Mosque** (Şirvani küç). The original mosque on this site was supposedly the second oldest in the trans-Caucasus. Excavations of its 10th-century incarnation can be seen in the grounds where a little nodding-donkey pump has nothing to do with oil – it draws water for the congregation's ritual ablutions. Today's mosque building was erected in the 19th century, damaged during the civil unrest of 1918 and not restored until recent years. Nonetheless, the powerful, bare stone interior columns exude a feeling of great antiquity and the imam, dressed in fine white gown and mufti hat, is generally very happy for visitors to look around. Shoes should be removed, bags left with the guard and women are expected to cover their hair.

Sleeping

Hotel Şamaxı (per person AZN3-10) This very central, decomposing 10-storey tower block has rooms ranging from nasty to appallingly unkempt. Water comes in fill-it-yourself buckets and toilets haven't flushed in years. Fragments of the former parquet floor lie scattered like an unsolved jigsaw. But the charmingly friendly manager believes the whole place will be elegantly redeveloped by 2009.

Şamaxı Motel (☎ 050 6822919; Ağsu road; tw from AZN10) Around 500m beyond the western end of the noisy bypass, this busy restaurant aimed at passing motorists and bus passengers has a very mixed bag of rooms at prices that seem to depend mostly on how much staff think you're prepared to pay. Some are full-facility affairs that are remarkably plush with dining room and balcony, others just a box with three beds.

Motel Savalan (☎ 055 2543035; Ağsu road; tw/stc AZN10/20) Similar but quieter to the next door Şamaxı Motel, the Savalan's upstairs rooms are somewhat rough with shared bathroom. However, the neatly tiled minisuites are clean and come with hot shower. Being hidden at the back they're somewhat shielded from traffic rumble.

Şamaxı Olympic Complex (☎ 51130; Baku Hwy; tw/stc AZN50/100; 🚻) These neat new box cottages 400m east of the bus station offer very acceptable motel standard accommodation, and in summer (May to September) guests have free

use of the excellent full-sized indoor swimming pool. No restaurant though.

Eating

Close to the Hotel Şamaxı there is a well-stocked Arzaq supermarket and several cheap cafés including **Kafe Delfin** (meals 80q-AZN4) which offers spit roast chicken, döner kebabs and various snack foods. There's better dining at the Motels Savalan and Şamaxı, or along the road to Pirqulu if you're prepared to drive. To find the **bazaar** (Rəsulzadə küç) walk towards Pirqulu from Şamaxı's theatre then take the third street to the left.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas (AZN3) and shared taxis (AZN4, two hours) to Baku depart from outside the main bus station all day long. Although through-services to Qəbələ, Şəki and Zaqatala pass regularly, they're often full on arrival, making westbound transport somewhat awkward.

AROUND ŞAMAXI

The main draw is relaxing at Pirqulu but with your own vehicle there are many minor curiosities hidden in the sheepy hills, including a ruined old church at Mədrəsə, ancient *turbe* (tomb-towers) at Kələxana, and a mysteriously timeless atmosphere in old Sündlü village.

Gulistan Castle

Above Xinişli village, 2km west of Şamaxı's bazaar along Rəsulzadə küç, rises a distinctive hill, on top of which once stood **Gulistan Castle**, the 12th-century residence of the Shirvanshahs. Remnant stones are pretty minimal but views are sweeping.

Pirqulu

Pirqulu (Pirguli) is the kind of place where you'd expect to see the Brontë sisters taking an afternoon constitutional. It commands a windswept hilltop reminiscent of Yorkshire, and makes a decent base for winter sledding or short summer hikes. Pirqulu's one 'sight' is the extensive **Pirqulu Observatory Complex** (☎ 050 4853363; Müşviq; donation appreciated; 🌙 9pm on clear nights Jun-Aug). The biggest of the observatory's domes is an impressively large structure resembling a gigantic nose-less Dalek prototype. The complex was one of the Soviet Union's key space-research centres when it opened in 1966. Since the USSR's collapse, the place has become

rather dilapidated, but its main telescope is still in good working condition. Staff speak no English and their attitude to visitors seems to vary unpredictably, from warm welcomes to general gruff rebuffs.

Sometimes you might be shown the collection of meteorites and, on clear summer evenings, there are often star-gazing demonstrations.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are nearly a dozen *istrahət zonası* in and around Pirqulu, most charging from AZN50 for a cottage.

Sometimes discounts are available outside the peak June to mid-September season. All have kebab-burning facilities.

our pick **Babayurd** (☎ 050 3900728; d yurt AZN30) Uniquely here you can stay in delightful carpet-draped Uzbek yurt tents, each with twin beds and a tiny shower/squat toilet attached. There's an atmospheric wooden restaurant (kebabs AZN3) arranged in faintly wild-west style around a giant *ocakbaşı* (flued barbecue). The whole complex lies in a beautiful pear orchard. Turn off the Şamaxı–Pirqulu road towards Qizmeydan (just before the end of the asphalt). After 900m turn left then wind round behind the Şəki İstrahət Zonası for 400m.

Magic Life (☎ 050 5200156; d chalets low/high season AZN35/50) This oddly named place might sound like a hippy commune, but it is actually a comparatively modestly priced collection of wooden huts. Although not luxurious, all are equipped with toilet, hot water, TV and fridge. They're hidden in an overgrown thicket of plum and maple trees around 800m beyond the observatory. Animal rights activists might be tempted to rescue the caged wolf and bear that are on sorry display at the Pirqulu Restorani next door.

Fortuna (☎ 050 3715390; 1-2-room chalets AZN50/60) The Fortuna's main advantage is that it's almost opposite the observatory entrance so it's easy to nip across for an evening's star-gazing. However, the pink-box chalets are small, rather characterless and a little worn, albeit with shower and toilet. They stretch along a ridge in rather regimented fashion towards a restaurant that has attractive views, pool tables and a disco on summer weekends.

Qoşabulaq (☎ 050 4233007; d AZN50) At least five comfortable cottage resorts are spread

over 2km along the Avarği road that turns west 600m north of the observatory. The most appealing of these is comfortable new Qoşabulaq, thanks to sweeping south-facing views from its open balconies. However, cottages are semidetached and share one hot water tank per pair of rooms. The side without the tank is considerably larger. You could take both for AZN100.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

In season, shared taxis run regularly from Şamaxı (AZN2, 40 minutes) but they're pretty infrequent after mid-September. They start outside **Sabir Market grocery** (Nərimanov küç), six blocks north of the theatre in Şamaxı. An 8am minibus (AZN1) and a bus bound for Damirçi via Pirqulu (between 1pm and 2pm) also depart from here.

To get back to Şamaxı, flag down vehicles outside the observatory gates.

One of the observatory workers is usually prepared to double as a taxi driver (AZN12 to Şamaxı) should nothing stop for a while.

İSMAYILI

☎ 0178 / pop 16,000

The nondescript town of İsmayılı offers tourists nothing particular to see or do, but serves as a useful transit point for exploring the magnificent mountain country that lies behind.

Almost everything that visitors are likely to need here is on the Şamaxı–Qəbələ road that bypasses the town along its northern edge. This road has three roundabouts. Shared taxis for Baku use the easternmost Çapanay roundabout facing Çaldas petrol. Buses run from here to Lahic (AZN1.40, 1½ hours) at 7am, 11am and 2pm. Some 800m beyond, the next roundabout is the departure point for Baku marshrutkas (AZN4, four hours).

Diagonally right, the road then leads 300m to a third roundabout overlooked by the run-down **Motel Talistan** (☎ 53632; per person from AZN6). The motel's tatty but survivable upstairs rooms share squat toilets and showers. Downstairs rooms (twins AZN20) have just-functioning private bathrooms, which aren't necessary a plus. It's still much better than İsmayılı's other grim option, the war-torn **Niyal Hotel** (☎ 55109; Heydar Əliyev küç; per person AZN4), 2km south in the town centre.

Some 200m northwest of the Motel Talistan, across a canal, is a tiny internet kiosk-shop. Hidden directly behind that, the very

simple but acceptable **Kafe Azerbaijan** (meals AZN2, beer 60q) has tree-shaded open-air tables. Westbound shared taxis and passing buses stop in front for transport towards Qəbələ.

AROUND İSMAYILLI

Qız Qalası

The idyllically situated **Restaurant & Pensionat Qız Qalası** (☎ 050 6136490; small/medium/large cottages AZN50/80/100) offers a delightful accommodation alternative to staying in İsmayilli. Its bungalows are dotted tastefully through a wonderfully natural woodland, and most are very comfortable, though the cheapest versions are a big step down in quality, with very small bathrooms and are nearer to the throbbing generator.

If you can ford the river (impossible after rain), it's fun to scramble through the glorious mossy birch forests beyond. You could seek out the pitifully fragmentary ruins of the 11th-century **Qız Qalası** castle, though these are just a few waist-high chunks of white-stone wall hidden in the trees.

Taxis from İsmayilli charge around AZN3 to the *pensionat*. If you can't find a ride back, stroll 4km south down the newly asphalted woodland lane following the Ahoğçay River to Xanəgah village then wave down a passing vehicle to İsmayilli (8km east) or Qəbələ (32km west).

Lahıc

☎ 0178 / pop 1800

With wonderful mountain hikes, horses to rent and a selection of homestays available, the quaint little coppersmith village of Lahıc is a superb place to sample traditional rural life.

And the experience is made richer, as several Lahıcı youths speak English, with more returning from Baku in summer (July to mid-September) to act as guides.

HISTORY

Older villagers speak a dialect that is nearer to Farsi than Azeri and claim that Lahıc is named for the Persian-Caspian town of Lahijun from which their ancestors supposedly emigrated a millennium ago, bringing with them their famous coppersmithing skills.

In its 19th-century heyday, Lahıc boasted around 200 craftsmen, and Lahıc carpets and metalwork fetched high prices in the bazaars of Baghdad. The population was around 15,000 until WWII, when the privations

of war led many to starve or flee across the mountains: the road wasn't built until the 1960s. During 2008 or 2009 the planned introduction of piped water in Lahıc will cause a great improvement in people's lives. However, it will mean the end to the photogenic sight of women filling their *guyum* (traditional copper water vessels) at the village's many springs.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Lahıc starts where the road from İsmayilli fords the Kişlərçay stream in front of the Cənnət Bağı Guest House. The road then snakes along a cliff top past the İsmayilli bus stop (150m) and over a small stone bridge to the triangular central square marked by a war memorial (300m). From here the cobbled main street (Hüseynov küç) passes a series of coppersmith workshops before crossing the Lüloçay stream on another bridge after around 700m. The road then continues a similar distance on the far side through a less commercial part of town known as Aracit.

Incredibly, little Lahıc has what is probably Azerbaijan's best-functioning **tourist office** (☎ 77571; www.lahijtur.az; Nizami küç; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-7pm Jun-mid-Sep). It organises homestays, guides and horse rentals and sells basic maps (AZN1) and photo CDs (AZN2) to fund its existence. Out of season, the keen English-speaking director **Dadash Əliyev** (☎ 050 677517) reverts to his role as school teacher, but can still offer assistance. To find the tourist office walk along the main street to the tiny **Internet Klub** (40 Hüseynov küç; per hr AZN1; ☎ 10am-midnight) and turn right up the narrow alley beyond, climbing steps up to Nizami küç. Then turn right again.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Lahıc is particularly famous for its **coppersmiths**, whose workshops overflow into narrow, stone-paved Hüseynov küç. On the upper floors of the workshops you can sometimes still find carpet makers at work. As years go by the workshops are increasingly transforming themselves into tourist boutiques but they remain rustic, welcoming places, where craftsmen are happy to be watched and photographed engraving intricate patterns. High global copper prices and growing tourist savvy mean that copperware is not as inexpensive as it used to be, but there are still some relative bargains to be had if you shop around.

The quaint little one-room **Lahıc History Museum** (Nizami küç; donation expected; ☎ 9am-8pm) is housed in a former mosque next door to the tourist office. It displays a typical selection of traditional cooking and farming instruments, ancient weapons and pottery, plus painted portraits of local artists and writers, a disproportionate number for such a tiny place. The **village school** is also open to the curious during the summer, and it's better appointed than most others you're likely to see in Azerbaijan.

One of the joys of Lahıc is hiking up the steep wooded hillsides towards the bare mountaintop sheep meadows (*qaylağ*) where flocks graze in summer and views towards the snow-topped high Caucasus can be magnificent on a clear day. Of the region's (very) ruined fortresses, the most accessible is **Niyal Qalası**, about 1½ hours' sweaty climb up the Kişçay valley. With a horse and guide you could make a two-day excursion to more impressive **Fit Dağ castle**. The tourist office can offer many more suggestions.

SLEEPING

In Lahıc & Aracit

Camping (for 2 people from AZN5) is possible in the lovely orchard surrounding Cənnət Bağı Guest House, including firewood. You can also pitch a tent in various other village gardens by discussion, or for free in the hills above.

One of the great attractions of Lahıc is sleeping in an archetypal **village home**, away from all car noise. But be aware that, as yet, only the Aracit area has piped water. Be prepared to use long-drop outside toilets and remember that water must be laboriously fetched from the nearest spring.

If a tout doesn't grab you first, it's easy to arrange homestays through the tourist office for AZN8 to AZN15 per bed, or AZN20 to AZN30 with meals.

Year-round options include the **Hacıyev Family** (AZN10), whose very simple rooms include one with a colourful antique niche. **Ruslan** (☎ 050 6120553) speaks English and can arrange for you to meet local musicians, but he's only there in summer. Enter via the second garden to the left as you walk towards İsmayilli from the main square along the cliff-top road.

The tourist officer, **Dadash Əliyev** (☎ 050 677517; r AZN15) also offers rooms and his house has the luxury of running water.

Cənnət Bağı Guest House (Garden of Paradise; ☎ 77200, 050 5870140; per person AZN15) The charming İsmailov family's homestay is a large, attractive house set in orchards at the entrance to the village. Handily there's almost always an English-speaking İsmailov in residence, who can rustle up guides and horses at relatively short notice. There's no running water (yet) but costs include use of the private 320-year-old *hammam*, which is fun if a little dingy. Breakfast and other meals are available but not included. Double-check food costs, which some readers have found comparatively steep.

Haji Mohammad's Hotel (☎ 77494, 050 5546174; Aracit Sq; tw AZN20) The nearest Lahıc comes to a real hotel, this overgrown new house has a façade of frilly metalwork that doesn't entirely beautify the otherwise quaint Aracit Sq. Unfussy twin rooms lead off large shared sitting rooms and there are two indoor shared toilets and shower rooms. Birds swoop about inside and the place can feel spookily abandoned off-season, but it's certainly peaceful and a great deal.

Around Lahıc

If you want more creature comforts there are two more upmarket rural resorts. Both lie near Qaraqaya, about 6km off the Baku-İsmayilli road towards Lahıc.

However, both seem a bit overpriced, neither offers the charm of staying in Lahıc itself and neither has air-con – potentially annoying in midsummer, given their lower altitude.

Kalamarc (☎ 050 7302408; chalets AZN80-90) Twelve relatively comfortable pink cottage units with pine interiors are set rather artificially around a grassy clearing with two tear-shaped pools (ornamental rather than swimmable).

