birdwatching
in Azerbaijan

azerbaijan

TAKE ANOTHER LOOK

salam
hello

Azerbaijan's convenient size and dazzling diversity are a winning combination when it comes to birdwatching.

Content

Birdwatching in Azerbaijan	2
Bird species in Azerbaijan	4
Birdwatching spots	8
Birdwatching calendar	30
Plan your trip	36

diverse habitats *dazzling species*

Straddling the border between East and West, the country contains geographical features of both, resulting in a remarkable range of landscapes, habitats, and climate zones. There are high mountains, extensive coastline and lowlands, reed-fringed lakes, wetlands and rivers, subtropical forests, and dry steppes and semi-deserts – all of which are buzzing with birdlife and their own set of attractive species.

Azerbaijan has recorded some 400 species of birds, ranging from many species of eagles and vultures, to exotic Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, colourful flamingos, masses of waterfowl and rare warblers. There are many rare or endemic species to look out for too, like the Shikra and the enigmatic Caspian Tit. And every season has its own exciting experiences for birdwatchers.

A major advantage is the short distances between birdwatching sites, so that in a single day there is the unique opportunity to observe the endemics in the Caucasus Mountains and enjoy the ever-changing avian show of migratory species cruising along the western Caspian coastline at Besh Barmag.

While the country's birdwatching potential has become better known over the last few years with the activity gaining in popularity inside the country, an added bonus is that Azerbaijan is still a largely undiscovered destination for international birdwatchers.

Within these pages is an overview of all the ornithological treats on offer.

what *to see*

While there is no single fully endemic bird species (ie. that exists only within the territory of Azerbaijan), the country is home to several rare and famous species in the Greater Caucasus mountain range: Caucasian Snowcock, Caucasian Black Grouse, Güldenstädt's Redstart, Great Rosefinch, Green Warbler and Mountain Chiffchaff.

Other very sought-after species, such as the Shikra and the Caspian Tit, were only recently rediscovered having not been seen for decades and are now known to be breeding in Azerbaijan. The bird migration site of Besh Barmag, along the Caspian Sea coastline, with its millions of birds annually is one of the most important and diverse bird migration locations in all of Eurasia.

Birds unique to the Caucasus region or very difficult to see elsewhere:

1 Caucasian Black Grouse
Inhabits alpine meadows high in the Greater Caucasus Mountains and is present all year round. The village of Laza is the best place to see it, especially when males display on early spring mornings.

2 Caucasian Snowcock
Lives on alpine slopes and mountain sides in the Greater Caucasus Mountains and is present all year round. Mount Gizilgaya near Khinalig is one of the best places to see it when males perform their territorial call on early spring mornings.

3 Shikra
Breeds in the forest and parks in and around Masalli and is present from May to early September. The park opposite the Olympic Complex in the town of Masalli is a good place to see it.

4 White-winged (or Güldenstädt´s) Redstart
A famous and strikingly coloured bird of the high alpine zone strewn with rocks and boulders above Khinalig and Laza. It comes further down the valleys in the winter months.

5 Red-tailed Wheatear
A rare and special bird of the semi-desert areas in Nakhchivan, where it is present in spring and summer.

6 Mountain Chiffchaff
Listen out for its song in the upper forest and bush areas of the Greater Caucasus Mountains, and look for it in the bushes near the tree line above the village of Laza. It can also be seen migrating along the coast, at Besh Barmag for example.

7 Green Warbler
A fairly common bird that sings in the lush Caucasus Mountain forests in May and June and can also be seen migrating along the coast in April and September.

8 Great Rosefinch
Another famous bird of the grassy, rocky high alpine zone above the villages of Khinalig and Laza. It comes lower down the valleys in winter but flies around a lot so quite difficult to find on the ground.

9 White-winged Lark
An epic rarity to most foreign birdwatchers! Migrates past Besh Barmag mainly in November; on top days there are more than 100. Some of them spend the winter with other larks in areas like Shirvan National Park and Gobustan.

10 Hyrcan (or Caspian) Tit
An enigmatic species recently rediscovered in Azerbaijan near the town of Lerik in the Talish Mountains, having expanded from known breeding sites on the Iranian side of the border. It lives high up mountain slopes in trees and bushes and can be seen throughout the year but most easily in spring and late autumn.

Other attractive species on visiting birdwatchers' in Azerbaijan:

Dalmatian Pelican
Can be seen in the Shirvan and Gizil Aghaj national parks in November-March, or migrating at Besh Barmag in October-November.

Marbled Duck
Inhabits wetlands at the Aggol and Shirvan national parks.

White-headed Duck
Inhabits reed-lined wetlands like those at Mahmudchala Lake and Aggol National Park.

Lammergeier
Healthy populations are found in the Greater Caucasus mountains and in Nakhchivan, and they are seen surprisingly often! Lives in the alpine zone and mountains near steep canyons and valleys.

Terek Sandpiper
Most easily seen at coastal lagoons and beaches in Gizil Aghaj National Park in late spring or early autumn.

Pallid Harrier
Migrates past the coastal plains in places like Besh Barmag (top days with 20-25 birds) and Shirvan National Park in spring and autumn. Some might also winter in Azerbaijan.

Greater Sand Plover
Rare and localised, can be found in late spring at small wetlands on plains, for example in the Shirvan and Gobustan regions.

BIRD SPECIES IN AZERBAIJAN

Purple Swamphen
Lives in reedy wetlands like those in Shirvan and Aggol national parks, Flamingo Lake at Shirvan NP for example.

White-tailed Lapwing
Inhabits wetlands and lagoons in the lakes of Aggol National Park, Hajigabul Lake and the Mingachevir region.

Radde´s Accentor
Rare and localised in the Lesser Caucasus Mountains, and found near Batabat Lake in Nakhchivan in spring and summer.

Citrine Wagtail
Any wetland, coastal lagoons or wet meadows may be home to this bird in spring and autumn.

Pallas´s Gull
Inhabits lagoons and beaches along the Caspian coast in winter months. There is a good chance of seeing them at Besh Barmag in late autumn and at Gizil Agaj National Park in February-March. Top counts of 200+ birds.

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater
Inhabits arid areas of the Azerbaijani countryside and is common from May to September. A common migrant at Besh Barmag with day counts of more than a thousand birds in September!

White-throated Robin
Another epic rarity for most foreign birdwatchers. Seen on dry hillsides in Nakhchivan and the Zuvand area of Lerik in the Talish Mountains in late spring and summer.

Semi-collared Flycatcher
Lives in dense lush forests and gardens in the Talish and Greater Caucasus mountains during spring and summer.

Eastern Rock Nuthatch
Inhabits rocky semi-desert areas in Nakhchivan.

Pale Rock Sparrow
Most likely to be seen in dry hillside and semi-deserts areas in Nakhchivan and Zuvand upland in May and June.

Red-fronted Serin
Seen near Greater Caucasus Mountain villages like Khinalig and Laza. Flocks descend to the lowlands in late autumn and winter.

Mongolian Finch
Another speciality of the semi-arid plains and rocky valleys of Nakhchivan in spring and summer.

Grey-necked Bunting
Inhabits dry hillsides in Nakhchivan in spring and summer.

Little Bustard
The wintering flocks of over 50,000 Little Bustards is one of the greatest spectacles in the entire region! Most easily seen in the vast steppe and plains in Shirvan National Park and central Azerbaijan during winter months, as well as migrating over Besh Barmag in late autumn.

