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Azeri Familiarization Table of Contents

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Country Profile

Introduction

Azerbaijan combines the heritage of two civilizations – the Seljuk Turks of the 11th century and the ancient Persians. Its name is thought to be derived from the Persian phrase “Land of Fire” that refers both to its petroleum deposits, which were known to exist in ancient times, as well as to its status as a former center of the Zoroastrian faith.¹ Mostly Muslim, today the Azeris enjoy a modern way of life.



© Behzad Rahmati
Caucasus landscape

Azerbaijan and the United States are close allies, with Azerbaijan building its military on NATO-based systems and a number of U.S. companies co-developing projects. Azerbaijan has also developed a cooperative relationship with Russia and maintains a friendly, mutually beneficial relationship with Turkey. Relations with Iran, by contrast, are pervaded with tension.²

Geography

Area

Azerbaijan is in the southern Caucasus region of southwestern Asia between Russia and Iran, and is bounded to the east by the Caspian Sea. The neighboring country of Armenia occupies the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, which is populated with ethnic Armenians. With its present borders, Azerbaijan is roughly the size of the U.S. state of Maine.

Azerbaijan’s landscape is varied. The Kura and Aras (or Araks) Rivers form lowlands in central Azerbaijan and river deltas at the Caspian Sea. Mountain ranges surround it to the north, west, and south with sharp foothills, and with the Caspian Sea to the east. Most of the country’s arable land is found in these lowlands.

The Greater Caucasus Mountains run along the northern border of Azerbaijan and extend down toward the Absheron Peninsula. The tallest peak in Azerbaijan is Bazardyuzi at 4,466 meters (14,652 feet). Collision of the Arabian plate with the Eurasian plate created the Greater Caucasus range 23-28 million years ago. The Lesser Caucasus runs almost parallel to the Greater range along Azerbaijan’s southwestern border with Armenia. The Talysh Mountains are located along the country’s southeastern corner bordering Iran.

¹ Though it has been established that Zoroaster lived in Persia around the sixth century BCE, little is known about the origin and subsequent development of the religion bearing his name. Book review of S.A. Nigosian’s “The Zoroastrian Faith: Tradition and Modern Research,” <http://www.mqup.mcgill.ca/book.php?bookid=1543>

² Dr. Brenda Shaffer. Caspian Studies Program, Harvard University. Security Challenges. Azerbaijan Investment Guide, 5th Edition. US-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce. <http://www.usacc.org/investmentguide.pdf>, p. 14

Climate

The landscape variations also produce great variations in climate depending upon the elevation. Central and eastern Azerbaijan enjoy a mild winter and long, hot summer, with temperatures ranging from 27°C (81°F) to a maximum of 43°C (109°F). In the southeast, Azerbaijan has a humid, subtropical climate with 119-140 centimeters (47-55 inches) of rain per year, most of it in the winter. Altitudes above 700 meters (2,300 feet) have a dry, continental climate with cold winters and dry, hot summers. Most of the rest of the country is moderately warm with upland tundra occurring above 3,050 meters (10,000 feet).³

Rivers and Lakes

There are large numbers of rivers (8,359), most of which empty into the Kura River, though 3,259 of them flow directly into the Caspian Sea. The Kura flows into Azerbaijan from Georgia (known there as the Mtkvari River, or “slow one”), and is joined by its tributary, the Aras River, eventually emptying into the Caspian Sea at the Kura-Aras delta. The length of the Kura is approximately 1,364 km (874.5 miles). The Mingäçevir Hydroelectric Power Plant and the Mingäçevir Reservoir are located on the Kura River. Both rivers start in the mountains of Turkey and carry enormous amounts of sediment. Through the plains, their banks are formed mostly by soil that has been carried and deposited by the water.



© Intercaspian
Aras River

As a major tributary to the Kura River, the Aras River rises in Turkey and flows along the Turkey-Armenia and Iran-Armenia borders before entering Azerbaijan along its border with Iran. The length of the Aras River is approximately 957 km (595 miles).

A canal system connects the rivers for irrigation and navigation.⁴ One of these, the Upper Karabakh Canal, connects the Aras River to the Mingäçevir Reservoir, providing irrigation for over 100,000 hectares (247,105 acres) of farmland. It also contributes reservoir water to the Aras River when it gets low during the summer. Another key canal is the Upper Shirvan Canal, which irrigates an equal amount of land in the same region. It also originates at Mingäçevir Reservoir and runs east from there.

There are approximately 250 lakes in Azerbaijan. One lowlands lake is Lake Hajigabul, about 1.5 hours from Baku. It shelters large flocks of migrating and breeding birds, as does Lake Boyukshor between Hajigabul and Baku.⁵ The biggest freshwater lake is the Mingäçevir Reservoir, which covers 605 sq km (234 sq miles).⁶

3 U.S. Department of State. Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs. 2005. Azerbaijan. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2909.htm>

4 “Azerbaijan,” Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Service. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-44279>.

5 Azerbaijan Tour Agency. Cities. <http://www.azerbaijan24.com/cities/12/>

6 Virtual Azerbaijan Republic. <http://www.zerbaijan.com/azeri/azerbaijan4.htm>

Caspian Sea

Humans may have been living in the Caspian Sea area for the last 75,000 years, with civilization appearing about 10,000 years ago.⁷ Millions of years ago, the Caspian Sea was linked to the ocean through the Sea of Azov, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea. That link has since closed by the same continental plate activity that created the surrounding Caucasus Mountains. The Caspian is 1,200 km (750 miles) long and as much as 320 km (200 miles) wide; its surface area is larger than the country of Japan. It is deepest in the south, at 1,025 meters (3,360 feet), and contains about one-third of the world's inland surface water.

Now lacking an outlet, it receives roughly 75 percent of its inflow from the Volga, Ural, and Terek rivers that originate in Russia. The Caspian Sea has three distinct areas. The Northern Caspian is shallow, with an average depth of six meters (19.6 feet). Nutrients brought downstream by the Volga enrich the biosphere, making it ecologically rich and productive. Most animals live in this area. The Middle Caspian makes up one-third of the area and volume of the entire lake. The Southern Caspian comprises 64 percent of the total volume and 35 percent of the area.⁸ The Caspian differs from the world's oceans in its high sulfate, calcium, and magnesium carbonate content.⁹

The Caspian's water level had dropped in the past because of damming and diversion of the Volga in Russia, in addition to climate-induced changes in evaporation rates. Its changing water level has been a concern for almost a century, especially since the 1970s. The greatest change in water level was a drop of 29 meters (96 feet) in 1977. Since then, water in the lake has risen to reclaim 70 km (40.5 miles) of shoreline in the shallower North Caspian. It has also flooded villages and factories, oil wells, and even a nuclear waste dump.¹⁰

Biodiversity

Eleven percent of Azerbaijan is forest, about 936,000 hectares (2,312,906 acres).¹¹ Primary forest is about 42.7 percent, most of which is subtropical or temperate. 20,000 hectares (49,421 acres) are in plantations. 109 of the tree species are native to Azerbaijan. Almost all of the forest land is in public ownership. Industrial use of forest land consumed only 8,000 cubic meters (282,517 cubic feet) in 2005 and fuel use accounted for an additional 16,000 cubic meters (565,034 cubic feet). These numbers are sustainable and have held steady for ten years. The Talysh Mountains especially are full of forests of rare trees such as the lignum-vitae or ironwood, box-tree, yew-tree, meek acacia, and chestnut oak.

7 Ajam, Mohammed. Names of the Caspian Sea. Iran Chamber Society
http://www.iranchamber.com/geography/articles/names_of_caspian_sea.php

8 Aladin, Nikolai and Igor Plotnikov. The Caspian Sea. p.6
<http://www.worldlakes.org/uploads/Caspian%20Sea%2028Jun04.pdf>

9 "Caspian Sea," Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Service <http://www.britannica.com/article-9110540>.

10 Kara-Bogaz-Gol, Turkmenistan. US Geological Survey, US Department of the Interior.
<http://earthshots.usgs.gov/KBG/KBG>

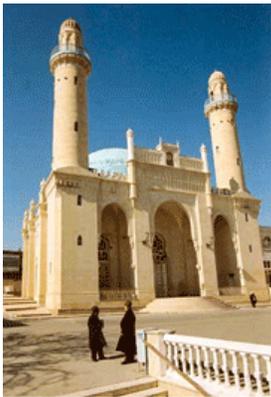
11 Butler, Rhett A. Azerbaijan Deforestation. The Mongabay Fund.
<http://rainforests.mongabay.com/deforestation/2000/Azerbaijan.htm>

Azerbaijan shelters 517 known species of amphibians, birds, mammals, and reptiles; three of these exist nowhere else in the world, and 27 are threatened. Among the mammals are gazelles, jackals, wild boar, bears, Caucasian goats, Caucasian deer, European bison, chamois, and rare leopards; birds include pheasants, partridges, flamingos, swans, herons, egrets and sandpipers.¹² There are 4,300 species of plants, just over 240 of which are endemic. The Caspian Sea is home to distinct wildlife such as the Beluga sturgeon.

Major Cities

Baku

Baku is the capital of Azerbaijan and its most heavily populated city, with 2.1 million residents as of 2004. It is on Azerbaijan's eastern coastline, extending onto the Absheron Peninsula. Near petroleum fields, it is a well established site for oil refining. Residents have been aware of the petroleum fields since the eighth century CE, and the fields have been heavily utilized since the 15th century CE. They were the most important of the Soviet oil fields. The on-land wells are mostly dry now, but oil companies have identified new sources offshore in the Caspian.