Qaya (☎ 050 2158090; tw/ste/cottage AZN80/100/150) The area's only real hotel, Qaya is heavily into white: white marble corridors, whitewashed walls, plump white duvets, new white bathtubs. It's a new four-storey building commanding a lovely woodland clearing. Sadly, the potentially delightful views towards a craggy mountain ravine are wasted, as all the windows face the wrong way and there are no balconies.

EATING

A very simple **yeməxana** (meals AZN1.50-3; ☎ 10.30am-3.30pm) and **çayxana** (tea 40q; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm) sit side by side just beyond the main

square where there's also a discordantly modern glass-fronted grocery shop. A **bakery** (Hüseynov küç 75) sells fresh bread (40q).

Girdiman İstirəhat Bağı (kebabs AZN2; ☞ variable) Near the school, halfway through the village, the Girdiman's garden has some super glimpses of mountains across the river and its large all-weather dining room stays open year-round.

Yeməxana Niyal (meals AZN3-6; ☞ May-Oct) In the orchard of Cənnət Bağı, Yeməxana Niyal serves unexotic kebab meals, salads and pickles at tables that are attractively dotted among the fruit and nut trees.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses to İsmayılı leave at 8.30am, 12.30pm and 4pm. The drive has some spectacular sections with perilous drops, geological wizardry and a couple of attractive villages en route. Consider paying a taxi at least one way, to allow photo stops (around AZN15 to or from İsmayılı). Sometimes the road is rendered impassable by landslides but should become more reliable and faster if it's paved in 2008, as mooted.

A direct marshrutka from Lahuc to Baku (AZN6, four hours) departs around 8am from the central square. Ask the driver to save you a seat the night before.

QƏBƏLƏ

☎ 0160 / pop 14,000

Formerly called Qutqaşın, this bustling market town was renamed in 1991 to honour the region's most historic city, though the site of the original 'Old' Qəbələ was actually more than 20km further east (see opposite). Qəbələ town isn't a great attraction but there are attractive picnic spots and streamside restaurants 4km north. Many more appealing villages lie in the surrounding valleys from which you could hike into the high mountains.

Qəbələ's centre is the junction of Heydar Əliyev küç and Qutqaşınlı pr, a point unani-mously known as Saat Yanı. That means 'be-side the clock', though the clock tower for which it was named has since been replaced by a globe-on-a-stick monument. One block east is the colonnaded 19th-century **mosque** (Heydar Əliyev küç). Around 500m south is the new **Historical Museum** (Tarix Muzeyi; Qutqaşınlı pr; admission 40q; ☞ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). It displays finds from Old Qəbələ but its most intriguing feature is the fake Stone Age-style swing gate through which one enters. Next door is a typically

RLS

Azerbaijan rarely makes the international news. When it does the subject is often Qəbələ's Radio Location Station (RLS). That's a massive Soviet-built radar station that's still under Russian control and whose possible use by America has been mooted as part of the diplomatic tussle over surveillance bases in Eastern Europe.

In fact the installation's tropospheric scattering technology is pretty outdated. Radiation it produces is widely blamed for a high incidence of tumours and birth defects in adjacent villages, especially those to the direct south. The RLS's angular silhouette is clearly visible on the near horizon when you drive into Qəbələ but taking photos isn't advised.

grand, wordless **Heydar Əliyev Museum** (Qutqaşınlı pr; admission free; ☞ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Gilan (Map p262; ☎ 52801; Qutqaşınlı pr; s AZN20, small/large ste AZN50/70; ☞) At the southernmost edge of town, this modern, no-nonsense four-storey box has surprisingly attractive new rooms with great showers. The location, 5km from Saat Yanı, isn't especially handy, though it's only 20q/AZN2 away by shared/private taxi. The hotel food is lacklustre.

Hotel Qəbələ (☎ 52408; info@hotelqebela.com; 28 May küç 31; s/d/ste AZN40/60/80; ☞) A block north of the mosque, the town's central hotel has been thoroughly renovated and is clean and comfortable. However, rooms lack the panache of Hotel Gilan and the en suite showers don't necessarily run hot. Staff are very obliging and some speak good English. Rear rooms face the mountains. Discounts are possible.

Xanlar Pensionat (Map p262; ☎ 51799; cottage r AZN40-100) Around 5km north of town in attractive mossy woodland off the Laza road, this renowned restaurant is the best of half a dozen miniresorts to offer peaceful rural accommodation. The cheapest cottages are divided into two units, each sleeping two with private shower and toilet and sporting an open-sided dining terrace close to the river. A vast new hotel complex is under construction just beyond.

There are several more hotel-restaurant complexes in Vəndam (opposite).

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (avtovağzal; Qutqaşınlı pr) is 2km south of Saat Yanı (20q by shared taxi). From here marshrutkas leave around twice hourly to Baku (AZN5, five hours) via İsmayılı and Şamaxı. Buses run to Gəncə at 8am and 8.30am and to Şəki (AZN2, three hours) at 9am and noon.

Shared taxis to İsmayılı leave sporadically from Saat Yanı. For Vəndam (60q, 20 minutes) they depart from a side lane one short block further east. For Baku, shared taxis start from outside Zərifə Park, 400m east along Heydar Əliyev küç.

AROUND QƏBƏLƏ Vəndam

☎ 0160 / pop 6000

Around 12km east of Qəbələ, Vəndam is an oversized village around which are dotted a considerable number of comfortable rural getaway-resorts. By far the most appealing (if least accessible) is **Pensionat Duyma** (☎ 91600; tw/ste AZN70/90), a four-storey hotel with utterly lovely views at the trailhead into the high Caucasus. Rooms are neat and comfortable, with pine floors and surrealist paintings on the walls. Mineral water is provided in terracotta flagons. There's an extensive playground complex for kids, an attractive decorative lake and a pair of outdoor summer swimming pools should they ever decide to fill them. Receptionist Ramazan speaks English and might be able to arrange horses.

The resort is a bumpy 5km ride through Vəndam village from the İbragim petrol station where taxi sharks ask a whopping AZN5 for the ride.

HIKING

Vəndam is the easiest starting point for several superb (if somewhat arduous) hikes into the high mountains. The most exciting is a two-day trek that can take you all the way to Xınalıq (p265) across the 2915m **Salavat Pass**. Although shepherds consider this a stroll, you'd be advised to find an experienced guide and pack-horse before attempting it. Weather can rapidly turn nasty and in low visibility the narrow cliff-top paths can be very dangerous. Take plenty of food and a tent.

Drinking water is available at certain points en route, but without a guide you might miss the springs. It's typically easier to find guides in Xınalıq and to do this trek in reverse.

Laza (Qəbələnsky Laza)

Clinging to the western side of Dəmiraparañay Valley, this photogenic little village offers an alternative to Vəndam as a finishing point for long-distance hikes from Xınalıq. However, you'll have to deal with a humourless army check post and the necessity to ford the mighty Dəmiraparañay – no easy task when the water is high. There's no formal accommodation in Laza and the degraded track from Qəbələ might require a 4WD (around AZN20).

Durca

Racked up a mountain-rimmed amphitheatre of crags, forests and mountain pastures, Durca is a delightful seasonal village where shepherd families spend their summers. It's easier to reach and less sensitive than Laza so more congenial for short day hikes up to the *yaylaq* (high shepherd pastures). The track from Qəbələ is pretty rough but passable by Lada Zhiguli (AZN10 return). Branch left off the Laza road where the asphalt ends.

Old Qəbələ

First mentioned in print in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (AD 77), Old Qəbələ was one of the foremost cities of Caucasian Albania, but after several batterings it was finally laid to waste by the Persian invader Nader Shah in the 18th century. It never recovered and the unguarded **site** (admission free) was only rediscovered in 1959.

There's little to see apart from the stumps of two massive brick gate towers at the southern perimeter.

Near the site's northwest entrance, the delightful **Qala Səlbir Kafesi** (☎ 050 3965246; kebabs AZN2) sits in pretty woodland beside a fishpond. The owner is keen to show the extraordinary collection of ancient coins he apparently found while nosing around the ancient site. Incredibly basic rooms are sometimes available at AZN5 per person, but they're a last resort with a tragicomic shared squat toilet outside.

Access is via a narrow lane that heads south for around 9km from the Qəbələ-Şəki road at Mirzəbəyli. There's no public transport but for around AZN20 taxis can take you between Qəbələ and **Oğuz** with side trips to Old Qəbələ and to **Nic**, with its three Albanian churches. Once in Oğuz you could visit a couple more ancient churches and



two latter-day synagogues before nipping on a bus to Şəki (80q, 1¼ hours, six daily, last at 5pm).

ŞƏKİ

☎ 0177 / pop 63,000

Snoozing amid green pillows of beautifully forested mountains, Şəki (Sheki) is one of Azerbaijan's loveliest towns. It has a rich history and is one of the few places in the country where tourism can be described as even vaguely organised. Even so you probably won't see more than a handful of fellow travellers here, even during summer.

History

Historic Şəki was originally higher up the valley around the site now occupied by Kiş (p278). That town was ruined by floods in 1716 but rebuilt by rebellious Khan Hacı Çələbi, who set up a defiantly independent khanate there in the 1740s. He built a second fortress at Nukha (today's Şəki). When the original Şəki was obliterated a second time by more catastrophic floods and mudflows in 1772, Nukha became the new royal capital.

The khanate was ceded to Russia in 1805 but Nukha continued to flourish as a silk-weaving town and an important traders' junction where the caravan route between Baku and Tbilisi met the cross-mountain branch route to Derbent in Dagestan. At its peak there were five working caravanserais here. Nukha was renamed Şəki in the 1960s.

Orientation & Information

The main square is an attractive park full of teahouses 1.6km north of the bus station. The old town starts around 1km further northeast up MF Axundov küç.

A steep cobbled lane continues 400m up from the Karavansaray to the fortress walls. Within lies the Xan Sarayı (Khan's Palace). Şəki extends almost all the way to Kiş village, 6.5km north through the suburb of Dodu.

There are several currency exchanges, ATMs and slow Internet Klubs around the main square.

If you can find a space there's much better web-connection at **World.com** (per hr 40q; ☎ 9am-midnight) though demand is heavy. It's within the

INFORMATION		Şəbəkə Workshop.....13 D2	DRINKING ☎
Booking Office for Narin Qala (Kiş).....1 B2	Xan Sarayı (Khan's Palace).....14 D2	Buta Bar.....(see 22)	Çempion Bar.....26 B3
Post Office.....2 B3		Old Sheki Teahouse.....(see 16)	Space Kafe.....(see 16)
Tourist Office.....3 C2	SLEEPING ☎		ENTERTAINMENT ☎
World.com.....4 B3	Cagarin Hotel (under construction).....15 D3		Cinema.....(see 6)
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	Karavansaray Hotel.....16 D3		SHOPPING ☎
19th-century Caravanserai.....5 D3	Makon Motel.....17 C1		Old Craft Market.....27 C3
Çingiz Klubu.....6 D3	Nagorny Resort (under construction).....18 C3		Təza Bazar.....28 A3
Chess School.....7 C3	Panorama Inn.....19 C3		Ipek Magazin.....29 B2
Cüma Mosque.....8 C2	Pensionat Sahil.....20 A3		
Karavansaray.....(see 16)	Şəki Hotel.....21 C2		
Omar Əfəndiyev Mosque.....9 C3	Şəki Saray Hotel.....22 B2		
Rəşidbey Əfəndiyev Historical-Regional Ethnography Museum.....10 D2			TRANSPORT
Rəşidbey Əfəndiyev House Museum.....11 D3			Bus Station.....30 B3
Russian Church/Museum of National Applied Art.....12 D2			Marshrutka 11 to Karavansaray.....31 C3
	EATING ☎		Marshrutka 15 to Kiş.....32 A3
	Çələbi Xan Restoran.....23 C2		Marshrutka 8 to Dodu.....33 C2
	Halva Shops.....24 C3		Marshrutka to Town Centre.....34 B3
	Şahin Kafesi.....25 D2		
	Şəbəkə Restoran.....(see 22)		

Şəki Telkom building through a side entrance marked Abunə Şöbəsi. That's near the **post office** (Rəsulzadə küç; ☎ 8am-8pm), which contains a useful **telephone desk** (international calls per min 54q).

An excellent 80-page *Sheki Guidebook* exists, but is hard to find now that the prominently signed Tourist Office is dormant.

Sights

WITHIN THE FORTRESS WALLS

The sturdy stone perimeter wall of Hacı Çələbi's Nukha Fortress today encloses an 18th-century palace, several museums and a decent café-restaurant, all set in patches of grass that are kept mown by flocks of sheep.

Xan Sarayı

Şəki's foremost 'sight' is the two-storey **Khan's Palace** (☎ 43666; admission/camera/video AZN0.80/2/4; ☎ 10am-6pm), which was finished in 1762. It's set in a walled rose garden behind two huge plane trees supposedly planted in 1530. The unique façade is decorated with silvered stalactite vaulting and geometric patterns in dark-blue, turquoise and ochre, magnificently setting off the intricate wood-framed, stained-glass windows known as *şəbəkə*.

Only one-room deep, the palace's interior is surprisingly petite. However, virtually every square inch is covered with extraordinarily colourful murals. These reach a climax in the central upstairs apartment which vividly features the heroic battles of Hacı Çələbi, complete with requisite swords, guns and gory severed heads.

The 'lady's room' to its right (as you face the window) is contrastingly pastoral,

decorated with flowers, birds and arabesques. The 'lord's room' to the left has more 'manly' scenes of hunting, mythical beasts, and lions ripping antelopes to pieces.

If you arrive after 6pm or want to see the façade in glorious golden sunset light, the guard might sneak you in for whatever he thinks you're prepared to pay.

Museums

Tour groups are marched dutifully around the **Rəşidbey Əfəndiyev Historical-Regional Ethnography Museum** (☎ 43702; admission AZN1; ☎ 10am-7pm), whose name is more impressive than its exhibits: archaeological oddments, ethnographical artefacts and the usual emotive panels on WWII, Karabakh and the Xocalı massacre.

Across the road is a late-19th-century **Russian church** in unusual cylindrical form, built on the site of a 6th-century Caucasian Albanian original. It now hosts the limited **Museum of National Applied Art** (☎ 44901; admission AZN1; ☎ 10am-6pm) that displays fairly haphazard collections of Şəki crafts, including metalwork, pottery and embroidery. Hardly worth the money.

More interesting is a **Şəbəkə Workshop** (☎ 40932; admission free; ☎ 9am-7pm), where local craftsmen (no English) assemble traditional stained-glass windows, slotting together hundreds of hand-carved wooden pieces to create intricate wooden frames without metal fastenings. Small examples are sold as souvenirs.

OLD TOWN

Even if you don't stay here, peep inside the wonderful **Karavansaray** (Karavansara; MF Axundov küç 185), an historic caravanserai with a twin-level

arcade of sturdy arches enclosing a pretty central courtyard. Stride through the somewhat daunting wooden gateway door and if questioned say you're heading for the restaurant in the garden behind, a lovely place for a cuppa with a slice of Şəki's signature halva (pastry with nuts; opposite).

