



# Expatriate Women in Azerbaijan

Definition of **expatriate** (Encarta Dictionary: English- North America), somebody who has left his or her homeland to live or work in another country, usually for a long period of time.

There have been many a day, when I wake, take a deep breath and repeat the words "Well, Toto, I guess we're not in Kansas anymore." For me and many of the expatriate women living and working in Azerbaijan, it frequently feels like a Wizard of Oz Adventure. Even though most chose to move, live and work here, it has not come without challenges and significant personal growth.

## YOU GOTTA LAUGH

When Mary Beth and her family arrived in Baku nine years ago their luggage didn't. After 24 hours of travel and three days in Baku without a change of clothes, they ventured down to a Levi store and purchased four large T-Shirts to wear while washing their traveling clothes. The European style washing machine was very different from what they were used to in the US. Taking a good guess to set the washing cycle in motion, they "settled in" for the evening dressed ONLY in the T-shirts. It was a warm night so on went the washing machine **and** the air conditioner.

Within minutes the fuse box burst into flames. After putting out the flames they assessed the situation; clothes were hostage in the washing machine; there was no electricity in the dark apartment; and as they were nearly naked chose not to call a repairman. Mary Beth ended up breaking into the locked washing machine, hand washing their clothes in the bathtub and hanging them out the window to dry.

A good sense of humor and ability to "go with the flow" seems to be two vital qualities necessary

for daily Azerbaijan adventures living. Anne remembers thinking she had allowed plenty of time to get ready for a fancy formal Baku Ball. The kids were fed, a check list prepared for the new babysitter, and the ball gown laid out. Just as she was reaching for her ball gown, the household toilets mysteriously blocked causing mayhem and offensive odors. Adaptable Anne said "I had no choice but to *morph* into the role as plumber, clearing the blocked pipes and cleaning the mess minutes before scrambling into my ball gown." A few hours later at the ball with a glass of wine in hand Anne chatted happily to a guest who had spent 4 hours having her hair done before the Ball.

## EXPECTATIONS

Expectations and attitudes about living in Azerbaijan vary from excitement to dread. Carrie, psychologist and life skills / executive coach moved to Baku less than a year ago, says that expectations "...are different depending on what life was like back home; also more significantly, whether this is the first overseas posting, or whether one is BP, Diplomatic staff, a contractor partner and the hours your partner works; or whether you have children and how old they are."

When Ruth, moved to Baku three years ago, she expected life to be interesting and different. For her like many expatriate women in Azerbaijan, that expectation has certainly been fulfilled. Ruth says, "The first six months I was here I found it very difficult to adjust. Everything was new and unknown and my confidence plummeted at that point. I hadn't expected to find it so difficult. Now I know what to expect and can communicate with the local people in their own language in the shops and bazaars and that does make a difference." Carrie added, "I moved here with some idea and assumptions, even prejudices about the ex-pat life but wanted to keep an open mind. One such concern was the amount of eating, drinking and socializing; and another was the expectations on an ex-

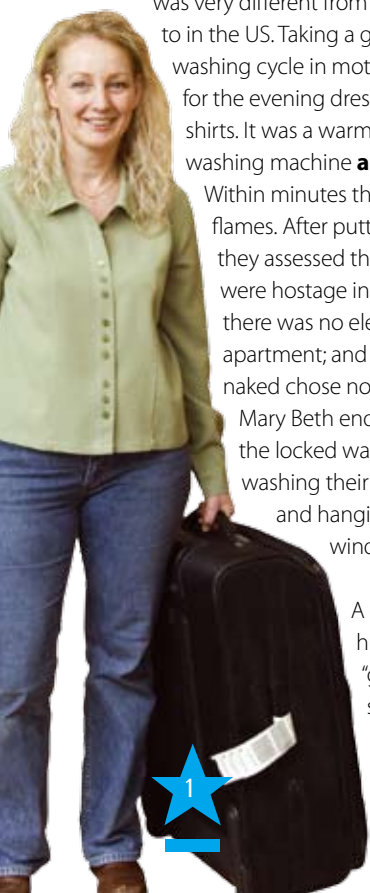
pat wife."

Of the thirty women from thirteen countries who shared their thoughts about living in Azerbaijan the opportunity for travel to new and different places was the leading expectation. While for some, the move to Azerbaijan offered a timely change. Sam experiencing her first ex-pat posting, said "I had reached a point having worked either in consultancy or the oil industry for 22 years, and I wanted to do something different. I did have the option to work in Azerbaijan, but wanted to explore other options, notably writing. I also wanted to get away from corporate life and have more space just to relax and chill out. In addition, we both wanted to start a family..."

## CHALLENGES

Any change, whether by choice or default brings about personal challenges. Many moved to Azerbaijan following their husband or partner. For many women who were in paid professional positions and came to Azerbaijan without a job as a trailing spouse, the adjustment to being "an ex-pat spouse" and loss of professional identity was disconcerting. Laura, whose professional background is business management and marketing says, "I found it very difficult not to be as busy as I was before. I missed using my professional training and got frustrated having so much free time. Then I decided to invest my time learning a new language and doing things I never had time for such as painting. I became active and involved in different things including charity work. This used some of my professional skills and gave me great satisfaction."

The majority of women said living so far away from adult children and aging parents has been more stressful and difficult than anticipated. In some cases it has prevented meaningful involvement or taking up work opportunities to ensure the flexibility to travel home when necessary.



