

# Azerbaidjan

## 2019-20



**BAKU  
QARABAĞ  
NEFTÇI  
ZIRÁ  
SABAH  
GABALA  
KEŞLA  
SUMGAYIT  
SABAIL**



# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20

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Surprising as it may seem for a country whose average top-league attendances barely climb into four figures, but **Azerbaijan** stood higher than Poland, Romania and Slovakia in the UEFA rankings as the 2018-19 season drew to a close.

Keen on gaining entry on the international stage, this energy-rich ex-Soviet republic by the Caspian Sea has posited sprawling capital **Baku** as a host metropolis, capable of staging the Europa League final of 2019 and Euro 2020. Until recently, however, Azerbaijan was only a curious footnote in football history.

Once a player for the country's most storied club, **Neftçi Baku**, Tofik Bakhrarov was the moustacheo'd linesman who famously (and demonstrably) indicated that a shot from England's Geoff Hurst had crossed the line in the 100th minute of the 1966 World Cup Final. In doing so, he provided Azerbaijan, then part of the USSR, with a solitary if quirky claim to fame.

Baku's first main sports arena, originally named after Stalin, then Lenin, became the **Tofik Bakhrarov Stadium** after his death in 1993. By then Azerbaijan had organised its first, post-Soviet league, for 26 (!) clubs, won by Neftçi. Plotted on a map, the host towns for this inaugural season, with exotic names like Sabirabad and Mingaçevir, covered the whole of Azerbaijan. The map for the 2019-20 campaign shows a cluster

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around Baku and a dot for Gabala, all competing in the eight-team **Azerbaijan Premier League**.

Over the course of nearly three decades, three main trends stand out. Major provincial clubs such as **Kapaz** from Ganja and **Turan** from Tovuz, both title-winners in the 1990s, have long waned. Meanwhile, Baku boomed as petrodollars – Neftçi ('Oil Worker') still feature a towering derrick on the club crest – poured into the



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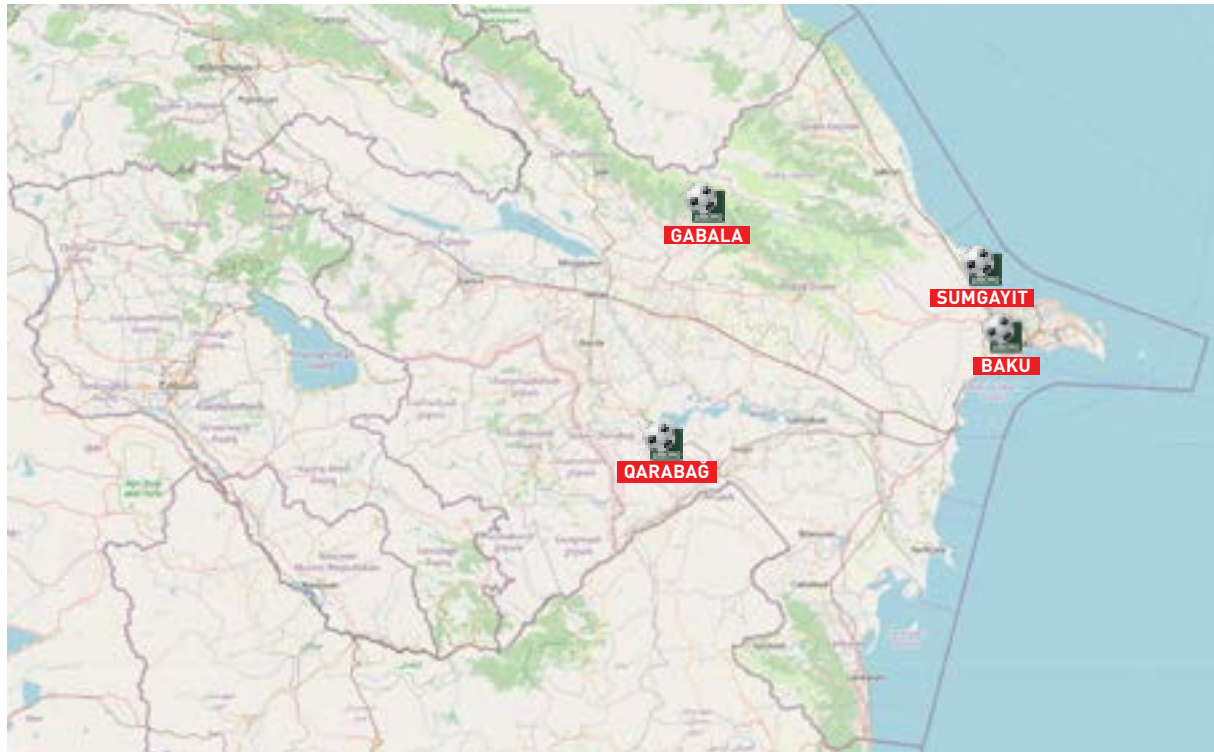
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capital. Stadiums were built across the city, the **Tofik Bakhrarov** rebuilt and the showcase **Baku Olympic Stadium** unveiled in 2015. Most of all, though, the domestic game has been dominated by **Qarabağ**, unassailable title-holders since 2014.

The Horsemen are also universally revered. A look again at the maps of 1992 and 2019 will partly explain why. That first post-Soviet season, 'Karabakh Aghdam'

played at Quzanli, on the fringe of the Nagorno-Karabakh, disputed between Azerbaijan and Armenia. All-out war then forced Qarabağ to flee to Baku, as former Neftçi forward Gurban Gurbanov arrived as manager. Riding a wave of national sentiment, backed by national food producers Azersun and grounded in solid coaching, Qarabağ qualified regularly for Europe until the current run that has seen them sweep everything before them.

The country's high UEFA ranking is due to Qarabağ's constant group-stage participation in Europe's main two competitions, taking on Spurs, Roma and Chelsea, among others. Marquee fixtures have been played at the Tofik Bakhrarov and Baku Olympic – home is otherwise the **Azersun Arena**, one of those new-builds around Baku.

**Keşla's ASK Arena**, Neftçi's **Bakcell**, **Sabail's ASCO**, **Sumgayit's Kapital**



**Bank, Sabah's** recently renamed **Alinja Arena** in **Masazir**, **Zira's Zira Olympic**, all are 21st-century venues holding a few thousand spectators within or close to Baku. Reconstructed in 2012, the **Gabala City Stadium** was where Tony Adams spent 16 months as manager in Gabala, close to the Russian republic of Dagestan, as remote from Romford as you can probably get.

## Station to stadium

EU and US nationals require a visa to enter Azerbaijan. The system has at last been simplified and digitalised, with **online applications** ([evisa.gov.az/en](http://evisa.gov.az/en)) arranged for 30-day stays. The e-visa is issued within three working days and costs \$20 plus a \$3 service fee. Other **visas** ([visaforazerbaijan.org.uk](http://visaforazerbaijan.org.uk)) require longer and cost more.