Immediately downhill is a second, even larger but partially ruined **19th-century caravanserai**. Beyond, Şəki's old town follows a canalised stream down towards the main square passing a pair of **19th-century mosques**, numerous halva shops and a **chess school** with interesting metal reliefs on its outer walls. An appealing maze of red-tiled roofs and shady lanes lies behind.

Did the ethnography museum (p275) make you wonder who the devil was Raşidbey Əfəndiyev? Probably not. But lovers of perversely off-beat attractions can nonetheless admire his spectacles, family portraits and the textbooks he penned at his loveable pro-saic **house museum** (Ev muzeyi; ☎ 44258; Əzizbəyov küç, admission 40q; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm).

The much more polished **Çingis Klubu** (☎ 47700; MF Axundov küç 91; admission 40q; ☎ 10am-7pm) celebrates TV journalist and national hero Çingis Mustafayev who died in 1992 filming the Karabakh war. Photos of his life are complemented by a small but very well-chosen gallery of modern Azerbaijani paintings. A basement ethnographic room illustrates typical crafts. There's also an air-conditioned cinema, whose 6pm screenings usually have English subtitles. Most films shown are somewhat more intellectual than typical Azerbaijani movie-house offerings.

Sleeping HOTELS

Şəki Hotel (☎ 42488; MF Axundov küç 17; d/ste AZN8/30) This nasty nine-storey Soviet wreck looms maliciously above the main square, its concrete almost crumbling as you watch. Just a handful of rooms are functioning off tragically gloomy old corridors. The dowdy suites have at least been renovated and actually have pretty presentable bathrooms. Meanwhile, embarrassed staff may entirely deny the existence of the four surviving 'standard' rooms. These are appallingly decrepit. Have some sedatives ready to deal with the sight of the stained, long-broken toilets. Only for impoverished masochists.

Pensionat Sahil (☎ 45491; S Mumtaz küç; d/q/ste AZN16/30/40; ☎) The Sahil has simple but

perfectly survivable rooms with private bathrooms. It's accessed through tall iron gates beyond the bazaar, then entered round the back through the good-value restaurant-garden. Seek out English-speaking administrator Elbruz Cabbarov.

Our pick Karavansaray Hotel (☎ 44814; reseil_ka_ravan@mail.ru; MF Axundov küç 185; s/d/tr from AZN12/20/24) Staying in this superb converted caravanserai (see p275) is justification enough to visit Şəki. Rooms have wonderful arched brickwork ceilings and while they're certainly not luxurious, all have sitting areas, humorously basic bathrooms and Western loos. There's hot water in the showers but not in the sinks. Prices vary considerably between rooms for no apparent reason, so take the cheapest on offer. Book ahead, especially for single rooms, of which there are only two.

Panorama Inn (☎ 050 6229027; d/tr AZN35/45) Lots of traditional knick-knacks and local fabrics give the seven rooms here a great atmosphere, though all share toilets and the shower block is across the yard – annoying when snows are deep. There are lovely views from the garden-terrace, where breakfast (included) is taken on sunny summer mornings.

Makən Motel (☎ 60372; ME Rəsulzadə küç, Dodu; d/AZN40-50) Above a popular local restaurant in Dodu are four new pine-interior rooms with little en suite bathrooms. They're clean but stylistically neutral, except for the carved wooden lamp-holders. Take northbound marşrutka 8.

Our pick Şəki Saray Hotel (☎ 48181; www.shekisaray.az; ME Rəsulzadə küç; d/ste AZN60/200; ☎) Impeccably chosen neo-oriental touches make this brand-new hotel the most stylish anywhere in provincial Azerbaijan. Staff speak English, standards are tip-top, yet prices are very fair and fall 20% in winter. Thoroughly recommended.

The new Gagarin Hotel and fanciful castle-style Nagornı Resort were under construction in the old town area when we visited. There are several more alternatives around Kis.

HOMESTAYS

Şəki has a great B&B homestay programme though unfortunately the organiser, **Farhad Azizov** (☎ 050 6126564), doesn't speak English. Call him (in Russian or Azeri), giving your mobile telephone number and explaining where you are (ideally somewhere easily identifiable like the Karavansaray). Within around 20 minutes a taxi should arrive to take you to the chosen house. Give the taxi AZN1, then

pay AZN10 per night to the homestay host. Most homestays are very central and delightfully friendly. Breakfast is included but don't expect any spoken English.

Alternatively, homestays can be arranged by English-proficient **İlgar Ağayev** (☎ 055 6238295; ilgarağayev77@yahoo.com) for AZN12. İlgar can also act as an unofficial freelance guide.

Eating RESTAURANTS

There are numerous very cheap but uninspiring eateries around Təzə Bazaar. Several better restaurants proudly tout their *aş* (fruity *plov*) and *piti* (two-part stew) but in fact you'll usually need to preorder those dishes.

Çələbi Xan Restoran (main square; mains AZN1-3.50) The interior pine décor is eccentric enough to make you feel you're dining in a cuckoo clock. In summer there's lots of space amid the trees outside and for just AZN1 you can fill up on a hearty borscht and basket of bread.

Şahin Kafesi (mains AZN2-4) Within the fortress walls the café interior is entirely uninspiring but the outside dining booths are quaintly draped in living ivy and the food is way better than you might anticipate. The particularly outstanding vine-leaf mini dolma (AZN2) has a minty tang and arrives in a clay pot.

Şəbəke Restaurant (Şəki Saray Hotel; mains AZN3-9) If you're craving Western food, this suave jazz-toned hotel-restaurant offers professionally presented dishes at prices that seem expensive in Şəki but would be cheap as chips in Baku. Our penne in pesto sauce (AZN3.20) was perfectly al dente if lacking in pizzazz.

The Karavansaray Hotel (opposite) has two restaurants (mains AZN3 to AZN10, tea AZN1) with a reasonable selection of Azeri favourites. In summer you'll usually dine beneath the sturdy, wooden pavilions in the attractive rose garden.

In winter the catering moves indoors to an atmospheric warren of vaulted chambers,

with musicians occasionally cropping up to serenade tour groups.

QUICK EATS

Şəki is famous for its confectionery. Shops all around town flog lurid *nöğül* (sugar-coated beans) and much more palatable *mindal* (hazelnuts in a crisp caramelly coating). But by far the best known offering is Şəki halva – really a misnomer for a kind of *paxlava*.

Drinking

Space Kafe (MF Axundov küç; beer 60q; ☎ 7am-11pm) If you're staying in the Karavansaray Hotel but want to nip out quickly to experience something more 'real', try this little cavern bar in the ninth arched niche to the right of the hotel entrance. Unadorned except for photo-posters of waving Əliyevs, the only options are *çay* (tea, 20q) or NZS beer (60q) plus *noxtu* (boiled chickpeas) as a bar snack.

Çempion Bar (Xırdalan beer AZN1; ☎ 9am-11pm) This relatively quaint one-room cellar-bar is air-conditioned and comparatively comfortable. It's easy to miss down a narrow stairway beside a barber's shop on 'Tae Kwon Do Alley'.

Buta Bar (Şəki Saray Hotel; beers from AZN2) This chic modern bar is by far the town's most stylish and serves the best coffee in Şəki.

Old Sheki Teahouse (Karavansaray Hotel; ☎ unpredictable) Fabulously atmospheric, but only serving tea by the samovar accompanied by jams, fruit and confectionery (costing a minimum of AZN6). If you just want a cuppa, head for the Karavansaray's garden restaurant (summer only).

Shopping

The expansive Təzə Bazaar sells pottery, metalwork and carpets, as well as masses of fresh fruit, vegetables, meat and cheese. Saffron is a bargain at just 50q a pouch. Get there by southbound minibus 11, 8 or 5.

ŞƏKI BUSES

Destination	Duration (hr)	Cost	Departures
Balakən	3	AZN2.15	10.10am, 2pm
Qəbələ	2½	AZN2	6.50am, 2pm
Gəncə	3	AZN2.50	8am, 8.30am, 1.30pm
Öğüz	1¼	80q	7.20am, 10.30am, 11.40am, 1.20pm, 3pm, 4pm
Qax	2¼	AZN1.80	7.40am, 10.30am, 1.40pm, 4.10pm
Zaqatala	2½	AZN2	7am, 9am, 11am, 11.40am, 3pm, 4.30pm

Şəki still has a working silk factory (*kombinat*) 50m west of upper Rəsulzadə küç. It doesn't allow tourist visits but opposite the entrance its store, **İpek Magazin** (☎ 42982; ☹ 9am-6pm), sells attractively simple silk scarves from AZN8.

Getting There & Away

There are several useful services from the **bus station** (☎ 44617; Rəsulzadə küç). For Baku via İsmayılı and Şamaxı, marshrutkas (AZN6, seven hours) depart approximately hourly between 6.30am and 5pm or later, supplemented by big buses around midnight. A shared taxi costs AZN12 per person. Şəki train station is a whopping 17km south of town. A nightly train to Baku departs around 10pm but you can't always count on getting a ticket for same-day departure.

Getting Around

Şəki sprawls over a very large area but there's a usefully extensive network of marshrutkas. The flat fare is 20q.

Bus 22 shuttles past the bus station, passes the southeast corner of the main square and rolls up to the Karavansaray and fortress area. However, it's fairly rare and from the bus station it's best to cross Rəsulzadə küç, turn right then walk one block north to the corner of Həmidov küç. From here frequent marshrutkas 8 and 11 (both starting at Təzə Bazaar) turn left and head for the central square. The 11 continues to the Karavansaray and passes near the Xan Sarayı. The 8 goes on past the Silk Factory and terminates at the Makən Motel in Dodu.

From the train station to town, a single marshrutka (60q) meets incoming trains but fills fast. Taxis cost AZN3. Alternatively, walk 700m east and flag down passing northbound transport from the AzPetrol junction.

AROUND ŞƏKİ

Kiş

☎ 0177 / pop 2300

The brilliantly renovated round-towered **Albanian church** (Alban Məbədi; ☎ 98833; foreigner/local/camera/video 80q/40q/AZN2/AZN4; ☹ 9am-8pm Tue-Sun) in Kiş village has been lovingly converted into a very well-presented trilingual museum. It's the best place anywhere to learn about mysterious Caucasian Albania, the Christian nation that once covered most of northern Azerbaijan. In fact the church site goes back well beyond the Christian era and glass-covered grave excavations allow visitors to peer down on the excavated bones of possibly Bronze Age skeletons.

In the delightful cobbled streets around the church you'll find kids playing, old men sporting flat caps, and women fetching water in traditional *guyum*. There are some charming walks up the river valley towards the **Gelersen Görəsən Fortress Ruins**, though surrounding areas are being steadily invaded by new bungalow resorts for vacationing Bakuvians, such as comfortable **Narin Qala İstirahət Zonası** (Map p262; ☎ 45300; pine cottages AZN60-120).

For something much cosier, do a village homestay. Tucked away in orchard gardens just three doors from Kiş church is the delightful **İlhama's Homestay** (☎ 98417; bed-only/with food AZN5/10). The well-maintained shower and toilet are outside across the lovely orchard garden. İlhama speaks some English.

Overcrowded day-time marshrutkas 15 and 23 run a few times hourly from Şəki's Təzə Bazaar (20q, 20 minutes).

To find the church get off near the start of the village and walk 800m, looping round and following the signs.

QAX

☎ 0144 / pop 12,000

Most useful as the gateway to İlisu 15km beyond, this pleasant but rather forgotten town is famous for its bottled mineral water and its partly Georgian-speaking population. Travellers are a rarity, with Şəki-Zaqatala buses bypassing the place altogether. The natives are friendly but expect to be stared at.

Qax town has three historic churches, the most celebrated of which is a **ruined Albanian church** perched above the dilapidated A20 road 3km south of town. This road is marked on maps as a direct route to Şəki but is usually impassable further east due to broken bridges.

Friendly and good value, the simple little **Hotel Qax** (Nərimanov küç; per person AZN4) is 10 minutes' walk northeast from the tiny little bus station.

Cranky minibuses to Zaqatala (80q, 1½ hours) depart roughly hourly. Four daily buses run to Şəki (AZN1.80, two hours) looping past Qax's new train station.

If arriving by train don't get off prematurely at the very isolated old train station 20km further east.

AROUND QAX

Near Qax you'll find the remains of 6th-century Albanian Churches in **Qum** village and in the hills above **Ləkit** but the most popular excursion is to İlisu.

İlisu

☎ 0144 / pop 3400

The small, stone-built village of İlisu is set in the beautiful Qaraçay Valley, nicknamed Qax's 'mini-Switzerland'. Amazingly, it was once the capital of a short-lived 18th-century sultanate. Two modest **castle tower ruins** bear testament and there's an unusual **mosque**. The village is a fascinating place to wander and makes a great base for hikes towards the nearby mountains and waterfalls of the **İlisu Nature Reserve**. Don't go too far, however, as the reserve is a closed zone and the peaks behind form the sensitive Russian border.

Clustered around a 17th-century bridge 3km south of İlisu village are three bungalow resorts, including the cheap but ropery **Ulu Körpu** (☎ 54140; d/tr AZN20/30) and the shamelessly overpriced **Green Park** (Yaşıl Park; ☎ 54575; cottage US\$150-250; ☎). Better located and better value is the new **Uludağ İstirahət Mərkəzi** (☎ 93425; per person AZN25; ☎) at the village's northernmost end. Rooms 35 and 36 have fabulous balcony views.

Minibuses from Qax (50q, 20 minutes) leave at 7.30am, 10.30am, noon, 2pm and 5pm.

ZAQATALA

☎ 0174 / pop 26,000

Azerbaijan's hazelnut capital has a lovely location at the confluence of wide mountain rivers descending steeply from the high Caucasus mountains. It's a pleasantly presented place, with an attractive new **mosque**, a small **Historical Museum** (30 Heydar Əliyev Pr; ☹ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm) and a pretty little **old town square** featuring some **700-year-old çinar trees**. Hidden close by is the maudlin ruin of a once-fine **Russian Church**. Directly above, Zaqatala's **Russian fortress** (military use, no entry) was built in 1830 and guarded against attacks from the Dagestan-based guerrilla army of Imam Shamil. In more recent times, the fortress imprisoned sailors from the battleship *Potëmkin*, whose famous mutiny at Odessa in 1905 foreshadowed the Russian revolution.

The best web connection is in the rear of the **Hotel Zaqatala** (per hr 60q; ☹ 9.30am-midnight). **Xalq Bank** (Nizami küç) has an ATM. So does the **IBA** (104 Heydar Əliyev pr), which also changes money.

