



NIGHT & DAY

Azerbaijan's capital is one of the fastest-growing and most dynamic cities in the world. Joseph Reaney spends 24 hours exploring everything from its historic heart to its modern shell

Baku's iconic Flame Towers



The quaint Fountains Square



The mood-lit Old Town

BAKU

05.15

Land at Heydar Aliyev International Airport (www.airport.az) and flag a taxi to **Fairmont Baku**. Located in one of the three iconic Flame Towers — flame-shaped columns that rise high above the city — the hotel boasts the best views in Baku. It might be a little early to check in, but you can deposit your bags and tuck into an early breakfast at Le Bistro.

07.15

Spend a morning getting lost in Baku's delightful **Old Town**, a majestic mix of cobbled streets, charming caravanserais (traditional inns) and tempting tea shops. Start at the **Maiden Tower**, a 29-metre-high stone structure that dates back to the 1100s. Folklore says the tower was built by a rich local ruler, who wanted to marry his daughter. She was so disgusted, she requested he build the tower as a wedding present, then promptly threw herself off the top. After enjoying the views of the Old Town from the tower's roof, walk down the steps in front to the striking 15th-century **Haji-Bani Bathhouse**, then turn the corner to drink tea in **Karvansara Restaurant** or buy a traditional Azeri silk scarf in the store opposite.

09.45

After a coffee break, make your way through the winding alleys to **Shirvanshah's Palace**. This (mostly) 15th-century site is home to royal apartments, a mausoleum, mosque and courtroom, as well as excavated Bayil Stones with beautiful Arabic text and animal engravings. From the palace, head to the **Vahid Gardens**, home to an imaginative bust of the poet Aliqha Vahid, whose character creations are weaved into the stone waves and knots of his hair.

11.30

The day started early, so lunch can too. Make your way to **Fountains Square**, Baku's social hub. Carnivores will love the lulya (minced lamb) kebab in flatbread at **Yeni Bah Bah Club** (+994 12 498 8734), while vegetarians might prefer a qutab (pancake turnover) filled with cheese or spinach.

12.30

Stroll along **Nizami Küçəsi**, the city's most popular shopping avenue, and investigate the boutique-laden side streets. Foodies can try delicious Sevruqa caviar, for which the country is famous, at **Taza Bazaar**

on Rasul Rza, or buy melt-in-the-mouth chocolate at Patchi. Keep walking until the pristine pavement turns into a dusty street, and you'll arrive at the off-the-trail **Museum of Modern Art** (Yusif Safarov St 5; +994 12 490 8404; www.mim.az). The museum is home to hundreds of pieces by contemporary Azerbaijani artists, as well as European masters such as Dalí, Picasso and Chagall.

14.45

Next, head down to the **Bulvar** (Baku Boulevard), which follows the coast of the Caspian Sea and is dotted with modernist buildings. Shopaholics should stop at the first, **Park Bulvar** (+994 12 598 8080; www.parkbulvar.az), for high-end stores; otherwise, walk for 45 minutes along the Bulvar until you reach the building shaped like a giant half-unfurled carpet. This is the **Carpet Museum** (132 Neftchilar Ave; +994 12 493 0501), home to a vast collection of rare and fine rugs that chart the work of Azerbaijani craftsmen over the centuries. Alternatively, you can walk a little further along the Bulvar to take a ride on the **Baku Ferris Wheel**, offering views over the oil-slicked sea to the Crystal Hall and a towering flagpole.

16.30

Put your feet up and enjoy a small aperitif in nearby **Chinar** (Shovkat Alekberova 1; +994 12 404 8211; www.chinar-dining.com).

17.30

Take the funicular behind Chinar up to **Martyrs' Lane**, comprising several hilltop grave memorials that commemorate the lives of Azerbaijan's victims in a 1990 skirmish with Soviet troops, as well as the Turks and Brits who fought here during the First World War. As sunset approaches, head to the eternal flame for a memorable panorama.

18.45

After freshening up at the Fairmont, right next to Martyrs' Lane, take a taxi back down to the seafont. **Sahil Bar & Restaurant** (+994 12 404 8212; www.sahil-dining.az) serves up fine traditional cuisine on a lovely outdoor terrace. Order the Caspian noodle soup, followed by pan-fried sturgeon with walnut crust, then sip a cocktail in the restaurant's bar **Pasifico**. Other fine dining options include the chic Brit-style **Evde** (25 Səməd Vurğun; +994 12 404 8213; www.saffron.az), and the Fairmont's own **Alov Restaurant**.

21.00

Time for a bar crawl, taking in swanky cocktail joints such as **Mamounia** (Uzeir Hajibeyov 51; +994 12 51 799 7777) or open-air venues like **Caspian Terrace** (90 Nizami St; +994 12 465 2000; www.thelandmarkhotel.az). Next, delve into Baku's late-night scene at **Face Club** (+994 12 51 788 1010).

01.30

Take a taxi back to the hotel and enjoy a final nightcap in **Alov Jazz Bar**, then crawl into bed for a welcome night's sleep. ■

ONEMOREDAY

If you've more time, check out some of the other luxury hotels in town including the palatial **Four Seasons Baku** on the edge of the Old Town (www.fourseasons.com) or head slightly further afield to the **Kempinski Hotel Badamdar** (www.kempinski.com) or **Jumeirah Bilgah Beach Hotel** (www.jumeirah.com).

Art aficionados and collectors might want to visit one of the myriad contemporary and traditional galleries springing up all over town. For a dose of architectural enlightenment, make a detour to the Zaha Hadid-designed **Heydar Aliyev Center** and its museum, dedicated to the life and heritage of the late Azerbaijani president (heydaraliyevcenter.az).

STAY

Fairmont Baku
Tel: +994 12 565 4848
www.fairmont.com

Four Seasons Baku
Tel: +994 12 404 2424
www.fourseasons.com

Jumeirah Bilgah Beach Hotel
Tel: +994 12 565 4000
www.jumeirah.com