The national carrier, **Azerbaijan Airlines** ([azal.az/en](http://azal.az/en)), and **Austrian Airlines** ([austrian.com](http://austrian.com)) provide regular flights.

The main point of entry is **Baku Heydar Aliyev International Airport**, 20km (12 miles) north-east of the capital. Buses and taxis run into town (see **Baku**), served by a metro network and buses. **International trains** link Baku with Georgia and Russia. Tbilisi is an overnight journey, but it's a gruelling 52 hours and two overnights from Moscow.

**Baku Pass station** near the city centre is on the metro network. To use the cheap **domestic train network**, **book tickets** at [ticket.ady.az/en](http://ticket.ady.az/en) – **Sumgayit** is 40min away. **Gabala** is connected by **bus** ([avtovagzal.az/en/page/](http://avtovagzal.az/en/page/)) →



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sheherlerarasi-schedule), also extremely cheap, with a direct service from Baku airport if required. Taxis between towns are also affordable.

Note that town and station names can be rendered in slightly different English versions, Gabala is often seen as Qabala, for example.

Car hire is expensive and driving can be treacherous.

The **currency** in Azerbaijan is the **manat** (AZN), currently trading at 2AZN/€1. The smallest banknote is 1 manat. There are 100 qepiks to one manat, the smallest coin 1 qepik or €0.005.

## Tables & trophies

The eight teams of the **Azerbaijan Premier League** play each other four times, twice home and twice away. The winners enter the Second Qualifying Round of the Champions League, runners-up and third-placed the First Qualifying Round of the Europa League. If the cup winners and runners-up are already in Europe, then the fourth-placed club qualify.

The team finishing bottom swaps places with the winners of the 14-team **Azerbaijan First Division**, organised on a straight home-and-away basis. Reserve sides cannot be promoted. Below this, the **third tier** is divided into five regions, Capital &



North, North-West & West, Centre, South and, inaccessible to many foreigners, Nakhchivan, the Azeri enclave squeezed between Armenia and Iran. These leagues are small, with end-of-season play-offs between the winners, but little direct exchange with the First Division. The **fourth tier** is amateur, 20 teams divided into two groups, the top four from each qualifying for knock-out tournament to decide the winners.

The **Azerbaijan Cup** involves the 22 clubs from the Premier League and First Division, lower-tier teams meeting first, the winners joining the top-flight clubs for the two-leg Quarter-Finals in December. Away goals also decide in the semis in April, which is how Gabala and



Sumgayit reached the final in 2019. This has recently been played at the **Nakhchivan City Stadium**, accessible by plane from Baku. The winners gain access to the First Qualifying Round of the Europa League.

## Season's dealings

The season runs from mid-August to May, with Premier League rounds often running over four days, from Friday through Monday. Saturday is the main match day. There's a winter

break for most of December and all of January. The First Division starts a week later and has the same winter break. Its games are played Thursdays and Fridays, with occasional ones on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

## Entry level

Admission for domestic fixtures is absurdly cheap – AZN1/€0.50 at Neftçi, for example – and paying on the day with small change the norm. Smaller clubs don't even charge.

Carry ID just in case. Big European and international fixtures often sell out, so booking through an agency such as **iTicket AZ** ([iticket.az/en](http://iticket.az/en)) is not a bad idea.

For showcase games, your ticket will indicate the gate (*qapi*), sector (*sektor*), row (*sira*) and place (*yer*). For most league games, just rock up and sit down. Soft drinks and tea are usually sold, as well as sunflower seeds in long cones. **LG**



# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Baku

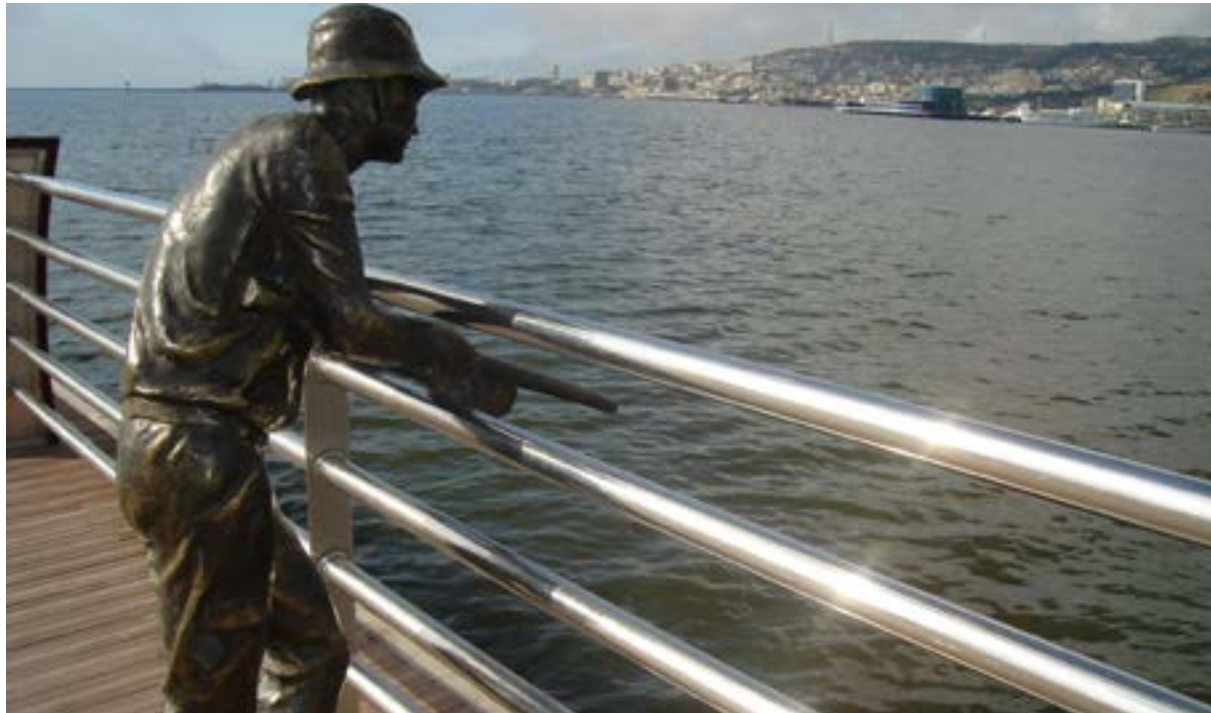
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## Baku

**Baku**, capital of oil-rich Azerbaijan, has emerged from its obscure status as a football footnote. Chosen as one of 12 cities to host finals matches for Euro 2020, elevating it alongside London, Munich and Rome, Baku was quick to build the 68,000-capacity **Olympic Stadium**, as well as revamp the **Tofik Bakhrarov**.