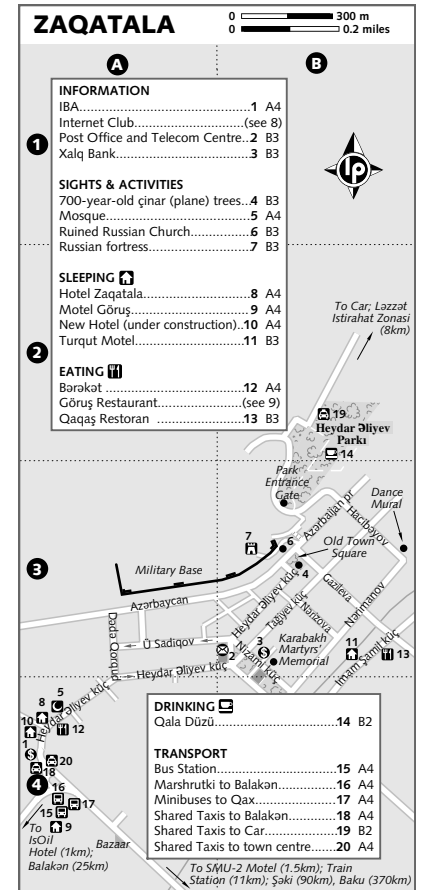
Sleeping

Hotel Zaqatala (☎ 55709; Heydar Əliyev Pr 92; dm/tw/ste AZN5/15/30) Despite rather rucked corridor carpets, standards are perfectly acceptable in this

partly renovated old Soviet hotel. Even the six-bed dorm (men only) has a private bathroom. TV costs AZN5 extra. Choose even-numbered rooms to reduce road noise. Upstairs 'luxe' rooms are planned.

SMU-2 Motel (Göyçə; ☎ 52142; tw with private/shared bathroom from AZN14/10; ☹) This sleepy place has better rooms than you'd expect from the simple exterior and those with bathrooms also have decent air-con. It's hidden behind the Tala roundabout, 1.5km east of the bus station, across the river.

Motel Görüş (☎ 050 3225289; tw & d AZN12) Across the bus station forecourt is a decent, unpretentious restaurant offering three handy if basic rooms. These share a clean bathroom with hot shower, though some of the tiling is broken.



Owner Muxtar is charming but doesn't speak English. A reputedly better motel within the bus station building is usually locked; finding the key-keeper is hard and getting locked out would be a worry.

Turqut Motel (☎ 56229; Imam Şamil küç; tw with private/shared bathroom from AZN30/15) Trios of cheaper non-air-con rooms share one good bathroom, while nicer AZN30 rooms have air-con and tiny new en suite bathrooms. Rooms at AZN50 are bigger but not really better.

IsOil Hotel (☎ 56959; Faiq Əmirov pr 1; ste AZN30-100; ☎) For now this is Zaqatala's top option and it's relatively stylish (by rural Azeri standards). All rooms come with air-con, sitting area and bathroom. Most have a fridge. Price relates to size, not quality, so the cheapest rooms are a comparative bargain. It's 1km west of the bus station beside the Balakən road.

A very grand-looking new hotel is under construction at 100 Heydar Əliyev pr.

Eating

Qaqaş Restoran (☎ 04427 40626, 055 7445920; Imam Şamil küç; kebabs AZN2, fish AZN2, herb-infused tea AZN1, draught beer 60q) Zaqatala's most intriguing restaurant has a façade of bottle-ends, an interior of timber rooms and a series of wooden perches out back as dining platforms. Up-beat Ukrainian music adds to the reliable food and cheap beer. Recommended.

Bərəkət (☎ 04427 40693; Heydar Əliyev küç 161; meals AZN2-4; ☎ 10am-11pm) Opposite Hotel Zaqatala this reasonably neat yet inexpensive eatery offers Turkish specialities, including fresh-baked *pide* and *lahmajun* (pizzas).

Qala Düzü (Heydar Əliyev Park; tea AZN1; ☎ summer) The big main building is a wedding palace, not a regular restaurant, but cliff-top pavilion seats in the park outside offer lovely summer views across the river valley and of the forested mountains beyond.

Getting There & Away

Zaqatala's airfield is being upgraded. From the main **bus station** (☎ 050 5028121), Baku-bound buses (AZN7, eight hours) leave regularly in the morning, plus at 2pm and around 11pm. The last of five services to Gəncə departs at 3pm. Nine daily services to Şəki (AZN2, 2½ hours) bypass Qax as the Qax-Şəki direct road is impassable. Marshrutkas to Balakən (60q, 30 minutes) and little bubble-buses to Qax (80q, 1¼ hours) leave once or twice an hour from outside. Shared taxis to Balakən

WHERE'S THE STATION GONE?

Beware that some train stations, especially on the northwestern line, are very, very far from the towns they purport to serve. At such places there's usually a single marshrutka that waits for disembarking passengers but it will be full if you don't hurry off the train. Even the taxis don't wait around too long.

(AZN2, evenings) and into central Zaqatala (20q) depart from across the roundabout.

An overnight train to Baku departs around 8.30pm from the station some 8km southeast of town.

AROUND ZAQATALA

Car

Lost in blossoms and greenery, this is a chocolate-box village of picturesque houses tucked behind mossy dry-stone walls in abundant orchards of chestnut and walnut. The hills above make for delightful hiking, where the thick deciduous forests give way to open, grassy ridges at around 1800m. Amid 3000m-plus peaks beyond, the remote **Zaqatala Nature Reserve** is home to brown bear, wild boar and the endangered Caucasian *tur* (a huge mountain goat).

Near the base of the village, **Ləzzət İstirahət Zonası** (Map p262; ☎ 54455, 050 3834573; s/d cottage AZN30/45) offers 16 stone-and-wattle cottages with old-tiled roofs and functional bathrooms. These are around a grassy clearing focused on a gaudy statue of giant mountain goat. Excellent Georgian, Azeri and Dagestani food is available and the eccentric owner styles himself as the 'King of Zaqatala'. Parking costs 40q.

Shared taxis (50q, 10 minutes) shuttle occasionally up to Car from beside Heydar Əliyev Park in Zaqatala.

BALAKƏN

☎ 0119 / pop 10,000

If you arrive from Georgia via Lagodekhi, then sleepy Balakən will be the first Azeri town you'll see. The town's commercial centre is around the bazaar. However, the town's only sight, a fine 19th-century **mosque**, is 1km further west, two blocks south of the prominent Heydar Bağ gardens.

The imam generally allows visitors to climb the mosque's unique brick **minaret** for a fine view over the town.

If you inexplicably want to spend the night in Balakən, there's a big new hotel under construction, 300m north of the bazaar. Meanwhile, the neat little **AzPetro Motel** (☎ 52401; Zaqatala rd; dm/tw/d AZN7/20/24; ☎), 2km east of the bazaar area, is way better than run-down Soviet-era **Balakən Hotel** (☎ 53589; dm/tw from AZN8/16) opposite the mosque. The latter's lobby might be attractively renovated but the stomach-churning en suite bathrooms belong in a horror film.

Getting There & Away

Shared taxis to the Georgian border (AZN1 per seat) depart from MMOil Petrol station on the main roundabout, 200m north of the bazaar. Ponderously slow marshrutkas to Zaqatala (60q, 30 minutes) leave from a small side road off Heydar Əliyev küç, two long blocks west of there. The bus station is 2km east of the main roundabout with a service to Baku (AZN7.20 to AZN8, 8½ hours) at 8.30am and several more between 10pm and midnight. There are also buses to Şəki (AZN2.15, three hours) at 8.20am and to Gəncə (AZN4.10) at 9.30am.

From the train station, 6km out of town, a taxi costs AZN2 to the bazaar, or AZN5 direct to the Georgian border. To Baku the train departs at 7.40pm.

CENTRAL AZERBAIJAN

Azerbaijan's monotonous central plains consist of drearily flat steppe, semi-desert and salt marsh. The scenery gets much more interesting in the beautiful Lesser Caucasus mountains, southwest of Azerbaijan's second city Gəncə, where the originally German village of Xanlar is a minor highlight. However,

HOW MUCH?

It's your first day in Azerbaijan. In beginner's Russian you check the taxi price. The driver quotes 'Two' and you agree. But when you later hand him AZN2 he starts shouting and demanding double the fare. This is not a scam. All across the country many people still think in 'Shirvan' (see Money, p297). And two Shirvan is AZN4. So always double-check whether prices quoted are in Manats or Shirvan.

the finest areas beyond are in (or sensitively close to) Armenian-occupied Karabakh. The occupation renders huge swathes of central Azerbaijan inaccessible from the rest of the country, including the ancient cultural centre of Şuşa. The ceasefire line is mined and the only access to Nagorno-Karabakh is through Armenia, a trip that's considered illegal trespass under Azerbaijani law. Refugees remain a big political issue and police are often suspicious of foreigners snooping around anywhere much south of the M27 Yevlax-Tbilisi highway.

GƏNCƏ

☎ 022 / pop 300,000

Despite a certain Soviet grandeur, the main touristic reason to come to Azerbaijan's pleasant second city is as a staging post for Xanlar and Göy Göl. Today Gəncə lags very considerably behind the capital in almost all senses. Yet, as it self-indulgently celebrated in 2006, the city has 25 centuries of history behind it and was formerly a much more important cultural centre than Baku.

Most proudly it was home to the national bard Nizami Gəncəvi (1141-1209). However it was levelled by earthquakes and razed by the Mongols in 1231. It rebounded somewhat as capital of one of Azerbaijan's many independent khanates in the late 18th century, before falling into the Russian orbit from 1804. Thereafter, the whole city shifted its centre of gravity to coalesce around the Russian fortress-town of Elizavetpol. From a building that is now the city's agricultural institute, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was declared in 1918 and Gəncə served for a few months as the short-lived republic's first capital, until Baku was recaptured from the Bolsheviks.

Information

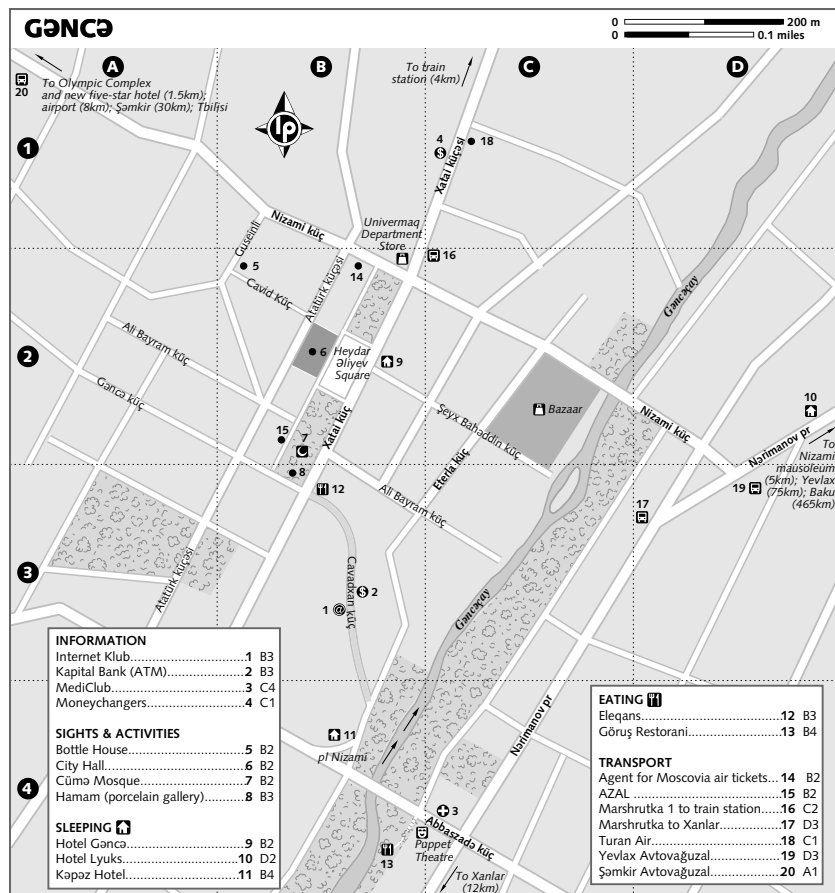
Several moneychangers north of the Univermaq department store open late.

Internet Klub (Cavadxan küç; per hr 40q) Variable-speed internet.

Capital Bank (Cavadxan küç) One of several handy ATMs.
MediClub (☎ 569911; www.mediclub.az; Abbaszadə küç 5) Medical help.

Sights

The vast, central Heydar Əliyev (former Lenin) Sq is lined by powerful Stalinist architecture, notably the arcade-fronted **City Hall** and the grand **Hotel Gəncə**. Towards the square's southern



end the old **hammam** now hosts a small, rather tacky **porcelain gallery** (☎ 565547; admission 20q; ☎ 5-9pm) near the twin-minareted 1620 **Cüma Mosque**.

From here you could stroll **Cavadxan küç**, the city centre's almost-quiet pedestrian lane, or explore some appealing patches of wooded parkland that twinkle at night with (male-dominated) *çayxanas*.

On a quiet residential street, the quirky, ivy-choked **Bottle House** (Güseini küç) is a building-cum-artwork created by İbrahim Caffarov using beer, champagne and water bottles.

East of town is the 1991 **Nizami Mausoleum** (Baku Hwy; admission free), a space shuttle-shaped tomb-tower flanked by a series of inspired **sculptures** depicting scenes from Nizami's

works. A vast aluminium smelter forms an incongruous backdrop.

Sleeping

Kəpəz Hotel (☎ 566013; Abbaszadə küç; price negotiable) Staff assume that anyone who's crazy enough to check in to this monstrous hulk of decomposing concrete must also be mad enough to pay whatever they're asked. The ragged room we saw was barely worth AZN5, certainly not the AZN20 demanded. Don't count on hot water. Only the 6th to 8th floors function and even here *dezhurnayas* (floor managers) cackle at guests rather than helping. Bizarrely lifts work up only!

Hotel Lyuks (☎ 574652; Nərimanov pr 42; d AZN40-60, ste AZN80-100; 🚽) Presentable if fairly bland modern rooms with cheap ugly curtains and

decent bathrooms. Entrance is hidden at the rear. Handy for the Yevlax bus station.

Hotel Gəncə (☎ 565106; Xətai küç; d/ste AZN50/120; 🚽) This splendid stone-fronted Stalinist edifice remains Gəncə's top choice. Despite a Brezhnevian tendency to underilluminate the grand lobby and corridors, the rooms have been fully upgraded to Western standards. It's wonderfully central.

A large new five-star hotel is under construction opposite the Olympic Complex off Nizami küç near the western edge of town.

Eating

In summer, anyone with a vehicle should consider driving up towards Hacıkənd to dine at one of the pretty woodland eateries en route. In town, the high-ceilinged restaurant at Hotel Gəncə is not as pricey as it looks.

Göruş Restorani (mains AZN2-4; ☎ noon-11pm) Handy for the Kəpəz Hotel, this open-sided riverside eatery has a pretty limited dining choice, but beers cost only 60q.

Eleqans (☎ 568224; Cavadxan küç; mains AZN2.40-5; ☎ 9am-10.30pm) This refreshingly bright Azeri-Turkish restaurant has sturdy wooden furniture, a beer terrace and even a menu(!).

Getting There & Away

Gəncə's airport, 8km northwest of the centre, was rebuilt in 2006. **Turan Air** (☎ 562800; Xətai küç) flies twice weekly to Istanbul (from US\$144).

To Moscow-Domodedovo both Turan and **Moskovia** (www.ak3r.ru) fly thrice weekly (US\$190). **AZAL** (Atatürk pr; ☎ 9am-6pm) has three scheduled weekly flights to Naxçıvan (US\$50) and Baku (US\$50), though these tend to be cancelled when planes are needed for the busy Naxçıvan-Baku run.

Gəncə has two bus stations. The main **Yevlax Avtovağzal** (Nizami küç) handles most major destinations. The smaller **Şəmkir Avtovağzal** (Nizami küç) serves towns west of Gəncə including Qazax and Krasny Most (Qırmızı Köprü) for the Georgian border (three hours).