BIRDWATCHING SPOTS

where *to go*

While anywhere can be a potential birdwatching site in Azerbaijan, there are a number of well-established places for birders around the country, which between them offer a wonderful range of high-alpine, wetlands, forest, steppe and semi-desert habitats populated by the full spectrum of Azerbaijani birdlife. While they can very easily be visited as individual trips, you may wish to combine several into memorable multi-day birding tours. The top nearby attractions have also been included to help visiting birdwatchers explore each region on a deeper level.

1 Nabran
2 Khinalig-Laza
3 Besh Barmag
4 Khizi
5 Mingachevir
6 Absheron National Park
7 Aggol National Park
8 Hajigabul Lake
9 Gobustan
10 Shirvan National Park
11 Mahmudchala Lake
12 Gizil Aghaj National Park
13 Talish Mountains
14 Nakhchivan

BIRDWATCHING SPOTS

Khinalig & *Laza*

Partly protected by Shahdag National Park, the high-mountain areas around the villages of Khinalig and Laza, perched picturesquely in the Greater Caucasus Mountains, are ideal places to see regional specialties and endemics to the Caucasus region. Both villages are set amid some of the most stunning mountainous scenery in Azerbaijan.

Previously too remote for many tourists, greater accessibility has now put Khinalig firmly on the tourist map of Azerbaijan as one of its must-visit places. Besides its tightly stacked stone housing and incredible hilltop location, the village is also home to a completely unique tiny ethnic group speaking one of the world's rarest languages. The sparsely vegetated mountainous terrain surrounding it is a great place to look for the Caucasian Snowcock, Guldenstadt´s Redstart, Alpine Accentor, Rock Thrush and Lammergeier (or Bearded Vulture).

Meanwhile, the fabulously emerald-green-carpeted slopes around Laza, a village inhabited by another ethnic group – Lezgins, is well-known among birders for such key species as Caucasian Black Grouse, Great Rosefinch, Mountain Chiffchaff and other high alpine species. Besides birds, the goat-like East Caucasian Tur, which can be found in higher remote areas, as well as Grey Wolf are iconic animals of these mountains.

Target species

Caucasian Grouse (Lyrurus mlokosiewiczi)
Caucasian Snowcock (Tetraogallus caucasicus)
Great Rosefinch (Carpodacus rubicilla)
Green Warbler (Phylloscopus nitidus)
Guldenstadt's Redstart (Phoenicurus erythrogastrus)
Mountain Chiffchaff (Phylloscopus sindianus)
Lammergeier (Gypaetus barbatus)
Wallcreeper (Tichodroma muraria)
Red-fronted Serin (Serinus pusillus)

When to visit
Late spring and summer, but best in mid- and late May.

Where to stay
As Laza and Khinalig are quite used to seeing tourists, in both villages there are a number of guesthouse and homestay options.

Explore
the area

Both Khinalig and Laza are fantastic jumping-off points for guided **hiking** through the Greater Caucasus mountains. Two particularly great routes are Khinalig-Galakhudat and Laza-Shahdag. Laza is located very near the luxury **Shahdag Mountain Resort** with great skiing from late December to late March, plus relaxing spas and adventurous outdoor activities in summer. In Guba, **Red Village** is a unique place to visit to discover the culture and history of Azerbaijan's Mountain Jews. Golfers can also enjoy a round at the picture-perfect **National Azerbaijan Golf Club**, about 10 km from Guba city.

Contact the Guba Tourism Information Centre (+99423 335 6465, guba@tourism.gov.az) for more information.

Besh Barmag *nature reserve*

Recently given the status of a national nature reserve, the Besh Barmag bird migration site (named after the famous nearby mountain considered sacred by Azerbaijanis, visible from the birdwatching area) is a narrow coastal strip 90 km north of Baku wedged between the Caucasus Mountains and the Caspian Sea which serves as a natural migration corridor, known internationally as the Besh Barmag "bottleneck".

It therefore offers an extremely rich experience for birders, predominantly in spring and autumn, when as many as 200,000 birds pass through on a daily basis, according to annual counting. Over 320 species have been recorded in the area and it's possible to see over 100 or more species in a single day! Among the stars of the constantly changing show are a wide variety of raptors (up to 20 species in a day, including Imperial Eagle, Greater Spotted Eagle, Black Vulture, Pallid Harrier, Long-legged Buzzard, Peregrine, and more), as well as great flocks of Little Bustards, Black-winged Pratincoles, Rosy Starlings, Pygmy Cormorants, Calandra Larks, and many more. Thousands of ducks, herons and waders pass along the shoreline and very exciting passerines rest in the area, including many 'first seen' records for the country!

Meanwhile, up at the Mt Besh Barmag rock itself are habitats for Rock Nuthatch, Rock Sparrow, Finschs Wheatear and sometimes also Wallcreeper.

During the peak autumn period, and also in mid-spring, many birdwatchers come to Besh Barmag to enjoy the massive bird migration. Since it is only about 90 km north of Baku it can be visited in multiple ways: as a day trip from Baku; as an overnight trip (both independent camping and a simple hotel are available); or as a day visit or stopover between Baku and the Greater Caucasus Mountains. It can be included as part of an itinerary or constitute the whole itinerary. Some birdwatchers will even want to stay here for one week in October-November and do shorter excursions from here, but spend the main time watching the migration.

Target species

Black-winged Pratincole (Glareola nordmanni)
Imperial Eagle (Aquila heliaca)
Steppe Eagle (Aquila nipalensis)
White-winged Lark (Alauda leucoptera)
Pallid Harrier (Circus macrourus)
Pallas's Gull (Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus)

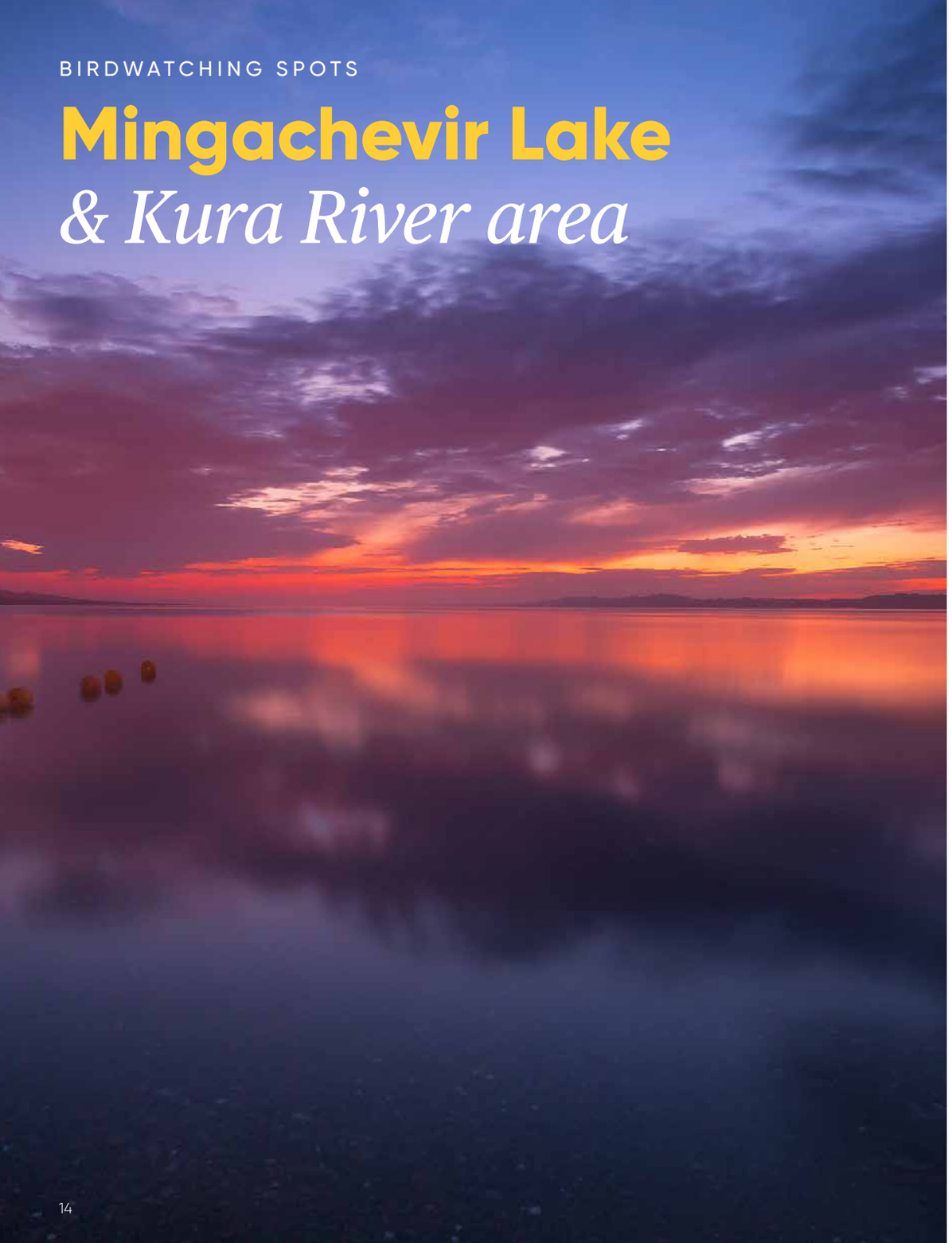
When to visit
Spring and autumn.