In its eagerness to become a global showcase, staging the Grand Prix and the Eurovision Song Contest, Baku also successfully hosted the 2019 Europa League Final. As fate and a penalty shoot-out would have it, the finalists were Arsenal and Chelsea.

Baku first witnessed major European club football in 2017. Prodigal residents **Qarabağ** became the first Azeri club to qualify for the Champions League. Representing devastated **Ağdam** in the war zone of Nagorno-Karabakh, Qarabağ were forced to relocate to Baku in the 1990s. The club was based at the former national stadium named after the most famous linesman in the history of the game. After his pivotal role in the 1966 World Cup Final, Tofik Bakhrarov provided Azerbaijan, then part of the USSR, with its only pre-boom claim to fame on the football pitch, albeit from the Wembley touchline.



Bakhrarov himself started out as a player for the city's flagship club, **Neftçi** ('Oil Worker'), around the time the stadium later named after him was being built. Both club and ground have their roots in Stalinism; as an agitator under the code name of Koba, Stalin had caused political unrest among the oil workers in the early 1900s. Neftçi, who still feature a towering derrick on their club crest, were founded as Neftyanik ('Oil Worker') at the height of Stalinism in 1937.

Shortly afterwards, work began on a Soviet-style stadium in the area of Ganclik, about 1km north of the city's main train station. Laid out as a letter C (ie a Russian 'S', as in Stalin), it was completed by German prisoners of war and opened in 1951.

Each Soviet republic had one stand-out football club – Azerbaijan had Neftçi. Strangely, like Bakhrarov, their most memorable year was 1966, when they finished a highest-ever third in a strong Soviet league.

Unlike Bakhrarov, however, Neftçi made no mark on the game outside their own borders.

After 1991, all former Soviet republics gained independence and created their own leagues. Azerbaijan was no different – except that it was fighting a terrible war with Armenia. While the national side relocated to Trabzon in Turkey, Neftçi won the inaugural domestic title in 1992. Later, they moved out of the Tofik Bakhrarov to the new



Baku Olympic Stadium



JW Marriott Absheron

**Bakcell Arena** in 2012. Set in Nizami halfway out to the airport, it holds 11,000 and was one of five stadiums in the capital used for the Under-17 Women's World Cup in 2012.

Shortly afterwards, Qarabağ began their domination of the domestic league, overshadowing previously preeminent Neftçi. No Azeri club has laid a glove on Qarabağ since they started their title run in 2013-14. Riding an unprecedented wave of success, Qarabağ opened their

BAKU



# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Baku

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Du Port Hotel

own stadium, the **Azersun Arena**, at Yeni Surakhani, close to Baku airport north-east of town.

Their success means that the Azeri title has gone to the capital every season but one since 2003-04.

Until recently, the second club in the capital was **FC Baku**. Bearing the landmark Maiden's Tower on their badge, Baki Futbol Klubu were formed after the Nagorno-Karabakh War and have suffered the capricious promises of controversial owner Hafiz Mammadov. The man responsible for the 'Land of Fire' sponsorship on the shirts of Atlético Madrid, Mammadov moved FC Baku out of the Tofik Bakhrarov, only to



Hilton

have the club play at their training ground since 2012. In 2015, they were relegated. In 2016, they turned amateur.

By contrast, **Inter Baku** eclipsed the other clubs from the capital to



Park Inn

put in the strongest challenge to the Qarabağ hegemony. Runners-up in 2014 and 2015, Inter also won the league in 2008 and 2010. In 2015-16, they pushed Athletic Bilbao pretty close in the Europa League. Against a background of financial uncertainty, Inter Baku became **Keşla** in 2017. The former Inter Arena (and Shafa Stadium, also an U-17 venue) is now the **ASK Arena**, halfway between the Tofik Bakhrarov and the Olympic Stadium.

Three other current top-flights clubs are based in or near Baku, starting with **Sabail**, from the bay area just south of the historic centre, base for the Azerbaijani Navy and the prison where Stalin was kept. The **ASCO Arena**, aka Bayil Arena, is further down but easily reached by public transport. **Sabah** are located in **Masazir**, just north of Baku on the M1, the **Alinja Arena** set between the nation's main brewery, Khirdalan, and most notable natural feature, mud volcanoes. **Zira** are way past

the airport, towards the Absheron National Park, at the furthest tip of the peninsula that points out over the Caspian Sea towards Turkmenistan. Home games for the 2017-18 Europa League were played at the **Dalga Arena**, by the beach on the northern coast of the peninsula.

## Bearings

**Baku Heydar Aliyev International Airport** is 20km (12 miles) north-east of the city centre. The Aero Express bus leaves every 30min for the metro station **28 Maya**, where the city's two main red and green lines meet. From there, it's an easy hop to the **Olympic Stadium at Koroglu**, the **Tofik Bakhrarov Stadium** at **Ganclik**, downtown seafront **Sahil** and the Old Town stop of **Içerisheher**. Journey time to 28 Maya is 30min, though it can take 45min during rush hour. The bus operates on the same **Baku Card System** as the **metro**. At the airport, tickets cost 1.50AZN/€0.75 from the kiosk near the exit of Terminal 1, cash only, in small denominations. In town, the Baku Card is 2AZN/€1, with each journey costing 0.20AZN/€0.10, available from machines at stations. Even cheaper is the Baku Card for limited use (0.20AZN/€0.10, as shown on the English-language touch screen), which you can charge for up to four journeys (4 *gedis*), each one 0.20AZN/€0.10. Buses also work on the same system. →



# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Baku

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Hops Pub Baku

A taxi from the airport should cost around 25AZN/€12.50). Always agree a fee beforehand. A taxi only as far as the Olympic Stadium should be under half that. An average journey across town in a London-style cab should cost around 7AZN/€3.50. To phone one, call centrally located **189 Taxi** (+994 12 565 31 89).

## Bed

With no hotels by the Olympic Stadium, to stay nearby, the four-star **Avenue Hotel Baku** stands two bus stops away and right by the ASK Arena, ideal for Keşla games.

All the main international chains have set up in Baku. These include the **Hilton** by the seafront, the **Fairmont** near the iconic Flame Towers and the **Park Inn** near the

train station. A couple of blocks from the Hilton on focal Azadliq Square, the **JW Marriott Absheron** exudes luxury, its top three floors given over to a panoramic pool, spa and gym.

To stay in the centrally located bar quarter, the **Du Port Hotel** on Yusif Mammadaliyev has its own pub/restaurant with a large-screen TV and billiard room. Close by, on the other side of Molokan Gardens, quieter **Theatrum** is more upscale, though five-star might be pushing it a bit.

## Bars

For a Muslim country, an awful lot of beer – much of it local **Khirdalan** or Turkish **Efes** – flows in Baku. Pool is another major feature – almost every bar has a table and local leagues are taken seriously.



