

Azerbaijan: Land of Hope, Diversity, Tolerance & Opportunity

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WHEN ONE THINKS OF AZERBAIJAN, it is easy to fall into stereotypical images of a country known for oil and natural gas exports. While such activities have contributed to a quickly growing economy, the true wealth of Azerbaijan is in its people and their steadfast practice of interfaith tolerance and commitment to celebrating the diversity that comprises their country. Azerbaijan, the Land of Fire, has existed at a crossroads of civilizations that has contributed to a rich, cultural

narrative as complex and beautiful as the carpets it is also known for.

CULTURE OF TOLERANCE

Within the borders of Azerbaijan, Muslims, Jews, and Christians live together side by side in harmony. This peaceful coexistence, practiced in a secular majority-Muslim country, is a trademark of Azerbaijani identity.

The Diverse Architecture of Azerbaijan's Capital, Baku



Today, around 95% of the population is of Muslim background, and most of the Muslims in Azerbaijan are Shiites. A continuing example of the unique power of the country's cultural heritage of peace and tolerance is also in the way they view other Muslims. Most Azerbaijanis do not see a major difference between Sunni and Shiite Islam, and followers of both groups intermarry, and at some mosques, pray and worship together - a phenomenon rarely observed in the Muslim world. Approximately 5% of the population is Christian. As is the case with 30,000 Jewish citizens of the country, Christians pray openly, often celebrating events collaboratively with their Muslim brothers and sisters.

Azerbaijan views diversity as a great national virtue and has worked to ensure that this culture of diversity and harmonious co-existence continues to blossom. These values transcend national boundaries also thanks to the diligent work of Azerbaijani diplomats who, in their international postings, share these practices with the foreign citizens they interact with. As the Consul General of Azerbaijan to the Western United States, myself and my team have been working to share these core Azerbaijani values with the residents of Los Angeles

and the whole Western region of the U.S. From interfaith dialogues, to concerts and performances, we have produced creative programming to ensure that California (among other states) properly 'gets to know' Azerbaijan.

CELEBRATION OF CULTURE

While interfaith tolerance is a cornerstone of Azerbaijan, we at the Consulate also work to share other traditional cultural elements.

Azerbaijan's beautiful natural surroundings and resources provide a backdrop for the fine arts. The folk arts of Azerbaijan are connected with the daily life and diversity of the people. Folk songs and dances have a special place in Azerbaijani musical heritage, which has developed along with literature since ancient times. Bringing together past and the present, Azerbaijani musicians have developed a unique fusion of jazz.

The support of theatre contributed significantly to Azerbaijan's cultural development, across various genres. Notably, Azerbaijan is where the first opera (1908), operetta (1913), and ballet (1940) in the Muslim world were composed and staged.

Goy-gol Lake in Azerbaijan



Traditional Azerbaijani Crafts and Instruments, including the Tar, Kamancha, Balaban (Wind Instrument) and Nagara (Drum)



A Little Azerbaijani Girl in National Costume

Mugham (Mu am) is a highly complex art form that weaves classical poetry and musical improvisation in specific local modes, associated with scales and an orally transmitted collection of melodies and melodic fragments used improvisationally. A record of Azerbaijani Mugham played in balaban, the national wind instrument, was included by NASA in 1977 in the Golden Record attached to the Voyager spacecraft as part of a small and exclusive collection of musical compositions representing the Earth's musical heritage.

In early May of 2017, we invited some of the most talented of Azerbaijani musicians to participate in concerts in California. From Mugham singers, to opera singers, to dancers, to instrumentalists, Los Angeles and San Diego were treated to a concert that exhibited the finest of Azerbaijani performing arts. This rich cultural legacy was shared with over 3,500 Californians who spent an evening immersed in Azerbaijani music. It was an event that transported the audience from California to the alpine peaks and deep canyons of the Caucasus mountains and to the shores of the Caspian Sea.

Now more than ever, the story that a country shares with foreign audiences has become increasingly more important. In such divisive times, a country that is working to promote peace and mutual understanding—

especially in a tumultuous region such as the Caucasus, is a fresh and welcomed perspective. Azerbaijan's brand is complex and far from perfect. However, myself and other Azerbaijanis remain hopeful that the values of tolerance and harmony we so believe in, will be more widely practiced throughout the world. ■



Azerbaijani national dance, "Qazaqi"

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