

Hi all of you! I feel convinced that you all thought that as Ann has turned 78, she would sit still in a sofa. But NO Neither my travel companion Ingrid or I had been to "the land of fire" , so we were curious! To get a visa was very easy, and that is a good start! Ingrid flew Lufthansa from Gothenburg and I flew Pegasus airlines from Copenhagen with stopover in Istanbul. We met at a hotel room in Baku 4 o'clock at night...

Next morning the planning started. Paola lived here for 6 weeks 20 years ago doing fieldwork for an essay in Political Science. At that time Baku was shabby and I remember when she wrote home that she would like to pay an airline ticket for Lars Ohly (chairman of Swedish communist party) to show him how communism could ruin a city with no consideration to environmental issues at all.

We always enjoy taking a "free walking tour with a student", that is available in so many cities. This time it was excellent, we walked for 2 1/2 hours in the old city and he gave us all facts we wanted. We were charmed to see this medieval city surrounded by walls and to see the landmark Maidentower.



We are aware that the country is run by a dictator, but all facts he gave us about pensions, free schooling and sick leave possibilities made us understand that this country has a functioning infra structure available to all inhabitants. But the oil makes the country wealthy, 1880 ,50% of all marketed oil in the world was produced here from offshore in the Caspian Sea. The guide suggested an authentic Azerbaijani restaurant, and we just loved this place in a cellar. The knowledge of English is very poor. We try to approach young people wearing glasses to ask questions, but we had to ask at least ten before we found someone speaking a little English. Russian is spoken by the elderly, but not by the young ones. Azerbaijani is close to Turkish so they can speak slowly to each other. The guide

explained the feelings towards the five neighboring countries as follows. Our best friend TURKEY the one we hate ARMENIA our grumpy old uncle RUSSIA our catholic marriage partner GEORGIA (You are stuck in a marriage and cannot get out ) the on and off friend, but just now off IRAN.

It took some effort to understand the Metro, but we succeeded! Later we learnt to appreciate BOLT taxis, and the cost was rarely more than 3 Manat (One Manat is 5,50 SEK)

The second day we went to see Villa Petrolia, the Nobel villa. Here is where they made their fortune. The brothers went to Azerbaijan because they know that a special tree grew here and it was perfect to make rifles from. But as soon as they arrived, they discovered the oil and started in the refinery business and forgot all about rifles. The villa was newly restored to its former glory, 20 years ago the roof had fallen in and it was in total decay. But now it was fantastic! When we wanted to go to hotel, a man wearing glasses helped us getting a Bolt as we had no WIFI. He was so helpful and stayed with us until we were inside the Bolt and we realized that he had prepaid it for us two old helpless ladies!!



The same afternoon we managed to navigate the Metro to the big bus station, which as usual was situated far out of town. The bus to Quba took 2 1/2 hours up north in the mountains. It was raining and the minibus was extremely uncomfortable. but after reaching Quba we, with some help, got another Bolt to get to the hostel where I had booked a room. The hostess spoke English and was very nice., the room was tidy A kitchen, and a living room was there for common use. The hostess recommended a local restaurant, and we took

her advice and went there. As typical for a Muslim country they seated us in a room of our own. Boring we thought, but that is their custom. A huge chicken was served and it was nice.

Next morning our hostess suggested a 4-hour excursion in the mountains with her husband driving. Perfect we thought! Another guest from the hostel joined. He was an Israeli student. I felt very uncomfortable talking small talk to an Israeli. But he spoke Russian to the driver and translated to us. Very useful. The rain was drizzling but when we arrived at the ski fields, clouds just vanished, and we had fantastic sunshine. Hundreds of snowmaking machines were there, and huge hotels owned by the president...The season for skiing is very short. The ground was very dry, but there were a few waterfalls that the driver pointed out proudly. For a Swede these waterfalls were pathetically small, but he was proud.

