

Easing on down the road to Azerbaijan

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As we traveled by van from Georgia to Azerbaijan, the Greater Caucasus loomed in the background, the peaks softened by the heat-generated haze of mid-summer. We were headed toward Baku, the country's capital, a big, bustling, rich, trendy, architecturally dazzling metropolis of two million people, but no more representative of authentic Azerbaijan than New York is of the American heartland.

To understand something about Azerbaijan, I had to start with a softer introduction because this is a daunting place to visit — language, culture, topography, religion, the blazing heat of summer. The name "Azerbaijan"

means *land of fire*, thanks to its flammable gas and oil resources. The country also has natural salt deposits and other mineral resources, plus agricultural riches including grapes, cotton, tobacco, and saffron, all evident when driving through the country. It is about the geographic size of South Carolina but has double the population (over 10 million) and contains nine of the world's 11 climatic zones within its territory. It shares uneasy borders with two resolutely Christian countries — Armenia and Georgia — but is itself Muslim, with the second highest percentage of Shia Muslims in the world, after its neighbor Iran.

On a recent trip to the region, my group and I crossed the border from Georgia at Lagodekhi, the northwestern "finger" of Azerbaijan pointing into the belly of its western neighbor. We were several long hours from Baku, on imperfect roads, passing forests, orchards, crop rich fields and houses made of brick or sandstone with a yellowish hue. So our plump smiling guide Samaia, she of good grace but poor English, scheduled a two-night stop for us in Sheki, an ancient caravanserai town about 1.5 hours from the border.



Sheki is conveniently located on the route to the capital, just as it was on the Silk Road route for centuries, and it has two surviving caravanserais (of five original) as proof. It also enjoys a reputation as the country's prettiest town. I haven't stayed in any other small towns in Azerbaijan, but this one was definitely cute, with greenery around the central square, a canal cutting through the Old Town, squat pale buildings enlivened with *shebeke*, colored glass set into wooden lattice frames without glue, and paved sidewalks — though you do have to mind your step. People populate the streets: women in both traditional and quasi-modern dress, walking arm in arm, children playing in the dirt, and men everywhere, in groups or alone, strolling, talking, squatting, smoking, scrutinizing.

The local economy is based on silks, just as in centuries past, saffron (grown everywhere in Azerbaijan and costing next to nothing by western standards), and sweets, including a local honey and nut concoction made only here. It is called Sheki halva, but is more like a baklava than what we normally think of as halva. A stretch of the Old Town has one sweet shop

after another, each with its own specialty but all featuring a variation of Sheki halva: ground hazelnuts and walnuts flavoured with coriander and cardamom, layered between sheets of butter-enriched rice flour dough, topped with saffron and secret ingredients (maybe carrots or beetroot), and sweetened with honey or sugar syrup. I looked longingly at the gooey concoctions, so a shopkeeper took pity and offered me a sample. Inspired, I bought several boxes to take home as presents.



Samaia described our hotel, the Sheki Saray, as the nicest in town, and the description is apt. It is centrally located on a main square (tree-rimmed and quiet), within arm's throw of shopping, cafes, restaurants, and handicraft workshops. The rooms are spacious, with good pillows (not always the case in the Caucasus), functioning AC (again, not a given in this part of the world), and a flat-screen TV with a zillion channels (but only one of them in English). Plus other appreciated benefits — abundant soft towels, a bathrobe and slippers, carpeting on the floors, marble on the bathroom walls, a desk with proper lighting, a full-length mirror, and a

plug that fit the sink so I could wash my clothes. Hooray.

Our tour of Sheki was unexpectedly revealing about the town (population 68,000) and the country. The jewel in every way is the Khan's Palace, an 18th-century summer residence of the ruler Hussein-khan Mushtad. It is small, as ruler's palaces go, but stunning, studded with Venetian glass mosaics inside and out. Each of the six rooms has a different theme, depending on whether the room was for the khan or his wife, for public display or private relaxation. All are bright and dazzling, with nature a recurring motif — trees, flowers, birds and animals. The khan's bedroom evokes the military history of his family's reign, including weapons, uniforms. His wife's bedroom has more swirling elegant forms featuring birds and oriental ornamentation.



Supposedly up to 5,000 pieces of glass were used in each square meter of the palace. Even more remarkable: no nails or glue were used in construction — not the masonry foundation or the ornate carved wooden window frames, nothing.

The glass mosaics reflect the artistry of *shebeke*, another specialty of Sheki. Stained glass compositions — doors, windows, room dividers — are set in wooden lattice frameworks without glue. Wooden groves hold each piece of glass in place and precision is paramount; otherwise you wind up with a pile of glass bits. We were invited into a *shebeke* studio to watch a 20-something young artist as he assembled a small mural. Naturally we had the opportunity to buy *objects d'arte*, small folding shelves, and the like, when the demonstration was over. In the days of the khanate, only Murano glass from Italy was used, but today the glass used for tourist items comes from the Ukraine, because it costs less.

More curious than Ukrainian glass is the oldest church in the Caucasus, considered a cradle of Christianity by some. Kish Church, about five miles north of Sheki, was built by ethnic Albanians in the first century. Getting there is an adventure, as we had to transfer from our group van to a miniscule local bus to navigate the narrow road arriving at the church.

Stranger still: Kish is being restored by Norwegians, prompted by Norwegian explorer-author Thor Heyerdahl, who claimed that Norwegians can trace their origins to Azeris. Current plans are to make the church a Caucasus-Albanian Historical Museum, underscoring the area's diverse cultural heritage.

Silk production is one result of Sheki's eastern heritage. Mulberry trees grow readily here and therefore so do silkworms. The town was famous for its silks four centuries ago, and we visited one of the remaining silk manufacturers to admire the handiwork on display.

Silk is also used in carpets. No carpet factories in Sheki but there are seven schools throughout the country, and examples of this handicraft are everywhere. Samaia told us that 30 million Azeris live in Iran, three times as many as live in Azerbaijan, and many make carpets sold as "Persian" carpets but with Azeri artistry.



The silk trade has left two standing caravanserai in Sheki. The smaller has been transformed into the town's poshest hotel, dripping with atmosphere and money and vapid-looking tourists the way the local sweets drip with honey. The other caravanserai was in the process of being converted into an even swisher lodging,

One final stop during my all-too-brief visit to Sheki: the town bazaar. It is a dusty half-hour walk from the center (one can taxi for almost nothing but I preferred to walk) in a modern nondescript part of town. The attractions are the food and clothing stalls, and the ability to bargain down prices. No one speaks English or any western European language, though, so a committed shopper has to hang tough. I didn't, and wound up with some loose-leaf tea that would have cost me 30% less at one of the food stores in central Sheki.

Same problem exists for restaurants outside of the tourist hotels and caravanserai. No one speaks English, i.e., everyone pretends not to speak

English. By persevering, and ignoring the fact that the non-tourist clients are almost exclusively male, I wound up at an outdoor garden cafe with a satisfying meal of yogurt soup, marinated chicken kebobs, pilaf rice, and seasonal melons for dessert.



Sheki can be summarized with a pneumonic of "S's" — silks, sweets, shebeke, saffron, and a surprising [soupçon](#) of Scandinavia. Baku awaited, but it didn't embrace me with the essence of Azerbaijan as Sheki had.

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