Where to stay
Located 3 km away from the observation point, **Zarat Hotel** (+994555258707) is ideal for its proximity to the site, decent comfort and experience of hosting birdwatching tourists. There are other hotels further south in Gilazi, as well as the spa resort in Galaalti, 30 minutes' drive inland.

Explore
the area

Perched on a mountaintop a few kilometres from the luxury Galaalti resort is **Chiraggala**, the ruins of an ancient Sassanid-era observation tower whose name means 'Lamp Castle.' Presumed to have been built in the 5th century, it was once part of the vast Gilgilchay defensive wall. There is a 6 km hiking route there from Dashlig Yanar village near Siyazan city. A few kilometres north-west, the ruins of the ancient Silk Road city of **Shabran** are another site to visit. Further birdwatching spots can be found in the nearby Khizi Mountains and Altiaghaj National Park – see page 27 for more information.

Mingachevir Lake *& Kura River area*



Mingachevir is an industrial town on the Kura River which expanded following WWII with the help of German PoWs. For birdwatchers, there are a number of interesting areas near the city, most notably a collection of wetlands created by a dam on the Kura River and connected by water channels, as well as the massive Mingachevir Lake. However, due to the current absence of specific observation sites, many birdwatching groups simply drive along the main roads through the open landscape and stop when they see flocks of birds.

Highlights include huge wintering numbers at the lakes of Ruddy Shelducks, White-fronted Geese, gulls including Pallas, and sometimes huge flocks of Greater Flamingos. Plus, large swarms of Calandra Larks and sometimes Little Bustards in the vast fields. There are also breeding Imperial Eagles in the area, and if you are lucky you may encounter a flock of resting rare Demoiselle Cranes on the Jeyranchol steppe in spring or early autumn.

Target species

Demoiselle Crane (Grus virgo)
Little Bustard (Tetrax tetrax)
Imperial Eagle (Aquila heliaca)

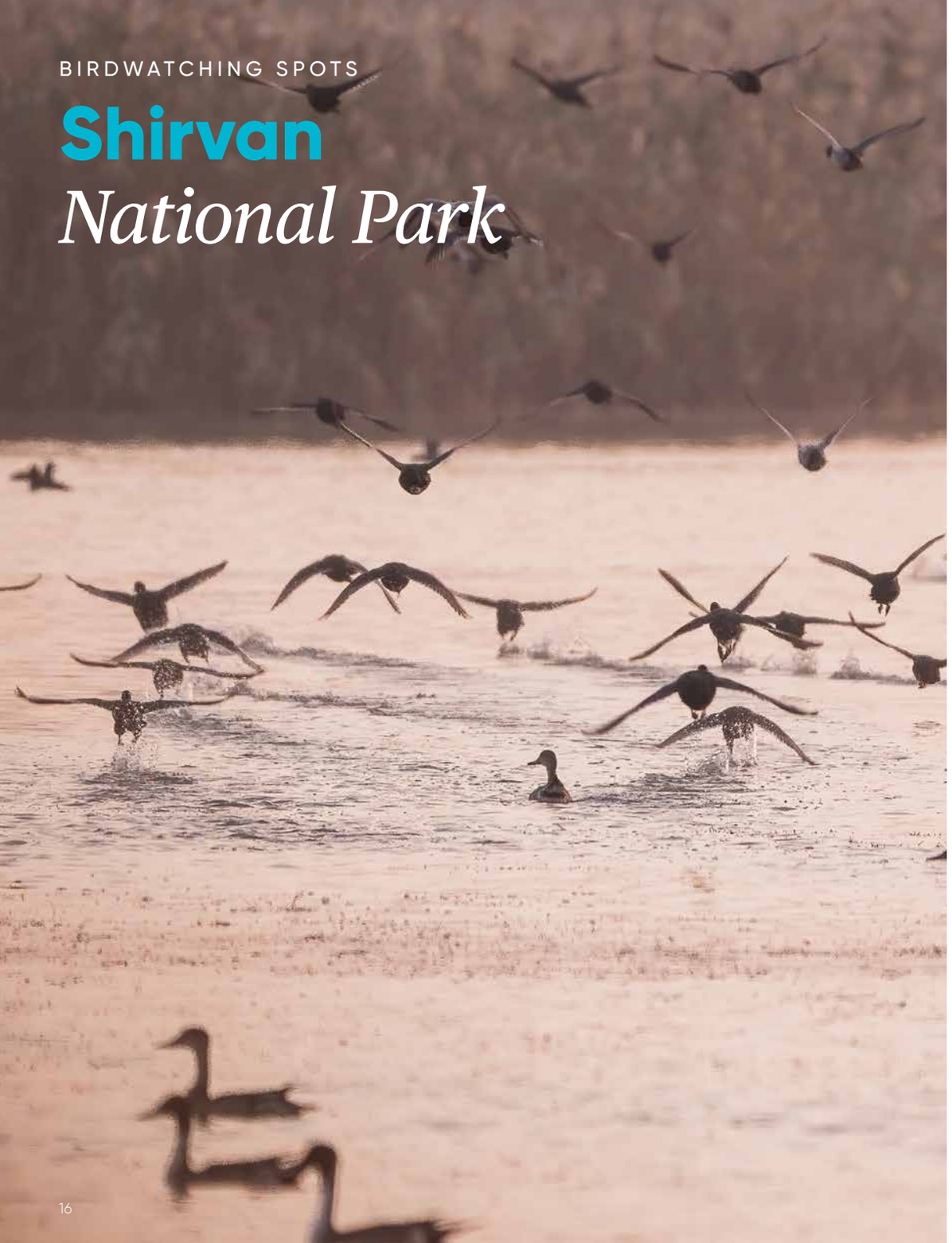
When to visit
Most interesting during spring and late autumn/winter.

Where to stay
Mingachevir hosts several hotels with peaceful riverside settings: the **Kur Hotel** (+994242730313); **Agsaray Deluxe Hotel & Spa** (+994502001988); and **River Side Hotel** (+994242749373).