GƏNCƏ BUSES

Destination	Duration	Cost	Departures (hr)
Baku	6½	AZN6	every half-hour 7.30am-4.30pm plus overnight
Lənkəran	8	AZN6.20	8am, 9am, 8pm
Qəbələ	3½	AZN2.80	1.30pm, 2.15pm
Şəki	3	AZN2.50	8.20am, 1.45pm, 4.30pm
Zaqatala	4½	AZN3.50	8am, 11am, 4pm, 5pm

Marshrutkas to Xanlar (50q, 25 minutes) leave when full from a point 200m south down Nərimanov küç.

The train station is 4km north of the centre by marshrutka 1. Several trains run overnight to Baku (from AZN3.10, eight hours), plus one poorly timed daytime 'express' at 4pm (not on Thursdays).

AROUND GƏNCƏ

Xanlar

☎ 230

Founded in the 1830s by German winemakers, the village of Xanlar (Map p262) has an unusually agreeable atmosphere. Although no Germans remain, Germanic key-stone inscriptions appear above picturesque gateways, the old **church** now houses a small museum and several houses on the tree-lined streets are very photogenic. One such hosts the extremely basic **Hotel Koroğlu** (☎ 52274; Heydar Əliyev küç 40; per person AZN5), just five minutes' walk from the marshrutka stand; walk west on Qazimov küç then south down Heydar Əliyev küç.

Göy Göl

The road south from Xanlar winds up through the pretty woodland picnic spots of **Hacıkənd** and onto a ridge with magnificent views of the dramatic Lesser Caucasus range, crowned by the distinctive cleft peak of **Mt Kəpəz**. For now the valley beyond is out of bounds. However it contains one of Azerbaijan's most celebrated beauty spots, the gorgeous, forest-ringed **Göy Göl** (blue lake), which is slated to reopen to tourism as a new national park within the next few years.

TOWARDS GEORGIA

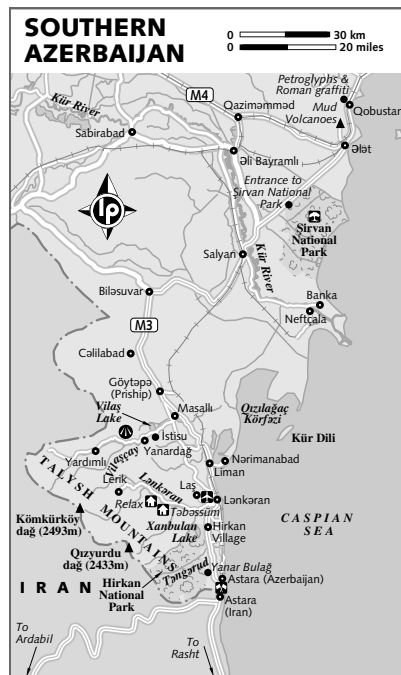
If you're heading to Georgia, by far the most pleasant route is via Şəki and Balakən. However, there is a shorter route between Gəncə and Tbilisi. This crosses the border at **Krasny Most** (Qırmızı Köprü; Red Bridge),

named for a 17th-century brick bridge in no-man's land. From Gəncə you can make marshrutka hops via **Ağstafa** (where there are three cheap but acceptable minihotels) and **Qazax**.

The latter is full of pretty parks and statues but plagued by suspicious cops, so you might be best advised to simply change marshrutkas at the bazaar and move on. There are several daily buses running to Krasny Most from Baku via Gəncə. Alternatively, you can make hops on very frequent marshrutkas from Gəncə.

SOUTHERN AZERBAIJAN

Southern Azerbaijan's coastal strip is the lush breadbasket of the country, where tea plantations line the roadsides and trees are heavy with citrus fruit. Inland, bucolic forested mountains offer tempting streamside getaways and plenty of hiking potential. The area is home to the hospitable Talysh people, famed for living to great ages. Using the overnight train to Lənkəran, a trip to the



south makes an easy escape from Baku or a pleasant stop en route to Iran.

MASALLI & AROUND

☎ 0151

Although less appealing than Lənkəran (opposite), **Masallı** offers an alternative gateway to the pretty Talysh mountains, thanks to the newly upgraded Masallı–Yardımlı road. En route are several woodland café-resorts overlooking attractive **Vilas Lake** (km10) and at nearby **İstisu**, a recently renovated **hot springs** minisanatorium crowded with slow-moving cure-seekers. Further towards Yardımlı there's an unusual **inflammable river** at **Yanardağ** (km15) and a seasonal two-level **waterfall** (şələlə; km27), which is one of Azerbaijan's more impressive. Little **Yardımlı** (km50) has a carpet factory and a pleasant backdrop of grassy hills split by a picturesque chasm, but isn't a major attraction in itself.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Masallı (☎ 53231; Heydar Əliyev pr; s/d AZN22/42; 🚰) Should you need to stay in Masallı itself, this Soviet-era building offers a mixed bag of mostly well-upgraded rooms. It's on the main road linking the central bazaar (500m) to the main Baku–Lənkəran highway (1.4km).

Golüstü Park (☎ 050 2206377; Yardımlı rd, km10; r AZN30-70; 🚰) The best value and best located of several places overlooking Vilas Lake, the well-maintained bungalows and cheaper pine-décor rooms share a good restaurant with wonderful balcony views.

Hotel Daştvənd (☎ 21230; fax 96002; Yardımlı rd, km5; s/d/cottage from AZN40/50/200; 🚰 🚰) The area's only real, modern hotel, the Daştvənd offers good-value, fully equipped rooms and a decent-sized indoor swimming pool with views towards the mountains. It needs to try hard, as its strange location around an artificial pond is back on the agricultural plains before the scenery starts getting interesting.

Yanardağ İstirahət Zonası (☎ 050 3255826; Yardımlı rd, km15; small/large cottage AZN30/40) Hidden in woodlands some way off the road the wooden hut-rooms here aren't especially well built but they're just a short stroll from the flammable river, ideal to see it at night when it's most photogenic. Restaurant attached.

A&E Hotel (☎ 0175 51246; Yardımlı Town; d/tr AZN40/40) Beside the Heydar Əliyev Museum on Yardımlı's main drag, this tiny four-room

hotel has attractive pastel-blue rooms with good bathrooms and sailor-striped towels.

Getting There & Away

Shared taxis and marshrutkas for Baku depart occasionally from Masallı's bus station, about 1km south of the bazaar/town centre. However, for both Baku and Lənkəran, it's generally quicker to flag down passing transport on the main road from the eastern end of Heydar Əliyev pr; it's an AZN1 taxi ride from town.

For Yardımlı, a few morning minibuses (AZN2, 1¼ hours) pick up at Masallı's central roundabout. Shared taxis (AZN3) leave from outside Aptek Nur in the nearby central bazaar.

However, to see the sights, consider renting a return taxi for around AZN25 including stops.

LƏNKƏRAN

☎ 0171 / pop 80,000

The biggest town in southern Azerbaijan, sleepy Lənkəran (Lenkoran) is famous for tea and abundant flowers. It has a certain docile charm and sections of seafront have some half-hearted charm, though hiding submerged Soviet detritus.

The town's heart and social centre stretches from beautifully manicured **Dosa Park** to the vaguely quaint train station around which half the town's male population seems to while away their evenings in open-air beer and tea gardens.

Information

Bank Standard (Otel Qala) Changes money; has ATM.

International Bank of Azerbaijan (Dosa Park) ATM.

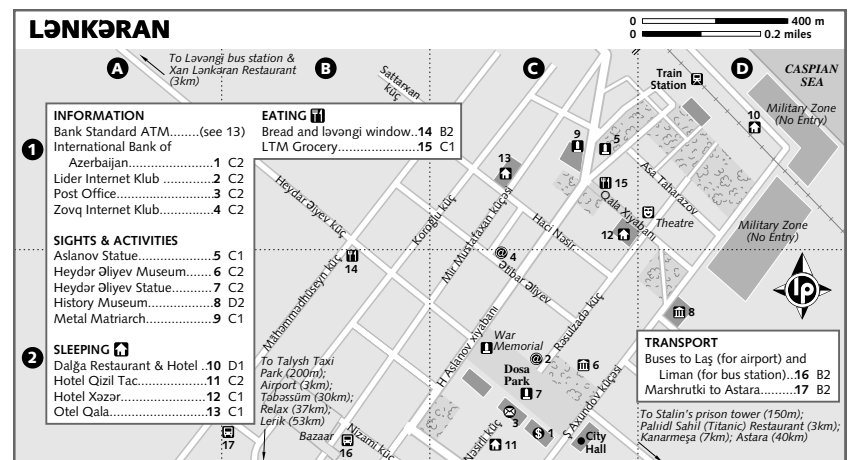
Lider Internet Klub (Rəsulzadə küç) Speeds are very variable.

Zovq Internet Klub (Etibar Əliyev küç 8)

Sights

The emblem of Lənkəran is a formidable **metal matriarch** bearing a cup of tea in one hand and a sword in the other. This metallic relief is similar in style to Tbilisi's Mother Georgia but on a much smaller scale and increasingly hidden by trees on the eastern wall of the local MUM department store. The town's dominant statues are to local WWII general **Hazi Aslanov**, beside an iconic lighthouse tower, and, of course, to **Heydar Əliyev**, who stands to attention in Dosa (Heydar Əliyev Memorial) Park. Strolling here amid all the fountains, minutely clipped shrubberies and newly mirror-glassed public buildings is especially surreal at dusk in summer, when lugubrious piped music is played from loudspeakers flanking the new, refreshingly air-conditioned **Heydar Əliyev Museum** (admission free; 🕒 8am-1pm & 2-5pm). The main attraction of the nearby **History Museum** (S Axundov küç; admission free; 🕒 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sun) is the building itself, a century-old brick mansion built in 'Scooby-Doo gothic' style. It looks great when illuminated at night.

Joseph Stalin was held prisoner in Lənkəran during his early revolutionary days. The sturdy brick-barrel of a **tower** in which he was incarcerated is now under renovation



with rumours that it might one day become a tongue-in-cheek Stalin-themed café. Well there's always hope.

Lənkəran's beaches can't be recommended for swimming due to chunks of concrete and ruined building parts that remain submerged since the rising Caspian swept away the former Soviet-era promenade. And part of it is off-limits for military use. Slightly nicer seafront areas (though still not really swimmable) are to be found near the Titanic restaurant (right) and at **Kanar-meşa**, where two vaguely attractive restaurant gardens overlook the waves.

Sleeping

CENTRAL

Dalğa Restaurant & Hotel (☎ 51769, 050 3409203; s/tw/tr AZN20/24/36) Five comfortably modern rooms with good air-con are ranged above the courtyard dining chambers of this comparatively upper-market restaurant. All have decent bathrooms with toothpaste and toiletries provided. The restaurant has an appealing trellis-garden section but bring mosquito repellent.

Hotel Qizil Tac (☎ 51664, 050 6171141; Nəsirli küç 2; tw with private/shared bathroom AZN50/30) There's no real reception or sign for this outwardly plush option just behind Dosa Park. Rooms appear well tended and modern, but the clocks have stopped and sheets arrive in Nescafe bags for you to make your own bed. Toilets lack paper (we were grudgingly given two sheets on request) and night staff disabled the air-conditioning ('it's not that hot tonight!') – all while persistently requesting beer money.

Hotel Xəzər (☎ 51663; Qala Xiyabani küç 11; s/tw/tr/q/ste AZN31/52/72/92/86) After years of renovation Lənkəran's most central hotel reopened in 2007. The lobby still gives a certain sense of bygone elegance while rooms are comparatively simple, if comfortable and modern, with decent bathrooms. Manager Anar speaks English.

Otel Qala (☎ 50284; fax 50288; Mirmustafaxan küç 22; s/d/tw/ste AZN41.10/52.20/72.20/122.20) A certain restrained elegance makes the Qala Lənkəran's best hotel with impeccable modern rooms, monogrammed towels and rugs spread over attractive terracotta floors. English is spoken but the place is often spookily empty, the lift doesn't work and the once-excellent restaurant has reduced its menu to a minimum.

TOWARDS LERIK

Several rural resorts are dotted along the Lerik–Lənkəran road.

Təbassüm (Map p284; ☎ 0157-56150; Lerik Rd km27; d/tr AZN40/50) Relatively simple but pine-fragrant huts with dining platforms and neat little shower-toilets set in an attractive stream gully.

Relax (Map p284 ☎ 0157 56068; www.relax.com.az/in dexen.htm; Lerik rd, km34; d/ste/cottage AZN95/130/140) The two-floor villas and stone-walled bungalows at Relax offer the most luxurious accommodation in the Talysh hills, right down to the monogrammed bathrobes. Activities include minigolf, table tennis, a children's play area and a 5km circuit of mossy-fenced woodland paths, but the pounding disco rather undermines its 'back-to-nature' image.

Eating

For great picnics buy hot bread (*isti çörək*) and chicken *ləvəngi* (stuffed with nut paste) from the unmarked window on the corner of H Əliyev küç and Məhəmməd Hüseyin küç.

There are several simple eateries and convivial teahouses near the train station and around pedestrianised Qala Xiyabani küç, where **LTM Grocery** (döner 70q; ☎ 9am-7pm) has a fast-food window.

Xan Lənkəran (☎ 51699; Ləvəngi Bus Station; kebabs AZN2; ☎ 8am-11pm; ☎) With wooden interior and thatched ceiling, this place is unexpectedly appealing for the location, and offers chicken *ləvəngi*, as well as cheap beers (50q) should you dare threaten your bladder before a bus trip.

Paliidl Sahil (☎ 055 7508618; Olympic Beach; kebabs AZN2.40) Commonly nicknamed Titanic, the main restaurant building is shaped like a concrete boat sailing towards the beach. Meals include a selection of rice dishes, there's a pleasant garden area, and bungalows (AZN50 to AZN100) are available if you can't face the 3km trip back into town.

With a car, an appealing alternative is to eat at any of the restaurants tucked away off the road to Lerik.

Getting There & Away

Lənkəran's airport is under reconstruction. Laş-bound minibuses pass by.

Ləvəngi bus station (Lənkəran bypass), 3km northwest of the centre, handles long-distance bus services. Baku-bound services leave at least hourly until 6pm, stopping

near Masallı en route. There's a Lerik mini-bus at 7.30am.

Local buses depart from around the bazaar. Take Laş buses for the airport, Liman buses for Ləvəngi bus station (20q, last around 4pm). Marshrutkas to Astara (AZN1) leave from Sabir küç, one block north. For Lerik, shared jeeps (AZN3) and charter taxis (AZN10 each way) depart from the **Talysh taxi park** (Koroğlu küç) west of the bazaar. Or flag down passing transport near the airport.

Two trains run to Baku, the seat-only 'express' at 4.59pm (AZN2.80, doesn't run Mondays) and the sleeper at 9.17pm (AZN2.60 *platskart*, AZN3.60 *kupe*, 8½ hours) arriving early next morning. Trains to Astara at 7.23am and 2.23pm (60q, one hour) offer a pleasant way to gaze at the Caspian.

