

# PICASP IN AZERBAIJAN: SCIENTIFIC AUDIT OF RESULTS AND ACTIVITIES IN BAKU

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Within the period 18-22 December 2024, it has been organised the final event in Baku for PICASP project, with the aim to see the results of the Azerbaijani partners in the implementation of BA courses, as well as MOOCs, PE (Practical Enterprise) laboratories. In the same occasion, some of the heritage sites of the activities and courses dedicated to Cultural Tourism have been visited.

The aim of this paper is to act as an external report of the events in Baku, as well as to operate an audit of results, activities, events and tours organised by Azerbaijani partners within PICASP project. This audit paper is therefore organised in the form of a diary of the events, with comments and images documenting a day-by-day visit.

## December 19, 2024

### Meetings between foreign delegations participating in the PICASP project and Azerbaijani universities.

In the morning, the hospitality was provided by Khazar University held in the Marble Hall Auditorium.<sup>1</sup> The meeting coordinated by Sabina Guliyeva, Project Manager of the Development Center, and opened by Prof. Irada Khalinova, Rector of Khazar University. Fatima Valiyeva from the Department of International Relations presented the university. General information about the Khazar University and the PICASP project was provided by Dr. Raziya Isayeva, Dean of the School of Economics and Management, who also gave an overview of the activities carried out over the four years.

Presentations were given by professors from the Department of History and Archaeology Dr. Yagub Mammadov ("Paleolithic Settlements of Azerbaijan") and Dr. Ramin Fatullayev ("Cultural Heritage of Azerbaijan during Early Soviet Rule").

A traditional dance show and a performance of classical and opera masterpieces by Azerbaijani composers WERE offered to the participants of the meeting.



<sup>1</sup> <https://khazar.org/en/news/7763>.

The second part of the day took place in the afternoon at ATMU (Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University).<sup>2</sup> The meeting was coordinated by the Specialist of International Relations Aytaj Babayeva and introduced by a welcome speech of the rector İlham İsa Madatov. Dr. Orkhan Musa, Head of international Relations, gave a speech on ATMU and its international relations. He was followed by the presentation of Aytaj Babayeva on the results gotten by ATMU In the frame of PICASP project. Dr. Fatima Suleymanova, Lecturer of Social Studies Department, then spoke about “Gobustan: timeless rock and historical treasures”.



Most of both meetings was devoted to presentations by groups of students. They described their experiences on the frame of pilot courses held by lecturers who experimented new teaching methodologies (MOOC courses and PE laboratories). The different activities implemented in the frame of PICASP were aimed to make available to students the methodologies and tools to develop startups, firms, and programs focused on cultural tourism.



<sup>2</sup> <https://atmu.edu.az/en/>





### Comments

The two universities opened several new courses in Cultural Heritage and Management of Cultural Tourism, which already reached the second year. A result that can be considered a great achievement in the frame of the four years span of the project. Within the new methodologies and technologies tested during the project, both partners have completed several MOOC courses, addressed both to academic and a broader audience, which are now available online. The application of PE (Practical

Enterprise) labs was very fruitful. That was well demonstrated by the presentations given by groups of students of Khazar University and ATMU. The implementation of PE activities, seminars and experimental laboratories greatly helped the students in dealing with Cultural Tourism from a more concrete and managerial perspective.

Both universities demonstrated extraordinary efficiency in organizing the activities and the events.

The reception of Khazar University was conceived as a sort of introduction to Azerbaijan and the traditional dance and musical entertainment gave greater depth to the intercultural meeting.

The meeting at ATMU remained on a more formal level, giving greater relief to presentations on the objectives achieved by the university in the frame of the ERASMUS+ PICASP Project.

The presentations of the teachers were extremely interesting and provided a broad overview of the country and its potential from the point of view of cultural tourism. Above all, they served to provide a preliminary and varied description of the historical-archaeological and naturalistic wealth of Azerbaijan, outlining what outcomes could result from spreading a better knowledge of the country outside the borders of the Transcaucasian region.

