



# TRAVEL THE UNKNOWN

TAKE THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

**AZERBAIJAN EXPLORER**

**10 days**

## Countries visited

Azerbaijan

## Tour Highlights

- Baku, the ancient capital of Azerbaijan
- Iconic Palace of the Shirvanshahs and Maiden Tower in Baku
- Continuously-burning Yanardag hill
- Ateshgah Fire Temple in Baku
- Take in Sheki's many historical monuments
- Discover the ancient ruins of Gellersen-Görersen Fortress
- 40,000-year-old engravings in Gobustan National Park
- One of the oldest village settlements in Azerbaijan

## Places visited

Baku • Sheki • Kish • Ganja • Lahic • Guba • Gala

## What's included

- Group arrival & departure transfers (as per tour dates)
- Ground transport with driver
- Accommodation
- Meals (refer to itinerary for meal plan)
- English-speaking guides
- Entrance fees to sites & parks

## What's not included

- Meals not mentioned in itinerary
- Drinks
- Visa fees
- Tipping
- Camera / video camera fees
- Personal items (laundry, telephone, etc.)
- Medical expenses
- Any services not mentioned in itinerary



*All accommodation subject to availability. Final accommodation choices will be confirmed after booking.*



## Your Itinerary Explained

Date	Place visited	Meals
	<p>The first part of the text in each day is the itinerary schedule and will explain what you will normally see/do during this day of your itinerary.</p> <p>---</p> <p><i>The part of the day's text in italics (and comes after the three dashes "---") is background information on the places or sites on that day of your itinerary. It is not part of your itinerary and may mention places that will not be visited on your itinerary. If you have any questions please ask us. Travel times where noted are only meant as a guideline.</i></p>	<p>B: Breakfast</p> <p>L: Lunch</p> <p>D: Dinner</p>

## Tour Itinerary

Day 1	Baku	Meals
	<p>Arrive into Baku airport where you will be met by a Travel The Unknown representative and taken to your hotel.</p> <p>Relax into your new environment. Remain at leisure for the rest of the day.</p>	N/A
Baku		
Day 2	Baku	Meals
	<p>Start a day touring capital hotspots at Highland Park and its panoramic sweep of Baku's horseshoe bay. Then we descend on the city's central zone, containing the greatest concentration of historical and architectural sites, most notably Baku's centuries old walled inner-city - Icheri Sheher - within which the UNESCO sites Shirvanshah Palace and Maiden Tower take pride of place.</p> <p>Keeping with Azerbaijan's Islamic character, later scheduled activities include Juma Mosque and the Carpet Museum. End our city-wide tour ambling through Seaside Park and along Baku Boulevard, which lays claim to being Europe's second largest.</p> <p>Spend your evening in leisurely fashion.</p> <p>---</p>	B
Palace of the Shirvanshahs and Maiden Tower		

***Baku**, the capital of Azerbaijan, is an ancient city that is located between Asia and Europe on the Absheron peninsula in the Caspian Sea. Its name means 'city of winds' or 'city on the hill' and Baku was first mentioned in the Egyptian Pharaoh Minesan's Book of the Dead in 3500 BC, meaning the city is at least 5,500 years old. A UNESCO World Heritage site since 2000, Baku was an important staging post on the Silk Road and is still a key rail junction and Caspian port. The city is also where the first national theatre in the Muslim world opened, and where the country's first newspaper and library were established. In the area around Baku there is a large concentration of ancient oil fields (or 'Oil Stones').*

*The **Palace of the Shirvanshahs** and **Maiden Tower** are two UNESCO heritage sites of Baku's Inner City (or Icheri Sheher). The Palace complex used to be the seat of the Muslim rulers of Shirvan, a historical region in the eastern Caucasus. It is composed of the Divankhana pavillion, Shirvanshah Mausoleum, Palace Mosque, Sultan Murad's Gate and a bath house, as well as several residential buildings and caravanserais. The **Maiden Tower** (or Giz Galasi) is an iconic symbol of Baku that features on Azeri bank notes. There are many legends that surround it and much debate as to how old it is, though most observers reckon it was built in the 12th century. The tower holds a museum showcasing the historic development of Baku. There is a great view of the Old City from the top.*

## Day 3

## Baku - Ateshgah - Yanardag - Baku

## Meals



Ateshgah  
Temple

Heading not far out of town, our first stop hints at the country's pre-Islamic roots. Ateshgah is a fire temple with deep origins in Zoroastrianism, the world's oldest monotheistic belief system. The Zoroastrians venerated the purity of fire, and this you will see in this striking temple where a natural gas vent burns an eternal flame. Interestingly the 'Azer' in 'Azerbaijan' means fire, denoting the centrality of the flame to Azeri culture.

B

In a variation on the same theme, next we go to Yanar Dag where a natural gas flare leaking from a crack in the earth creates a surreal and almost biblical sight.

End the day back in the capital in the comfort of your hotel, or cooling off from all that fire on an evening stroll.