The Green

The main bar hub, close to focal **Fountains Square**, is where the streets of **Alizade** and **Tarlan Aliyev** intersect. There you'll find the long-established expat hubs of **Finnegans** and **Shakespeare**, with all the trappings including TV football. Corner bar **Otto** is another old favourite. Other expat-friendly options include **Shamrock** and the neighbouring **Hairy Lemon** on Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev and, liveliest of the lot, the memorabilia-

decked **Hops Pub Baku** on Tarlan Aliyev. There you'll also find the **Compass West** pub and the excellent **Tortuga**, closer to Fountains Square.

The **Red Lion Pub** on Bulbul Avenue was particularly busy in the build-up to the Europa League final and generally provides a rowdier experience for match-watching, while the **London Pub** and **Top Beer** on Yusif Mammadaliyev are more about a quiet pint as you take in

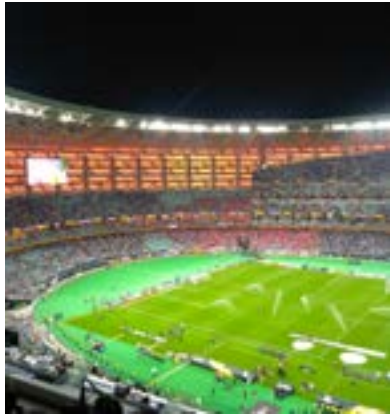
the game. Further up, on the corner of Mardanov and Bashir Seferoglu Kücesi, the **Koleso** is another screen-equipped hostelry, with Stara Praga beer on tap. Just over the road, the **Sport Pub Beer Dad** ticks most boxes.

If you'd rather try out a locals' bar, the **3 Bochki** (Dilara Aliyeva 251) near the train station/28 Maya is an honest, wooden cabin of a pub with a variety of beers and TV sports. It does food too – and all is inexpensive. **LO**



# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Baku Olympic Stadium

[www.libero guide.com/baku-olympic-stadium](http://www.libero guide.com/baku-olympic-stadium)



## Baku Olympic Stadium

Opened in 2015, the **Baku Olympic Stadium** ([bos.az/en](http://bos.az/en)) personifies the oil-rich capital of Azerbaijan, determined to claim its place on the world stage by hosting prestigious global events. The Europa League final of 2019 is the most recent.

The fact that Baku's once modest metro network now extends this far out of town is almost as indicative of the speed of urban development in the city. Host of the inaugural European Games of 2015, the Olympic Stadium covers a vast site – three times the size of Baku's historic Old Town – and rises six storeys high. The 68,000-capacity Olympic Stadium is set way north-east of town, by the shores of Lake Boyukshor.



Qarabağ, the club from the war-torn region of Nagorno-Karabakh that moved to the Azeri capital in the early 1990s, have welcomed the likes of Roma, Atlético Madrid and Sevilla here, along with Chelsea and Arsenal, who then returned for that final a long, long way from London.

Laid out in three tiers, the stadium loops around a running track with a fair distance between those in the highest ring and the action. Away fans for international fixtures are

usually allocated sectors 307-309 behind one end.

### Transport

The quickest way to reach the stadium is by metro. **Koroglu station** is on both the red and the green lines, four stops from the main crossing point of **28 May**, five on the red from central **Sahil**.

Allow 20 minutes from town. Koroglu station is a 10-15min walk to the stadium, approaching the south-west exit.

Several bus lines, including **Nos.1** and **13**, serve the nearest stop of **Milli Stadion**, but unless you're staying at a hotel en route, it's hardly worth the hassle.

A **taxi** from the city centre should cost around 12AZN/€6 but make sure the meter is running and/or agree a price beforehand. The traffic will be heavy heading to the match and atrocious coming back, so, again, metro might be best. As European matches are usually

scheduled for 2100 local time, transport should still be running after the final whistle.

### Tickets

The Baku Olympic Stadium is only used for prestigious international fixtures. Many, such as the Champions League fixture with Chelsea in November 2017, sell out.

Visiting supporters should organise tickets through their own club or national football association.

When Azerbaijan play at the Baku Olympic Stadium, tickets can be booked online through the **FA** ([tickets.affa.az/en](http://tickets.affa.az/en)) or local agency **iTicket AZ** ([iticket.az/en](http://iticket.az/en)), which also distributes for Qarabağ's major European games.

### Bars

Metres from Koroglu metro station, the **MAF Lounge** is the best option close to the Olympic Stadium. An outdoor terrace, reasonably cheap beer including local brews, a large indoor space with shisha pipes and plenty of screens for sport attract plentiful football pre-match, but it's also a good option for a post-match bite while the crowds disperse. Alongside, the **Metro café** is a much simpler option with sensational shawarma and basic street food. Beers fill the fridge but there's less of a bar/pub atmosphere. **LB**





# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Keşla

[www.liberoguide.com/kesla](http://www.liberoguide.com/kesla)

## Keşla

**Keşla** ([keshlafc.az](http://keshlafc.az)) emerged from the financial meltdown of Inter Baku, one of the most successful sides of the modern era in Azerbaijan. Turning professional in 2004, this former university club picked up a first title in 2008 with goals from Khagani Mammadov, who had won it with Neftçi as a teenager a decade before.

A second championship in 2010 led to the Champions League, and a nail-biting finish with Lech Poznan. Each team's goalkeeper took the last spot kicks in a 17-penalty shoot-out, Georgian international Giorgi Lomaia seeing his saved in the Baku side's last participation in Europe's premier tournament to date.

Despite decent domestic form and regular appearances in the Europa League, Inter Baku's sponsors dropped out and the club was facing bankruptcy when the name change to Keşla came in 2017. The rebranded club won the Azerbaijan Cup a year later, East-Berlin born striker Pardis Fardjad-Azad getting the only goal in a 1-0 win over Gabala in the final.

Soon afterwards, the Inter Arena became the **ASK Arena**, although it's also often referred to by its even older name of the **Shafa Stadium**. Built by the Azerbaijan FA in 2001, it is surrounded by training pitches, with a



hotel built into one corner. The ground comprises three low blue-and-white stands, with the south end open. Capacity is 5,300, the playing surface artificial.

Games in the Europa League – Inter/Keşla have qualified most seasons since 2012 – have recently been staged at the **Dalga Arena**. Surrounded by hotels, this modern, compact ground in upscale Mardakan sits behind a row of beaches, 10km beyond Baku Airport, a taxi the only practical means of transport there. Capacity is 6,500.

Keşla have so far failed to assert themselves as Baku's de facto second club, however, three-figure attendances at the ASK Arena behind those of modest Sabah.



### Transport

The stadium is a 10min walk from **Ulduz metro station** on the red and green lines, one before **Koroglu** that serves the Baku Olympic Stadium. From Ulduz, head along Volodarski to the roundabout, then take a right down Muzaffer Narimanov to the main road, and over main Heydar Aliyev



Avenue. Alternatively, from Koroglu metro station, head towards the twisting Alov fountain, and take bus No.13 along Heydar Aliyev Avenue for three stops to Shafa Stadium.