We took a minibus back to Baku as we had tickets to the night train to Sheki (saki). Strangely enough, the Israeli guy Aba also had tickets for the same train. The road is boring, absolutely nothing of interest to see. We strolled around trying to find a nice place to have dinner. We walked and walked, and we got tired of carrying our backpacks. So, in the end we tried a very local simple restaurant where the Indian man served us beef with mashed potato tied around a stick and grilled. It tasted OK though. Hardly any tourists to be seen But of course we would not be able to see the difference between a Turk or a Local. After the meal we strolled back to the railway station to find our cabins on the train that was supposed to leave 23.50

We had paid 3 euro extra for having a door to close on the train and only 4 in the cabin, and that was well spent money! Our section was really nice with clean sheets, but the cheaper sections were not pleasant at all. But there was not a ladder to the top bunk, so it was extremely complicated to get up! But we succeeded after several attempts. We arrived in Sheki at 5.50 but smart Ingrid had bought extra tickets to Zikalala north, close to the Russian border, where we arrived at 8 so we woke up rested! We took a taxi to the bus station and enjoyed seeing the city that was beautifully set between two mountain ridges. The city is famous for its hazelnuts. A bus to Sheki left after half an hour but the standard of that bus was the lowest possible. Nice scenery all the way to Sheki where we jumped off at the bus station. Sunshine and 21 degrees! We both were travelling light, with backpacks weighing 5 kilos so we walked all the way through the city to reach our goal, the famous caravanserai. It had 200 beds, but ALL were taken. What to do? The friendly receptionist mentioned that the VIP suite was free, but it costed three times more. What to do, Ingrid made a quick decision and said YES!

That suite was fantastic but had hardly any Wi-Fi due to the extremely thick stonewalls. But we sat in the lovely garden, thinking of all the caravans from the



Silk Route that had rested here centuries ago. The wifi was perfect in the garden and maybe just YOU had an Email from me from that lovely place!

The afternoon we visited a beautiful palace and there Ingrid and I had a disagreement. I disliked that there was not a single sign telling about the history of the place. Ingrid thought it was perfect, you should use a living guide instead, telling the history. My experience of boring guides going into complicated details, so I always prefer reading about interesting places at your own pace! But of course she is right, if you get a talented guide it is golden! We strolled around this charming city with its atmosphere of the old silk route. There were so few tourists, so the people approached us

and asked if they could help us with something. And the sun was shining and we thought about the rain, wind and fog in Sweden right now.

Sheki was lovely and my plan was that we should leave early in the afternoon to stay in some other interesting places on our way back to Baku. But Ingrid was eager to go back to Baku to see more of the fascinating architecture there. We had only overnight booked for Saturday, but I fixed an overnight at a promising boutique hotel, very central, for Friday night. The ride with a big coach was a very nice 6 hours ride. Plenty to look at. The hotel turned out to be fantastic, so charming with a cosy room. We just loved it immediately and it was nearly embarrassing to pay 22 Euro for the room including a great hotel breakfast. We remembered that our student guide had told us about another very

Azerbaijani restaurant in the old city so we walked there, but there was a line of people wanting to get a seat. But after half an hour it was our turn. We were seated. next to the musician, and the music was so loud that we asked to be moved to another table. Very embarrassing for the musician .... But we liked the new table and were very content with our meal. Ingrid has learnt to like beer like I do, and we both liked the local draught beer.

It was now rather late, but we took a long walk along the beach promenade. It was fantastic, with decorations everywhere. The three Flame Towers



are illuminated after 8 pm and it looked like a fire at a distance. Never seen anything like it! And the world's

second highest flagpole with the enormous silk flag weighing 500 kilos even if it was all silk. The flag is up around the clock surprisingly enough! So many families strolling happily along enjoying the Caspian Sea. All the people we saw were well dressed, and we did not see a single beggar.