---

***Yanardag** is an incredible site to see. Translated as 'Burning Mountain', it is a continuously burning hillside located near Baku that does not get extinguished even by snow or rain. This phenomenon is due to the steady seeping of hydrocarbon gases from below the surface that causes flames ranging from 1 to 10 metres in height. The air near Yanardag is filled with the smell of gas and the surfaces of nearby streams can be lit with a match.*

*The 17th-century **Ateshgah Temple** (also known as the 'Fire Temple of Baku') is located in the Surakhani district of Baku and is often described as a castle-like monastery complex. Ateshgah was built on a pocket of natural gas that produced a 'holy fire' and was used by Hindus and Zoroastrians as a place of worship. The temple was abandoned in 1883 when the flow of natural gas ended and extinguished the flame. Nonetheless, it is still frequently visited by Zoroastrians on religious pilgrimages.*

## Day 4

## Baku - Shemakha - Sheki

## Meals



Shamakhi -  
Seven Domes

After breakfast depart for the district of Shamakhi. Once there, we'll explore the district capital, Shamakha, which contains important historical artifacts in the form of Diri Baba Tomb and Yeddi Gumbaz. Shamakhi was the erstwhile centre of the Shirvan kingdom. As in neighbouring Iran, monarchs too were called Shahs. Yeddi Gumbaz, in fact, lies on a site of seven cupolas, resting places of various Shirvan shahs.

B

Onward to Sheki, where we stay overnight.

---

*The **Seven Domes** (also known as the Shirvan Domes) is a complex of tombs built for Shirvan's royal family in the 18th century. Only three of these domes remain to this day - the others have been destroyed by earthquakes. There is a good view of Shamakhi city from this location.*

*There are many interesting historical monuments in **Sheki**. To the north of the city there are the ruins of the once impregnable fortress "Gellersan – gerarsan" ("come and see") dating from the 16th to 18th centuries. The city itself which was famous for its trade and boasted numerous caravanserais during the Silk Road era. Two still exist; the Upper and the Lower Caravanserais, both built in the 18th century. The nearby Albanian temple in the village of Kish dating to the 1st century is another popular attraction. Sheki is famous within Azerbaijan for its baklava, piti (stew with vegetables in a clay pot), and the sense of humor of its people.*

## Day 5

## Sheki - Kish - Sheki

## Meals



Sheki

Today has a certain educational ring to it. You'll watch and learn and interact. That said, we'll start our exploring with a tour of the town in which you're staying. Sheki, apart from occupying a serene location high on a promontory and ringed with oaks, has quite a history. Settled since at least the 7th century BC, it was a silk manufacturing centre, as well as a fixed stopover on the Persian branch of the Silk Road. This tour includes the Khan's summer palace. Another monument we'll see is a 1,400 year-old Albanian church.

B

Learn about artisanal traditions at a shebeke workshop. Shebeke is a age-old art form creating intricately-patterned stained glass. Another workshop will instruct you in methods of baking paxhlava (baklava). With appetites whetted, we end with an invite to help prepare pilaf in the kitchen of a local family.

Return to your hotel in Sheki. Rest of the day at rest.

---

*Located at the foot of Mount Tat upon the banks of the Kish River, the village of **Kish** offers the few visitors it sees an authentic experience of rural small-town Azerbaijani living. One of the village's highlights is the quaint 12th-century church, known locally as the Church of Saint Elishe or the Holy Mother of God Church. The village is also home to the even more ancient ruins of Gellersen-Görersen Fortress, which date back to the Middle-Ages. The ruins sit within the dense forests of Garatepe Mountain, and the hike to find them is spectacular.*

The **Church of Kish** village (also known as the Church of Saint Elishe) is a 12th-century Caucasian Albanian church that was built on a cultic site from 3,000 BC. Under the altar, archaeologists found the remains of the original church that was founded by the first-century apostle Eliseus.

## Day 6

## Sheki - Lahij - Ganja

## Meals



Lahic

See how local people trade and deal at Sheki Bazaar. On leaving Sheki, we'll pause in Ismayilly district to see village life in Lahic. And for good reason. Many of the 2,000 people living in Lahic are involved in ancient crafts such as engraved copper work and carpet weaving. Such artisanal flair travelled far and wide, for by the mid-19th century Lahic's 200 workshops were selling wares for a premium to bazaars in Baghdad and Shiraz. You can't fail to be impressed by this craftsmanship, and you'll get to see it in the guise of coppersmiths hammering away with small mallets on decorative plates, trays, jugs, goblets and pitchers.

B

En route to Ganja, the nation's second city, we make a detour into Mingyachevir, an industrial town on Kura river. Onward to Ganja, the programme allows for a full city tour. And rightly so. We'll visit the mosque of Safavid Persian ruler, Shah Abbas. We'll see a medieval caravanserai, the Bottle House Museum of Miniatures, as well as the mausoleum of the Great Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi. End on a visit to the local bazaar.

Check in to your Ganja hotel and rest the evening at leisure.

---

**Ganja** has a rich natural, cultural and historical heritage dating back to 494 BC. The landscape is surrounded by a number of forests, vineyards, lakes, rivers and mountains. The area is famous for many mineral springs and unique medicinal oil – naphthalan. This natural substance is used as the most effective drug for the treatment of dermatological, rheumatic and neurological diseases. The Ganja sanatorium "Naftalan" is located in the heart of the ancient capital of Azerbaijan.

