



Baku: view of the bay

Baku

by

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Baku is the capital city of the independent Republic of Azerbaijan. It is located on the western shore of the Caspian Sea and the eastern tip of Azerbaijan. The name Baku is allegedly derived from the Persian word "bad" (wind) and either "kub" from the verb "kubidan" (to strike hard) or the noun "kuy" (place). The name, therefore, can mean either a place where the winds strike hard, or simply a windy place. The climate of Baku is subtropical. The temperature for January is 33.8 F (1 C) and in July 82.4 F (28 C). Baku's annual temperature is 57.92 (14.4 C).

Baku is located on the Apsheron Peninsula which also accommodates the Ramana Castle (mid-4th century), the Apsheron Fire Temple, the Mardakyany Castle (13th and 14th centuries), the Nardaran Castle (14th century), and an 18th century caravansary. The population of Baku consists of Azerbaijanis (35%), Russians (35%), Armenians (20%), Tatars, and Ukrainians. As far as religion is concerned, the inhabitants of Baku are primarily Shi'ite Muslims; they have been almost constantly at war with their Christian neighbors in Armenia and Georgia but not so with the Jewish community in the city.

The fifth largest city in the former Soviet Union, after Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, and Tashkent, Baku is a city with a very busy harbor, an immensely long sea front, and a picturesque promenade. To offset the industrial atmosphere that an oil town might present, each Baku resident is required to plant a tree every year. At the present, the population of Baku is over two millions. As an indicator of the rate of population growth in the city, consider the following:

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|------|-----------|
| 1874 | 15,000 |
| 1920 | 313,000 |
| 1959 | 982,000 |
| 1982 | 1,618,000 |

It should be added that the inhabitants of Baku are known for their longevity. In 1985, for instance, there were 1,400 persons over the age of 90 and 120 persons over the age of 100

in the city. The trend, of course, is not exclusive to Baku but applies to the Caucasus region as a whole.

The first historical reference to the city goes back to AD 885. Archaeological evidence, however, indicates a much earlier date. In fact, Baku's original Zoroastrian population was among the first to discover natural fumes that once ignited burned for ever. Since that time, Baku oil has been employed in various forms as fuel for lamps, medicine, even as *nafta*, or Greek fire, in warfare.

Baku was devastated during the Arab invasion of the 8th century and again during the Mongol invasion of the 13th century. But each time, the people of Baku rebuilt their city. Their original language and culture, however, succumbed to the Turkish language and the Islamic culture, respectively. Baku was captured by Peter the First the Great in 1723, but was returned to Persia in 1735. Russia captured Baku again in 1806 and retained it. In 1813, Baku was included in the Russian Empire. In 1918, the Baku Commune issued a decree industrializing land, the oil industry, and the mercantile marine. The decree was enthusiastically supported by the oil workers of Baku. In 1920, Baku became the capital of the Azerbaijan republic.

Baku's economy is based on petroleum and natural gas, a fact that becomes very obvious to visitors to Baku upon arrival. The smell of oil suffuses the atmosphere of the city while stark derricks dot the landscape. Oil was discovered in Baku around the turn of the 20th century and was exploited after 1923 for the better part of that century. After the oil boom, the inhabitants of Baku diversified their economy. Today, Baku is known for its petrochemical, electrical, mechanical, and radio industry, as well as for electronics, telecommunications, and machine tools industry. At the center of the city, industrial, cultural, and educational centers, compete with markets filled with vegetables, fruits, cotton, grapes, and tobacco. Additionally, The city has countless libraries, museums, clubs theaters, and institutions of higher learning.



Major places of interest in Baku include both modern and ancient sites. The most interesting moodier site is the township of Oil Rock, which is built 60 miles out into the sea. Other modern sites are the Azerbaijan Art Museum, the Azerbaijan Carpentry and Folk Applied Art Museum, and the Nizami Azerbaijan Literature Museum. Structures that recall Baku's past include the Icheri Sheker Fortress (AD 1078) with its Sinik Kala Minaret still very much intact, the Sherwanshah Palace (AD 1400s) ensemble which harks to the days when Baku was the capital of the mighty Sherwanshah, and the Maiden Tower. The latter has a sad tale to tell.



Baku: the Maiden Tower

One of the early Khans of Baku had an unusually beautiful daughter. She was so beautiful that he himself fell in love with her. Embarrassed by her father's incestuous advances, the daughter finally agreed to grant his wish if he proved his love by building a tower for her that would be taller than any building in Baku. The tower was built quickly, supervised by the lustful Khan himself. The Princess, however, continued to ask for a taller and taller tower.

When the tower surpassed even the minarets of the mosque, the father demanded that his wish be granted. Helpless, the Princess added one last condition: that the tower be furnished with the most exquisite furnishings available. The Khan, thereby, sent buyers into every bazaar to find the finest carpets and brocades for the tower. The Princess's last wish was to inspect her tower to make sure that all was in order. On the day of inspection, She climbed to the top of the tower, looked around, and then suddenly, leaped lightly over the battlements into the sea below.