AROUND LƏNKƏRAN

Lerik

☎ 0157 / pop 14,000

The Talysh Mountains are not as high nor as spectacular as the Caucasus but their attractive mix of forest, canyon and sheep-mown uplands makes the area a delightful place to hike, as long as you don't stray too close to the Iranian border. The hub of the mountain region is the overgrown village of Lerik. Even in summer Lerik is refreshingly cool, so remember to bring appropriate clothing. Along the pretty Lənkəran–Lerik road are many appealing teahouses and rest areas from which to take random strolls in some of Azerbaijan's most appealing mature forests.

Central Lerik is marked by a **bust of Heydar Əliyev** and an eerie **memorial** depicting the faces of the locals who gave their lives in the Karabakh conflict. Several delightful walks are possible by simply striding out of town in any direction. **Gussein Baba's** (☎ 54276; s/d/tr AZN6/10/15) is an unmarked little cafeteria-hotel with perfectly acceptable rooms sharing clean squat toilets and shower right in the middle of town. Find it by going up the hill to the right of the war memorial, passing the tiny **museum** (☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sun-Fri) and following the pathway immediately to the side of the Lerik Finance Committee (signposted in English).

Several morning minibuses run to Baku via Lənkəran (AZN7, six hours) from near the Kapital Bank (ATM available) in the valley 1km below and beyond central Lerik.

Hirkan National Park

☎ 0171

In 2004 a vast swathe of dense southern forest was declared the Hirkan National Park. The area is relatively impenetrable, with muddy 4WD tracks and horse trails the only way to get far into the delightful deciduous foliage. The park has a **visitor centre** (☎ 76266; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) on the Lənkəran–Astara road, where all visitors to the park are supposed to sign in and buy a ticket (local/foreigner AZN2/4 per day) entitling you to the services of a guide on one of 10 *marşrut* (routes). That's great if you're interested in local flora or fancy searching for leopard prints. However, no vehicles are available for hire and without one it's tough to access many of the trails' starting points. One comparatively accessible viewpoint is **Lake Xanbulan**, a modestly pretty woodland-ringed reservoir. Few locals seem to bother paying the park fee to picnic here, and there is no barrier gate, but occasional spot checks do occur.

Deputy Park Director **Haji** (☎ 050 6871009) speaks English and can help arrange AZN10 homestays in nearby Hirkan village. Alternatively, there are reasonably pleasant cottages attached to the **Xanbulan Restaurant** (☎ 57190; meals AZN6, bungalow AZN40), 2km off the Lənkəran–Astara road along the access road to Lake Xanbulan.

ASTARA

☎ 0195 / pop 25,000

Astara has one of Azerbaijan's nicer beaches, but being a border town you'd be unwise to linger too long here and there's little else to do except cross the **border** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm, variable) to Iran. Note that midrange hotels in Azerbaijani Astara are generally better value than the equivalents in Iran's namesake town.

If you're arriving from Iran as a pedestrian you emerge through an oddly unmarked metal doorway into a nest of waiting taxi drivers. Contrary to their assertions, it is very easy to walk to the central square (less than 10 minutes, straight ahead up Heydar Əliyev küç). Close to the square, Kapital Bank has an ATM that accepts international cards and you can change money on the Iranian side.

Sleeping & Eating

There's an unnamed, entirely unappealing crash-pad **hotel** (tw AZN6) right at the pedestrian

border post. Squat toilets and cold tap are shared.

Hotel Xəzər (☎ 53530; Azərbaycan küç; tw AZN10) One short block west of the central square, this clean new place offers bright no-nonsense rooms with shared (but very well-maintained) bathroom.

Hotel Şindan (☎ 34177; fax 34188; H Əliyev pr 11; s/d/ste AZN30/50/70; 📶) Astara's best hotel, this appealing and great-value new midrange option is less than 10 minutes' stroll straight up the main street from the Iranian border crossing. It has immaculate international-standard rooms with marble sinks, good bathrooms and desk-units hiding a minibar. There's a fitness centre (extra fee) and a congenial beer garden.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses to Lankaran (AZN1, 45 minutes) and night buses to Baku depart from the north end of the central square, two minutes' walk north of Hotel Şindan. A taxi shouldn't cost more than AZN10, including a stop at Yanar Bulağ, though drivers at the border post want twice that amount. Remember to double-check if they're demanding Manats or Shirvans (see Money, p297).

Day buses to Baku depart from a bus stand 2km north of centre. The inconveniently located train station is an AZN3 taxi ride up the coast.

AROUND ASTARA

Yanar Bulağ

If you're in Astara, don't miss the curious **Yanar Bulağ** ('burning spring'), in nearby Ərçivan village. Here, spring water gurgling from a metal stand-pipe is impregnated with methane. Put a lighter to it and it burns, giving a magical little display of the wet and the warm. It's shaded by a modest brick-domed pavilion, right beside the Lankaran-Astara road, 6km north of central Astara. The water's flammability is secondary to its remedial properties for locals, who collect it by the gallon and seem bemused by visitors' flaming antics.

NAXÇIVAN

This cradle of Azeri culture and history is now a disconnected lozenge of Azerbaijan wedged uncomfortably between hostile Armenia and indifferent Iran. It's kept going

economically thanks to a tiny border with Turkey and numerous subsidised flights from Baku. Historical monuments and intriguing oasis villages are dotted about a fascinating landscape of deserts and melon fields rimmed dramatically by craggy barren mountains.

But visiting requires resourcefulness and imagination. Western visitors are an extreme novelty and even Russian speakers are comparatively rare. While much of the population is extravagantly hospitable, officials beyond Naxçıvan City tend to regard lone travellers with a deep suspicion bordering on aggression.

Transiting Naxçıvan would make an interesting alternative route when crossing between Turkey and Iran. However, if you're coming from the rest of Azerbaijan you'll need to fly.

HISTORY

Legend claims that Naxçıvan was founded by none other than Noah. The biblical ark supposedly crashed through the then-submerged crest of İlandağ (see p293) before landing on nearby Ararat (Mt Ağrı, Turkey), whose twin cones loom powerfully above the western tip of the enclave. In the 12th century Naxçıvan was one of three capitals of the Atabey dynasty, which controlled much of western Persia. Throughout medieval times it flourished as an important centre of trade, emerging as an independent khanate in the 18th century. Like many Azeri khanates, Naxçıvan was sucked into the Russian Empire following a series of Russo-Persian wars, sealed by the 1828 treaty of Turkmenchay.

When Azerbaijan was briefly independent from 1918 to 1920, it stretched from Baku to Naxçıvan. However, in the early Soviet era that followed, Lenin's divide-and-rule policies gave Armenia the province of Zangezur, thus isolating Naxçıvan from the rest of Azerbaijan. In 1924 Naxçıvan was declared an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

In January 1990, as the Soviet Union began to crack, Naxçıvan became the first part of the Soviet Union to formally declare independence, beating Lithuania by a matter of weeks. It didn't last. Naxçıvan soon rejoined the rest of Azerbaijan and remains an integral (if dislocated) part of the nation.

NAXÇIVAN CITY

☎ 0136 / pop 63,200

Occupying a low plateau overlooking the Araz Su Reservoir, this pleasant provincial town offers wide, if distant, panoramas

DON'T MENTION ARMENIA

Given the unconcluded war, it's perfectly understandable that Azeri officials are a little edgy about visitors nosing about in border areas. However, in parts of Naxçıvan, many officials treat visitors with quite unguarded hostility. Expressing the merest interest in medieval church sites or any other historical monuments built by the now-vanished Armenian community is likely to land you in hot water. It appears that most such sites have themselves 'disappeared' (see <http://forum.openarmenia.com/index.php?showtopic=8751>) and some straight-faced officials farcically claim that there 'never were any Armenians here'. Police watch travellers closely, will probably interview your taxi driver and might check your bags for 'pro-Armenian' material. Comically enough, during questioning, a popular technique is to bark at you in Armenian to see if you understand it, as though speaking Armenian was a crime.

towards Iran and Mt Ararat from its soothingly shady parks. Despite a rash of shiny new buildings on its long main streets, the atmosphere is one of sleepy torpor, as the incredible summer heat renders most activities beyond playing nard and drinking tea out of the question.

Information

There are currency exchanges and ATMs throughout the town, notably at the bazaar and the Ticaret Mərkəzi Gənclik. The main post office is under reconstruction. For details of the Iranian and Turkish consulates here, see p295.

Aliheydar Paşayev (☎ 050 5672506; www.natiglic.eu.net) This urbane and well-connected translator, guide and travel fixer is passionate about Naxçıvan, speaks decent English and can miraculously help his guests get aboard seemingly full flights back to Baku.

Bilan Kompüter (Atatürk küç; per hr 60q; ☎ 9.30am-midnight) Decent internet connection.

Sights

MÖMİNƏ XATUN

The impressive **Möminə Xatun mausoleum** (☎ 458039; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun) is Naxçıvan's icon and one of Azerbaijan's best-known landmarks. It's a glorious, gently leaning 26m brick tower decorated with geometric patterns and Kufic script (a stylised, angular form of Arabic) picked out in turquoise glaze.

Located in the park of the same name, the mausoleum dates from 1186 and entombs the founder of the Atabey dynasty, Shemseddin Eldeniz, along with his beloved wife, for whom the monument is named. The graves themselves were removed to St Petersburg during the 1950s, but the hollow interior features a small exhibition of relevant photos

and drawings, including images of the minaret-gate and historic Cümə mosque that survived beside the mausoleum until the 19th century.

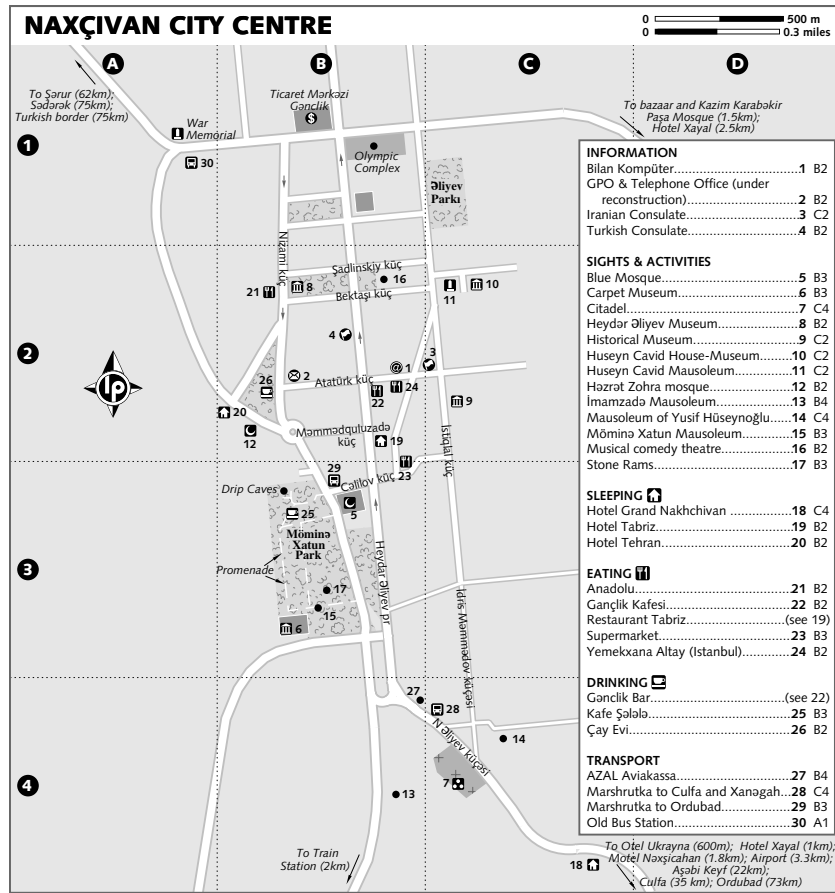
AROUND MÖMİNƏ XATUN

Close to Möminə Xatun is a paved, open-air 'museum' of historic **stone rams** and grave markers plus a **promenade** offering views down over the lower town with Mt Ararat visible on an exceptionally clear day. The promenade culminates in a formal garden containing the **Carpet Museum** (☎ 447720; Möminə Xatun Park; admission 50q; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun), housed in the rebuilt palace of Ehsan Khan, Naxçıvan's 18th-century monarch. Despite the *şəbəkə* windows and attractive exterior porches, the building isn't quite as impressive as Şəki's equivalent (p275). Nonetheless the rug displays are well chosen if you want to learn the difference between a kilim and a *sumax* or *palaz*, or to recognise the four main styles of Azeri carpet making. The ghoulish centrepiece is a totally non-ironic silk-wool carpet portrait of a young Heydar Əliyev, replete with Soviet medals. Two side rooms relate to the history of the Naxçıvan khanate, replicate the khan's cushion-throne and gratuitously add photos of Yerevan (now the Armenian capital) to remind visitors that that was once a Turkic khanate too.

The red-brick **Blue Mosque** (Nizami küç) isn't very blue at all but makes a useful landmark when approaching the Möminə Xatun area by marshrutka.

OTHER SIGHTS

The khans who once ruled from the Carpet Museum were buried in a squat, rather over-restored brick tomb complex with a simple blue-glaze dome. Known simply as the



İmamzadə, it's below a graveyard on what were once the city's **citadel** walls. Access is from the road to the train station (marshrutka 2 from Nizami küç).

Hidden in Naxçıvan back streets are a couple of medieval pointed tomb-towers in an octagonal form common throughout eastern Anatolia. The best known is the 1162 **Mausoleum of Yusif Hüseynoğlu**, by the same architect as the Möminə Xatun tower.

The grandly rebuilt **Heydər Əliyev Museum** (admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) is a veritable modern palace of shiny marble. It's somewhat more interesting than other such hagiographic shrines elsewhere in Azerbaijan if only because Naxçıvan was Heydər's home region. Across the manicured square, Naxçıvan's

musical comedy theatre is an archetype of provincial Soviet classicism. Behind lies the striking, if modern, white marble **mausoleum of Hüseyn Cavid** and Cavid's sweet little wooden **house-museum** (☎ 452726; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm), where the writer once lived, long before being infamously deported to Siberia. If you have time to kill, the **Historical Museum** (Dövlət Tarix Muzeyi; ☎ 450136; admission AZN1; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm) is attractively presented, if fairly standard.

The town's biggest mosques are modern affairs. Built in pallid yellow brick the **Həzrət Zohra mosque** (İslam Səfərlil küç) sports twin, rectilinear minarets and a metal-clad dome looking more like a lagged boiler tank. It's nicknamed the 'Iranian mosque', as it was funded by Naxçıvan's southern neighbour.

Not to be outdone, Turks stumped up money to build the impressive **Kazim Karabəkir Paşa Mosque** behind the bazaar. This grandly domed stone edifice has elegant missile-style twin minarets and splendid gilt inscriptions on the white marble doorway. However, if you're coming from Turkey you're likely to have seen dozens of similar structures.

Sleeping

For many years several of Naxçıvan's hotels were squarely aimed at weekend Iranian men in search of booze and (relative) sexual openness. However, a recent zero-tolerance crackdown on prostitution has left hotels with very low occupancy, so rates are cheap compared with Baku.