The pilot projects developed by students at both universities proved to be of excellent quality. In some cases, they brought to the implementation of real startups. The presentations were well prepared, and the knowledge of English was generally good. The inevitable naivety resulting from the young age of the students was overcome by a considerable amount of enthusiasm.





## December 20, 2024

### Visit of Baku

The visit had been organized by the ATMU Specialist of International Relations Aytaj Babayeva. The guide of the group, consisting of members of the Lithuanian, Kazakh and Italian delegations, was provided by an ATMU young student under the supervision of a graduate. Both students are related to PICASP courses in this university.



The tour started with a visit of the Old City (*İçəri şəhər*) with stops at the Palace of the Shirvanshahs (*Şirvanşahlar sarayı*), the Museum of Miniature Books, Multani Caravanserai (*Multani karvansarası*), Maiden Tower (Qız qalası) and the Double Gate of the Fortress (*Qoşa qala qapıları*).

A lunch organised by ATMU to the typical Fisincan restaurant was offered to the participants of the tour. The intent was to emphasize how, in a wide perspective of the concept of Cultural Heritage, traditional food plays an important role for a better acquaintance with a country and its people. The food was delicious, and sitting at the table together also allowed to share experiences.

Then, the tour continued with a walk along Nizami Street (*Nizami küçəsi*) and Baku Boulevard (*Dənizkənarı Milli Park*) ending at the Baku Funicular (*Bakı funikulyoru*). From there the Highland Park of Baku was reached, where the visit continued along the Martyrs' Alley (*Şəhidlər Xiyabanı*) to finally end at the Eternal Flame Memorial (*Əbədi Məşəl abidəsi*).

The evening ended with a dinner at the Riviera restaurant.

### Comment

The visit was well planned and allowed the delegation to have a general idea of Baku with an itinerary that, despite adverse weather conditions and the length of the walking, did not result too tiring. The Old City offers a pleasant walk to the tourist with a focal point in the Palace of the Shirvanshahs from where the tour begins. The valorisation of the building complex is excellent because it offers a didactic experience without diminish the charms of the ancient building. The moderate use of 3D reconstructions has the result of intriguing the visitors and pushing them to ask more information about the images that pass before their eyes. The choice to end the tour in a room with a model of the Old City, that allows to appreciate its original size and look, is excellent. The bookshop, located at the end of the exhibition, is well designed and located as to give time to select souvenirs among a large choice without blocking the flow of visitors.

The student chosen as a guide was not always up to the task and the assistance of a graduate was providential. The experience nevertheless has been very instructive on the methods of preparation of young people who intend to undertake the profession of guide.

## December 21, 2024

**Visit to Zargarpalan Bath** (Zargarpalan Hamam), **Mud Volcanoes Tourism Complex** (Palçıq Vulkanları Turizm Kompleksi), and **Gobustan State Historical and Artistic Reserve** (*Qobustan Dövlət Tarixi-Bədii Qoruğu*)

### The Zargarpalan Bath

An excavation and restoration project is underway at the Zargarpalan Bath (*Zargarpalan Hamam*) that was the first destination of the morning. It is funded by the owner of the building and carried out in cooperation with MIRAS (Social Organisation in Support of the Study of the Cultural Heritage).

The President of MIRAS and director of the project, Doctor Fariz Khalilli, gave a short introductory speech about the monument, focusing on the various transformations it underwent (it was built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century), and giving several details on its restoration and the discoveries made during the work.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Gafar Jabiyev from the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences talked about the history of Azerbaijan and the importance of preserving its cultural heritage. He stressed the fundamental role international cooperation can play in achieving this goal.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://miras.az/index.php?lang=az&sectionid=8&sect=1487>.



