



ATA Organised TOURS 2020



SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER

3 – 10TH Tour to Azerbaijan



Azerbaijan, the nation's former Soviet republic, is bounded by the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountains, which span Asia and Europe. Its capital, Baku, is famed for its medieval walled Inner City. Billing itself as the 'land of fire', Azerbaijan (Azərbaycan) is a tangle of contradictions and contrasts. Neither Europe nor Asia, it's a nexus of historical empires, but also a 'new' nation which has undergone an extraordinary transformation from the war-ravaged

post-Soviet 1990s to an oil-enriched nation with Formula 1 and Europa League football. Its capital, Baku, is famed for its medieval walled Inner City. Within the city lies the Palace of the Shirvanshahs, a royal retreat dating to the 15th century, and the centuries-old Maiden Tower, which dominates the city skyline. The cosmopolitan capital, Baku, rings a UNESCO-listed ancient core with dazzling 21st-century architecture and sits on a balmy bay of the Caspian Sea. In the surrounding semi-desert are mud volcanoes and curious fire phenomena.

It's known as the 'City of Winds', but while Azerbaijan's capital is indeed among the world's breeziest, the nickname can also be applied to its eclectic architectural landscape, shaped as it has been by the various winds of change that have swept through Baku over the centuries.

From its medieval fortifications to the lavish palaces commissioned during the oil boom, Soviet-era relics to post-modern skyscrapers, Baku's architecture is, for many travellers, the top reason to visit this quirky Caspian Sea city. Here's where to experience the four major periods that define its architectural legacy.

Two millennia ago, Baku was a major centre of Zoroastrianism, an ancient Persian religion known for its fire temples. It's during this period that construction is thought to have begun on the 29m-high Maiden's Tower, Baku's foremost cultural icon and a great first stop on a self-guided architectural tour of the city. Fortified in the 12th century, when Baku was the capital of the historical region of Shirvan, the sandstone tower (which is thought to have once been used as a Zoroastrianism fire temple) now forms part of Baku's Old City.

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overzealous, the 15th-century Palace of the Shirvanshahs with its attractive murqarna (stalactite vault) doorways and moody mausoleums still offers a fascinating glimpse into an era of Baku characterised by endless conflicts between the Persians, Ottomans and Imperial Russia. In 1918, the Bolsheviks left their own mark on the Palace by firing rounds into an ancient sandstone wall near the entrance; the bullet holes are still visible today.

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Breaking from the rigid style that dominated the twilight years of USSR architecture, the fluid wave-shaped Heydar Əliyev Centre (opened in 2012) was designed by the late Iraqi-born architect Zaha Hadid to express the optimism of a nation looking to the future. Hot on its heels was the 2013 opening of the Flame Towers. Inspired by Baku's history (Baku means 'protector of fire' in Persian) and ongoing connection with natural gas, its trio of sinuous towers appear to flicker at night thanks to an integrated LED system.

Yet barely three hours' drive away, timeless rural villages lie amid orchards backed by the soaring Great Caucasus Mountains. Come quickly. Having long been overlooked by visitors, Azerbaijan's new easy visas, bargain-value hotels and close-packed range of beautiful landscapes are starting to attract significant flows of tourists, though as yet few of them from Western countries. If there was a place to leave you mesmerized and spellbound it is Azerbaijan and Baku in particular. People here not knowing what to expect and leave awe inspired by its magical beauty, cleanliness and by the most habitable of people imaginable. If you can only go on one Tour in a lifetime go on this one!



THIS TOUR IS BEING REARRANGED FOR 2021

Descriptions of all Tours are done so using poetic journalistic license and should not be assumed to be a detailed description or itinerary of any particular Tour, rather a 'wetting the imagination'. Detailed information on all Tours will be emailed to members in sufficient time prior to the actual Tour to enable informed decisions made as to if the Tour is of interest to you.

For more information on any of our Tours in 2020 please email our Tours Organiser whose contact details can be found on the committee members page and events page of our website.