Hotel Tehran (☎ 050 6228285; İslam Səfərlil küç 11; s/tw from AZN8/8) Like an Iranian *mosafərkhaneh* (lodging house or cheap hotel), waterless box-rooms are crammed around a very narrow courtyard sharing passably clean squat toilets. Rooms in the rear are windowless but slightly neater, and some singles at AZN12 have simple private bathrooms. The owner seems friendly and speaks passable Russian, but this wouldn't be a place for single women.

Hotel Xayal (☎ 445915; s/d/stw AZN10/20/30; ☎) Despite some peeling paint, this 1990s suburban building offers by far the best budget deal in Naxçıvan. The 12 rooms are large and bright, sporting passable air-conditioning. En suite bathrooms have Western loos, piping-hot showers and clean towels. The challenge is finding it. Take marshrutka 2 or 3 to where either turns 270 degrees at a big Koroglu statue in a roundabout halfway to the airport. Walk 50m towards the bazaar from there then take the first improbable back lane to the right beside a grotty Soviet apartment block. After the Xayal wedding hall, the hotel is the three-storey pink building through gates to the left. It looks a bit like a grain elevator.

Otel Ukrayna (☎ 455383; Tusi pr; tw with/without air-con AZN28/24, tr AZN30; ☎) Should the Xayal be full, this ageing peach-coloured establishment would make a passable standby. The large, if slightly shabby, upper-floor air-con rooms have fridges and acceptable bathrooms. However, the ground-floor triple rooms are overpriced (without air-con or bathroom). Corridors are a little gloomy and the faded alpine scenes that cover the landing walls give a maudlin feel to the place. Marshrutkas 2, 3 and airport-bound

6 pass the gates, from which the hotel is set back 100m.

Hotel Grand Nakhchivan (☎ 445930; fax 445932; N Əliyev küç 1; tw/stw AZN50/100; ☎) Built in 2002, the Grand does indeed look pretty grand from the outside. The tidy modern rooms are quite stylish, and are bigger and brighter than those at the Tabriz. However, hot water can be temperamental, some bathtubs are very stained and the lift has been out of order for years. Don't count on English-speaking assistance.

Hotel Tabriz (Mehmanxana Tabriz; ☎ 447701; www.tebrizhotel.com; s/d/tr/stw US\$50/75/100/150; ☎) With its shiny blue-glass make-over, liveried doorman and English-speaking receptionists, this 13-storey tower is once again Naxçıvan's top accommodation address. Rooms aren't huge but offer full Western-style amenities, including a closable shower-booth in the sparkling-clean bathrooms. The location is brilliantly central, too.

Motel Nəxçivan (☎ 441441; d AZN70; ☎) This rather plush stone-clad motel is tucked behind a lonely riverside restaurant-wedding palace whose pleasant willow gardens are the main attraction. Rooms are presentable and vaguely stylish, despite the leopard-print duvets. The location is somewhat awkward, though southbound bus 6 passes by. Breakfast is included but neither English nor Russian are reliably spoken.

Eating

Restaurant Tabriz (13th fl, Hotel Tabriz; ☎ 447701; mains AZN2-8; ☎) Potentially spectacular views are bizarrely hidden behind opaque lace curtains in what's surely the best restaurant in town, though it's still nothing very fancy. Uniquely there's a menu (partly in English) with pseudo-Western choices including a rather dry, if tasty, meat-chunk spaghetti mapolitan (sic; AZN2), ideally accompanied by a side order of *haydari* (AZN1), a deliciously smoky aubergine 'salad' in garlic-yogurt sauce. Beers (from AZN1.50), wines and spirits are available.

Gənclik Kafesi (Heydər Əliyev pr; dishes AZN1.20-2) Like most decent restaurants in Naxçıvan the cavernous Gənclik offers point-and-pick pre-cooked Turkish dishes, though there's also a salad-bar, of sorts. Staff are friendly and women do venture in (usually chaperoned, of course) but there's little atmosphere. Mirrored glass misleadingly makes it appear permanently closed. No alcohol.

Other slightly cosier but more male-dominated Turkish restaurants include the friendly **Yeməlxana Altay** (Istanbul Restaurant; ☎ 451762; Atatürk küç; dishes AZN1-2) and the essentially similar **Anadolu** (Nizami küç; dishes AZN1-2).

Drinking

Local men have a great choice of *çayxanas* to while away those summer days in shady parks. One of the nicest, simply called **Çay Evi** (tea house; per pot tea 60q), sits amid trees that also hide the chess school and philharmonia. For women wanting a teahouse experience without eliciting endless attention the best bet is **Kafe Şələlə** (per pot tea AZN1), where tables are ranged up an amphitheatre of paved terraces around an artificial waterfall. However, beware that the jams or pickled walnuts that arrive in lieu of sugar will each cost a whopping AZN3 extra.

Naxçıvan is one of the driest areas of Azerbaijan in both senses: relatively few restaurants or cafés serve alcohol. However there are several *pivə* bars (beer bars) where you can drink refreshingly weak Naxçıvan or NZS beers at 60q a pint. There's also a spacious subterranean cavern-bar beneath the **Gəndlik Kafesi** (Efes beer AZN1.20); enter from the side. Single women are likely to feel pretty uncomfortable at any of these places but can drink in comparative peace at the Restaurant Tabriz.

Getting There & Away

AIR

AZAL operates at least five flights a day between Baku and Naxçıvan (55 minutes) on tatty Tupolev 154s. Additional flights are organised during busy periods but demand can still outstrip supply and it's not unknown to wait a week for a seat to become available, unless you have a well-connected helper. Tickets are only sold from the relevant AZAL *aviakassa* (office) or from booths at the airports. These seem to open and close at whim. Round-trip tickets don't exist.

The one-way foreigner fare (US\$100) seems reasonable enough till you realise that locals pay just AZN16. A cheaper Naxçıvan–Gəncə flight (US\$50) is timetabled thrice weekly. However, at peak times these might be randomly cancelled to provide more planes for the overloaded Baku run. UT Air operates weekly, summer-only flights directly to Moscow.

BUS

Remarkably, six buses a day run from Naxçıvan all the way to Istanbul, Turkey (AZN38, 26 hours) via İğdır (AZN4, five hours). Most start from the airport then pick up passengers at the decrepit old bus station between 8am and 10am. Advance booking is rarely required. Crossing the Azeri–Turkish border the bus takes around 2½ hours, so some İğdır-bound passengers save an hour by taking shared taxis to the border (around AZN5, including crossing no-man's land). However, this can be confusing and a little daunting if you don't speak local languages.

Naxçıvan–Baku buses run at periods of peak demand via Iran but getting the visas (Iranian and Azerbaijan re-entry) will cost vastly more than the fare.

For Ordubad, minibuses (AZN2, 80 minutes) leave roughly hourly in the mornings from beside the Blue Mosque, and then again at 5pm. Shared taxis (AZN3, one hour) are occasionally available.

Marshrutkas for Culfa (AZN1, 40 minutes) and very irregular *raff* (minibuses) to Xanəgah leave from a roadside lay-by just beyond the *aviakassa*.

TRAIN

Naxçıvan's railway links to Baku and Moscow haven't worked for well over a decade. The tracks through Armenia and Armenian-occupied territories have been partially torn up so even if peace were to miraculously break out there wouldn't be a rail service ready to run. Two domestic trains from Naxçıvan City both depart at 3am and return next morning. One goes to Şəhrur. The other goes to Ordubad (3½ hours) traversing some superb canyon scenery directly northwest of Culfa. However both routes skirt right alongside the sensitive Iranian border so tourists taking any train can expect to be bombarded with questions and might endure a full-scale interrogation.

Getting Around

Taxis charge AZN1 per hop in town, AZN2 at night or to the airport (4km). A pretty comprehensive bus/marshrutka network operates till around 8.30pm but don't expect any service to return the way it came. All cost 20q per trip. Useful route 6 links the bus station to the airport via the Turkish consulate, blue mosque and Koroğlu statue, returning via the

bazaar. More frequent route 3 circles from the Olympic Complex round to the bazaar and Xayal Hotel, looping back past the Ukrayna and Grand Nakhchivan hotels to the Culfa bus stand, then side-stepping a block and returning via İnqilab küç. Route 2 does essentially the same thing in reverse albeit transiting the centre on Nizami küç instead of İstiqial and adding a diversion to the train station.

NAXÇIVAN CITY TO ORDUBAD

The drive to Ordubad takes you past some of Naxçıvan's most memorable scenery. Several abrupt crags rise powerfully in the middle distance and once you're past Culfa, sections of painted desert sprout lion-paw ridges and red-rock mesas. In between lie just a handful of surreally green oasis villages.

Aşəbi Keyf

Contrasting with the thrusting masculinity of Beşbarmaq Dağ (p261), the womblike rocky folds of Aşəbi Keyf are decidedly feminine. But both reveal an interestingly animist side to Azeri Islam. A series of overneat restaurant terraces lead up to a cleft cliff that gives something of the feeling of entering Petra (Jordan), albeit on a much smaller scale and without the carvings. Steps lead through the cleft and past a blackened minicave that was once the abode of seven legendary holy men. Quite how they all managed to fit in it is as miraculous as their mythical 309-year sleep. More stairs lead up to somewhat bigger caves, passing a prayer area and two minishrines, one of which displays a tooth-shaped holy rock on a wooden stand. Some devotees puff their way to the top of a metal-ladder stairway to make miniature prayer cairns at the top.

Allow at least half an hour up and back from the car park which is 14km northwest of the Ordubad road. The turning is 8km southeast of Naxçıvan City, from which taxis want AZN10 return.

İlandağ

Like a gigantic eroded tombstone, the rocky 2415m peak of İlandağ (Snake Mountain) stands out as the most distinctive natural feature in Naxçıvan. It's clearly visible from Naxçıvan City almost 30km away. Legend has it that the cleft in the summit was created by the keel of Noah's Ark as the floodwaters abated.

On a separate rocky outcrop above the village of Xanəgah are the remains of the 7th-century Alınca Fortress. A two-hour climb, which involves some steep scrambling, leads through the scant ruins to the summit but you don't need to go all the way up for the magnificent views of İlandağ, which are the main reward.

Culfa

☎ 0136

Unless you're crossing the Iranian border, it's unwise to stop in Culfa. This lacklustre settlement was founded in 1848, 3km southeast of the windswept site of Ancient Jolfa (Cuğa). Ancient Jolfa had been a thriving cultural centre for centuries. However in 1604 Persian Shah Abbas sacked the town and ruthlessly exported its talented Armenian craftsmen to build his glorious new capital at Esfahan. The Armenian quarter of Esfahan is still known as 'New Jolfa'. Today the lumpy remnants of ancient Jolfa include a ruined bridge and the **Gülüstan Türbə**, a beautifully embellished mausoleum stump that features heavily in Azerbaijan's tourist literature. Yet ironically, the easiest way to see this is from across the Araz River on the Iranian side. It's easily visible while driving to beautiful St Stephanos Church. Visiting on the Azeri side, however, or even snooping around Culfa is liable to get you a lengthy interrogation or worse. Culfa's bureaucrats love to pontificate on the area's 'strategic' sensitivity (ie proximity to the Iranian border). But their needlessly paranoid attitude seems to give credence to reports that Cuğa's once-magnificent ancient Armenian cemetery has been desecrated (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khachkar_destruction_in_Nakhchivan). Until the 1980s it had featured thousands of fabulous *khatchkars* (medieval headstones).

Ordubad

☎ 0136

Little Ordubad was once the seat of a sultanate but today it lies in a rather forgotten corner of the Zangezur Mountains, trapped between closed Armenian borders and an unbridged stretch of the Araz River. However, this isolation has preserved it as a charming backwater oasis, where houses sit in lush wooded compounds behind timeless mud walls. Minibuses from Naxçıvan City terminate outside the town's interesting **museum** (Heydar Əliyev pr 18;

admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) housed in an 18th-century domed building that has been used variously as a silk shop, restaurant and *zurkhaneh* ('house of strength' – for the practice of a unique Iranian sport based on sufi philosophy). If you feign ignorance of Russian maybe the museum's superkeen curator won't force you to peruse the books he's written to celebrate Ordubad's 'celebrity' citizens.

Across the road, the **Cümə Mosque** started life as the office of Hatəmbek Ordubadi, the 17th-century vizier of Shah Abbas. It still looks more like a khan's palace than a place of worship. Interesting old photos in the museum show its Soviet-era form, when the arched porches were filled with silver communist statuary and the roof was Russified with a Kremlin-style spire (since removed).

There are several other old **mosques** and attractive alleys to explore but be careful where you point your camera, as virtually any landscape will include a bit of sensitive border and police are quick to smell 'spies'.

The mountains of Ordubad National Park contain many fascinating petroglyphs but getting there is effectively impossible. Ordubad's hotel has closed but the town is easy to visit as a day trip from Naxçıvan City. Marshrutkas back (last around 5pm) leave from beside a *çayxana* beautifully shaded by ancient plane trees (*çinar*). For lunch there are a couple of kebab-grill cafés but for a better lunchtime selection head for the very unexotic *yeməxana* down totally unmarked steps at the rear of the town hall (the new building directly south of the Cümə Mosque).

NAXÇIVAN CITY TO TURKEY

The drive to Turkey is slightly less picturesque than that to Ordubad, but the looming approach of **Mt Ağrı** (Ararat) gives a constantly mesmerising focus when visibility allows. Around 7km out of Naxçıvan City a spur road leads up to **Duzdağ** where sanatorium patients come in the evenings to sleep in the asthma-reducing environment of a disused salt mine. It's not open to visitors, but the mountain's candy-striped pink and white contours are very attractive viewed from the road a couple of kilometres later. Around 35km from Naxçıvan City, a 5km spur road leads to **Qarabağlar**, where a famous 14th-century tower, crusted with blue glaze-work, entombs a wife of the great Mongol-Persian ruler Hulugu Khan.

The **Sədərək border** (☎ 10.30am-2am Azerbaijan time, 8.30am-midnight Turkish time) takes a de facto lunch break around 2pm once most west-bound buses have passed through. Turkish visas are available on arrival here for most Western nationalities but oddly not for Brits.

AZERBAIJAN DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

The past five years have seen an astonishing transformation in Azerbaijan's accommodation scene. Many old Soviet hotels have closed or been totally rebuilt, though a few decaying remnants remain as a grimy reminder of the past and as a comparatively cheap boon to budget travellers.

Rural homestays (typically AZN10) are still a relatively new idea but are slowly spreading. Although unevenly spread, there are now many rural resorts known as *istrahət zonası* (rest zones), most offering 'Finnish'-style wooden cottages with en suite bathroom. These are often big enough to sleep a family and typically huddle in woodland clearings and stream sides. The simplest will usually cost just under AZN50 and some flashier resorts can cost up to AZN200, though price isn't always a fair guide to quality.

Several provincial towns have at least one *mehmanxana* (new or rebuilt hotel) that has acceptable lower-midrange value. In Baku there's a vastly wider selection, but finding an en suite room for under AZN60 can be a challenge. Even relatively simple Baku hotels often charge over US\$100 a night. Only a few of Baku's numerous new 'boutique' hotels are as stylish as their adverts imply.