### Tickets & shop

Admission is a nominal fee paid on the day, with no issues of availability. Souvenirs available on match days will be in the red of Keşla, a shift away from the white and blue of Inter Baku. The club badge not only features the

two unusual Azeri letters in Keşla, but also three flames, Azerbaijan known as the Land of Fire.

### Bars

A drink in the little bar at the **Avenue Hotel** built into the stadium is the only practical, pre-match option for the ASK Arena. If you're seeing a European game at the Dalga Arena, then the seafront a short walk away is lined with waterside eateries, including **Estacada** and **Del Faro**.



# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Neftçi

[www.libero guide.com/neftci](http://www.libero guide.com/neftci)

## Neftçi

No club in Azerbaijan has anything like the pedigree of **Neftçi Baku** ([neftchipfk.com/en](http://neftchipfk.com/en)). Founded at the height of Stalinism in 1937 as Neftyanik ('Oil Worker', Neftçi in Azeri), the club was the main one representing Azerbaijan when it was part of the Soviet Union. Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus and Armenia all had flagship clubs who won the Soviet League. The nearest Neftyanik came was third place in 1966, goals coming from Baku-born Anatoliy Banishevskiy, who also played in a World Cup semi-final that summer for the USSR. Then just turned 20, one-club man Banishevskiy was later found, a homeless drunk, on the streets of Baku and died at the age of 51, the greatest player the country ever produced.

The most famous, however, made his name in the final of that same World Cup, and as a linesman: ex-Neftçi player Tofik Bakhrarov. His demonstrative awarding of a goal for England on 100 minutes, the most contentious in the entire history of the game, earned him hero status in Baku and a statue outside the national stadium that also took his name.

Neftçi were based there for half-a-century, from the Stalinist era to post-Soviet independence, becoming the most dominant side and the first from



Azerbaijan to reach the group stage of European competition in 2012-13.

That same season, Neftçi moved into their new stadium, the **Bakcell Arena**. The former 8th Kilometre Stadium holds 11,000, in mainly two tiers, sectors 3A/3B filling one sideline opposite the VIP and media, 1A/1B and 2A/2B behind one goal, 4A/5A behind the other.

### Transport

The Bakcell Arena is reasonably close to **Kalghlar Dostlughu metro station**,

on both the red and green lines, seven from 28 Maya by Baku train station. From there head up the Gara Garayev Avenue, then hang a left at Heydar Aliyev Park after 200 metres.

### Tickets & shop

Admission is an across the board AZN1/€0.50, AZN5/€2.50 for VIP seats, on the day or a couple of days before – though availability is never an issue. Merchandise is sold in the stadium concourse on match days, all bearing one of the classic Soviet-era club badge, an oil derrick

spouting a gold star, with waves of the Caspian Sea below and the date, 1937.

### Bars

The stadium is slightly hidden inside a few residential blocks off a main road, with little by way outlets across the road. The most popular area to gather is in the middle section of a wide boulevard lined with trees a few minutes' walk from ground, it has a family-friendly atmosphere and plenty of street-food stalls. The smart **Beri Bax café** is the pick of the bunch, with terrace seating and



good access to a side street leading to the stadium. Across the road, **Zovg Lounge** has a late-night, chilled-out lounge atmosphere, with shisha, beers, including local, and spirits, and plenty of screens where they show football if asked. Open till the early hours, so a useful post-match option, too. **L9**

NEFTÇI



# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Qarabağ

[www.lib eroguide.com/qarabag](http://www.lib eroguide.com/qarabag)



## Qarabağ

A shining example of how an Azeri club can succeed, **Qarabağ** ([qarabagh.com/en](http://qarabagh.com/en)) have not only been champions every season since 2014, but singlehandedly lifted Azerbaijan onto the European stage. While the national side have failed to qualify for any major finals, the Horsemen have been galloping ahead in Europe as no other team from the region since, perhaps, Dynamo Tbilisi in the 1980s. Qarabağ have held Internazionale, Celtic, Monaco and Atlético Madrid to draws, edged out Anderlecht and hammered Young Boys Berne.

Few clubs have emerged as triumphant from a history as patchwork or as tragic Qarabağ's. The club was founded in 1951 in Ağdam. During the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Ağdam, and Qarabag's stadium, İmarat, suffered serious damage. The whole populace fled east. Ağdam, once a community 40,000 strong, has been a ghost town ever since. The stadium is still rubble.

Qarabağ relocated to Baku. Around the same time, bullish forward Gurban Gurbanov began scoring a record number of goals for the national team. Moving into coaching, first for his old team Neftçi Baku,



then Qarabağ from 2008, Gurbanov has given local players the confidence they might lack when playing in the national side. With backing from food conglomerate Azersun, Gurbanov could also lure prolific Brazilian striker Reynaldo and Spanish winger

Dani Quintana, and nurture Azeri talent such as forward Mahir Emreli.

First based at the **Tofik Bakhrarov Stadium** and still playing big European games at the **Baku Olympic**, Qarabağ moved domestic fixtures to a new stadium in Yeni Sukhrani, towards Baku airport. Named after the holding company of club owner Abdulbari Gözel, a one-man success story of modern-day Azerbaijan, the **Azersun Arena** holds 5,800. While home gates average under 2,000 in the league, European games are a national celebration in packed big arenas, a chance for all Azeri supporters to come together for matches beamed into the living rooms of western Europe. Many may not remember the

original Nagorno-Karabakh conflict of the early 1990s but its effects are still felt today.

### Transport

From the city centre, the nearest convenient departure point is **Qara Qarayev** on metro lines 1 and 2. Beside the metro station, take **bus Nos.113** or **191** directly to the Azersun Arena, a trek of at least 30min. A taxi from the next metro station along, **Neftchilar**, would mean a journey of around three kilometres and shouldn't be too expensive.

### Tickets

For league games, admission is a nominal fee, pay at the gate. Big European matches at the Baku Olympic Stadium are often sell-outs, so booking through an agency such as **iTicket AZ** ([iticket.az/en](http://iticket.az/en)) is the best bet.

### Shop

Merchandise, mainly T-shirts bearing the Qarabağ horse logo, are sold on the **club website** ([qarabagh.com/en/shop](http://qarabagh.com/en/shop)) in English, although not replica shirts. There's no fixed store – stalls are set up by the stadium on match days.