Courtesy of wikipedia.org
Drilling platform in the
Caspian Sea

“Old Town” is a fortress that walls in the center of the city. This is the original site of the ancient town of Icheri Sheher. Outside of these walls, modern Baku sprawls out towards the Caspian Sea and onto the Absheron Peninsula. Inside the fortress is a maze of narrow, cobble-stoned streets winding around ancient buildings such as the Maidens Tower (or tower of Kyz-Kalasy), which was built sometime in the 12th century CE and provides a good view of the city. Another interesting ancient building is the palace of Shirvan Shahs constructed during the 11th century CE. It is now a museum open to the public.¹³

Ganja

The “Ganjak” tribe may have given its name to the city Ganja. It is Azerbaijan's second largest city with a population of 300,000. Ganja lies 300 km (186 miles) west of Baku, adjacent to the Ganja River in the northwestern part of the country south of the Kura River. First mentioned in the fifth or sixth century CE, it was once the capital of Azerbaijan and a stop on the caravan routes from Baku to Tbilisi. In the 11th century CE, it was the center of Caucasian Albanian Christianity. The area around Ganja is ideal for farming, producing a rich variety of farm products. Under the Soviet regime, Ganja became the center for industry in western Azerbaijan. Most of the industrial factories from the Soviet era have now closed down. But the industrial heritage remains, with a rebirth of new, smaller companies producing porcelain, silk, and footwear. There was once a strong German influence, but most ethnic Germans left after the collapse of the

12 Ragimov, Sabir. Ecotourism in Azerbaijan. <http://www.ecotourism.aznet.org/generalinfo/t2.html>

13 Balametov, Jamal, Julia Shukurova, Vadim Derkach. International Community of Bakunians. http://www.bakupages.com/pages/baku/baku_en.php

Soviet Union in 1991. There is much to see in the city; sites include a 17th century CE mosque and a house made of 50,000 bottles. There are also refugee settlements nearby.¹⁴

Sumqayıt (Sumgait)

Sumqayıt is the third largest city in Azerbaijan, but only gained that status in recent history. Before World War II, Sumqayıt was a small town of approximately 4,000 people. In 1944 Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, recognizing Sumqayıt's industrial potential owing to its oil reserves, directed resources on a large scale there to support the war. Sumqayıt was also renamed Sumgait at this time. By 2005 the city's population had grown to 268,522. With cheap and plentiful hydropower available, factories in Sumqayıt process imported bauxite into aluminum. Sumqayıt has also become a center for other products, with local industries turning petroleum into synthetic rubber, fertilizer, detergents, and petrochemicals. But it remains a heavily polluted city. Although the production of petrochemicals has virtually ended and pollution has declined, chemicals remain in the ground and are a major hazard. While the government has begun a program to build a landfill for toxic materials, dioxin levels, for one, have been measured at 1,000 times the rate deemed safe. Refugees live in and near the city in camps, some in tents.¹⁵

Mingäçevir

Mingäçevir (or Mingeçaur) also saw tremendous growth in the 1940s. It is in central Azerbaijan, near the Kura River, about 275 km (171 miles) west of Baku. Archeological digs in the area have uncovered human remains over 5,000 years old. The city remained small until World War II, but the population has since grown to almost 100,000. Mingäçevir is known for its unusual architecture and its many monuments and parks. The Mingäçevir Reservoir also provides 360 megawatts of hydroelectricity at capacity, flood control, and irrigation for the river valley.¹⁶

Ali-Bayramlı

Ali Bayramlı is in the heart of the ancient plains next to the Kura River. Originally a small settlement, it now has a population of 70,900, excluding refugees. Ali-Bayramlı became significant when the Ali-Bayramlı Hydroelectric Power Station opened in 1968. It was the first power station of its type to open in the then USSR or in Europe.¹⁷

Şakı (Säki or Sheki)

Another ancient city of Azerbaijan, founded some 2,700 years ago, Şakı was a trade center on the silk route to Daghestan. It sits in a bowl 700 meters (2,297 feet) above sea level, surrounded by oak trees, on the southern side of the Greater Caucasus Range. Şakı's fame comes from its refined sericulture (the craft of producing silk and its cloth) industry.¹⁸

¹⁴ "Ganca." <http://www.travel-images.com/az-ganja.html>

¹⁵ Yakubov, Kamal. "Ecological problems of the Sumgait petrochemical complex." <http://ruzgar.aznet.org/ruzgar/1-5.htm>

¹⁶ "Mingeçaur." <http://www.travel-images.com/az-mingeçaur.html>

¹⁷ Azerbaijan Development Gateway. http://www.gateway.az/cgi-bin/cl2_gw/browse.cgi?lang=en&topic=000e0c

¹⁸ "Säki." Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Service. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9067243>.

History

Early in the country's history, Turkic tribes, Kurds, and Christian Caucasian Albanians lived in the area. They were culturally influenced by the Armenians. The invasion by the Seljuk Turks in the 11th century gave the Azerbaijani their Turkic language. Various groups with predominantly Islamic influences, including Arabs, Persians, Turks, and Mongols, controlled Azerbaijan until the early 19th century CE when the Russian Empire invaded.¹⁹

Azerbaijan was under Russian control until breaking away and declaring independence in 1918. The capital, Baku, remained in Communist hands with the assistance of local Armenian soldiers. Allied with advancing Turkish forces, Azerbaijani nationalists secured their capital and began a massacre of the Armenians.²⁰ One year later the Russians, this time as the Soviet Army, invaded again, and Azerbaijan became part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In 1936, the USSR officially declared the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. It was not until 1991, when the Soviet Union broke apart, that Azerbaijan finally achieved its present-day independence.

Territorial Disputes

Part of the Soviet legacy is the contentious and unique border that surrounds Azerbaijan. Armenia, the Republic of Georgia, Russia, and Iran, as well as the Caspian Sea, all share common borders with Azerbaijan.

The Naxçivan Autonomous Republic is geographically isolated from the rest of Azerbaijan by Armenia as a consequence of Soviet governance. When Stalin reassigned the intermediate province of Zangezur to Armenia in 1924, he completely cut off Naxçivan from the main part of Azerbaijan. Naxçivan has a long history of being a contested territory, dating from 1500 BCE. But in 1828, the territory passed to Russia. In 1924, it became an autonomous republic of the Soviet Union. Azerbaijanis constitute almost the entire population, with small numbers of Armenians and Russians. It is mostly mountainous, dry in the small plains area, and moderately wet in the mountains.²¹



DLIFLC image
Map of Azerbaijan

The Nagorno-Karabakh region, controlled by ethnic Armenians, is in the southwestern part of Azerbaijan. The term Nagorno-Karabakh originates from the Russian for "mountainous Karabakh," which separates it from Armenia. The region was Artsakh when Russia acquired it in 1813. Then, in 1923, the Soviets made it a part of Azerbaijan

¹⁹"Azerbaijan," Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Service: <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-129462>

²⁰ "Azerbaijan," Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Service: <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-44299>

²¹ "Nakhichevan," Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Service <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9054715>

though its population is 80 percent Armenian. As the Azerbaijani population grew, the Karabakh Armenians chafed under discriminatory rule, and by 1960 hostilities were evident between the two populations.²²

In 1988, the ethnic Armenians agitated for a reincorporation with Armenia, something which was anathema to and militarily opposed by both Azerbaijan and the then Soviet government. The ethnic war began when the USSR was disbanded and withdrew its military presence at the same time that both Armenia and Azerbaijan gained their independence. By June 1992, the ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh had expelled all ethnic Azerbaijanis and had opened a corridor to Armenia through the Azerbaijani region of Lachin, which had a substantial Kurdish population.²³ Though Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a cease-fire in 1994, it is estimated that 30,000 people died between 1992 and 1994.



© Aramco Services Company
Armenian man in Lahic, Nagorno-Karabakh

After the cease-fire, about 72,000 displaced Azeris returned to regions bordering ethnic Armenian-controlled areas. Because Armenian forces continue to control Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding provinces, which make up about 16 percent of Azerbaijan's territory, the vast majority of the displaced cannot return to their home regions. Those who remain displaced include about 40,000 refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh and 530,000 refugees from areas outside Nagorno-Karabakh. The overwhelming majority is ethnic Azeris, but there are also ethnic Russians and Chechens.²⁴

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, the legal status of the Caspian Sea, with the area's potential to generate billions of dollars in oil revenue at stake, has been in limbo.²⁵ Among the Caspian's five littoral states of Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkmenistan, only the first three have been able to agree on how to divide the seabed. Iran and Turkmenistan have adopted different positions, although Turkmenistan has been moving closer to the position of the first three states.

The potential for tension and even armed conflict was illustrated in 2001, when an Iranian gunboat threatened two of Azerbaijan's exploration vessels that were operated by British Petroleum in the disputed region. Iran's position is that the Caspian Sea should be divided into five equal parts with 20 percent for each littoral state. Azerbaijan, by contrast, argues that the division should be done according to a median line, which leaves Iran with only 12-13 percent. The trilateral agreement signed among Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Russia is based on the median-line approach, which has weakened Iran's stance. But

²² "Nagorno-Karabakh," <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/nagorno-karabakh.htm>

²³ "Nagorno-Karabakh," Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9054658>

²⁴ "Azerbaijan," <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/country/detail/2938/>

²⁵ "Europe and the development of energy resources in the Caspian sea region." Parliamentary Assembly Report, Council of Europe, December 12, 2002. <http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/doc02/EDOC9635.htm>

Tehran remains steadfast on its right to 20 percent of the sea, because only then does the Alov/Alborz oil field within the Caspian fall under Iranian sovereignty.²⁶

Government

Formally known as the Republic of Azerbaijan, the country has a unicameral legislative branch of 125 representatives in its National Assembly. The president, elected by the people to a five-year term, is responsible for appointing a prime minister and a Council of Ministers. The National Assembly confirms them both. Multiple political parties vie for public support.²⁷ The nominally independent Supreme Court heads the judicial system. Of the three branches, the judicial, legislative and executive, the most powerful is the executive, with the president having stronger powers than the courts or the legislature. Azerbaijan declared independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991. Its first president was Ayaz Mutalibov, who had been the First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party. Not long after violence broke out with Armenians over the Nagorno-Karabakh region and many Azerbaijanis were killed in 1992, Mutalibov resigned. What followed was a period of wavering political discord.

Heydar Aliyev was elected president in 1993, holding two consecutive five-year terms. His son, Ilham Aliyev, succeeded him in 2003, through an election which international observers said did not meet international standards for transparency.²⁸

Media

Soviet censors prevented the dissemination of unapproved content through any official outlet. Coming out of this tightly controlled atmosphere has been a slow process. The constitution promises freedom of speech and a free media, but there have been instances of violence and threats made towards journalists and media outlets that criticize the government.²⁹

Economy

Though rich in natural resources, Azerbaijan suffers from extensive environmental degradation that can be attributed to the Soviet Union's oil industry and Baku's aging urban infrastructure.³⁰ The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, which comprises about one-

26 Ziyadov, Taleh. "Iran and China Sign Agreement to Explore Oil in the Caspian Sea," February 1 2006. http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2370729

27 Department of State. Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs. Azerbaijan. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2909.htm>

28 Department of State. Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs. Azerbaijan. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2909.htm>

29 Azerbaijan Country Profile. British Broadcasting Corporation.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country_profiles/1235976.stm#media

30 Rowe, Gilbert T. "Azerbaijan, oil, and sustainable development in Azerbaijan," <http://www-ocean.tamu.edu/Quarterdeck/QD4.3/rowe-4.3.html>

third of Azerbaijan's croplands, substantially reduced agricultural production beginning in 1989.³¹

Azerbaijan's nominal gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 10.2 percent to USD8.5 billion in 2004, as foreign investors pushed ahead with major projects in Azerbaijan despite the worldwide economic slowdown. Foreign direct investment in the country rose 30 percent to USD4.4 billion in 2004, of which over 97 percent occurred in the country's hydrocarbon sector.