One of the archaeologists coordinating the excavation and restoration project of the Zergaralan Bath, Maleyka Huseynova, described the aims of MIRAS, the activities carried out during the four-year ERASMUS+ PICASP project, and the results achieved. Among these, it is noteworthy the participation of students from Khazar University (Tourism Management address) in a special event (held on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024) dedicated to learning restoration and conservation methodologies of monuments.<sup>4</sup> During their visit, Dr. Fariz Khalili provided some theoretical explanations to the students who were then asked to take part in practical restoration under the supervision of specialists. The same experience was repeated with students from the “S.C. Pishevar” Lyceum. The latter experience proved to be a great achievement. The involvement of high school students is an important step for locally improving the sensitization towards Cultural Heritage, starting with young generations.



### Comment

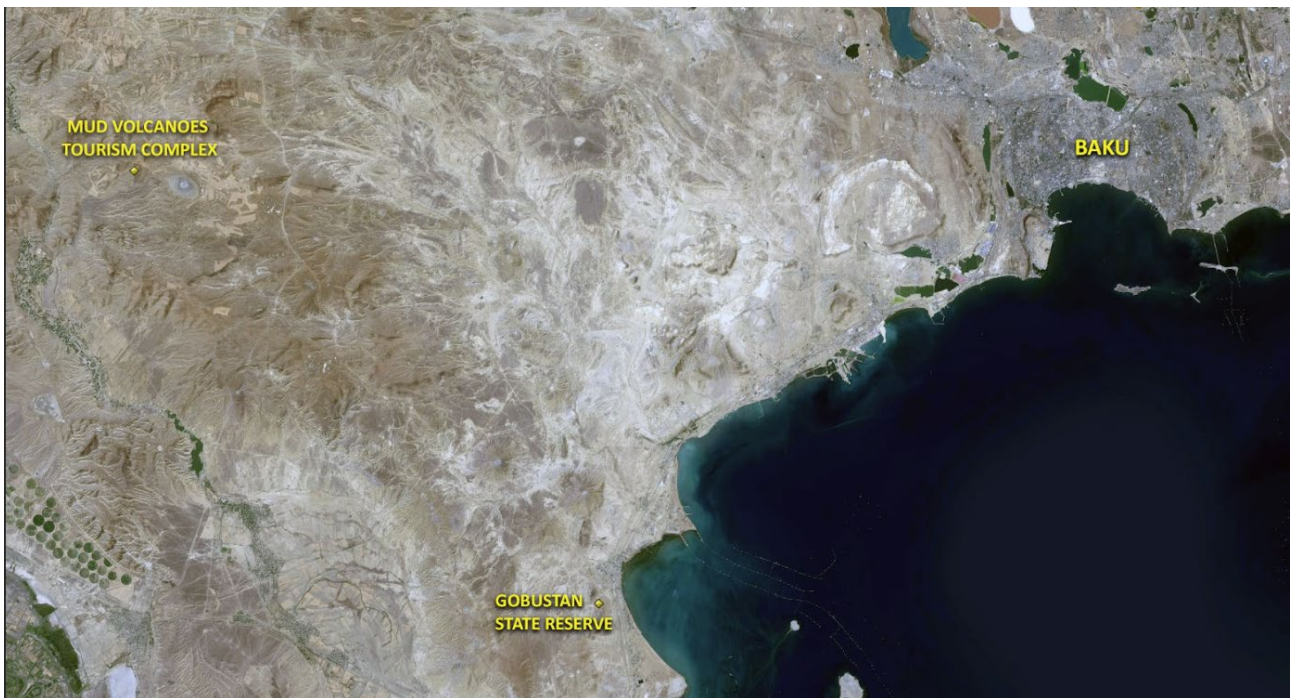
The visit to the Zergaralan Bath was a key moment for the evaluation of the validity of the ERASMUS+ PICASP project. Here the teaching techniques implemented in the four years of activity were transformed into real applications and practical laboratories. According to what was reported in the presentations, the integration of students from Khazar University and the “S.C. Pishevar” Lyceum in the team of conservators gave excellent results, especially in increasing sensitivity towards the problems connected with the restoration and conservation of the Azerbaijani cultural heritage.

