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Azerbaijan
By David R. Garfinkle

I took the overnight train from Tbilisi, Georgia to Baku. No more first class available, so I made due with second class. A bit grimy looking, but fresh pillows and sheets handed out. A maddening 3-1/2 hour or so delay at the border, including a bit of cross examination of me if I had been to Karabakh: a total no-no; I had the Karabakh Council do my visa on a separate piece of paper as I had heard the Azerbaijani border police would pull you off the train if you had been to Karabakh. You can understand why. Without really knowing all the facts or making a judgment, Azerbaijan lost 18% of its territory to Armenia in the 1994 war. Judging by what I've seen during daylight, maybe the best piece!

I initially had one cabin-mate in my compartment (for four) and he spoke some English. He was a painter and a friend in Baku called him up desperate for some help in the work he was doing. His Russian wife did not feel welcome in Georgia, so stayed home in Moscow. We traded a few stories, a glass of his juice for a glass of my Cognac (I thought I was buying a bottle of wine). Our two other cabin mates joined us at the border. There was a lot of English coming from the next compartment and I heard "Ukraine" when they were collecting the passports, so I struck up a conversation. A young (30's) couple from Belarus and two guys from Ukraine. The Belarus couple helped me get a cab in Baku; I don't really need help, but they were trying so hard to be helpful. Turns out to have been a good thing as the hotel I was going to go to was closed for renovation, a bit of a hard concept to get across in the driver's Azerbaijani. Anyhow, with their help, I ended up with an adequate place (squat toilet, but good shower, air conditioning, minibar, etc).

From what I saw of the country side once it got light, Lonely Planet is generous in its description. Dull, drab desert, broken only by very ugly oil works of various sorts. Baku is a big city (about 2 million) with a very interesting Old Town walled off from the modern city. The Old Town has early 20th century mansions from the first oil boom, well preserved 19th century houses, a very interesting 15th century palace, etc. One of the most interesting sites was the Maiden's Tower. It's about 100 feet tall, 25 feet wide with thick walls enclosing stairs to the platform on top. It was originally built in about the 5th Century (to half that height) and completed in the 10th century. The story is that the local ruler fell in love with his daughter; she didn't want to engage in incest or defy her father so she asked him to build her a tower so she could see his domain. After it was finished, she threw herself off the top; sleeping pills would have been a lot simpler! The enormous bulk of the tower dominates the town in photos from the late 1860's through the early 20th Century. I also wandered around some of the upscale Baku neighborhoods, put in my obligatory stop at the Passaj Street Tourist Market (junk!!), and had a nice lunch at a restaurant in a courtyard in the old town.

I then spent quite a day exploring the area around Baku. There are no organized tours of the area, so I arranged for a taxi driver through the hotel. No English, but what the heck. Off we go at 9am, with the Qobustan Petroglyphs the first stop. As soon as we are out of the city, we are cruising through a desert broken by enormous oil processing plants and other factories. A glass factory the size of Rhode Island (slight exaggeration) is just one of literally dozens and dozens, all emitting fumes and smoke. Modern freeway full of smoke emitting trucks and diesel fueled vans. I've never feel the smog in LA, although it does sometimes obscure the view; here it is smoggier than I've ever seen and I actually felt a little eye irritation. Right after town you pass through the James Bond Oilfield, so named (even so referred to by the locals) because scenes from one of the Bond movies was filmed here.

The petroglyphs were fascinating. There are 4000 of them (we, the site guide and me, only visited a dozen or so). Over 100,000 tools have been recovered at the site. Some petroglyphs and tools date back to the late Stone Age. The site was easy to find, well marked from the main road. There must have been 8-10 staff on site with me the only tourist. From there it gets exciting. I thought I had good directions to the Mud Volcanoes nearby. Well, even Lonely Planet falls down sometimes. The driver had never been there

and got directions from the site guide at the petroglyphs. He warned us they were hard to find and wanted to supply a guide, but too expensive. So off we go across the desert. Picture driving on the maze of dirt roads in the Mojave. The driver kept looking at me every time we hit an intersection, if you can call faint tracks in the desert an intersection. We drove about 10 miles on bad dirt roads, took what we thought was the right way, barely made it up a steep hill in the car, and came to an open desert expanse with no clue how to go. We gave up and headed back. We didn't get lost, but had to back up a few hundred yards when what looked like the main road in the area (paved) turned out to have a huge pit totally across it. At a small village the driver stopped and asked the kids outside of a little stall how to get there. They called a guy from one of the houses and he jumped in the back seat and off we went in the right direction this time! Absolutely special. A series of small volcano-like cones (no more than a couple of feet high) burping mud. Not hot, cool mud. Doesn't compare to the geysers at Yellowstone, but I really felt like I was Stanley finding Livingstone!

On the way back we stopped at the beach and I swam in the Caspian. Both the Black Sea and the Caspian in one trip! This was a quick emersion, not because of the cold (it was ok), but because of the pollution. Right off the beach were a bunch of oil drilling platforms, all around the signs of 70 years of Soviet style environmental concern and over 100 years of oil exploitation. I may be imagining it, but my fingers felt a little greasy after I got out. A small problem when I wanted to take a picture. A young man objected because of the women in their bathing suits on the beach. No topless or anything like that and the women walk around town with revealing tanktops and blouses, but local customs prevail. So I walked 15 yards down the beach.

My driver dropped me off in the center of town, I wandered around for a while hitting the sites I hadn't seen, including a stroll down the very nice Promenade along the Caspian. Lushly landscaped, lots of cafes and restaurants, several amusement parks.