The day after, Saturday, we planned to take the hop on hop off bus. We signed out from our lovely hotel and took a Bolt to reach the meeting point for the bus. It turned out really well and we sat on top listening in earphones to the English Speaking guide. The city of Baku, we pronounce it Baku but the locals call it Baku, is so clean and nice, and with so much interesting architecture.

The sun was shining and we just loved the scenery.. We did 11/2 hours and then we were back at the starting point. We took another half and then left at Heydar Aliyew center as Ingrid had read so much about that building planned by the Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid. It was snow white and there was not a single straight line, only soft curves and it was huge! Inside it was just as wonderful architecture. The building is to commemorate Heydar who was president 1993 to his sudden death in a heart attack (not murder...) 2003. He was immediately succeeded by his son who is still in power. He seems quite popular, probably because the standard of living has risen so much for the 10,2 million. The vast majority are muslim but very secular, as our guide pointed out over and over again! It took us over 3 hours to see all the floors. School classes were guided around in groups, in the same manner as you will see in countries with a dictator.



We were hungry and went back to the restaurant where we had our first meal. This time it was packed with people but just as nice with the paintings on the roof and azerbaijani carpets covering the walls. After dinner we strolled back to the boutiquehotel to get our backpacks, and took a Bolt back to our first hotel where we had booked this final night. A big surprise waited for us! Your room has been taken by someone else and the hotel is full! WHAT! But you had not prepaid and it was already 8 pm! But the receptionist found another hotel for us and he took us there in his private car. But we were angry!!

Next morning we were ready for an excursion that I had looked forward to a lot! A 9 hour bus tour going south and east of Baku! The receptionist came to pick us up as agreed. He took us to the meeting point and we said Thank you, as we expected that driving us was a gesture of thanks for us accepting that our room was taken.. But he asked for money for taking us! We could not believe our ears, but Ingrid gave him 2 Manat (11 SEK). He looked extremely unhappy, but Ingrid told him that 2 Manat was the usual cost of a Bolt. The tour started well, but our guide was mumbling when he spoke in Russian and English, so we understood next to nothing.

The first stop was on Bibi-Heybat mosque built in 1998. It replaced a mosque from 13th century that the Soviets demolished when widening the road 1937. The shining green interior was stunning but outside the mosque we overlooked the old shabby oil harbour.



The next stop was Qubustan mudvolcanoes. There old small Russian Ladacars waited for us to take us out in the mud fields. The mud did not impress me much but the fires here and there, with burning Metangas was weird. The driver only knew of top speed, so it was a bit scary. Next stop was the Unescolisted Petroglyphs. To see them we had to walk in very difficult terrain, not easy for me with the crutch. They were up to 12 000 years old and showed scenes of hunting and wild animals. Here there were signs to tell what we saw, and that was lucky as our guide continued to mumble. After a basic lunch we continued east to the Abseron peninsula. We were shown fires that had

burned continuously for 130 years, due to the Metangas that came from the ground.



At 6 pm the bus dropped us off and we walked back to the city in the beautiful Promenade. We decided to have pizza in an outdoor restaurant on the seafront. It was 18 degrees, and it was lovely sitting outdoors enjoying the fantastic Flame Towers at a distance. Pizza is always a safe choice even if no pizza can compare with Robin homemade from his oven outdoors.

Time to pick up our backpacks and take the Airportbus for 1.40 Manat (8 SEK) to the airport to take our flights back to the county of LongJohns.

At the airport we had time to count all our expenses for this lovely week, and it added up to 3.900SEK PP plus flights for 8 fantastic days. Ingrid is always delightful company, but this time it was specially nice to hear her comments re the supermodern architecture that we saw. We enjoyed the friendly Azerbaijanis even if the language problem had to be overcome. We felt safe all the time and the crime rate seems to be low. The cost is so much lower than at home, and the climate so much better this time of the year. I don't think Chris would have liked it like we did, but why not go there and see for yourself.

JUST DO IT, like Nike says.....