Explore
the area

While Mingachevir is not currently a travelling hotspot, wandering around the city will interest admirers of Soviet architecture and allow you to feel the atmosphere of Azerbaijan's largest river, the Kura. More interesting, though, is that from Mingachevir it is easy enough to reach both **Ganja** and **Sheki**, cities located some 70 km away in opposing directions and offering a variety of historical and cultural sights, as well as excellent restaurants and hotels. Another option is **Naftalan**, some 50 km to the south-west, which is home to Azerbaijan's famous healing oil therapies, which are offered at a number of resorts, ranging from basic to extreme luxury.

Shirvan *National Park*



Easily accessible along the Baku-Astara highway 90 km south of Baku, Shirvan National Park is one of Azerbaijan's top all-round nature sites which is best known as the home of the iconic Goitered Gazelle. The gazelle is an absolute Azerbaijan success story, since their numbers had dropped to just a few hundred animals in the 1960s but now count between 7,000 and 8,000 alone at Shirvan NP thanks to persistent conservation efforts. Visitors are guaranteed to see them during a visit to Shirvan.

Additionally, this huge area (54,000 hectares) is a paradise for birdwatchers as it has recorded over 270 different species, to see many of which this is the most accessible site in Azerbaijan. The reason for such abundance is its location, like the Absheron and Gizil Aghaj national parks, on the Caspian coastline bird migration path, as well as its importance as a breeding, resting and wintering spot for a huge variety of species, including Greater Sandplover, White-tailed Lapwing, Greater Flamingo, Pygmy Cormorants, Lesser Kestrel, Steppe Buzzards, Imperial Eagle, both species of bee-eaters, Rollers, and Black Francolins. The artificial Flamingo Lake not far from the park entrance is a brilliant observation spot.

Target species

Black Francolin (Francolinus francolinus)
Little Bustard (Tetrax tetrax)
Menetries's Warbler (Sylvia mystacea)
Lesser Short-toed Lark (Calandrella rufescens)
Blue-cheeked Bee-eater (Merops persicus)
Marbled Duck (Marmaronetta angustirostris)
Rufous Bush Chat (Cercotrichas galactotes)

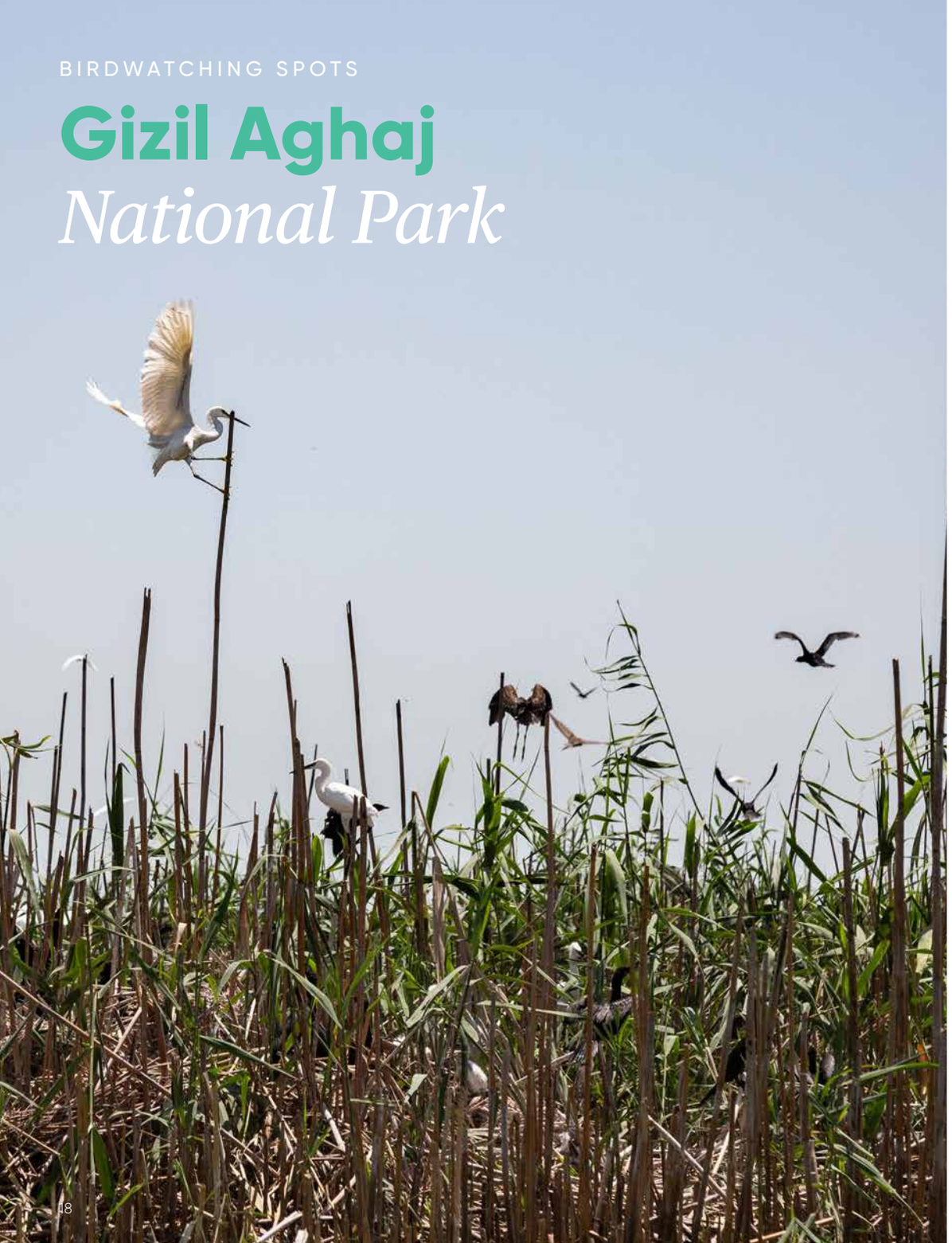
When to visit
Winter, spring and autumn.

Where to stay
Kur Hotel (+994514130011) is a comfortable and affordable option in the nearby town of Salyan.

Explore
the area

En route to Shirvan National Park from Baku is the UNESCO-listed **Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape**, home to over 6,000 prehistoric petroglyphs, as well as nearby mud volcanoes. Alternatively, consider spending longer in Shirvan National Park, which besides its rich fauna is also home to several mud volcanoes, local shrines (pirs) and wild Caspian beaches.

Gizil Aghaj *National Park*



Located 260 km south of Baku, this nearly 100,000 hectare protected area by the Caspian Sea consisting of forest and wetlands is one of the top sites for birders in Azerbaijan. Gizil Aghaj serves as a crucial resting and refuelling spot for seabirds migrating along the western coast of the Caspian. Its mixed landscape of wetlands, reedbeds and shallow lagoons is home to millions of birds mainly from October to May with the avian show constantly changing throughout the year.

Present in particularly large numbers are waterbirds, which venture here to winter and breed and include cormorants, pelicans, spoonbills, geese (sometimes the rare Lesser White-fronted Goose), herons, waders and ducks. The park is also home to predators such as wolves, reed cats and jackals.

While a nature reserve was first established here in 1929, the national park was set up only in 2018 and is currently the country's largest. The site was included in the Ramsar List of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, which designates sites of international importance, in 1976.

Note that some excellent birdwatching points are actually located just outside the park to the south, easily visible from the road leading out across the lagoon to the peninsula. The park's brand-new Tourism Information Centre is easy to visit, but to venture further inside the main reserve and its vast wilderness requires support from a tour guide or proper arrangement in advance.