A number of women moved to Azerbaijan for new and exciting work opportunities. In some cases their husbands or partners did not move with them. Sheila, working and living in Baku the last 4 years and whose husband is based in another country says, "It has taken a lot of creative traveling and vacation strategies. I won't even mention the phone bills. It can work, but it is hard." The social scene for employed and single women can be trying. Astrid noted, "Most of my friends are work related. The line between work and play can be thin."

For some women putting food on the table involves a laborious daily scavenger hunt. You never quite know what you will find or where. Creative improvisation is required for almost all cooking and a greater reliance on cooking from scratch. But for others, it has been a pleasure to enjoy the fresh produce of the bazaars.

Communication can be a challenge in the best of circumstances. Throw in a mix of Russian, English and Azeri languages and there are bound to be surprises. Karin experienced a painful result of mixed up verbal communication, "I once made an appointment for a facial at a beauty salon that services many expatriate women. As I lay back on the table and got ready for my relaxing experience, a lady slapped hot wax on my face. I screamed so hard that two other ladies came running in. There was one lady that understood some English. With eyes watering in pain I told her that I booked a facial. They had understood that I wanted a facial wax."

The lack of nearby unpolluted areas to run and cycle out of doors has been difficult for a considerable number of expatriate women. However, there were repeated comments about the weather and beauty of the countryside outside Baku. Jemma notes: "I've loved getting out into the country and exploring, never quite knowing what adventures were going to happen along the way- and adventures always happened." On a regional driving excursion, Myriam and her husband who was driving were stopped by a policeman. They thought they were in big trouble. "With arrogant authority in his voice and referring to an English phrase book in his hand the policeman said to my husband, "I fire you!" We have crisscrossed this country and have been invited on many occasions into people's houses to drink tea and hear their (life) stories."

Life in itself is full of challenges. Azerbaijan just throws a different spin on it. Peg on her second ex-pat posting reflects, "I think the most challenging aspect of living here is to constantly remind myself that I am a guest in Azerbaijan. And as a guest, I need to respect their culture and lifestyle. It sometimes is difficult to remain a 'closed mouth' spectator when you see or hear a situation which is opposite of our western standards beliefs. I'm not here to judge but to appreciate and learn!"

### SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

The desire to learn and take in new experiences is what brought most women to Azerbaijan. Here are a few ways helpful making an Azerbaijan expatriate posting positively memorable.

- Relax when things do not go the way they would at home- be adaptable.
- A sense of humor is invaluable.
- Do not be surprised if you do not settle in straight away. It may take several months to get yourself sorted, find your way around and find a niche.
- Take all opportunities to explore the regions outside of Baku. Try to get out of the city at least every 2 months.
- Carry a picture of your children and family as it is a great way to communicate when there is no common language.
- Be prepared to give something of yourself to the country and you will receive much in return.
- Have an open mind and an open heart and you will enjoy your time.
- Enjoy what you can do here and don't pine over what you can't do.
- Take advantage of all travel opportunities.
- Go to various activities sponsored by various clubs and organizations, such as International Women's Club, Social Welcoming Coffees, etc.
- Connect with others who have been here a long time.
- Take the initiative. Do not wait for others to come to you.
- The more you learn about the culture of the country you are living in, the more you can appreciate your experience there.
- Learn some Azeri or Russian.



Tarja Kindstedt - Finland &  
Kari Norheim - Norway



Anne Skitmore - UK



Constance Page - USA



Elisa Torres - Venezuela &  
Diana Vargas - Colombia



Ruth, Sarah, Lynn,  
Anne, Helenn

Ruth Wolfe - Scotland



Lisa Gertsch - USA





- Make an effort to go to the national cultural events like the philharmonia, opera, art exhibitions etc., fantastic and in-expensive.

### **WHERE EVER YOU ROAM, MAKE IT YOUR HOME**

Scores of creative intelligent women have relocated to Azerbaijan. Many of these women came to Baku with their husbands or companions. Most women left close family and friends to seek new experiences and "adventures." Numerous women quit their work, seeking a change of pace or a sabbatical of time off from a career or profession. Others found this stage of their life and relationship, a good time to start a family. Many women followed career and job opportunities. Whatever the reasons, Azerbaijan has collected women from all over the globe. Maria Elena on her 5<sup>th</sup> ex-pat posting fittingly says "Every country where we have been has its own charm, culture, customs, new language to learn, new friends to meet, and always new challenges. All these are very enriching and exciting.

As an expatriate, we belong to the very few who experience life beyond the borders of our native home."

**A sincere thanks** to all that shared their thoughts and comments. There were many more wonderful anecdotes than could not be utilized. Hopefully many will identify with other's comments or stories. If you would like to share an Azerbaijan story, please contact me [pagebaku@yahoo.com](mailto:pagebaku@yahoo.com)

Constance Page, an US citizen on a 2<sup>nd</sup> expatriate posting, living and working in Baku, Azerbaijan 4 years.

Check out these ex-pat internet sites:  
[www. expatwomen.com](http://www. expatwomen.com)  
[www. interchangeinstitute.com](http://www. interchangeinstitute.com)  
[www. thetrailingspouse.com](http://www. thetrailingspouse.com)  
[www. portableidentity.com](http://www. portableidentity.com)  
[www. transitionsabroad.com](http://www. transitionsabroad.com)  
[www. outpostexpat.nl](http://www. outpostexpat.nl)