© Galen R Frysinger
Drilling platform in the
Caspian Sea

Nonetheless, Azerbaijan is still struggling to overcome the economic collapse that ensued after the Soviet system was disbanded. The country's GDP contracted by almost 60 percent between 1990 and 1995. By 2000 and 2001, wages were increasing around 20 percent each year, but by the first quarter of 2004, the average monthly wage was only around USD78.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), almost 45 percent of the population lies below the poverty line.³²

Azerbaijan's installed electricity production capacity of about 5.2 gigawatts comes from eight thermal plants (providing 80 percent of the capacity) and six hydroelectric plants. The plants are all state-owned, and unable to provide enough electricity for the total needs of the country. Some of the power is imported from outside the nation. Distribution has been inefficient, with as much as seven percent of generated power lost in transmission. In May 2005, the World Bank approved a USD48 million loan to improve the efficiency of the power transmission operation in Azerbaijan through technical and institutional strengthening of the generation/transmission utility.³³

Ethnic Groups and Languages

The three primary ethnic groups are Azerbaijani, Lezgins, and Russian. The 2005 census estimate puts the Azerbaijani population at 90.6 percent, the Lezgins (Dagestanis) at 2.2 percent, and the Russian population at 1.8 percent.³⁴

The Armenian population, which is at about 1.5 percent, is almost entirely located in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The Lezgins live in northern Azerbaijan across the border from Russia, where the majority of their people live in Dagestan. They are Sunni Muslim and have their own Caucasian language.

31 "Azerbaijan," Library of Congress Country Studies. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+az0046\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+az0046))

32 Azerbaijan Country Analysis Brief. Energy Information Administration, US Department of Energy. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/azerbjan.html>

33 "Power Transmission Project," <http://web.worldbank.org/external/default/main?pagePK=64027221&piPK=64027220&theSitePK=362340&menuPK=362374&Projectid=P083341>

34 Department of State Country Studies. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2909.htm>

The remaining ethnic groups make up about 3.9 percent of the population. Among them are the Talysh, a group of Iranian people that live in extreme southeastern Azerbaijan. Since gaining independence, the Talysh have demanded more equality for their group and more regular contact with their fellow Talysh. They are primarily agricultural, Muslim Shi'a, and speak a dialect related to Farsi.³⁵ There are also small groups of Kurds on the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Azerbaijan has had many ethnic influences from Turkic, Russian, and Islamic cultures. Azeri, the official language, is Turkic, and about 89 percent of the population speaks it as a first language. Because of Soviet occupation, almost 40 percent of Azerbaijanis also speak Russian fluently. In 1940, Stalin changed the official alphabet, from Arabic to Cyrillic. This isolated the Azerbaijani people from Islamic nationalist movements and forced them to learn Russian. In 1992, after gaining independence, the government changed the official written language to an adapted Roman alphabet, choosing not to resume use of an Arabic script.

In the Nagorno-Karabakh region, the Armenians speak Turkish and use Russian as their second language. In larger villages and urban areas, those who are 40 years and younger will usually speak or at least understand English. Education and the influence of Western films have encouraged young Azerbaijani to learn English.

Approximately 16 million Azeri-speakers live outside Azerbaijan, mostly in northern Iran.³⁶ In Iran, they constitute one-fourth of the population and are the largest ethnic minority.

There are also a substantial number of Azeri-speaking natives in Georgia, based in the rural areas around Rustavi. They form the largest ethnic group of that region, with a population of 630,000. Most are refugees from a Turkmen invasion from Central Asia in the 14th century CE. They define themselves as Azeri, and the Georgian government grants that definition. Most are Shi'a, though there is a Sunni minority.³⁷

³⁵ Vladimir Socor, "Talysh Issue, Dormant in Azerbaijan, Reopened in Armenia."

http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2369811

³⁶ "Azerbaijan," Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Service <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-44283>.

³⁷ Curado, Luis Miguel Torres. Travel Images. Rustavi, Georgia. <http://www.travel-images.com/az-rustavi.html>

Religion

Islam

Muslims believe that the Prophet Mohammed received the Koran by periodic revelations from Allah through the archangel Gabriel over a period of 23 years while meditating in the desert. One becomes a Muslim by professing the singularity of Allah as God, and naming Mohammed as the Messenger of Allah. This is the confession of faith called *shahada*, one of the five “pillars” of Islam. The other pillars of this faith are daily prayer; the giving of alms as charity; making a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to the holy city, Mecca; and fasting during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar.

Muslims have divided themselves into two main groups splitting over who has the right to govern the faithful. Since Mohammed said nothing explicit about who should succeed



© Aramco Services Company
Men praying in a mosque in Sheki

him, it was assumed by many Muslims that the standard succession practice would apply. At the death of their leader, the men of a tribe would gather and elect a leader from their fellows. This new leader would be selected based on merit, not on lineage, competence being the most important factor. Upon Mohammed’s death in 632 CE at Medina, his father-in-law, Abu Bakr, succeeded him. His followers became the Sunni.

The Shi’a, by contrast, still view the Abu-Bakr succession as wrong. They maintain that Mohammed all but named his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib, as his successor. Thus, the term Shi’a is derived from the expression *Shi’at Ali*, or Party of Ali. By 1250 CE, the Prophet’s line of descendants had died out, and the Shi’a started electing a supreme leader. This leader’s edicts carry, for Shi’a, the moral authority of Mohammed.

About 93% of the Azerbaijani population is Shi’a Muslim, though the actual numbers of those practicing the faith are unknown. The Muslim faith is practiced in a somewhat more relaxed fashion in Azerbaijan than in other Islamic countries, yet there are some groups and families that strictly adhere to the teachings of the Koran.

Influence of Religion on Daily Life

Prayer is mandatory for every devout Muslim. Both men and women may go to the mosque to pray, but many pray at home, sitting on a rug. Muslims say prayers to Allah five times a day, facing east to Mecca, the spiritual homeland for Muslims. This requirement to pray five times daily demands a certain amount of time, so there is some effect on a primarily Muslim culture. Also, in the month of Ramadan, when the faithful are fasting during the day, patience can be a little thinner than at other times, even in Azerbaijan, where religious tolerance is widespread.

Even though the majority of the population is Islamic, other religions such as Christianity, for example the Armenian and Russian Orthodox Churches, are represented. On any given holy day, or *sabbath*, services are held in Baku at two principal mosques, two

Russian Orthodox churches, the New Apostle Church (German Lutheran), two Synagogues (Sephardic and Ashkenazi), and the Seventh Day Adventist Church.³⁸ These faiths have their own places of worship and anyone can attend services openly. Discussing religion or religious topics is completely acceptable and would not generally offend anyone. People of different faiths interact with each other without restrictions.

Influence of Religion on Male/Female Interaction

The more relaxed attitude toward religion that prevails in Azerbaijan makes the issue of male-female interaction less volatile than in other societies. However, the usual Muslim customs apply, such as trying to avoid speaking to females when a male is present.

Women in rural areas that set out without a male companion, drive by themselves, or frequent certain restaurants or theaters may be frowned upon by the more conservative members of the community.³⁹ Conservative Muslim women will still cover their head in public and when unrelated males are present in the home. When in a mosque, men and women pray separately in designated areas separated by a curtain.



© Aramco Services Company
Women praying in a special section of the mosque

Religious Holidays

There are two major religious holidays in Azerbaijan: Ramadan and *Kurban-Bayram*. Ramadan is a special celebration that lasts for an entire month, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. During Ramadan, Muslims fast during daylight hours and break the fast at sundown with a large meal called *iftar* and a prayer. The elderly, children, and the infirm are excepted from the fasting. However, it is considered rude for non-Muslims to eat, drink, or smoke in public during daylight hours. Muslims mark the end of Ramadan with a three-day celebration called *Eid-al-Fitr*, which means the “breaking of the fast,” and a gift to members of the clergy.

Kurban-Bayram is celebrated in the tenth month and honors the biblical story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his own son. The ceremony involves an animal sacrifice to Allah, the meat of which the devout then divide among its owner’s family, relatives, and as charity.⁴⁰ *Kurban-Bayram* is marked by shepherds driving their flocks into the cities and slaughtering the sheep on demand in the streets.

Buildings of Worship

There are many places to worship in Azerbaijan, and almost every city has one or more mosques. Some of the more notable sites include Taza-pir and Bibeydat in Baku, and Shakh Abbas and Immanzade in Ganja.

38 United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund. UN Azerbaijan. Living. http://www.un-az.org/doc/living2005_final.doc

39 “Azerbaijan,” Library of Congress Country Studies. <http://countrystudies.us/azerbaijan/18.htm>

40 Heydar Aliyev Foundation <http://azerbaijan.tourism.az/holi.html>

One of the more interesting sites, the Ateshgah Temple, is located near Baku on the Absheron Peninsula near Surakhany, about 20 km (12 miles) from Baku. Zoroastrians constructed the temple on sacred ground that was also a natural gas vent. Called the Fireworshippers Temple, devout Azerbaijanis have been visiting this temple for thousands of years. Flames would appear to burn from the ground due to the area's dispersion of natural gas and oil.⁴¹ The natural gas vent has been exhausted since the late 19th century CE.⁴²

Behavior in Places of Worship

If you wish to visit a mosque, it is a good idea to request permission.

Exchange 1: May I Enter?

Soldier:	May I enter?	man eecharRee kecha bilaRamee?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Faces, hands, and feet are cleansed according to preordained rituals. Shoes should be removed before entering a mosque.

Exchange 2: Should I remove my shoes?

Soldier:	Should I remove my shoes?	aayaaKh gaablaaRinee cheKhaRmak laazemdee?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Heads are covered out of respect: women wear either scarves or shawls, and men wear hats.

Exchange 3: Do I need to cover my head?

Soldier:	Do I need to cover my head?	baashamee æRtmak laazemdee?
Local:	Yes.	balee

It is not acceptable to talk to those who are praying, or to ask them questions while they are saying their prayers. Similarly, do not walk in front of someone who is praying; this is thought to invalidate their prayers.

Exchange 4: When do you pray?

Soldier:	When do you pray?	naa zaamaan naamaaz gleRaRseniz?
Local:	I pray at noon.	junoRta zaamaanee naamaaz gelaaRaam

41 Lonely Planet World Guide. Places to see.
<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/destinations/europe/azerbaijan?poi=296>

42 Faig Nasibov. Window to Baku. Fire Temple Ateshgah. <http://www.window2baku.com/eng/9ateshqeh.htm>

Traditions

Traditional Jobs

While almost half the nation was engaged in agriculture, farming activity contributed only nine percent to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2005. Mining and quarrying (crude oil and natural gas) contributed another 39.4 percent, and manufacturing accounted for 7.2 percent of the GDP. Other significant GDP percentages were generated by construction (10 percent) and social and non-formal services (10.6 percent).⁴³

Traditional Economy

The Soviets introduced heavy industry to Azerbaijan, but agriculture has always been a major part of the Azerbaijani economy. Fame, however, as opposed to fortune, has come through the craftsmanship that produced intricate carpets and textiles as far back as the Middle Ages. Artists used rich pictures of vegetation patterns and texts of poetry. Each region had a traditional pattern and, during the 18th century CE, silk production became important. Additionally, Azerbaijan has been famous for producing chased, or engraved, weapons, and miniature books with elaborate calligraphy and illustrations.⁴⁴

Greetings

Most Azeris appreciate warmth and friendliness.⁴⁵ Men will always greet each other with a handshake. If they are related or close friends, the handshake is accompanied by a kiss on the cheek. Azeris will also greet each other by saying *salaam*, which means “peace.” Younger people are expected to show respect for their elders by greeting them first, but it is the older person that must initiate the handshake.