### Bars

The only outlet anywhere near the Azersun Arena is the **Bazar Store** built into the main stand, selling soft drinks and snacks. See **Baku Olympic Stadium** for bar tips there. **LG**

QARABAĞ



# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Sabah

[www.liberoguide.com/sabah](http://www.liberoguide.com/sabah)



SABAH

## Sabah

The youngest club in the Azerbaijan Premier League, **Sabah** ([sabahfc.az/en/](http://sabahfc.az/en/)) prove that with a little investment, sponsorship from a local bank, the right connections and a stadium to inherit, you can sail into Europe's smallest top flight and put yourself in contention for one of currently three slots in the Europa League.

'The main objective,' says the Sabah website under the heading 'Our Mission', '...is the qualification of

Sabah for the Eurocups. The work done to create a competitive team with the combination of experienced foreign players and local ones has been designed exactly for this'.

Nothing wrong with that, of course, except that, like Zira before them, Sabah were granted immediate passage into the lower-tier First Division then, after finishing fifth (!), promotion to the Azerbaijan Premier.

That notwithstanding, with their **Bank Respublika**, formerly **Alinja, Arena**, is easily the biggest club ground

in the country at 13,000 capacity. It sits in the bustling community of Masazir, north-west of Baku, halfway to Sumgayit. Given the recent lack of clubs outside Baku in the Azerbaijan Premier, the swift rise to prominence of Sabah with a potentially sizeable fan base close to but outside the capital is no bad thing.

With goals from former Ukrainian international Marko Dević, whose erroneously disallowed effort against England at Euro 2012 helped lead to VAR goal-line technology around the football world, crowds at the Bank

Respublika Arena for Sabah's debut Premier-League season in 2018-19 were the third highest after Qarabağ and Neftçi.

The danger is, as seen at Inter Baku (now Keşla), that if the bank sponsor drops out, unpaid salaries and possible dissolution are the result. For the time being, Sabah provide a relatively easy trip for fans of the only club with any kind of away support, Neftçi. Opened in 2014, the Bank Respublika Arena comprises four neat stands around a grass pitch, with a raised tier in the main one for VIPs.

### Transport

The quickest, cheapest way to Sabah is to take the hourly **train** to **Khirdalan** (AZN1/€0.50) 20 minutes from Baku, then a taxi for the 4.5km to the stadium, which the driver will probably know as the Alinja Arena.

### Tickets & shop

Ticket windows line one wall by the main entrance to the stadium, modest admission charged on match days. Light blue and dark blue are the club colours for merchandise sold.

### Bars

Across the road from the stadium, near the supermarket, a nameless **little bar** comprises outdoor seating amid trees on a grassy area, an ideal spot for a pre-match drink. In fact, the only spot for a pre-match drink. If you're coming from Khirdalan station, 200 metres away on main Heydar Aliyev Avenue in the direction of Masazir, a number of restaurants includes the **ETO Pub**, with the country's most popular domestic Khirdalan beer and standard dishes on offer. Match action can be shown on the pull-down screen in the rustic interior. Right outside, a fleet of taxis awaits to whisk you off to the stadium. 



# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Sabail

[www.liberoguide.com/sabail](http://www.liberoguide.com/sabail)

## Sabail

**Sabail** ([sabailfc.az/az/](http://sabailfc.az/az/)) differ from other recently formed clubs around Baku – based wherever their new-build stadiums might be, in seemingly random locations – in that their name, identity and setting relate to steep-sloped Bayil area just south of the capital's historic centre.

Here, around the wide bay lapped by the Caspian Sea that made foreign entrepreneurs and engineers huge fortunes over a century ago, mansions were built and dense housing. A naval base and a port area for sea trade were established, as well as a maritime prison where Stalin was incarcerated after inciting oil workers to strike.

It is no coincidence, then, that Sabail, nicknamed *Denizçiler*, the Sailors, play in sea blue and have a club badge depicting a wave. Their stadium, formerly known as the **Bayil Arena**, is now the **ASCO Arena**, the acronym referring to the Caspian Sea Shipping Company. It was built to co-host the under-17 Women's World Cup in 2012 – it was here that the US team controversially went out to North Korea at the group stage, their 1-1 draw not enough to match the goal difference France had built up across the Absheron peninsula at the Dalga Arena with a 10-2 (!) win over Gambia.



As for domestic football, in 2019 Sabail gained a European place in only their second top-flight season thanks to goals from Azerbaijan international striker Aghabala Ramazanov, younger brother of one-time forward in the national squad, Rauz, since retired. Also on the positive side, the club now has a company sponsor, AZ Tea, rather than being propped up by the Azerbaijan FA.

Sabail's home games in their debut Europa League campaign take place



at the ASCO Arena, temporarily re-named the Bayil Arena to avoid sponsorship issues, a handy destination for visiting supporters rather than treks to the remote Dalga Arena beyond Baku Airport. A compact ground of 3,200 capacity is divided into four low stands, behind a grandiose colonnade and gates bearing a huge Sabail logo.

### Transport

The **Bayil Arena stop on bus Nos.5 and 6** is 10-15mins from the **Intourist Hotel** near the Baku Eye, on the same

route. A taxi from there would be a few euros at most. The No.6 also runs from the Philharmonia Garden by focal Azneft Square.

### Tickets & shop

Admission is a modest sum paid on the day. Sky-blue merchandise will feature the big letter S of Sabail.

### Bars

You're still in town, so there are a few options along the main **Bibiheybat Road** leading to the stadium. Best

of them is the smart **Café Orxan**, its raised terrace offering views of the bay. More restaurant than bar but with plenty on the drinks list. Next door, the **Duyma Restaurant** also has a terrace, fewer crowds and beer sold.

At the opposite end of the scale, the **Cafe Sovetskiy** sells cheaper beer, locals spitting out sunflower seeds on the crumbling concrete outside. Again cheaper but comfortable, the **Elay** past the ground is more geared to beer than its menu of basic dishes. **LG**

SABAIL



# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Zira

[www.libero.guide.com/zira](http://www.libero.guide.com/zira)

## Zira

The Eagles of **Zira** ([fczire.az](http://fczire.az)) took flight in 2014, two years after the **Zira Olympic Sport Complex Stadium** was officially declared open – the ground came before the club. Stuck way out towards to the farthest tip of the Absheron peninsula, whose shape centrepieces the club badge, Zira is as remote as it can get, and still be within striking distance of Baku.

Beyond the Zira Olympic Sport Complex Stadium, the small community of Zira ('Cumin') runs out of streets, and a solitary road leads to the Absheron National Park a few kilometres away, former haunt of the Caspian tiger and the Caucasian leopard. Much is semi-desert.

For a football club to survive here seems miraculous and yet, with the backing of electrical giant Santral, Zira have not only survived but thrived. Joining the lower-tier First Division in 2014, Zira gained promotion that first season despite only finishing fifth (Kapaz finished ninth and still went up.)

From there, the Eagles kept on flying, though had their wings clipped when, having actually qualified by right thanks to taking runners-up spot in their debut season in the Azerbaijan Premier in 2015-16, they were refused entry to the Europa League. (Ironically,



of course, Kapaz were given their place.) The reason? The club had not existed long enough in a professional capacity.