BOOKS

Trailblazer's *Azerbaijan with Excursions to Georgia* by Mark Elliott is regarded as a classic handbook to the country. Visitors passing through or just spending a week in Azerbaijan may find its size overwhelming, but the author's zeal for all things Azeri makes it an encyclopaedia as much as a travel guide and it is a must-have among the Baku expat community.

Kurban Said's *Ali and Nino* is a fantastic introduction to the whole Caucasus – the story of a love affair of a young Azeri Muslim and a Georgian Christian princess

set in Baku on the eve of WWI, it's a wonderfully atmospheric tale of the city at an age of immense change and modernisation, and an interesting examination of the clash between Europe and Asia on a human scale.

Thomas Goltz's *Azerbaijan Diary* offers a fascinating first-hand insight into the complex politics of the war-torn 1990s but be sure to read Thomas de Waal's *Black Garden* first.

BUSINESS HOURS

As a general guide, offices work 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday, but late starts and long lunches are not uncommon. Most shops operate seven days a week, opening around 10am and closing after 7pm. Bazaars tend to be mainly morning affairs. Restaurants in Baku typically function from 11am to around 11pm but outside Baku opening hours don't necessarily exist and are more dependent on the number of people visiting the establishment.

CUSTOMS REGULATIONS

The once-notorious Azeri customs are relatively professional these days... at least with Westerners. Customs forms are rarely needed, though you should fill one in if you plan to import and later re-export over US\$1000 in cash. Taking carpets, artefacts or artworks out of the country is awkward, as you'll need written permission from the Ministry of Culture. The export limit for caviar changes every year. It's currently 200g per person.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Apart from the sometimes-terrifying driving, Azerbaijan is generally a very safe country. You're more likely to encounter hospitality than crime. However, that hospitality is tempered with a certain intrusive inquisitiveness, which can become tiresome. Lone travellers are especially likely to raise questions in local minds. Police in small, out-of-the-way places seem to imagine any outsider to be a potential spy.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Addresses of Azeri embassies abroad are listed in the 'useful information' section of www.tourism.az.

Embassies and consulates, all in Baku unless stated, include:

China (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4974558; Xaqani küç 67; ☎ 10-11.30am Mon & Thu)

France (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4931286; www.ambafrance-az.org; Rəsul Rza küç 7)

Georgia (Map p238; ☎ 4974558; Suleyman Dadaşev küç 29, Baku) Marshrutka 177.

Germany (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4654100; www.baku.diplo.de; 10th fl, ISR Plaza)

Iran Consulate (Map p238; ☎ 4980766; www.iranembassy.az; Cəfər Cəbbarlı küç 44) Consulate (☎ 0136 50343; Atatürk küç 13, Naxçıvan; ☎ 10.30am-noon Mon-Thu)

Kazakhstan (Map p238; ☎ 4656248; Ak Həsən Əliyev [İgilab] küç 82; ☎ 9.30-11.30am Mon-Fri) Walking distance west from Gənclik metro. Visa takes one day.

Russia (Map p238; ☎ 4986016; Bakixanov küç 17; ☎ 10am-1pm Tue & Thu)

Turkey Consular section (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4988133; Xaqani küç 27; ☎ 9.30-11.30am Mon-Fri) Consulate (☎ 0136 57330; Heydər Əliyev pr 17, Naxçıvan)

Turkmenistan Closed in 2001, expected to reopen in 2008.

UK (Map pp240-1; ☎ 4975188/89/90; www.britishembassy.gov.uk/azerbaijan; Landmark Bldg, Xaqani küç 45A) Represents Commonwealth citizens.

USA (Map p238; ☎ 4980335; <http://azerbaijan.usembassy.gov>; Azadlıq pr 83)

Uzbekistan (Map p238; ☎ 4972549; Badamdar Şosesi, 9th Lane, 437) Take marshrutka 3 from behind Bakı Soveti metro. Infuriatingly the US\$75 visa fee must be paid into the central IBA bank, Nizami küç.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Religious Festivals

Those holidays that are calculated according to the Islamic lunar calendar occur about 10 or 11 days earlier each Western year. Exact dates must be locally pronounced by Muslim clerics based on moon sightings, but 'predicted' dates are:

Aşura This Shiite holy day commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, at the AD 680 battle of Karbala. In Iran this solemn occasion is widely marked by processions of men dressed in black flagellating themselves with metal flails. However in Azerbaijan religious fervour is much less marked so only in Muslim hot spots like Nardaran (p259) are you likely to see any such displays. Local Muslim leaders suggest that devotees give blood instead.

Noruz Bayramı (New Year Festival) Marks the return of spring and the start of the New Year, according to the Persian solar calendar. Azerbaijan's biggest celebration, it culminates on the spring equinox (night of 20 to 21 March) but related festivities stretch for a week or more either side of this date. Traditions associated with Noruz Bayramı include spring-cleaning the house, growing wheat and barley sprouts, preparing special rice dishes, and cleansing the spirit by jumping over bonfires on the last Tuesday night before Noruz.

RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL DATES

Year	Aşura	Noruz	Ramazan	Gurban Bayramı
2008	19 Jan	21 Mar	1-29 Sep	8 Dec
2009	10 Jan	21 Mar	21 Aug-19 Sep	27 Nov
2010	1 Jan	21 Mar	11 Aug-8 Sep	16 Nov
2011	22 Dec	21 Mar	1-29 Aug	6 Nov

Ramazan During the Islamic month of Ramazan (Ramadan), many Muslims refrain from eating, drinking and smoking during the hours of daylight. The *orucdaq* (fast) is not very strictly observed throughout Azerbaijan, but many people will fast for at least part of the month.

Ramazan Bayram The day after Ramazan, it is a holiday involving widespread feasting.

Gurban Bayramı (Festival of Sacrifice) Held 11 days before Muslim New Year, commemorates Abraham's test of faith on Mt Moriah, when God ordered him to sacrifice his son Isaac. People visit family and friends, and the head of the household traditionally slaughters a sheep, which forms the basis of a grand feast.

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day 1 January

Martyrs' Day 20 January (commemorating the massacre of Baku civilians by Soviet troops in 1990); this is not a holiday but a national day of mourning

Xocal Day 26 February (remembering the massacre of Azeris in Xocal in 1992); national day of mourning

International Women's Day 8 March (not a day off but widely celebrated)

Noruz Bayramı 20-21 March

Republic Day 28 May (founding of first Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918)

National Salvation Day 15 June (parliament asked Heydar Əliyev to lead the country in 1993)

Armed Forces Day 26 June (founding of Azerbaijan's army in 1918)

Ramazan Bayram (above)

National Independence Day 18 October (date of Azerbaijan's breakaway from the USSR)

Constitution Day 12 November (framing of constitution in 1995)

National Revival Day 17 November (first anti-Soviet uprising in 1988)

Gurban Bayramı (above)

Solidarity Day 31 December (breaking down of border fences between Azerbaijan and Iran in 1989)

INTERNET RESOURCES

See also Media (right).

Az.az (www.azerbaijan.az) Extensive official site including links to various personal sites of the Əliyevs.

Azerbaijan International (Map p242; ☎ 02 4928701; www.azer.com; İstiqlaliyyət Gəngə 5, Baku) Splendid magazine and website with extremely comprehensive archive of cultural articles and resources.

London Azerbaijan Society (<http://karabakh.co.uk>) Spells out Azerbaijan's claims to Karabakh. Other more rabidly anti-Armenian sites include www.khojaly.net.

MAPS

The best commercially available map of Azerbaijan is a 1:500,000 topographic sheet (Ümumcoğrafi Məlumat Xəritəsi) sold in better Baku bookshops. It is fairly comprehensive, although not quite all roads are recently updated. More detailed 1:100,000 maps exist but are considered 'secret'. Soviet-era versions available on the web tend to be hopelessly outdated and carrying them could get you into trouble. Any map showing Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent country might also be confiscated by police if found.

While good city maps exist for Baku, for other towns they're virtually impossible to find.

MEDIA

The Azeri press is the least free of the Caucasian countries and has been further pummelled in recent years. Several non-government publications have been closed, sometimes using the ruse of closing their offices for 'safety' reasons. The assassination of leading independent journalist Elmar Huseynov in 2005 hardly helped. Read more on Amnesty International's site <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGEUR550032007>.

ANS (www.anspress.com) and AzerNews (www.azernews.az) offer regular online news reports with English versions more frequently updated than on Day.az (www.tod.az).

Magazines

The venerable *Azerbaijan International* (www.azer.com) deals with all things Azeri in detailed themes and maintains magnificent

cultural websites. *Azerbaijan Today* (www.azerbaijantoday.az) looks mostly at economic issues through long interview pieces. *InBaku* (<http://inbakumagazine.com>) is a glossy vanity mag photographing expats at play.

Newspapers

A boon for the large foreign community in Baku is the wide choice of free English-language newspapers available through restaurants and hotels, though most are merely platforms for (useful) advertisements of services and restaurants. Some are written in an impenetrable, propagandist English which is almost comical to decipher. *CBN Extra* (www.cbnextra.com) and *Baku Sun* (www.bakusun.az) combine tabloid headlines with occasional nuggets of serious news.

TV

As part of the nation's ongoing Azerification, once-popular Russian-language channels have been dropped from the terrestrial TV network. However, cable and satellite TV is increasingly available, particularly in better hotels. These offer a vast choice, predominantly Turkish and Russian options but also BBC World, CNN and other Anglophone options.

MONEY

Costs

Baku is in the throes of a major oil boom, meaning that many prices seem inflated and poor value in comparison with those in neighbouring countries. This extends to places where Bakuvians take their weekends, but out in the more distant provinces prices are contrastingly very inexpensive.

Currency

Azerbaijan's national currency was revalued in 2006 by a factor of 5000. Azerbaijan's new Manat (AZN1) is divided into 100 qəpiq (100q) and is worth somewhere between a US dollar and a euro. Confusingly, many locals still quote prices in old Manat, frequently using the former nicknames 'Shirvan' (10,000 old Manat, ie AZN2) and

Məmməd (1000 old Manat, ie 20q). Especially outside Baku, if someone quotes a price without a unit (eg simply '3'), that's likely to mean three Shirvan, ie AZN6. Contrary to backpacker instincts this is not a scam.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Many Azeri people love to have their photos taken, though it's always polite to ask first. Before snapping other subjects remember that the nation is still in an unfinished war and thus retains a certain sensitivity to the photographing of anything that could be considered strategic. That includes pretty much anywhere near the Armenian border/ceasefire line. Naxçıvan is also very sensitive. Don't try to take snaps on the Baku metro either.

TELEPHONE

Azerbaijan's land-line phone system has been rationalised. Calls now simply require the dialling code and number without the palaver of the old Soviet-era '8-and-wait'. Payphones are increasingly rare. Those antiquated beasts that require *jeton* (tokens) give you an unlimited time for a local call but cannot connect to international, regional or mobile numbers. For that you'll usually need to go to a call centre, typically attached to or within the post office. Standard price calls to most of the world cost 54q per minute.

Mobile Phones

Few locals don't have a mobile phone.

SIM cards can be bought at ubiquitous dealerships and slipped into your own handset. You'll need a photocopy of your passport to buy one. Packages start at AZN5 for the least popular numbers. Azercell is best for rural areas. When calling between phones on the same network, no codes are necessary, just the seven-digit number.

VISAS

Visas are available on arrival in most circumstances at Baku's Heydar Əliyev International Airport but not at land borders.

MOBILE PHONE PROVIDERS

Provider	Access Code	Nickname	Coverage (% pop)
Azercell (www.azercell.com)	☎ 050	Sim-Sim	99%
BakCell (www.bakcell.com)	☎ 055	Cin	80%
NarMobile (www.narmobile.az)	☎ 070		80%

Border Crossings

Foreigners may enter/exit Azerbaijan at the following points.

Astara Land border with Iran.

Baku port By ferry from Turkmenbashi (Turkmenistan) and Aktau (Kazakhstan).

Böyük Kəsik Railway-only border with Georgia.

Culfa-Jolfa Land border with Iran.

Gəncə International Airport

Heydər Əliyev International Airport For Baku.

Krasny Most (Red Bridge, Qırmızı Köprü, Tsiteli Khidi) Land border with Georgia.

Naxçıvan Airport From Moscow.

Postbina (Balakən-Lagodekhi) Land border with Georgia.

Sədərək Land border with Turkey.

Registration

Within three days of arrival, *müvəqqəti qeydiyyat* (registration) is a legal requirement for those planning to stay longer than a month. Apply at the local police station, bringing copies of your passport and apartment-lease agreement. It can be hard to persuade police to do this procedure and for years the rule has been laxly enforced, however any cops who fancy causing trouble can use this against you and extort hefty fines.

Visas for Onward Travel

Visas for Pakistan are not issued in Baku unless the applicant is a registered resident in Azerbaijan, and there's no Turkmenistan embassy whatsoever. However, visas for China are generally easier to get in Baku than in Central Asia. For Russian, Uzbek and sometimes Kazakh visas you'll first need an invitation letter or tourist voucher (eg from STANtours). For Iran, arrange visa clearance through an agency like Persian Voyages.com at least two weeks before application (in Baku or Naxçıvan). Most Westerners can get a Turkish visa at the border but Turkish immigration officers at the crossing from Naxçıvan demand that Brits have their visa in advance. See p295 for a list of consulate addresses in Baku and Naxçıvan.

Visas in Advance

Applicants need two passport photos, a completed application form and a passport valid for at least one month after travel. Certain embassies demand either a letter of support from a travel agency or a hotel booking confirmation. In these cases, it's usually sufficient to book a midrange or top-end room (no budget hotels are likely to fax confirmation) for your first

BORDER NOTES

- Azerbaijan–Russia borders are closed to foreigners.
- Azerbaijan–Armenia borders are sealed.
- Armenian-occupied areas of Azerbaijan including Nagorno-Karabakh cannot be accessed from the rest of Azerbaijan.

night or two and use the faxed confirmation to receive your visa; you can subsequently simply cancel the booking. Transit visas, usually valid for 72 hours, are issued to those with an onward ticket to a third country in the region.

Single- and double-entry visas are usually issued in five days. Business and multi-entry visas require official invitation letters and referral to Baku, so generally take longer. Visa prices vary by nationality. Typically it's €60 but US citizens pay US\$100 and Brits pay US\$101. Express processing is not generally an option though it may be possible at the consul's discretion. Fees generally need to be paid into a local bank (often a fair distance away), so don't apply late in the day.

Visas on Arrival

Single-entry 30-day visas are available at Baku airport for the same fees. No Letter of Invitation (LOI) or hotel booking is necessary. There has been discussion about phasing this out so check carefully with your nearest embassy beforehand. Oddly you need to get the entry stamp before going to the visa-application window. Bring two passport photos or you'll have to pay US\$20 to a savvy waiting photographer.

Remember that Azerbaijani visas are not issued on arrival at any other arrival points.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

In Baku local women appear to be very liberated, but it's something of a veneer and in the regions Azeri women tend to be semi-invisible. Western women might be treated as 'honorary men' in social situations, but a woman travelling alone may cause confusion or consternation by sitting down to tea at an all-male *çayxana*. Physical harassment is graciously rare, however stares are common and provincial young Azeri men may think it fair game to snap photos of you on their mobile phones. Getting annoyed rarely helps, as offenders don't imagine they've done anything wrong.

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