

Letter to Ilham Aliyev



Dear Mr Aliyev,

I recently spent about 9 hours in your country and would like to make some comments about my experiences and observations.

Firstly, there was the extraordinarily complicated procedure for obtaining a visitor's visa which I endured over several days in Tblisi, Georgia. I have visited some 120 countries around the world and have to say that getting into yours was the hardest, probably akin to entering North Korea. Consulate working hours of just 2 hours a weekday, letters of introduction and photos to be procured elsewhere, payment for the visa only possible several kilometres away in an Azerbaijan bank. It was then required that I leave my passport for several days – this I was unable to do because I was intending to travel into neighbouring countries. On my return a few days later at 10a.m. I was then told to come back at 4p.m. when the long-drawn-out process would be completed. Honestly ! All this for just a few hours in Baku.

I took the Azerbaijan Airlines morning flight from Tblisi which was fine, although serving a full meal on a 40 minute flight might be a step too far. Luckily there weren't too many passengers.

On arrival at Baku Airport (oh, I do beg your pardon sir, ... at the Heydar Aliyev International Airport) I was extremely disappointed to discover there were no 'left luggage' facilities available which meant I had to lug my case around for the next few hours. Yours must be the only airport in the world with this problem.

After avoiding several aggressive taxi sharks a decent bloke took me via the fascinating Yanar Dag (where the custodians

appear to know little about their 'blazing mountain') to the Old City of Baku.

I then walked for miles around the city – along the 'Bulvar', in my view a poorly designed indentikit effort at a French boulevard / promenade where hundreds of workers were tending their formulaic sections in some sort of Soviet-inspired utopian work ideal. I passed the world's tallest flagpole (or is it the Heydar Aliyev Flagpole ?), the base of which was out of bounds to us mere mortals – perhaps the Aliyev dynasty mausoleum was being constructed underneath. Yet more workers tended unnecessary, over-engineered verge gardens on the 'Heydar Aliyev Avenue' out towards the airport.

It was somewhat galling to note that you have named Zaha Hadid's rather fine edifice the 'Heydar Aliyev Centre' – is your family on some sort of power trip ? These vanity projects are an utter waste of your country's oil money which you appear to be squandering willy-nilly.

Leaving your country was a bittersweet affair too. The good bit was excellent service in the departure check-in area. The bad bit was truly outrageous ... my checked-in bag was taken aside for 'additional security checking'. A security guard prodded around its contents before asking me to zip it up again. When I arrived home in England I was appalled to discover that this 'security' man had stolen 3 packets of Georgian cigarettes bought for one of my daughters. An absolute disgrace.

I gather Tony Blair does your public relations – a rather poor choice in my estimation. He pockets US\$ 1.5 million per annum as Middle East Peace Envoy with a free flat in Jerusalem. Have you noticed his efforts to keep the peace in Syria. No, me neither.

I was just a humble tourist in Azerbaijan who even on a brief visit noticed a vast dichotomy between all this 'Heydar

Aliyev' stuff and the people at the periphery of your projects. Do you think Allah approves of your activities ?

Yours sincerely,

Jamie Summers