



INTRODUCTION OF THE COUNTRY

The Republic of Azerbaijan is located in the Caucasus region, bordered from its east side by the Caspian Sea, and sharing land borders with the Russian Federation, Georgia, Armenia and Iran. The country has a total population of 9 686 210, consisting of majority ethnic Azeri and Shia Muslim inhabitants.

Azerbaijan was established as a democratic republic in 1918. Two years later, in 1920, it was invaded by the Russian Red Army and incorporated into the Soviet Union as a Soviet Socialist republic for seven decades. The country gained back its independence only in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.



During the recent years, Azerbaijan has enjoyed high economic growth rates, mainly attributable to its oil and gas industries. The country has, however, made only limited progress on instituting market-based economic reforms, and to this day the economy suffers from structural inefficiencies and lack of foreign investment especially in the non-energy sector. Corruption is widespread and the government is accused of authoritarianism. President Ilham Aliyev has ruled the country since 2003 and was elected for another five-year term in 2013.



TOURISM IN AZERBAIJAN

During Azerbaijan's incorporation into the Soviet Union, especially during the 1970's-1980's, the country was a key regional tourist destination and the central planners made significant investments in the Azerbaijani tourism sectors. Nevertheless, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia (1988-1994), all tourism in Azerbaijan was brought to a standstill. The government was able to put strong emphasis on promoting tourism in the country only since 2002.

Azerbaijan has a number of unique features favourable for tourism development. The opportunities are extensive especially in the fields of nature and cultural tourism. Different regions of the country offer a variety of tourist attractions in terms of culture, history, landscapes, and cuisine. The country also enjoys nine out of eleven possible climate zones in the world ranging from tropical to the alpine climate.

Unique nature and ecotourism opportunities lay especially in the sustainable use of the natural resources such as the 400 mud volcanoes, the variety of plant and animal species (4 300 plant and 18 000 animal species altogether), bird watching in the Caspian Sea (the area is a north-south migratory corridor), as well as the various possibilities for outdoor activities in all seasons such as fishing, hunting, rafting, hiking and skiing.

For the cultural tourist, Azerbaijan offers a rich history that has been influenced by Persians, Romans, Arabs and Seljuk Turks. Religious sites of Muslim, Christian and Jewish faith, and even the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism, are abundant. The country has also been on the travel route of the Great Silk Route connecting China to the Middle East and Europe (Sheki region brochure). Consequently, local cuisine, handicrafts, and traditions are an inviting and exotic mix of different cultural influences.

