

DESTINATION

Baku

The host of COP29 – which takes place from 11 to 22 November 2024 – Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, is a bustling commercial hub with a storied history, easy access to unique natural attractions, and gorgeous views of the Caspian Sea

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MORNING

One of the most striking things about Baku is its balance of cutting-edge modern architecture and historical building. Icheri Sheher, the inner city of its Old Town, is a walled city that has been home to a wide variety of different types of people since the Palaeolithic period, including Zoroastrians, Arabs, Shirvanis, Persians, Russians, and people from the Sasanian and Ottoman empire. There are plenty of great places here to enjoy a traditional breakfast of oven-baked Tandir bread, salty cheeses made of sheep and cow's milk, fresh honey and cream, and Pomidor Chighirtmas (scrambled eggs with cooked tomatoes), washed down with hot, sweet tea.

For a ticket of 15 Azerbaijani Manat, you can enter the Maiden Tower: a cylindrical, eight-storey 12th-century monument that is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. While historians are still debating its original purpose, there are multiple local legends about it. Some are inspiring and others darker in nature, but the majority involve a maiden with fire-coloured hair. In some, she is a saviour of the people, while in others, she is a doomed princess who leaps off it to escape her fate. Nowadays, it houses a museum showing the evolution of Baku through the ages, making it a perfect place to understand the significance of the city, and orient yourself. Don't miss the panoramic views from the rooftop. Another Icheri Sheher must-visit is the Palace of the

Mud volcanoes of Gobustan



Gobustan's petroglyph reserve



Shirvanshahs, built in the 15th century and described by UNESCO as “one of the pearls of Azerbaijan’s architecture.”

As you walk around the Old Town, keep an eye out for the original street art adorning many of its walls – one of our favourites is the mural of a lion with leaves forming its tufts of hair, outside local artist Ali Shamsi’s workshop, on the way to the palace.



AFTERNOON

Baku has a wealth of incredible sights easily accessible by day trip. One popular route is the mud volcanoes of Gobustan, followed by a look at the area’s archaeological wonder, the Rock Art Cultural Landscape – which boasts more than 6,000 ancient petroglyphs. It’s about an hour’s drive from the city, and you’ll typically need a couple of hours there. Alternatively, visit the Ateshgah of Baku, also known as the Fire Temple of Baku. This ancient complex was once a monastery, and has been used as a place of Hindu, Sikh, and Zoroastrian worship through the ages. It’s a great chance to learn more about the country’s history and witness its famous “purifying” flame. Next,



Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center

Baklava with nuts



make a pitstop at Yanar Dag, the “Burning Mountain” 30 minutes from Baku, to see one of the all-natural Eternal Fires that gives Azerbaijan its name as the “Land of Fire”. The sight of the gas fire that steadily blazes out of the mountain to three metres high, rain or shine, is a spectacular, unforgettable sight.

Architecture enthusiasts would do well to pass by the Heydar Aliyev Center on the way back into town. Designed by the seminal Zaha Hadid, the building’s distinctive structure is otherworldly beautiful, and houses a museum, library, and concert hall.

If you can extend your trip by a day or two, the tea plantations of Lankaran – where you can enjoy a teatime spread in one of its idyllic forest cafés; or the historically-rich city of Sheki, once a crucial stop on the famous Silk Road – are worth a visit. Both are between three to five hours drive from the city.



EVENING

If you’re after jaw-dropping views with your dinner, the Sky Grill on the 34th floor of the Hilton Baku is known for its outstanding service, upscale menu, and spectacular vistas. For those craving a more cozy, traditional experience, there are plenty of restaurants in the Old Town that will sweep you away to another world and time, through both the décor and the food. Qaynana Restaurant, Firuze Restaurant, the Shirvanshah Restaurant-Museum, and Dolma Restaurant are all highly recommended. From warm and hearty handmade dumplings to saffron-infused plov, juicy dolma, melt-in-your-mouth kebabs, and buttery Qutab with all sorts of fillings – and perhaps a glass of local pomegranate wine – you’ll feast like a king. **BT**

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