The project related to the Zergaralan Bath also represents an interesting example of interaction between public and private that, according to what the speakers related, gave good results.

It must be emphasised here the great work done by MIRAS Association, included in the project to support both university partners in teaching activities. In the last two years MIRAS was active in promoting practical activities of excavations, restorations, laboratories and instruction tours, which are now giving evident great results.

Two collaboration memoranda were signed by MIRAS both with ATMU and Khazar University. They represent another important achievement with two specific new project deliverables. The first is the agreements among institutions themselves. The second corresponds to the future results that can derive from those agreements. The latter gives a great hope for the prosecution of PICASP project objectives, even after its conclusion.

<sup>4</sup> <https://miras.az/index.php?lang=az&sectionid=8&sect=1485>.



### The Mud Volcanoes Tourism Complex and the Gobustan State Historical and Artistic Reserve



#### Mud Volcanoes Tourism Complex<sup>5</sup>

The day continued with the bus transfer to Gobustan, first for the visit at the Mud Volcanoes Tourism Complex (*Palçıq Vulkanları Turizm Kompleksi*), opened in 2021.<sup>6</sup>

The site is about 85 km from Baku and is designed around the Gilinj mud volcano.

Mud volcanoes are geological phenomena consisting in pressurized pockets of gas and liquids that force their way toward the Earth's surface bringing mud and sediments with them. Around 350 mud volcanoes are found in several regions of Azerbaijan. They provide important information about dynamic forces that shaped and are shaping our planet.

Other than a short visit to the mud volcano, the complex includes a building that houses a permanent natural history exhibition.

The exhibition displays nearly 100 animal skeletons related to the fauna of Azerbaijan and the rest of the world, dried insects, a variety of reptiles and amphibians, and some samples of paleontological animals. A special area is dedicated to a collection of over sixty mineral samples from across

<sup>5</sup> <https://mud-volcanoes.heritage.org.az/en>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.azernews.az/travel/194860.html> and <https://president.az/en/articles/view/51248>.



Azerbaijan. The display is intended to provide the visitor with a deeper understanding of the rich biodiversity surrounding the mud volcanoes.

In a second building there is a large space dedicated to a café-restaurant where the group had a takeaway lunch provided by the ATMU.



### Comment

The Mud Volcanoes Tourism Complex is an instructive example of how to transform a place that does not have much to offer in a tourist attraction. Even if the phenomenon of mud volcanoes has an extraordinary geological interest, the visit without infrastructures would have been not so effective. The addition of the Natural History Museum, as well as of the Geological section and the spacious café-restaurant enriches the offer and attributes a wider educative and didactic perspective to the visit, which represents a motivating reason to make the place a destination for a school trip and not only. A didactic laboratory is also at the disposal of schools and visitors and gives the possibility of carrying on practical activities on the spot.

A special space of the building is also devoted to display the work of local artists. Replica or other memorabilia from their artistic productions are on sale at the end of the gallery.

The architecture of the Tourism Complex is very well designed and combines the linearity of the forms, which fits well with the surrounding desert landscape, with futuristic architectural solutions as they were conceived in the context of the brutalist architecture of the last century.

For all these reasons the Mud Volcanoes Tourism Complex represents a very good example of a sustainable geo-park.

The clear reference is to the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum in Los Angeles, where a dedicated exhibition building hosts the remains of prehistoric animals recovered from the asphalt. In the Mud Volcanoes Tourism Complex this suggestion is well received and developed in a similar complex with the further attractive of representing a pleasant surprise in the middle of the Azerbaijani steppes. That makes a strong parallel with the Corona Arrùbia complex in Sardinia which constitutes the central element of the Marmilla Tourist Consortium, and it is placed in the middle of a large, inhabited area of the region.

The visit to the Corona Arrùbia and the nuraghes that surround it, is enriched by the Naturalistic Museum of the Territory "G. Pusceddu", not too different from that of the Mud Volcanoes Tourism Complex.