Target species

Citrine Wagtail (Motacilla citreola)
Pallas's Gull (Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus)
Terek Sandpiper (Xenus cinereus)
Dalmatian Pelican (Pelecanus crispus)

Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

When to visit
Particularly high numbers in winter but more species in autumn and spring. Good from October until May.

Where to stay
The comfortable **Masalli Hotel** (+994709513086) in Masalli town has a very good restaurant and is only 3 km from the start of the birdwatching area as you turn off the main road towards the sea. The **Mandarin hotel** (+994505478383) is located on the road to Lankaran, 9 km from the settlement of Liman and 27 km from the national park entrance. **Khan Lankaran** (+994508101056) hotel and restaurant on the edge of Lankaran city offer a very authentic stay 28 km from the national park entrance. More good hotels can be found in Lankaran city.

Explore
the area

The capital of south-eastern Azerbaijan, **Lankaran**, is a great place to get acquainted with the southern flavours of national cuisine and learn about the country's tea heritage. The city is also historic, as travellers can discover at the Lankaran Historical and Ethnographical Museum, housed in an elegant avant-garde mansion with an interesting story itself. Elsewhere, in Masalli the **Istisu sanatorium** is set around a therapeutic hot spring on the Velvelechay River, and can be reached via a scenic road into the Talish Mountains.

Talish *Mountains*

Another vast area with several birdwatching sites home to exclusive bird species is the Talish Mountains, which cover large parts of Azerbaijan's south-eastern corridor and straddle the border with Iran.

Lower down the climate is subtropical and much of the region is covered by the Hirkan Forest, an internationally significant refuge of tertiary relict flora including many endemic tree species and interspersed by creeks and rivers which is protected by the Hirkan National Park. The most interesting species living here are the Caspian Tit, the very localised subspecies, poelzami, of Great Spotted Woodpecker, Shikra and in winter the Black-throated Thrush from Siberia, mostly found near the popular Tabassum restaurant on the road from Lankaran city to the hilltop town of Lerik. Here, in the hillside bushland and forest near the treeline, is the only place in Europe inhabited by the elusive Caspian Tit, which was only rediscovered by a British birder in 2017 after decades of going unsighted.

Similarly, the Shikra, another speciality to the region similar to a Eurasian Sparrowhawk, was spotted in 2008 for the first time since 1968, though today birdwatching groups have an excellent chance of seeing them in Masalli.

Beyond Lerik a delightful country road passes through lush meadows en route to a dramatic canyon, after which it enters an expanse of semi-arid highland scattered with thorny bushes and small oases of luxuriant forest. Up here in the Zuvand highlands you may encounter species that are otherwise limited to the exclave of Nakhchivan like White-throated Robin, Pale Rock Sparrow and Crimson-winged Finch.

Target species

Black-throated Thrush (Turdus atrogularis)
Caspian Tit (Poecile hyrcanus)
Shikra (Accipiter badius)
Semi-collared Flycatcher (Ficedula semitorquata)

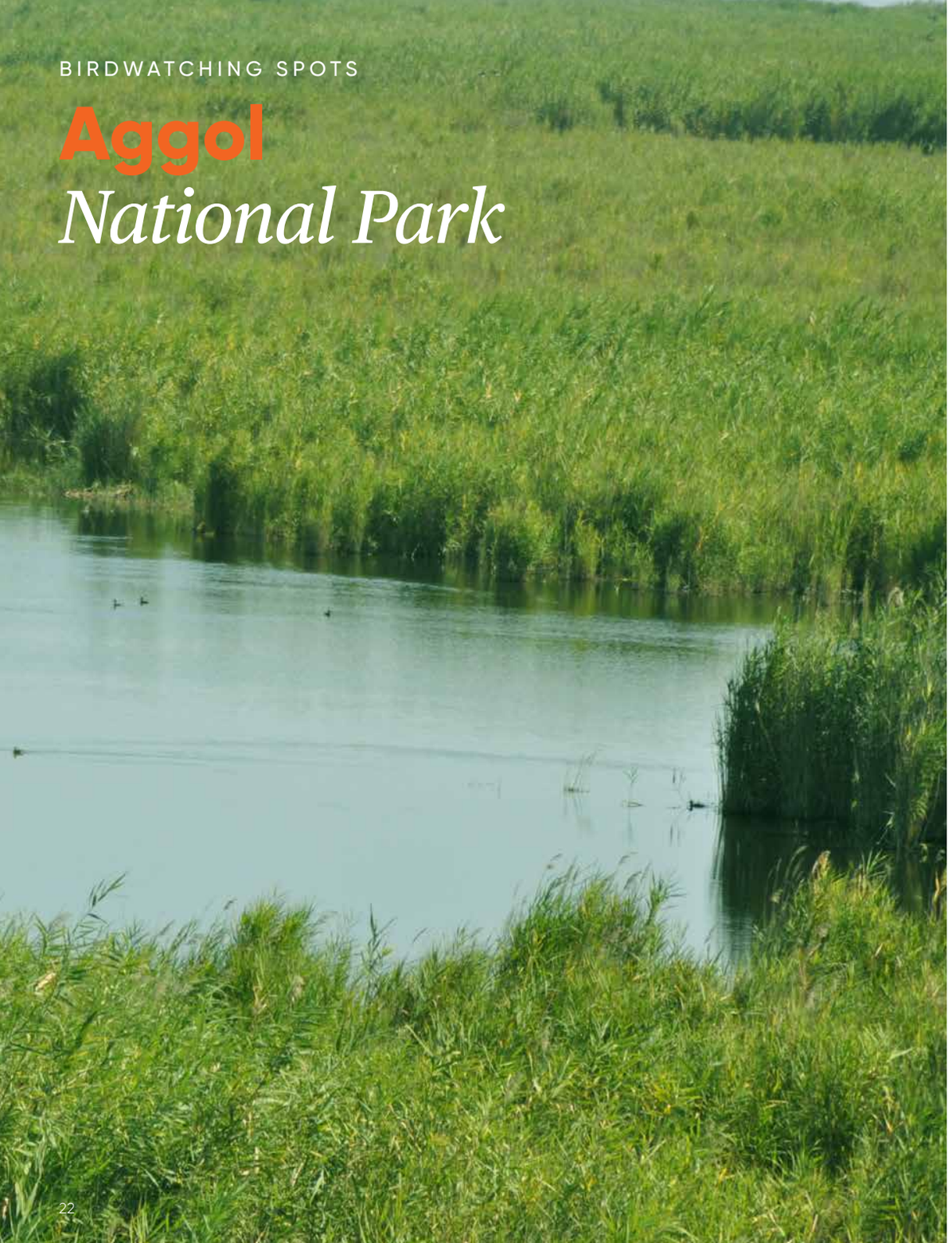
When to visit
Late spring or late autumn.

Where to stay
The forest huts at **Tabassum** restaurant along the Lankaran-Lerik road are an authentic nearby option popular with birdwatchers. A little further away, Lankaran city has a good range of hotels. The hotels in Masalli can also be used as a base.

Explore
the area

The hilltop town of Lerik is home to one of Azerbaijan's most unique museums: the **Museum of Longevity**, which celebrates the region's remarkable number of centenarians, whose longevity is thought to be down to the pure air, water, nature and produce. Two **waterfalls**, Galabin and Gunashli, accessible by hiking, are impressive natural attractions of the Lerik region. Another is the **Gateway to the Mountains canyon**, containing a number of caves which were ancient human settlements.

Aggol *National Park*



This national park encompasses a vast lake surrounded by steppe and semi-desert in western-central Azerbaijan, near the town of Agjabadi. Located below sea level, the Aggol Lake at the centre of the park formed mainly as a result of flooding of the Kur and Araz, Azerbaijan's two major rivers.