In 2016-17, Zira qualified again, and duly made their European debut. As also the case for Keşla, home legs were played at the **Dalga Arena**, a short drive from the airport and close to the many beach hotels on the north coast of the Absheron peninsula. Whatever the reason for the ground swap, it worked, as Differdange

of Luxembourg were beaten 2-0, Haitian international Kervens Belfort scoring in one of only a handful of appearances for the club. Romania's Astra Giurgiu then stood in the way of any further progress.

The Dalga Arena also staged Zira's Azerbaijan Cup semi-final of 2019, an away-goals win by Sumgayit preventing a first chance of silverware for Zira. No European football for Zira in 2019-20, then – domestic fixtures take place at the Zira Olympic Sport



Complex Stadium, a modest ground of 1,500 capacity in one stand and a VIP balcony, facing each other across an artificial pitch.



ZIRA

## Transport

The only practical way to reach Zira's ground is by taxi, either from Baku Airport, which is only about 20km away, or from town, twice that distance.

## Tickets & shop

Admission is a nominal fee, pay on the day, if you need to pay at all – average crowds for 2018-19 were under 500.

If you see any merchandise, it will be sky blue, the club badge a neat arrangement of an outline of the Absheron peninsula illuminated by a lighthouse, overseen by an eagle.

## Bars

There's absolutely nothing around the ground, not even so much as a shop. If you're seeing a European game at the Dalga Arena, then the seafront a short walk away is lined with waterside eateries, including

**Estacada** and **Del Faro**. 📍



# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Gabala

[www.liberoguide.com/gabala](http://www.liberoguide.com/gabala)



GABALA

## Gabala

Nestled in the foothills of the Greater Caucasus, surrounded by thickly wooded slopes that soon reach the Russian border, **Gabala** was the unusual staging post for Arsenal legend Tony Adams on a managerial career path that started in High Wycombe. But here, on the ancient Silk Road, 240km north-west of Baku, the former England captain earned £1 million a year between 2010 and 2011.

Ironically, it was after he left that **Gabala FK**, formed in 1995 then moved from the distant, formerly German city of Goygol a decade later, came closest to winning the league. Two runners-up spots in 2017 and 2018 were followed by a cup win in 2019, interspersed with two appearances in the group stages of the Europa League.

Borussia Dortmund, Anderlecht and Saint-Étienne were hosted at Neftçi's Bakcell Arena, rather than they

trekked to Gabala, though Progrès Niederkorn of Luxembourg not only ran out at the **Gabala City Stadium** in 2018, they won 2-0. Built back in 1985, the ground sits on the edge of the town centre, a 15-minute walk from the bus station. There's more this neat stadium than 4,500 red and black seats and a foreboding hilly backdrop permanently swathed in cloud – here is where you find one of the country's most impressive academies, a major factor in Gabala's game plan.

### Bearings

The airport at **Çarxana** 25km (15.5 miles) away by taxi serves Gabala for occasional domestic flights from Baku. From the capital, frequent **buses** take 3.5-4hrs, arriving at the station south of town, on main road R9 that becomes the town's main street. Taxis are the main form of public transport. Note that Gabala is also rendered as Qabala.

### Bed

Things weren't all bad for Tony Adams in Gabala – while here, he was put up at

the **Qafqas Sport Hotel**, three minutes from the stadium. Three pools, a spa and full gym feature in this five-star set in sumptuous grounds. Equally luxurious, the nearby **Qafqas Karvansaray Hotel** is also used by some teams.

Where Samad Verghun meets the main road of Ismayil bay Gutgashinli, the mid-range **Gabala City Hotel** is also a ten-minute walk from the stadium, 15 from the bus station. Convenient for shops and amenities, the comfortable **Karvan** sits opposite pretty Heydar Aliyev Park. On the other side of the park, the friendly, English-speaking **Gabala Villa Vasif** (Vahid Qehramnov ev 26) has great budget lodgings with its own kitchen and garden.

### Beer

The riverside park, centrepieced by the World War II memorial, offers a number of options for drinks in Gabala, starting with the most pub-like place in town, **Beer Bros**. Khirdalan, other local brews and familiar dishes are served on the pleasant terrace and bare-brick interior, blessed with TV screens. The nearby **Cay Evi Bar** also provides Azeri lagers on tap, tables ranged around a concrete beer garden. Also here, the **Dondurma** is more food-oriented, in a picturesque setting.

On the main road towards the bus station, the spacious, rustic **Bizim Gabala** serves up a veritable Caucasian feast. **LD**



# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Gabala FK

[www.liberoguide.com/gabala-fk](http://www.liberoguide.com/gabala-fk)



## Gabala FK

Azerbaijan's third club in recent years behind Qarabağ and Neftçi, **Gabala FK** ([gabalafc.az/eng](http://gabalafc.az/eng)) are trying to match the ambition of its namesake town, surrounded by natural beauty of the Greater Caucasus. Spa hotels, waterfalls and stunning hiking routes bring tourists here in numbers, while young footballers trained at the local academy are integrated with

experienced foreign players to find success at home, before performing on the European stage.

Backing the club, Gilan Holding invest in large-scale projects around Azerbaijan, construction, tourism and logistics the cornerstones. Not only are there two high-end, sports-focused hotels in town but, just outside, the Gabaland theme park.

The decision to attract former Arsenal star Tony Adams here on a lucrative

contract is part of this wider scheme – after 16 months as coach in 2010-11, he returned as sporting director in 2012.

Epicentre of this operation, the **Gabala City Stadium**, set between the town's eastern outskirts and the wooded slopes of the great outdoors, is done out in the club colours of red and black. Grass training pitches surround the main ground, the academy unique in Azerbaijan.

The results, mainly thanks to this ambitious infrastructure, have been impressive. Since 2013, six creditable campaigns have resulted in four cup finals, one successful, and five top-three league finishes. A strong

provincial challenge to Qarabağ's dominance is no bad thing for the game in Azerbaijan.

In the Europa League, more prestigious home fixtures are switched to the Bakcell Arena in Baku. Wins over European veterans Panathinaikos, Lille and Maribor have allowed Gabala to face Borussia Dortmund, Anderlecht and Saint-Étienne in the group stages two seasons running, recouping part of the investment in their training complex. Earlier rounds and, of course, domestic matches, take place at Gabala's 4,500-seater stadium, compact and intimate, though currently uncovered. Long distances mean that away support is

minimal, a shame, as the standard of facilities is high, accommodation around town too.

### Transport

After the 3.5-4hr ride from Baku, the bus drops you at at the **station** south of town, a 15min walk up the same main road to the stadium, turning left at the New Mosque and Delhi-Karachi Darbar curryhouse into Elçin Karimov that bends right towards the stadium. A taxi (3AZN/€1.50) wouldn't take much more than 5mins.

