



THE LENKARAN-ASTARA REGION

The Lenkaran-Astara region is a sub-tropical area in the southeastern part of the country, near the Iranian border, with a total population of 213 000. The region is rich in flora and fauna, and it boasts many unique natural features such as thermal mineral waters, hot water springs and a noted national park.

The main fields of employment in the region are agriculture, cattle breeding, fishing, silkworm breeding and bee-keeping. Various traditional arts and crafts such as carpet making and mat weaving, are also exercised in the villages around the city of Lenkaran.

Annually, around 18 000-20 000 tourists visit the area. Tourism is, however, very seasonal and concentrated on the summer months. Additionally, majority of the visitors come from other parts of Azerbaijan or a handful of neighboring countries, namely Russia and Iran. These two factors, seasonality and a limited number of tourist origin countries, make tourism in rural Azerbaijan very vulnerable.

Some of the important sights and resources of the region – easily developed into more lucrative and sustainable tourist attractions as well – include the following:

Hirkan National Park is located on the shores of the Caspian Sea encompassing a part of the Talish Mountains as well. Lake Hirkan and ruins of a historical fortress are also within the park precincts. The region around the national park is also known for a rare tree species *Parrotia persica* or ironwood. Many local myths and stories tell about the wood that sinks, hence the name.

Natural hot and cold water springs. Several geothermal natural springs containing a high level of sulphide, chloride and sodium-calcium are located within an hour's drive of Lenkaran. The springs are used for recreational purposes as well as believed to have healing effects and used to treating rheumatism, among other things. Some springs also have attached bath houses and other facilities such as accommodation, massage and restaurants. Currently, though, many of the bath houses and the required tourism infra-structure are in a poor condition and need refurbishing.

Beaches. One of the natural highlights of the Lenkaran-Astara region is its proximity to the Caspian Sea, however beach barriers have been constructed in many places in order to prevent erosion.

The Circular Tower in the city center has been built in 1747 and later used a prison. One of the prisoners of the tower has reportedly been Josif Stalin.

Many of the challenges mentioned by people working with tourism in the Lenkaran-Astara region are similar to those in the Sheki-Qabala region. Local Project Coordinator Vamiq Babayev (2014) mentions that especially the handicraft makers need more support and business skills training. Head of the Tourist Information Centre in Lenkaran, Samir Akhundov, adds that lack of marketing material is the most urgent obstacle that needs to be tackled. Akhundov would also like to see the project clarify its target; in his opinion domestic tourism should be developed prior to international tourism.