The expansive area is a haven for birds all year round home to over 140 species, including nesting colonies of many herons and egrets, Glossy Ibis, Spoonbills, Pygmy Cormorants and lots of wintering geese (sometimes the threatened Lesser White-fronted Goose) ducks and waders. Aggol's global significance is highlighted by the fact it was included in the Ramsar List of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance in 2001.

The park derives its name, which means "White Lake" in English, from the white plumage of the birds found on the lakeshore. Highlights include Marbled Duck, Ferruginous Duck, White-headed Duck, Little Bustard, Purple Swamphen, and Black Francolin. Besides birds, the park is inhabited by gazelles, wolves, reed cats, foxes, wild boar, snakes, and turtles.

Target species

Purple Swamphen (Porphyrio porphyrio)
White-headed Duck (Oxyura leucocephala)
White-tailed Lapwing (Vanellus leucurus)
Marbled Teal (Marmaronetta angustirostris)

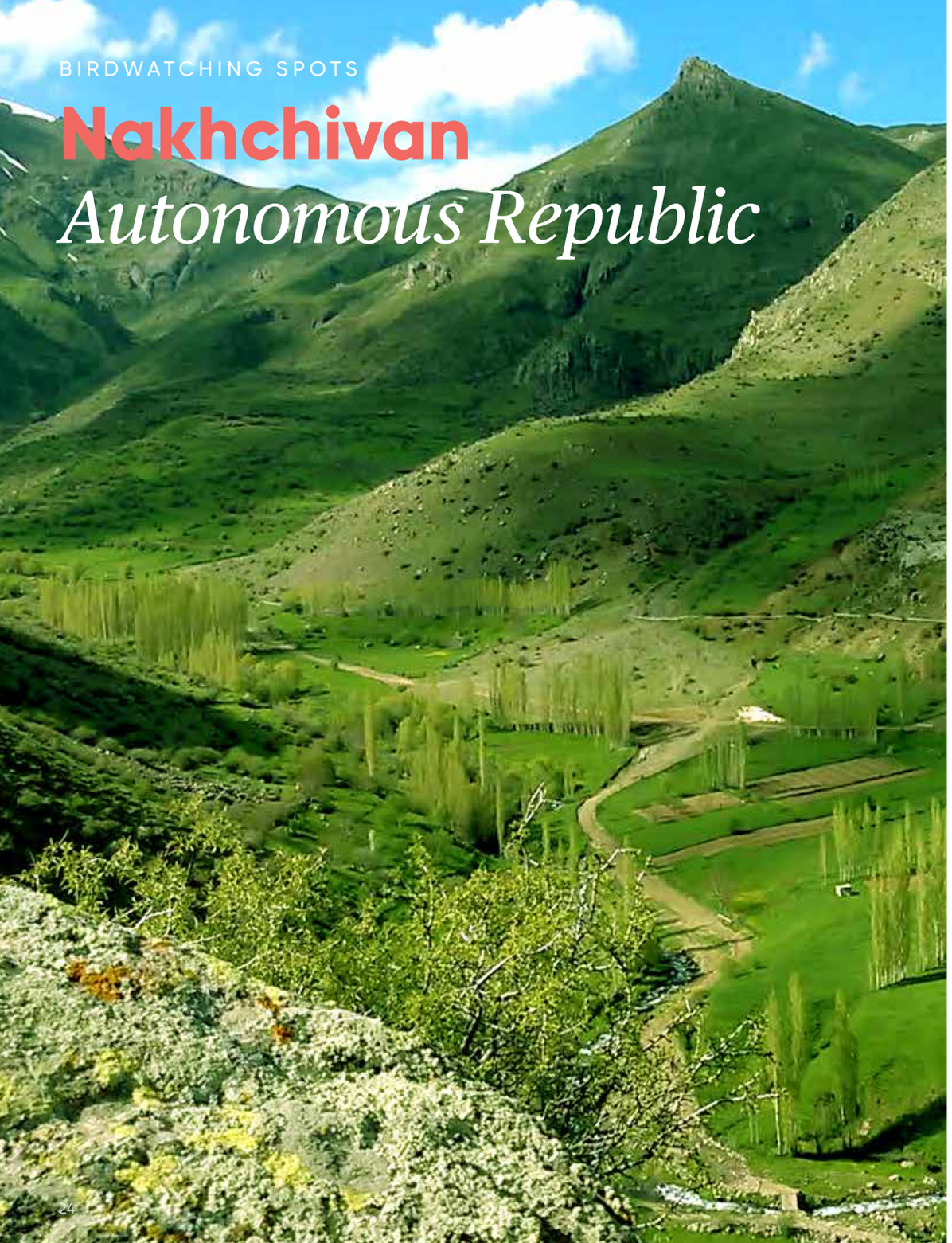
When to visit
Late autumn to late spring.

Where to stay
The closest option is the town of Agjabadi at **Royal & Xan Palace** (+994503543054). A little further away in Barda city are several local-level hotels, including **Kral Hotel and Restaurant** (+994504578634).

Explore
the area

While Aggol is a little far from the well-trodden tourism routes, about 50 km north of nearby Agjabadi town is the small city of **Barda**, famous for once being the capital of the ancient state of Caucasian Albania existing across much of present-day Azerbaijan between about 4BC and 8AD. Located on the Terter River, Barda today is a quieter place but still home to several historical attractions including the elegant Juma Mosque, 19th-century Imamzadeh religious complex, and the ornately tiled Barda Mausoleum built in 1322.

Nakhchivan *Autonomous Republic*



Visiting Nakhchivan as a birdwatcher is a hugely worthwhile experience. In fact, many birdwatchers consider it the highlight of a trip to Azerbaijan, as the landscape and feel of the place is very different. Nakhchivan has a continental climate with very cold winters and very hot summers. Much of the central zone is covered by orange-red steppe or semi-desert. The Araz River creeps along the south and marks a natural border with Iran, while the southern extreme of the Lesser Caucasus Mountains tower across the north of the territory.

It is a large region but the key birdwatching sites can be covered in two to three days, during which you can base yourself in Nakhchivan city. The avifauna here is markedly different and has more in common with eastern Turkey and north-western Iran than mainland Azerbaijan. A visit here in May or early June especially will add 10-12 species that you will not see elsewhere in Azerbaijan, including Radde's Accentor, Mongolian Finch, Trumpeter Finch, Grey-necked Bunting, Upchers Warbler, White-throated Robin, and See-see Partridge.

Currently, the virtually only way of getting to Nakhchivan is with one several daily flights (duration about 40-50 mins) from Baku, but new rail and road routes are planned to be constructed in the near future to make the autonomous republic more accessible than ever before, which is great news for birdwatchers!

Target species

Mongolian Finch (Eremopsaltria mongolica)
Grey-necked Bunting (Emberiza buchanani)
Red-tailed wheatear (Oenanthe chrysopygia)
White-throated Robin (Irania gutturalis)
Radde's Accentor (Prunella ocularis)
See-see Partridge (Ammoperdix griseogularis)
Upcher's Warbler (Hippolais languida)
Pale Rock Sparrow (Carpospiza brachydactyla)
Bimaculated Lark (Melanocorypha bimaculate)
Caspian Snowcock (Tetraogallus caspius)
Eastern Rock Nuthatch (Sitta tephronata)

When to visit
Late spring and early summer.

Where to stay
Nakhchivan city is the best base for birdwatchers and has several good hotels: **Tabriz Hotel** (+994365447701), **Hotel Grand Nakhchıvan** (+994365445930), **Duzdag Hotel** (+994365444901), **Saat Meydani Hotel** (+994365457755).