### **Gobustan State Historical and Artistic Reserve<sup>7</sup>**

The delegation reached, by bus again, the Gobustan State Historical and Artistic Reserve (*Qobustan Dövlət Tarixi-Bədii Qoruğu*). The site is about 65 km from Baku, covers an area of 537 acres, and is inscribed in the UNESCO list since 2007.<sup>8</sup> It comprises several rocky boulders engraved with more than 6,000 petroglyphs that cover 40,000 years of history. The site shows an intensive human occupation from immediately after the Upper Palaeolithic to Middle Ages.

The site is associated with the Petroglyph Museum whose construction was financed by Azerbaijani Ministry of Culture and opened in 2011.<sup>9</sup> Its design and construction were entrusted to the Latvian "El Studio" Ltd. The museum's permanent exhibition includes twelve rooms mainly devoted to the history of Gobustan petroglyphs and their importance in comparison to other similar sites all over the world. Not far from the museum is a Latin rock inscription left by a soldier of the XII Legio "Fulminata" in 85 AD, ruling Domitian. The six lines text is engraved on a huge boulder, and it is the easternmost Roman inscription ever found.

### **Comment**

Gobustan State Historical and Artistic Reserve is a both historically and scenically spectacular site. The route among engravings uses natural paths that perfectly blend in with the surrounding rocks and represents a fair good example of eco-sustainable visit.

The museum, built at a certain distance from the site, includes a series of twelve successive rooms arranged in a circle. Despite the poor lighting it is very well structured from a didactic and educational point of view and constitutes an excellent complement to the visit of the graffiti.

The inscription of the XII Legio is engraved on a stone that pathogens and atmospheric agents have obliterated after the 2008 cleaning carried out by an Italian conservator. The present protection is a low wall with fences. Given its importance and uniqueness, it would be necessary and urgent to provide for a further and definitive restoration of the inscription but also, as soon as possible, a total covering to protect the boulder, with a structure which could be transformed in another museum. The musealization of the inscription could also offer the opportunity for an improvement of the short piece of road that separates it from the museum. It is at present roughly regularised, but in an evident state of abandonment. The inscription could be the central point of a project, which could involve the same academic entities that participated in the ERASMUS+ PICASP program. It can be a strong theme for a pilot project to be developed again by students and focusing on the creation of an exhibition space that taking as a starting point the expansion of Rome towards the East can document the cultural exchanges between the Mediterranean and the Caspian.

## **Conclusions**

The visit in Azerbaijan clearly showed the effectiveness of the PICASP project in this country. The presentations given by lecturers and students at Khadar University and ATMU demonstrated that the implementation of courses using new teaching methods brought fast results in developing a basic

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<sup>7</sup> [https://artsandculture.google.com/story/gobustan-rock-art-cultural-landscape-azerbaijan-unesco/FgUx8g\\_n\\_SMsiQ?hl=en](https://artsandculture.google.com/story/gobustan-rock-art-cultural-landscape-azerbaijan-unesco/FgUx8g_n_SMsiQ?hl=en).

<sup>8</sup> <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1076/>.

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Petroglyph\\_Museum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Petroglyph_Museum).



knowledge on cultural tourism. Considering that the project only lasted four years (two of which were covered by the spread of COVID-19 pandemic), the results obtained are amazing. That was proved by the high quality of the projects elaborated by students.

In this contest, the tour of Baku, and the visit to the Mud Volcanoes Tourism Complex and the Gobustan State Historical and Artistic Reserve were basic in understand how tourism can be important to the cultural growth of Azerbaijan and the role it can play to make the country better known outside the Transcaucasian region.

The professionalism of the Azerbaijani counterpart, their warm welcome and the sight and taste of the country they were able to offer only make regret that our visit was only four days long. A desire to go back and to know more about this amazing land is what is now left. More than anything else, that shows that the purposes of the project were fully achieved.

