



A slice of Azerbaijan

Unspoilt nature, mineral springs, the world's only oil field treatment - naftalan, unique ancient architecture, culture and cuisine. A territory of nine of the world's eleven climatic zones, Azerbaijan offers some of world's best ski resorts.

The Shah-Dag skiing resort offers sport, medical, cognitive, hunting, exotic, beach and gastronomic adventures. It houses world's renowned hotels, recreation, entertainment and sports centers.

Azerbaijan has all the necessary elements for a tourist country; hospitality, rich cultural heritage, serene landscapes, delectable cuisine and a favourable geographical location.

"From the great Caucasus in the north down to the border with Iran, you have nine climates out of eleven. In the great Caucasus there might be snow but you can go and have a swim in the southern parts where it is more like a desert," Florian Sengstschmid, Executive Director of Azerbaijan Convention Bureau, tells *Community*, explaining the explored and relatively less explored tourist destinations in Azerbaijan.

Florian is part of the delegation of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan led by Abulfas Garayev, the Minister for Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan that held a roadshow in Doha recently to promote Azerbaijan as a tourist destination.

The roadshow was aimed at developing co-operation in the field of travel and tourism and to disseminate information about tourism in order to diversify Azerbaijan's dependence on oil and gas. Development of tourism is currently a key priority for Azerbaijan.

The show was attended by Qatari dignitaries, ministers and pioneers in the industry. Speaking about Azerbaijan's climate and what makes it one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world, Florian says the country has 300 sunny days a year.

"Baku as a city has a very mild climate. It is called the city of winds which may last a few hours or a day but then it is like any other beach destination with sun clouds gone and sun shining back," Florian.

He recommends the period from March to November as the best part of the year to visit Azerbaijan. However, in other days, festivities continue in a multicultural setting. Baku offers the best in terms of multicultural festivities.

The southern part of the country is more unexplored, he says. "Places like Lankaran and the village of Ballabur. It is a beautiful valley with waterfalls and small rivers running through and restaurants by the river banks. It



SPECTACULAR: A view of the Shah-dag Ski resort.

Unspoilt nature, mineral springs, the world's only oil field treatment -naftalan, unique ancient architecture, culture and cuisine, territory of nine of the world's eleven climatic zones, some of world's best ski resorts. What more could you ask for? **By Umer Nangiana**



COLOURS OF AZERBAIJAN: Performers from Azerbaijan presenting a cultural dance.

Photos by Umer Nangiana

“It is a country where we have very big heritage sites. We have nearly 7,000 sites which are under the protection of the state. Our history spans over 40,000 years and we have had several influences during this period of time,” says Abulfas Garayev, Minister for Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan



MAKING A STATEMENT: Abulfas Garayev, Minister for Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan, speaking on the occasion.

is a steep valley and goes deep into the forest,” says Florian.

“You can find spots there where you can jettison wifi and experience nature from so close. And the facilities there are state-of-the-art with an international airport in Lankaran and driving from Baku to Lankaran would also take you 4-5 hours,” he adds.

Speaking to media prior to the event that featured traditional dance performances by dance troupe from Azerbaijan, Abulfas Garayev, Minister for Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan, says his is a country with ancient traditions.

“It is a country where we have very big heritage sites. We have nearly 7,000 sites which are under the protection of the state. Our history spans over 40,000 years and we have had several influences during this period of time,” says the minister.

Azerbaijan is a country which has enjoyed independence for 25 years and during this period, he says, it has achieved many goals in economic development.

“The vision of the country changed tremendously during these years and we consider that the independence achieved by the citizens of Azerbaijan brought us a totally new understanding to present our culture, traditions, goodwill to the entire world,” says Garayev.

Azerbaijan is not a new destination on the tourism map of the world yet they consider it is time to enlighten the world about the volume of their activity. He thanked the government and leadership of Qatar for the support given to the trip.

“We are on schedule to visit several countries of the Gulf and we consider that Qatar is a very important starting point and we



LUCKY DRAW: Through lucky draw, attendees won trips to Azerbaijan.

believe that this starting point will give us a boost to fulfil our aims in making an impact in other countries, too,” says the minister.

The minister engaged the attention of the show with simple and explanatory presentation on the solution basket that will help make Azerbaijan the ultimate tourism destination offering unparalleled variety of travel and holiday experiences.

“We would like to inspire travellers from all over the world to visit and explore Azerbaijan. We’d also like to deliver a global network to support tourism promotion in Azerbaijan,” he added.

The minister spoke about the importance of the Middle East, particularly the GCC states for

Azerbaijan’s tourism. He shared all his best experiences working in cooperation with Qatar.

“The Government of Azerbaijan has lifted advance visa requirement for citizens of the five GCC countries, as well as Japan, Malaysia, China, South Korea and Singapore. This is a milestone in our relationship with these countries,” the Azeri minister told the media.

Azerbaijan is a next-generation travel destination. It was chosen to organise the World Tourism Forum Lucerne Think Tank in the presence of the Secretary-General of the UN World Tourism Organisation Taleb Rifai and president of the World Tourism Forum Lucerne Reto Wittwer.

Azerbaijan also hosted the First European Games that happened in Baku last year 2015 and have signed a contract with Formula 1 to organise the Baku Grand Prix this year. These major events will attract people from all over the world and further contributing to Azerbaijan tourism over the next decade, says the minister.

“Along with excellent air accessibility, world class conference facilities and high quality hotels to accommodate events of different size and scale, unique dining venues and authentic on-site activities, we are all working together to make Azerbaijan visible to the World of Meeting,” says the minister.

He was accompanied by Rashid al-Noori, Representative of the

Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan in the GCC who presented Azerbaijan’s travel and tourism portfolio which offered different segmentations in Azerbaijan’s tourism market, and special highlights were discussed to engage industries and government in support of Azerbaijan’s tourism growth.

Azerbaijan has a number of airline connections from Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, to different parts of the world, particularly the Middle East. There is Azerbaijan Airline, Qatar Airways, and Fly Dubai with direct flights to Baku. Other national airlines from the GCC regions are in the process of starting direct flights. Visas are given upon arrival for the GCC nationals.