

THE ITINERARY



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**SILK, SPICES AND
STORIES IN SHEKI**

Palace jaunts and a stew that warms the heart in the Azerbaijani city

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CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

SILK, SPICES AND STORIES IN SHEKI

A CENTURIES-OLD CARAVANSERAI, PSYCHEDELIC PALACES, AND A LOCAL STEW THAT GOES STRAIGHT FOR THE HEART IN THIS AZERBAIJANI CITY **BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI**

Sheki's architecture is a canvas for the art of *shebeke*—stained glass mosaics pieced together without glue or nails.

Few travellers to Azerbaijan look beyond the capital, Baku. What they miss is the charm of Sheki, a city swaddled in the foothills of the Greater Caucasus Mountains, and a significant stop on the Silk Route.

In July 2019, Sheki's historic centre along with the Khan's Palace was anointed as UNESCO sites. It takes a day spent in its cobbled alleys, silk and spice bazaars, weaving in-and-out of its red-tiled homes, to unravel Sheki's stories.



Floral and paisley motifs pop inside Sheki Khan's Palace.

10 a.m.

Sheki's superstar is Xan Sarayi, or Sheki Khan's Palace, perched on a hill at the northeast end of the town. Shaded by chinar trees, the two-storey structure was built as a summer palace for the ruler in 1762. The facade itself is quite the stunner, with turquoise, cobalt and ochre tiles studded on the walls, and wooden latticework windows. It is also the only fully restored building in the fortress complex which houses the Khans' residences and a winter palace.

Inside, every inch of the walls and ceilings pops with vivid murals and frescos of floral and paisley motifs, along with hunting and war scenes in the rooms on the upper floor. But the palace's cynosure are the windows covered in *shebeke*: mosaics of stained glass pieced together like a large jigsaw. I marvel at the sunlight streaming through them, casting psychedelic shadows, bathing the room in its warmth.

11 a.m.

Walk down to the fortress grounds, to the roofed art and crafts bazaar where several artisans' stalls showcase Azerbaijan's unique handicrafts. The *shebeke* workshop is near the entrance, and the master craftsman demonstrates how he

works magic on the wooden latticework, deftly incorporating bits of coloured glass. Other stalls display local embroidery, pottery, and the popular 11-stringed instrument—the Azerbaijani *tar*. A small history museum in the complex is also worth a stop for its galleries of traditional artefacts, cooking implements, pottery and weapons.

11.45 p.m.

For a modern-day Silk Route experience, walk down the main road for about 10 minutes. Step inside the historic Yukhari Karvansaray Hotel, where a lush central courtyard is fringed



The local 11-stringed instrument, *tar*, is an ode to Azerbaijan's musical heritage.



Visit the Yukhari Karvansaray hotel for an elaborate tea ritual with white cherry *murabba* and baklava.

by a two-level arcade of stone arches. Built in the 18th century for travellers and traders to rest for the night, the restored caravanserai is now open to both overnight guests and daytime visitors. There are far better hotels in town, so drop in just for a walk and their elaborate tea ritual at the *çayxana* (teahouse) with its cosy alcoves—sample dried fruit and nuts, apricot and white cherry *murabba* (jam), and baklava served with fragrant çay straight from the samovar.

1 p.m.

For lunch, walk four minutes to Restoran Qaqarin for a quick meal of pilaf (fragrant rice baked inside phyllo pastry) and Azeri wine.

Sheki is renowned for its sericulture industry, and few souvenirs are as lovely as the traditional silk Azeri headscarves known as *kelagayi*: These can be stylishly accessorised as scarves or stoles too. Pick one up from one of the shops lining the main road outside the Karvansaray hotel. And don't forget to buy some famous Sheki halva, the rich and layered, nutty dessert also known as *pakhlava*, from Aliahmad Sweets, a five-minute walk away.

3.30 p.m.

A 20-minute drive north of Sheki, deep in a valley overlooking jagged peaks lies the village of Kish, home to only a few thousand residents. Walk its cobblestone streets until you reach: the Albanian Church of Kish, said to have been built in the first century A.D. The modest, beautiful space is now a museum, and displays pottery and Bronze Age skeletons excavated in the region over the past two decades. Aimless walks around Kish are equally rewarding, with the mighty Caucasus for company.



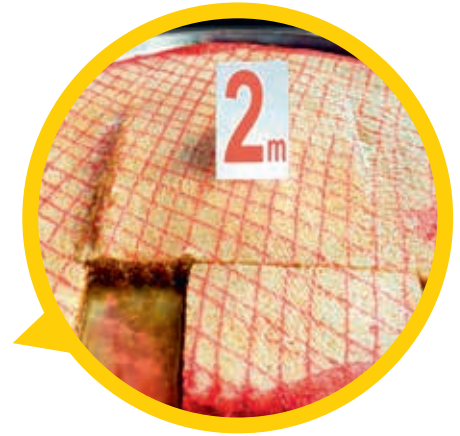
The Albanian Church is the main draw in the town of Kish.



8 p.m.

Back in Sheki, reward yourself with a hearty dinner of *piti*, Sheki's signature dish, at the restaurant Nuxa at Marxal Resort and Spa. The thick stew of lamb, chickpeas, vegetables rich with the flavour of onions and garlic, chestnuts and the stray apricot is traditionally slow cooked for 8-12 hours in clay pots called *dopu*, which impart a unique taste. Piti is usually served with copious amounts of lavash or soft bread.

To eat piti like a local, tear the bread into small bits, pour over it the liquid from the *dopu*, sprinkle some sumac, and enjoy the flavourful, soupy mess. Then mash the remaining stew into a chunky paste with a wooden pestle, pour it into the bowl and eat it as the second course. ●



ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Around

There are no direct flights from Delhi and Mumbai to Azerbaijan's capital, Baku. All connections need a layover at gateway cities like Dubai and Sharjah. Sheki lies about 300 km/4.5 hr northwest of Baku. If you

don't hire a taxi, a bus from Baku International Bus Station (32 km/45 min drive west the airport) is a more economical option.

Indian travellers to Azerbaijan can get an evisa at evisa.com.az, which costs \$25/₹1,800, plus a service fee.

Stay

Rooms at the Sheki Saray Hotel are kitted with modern comforts and overlook either the city or the Caucasus Mountains (www.shekisaray.az; doubles from AZN70/₹2,950).



Ringed by the Greater Caucasus Mountains, Sheki was a significant stop on the Silk Route; Sheki's best flavours are hidden in a pot of *piti* (top left) and the sweetness of Sheki halva (top right).