

Azerbaijan: Tourist Industry's Own Goal

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British football fans due to visit Baku for a World Cup qualifying match may be unable to find a hotel room for the night.

The room was already cold, so the draught that poured through the cracks in the frame of the broad but rather murky windows only added to the gloomy atmosphere inside. Its resident, Barbara Harrell-Bond, an American writer and frequent visitor to Azerbaijan, is not impressed by having to pay 80 US dollars a night for the privilege of staying in this hotel in the centre of the capital Baku.

"I would like them to give me more comfort and more services for this price," she said, adding that the accommodation compared unfavourably with that in neighbouring Georgia, where she paid 50 dollars a day and enjoyed a far higher quality stay.

Another American journalist, Harry Carpenter, eventually abandoned the same establishment for a higher-priced privately-run hotel in the city, where he received much better service.

According to Azerbaijan's ministry of youth, sport and tourism, the country has 240 hotels of various types, 37 of which are in the capital and provide accommodation for 5,320 guests, which is clearly inadequate in a city of nearly three million people which is currently enjoying an oil boom.

This problem could come to a head very soon, as thousands of football fans are expected to descend on the capital – and they will be looking for places to stay.

On October 9, Azerbaijan's national team plays Northern Ireland at home in a qualifying match for the 2006 World Cup. Four days later, the England football team arrives in Baku – and many of its supporters will be hot on their heels.

However, most of the hotels in Baku are already almost completely booked up.

Analysts fear that this lack of hotel places could seriously hamper the development of a tourist industry in Azerbaijan.

Economist Yelena Starostina told IWPR that heavy investment and long-term planning will be needed for a tourist infrastructure to develop. She said that Azerbaijan badly needs private hotels to develop alongside and compete with the country's 80 state or recently privatised establishments.

"The state has shown itself to be extremely ineffective in running this sector," Starostina said. "Of course the state budget receives some income from the hotels, but only if they make an official profit."

"The profit was a little more than 200 million manats (around 40,000 dollars) last year, but it could be much more if it was generated by private hotels as well."

Mamed Orujev, who runs a private summer hotel on the Caspian Sea, said, "I have been working with

guest houses for 20 years now and I could easily open a small private hotel in the capital. But unfortunately we are not used to this kind of thing in our country.”

Of the country’s privatised hotels, once run by the state, Orujev said, “The overwhelming majority either practically don’t work or give very poor service.”

But Ilgar Nuri, administrator of one such privatised hotel, rejects these accusations. “Today we have normal hotels and visitors want to stay in them, not in private establishments,” he said.

Some analysts suspect that the state-sponsored hotels are simply wary of any competition which would offer guests better accommodation at lower prices. At the moment, no state programmes exist to develop private hotels, and it is very difficult for potential hotel owners to get official registration.

However, the government has recently begun a drive to improve the country’s hotels by introducing a certification programme.

Tourism industry spokesperson Abulfas Garayev said that the process would be voluntary at first, and said that the certification commission – which consists of both government and independent specialists – was starting with the top echelon of hotels. Ten of them, including the Hyatt Park and Crescent Beach, will be given a ranking in stars by the end of the year.

Garayev said that if the commission identified problems with a hotel, it would be allowed one month to correct them, before it was issued with its star ranking.

Those hotels which did not come up to scratch will not be ignored, Garayev warned. From 2006 on, measures will be taken against them to force them to raise their standards, and information on those that do not pass the certification procedure will be given to international tourist firms.

In the meantime, the authorities say that they are determined to deal with low-standard and potentially dangerous hotels.

Murad Husseinov, head of the fire department at the Azerbaijani interior ministry, warned that most hotels are not properly equipped to deal with fire and recommends that between three and five per cent of money spent on hotel construction should go towards fire safety.

And health ministry spokesman Viktor Kasumov added that steps are being taken to improve the low standard of sanitation in Azerbaijani hotels. “This is unacceptable in a situation where there is a rise in the number of infectious diseases here,” he said.

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