© Aramco Services Company
Man in Sheki

Exchange 5: Good morning.

Soldier:	Good morning!	sabaahiniz KheyiR olsun!
Local:	Good morning!	sabaahiniz KheyiR!

The handshake is, in fact, is so important in Azeri culture that not shaking hands, even with strangers, is considered rude. Azeri women do not normally shake hands with each other, though they may with a foreigner. Men should wait for a woman to extend her hand. Most will, but the more religious may not.

⁴³ Republic of Azerbaijan. State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan in Figures 2006. <http://www.azstat.org/publications/azfigures/2006/en/010.shtml>

⁴⁴ Library of Congress Country Studies. Azerbaijan. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstty:@field\(DOCID+az0037\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstty:@field(DOCID+az0037))

⁴⁵ Kwintessential Language and Cultural Specialists. Cultural Guide-Azerbaijan. <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/azerbaijan.html>

Exchange 6: Good afternoon.

Soldier:	Good afternoon!	junoRtaaniz KheyiR olsun!
Local:	Good afternoon!	junoRtaaniz KheyiR!

Women hug and kiss each other once on the left cheek. In rural areas, women are more traditional and reserved than their urban counterparts. It is all right to say hello, but do not try to force them to engage in conversation. It may make them uncomfortable or even offend them.⁴⁶

Exchange 7: Good evening.

Soldier:	Good evening!	aaKhshaaminiz KheyiR olsun!
Local:	Good evening!	aaKhshaaminiz KheyiR!

Good-byes are just as important as greetings and are usually long and a bit drawn out. Azerbaijanis say good-bye to everybody they meet, be it other guests at a party, their cab driver, or even a shop clerk who assisted them.

Exchange 8: Good night.

Soldier:	Good night!	jejaaniz KheyRa gaalsin!
Local:	Good night!	KheyRa gaRshi!

Communication & Meetings

Always ask about family, health, and business.

Exchange 9: How are you?

Soldier:	How are you?	nejaaseeniz?
Local:	Fine, thank you.	choKh yaaKhshe, saagh olun

Use first names in social situations if those present are about the same age. It is always up to younger people to initiate greetings with elders. If you do not know a person well, use the first name followed by *hanum* (woman) for a female, and *bey* or *janab* (mister) for a male.

Exchange 10: Are you doing well? (Informal)

Soldier:	Hi, Mr. Kazimov!	salaam-aleykum janab chaazimov!
Local:	Hello!	aleyk-asalaam!
Soldier:	Are you doing well?	eeshlaReeniz yaaKhshidiR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Directness in communication is positive, but be careful to present information diplomatically and sensitively. In fact, if it is a new, formal, or important relationship, it

⁴⁶ Columbia Travel Publishing New Media Group. World Travel Guide. Azerbaijan.
http://www.worldtravelguide.net/country/general_information.ehtml?o=22&NAV_guide_class=CountryGuide&NAV_Region=22

is critical to be diplomatic. Well-developed relationships can withstand a bit more honesty.

When calling an Azeri, it is polite to converse with the person who answers the phone, even if it is not the specific person you are trying to call. Just demanding to speak to someone else without engaging in some small talk would seem rude.

Exchange 11: What is your telephone number?

Soldier:	What is your telephone number?	seezin tilefonun nœmRaniz nechadiR?
Local:	My phone number is 132-5477.	manim tilefon nœmRam (yuz otoz eechee, alee dœRt, yetmish yet-didiR.)

Meetings in Azerbaijan are set up by first sending an introductory letter (translated into Azeri) that mentions the purpose of the proposed meeting. Often a meeting will begin informally, with tea. Eye contact, a sign of sincerity, is essential. Decisions can take considerable time, and thus it is important to remain patient. Haggling and bargaining is the way business is conducted on the street in Azerbaijan; it is also the norm during meetings.⁴⁷

Dress Code

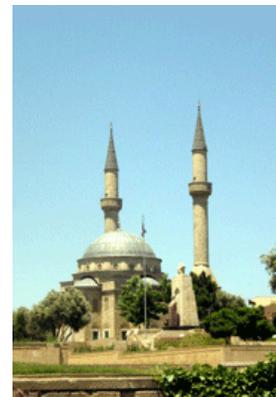
Clothing varies in Azerbaijan. Western casual clothes are acceptable, especially in the cities.

Exchange 12: Is this okay to wear?

Soldier:	Is this okay to wear?	boonoo jeyinmek yaKhshidiRmi?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Stricter Muslims dress conservatively, but the rest of the population follow European fashion trends. In cities, women wear make-up, do not cover their face, and wear slacks, sometimes even jeans. In urban areas, women can also wear shorts, but they should cover their legs in more conservative rural areas. Men, however, should not wear shorts. In contrast to other Islamic countries, it is acceptable for women to bare their legs, but not for men.

Strict Muslim women, especially those living in rural areas, will cover their heads with shawls and wear long dresses over long slacks. These women do not wear make-up. Muslim men usually have beards. When unsure of how to dress appropriately, it is good to ask.



© Phil Roberts
Mosque in Baku

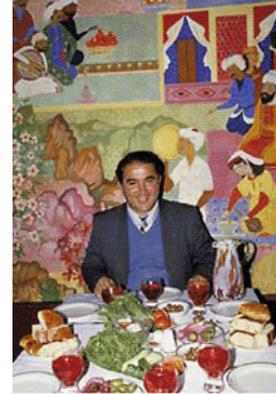
⁴⁷ Cultural Guide-Azerbaijan Kwintessential Language and Cultural Specialists.
<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/azerbaijan.html>

Gift Giving

Gifts for special occasions are quite common, especially for New Year’s and International Women’s Day, but also for weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, graduation, and acceptance to school. Standard gifts include souvenirs, clothing, jewelry, or money. If you are to give flowers to someone, make sure they have an odd number of stems. Flowers with an even number of stems (as in a dozen roses) are associated with death and reserved for funerals.

Hospitality

When you visit someone’s home in Azerbaijan, you will most likely be given a gift such as flowers or a souvenir. Visiting an Azeri home, especially for the first time, without bringing a gift is seen as inconsiderate, so a small token should be given in return. It is a good idea to travel with a few items that would be suitable, such as souvenirs or special food items from home. The gift may or may not be opened in your presence.



© Aramco Services Company
Man dining at a restaurant

Smoking and drinking are permissible in Azeri culture; only strict Muslims abstain. Before bringing a present that contains alcohol, be sure to know whether your hosts use alcohol. If you are unsure, bring something else.

If invited to an Azeri home, it is not critical to be punctual, as it is perfectly acceptable to arrive within 30 minutes of the specific time. Dress casually but neatly, and do not wear clothing that is too tight or revealing. Remove your shoes before entering the home.

Exchange 13: How should I dress?

Soldier:	How should I dress?	man neja jeyinmaliyam?
Local:	Dress casually.	saada

Upon entering, greet everyone in the room individually by shaking their hand. Should guests arrive after you are already in the home, stand up and shake their hand as well. Do not seat yourself, but remain standing until you are invited to sit in the place that was meant for you.

Exchange 14: I really appreciate your hospitality.

Soldier:	I really appreciate your hospitality.	gonaKhpaaRvaRliyiniza jøeRa choKh meenaat-daaRam
Local:	You are welcome.	deymiz

Table manners can be formal. If you are unsure of what to do, watch the host or other guests and imitate what they are doing. Do not serve yourself. The host will typically serve elders first, then the guest, and finally the children.

While eating, use only your right hand. The left hand is considered unclean and should not come into contact with food. The same goes for passing things around the table: use

only your right hand. Keep your hands above the table, not in your lap, and rest your forearms on the edge of the table. Elbows should be kept off the table at all times.

Complimenting a woman can get a man into trouble. Among more educated people, it may be acceptable. Since the status of local people is a difficult thing for an outsider to gauge, it is best to avoid complimenting a woman about her appearance. However, any specific compliments regarding cooking are welcome.

Exchange 15: The meal was very good.

Soldier:	The meal was very good.	yemak choKh daadlee-eedee
Local:	Thanks.	choKh saaghooloon

Cuisine

Azerbaijani food is Georgian and Turkish, with Iranian influences.⁴⁸ Meat is commonly served, primarily lamb in a number of forms including *dolmas* which are stuffed in rolled grape leaves.

Exchange 16: What is the name of this food?

Soldier:	What is the name of this food?	boo yemayin aadi nadeeR?
Local:	This is dolma.	dolmaa

Exchange 17: What kind of meat is cooked for dolma?

Soldier:	What kind of meat is cooked for dolma?	dolmaani haansi atdan hazeRlayRsiniz?
Local:	Lamb or beef or mixed.	goyoon yaa maal atindan yaaKhud gaRisheKh

Kebabs, though normally made of skewered or grilled beef, can also include mutton or poultry.

Exchange 18: What type of meat is this?

Soldier:	What type of meat is this?	boo yemayin aadi nadeeR?
Local:	Lamb.	dolmaa

Seasoning is intricate and thorough, and varies from region to region. Flavorings and seasonings can include chestnuts, apricots, raisins, and herbs. Most commonly, the starch would be pilaf or *plov*, rice fried with meats, fish, vegetables, and even fruit. In Azerbaijan, the pilaf is cooked in separate pots, then served either with melted butter in a jug or in a lidded metal dish.

Exchange 19: The food is very good.

Soldier:	The food is very good.	boo yemak choKh lazatlidiR
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⁴⁸ Azerb.com. A to Z of Azerbaijan. Food. <http://www.travel-images.com/azerb.html>

Local:	Thank you.	choKh saaghooloon
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Northwest Azerbaijan serves a dish called *khingal*, with meat, fried onion and *kurut*, a dried cottage cheese.

In the southeast, near Iran, chicken is stuffed with nuts, onion, and jelly, and then fried. Fish is stuffed and baked as in Afghanistan or India, in a *tandoor* or clay oven. The Absheron Peninsula has the famous *dushpara*, small meat dumplings made in thin dough.

Bread is served with almost every meal, most commonly a round loaf called *chorek*. There is also a cracker-bread, *lavash*, and a traditional white-flour wheat bread, also baked in a *tandoor* oven.



© Aramco Services Company
Chorek

One of Azerbaijan's most unusual and expensive delicacies is caviar, and it is available both fresh and canned. Unfortunately, much of the caviar available is most likely poached. The sturgeon itself is also eaten in a number of forms—filleted, boiled, grilled, stewed, and in a pilaf.

Tea is the most common beverage, used for social occasions at home or even at business meetings. It is served, usually unsweetened, in small pear-shaped glasses called *armud*, which, coincidentally, is Azeri for pear. A common sweetener, if added, is jam. Dessert is *shekerbura*, a pie made with flavoring of nuts and sugar; *shekerlockum*; or *pahlava*, a light pastry layered in a diamond shape and flavored with honey and nuts. It is all accompanied by tea and, perhaps, sherbet, which is very popular.