### Tickets & shop

Unless it's a major European fixture, admission is generally free or a nominal manat or two at most. Gabala actually run a **match-day shop**, perhaps the only club in Azerbaijan to do so, a modest boutique of red-and-black merchandise. No copies of Tony Adams' *Sober: Football. My Story. My Life.*, though.

### Bars

Located on the first floor of the luxurious **Qafqas Sport Hotel** near the stadium, the **Sports Café** also doubles up as a games room, with table football and pool. Alcohol also served. On the other side of the stadium, the **Alma Baği** restaurant on 28 Maya serves hulking platters of meat and glasses of beer in a pretty garden. From here, it's a short walk to the main entrance of the stadium. **L9**





# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Sumgayit

[www.liberoguide.com/sumgayit](http://www.liberoguide.com/sumgayit)

## Sumgayit

In terms of football destinations, Azerbaijan's third city of **Sumgayit** is a pleasant surprise. An easy, cheap train journey from Baku, it sits behind a wide length of beach and parkland alongside. Here is where you find the home of **Sumgayit FK**, the **Kapital Bank Arena**. Sea-facing restaurants and alfresco bars abound, with impressive monuments dotting the well-planned cityscape.

But behind it all this lies a different story. Sumgayit FK, formed in 2010, are nicknamed **Kimyaçılar**, the Scientists. Pretty Sumgayit was the hub of Azerbaijan's petro-chemical industry, one of the most polluted places in the whole Soviet Union, no idle boast. It also housed a significant Armenian population, a violent uprising here in 1988 one of the main incidents that triggered the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The greenery was integral to post-industrial urban redevelopment, many monuments honouring victims of the conflict.

When Sumgayit gained promotion to the Premier League in 2011-12, they relied almost entirely on young Azerbaijani players, a show of national pride – but results have been mediocre. The nearest the club has come to Europe has been the cup final of 2019, a 1-0 defeat by Gabala.



### Bearings

**Baku Airport** is 53km (33 miles) from Sumgayit, a journey (combined 4AZN/€2) of just over 2hrs by public transport if you time it right changing

from the **Aero Express bus** to the **train** (40min) at Baku station. A taxi all the way should cost around 35AZN/€18. **Sumgayit station** is on the south-eastern edge of town, a 15-20min walk to the centre, 30min to the stadium. Locals use plentiful **taxis** rather than infrequent buses – **maxim** can be booked by using the **website** [taximaxim.az](http://taximaxim.az).

### Bed

Despite the beach, hotels are few in Sumgayit, with Baku close at hand. The **Sumgayit Plaza** is (17-19 Süth

küc) is halfway between station and stadium, on the edge of the city centre, an upper three-star with a pool, sauna, restaurant and panoramic bar. Rooms start at around AZ130/€65. For roughly the same price, the beachfront **Regnum** on Samad Verghun has sea-view rooms, a spa and lounge bar overlooking the waves, about 3.5km from the stadium. The budget option is the **Sumgait Olimpik SportComplex** (ulitsa Kamal Axundrov 17 m/n), in no man's land, about 1.5km from the station, with a pool, gym and basic rooms from 60AZN/€30.



### Beer

Seafront and alfresco drinking is the way to go. At the city end of the main park, **StaRRooms** and its wide terrace sit in shaded greenery, while further down the promenade towards the Regnum Hotel, **Panorama** offers a sea-view terrace at higher-than-average prices. The Regnum's Caspian-lapped **Tandir** is open to non-guests, too. Further along, at the beach, the **Yelkan** has stylish shade from the burning seaside sun.

City-centre bars include a broom cupboard with a huge tap of beer – the **Efes Pub** (Nariman Narimanov 42-44) – and a large brewpub with a huge screen for beIN Sports, **RePublic**, where Nariman Narimanov meets A Guliyev. Near the station, on a central section of Uzeyir Hajibeyov, **Xane** provides leafy terrace for beer-sipping. **LG**

SUMGAYIT



# AZERBAIJAN 2019-20 Sumgayit FK

[www.liberoguide.com/sumgayit-fk](http://www.liberoguide.com/sumgayit-fk)

## Sumgayit FK

Representing Azerbaijan's third city, **Sumgayit FK** have competed in Azerbaijan's Premier League for nearly a decade without pulling up any trees or winning any silverware. Success has seemed to take a back seat to the policy of filling the squad with young domestic players, for which the club is known. Sumgayit improved under former international defender Samir Abbasov, who finished his distinguished playing career at his home town of Sumgayit before trying his hand at management. In 2018, he moved to Zira, changing places with his namesake, Aykhan Abbasov. The former Qarabağ midfielder then led Sumgayit to their first cup final, a 1-0 defeat by Gabala in May 2019.

Formed in 2010, Sumgayit soon moved into the newly built **Kapital Bank Arena** that squeezes in beside the city's former main stadium, the Mehdi Huseynzade. But there's more to the location than the simple contrast between the shiny single stand of the contemporary ground and the dilapidated, Soviet-era bowl alongside. This, at the far end of an extensive city park, a corner kick from the Caspian Sea, is one of the loveliest settings for any stadium in Azerbaijan. Old men fish off the purpose-built pier nearby, the bay widening into a long stretch of beach, and waterside



restaurants, about 20 minutes' walk away. Were it not for the oily surface of the water, wherein lie Azerbaijan's riches, you could almost be in Split or La Coruña, with their match-day maritime backdrop.

The actual football takes place on an artificial surface, the pitch empty on three sides, a long stand of blue seating holding some 1,500 people, usually around two-thirds full, healthy by Azerbaijan standards.

### Transport

Regular trains from Baku station to Sumgayit take 40 minutes, dropping



you at the other side of town. It's also the wrong side of a long walk and local buses are infrequent. A taxi to the stadium shouldn't be more than 6AZN/€3 and take 10 minutes at most.

### Tickets & shop

Pay on the day is the way, if admission is charged at all. As for merchandise, the club decided to change its image in 2019, switching badges to a dove of peace, the first

kit all purple. The away strip follows the red/deeper red colour scheme of stadium sponsors, Kapital Bank.

### Bars

Rare is the stadium in Azerbaijan surrounded by such a choice of pre-match drinking spots. The long park and promenade parallel to the Caspian Sea are the city's main recreational areas, so family-friendly terrace bars and restaurants are dotted everywhere.

Some are quite smart, including the **Turan** by the outdoor summer theatre, with its rooftop terrace, and, alongside the park and the Nasimi monument, the **Breeze club&lounge**, its large screen tuned to music and fashion video rather than Neftçi's earlier clash with Keşla. Outdoor seating is a plus, though. The most suitable option stands alongside, the **Russkiy Stol**, announced with large, illuminated glass of Erdinger Weißbier by the front door, beckoning you into a small but friendly interior. **LE**