Explore
the area

A fascinating region, Nakhchivan is dotted with historical, cultural and natural monuments. Highlights include the 12th-century Mausoleum of Momine Khatun, Nakhchivan Khan's Palace, the mountain setting of Batabat Lake and mysterious Mt Ilandag. Several local legends are connected with Noah, who they say settled here after The Flood. The more continental climate results in a unique local cuisine too, with specialities like arzuman kufta and the honey-drizzled Ordubadi omelette. And the local people are incredibly hospitable.

more *sites*

Gobustan

Gobustan is well known among travellers for the Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape, a UNESCO-listed site home to over 6,000 petroglyphs spanning some 40,000 years, accompanied by a state-of-the-art museum. Most travellers here also visit the nearby mud volcanoes. However, Gobustan is also of interest to birdwatchers as living amongst all the rock carvings are interesting birds like the Rock Nuthatch, Red-billed Chough, Finch´s Wheatear, Rock Sparrow and Chukar, as well as the Woodchat Shrike and Egyptian Vulture in spring and summer. So this is a unique opportunity to combine archaeology with ornithology! Further inland is a vast semi-desert habitat crisscrossed by gravel roads and populated only by occasional shepherds. Exploring this area is difficult but the intrepid birdwatcher can be rewarded with such highlights as Lesser Short-toed Lark, Greater Sandplover, Lanner, Long-legged Buzzard and the occasional resting Sociable Lapwings in mid-spring.

Absheron National Park

Conveniently close to the capital, Baku (about 60 km east), this may be Azerbaijan's smallest national park at 783 hectares but it is deceptively busy with birdlife and has a lovely remote feel at the extreme tip of the Absheron Peninsula. The landscape combines coastal wetlands and semi-desert and a trip here will reward birders with sightings of a variety of gulls, terns, ducks and waders, as well as various species of raptors. Most of the birds are migratory visitors travelling along the Caspian coastline. However, the Short-eared Owl is one of a few nesting species and can also be seen in autumn. Birds aside, the park's other interesting residents include gazelles, wolves, jackals, Caspian Turtle, the Levantine Viper and aquatic Dice Snake. In the past it was possible to spot Caspian Seals but they have been absent in recent years.

BIRDWATCHING SPOTS

Nabran

This unique area near the Russian border in far north-eastern Azerbaijan where the humid subtropical climate allows forest to grow right up to the Caspian seashore is partly protected by the Samur Yalama National Park. In summer it has long been a hotspot for vacationing families from the capital, Baku; however, before the crowds arrive, in spring, there are plenty of birds to delight ornithologists, including Black Stork, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Golden Oriole, and many species of woodpeckers. But since most of the birds here can also be seen in Eastern Europe and the Balkans many foreign birdwatchers give it a miss during a hectic birding trip.

Altiaghaj National Park & the Candy Cane Mountains

The staggering pink-and-white slopes of the Caucasus mountain foothills of the Khizi region led to their unofficial name, the 'Candy Cane Mountains.' Their unique colouration comes from the fact that millions of years ago iron trapped within their shale composition became oxidised. For birders, the area is mainly attractive for some species of lower mountain habitats like the Rock Nuthatch, Chukar, various raptors and, in spring, songbirds like Black-headed Bunting, Rufous Bush Chat and Barred Warbler. The road through these mountains is one of the most scenic in the country, crossing semi-desert and steppe before ascending to the oak forests of the Altiaghaj National Park, located at an altitude of 1,200 metres. This park is also of interest to birdwatchers for its raptors and passerines. Both sites make convenient side trips from the main birdwatching site at Besh Barmag.

Hajigabul Lake

Located about 1.5 hours' drive south-west of Baku is an expansive wetland fed by the Kura River which is an important habitat for wintering birds, as well as migrants from the coast to inland wetlands. The water is very shallow, however, and does sometimes dry out. Nonetheless, it makes for an interesting roadside stop whether driving along the Caspian coast towards Shirvan National Park and the Talish Mountains or heading inland to Aggol National Park. In winter over a dozen species of duck can be seen, while in late spring and autumn the area is an absolute haven for waders with thousands present on some days with suitably low water levels.

Mahmudchala Lake

A shallow saline wetlands area surrounded by semi-desert, Mahmudchala Lake spans about 8,000 hectares near the town of Bilasuvar and is easily accessible for birders as the main highway cuts through the area and there are turn-offs en route to Masalli. Located about 160 kilometres south of Baku, this is a worthwhile and simple stop-off on the way to the bigger birdwatching areas of Gizil Aghaj National Park and the Talish Mountains further south. From November until April it's a refuge for tens of thousands of wetland birds including Ferruginous, White-headed and Marbled Duck, and White-tailed Lapwing.

Absheron National Park

when *to visit*

Unlike other places in Europe, one of the major advantages of birdwatching in Azerbaijan is the exciting experiences available all year round, with each season offering something different. For example, you can visit in May for the breeding birds and Caucasus specialities, or in autumn to focus on the migratory species passing through Besh Barmag, or during winter to experience the flocks of Little Bustards and teeming wetlands. The possible combinations of when to go, which sites to visit and what kind of species to look out for are so many. But here is a brief overview:

Autumn (Sep-Nov)

Birds are not in breeding season so they are not territorial or in song but rather gather at coastal sites and migration resting areas. There is not too much to see in the forests or up in the mountains. Highlights include watching the bird migration at Besh Barmag and the great array of species at Shirvan National Park, Mahmudchala Lake, Hajigabul Lake, Aggol National Park, and Gizil Aghaj National Park. If road conditions and weather permit, visit the Talish Mountains and Khinalig in search of target species later in November.

Option 1: Bird-rich steppes and wetlands

Day 1:
Early morning drive from Baku to Shirvan National Park, spend the day there birdwatching and stay one night in Salyan.

Day 2:
Drive south and stop for birdwatching at Mahmudchala Lake. Have lunch in Lankaran and spend the afternoon at the wetlands in Gizil Aghaj National Park. Two nights in Masalli or Lankaran.

Day 3:
A full day visiting different sites in and around Gizil Aghaj National Park.

Day 4:
Drive to Aggol National Park and birdwatch there, including lunch. Afternoon drive to Mingachevir and stay two nights there.

Day 5:
Full day of birdwatching around Mingachevir Lake and steppe habitats.

Day 6:
Morning drive to Hajigabul Lake and birdwatching there. Lunch nearby, then drive to Absheron National Park for afternoon birdwatching. Spend the last night in Baku.

Day 7:
Fly home.

Option 2: Bird migration at Besh Barmag

Day 1:
Early morning drive from Baku to Besh Barmag

Day 2-5:
Bird migration studies at Besh Barmag. Stay at hotel in Gilazi or Zarat (simple apartment-style) or Qalaalti Hotel & Spa (upmarket spa resort). Lunch in the field.

Day 5 (afternoon):
Drive to Khinalig and stay two nights there.

Day 6:
Full day of birding and hiking around Khinalig.

Day 7:
Return to Baku and fly home.

Winter (Dec-Feb)

Birds congregate in wetlands, coastal regions and some specific (and very attractive, like the Little Bustards) species also in steppe and agricultural areas. Lowland sites are the main focus from late November to early March but the snowy scenery is also strikingly beautiful in both the Caucasus and Talish mountains with some attractive and rare mountain species to see there. Highlights include the huge winter flocks of Little Bustards and many wetland species at Shirvan National Park, Aggol National Park and near Mingachevir.

Bustard bonanza

Day 1:
Early morning drive from Baku to Shirvan National Park and full day of birdwatching there. One night in Salyan.