Restaurants

Eating out is a favorite pastime in Azerbaijan. There are many restaurants, both in rural and urban areas, with cuisine varying from American and European to Turkish.

Exchange 20: I would like coffee or tea.

Soldier:	I would like coffee or tea.	mana kah-va yaaKhud chaay jateeRin
Local:	Sure.	oldu

Try to order bottled water in a restaurant, or make sure that it has been boiled first. Do not drink water directly from the tap in any case.

Exchange 21: Can I have a glass of water?

Soldier:	Can I have a glass of water?	mana beeR istekaan soo jateeRa bilaRsiniz?
Local:	Yes sir!	albeta aagha!

According to traveler accounts and blogs written by expatriates, what a restaurant has listed on a menu and what it actually serves are two very different things.⁴⁹

Exchange 22: Are you still serving breakfast?

Soldier:	Are you still serving breakfast?	seezda sahaR yemayi olaaR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Moreover, there is a custom that you do not eat fish in any months that do not have the letter “r.” Therefore, it is nearly impossible to get fish any time from May to August. Soups and desserts will almost always be available.

Exchange 23: I’d like some hot soup.

Soldier:	I’d like some hot soup.	mana eesti soop jateeRin
Local:	Sure.	baash usta

Exchange 24: Do you have a dessert?

Soldier:	Do you have a dessert?	seezda dezeRt vaaR?
Local:	Yes, we have sherbet, cake, and pastries.	balee, bizda shaRbat, toRt, va pRiyonaa vaRdaR

If you are dining out with others, it might be a nice gesture to invite them to dinner.

Exchange 25: Put this all in one bill, okay?

Soldier:	Put this all in one bill, okay?	haamisini beeR hesaabaa saalin, olaRmee?
Local:	Okay.	baash usta

Exchange 26: Can I have my total bill, please?

Soldier:	Can I have my total bill, please?	zah-mat olmaasaa hesaabi gateeRin?
Local:	Yes sir!	boo saa-aat aagha!

If you need to use the facilities, just ask where they are.

Exchange 27: Where is your restroom?

Soldier:	Where is your restroom?	aayakyolu haRdaadiR?
Local:	That room to your left; over there.	oRdaa seezin sol taRafinizdan

⁴⁹ “Xenia in Baku,” July 2001. http://www.jacwell.org/xenia/7_2001.htm

Holidays

One of the most anticipated holidays in Azerbaijan is *Novruz Bayram* which celebrates the first day of spring. *Novruz* is a Farsi word for “new day,” and this holiday celebrates the reawakening of nature in spring. There are festivals all over Azerbaijan to celebrate this holiday that are full of customs like spring cleaning, leaping over bonfires, music, and games. This is a time of freshness and new beginnings.

Another important holiday is International Women’s Day on March 8th. This is a holiday that is celebrated in many countries around the world, but particularly in the former socialist countries. This day honors women who have achieved historical significance in furthering women’s rights politically as well as economically. Women receive flowers and small gifts from husbands and employers.⁵⁰

Other important holidays are New Year’s Day (January 1), Day of the Martyrs (January 20), WW II Victory Day (May 9), Republic Day (May 28), National Salvation Day or Liberation Day (June 15), Army and Navy Day (June 26), Independence Day (October 18), Constitution Day (November 12), National Revival Day (November 17) and Day of Solidarity with Azerbaijanis of the World (December 31).⁵¹ In the past, on March 31st, Azerbaijan has commemorated by presidential decree the Day of Genocide of the Azerbaijanis, but it seems no longer to be celebrated.⁵² Avoid public gatherings of a political nature. International terrorist organizations have realized the pay-off from co-opting national celebrations to create news stories. Attacks could be directed at places or events frequented by foreign visitors.

Favorite Pastimes

Azeris enjoy spending lots of time drinking tea in *chayhana* (teahouses) and playing *nards* (backgammon), which allows them to catch up on the latest happenings in the community.⁵³

Other popular pastimes include the opera and ballet in Baku, both well attended, as are the cinemas. Most of the foreign films are dubbed into Azeri or Russian. If the dialogue has been dubbed into Russian, a good bit of the original language will come through.⁵⁴ The Soviet emphasis on sports is still evident. In Baku there are a number of fitness centers and swimming pools, as well as sports clubs for specific sports.

⁵⁰ Virtual Travel Agency in Azerbaijan. www.tourism.az. Country overview <http://azerbaijan.tourism.az/holi.html>

⁵¹ Embassy of Azerbaijan. About Azerbaijan. <http://www.azembassy.com/azerbaijan/browse.htm>

⁵² Council of Europe. European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. Report on Azerbaijan.

http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/ecri/1-ecri/2-country-by-country_approach/Azerbaijan/Azerbaijan_CBC_2en.asp

⁵³ World Travel Guide. Country Guide Azerbaijan. 2006.

http://www.worldtravelguide.net/country/country_guide.ehtml?o=22&NAV_guide_class=CountryGuide&NAV_Regio n=22

⁵⁴ “Azerbaijan,” Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Service. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-44296>.

Chess is another favorite recreational activity. Garry Kasparov, a former World Champion while competing for the Soviet Union, was born in Baku. Kasparov competed against the IBM computer Deep Blue in several sessions, winning one, drawing another, and losing one to an updated version.

Social Events

Circumcision and Kirve

Parents have two responsibilities for a son: one is circumcision; the other is to see him married off in style to a well-chosen mate. The first rite is a grand ceremony that also affirms the respectability of the parents. Circumcision is performed on boys, usually well before puberty, as part of the male rite of passage. In some areas, it is called a “wedding.” The family chooses their best and most beloved friend to be a kind of “godfather,” or *kirve*, for the ceremony. From that moment, the *kirve* is as close to the boy as his own father. Notices are sent out, either by messenger or by printed invitation, to a carefully compiled guest list. The child is attired in a special outfit and, a few days before the ceremony, paraded through the area. At the ceremony, the boy sits on the lap of his *kirve* who holds the boy’s arms tightly and whispers words of endurance and manliness while the procedure is carried out. Afterwards, friends present gifts of gold, money and other items to the boy.⁵⁵

Weddings

Called *toy* in Azeri, weddings are an informal means to cement relationships across social networks that consist of neighbors, friends, and kin.⁵⁶

Exchange 28: Congratulations on your wedding!

Soldier:	Congratulations on your wedding!	toyoonuz mubaaRak!
Local:	Thank you.	choKh saaghooloon

Normally, there are two parties, one given by the bride’s family, another by the groom’s. It is important that the costs of both be equal, and those costs can be high. The wedding parties can last all day, with singers, dancing, special foods, and alcoholic drinks.

Exchange 29: I wish you both happiness.

Soldier:	I wish you both happiness.	seeza KhoshbaKhliKh aRzee edeeRaam
Local:	Thank you!	choKh saaghooloon

⁵⁵ Javid Huseynov. Global Azerbaijani Network. Intercosmos Media Group, Inc. <http://www.azeris.com/history/adr/keykurun/keykurun16.htm>

⁵⁶ Yalchin-Heckmann, Lale. “Political Economy of an Azeri wedding,” Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Papers. #28. <http://www.eth.mpg.de/pubs/working-papers.html>



© Galen R Frysinger
Music is always a part of weddings

Costs can reach the equivalent of USD10 per person in a society where monthly income is well below USD100 per worker. In contrast to the Soviet era of secure jobs and steady incomes, the expectation of taking part in conspicuous consumption may necessitate the groom's family taking out large loans to cover the cost of the dowry given to the bride's parents in addition to the other expenses.

Exchange 30: Live long!

Soldier:	Live long!	oozoon œmuR!
Local:	Thank you all!	seezin haaminzaa choKh meenaat-daaRigh.

At the concluding event, the groom's ceremony, guests are seated together rather than separate as at earlier wedding parties. There are more rare and delicious foods, more alcohol, and more music and dancing.

Funerals

When a person is near death, a *mullah* (prayer leader) is invited. He reads from the Koran.

Exchange 31: God bless you and your family.

Soldier:	God bless you and your family.	alaah seezin va aayilanizin ustunuda olsun
Local:	Thank you.	choKh saaghooloon

Upon death, prayers are recited in the mosque for the soul of the deceased.

Exchange 32: I would like to give my condolences to you and your family

Soldier:	I would like to give my condolences to you and your family.	seeza va seezin aayilaneeza œz baash-saaghlighimi bildeeRiRam
Local:	Thanks a lot so much.	choKh saaghooloon

Friends and relatives attend the burial, though women are not allowed to go to the cemetery. The body of the deceased is wrapped in white cloth and placed into the grave with the face turned to Mecca. After burial, the Mullah says an appropriate prayer and then asks Allah for the health of the deceased's relatives and friends.

Exchange 33: Please be strong.

Soldier:	Please be strong.	sabiRlee oloon
Local:	Thank you.	choKh saaghooloon

Everyone attends a reception held afterwards. There is a memorial reception also on the third day, the seventh day, the 40th day, and on the one-year anniversary of the death.⁵⁷

Exchange 34: I sympathize with you.

Soldier:	I sympathize with you.	daRdineeza shaReekam
Local:	Thank you so much.	choKh meenaat-daaRam

Other Traditions

Guns

In the past, people in Azerbaijan used to shoot guns in the air on special occasions like weddings, holidays, and the birth of children, because they wanted everyone else to know about their happiness. That has changed and shooting is very rarely heard anymore, even during the holidays. Only people who are enlisted in the military or who work for the police have the right to own or carry a weapon.

Exchange 35: Did these people threaten you?

Soldier:	Did these people threaten you?	boo adaamlaaR seeza hada goRKhoo galiRdilaR?
Local:	No.	KheyiR

Superstitions and Folklore

Azeri society has many superstitions. A cat crossing your path means bad luck, as does encountering a person who has empty buckets. On the other hand, there are just as many superstitions that are harbingers of good luck, such as encountering a person with bread or full bags, as well as if the first person you meet on the way to work is male. Money or bread should not be lent at night, and one should never hurry to a funeral or cross the path of a funeral procession. Azeris are careful not to leave scissors open, because this means misfortune or perhaps even death. If salt is spilled, it is said that a quarrel will soon ensue, but sprinkling sugar can counter this. Finally, throwing a bowl of water after a person is seen as a way to ensure their safe return from a trip.



© Ken Douglas
Street vendors

Gestures

Certain gestures are just as rife with meaning. When an Azeri puts his hand up, palm facing out, with all five fingers spread he is signaling “bad luck.” One thumb that is pointing down signifies that something is “bad.” The same thumb pointing up can mean that something is “good,” but it can also be considered obscene, depending on the context

⁵⁷ Carpetblogger. Funeral for a friend.. <http://carpetblog.typepad.com/carpetblogger/azerbaijan/index.html>

in which this gesture is used. Women often slap palms, one hand underneath, one hand on top, to show that they agree on something.

