



Azerbaijan

994 / POP 9.6 MILLION

Includes ➔

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Why Go?

Selling itself as the 'Land of Fire', Azerbaijan (Azərbaycan) is a tangle of contradictions and contrasts. Neither Europe nor Asia, it's a nexus of ancient historical empires, but also a 'new' nation rapidly transforming itself with a super-charged gust of petro-spending.

The cosmopolitan capital, Baku, rings a Unesco-listed ancient core with dazzling 21st-century architecture and sits on the oil-rich Caspian Sea. In the surrounding semi-desert are mud volcanoes and curious fire phenomena. Yet barely three hours' drive away, timeless rural villages, clad in lush orchards and backed by the soaring Great Caucasus mountains are a dramatic contrast. In most such places, foreigners remain a great rarity, but in return for a degree of linguistic skills, you'll find a remarkable seam of hospitality. And a few rural outposts – from village homestays to glitzy ski- and golf-hotels – now have the odd English speaker to assist travellers.

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Calğalıq Restoranı (p246)
- ➔ Şirvanşah Muzey-Restoran (p216)
- ➔ Xan Lənkəran (p251)
- ➔ Paris Bistro (p215)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Karavansaray Hotel (p241)
- ➔ Sultan Inn (p213)
- ➔ Vego Hotel (p249)
- ➔ Rixos Quba (p231)
- ➔ John & Tanya Howard's Guesthouse (p235)

When to Go

- ➔ Lowland Azerbaijan is especially lovely from April to June as showers interspersed by clear skies enliven bright-green, flower-dappled fields.
- ➔ October is very pleasant in Baku, though much of the rural countryside is parched brown.
- ➔ Summer gets oppressively hot and humid in low-lying areas, but late July is the best trekking season in the higher mountains.
- ➔ Winters are relatively mild around the Caspian shores, but you may need a sweater and coat even in Baku.
- ➔ January to February is the top ski season, though brass monkeys may panic in Xinalıq or Lahıc.



Azerbaijan Highlights

1 Comparing the grand stone architecture, medieval walled city centre and modernist tower skyline of Azerbaijan's dynamic capital **Baku** (p200).

2 Seeking out an 18th-century palace, unforgettable caravanserai-hotel and picturesque Old Town in **Şəki** (p238), cupped in beautiful wooded mountains.

3 Taking in stone- and bronze-age petroglyphs and a nearby 'family' of wonderfully weird mud volcanoes near **Qobustan** (p226).