*Lahic is a village and municipality on the southern slopes of Greater Caucasus within the Ismaili Rayon of Azerbaijan. The population is approximately 900 people who speak the variation of Tati - Lahiji language.*

*Lahic is a notable place in Azerbaijan, with its authentic handicrafts traditions, particularly related to copper. The village's carpet and rug crafts are also well known in Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus.*

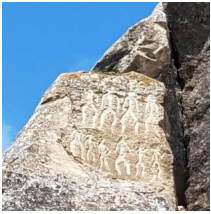
*Due to frequent earthquakes local people have developed sophisticated and authentic construction techniques. These include crosscutting stone and installation of wood. The ancient dwelling houses in Lahij have remained unchanged, as, during the past centuries, there have not been any significant changes in the urban planning. The ground floors of houses built in the main trading street are used as workshops and trade rooms. The traditional interiors of these Lahij houses include decorative tableware and other items, placed in different sized holes in the walls (known in Azerbaijan as takhcha, chamakhatan) and on wall shelves.*



## Day 7

## Ganja - Gobustan - Baku

## Meals



Gobustan  
National Park

After check-out, we take the road back to Baku. But not before stopping off at Gobustan National Park. With interesting topography wedged between the greater Caucasus range, the Caspian Sea and the Absheron peninsula, this archaeological reserve reveals direct evidence of local human presence as far back as the Upper Paleolithic period, 40,000 years ago. Its petroglyphs are a must-see when in Azerbaijan.

B

Onward to Baku when you will rest the night.

---

***Gobustan National Park** is located in the southeastern part of the Greater Caucasus mountain range in the Jeyrankechmaz River basin. A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2007, it boasts more than 6,000 preserved rock engravings that reflect up to 40,000 years of rock art. These engravings cover hunting scenes, people, plants, animals, boats and much more. The National Park also hosts the remains of settlements, lived-in caves and burial sites used between the Upper Palaeolithic and Middle Ages.*

## Day 8

## Baku - Guba - Baku

## Meals



Guba

It's a great road to Guba over the venerated mount Beshbarmaq. In Guba itself we offer a menu of sites worthy of visiting: the mosque, the old bath house, the Jewish quarter (the so-called Red Settlement), and the genocide memorial complex.


B


Back in the capital, return to your hotel and spend the evening at leisure.

---

*With a population of just under 30,000 people, **Guba** is the main town of northern Azerbaijan. It serves as a trade centre for people living in the mountains near there and hosts some tourists from Baku on weekends. Its main feature is the post-Soviet-era Bet Knesset Synagogue, a sign that this town is the base of Azerbaijan's small Jewish population. Famous for carpets and apple orchards, the low-key town of Guba, is perched on a cliff top overlooking the Qudiyalchay River. It was founded in the 18th century as the new capital of local potentate Fatali Khan but rapidly became a quiet provincial backwater once the khanate had been absorbed into the Russian Empire (1806). A number of historic buildings remain from that period and today Guba's wooded hinterland is becoming a popular spot for Baku weekenders, thanks to its distant horizon of snow-topped mountains and a comparatively cool summer climate.*



Day 9	Baku - Ramani Castle - Mardakan Castle - Gala - Baku	Meals
	<p>Our final day of excursions should be a good one. We head to the fortresses of Ramana and Mardakan, built probably in the era of the Shirvanshahs. Then it's off to Gala (Qala), a rural settlement with foundations stretching back, some say, 5,000 years. A manufacturing base for wool and salt extraction, visitors get a taste of small-town Azerbaijan. Its open-air ethnographic museum comes highly recommended.</p>	B
Mardakan Castle	<p>Back to Baku and the comforts of your hotel. Spend your final night in a manner befitting of a good holiday.</p> <p>---</p> <p><i>Located in Ramana village of Baku, <b>Ramani Castle</b> is a white stone fortress dating back to the 12th century. It contains a 15m high tower, which is assumed to have been created for the defense of the castle under Shirvanshah's rule.</i></p> <p><i>The historic <b>Mardakan Castle</b> (also known as Quadrangular castle) was built in the XII century by Akhistan I for the purpose of shelter and observation point of feudals. The castle is remote and the keyholder must be sought before one can enter, adding a romance to the visit. The castle also houses a tiny museum and boasts views across the whole region.</i></p> <p><i>One of the oldest recorded settlements in Azerbaijan, Gala (Qala) is a village in the middle of the Absheron peninsula. A sheep-breeding and wool-producing settlement, its foundations may go back upward of 5,000 years. Majorly, though, Gala is a source of salt, and extracting it is something villagers do in abundance. Attracts visitors mainly because of its open-air ethnographic museum.</i></p>	

Day 10	Departure	Meals
	<p>At the appointed hour, be transferred to the international airport for your onward flight home, or perhaps elsewhere with us in the Caucasus.</p> <p>---</p>	B
Departure		