Day 2:
Drive south, stopping for birdwatching at Mahmudchala Lake. Lunch in Lankaran and afternoon at the lagoons in Gizil Aghaj National Park. Two nights in Lankaran.

Day 3:
Morning drive up to Lerik to look for target species like Caspian Tit and Black-throated Thrush. Possible afternoon at Gizil Aghaj National Park lagoons.

Day 4:
Drive to Aggol National Park and birdwatch there, including lunch. Afternoon drive to Agjabadi and stay two nights there.

Day 5:
Full day of birdwatching around Mingachevir Lake and steppe habitats.

Day 6:
Morning drive to Hajigabul Lake for birdwatching there. Lunch nearby, then drive to Absheron National Park for afternoon birdwatching there. Last night in Baku.

Day 7:
Fly home.

Spring (Mar-May)

Birds prepare for the breeding season and some also migrate northwards, all of them in their best plumages and colours, so all over Azerbaijan is teeming with birdlife! To try and see all the exciting breeding species, some of them arriving back from wintering grounds late in spring, you need to visit approximately after 25 April. Highlights include all the active birdlife in all wetland areas, flowering steppes, fields and green forests. Nakhchivan is particularly rich in exclusive species in May, while the Greater Caucasus alpine zone is nice to visit from late April (weather depending) to see the unique species there. Visit Besh Barmag for the migration in April or early May.

All over Azerbaijan

Day 1:
Early morning drive from Baku to Shirvan National Park and full day there. One night in Salyan.

Day 2:
Morning walk in the village, then drive south, stopping at Mahmudchala Lake. Lunch in Masalli and look for the Shikra in the local park. Afternoon at Gizil Aghaj National Park lagoons. Two nights in Masalli.

Day 3:
Early morning drive to find the Caspian Tit near Lerik. Enjoy some forest birding and/or possible repeat visit to the Masalli Shikra site or Gizil Aghaj National Park.

Day 4:
Long drive north with possible birdwatching stops at Mahmudchala Lake, Gobustan and/or Besh Barmag. Arrive at Nazli Bulag Resort (en route to Khinalig from Guba) in the evening; alternatively, continue to Khinalig for two nights there.

Day 5:
Full-day birdwatching hike at Khinalig. Reach almost 3,000 m by 4WD or on foot.

Day 6:
Early morning birdwatching around Khinalig, then drive to Laza village after lunch. Homestay for one night.

Day 7:
Early morning look for Caucasian Black Grouse outside Laza village, then birdwatch until after lunch. Drive back to Baku and take an evening flight to Nakhchivan. Spend three nights in Nakhchivan city.

Day 8-9:
Explore different areas in Nakhchivan with a local guide and prior arrangements.

Day 10:
Fly home.

Summer (Jun-Aug)

The quietest period for bird activity and usually too hot for a comfortable visit, for Western visitors at least. However, an exception is the Greater Caucasus Mountains, where the climate is pleasant and even the highest locations are usually accessible for birdwatching hikes. Highlights include the rare mountain species in Khinalig and Laza villages, and from mid-July onwards the waders at Gizil Aghaj National Park and other coastal and wetland areas.

Mountains delights & wetland haven

Day 1:
Drive from Baku to Laza and have lunch on arrival at homestay. Afternoon birdwatching around the village. One night there.

Day 2:
Full-day hike across the mountains to Khinalig (will need good fitness and good weather!) with a mountain guide. Alternatively drive there via Guba.

Day 3:
Full-day birdwatching at sites around Khinalig. Late afternoon drive to Baku. One night in Baku.

Day 4:
Drive to Lankaran with birdwatching stops at Mahmudchala Lake wetlands. Lunch in Lankaran, then afternoon at Gizil Aghaj National Park lagoons. Two nights in Lankaran.

Day 5:
Full day in Gizil Aghaj National Park with guides and boat/4WD if needed. Evening drive to Kura.

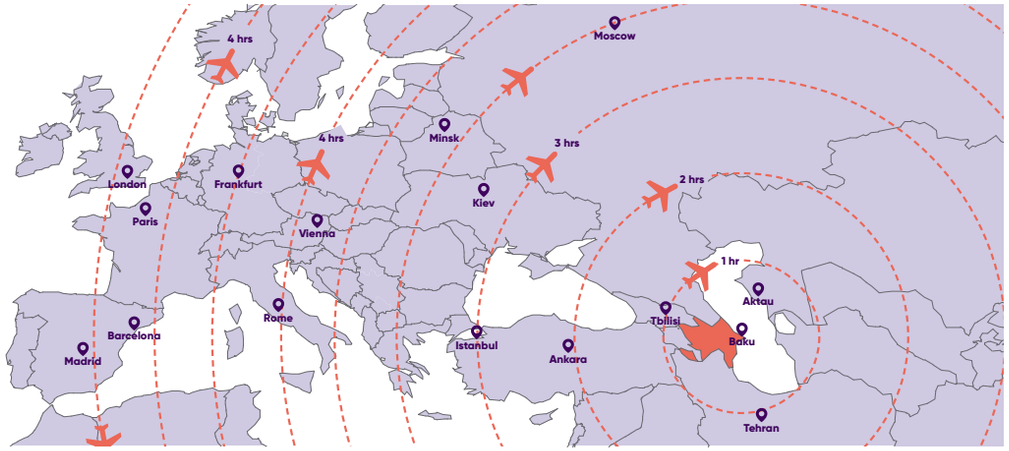
Day 6:
Full day of birdwatching around the Kura river delta and northern area of Gizil Aghaj National Park.

Day 7:
Back to Baku and fly home.

salam *Azerbaijan*

Country Size
86,600 km²

Population
10 million



COVID-19 measures
COVID-19 has affected us like the rest of the world, but we've taken various measures to protect people. The main one is the SAHMAN programme, aiming to raise health, safety and hygiene standards across the accommodation, hospitality and transportation sectors and supported by the UNWTO. Named after the Azerbaijani word for 'immaculateness', it urges businesses to take mandatory measures on social distancing, disinfection, quarantine areas, cleaning methodology, and more. Learn more at **sahman.az**.

Visa
Normally, for some nationalities visas are available upon arrival. For others e-visas can be obtained within 3 days via **evisa.gov.az**. Currently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic only citizens of the countries eligible for entry to Azerbaijan can obtain visa upon arrival or e-visa. For others, visas are being issued through Azerbaijan embassies. We advise you to check requirements before booking your trip.

Money
Our currency is the manat (AZN). Card payments are accepted at most shops and restaurants in the country. Mastercard/Visa ATMs are very widespread and available in main towns. Changing money back is no problem.

Accommodation
We have a complete range of options, from luxury and mid-range hotels to rural ensuite bungalows, provincial hotels and even private homestays. Many have joined the SAHMAN programme to raise health, safety and hygiene standards.

Language
Our state language is Azerbaijani, which is similar to Turkish. Many people speak fluent Russian. Basic English is understood by most of the population.

Religion
While we are a secular country, most of the population follow Islam. Muslim dress code is not enforced nor expected. Alcohol is very widely available. All religions have somewhere to worship in Azerbaijan.

Dining
Azerbaijan's cuisine is full of flavours and surprises. Due to having 9 different climate zones and an arable land mass of 38.9%, a huge variety of fruits and vegetables are cultivated here. With impressive growing credentials, Azerbaijan is no stranger to organic produce and healthier options. Local restaurants offer not only traditional dishes, but also a variety of food options, such as vegetarian, vegan, organic, halal, kosher, etc. Baku has an excellent selection of restaurants, from Japanese fusion to Italian.

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Published by:
Azerbaijan Tourism Board,
96E Nizami Street,
3rd floor, Landmark I
Baku AZ1010, Azerbaijan