Offensive Language

Cursing or swearing is not acceptable in Azeri culture and may anger others. Many people in Azerbaijan speak English or at least understand it, especially the younger generation. Some have English tutors, and Western movies are quite popular in the large towns, so you cannot assume that others will not understand you when you are speaking English.

Do's and Don'ts

- Do use your whole hand to beckon.
- Do bring a small gift to show respect for the host or hostess when invited to an Azeri home.
- Do praise the quality of food when invited to a home. This is considered not just a compliment to the wife, but to the husband as well.
- Don't present the hostess with a bouquet that has an even number of stems; this is reserved for funerals. When giving flowers as a gift, make sure the arrangement has an odd number of stems.
- Don't point or show your elbow; it's considered very rude.
- Don't point your finger at people.

Urban Life

Urban Economy

Many of the factories that provided non-agricultural work for urban populations closed after the USSR was disbanded, causing an economic slump in the 1990s. The transition from central planning to a market economy has meant excess workers have been shed. The average salary is below what the government sets as the poverty level. The income of 45 percent of the population falls below this poverty line.⁵⁸

Exchange 36: Are you the only person in your family who has a job?

Soldier:	Are you the only person in your family who has a job?	aayilaneezin uzvlaReendan anjaag seez ishliyiRseeniz?
Local:	No.	KheyiR

As a result, some Azerbaijanis have emigrated to Russia or other countries in search of better opportunities. Many, however, have opted to stay.

Exchange 37: Did you grow up here?

Soldier:	Did you grow up here?	seez booRaadaa bæyumushunuz?
Local:	Yes.	balee

While many Azerbaijanis were once employed in the oil industry, the oil fields around Baku have now mostly ceased production or are producing only at a fraction of their former level. Some of the foreign investment today is in making these fields productive again, but the major emphasis is on drilling new wells and exploring in the Caspian Sea.

Housing Issues

Despite the Azerbaijani-Armenian cease-fire and some improvement in the country's economic situation, the future of those who were displaced from their communities as a result of this conflict is unclear. Many do not have permanent shelter and remain the most disadvantaged in terms of finding work. Furthermore, even if they secure employment, their wages are very low in comparison with ordinary citizens. The economic prospects of this group have been adversely affected by government policy. Starting in 1993, Azeri authorities began to take measures to prevent refugees or displaced persons from traveling to the capital or other major cities.



© Intercaspian
Remnants of the Soviet period in Baku

⁵⁸ "Azerbaijan," Country Analysis Briefs, Energy Information Administration, US Department of Energy, August 2006. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/azerbjan.html>

Exchange 38: Are these people part of your family?

Soldier:	Are these people part of your family?	boo aadamlaaR seezin aayileneezin uzvulaRidiR?
Local:	No.	KheyiR

Roadblocks were set up close to the front lines of the conflict, preventing them from migrating elsewhere.

Exchange 39: Are you planning to move?

Soldier:	Are you and your family planning to move somewhere?	seezin va aayilanizin bashka beeR yeRa chochmak fikReeniz vaaR?
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In May 1995, the mayor of Baku issued a decree prohibiting people lacking permanent residence (a remnant of the Soviet *propiska* household registration system) from acquiring a home in the city. A similar restriction applies to aliens, who are not entitled to buy property in the country.⁵⁹

Education

The right to free education is guaranteed in the constitution.⁶⁰ Since 1959, children have been required to attend school through the eighth grade.

Exchange 40: Do your children go to school?

Soldier:	Do your children go to school?	seezin ooshaaglaRiniz maktaba gediR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

The prospects for receiving a good education are better in the cities than in rural areas. Much of the population attends Russian-built schools and universities which are still in operation. Azerbaijan continues to use the educational system established by the Soviets, because it does not have the resources to introduce substantial modifications. One change has been the reintroduction of religious education, banned during Soviet rule. Also, instruction in Azeri is supplanting instruction in Russian. Azerbaijan has a high percentage of educated citizens, with a literacy rate approaching 98 percent for both males and females.⁶¹



© Galen R Frysinger
First graders in Sheki

⁵⁹ Kengerlinsky, Marat. "Aid Strategies Target Sustainable Development in Azerbaijan," Migration Policy Institute. April 1, 2004. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=212>

⁶⁰ Mardanov, Misir Djumail Oglu, Minister of Education, Azerbaijan. "Quality education for all: living together, democracy and social cohesion." International Bureau of Education, UNESCO. <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/ICE/ministers/Azerbaijan.pdf>

⁶¹ "Azerbaijan," Library of Congress Country Studies. <http://countrystudies.us/azerbaijan/23.htm>

Notable universities and research institutions include Azerbaijan State University, established in 1919, which has the largest library in Azerbaijan; the Azerbaijan Polytechnic Institute; and the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences. All are located in Baku.⁶²

Healthcare

Under the Soviet system there were many medical facilities throughout the country, some of which offered specialized care. Even villagers in remote mountain passes in the Caucasus had access to medically trained personnel. But Azerbaijan’s healthcare system, like that of the other former Soviet republics, deteriorated dramatically after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁶³ Since the end of 1995, the Ministry of Health has closed approximately one third of all government-operated facilities in Azerbaijan while discharging all associated staff.⁶⁴ Hospitals remain mainly in urban centers.

Exchange 41: Is there a hospital nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a hospital nearby?	boo yaaKhinligdaa KhastaKhaana vaaR?
Local:	Yes. In the center of town.	balee, shaheRin maRkazinda

Funding allocation is still based on a per-bed system, rather than on the quality and quantity of actual services provided, resulting in inefficiencies, underutilization, and unnecessary costs to the government. With funding slashed, medical staff and administrators are ill-equipped to provide even basic services.

Exchange 42: Is Dr. Vezirov in?

Soldier:	Is Dr. Vezirov in, Sir?	doktoR vaazeeRov eechaReedadilaR?
Local:	No.	KheyiR

The former interdependent supplier network of pharmaceutical, medical equipment and supplies has also broken down and, as a result, shortages are common.⁶⁵ Because of this, it is advisable to bring an adequate supply of all medicines one might need. Nonetheless, emergencies can crop up.

Exchange 43: My arm is broken?

Soldier:	My arm is broken doctor, can you help me?	hachim, maneem goloom sinib, seez mana chøemak eda bilaRsinizmi?
Local:	Yes, I can help you.	balee man seeza chøemak eda bilaRmee

⁶² “Azerbaijan,” Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service. 2006. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9108701>

⁶³ “Azerbaijan,” Library of Congress Country Studies <http://countrystudies.us/azerbaijan/23.htm>

⁶⁴ “Baku-Houston Healthcare Partnership: 1999 – Present.” Chronic Disease Prevention and Control Research Center. <http://chronic.bcm.tmc.edu/projects/bhhp/default.htm>

⁶⁵ Blair, Betty. “Editorial: Health and Medical Care.” Azerbaijan International. Winter 1995. http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/34_folder/34_articles/34_editorial.html

The health and well-being of the populace has declined dramatically since Azerbaijan gained independence from the Soviet Union. Of course, the large numbers of refugees who have no access to health care are reflected in the statistics. But overall infant and child mortality rates have increased in the general population. Survey data indicate that mortality rates for infants and children under five have increased to 81 and 92 per 1,000 live births, respectively. These rates are among the highest in this region of the world. Life expectancy of adults is also declining. In 2004 it was calculated to be 68 years for women and 63 years for men.⁶⁶ Two years later it was already down to 59 years for men, remaining at 68 years for women. This decline in life expectancy is largely attributed to lifestyle factors such as smoking and the propensity for alcohol consumption.



© Aramco Services Company
Azerbaijani boys

Annual per capita public health expenditure has fallen below USD8. As a result, out-of-pocket expenditures for medical attention consume an ever-increasing proportion of Azeri household income.⁶⁷

Traffic

Driving in larger cities, such as Baku, can be trying.⁶⁸ Potholes and open manholes are serious problems, and local drivers often speed and do not pay attention to the rules of the road, lane markings, or signage.

Exchange 44: Where can I rent a car?

Soldier:	Where can I rent a car?	man haRdaa maashin eejaaRa eeda beelaRam?
Local:	Downtown.	shahaRin maRkazinda

It is absolutely forbidden to make a left turn across oncoming traffic, but there is some discretion in deciding what constitutes a left turn. Accidents are common and, because of the high speeds, the consequences can be deadly. Lanes are marked but too often ignored, as are posted speed limits.

⁶⁶ WHO Core Health Indicators for Azerbaijan. Life expectancy figures for 2004 (latest data).

http://www3.who.int/whosis/core/core_select_process.cfm?country=aze&indicators=selected&language=en

⁶⁷ Rogosch, John et al., "USAID/Caucasian/Azerbaijan Primary Health Care Assessment," January 2005

http://pdf.dec.org/pdf_docs/PNADC991.pdf

⁶⁸ Torres Curado, Luis Miguel. "Images of Azerbaijan." <http://www.travel-images.com/az-tran.html>.

Urban Transportation

Taxis are an option in most cities of Azerbaijan.

Exchange 45: Can I get a cab around here?

Soldier:	Can I get a cab around here?	man booRalaRda taaksee taapa bileRemee?
Local:	Yes.	albeta

However, most are not metered. They will also not accept foreign currency.

Exchange 46: Do you accept U.S. currency?

Soldier:	Do you accept U.S. currency?	biRlashmish shtatlaR valutaasi qabool ediRseeniz?
Local:	No we only accept manat.	KheyiR, biz aanjaaKh maanaat qabool edeeRik

Be sure to ask if the driver is familiar with your destination.

Exchange 47: Do you know this area very well?

Soldier:	Do you know this area very well?	boo Raayaane yaKhshi taanyiRsiniz?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Negotiate the rate before getting in. Keep in mind that the first price the driver quotes may be intentionally high, so ask what the “going rate” is beforehand and do not forget to tip. Make sure the driver is licensed and the vehicle registered. If there’s any doubt on either score, find another car and driver which meets these standards.⁶⁹

As in Russia, it is common to stop a private car and negotiate a fare.

Exchange 48: Can you take me there?

Soldier:	Can you take me there?	manee oRaayaa apaaRaa beelaRseenizmee?
Local:	Yes, I can.	balee

But using a “gypsy” cab puts passengers at risk of being robbed or finding themselves charged with offenses such as drug trafficking, since the police can be working in league with the drivers.

Exchange 49: May I use your phone?

Soldier:	May I use your phone?	man seezin telefonuzdaan isteefaada eda bilaRaRmee?
Local:	Sure.	balee

⁶⁹ “Azerbaijan,” Consular Information Sheet, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs. 2006. http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_978.html

Do not pick up hitchhikers. Giving an injured person a lift is also inadvisable because, upon arrival at the hospital, you may find yourself identified as the cause of the accident.

The current trend in Azerbaijan is personalized horns. Listen for European cars with a standard horn and another modified horn playing a tune at the same time.



