

Walled City of Baku with the Shirvanshah's Palace and Maiden Tower (2000)

Baku (Azerbaijani: *Bakı*), sometimes known as Baky or Baki, is the capital, the largest city, and the largest port of Azerbaijan. Located on the southern shore of the Absheron Peninsula, the city consists of two principal parts: the downtown and the old Inner City (21,5 ha). As of January 1, 2003 the population was 1,827,500 of which 153,400 were internally displaced persons and 93,400 refugees. Baku is a member of Organization of World Heritage Cities and Sister Cities International. The city is also bidding for the 2016 Summer Olympics.

Baku is divided into eleven administrative districts (Azizbeyov, Binagadi, Qaradagh, Narimanov, Nasimi, Nizami, Sabayil, Sabunchu, Khatai, Surakhany and Yasamal) and 48 townships. Among these are the townships on islands in the Bay of Baku and the town of Oil Rocks built on stilts in the Caspian Sea, 60 km away from Baku.

The first written evidence for Baku is related to the 6th century AD.

The city became important after an earthquake destroyed Shemakha and in the 12th century, ruling Shirvanshah Ahsitan I made Baku the new capital. In 1501 shah Ismail I Safavi laid a siege to Baku. At this time the city was however enclosed with the lines of strong walls, which were washed by sea on one side and protected by a wide trench on land. In 1540 Baku was again captured by the Safavid troops. In 1604 the Baku fortress was destroyed by Iranian shah Abbas I.

On June 26, 1723 after a lasting siege and firing from the cannons Baku surrendered to the Russians. According to Peter the Great's decree the soldiers of two regiments (2,382 people) were left in the Baku garrison under the command of Prince Baryatyanski, the commandant of the city. In 1795 Baku was invaded by Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar to defend against the tsarist Russia beginning a policy of subduing the South Caucasus to itself. In the spring of 1796 by Yekaterina II's order General Zubov's troops started a large campaign in Transcaucasia. Baku surrendered after the first demand of Zubov who had sent 6,000 militants to capture the city. On June 13, 1796 the Russian flotilla entered the Baku bay and a garrison of the Russian troops was placed in the city. General Pavel Tsitsianov was appointed the Baku's commandant. Later, however, Czar Pavel I ordered him to cease the campaign and withdraw the Russian forces. In March, 1797 the tsarist troops left Baku but a new tsar, Alexander I began to show a special interest in capturing Baku. In 1803 Tsitsianov reached an agreement with the Baku khan to compromise, but the agreement was soon annulled. On February 8, 1806, after the city was surrendered, under the accompaniment of the retinue Huseyngulu khan left the city to present the city's keys to Sisianov.

In 1813, Russia signed the Treaty of Gulistan with Persia, which provided for the cession of Baku and most of the Caucasus from Iran and their annexation by Russia. Since 1873 an oil belt of Baku began to be formed which was known as a Black City. By the beginning of the 20th century almost half of the oil reserves in the world had been extracted in Baku.

The centre of Baku is the old town, which is also a fortress. In December 2000, the Inner City of Baku with the Palace of the Shirvanshahs and Maiden Tower became the first location in Azerbaijan classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Most of the walls and towers, strengthened after the Russian conquest in 1806, survived. This section is picturesque, with its maze of narrow alleys and ancient buildings: the cobbled streets past the Palace of the Shirvanshahs, two caravansaraies (ancient inns), the Maiden Tower (nice view of the harbor), the baths and the Djuma Mosque (it used to house the Carpet and Applied Arts Museum, but now is a mosque again; the carpets got moved to the former Lenin museum). The old town also has dozens of small mosques, often without any particular sign to distinguish them from the next building.

In 2003 , UNESCO placed the Inner City on the List of World Heritage in Danger, citing damage from a November 2000 earthquake, poor conservation as well as "dubious" restoration efforts^[1]. The Martyrs' Lane, formerly the Kirov Park, is dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives during the Nagorno-Karabakh War and also to the 137 people who were killed on Black January, 1990. A sizable and influential Armenian population of Baku going back to 15th century was virtually annihilated or deported after the independence from USSR. Many Armenian churches, once prominently present in the city are now either destroyed or purposely neglected.

Source: -- Wikipedia [<http://www.wikipedia.org>]