



# Discover Baku, Azerbaijan

Posh, cosmopolitan and rich in culture, your next adventure awaits.

By Joseph Reaney

Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, is one of the fastest-changing cities on earth. Since the turn of the century, crumbling Soviet-era apartments have given way to shimmering steel skyscrapers, potholed paths have become tree-lined boulevards, and dented Ladas have been overtaken by gleaming BMWs. And the city continues to pump its oil-fueled fortune into matching, and ultimately usurping, Dubai and the Emirates.

This relentless surge for modernization, built on a long and storied history, makes Baku a fun, dynamic, and decadent destination for a getaway. *Life Refined* sent travel journalist, Joseph Reaney out to uncover the best of the best the city has to offer.

### Explore a Storied History

The best way to understand a modern metropolis like Baku is to delve into its past, and this city's rich history does not disappoint. Dive right in with a leisurely stroll through Baku's Old Town which is full of cheerful caravanserais, ruined churches, pretty parks, time-honored tea shops and twisting alleyways. Nearby, sightseeing at Maiden's Tower is a must; this 29-meter-high stone structure is said to date back millennia. In fact, one of the many legends surrounding it is that a wealthy ruler wished to marry his daughter, who was so appalled by the idea of incest (but unable to disobey her father) she asked him to build a tower in her honor before the marriage... then threw herself off it. Today, it offers fine views across the Old Town and the Caspian Sea.

Of course, true history buffs won't want to miss these sites: the Palace of the Shirvanshahs and the UNESCO World Heritage Site Gobustan. At the Palace, you'll explore an impressive 15th century sandstone masterpiece comprising royal apartments, a mausoleum, mosque, and courtroom, and housing a series of stones adorned with flowing inscriptions of Arabic text and crude animal figures, recovered from the sunken city of Bayil. It's a lot to take in

so carve out plenty of time to explore.

An hour's drive from the capital, plan to spend half a day at the UNESCO World Heritage Site which is home to more than 6,000 petroglyphs that date back up to 40,000 years; it's a moving experience. The vivid images of primitive men, charging bulls, and ritual dances offer a real connection to our ancient history. You'll find walking among the open-air rock carvings and cave paintings is really special.

### Soak up the Culture

There is so much history in Baku, but experiencing life as a local is crucial, too. Get to know the culinary culture with a memorable lunch in the traditional caravanserei Mugham Club, a 16th century restaurant with a range of high-end Azeri dishes like meaty lyulya kebabs (ground lamb wrapped in lavash flatbread, with grilled vegetables), delicious dolma (zucchini or grape leaves stuffed with meat and rice) and vegetarian chikhirtma (a tasty blend of egg, onion, and eggplant).

An afternoon tour of the Abseron Peninsula will also prove memorable. Regional highlights include Mardakan, a small town that boasts an old quadrangular castle with a large central keep; Süvalan, an even smaller town with a spectacular mosque of sparkling mosaics; and Bilgeh Beach, where you can dip your toes in the Caspian Sea.

A 25-minute taxi ride from Baku is Yanar Dag. It is a small hill which naturally emits gas, and has been continuously on fire since being accidentally lit in the 1950s; a true sight to behold. Go early to see the flames in darkness.

And if you're an art aficionado, you won't want to miss the city's Museum of Modern Art. The museum's excellent exhibition hall is home to hundreds of pieces by contemporary Azerbaijani artists, along with a selection of works by other European masters like Salvador Dalí, Mark Chagall and Pablo Picasso.



Maiden Tower



Nizami Street in the center of Baku



Mud volcano



Sheikh Lutfullah Mosque



Baku in the evening

## Enjoy the Luxe Lifestyle

With so much to do, there will be a need to unwind and pamper yourself. And for that, opulent options abound.

Take a stroll through Fountains Square, the city's main social spot, and onto pretty Nizami Street. Besides being a pleasant walk, there are several places off Nizami to buy Sevruga caviar. Azerbaijan is famed for its salt-cured sturgeon eggs, and prices here are half that in the West, so head to the bustling Taza Bazaar on Rasul Rza to sample some. Then turn down toward Neftchilar Avenue for some serious shopping; you'll find plenty of high-end boutiques and well-known brands like De Beers, Christian Dior, Dolce and Gabbana, Burberry and Versace.

If you're looking to indulge your tastebuds, head to nearby Chinar restaurant for a sumptuous pan-Asian meal. The Atlantic black cod in spicy miso is a haute cuisine highlight, while the Chinar Mojito (fresh raspberries blended with rum, mint, lime, passion fruit puree, and soda) will soothe your aching muscles.

After dinner and drinks, catch the convenient funicular next door up to your hotel, the eye-catching Fairmont Baku, Flame Towers. One of three gargantuan flames that stand high over the city, and are majestically lit up every evening, it offers the best hotel room views in the city. A nightcap in the hotel's

Alov Jazz Bar where you can soak up the spectacular views across the Caspian Sea along with a live jazz soundtrack is the perfect way to end a day of sightseeing.

Spagoers will find some much-needed respite at Talise Spa at the luxe Madinat Jumeirah hotel. A beachside massage, private yoga class or perhaps the Shiffa 24-Carat Gold Hamman treatment may be just what the doctor ordered. The 120-minute treatment includes skin exfoliation using a Moroccan Hammam mitt, a full-body gold clay body mask and ends with a full body massage using gold-infused precious oils. It's the ultimate pampering experience.

After you feel suitably de-stressed and un-knotted, head out onto the water to dine at the hotel's Pier Grill, serving perhaps the finest steak and seafood in the country. Meat-lovers will love the Angus beef tenderloin fillet, while fish fans can opt for the whole sea bass stuffed with herbs, capers and anchovies.

And if you're looking for a different point of view while on your vacation, charter a yacht for the afternoon from the Yacht Club on Baku Boulevard. You can easily spend most of the afternoon out on the Caspian Sea, enjoying your just-purchased caviar and another perspective on the Azerbaijani capital.



Fairmont Flame Towers



Jumeirah Beach Hotel, Piano Bar



Jumeirah Beach Hotel, Talise Spa treatment room



Fairmont Flame Towers

## Sleep. Eat. Drink. Relax.

Sleep. Fairmont Flame Towers, [fairmont.com/baku](http://fairmont.com/baku)

Eat. Chinar, [chinar-dining.com](http://chinar-dining.com). Mugham Club, +994 12 492 40 85.

Pier Grill, [jumeirah.com/en/hotels-resorts/baku](http://jumeirah.com/en/hotels-resorts/baku). Alov Restaurant, [fairmont.com/baku/dining/alov-restaurant](http://fairmont.com/baku/dining/alov-restaurant)

Drink. Alov Jazz Bar, [fairmont.com/baku/dining/jazz-bar](http://fairmont.com/baku/dining/jazz-bar)

Piano Lounge & Bar, [jumeirah.com/en/hotels-resorts/baku](http://jumeirah.com/en/hotels-resorts/baku)

Cigar Divan, [fairmont.com/baku/dining/cigar-divan/](http://fairmont.com/baku/dining/cigar-divan/)

Relax. Talise Spa, [jumeirah.com/en/hotels-resorts/baku](http://jumeirah.com/en/hotels-resorts/baku). ESPA Spa, [fairmont.com/baku/spa/](http://fairmont.com/baku/spa/)