© Phil Roberts
Taxi drivers in Baku

The U.S. State Department has advised against using Baku Metro, owing to concerns that the antiquated subway system is at risk for electrical fires. The transportation network is not well maintained and is burdened by more demand than it can handle. Traveling by bus is considered to be both fast and safe.⁷⁰ When using mass transportation, it is considered rude to sit next to someone without greeting them or striking up a conversation.

Exchange 50: Will the bus be here soon?

Soldier:	Will the bus be here soon?	ovtoboos eendeelaRda booRa gyalajak?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Marketplace

Since the break up of the Soviet Union, individual street vendors have slowly declined in number. Now, in open markets, vendors come together to sell their individual wares in one location, with shops and even supermarkets.

Exchange 51: How much longer will you be here?

Soldier:	How much longer will you be here?	booRadaa nagadaR olaanajaksiz?
Local:	Three more hours.	indeedan sonRaa, uch saa-aat

In the markets, it is perfectly acceptable to haggle over prices.

Exchange 52: I can give you this much money for this.

Soldier:	I can give you this much money for this.	man boonaa boo gadaR pool veRaa bilaRamee
Local:	No.	KheyiR

The unit of currency is the Azerbaijani manat (AZM), further divided into 100-gopik coins (which stopped being used in the early 1990s owing to inflation).⁷¹ Credit cards may be accepted at larger hotels and restaurants in the cities and can be used at banks. Smaller stores and street vendors have no means of processing a credit card transaction.

⁷⁰ “Azerbaijan: Getting There and Getting Away,” South East Asia Tours. 2002. <http://www.southtravels.com/middleeast/azerbaijan/gettingthere&away.html>

⁷¹ Azerb.com. A to Z of Azerbaijan. Money. <http://www.travel-images.com/azerb.html>

Exchange 53: Do you accept credit cards?

Soldier:	Do you accept credit cards?	seez kRedit kaRd gabool ediRseeniz?
Local:	No.	yoKh

Everywhere else, you will need local currency.

Exchange 54: Can you give me change for this?

Soldier:	Can you give me change for this?	boonu KhiRdaaliyaa biliRsinizmee?
Local:	No.	KheyiR



© Intercaspian
Women at a market

State banks are recommended when changing currency or getting wire transfers, though currency exchanges can be made at kiosks set up for that purpose called *bureaux de change*. ATMs are not widely available in Baku, nor are they available at all outside the capital. However, the ones in Baku offer AZM (the Azerbaijani currency) rubles, and dollars.⁷²

Once you have narrowed your choices at the market, you may want to get more specific in questioning the vendor about the goods.

Exchange 55: Do you have any more of these?

Soldier:	Do you have any more of these?	boonlaRdaan yenada vaaR?
Local:	No.	KheyiR

Exchange 56: Do you have this in a different color?

Soldier:	Do you have this in a different color?	seezda boonun bashka Ran-gee vaaR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

It is usually acceptable to pick up and inspect a vendor's inventory, but ask to make sure just in case.

Exchange 57: May I examine this up close?

Soldier:	May I examine this closer?	man boonaa yaaKhinaan baaKhaa bilaRmee?
Local:	Sure.	albeta

⁷² World Travel Guide. Country Guide Azerbaijan. Money. Nexus Media Communications, Inc. Columbus Travel Publishing Company. 2006.
http://www.worldtravelguide.net/country/money.ehtml?o=22&NAV_guide_class=CountryGuide&NAV_Region=22&NAV_SubRegion=

Some street vendors will be very insistent that you buy their wares.

Exchange 58: Please, buy something from me.

Local:	Please, buy something from me.	zah-mat olmaasaa mandan beeR shey aalin
Soldier:	Sorry, I have no money left.	baaghishlaayin, aanjaaKh maneem pooloom qaalmayooB

Dealing with Beggars

Beggars will stop you for help. A common approach for a beggar is to ask a couple for money, saying to the man, “Your girl is so pretty, you must help me for her sake” or “If you love her, you will help me,” attempting to embarrass the man into giving him money. If you help beggars, they will not leave you alone. The best course of action is to ignore them, or tell them that you do not have any money.

Exchange 59: Give me money

Local:	Give me money	mana pool veR
Soldier:	I don't have any.	maneem pooloom yoKhdoOR

Rural Life

Daily Life in the Countryside

The majority of Azerbaijan's rural population, 41 percent of the country's total population, is engaged in agriculture. Much of this is subsistence farming, but some cash crops are produced nonetheless. These crops include grapes, cotton, tobacco, citrus, and vegetables. The first three account for half of all production, and the latter two account for another 30 percent.⁷³

Just over 20 percent of Azerbaijan's land is considered arable. The official number of registered individual farms in 2005 was 2,669. These farms had an average size of 8.3 hectares (20.5 acres) and represented 96.5 percent of all farming activity. Azerbaijan historically has benefited from fertile farmland and a diverse climate that enable farmers to cultivate a wide range of crops.



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Farmer

Exchange 60: Where do you work, sir?

Soldier:	Where do you work, sir?	seez haRaadaa ishliyiRseeniz?
Local:	I am a farmer, sir.	man achincheeyam

Upon annexation by the newly established Soviet Union in 1920, all commercial activity was incorporated into a central economic plan. Family-run farms were shut down, and the land was combined to create vast, government-run agricultural cooperatives known as *kolkhoz*. Agricultural ministers in Moscow decided which crops Azeri farmers would grow, how much their produce would sell for, and exactly where in the USSR it would be sold.

Just as other regions were given a single key crop to focus on, the Soviets wanted to develop Azerbaijan's vineyards. Rice, wheat, cattle, and poultry farming were drastically cut back as these goods were being procured elsewhere. Azeris could import food staples at low, state-set prices without regard for the transportation costs, no matter how far the produce traveled to reach Azerbaijan.

For 70 years, Azeri farmers labored without concern for profits, transport costs, or even markets and buyers. By acting quickly to convert the huge profitless collective farms into private property after socialism was disbanded, the Azeri Parliament administered a kind of "economic shock therapy" on the farming sector. In fact, Azerbaijan was the first of the eleven former Soviet republics to complete the process of agricultural privatization.⁷⁴

⁷³ "Azerbaijan, Library of Congress Country Study.

[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+az0046\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query2/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+az0046))

⁷⁴ Aguhayeva, Arzu. "Seeds of Change: Transition in Azerbaijan's Agriculture," Autumn 2000.

http://azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/83_folder/83_articles/83_agriculture.html

Exchange 61: Do you own this land?

Soldier:	Do you own this land?	siz boo toRpaaghin saaheebisiniz?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Still, the transition has been difficult. Prices for agricultural products have not risen as fast as the cost of inputs. Soviet-era collective equipment in general and the irrigation system in particular were outdated. To encourage and reinforce the desirability of private ownership and family management, the Azerbaijani government has developed farm support programs to achieve this end.⁷⁵ Specific measures include tax holidays for up to five years in irrigation upgrading, for example. The government also sells farmers certain farm materials and machine lubricants at 50 percent discounts.

Available Schooling

Rural areas do not offer a wide range of schooling options, nor is the quality of education the same as what is available in cities.

Exchange 62: Is there a school nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a school nearby?	boo yaaKhinligdaa maktab vaaR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Many teachers prefer to teach in urban schools, where both the pay and standard of living are higher. Most children whose families are engaged in agriculture must divide their time between farm chores and school. This can make it difficult for them to get the same education as children in urban areas.

Who is in Charge?

A tradition held over from the past is the respect that is shown to elders in Azerbaijan. Elders are addressed as *arsarral* or “leader.”

Exchange 63: Does your leader live here?

Soldier:	Does your leader live here?	aaghsaakiliniz booRdaa yaashiR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Even those who are middle aged show respect for those who are elderly. If the community is Muslim, speak with the *mullah* or *imam*. If you are unsure, find an guide who can direct you to the proper person.

⁷⁵ “The fruitful return of the Azeri farmer.” International Special Reports.
<http://www.internationalspecialreports.com/ciscentralasia/01/azerbaijan/thefruitfulreturn.html>

Exchange 64: Can you take me to your leader?

Soldier:	Can you take me to your leader?	manee aaghsaakalinizin yaaninaa apaaRaa biliRsinizmee?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Exchange 65: Respected leader, we need your help.

Soldier:	Respected elder / leader, we need your help / advice / opinion.	hœRmatli aghsaakaal / baash-chee beeza seezin chœmayeeniz / fikRiniz / maslahatiniz laazimdiR
Local:	Yes.	buyooRoon

Health Care

Folk medicine treatment in Azerbaijan was called *turkahara* in ancient times. This tradition lives on, particularly in rural areas. Today, Azerbaijan has its share of extrasensors, a profession that does not require practitioners to have a medical diploma. They claim to have the ability to treat others with the help of words, suggestions, or bio-energy. Sometimes they mix different spiritual practices, meaning that they may make a diagnosis by randomly selecting texts from the Koran and combining them with amulets and magical formulas.



© Behzad Rahmati
Fog in the mountains

Exchange 66: Do you know what is wrong?

Soldier:	Do you know what is wrong?	na oldughoonoo bulurseeniz?
Local:	No.	KheyiR

There are also fortunetellers and magicians who claim the ability to remove the evil eye, a curse believed to be elicited by the envy of someone's good fortunes, with the help of black or white magic.

Throughout Azerbaijan, there are also centers where Tibetan, Indian, and Chinese folk medicine is used to treat those in need of medical attention.⁷⁶

In rural areas, western-style health care is available, but the clinics are not of the caliber of those located in urban areas. Some villages may have just one clinic, and since the breakup of the Soviet Union, many rural clinics have even closed altogether.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Alakbarli, Farid. "Cures through the Ages: Lion Hearts, Rhinoceros Horn and Wolf Paws." Winter 2004. http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/ai124_folder/124_articles/124_farid_folk_medicine.html

⁷⁷"Azerbaijan." Library of Congress Country Studies. <http://countrystudies.us/azerbaijan/23.htm>

Exchange 67: Is there a medical clinic nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a medical clinic nearby?	boo yaaKhinligdaa teebee kileeneeka vaaR?
Local:	Yes, over there.	balee oRaadaa

Azerbaijan has a long history of malaria. This communicable disease was endemic until the 1960s, when the Soviet Union launched a successful nationwide malaria eradication campaign. By 1967, just three indigenous cases of malaria were reported in Azerbaijan. In the early 1990s, malaria returned with a vengeance. The number of cases increased from 23 to 667 and by 1996, the number of cases had reached 13,135. The primary causes of this resurgence are deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, changes in agricultural practices, the seasonal migration of farm workers, and the mass displacement of nearly one million persons due to armed conflict.⁷⁸

Landmines

Nobody knows how many landmines there are in Azerbaijan, though they have killed at least 1,400 people and left another 14,670 wounded. Two thirds of the victims have been civilians. All of these landmines are left from the Armenia-Azerbaijan war that ended in 1994. There are few—if any—maps showing the locations of the minefields, but the largest concentrations are along the Azerbaijani western border with Armenia and along portions of the Naxçivan eastern border with Armenia.⁷⁹

Exchange 68: Is this area mined?

Soldier:	Is this area mined?	boo zonaa minaalaanib?
Local:	Not at all.	KheyiR

Rural Transportation

Of the 27,016 km (16,885 miles) of roads, only about 46 percent are paved.⁸⁰ One main highway heads down the coast of the Caspian Sea toward Iran before heading west toward Turkey. The other main expressway heads out of Baku toward Georgia.

Exchange 69: Is there a gas station nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a gas station nearby?	boo yaaKhinligdaa yanajaagh mantagaasi vaaR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Estimates are that 60 percent of all roads are in bad condition, with little maintenance. It is recommended that one use four-wheel drive whenever possible.

⁷⁸ “Azerbaijan: Overview of the Malaria Situation.” World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe. May 1, 2006. http://www.euro.who.int/malaria/ctryinfo/affected/20020722_7

⁷⁹ Aydamirova, Gulnar. “Hidden Killers: Landmines in Azerbaijan.” Azerbaijan International, Summer 2001. http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/92_folder/92_articles/92_mines.html

⁸⁰ CIA World Factbook. Azerbaijan. Roadways. 2003 estimates. <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/aj.html>

Exchange 70: Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?	boo yaaKhinligdaa yaKhshi otomeKhaanik vaaR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

In rural regions, drivers share the road with animals, unlit bicycles, and broken-down trucks parked on the pavement, marked by stones that have been placed around them.

Exchange 71: Is there lodging nearby?

Soldier:	Is there lodging nearby?	boo yaaKhinligdaa cheeRaaya goetuRmak uchun manzeel vaaR?
Local:	Yes.	balee



© Galen R Frysinger
A herd of sheep blocks a rural road

Smaller unpaved rural roads can be unsafe for those traveling alone. Also, it is not advisable to travel by car through Nagorno-Karabakh or through any of the military-occupied land surrounding that region.

There are 36 airports, 27 of which have paved runways. Air travel between Baku, Ganja, and Naxçivan can range from USD50 to USD100 and is virtually the only way to travel between those cities.

Exchange 72: Which road leads to the airport?

Soldier:	Which road leads to the airport?	haavaa leemaaneenaa hansi yoldaan getmak olaaR?
Local:	The road heading east.	boo yoldaan shaRge taRaf

Trains can be an inexpensive alternative and offer a means to get around the country. However, reduced speeds and delays are common throughout the system due to lack of maintenance as well as other problems.

Exchange 73: Is there a train station nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a train station nearby?	yaaKhinligdaa dameeR yolu vaagzali vaaR?
Local:	No.	yoKh

Of the 2,957 km (1,850 miles) of broad-gauge track (many of the lines parallel major roads) fully 700 km (436 miles) of which are in need of serious repair. Generally, travel by train is not recommended to Tbilisi. Bandits and shakedowns at the border can cost the traveler as much as the original ticket, if not more.⁸¹

⁸¹ Travel-Images.com. A to Z of Azerbaijan. Transportation. <http://www.travel-images.com/az-tran.html>

Checkpoints

When passing through a checkpoint, identification will be required.

Exchange 74: Where is the nearest checkpoint?

Soldier:	Where is the nearest checkpoint?	an yaaKhin yoKhlaanish mantagasee haaRadaadiR?
Local:	It's two kilometers.	eechee cheelomeeteR aRaalidaa

Soldiers may address women just as they would men when requesting identification or documents. Traveling close to the Armenian border may require special permission from the government. Visiting Nagorno-Karabakh or the areas around it is not advisable. In lieu of internal Soviet passports which enabled citizens to travel within the USSR, Azeri citizens are able to receive national ID cards at district police precincts. The machine-readable laminated photo ID card contains the following information in Azeri: ID card number, last name, first name, father's name, place and date of birth, marital status, military status, blood group, color of eyes, height, gender, home address, place of issue, signature of the official, signature of the citizen, issue date, and seal.

Exchange 75: Is this all the ID you have?

Soldier:	Is this all the ID you have?	shaKhsiyatinizee tasdeeg edan butun sanadlaRiniz boonlaRdiR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Drivers and any passengers may be asked to step out of the vehicle.

Exchange 76: Please get out of the car.

Soldier:	Please get out of the car.	zah-mat olmaasaa maashendaan chiKhin
Local:	OK.	oldu

It may also be necessary to verify vehicle ownership.

Exchange 77: Show us the car registration.

Soldier:	Show us the car registration.	maashin giyaadaat sanadlaReenee jœstaReen
Local:	OK.	boo saa-aat

Checkpoint guards may want to know more about the possessions of those riding in the vehicle.

Exchange 78: Are you carrying any guns?

Soldier:	Are you carrying any guns?	seezin yaanizdaa beeR seelaaKh vaarR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

In the past, the U.S. Departments of Defense and Energy have expressed interest in helping set up border checkpoints in Azerbaijan to control the export and import of radioactive materials.⁸²

⁸² “Azerbaijan Profile: Radioactive Waste.” Nuclear Threat Initiative, Inc. August 2005.
http://www.nti.org/e_research/profiles/Azerbaijan/index_4666.html

Family Life

Clan and Family Structure

A clan-type family structure was the norm among the Azeri in the pre-Soviet era. The clan, or *hoj*, was typically named after a common ancestor. Clan members held land in common and were bound to provide mutual aid to each other.

Clans often acted as a unified entity in business dealings with outsiders. It was not uncommon for up to forty members of an extended family to live together in large dwellings called *gazma*.⁸³ In a desire to protect their culture, marriage within the family was encouraged. Unions between first cousins were considered the most desirable.



© Ken Douglas
Brother and sister in Baku

Nowadays households are usually comprised of a married couple with children and possibly grandparents. Families still function as interdependent units that support each other.

Exchange 79: Is this your wife?

Soldier:	Is this your wife?	boo seezin hayaat yoldaashinizdiR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Cultural, traditional, religious, and family-based practices often take precedence over government laws. Even the president has been known to consult respected members of the community to solve problems. The term *agh sakkal* (“white beard”) is used to describe those consulted.⁸⁴

The Typical Household

The number of residents in a household depends on the financial status of the family. Wealthier families typically buy homes and then, as their children get older, buy homes or apartments for their children. Families that do not have as much money usually live in apartments and may have extended family living with them as well.

Exchange 80: How many people live in this house?

Soldier:	How many people live in this house?	boo evda necha nafaR yaashiR?
Local:	Ten.	on nafaR

⁸³ The Azerbaijani of Ukraine. http://www.kcm.co.kr/bethany_eng/p_code1/1964.html

⁸⁴ Kwintessential Language and Cultural Specialists. Cultural Guide-Azerbaijan. <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/azerbaijan.html>

Under the Soviet system, all housing was assigned and residents paid a nominal rent. As the market was privatized, actual ownership was transferred to the tenants. These tenants were expected to buy their homes with a lump sum-payment. The amount of this payment was determined in part by the tenant's length of residency.⁸⁵ As time went on, better housing was built, but only the affluent could afford it since a lump sum-payment at full market price was required. Young families now have the opportunity to finance the price of a home through a bank mortgage. As a result, more homes are being built to accommodate the pent-up demand for an improved standard of living.

In rural areas, the entire family may be engaged in subsistence farming. Each family has a male head of household. Grown-up sons, their wives, and their children typically live on the same farm. This is called a patrilocal⁸⁶ family structure.

Exchange 81: Do you have any brothers?

Soldier:	Do you have any brothers?	seezin gaRdaashiniz vaaR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Status of Elderly, Children, and Young Adults

The elderly are seen as the source of wisdom and as the head of family, though day-to-day issues might be handled by a younger male. It would be insulting to send elderly family members off to live in an institution instead of caring for them at home.

Exchange 82: Is this your entire family?

Soldier:	Is this your entire family?	boo seezin butun aayilanizdiR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

Children are much desired and well cared for. They are considered so important that there are many proverbs about them, such as: "A home without child is like a mill without water."⁸⁷

Exchange 83: Are these your children?

Soldier:	Are these your children?	boonlaaR seezin ooshaaklaaRinizdiR?
Local:	Yes.	balee

It was once expected of a newly-wed couple to have their first child within the first year of marriage. While this tradition is fading somewhat, mainly due to economic hardship, young couples may still feel pressured by the older generation to produce offspring. Azeris often ask new acquaintances if they have children and may express pity if the answer is negative.

⁸⁵ Azerbaijan: Privatization. Library of Congress Federal Research Service <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-979.html>

⁸⁶ A patrilocal family structure is one in which male offspring remain in their father's house even after reaching maturity.

⁸⁷ Birth and Death. Azerbaijan International. Autumn 1999. http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/topics/azeri/az_learn/az_socio/az_socio/az_socio_73/73_socio.html

Gender Issues

Under the Soviet system, both males and females received full-time job assignments upon completion of their education. Household and family responsibilities, however, fell solely on the shoulders of working women. They had little access to household help since authorities considered this to be “class exploitation.”



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Elderly woman

Muslim culture helped to alleviate this double burden somewhat for urban Azeri women.⁸⁸ Their responsibilities were reduced, owing to the belief that it was unseemly for women to be too active in life outside of the home. Shopping, taking things for repair and even taking the garbage out were thus considered chores to be performed by males only.

Beginning with Lenin and intensifying from World War II onwards, Soviet officials obliged Muslim women to renounce the veil. This may account for the large urban number of employed Azeri women that prefer to wear Western clothing. In rural areas, religious practices are often more strictly observed and women may veil in public.

Divorce

It is acceptable for either spouse to file for divorce. Azeri parents have equal rights to a child under the law, yet traditionally custody has been given to the mother. During the Soviet period, the financial burdens associated with single parenthood were offset by benefits and various types of public assistance that single mothers were eligible to receive. Nowadays these women must assume the whole responsibility of child-rearing.⁸⁹ They no longer have access to subsidies from the state, even though they usually end up materially worse off than men after a divorce.

In addition, women’s remarriage prospects are not good. Many men shy away from marrying divorcees, especially if there are children from the first marriage. However, Azeris who do get divorced are not treated as social outcasts or looked down upon within their own communities. In contrast, having an illegitimate child would be considered unacceptable in the eyes of Azeri society.

Exchange 84: Are you married?

Soldier:	Are you married?	seez evliseeniz? seez aRdaseeniz?
Local:	No.	Kheyir

⁸⁸ Heyat, Farideh. *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Reviewed by Bruce Grant. <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=145471049306632>
⁸⁹ “International League for Human Rights,” http://www.ilhr.org/ilhr/reports/womenrights/azerbaijan_b.html

Naming Conventions

Names in Azerbaijan are mostly Azerbaijani, Persian, or Arabic in origin. Some popular female names include: Aysel, Leyla, and Emine. Popular male names include Tural and Fazil. In the past, rural families were often pressured to produce a male heir. In cases where many daughters were born to a family before a son came along, the girls sometimes received names such as Basti (“Enough”) or Tamam (“Sufficient”).



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Grandparents are very much respected in Azerbaijan