



Discovering Azerbaijan

Photos and text: by Sabina TUMANSKAYA

Sheki – fabulous and beautiful





Sheki is located in the northwest of Azerbaijan, near the border with Georgia. It is about four hours of drive from Baku, or about 300 kilometers.



The road is quite picturesque – rivers, fields, but most importantly mountains covered with dense forest, resembling a frame around the main jewel, the ancient town of Sheki. It used to be called Nukha and was an important religious and trade center for many centuries. Despite the fact that there was a settlement here already in the 8th century BC, most of the historical information refers to the period of Caucasian Albania, when Christianity came to these lands. After the conquest of Azerbaijan by the Arabs in the 7th century and the country's incorporation into the Arab Caliphate, Sheki repeatedly fell into the zone of the Arab-Khazar war. A relatively quiet time came in the late Middle Ages, when the city became the capital of the independent Sheki Khanate. Nowadays Sheki is a medieval city where the charm of ancient streets and the beauty of historical buildings have been preserved. The most famous landmark of Sheki is the Palace of Sheki Khans built in the 18th century. The fortress walls surrounding the historical part of the city were built at about the same time. The Palace of Sheki Khans is built of red brick and cobblestone and its façade is decorated with shebeke. These are unique colored stained glass windows containing from three to seven thousand parts in a square meter. All of them were assembled by hand. Multicolored rays of light pass inside the premises of the palace through the shebeke,





illuminating the magnificent paintings on the walls of the rooms. Some of the storylines depict hunting scenes and military actions, the rest are fantastic gardens with different birds and plants. Almost all of them bore sacral meaning, such as the tree of life, sacred peacocks and pomegranates, a symbol of abundance. In a word, the Sheki khans did not stint on decorating the palace. In the courtyard, in front of the entrance, there are plane trees that are more than five centuries old.

Another frequently visited location is the central street, where there are two well-preserved caravanserais built in the 17-18th centuries. They are called Yukhari and Ashaghi (Upper and Lower). Merchants who visited Sheki during their trade journeys used to stay here. Present-day visitors can also stay here overnight and have a tasty snack in the caravanserai. It is better to come to Sheki at least for two days to walk around the city, where there are many interesting places. To the side of the Upper Caravanserai there is the Imam Ali Mosque built around the 18th century. Nearby there is also the Khan Mosque of the same period, in the courtyard of which Sheki rulers and members of their families are buried. In the house of the Shekikhanovs, where relatives of Sheki khans lived, one can also see beautiful paintings.

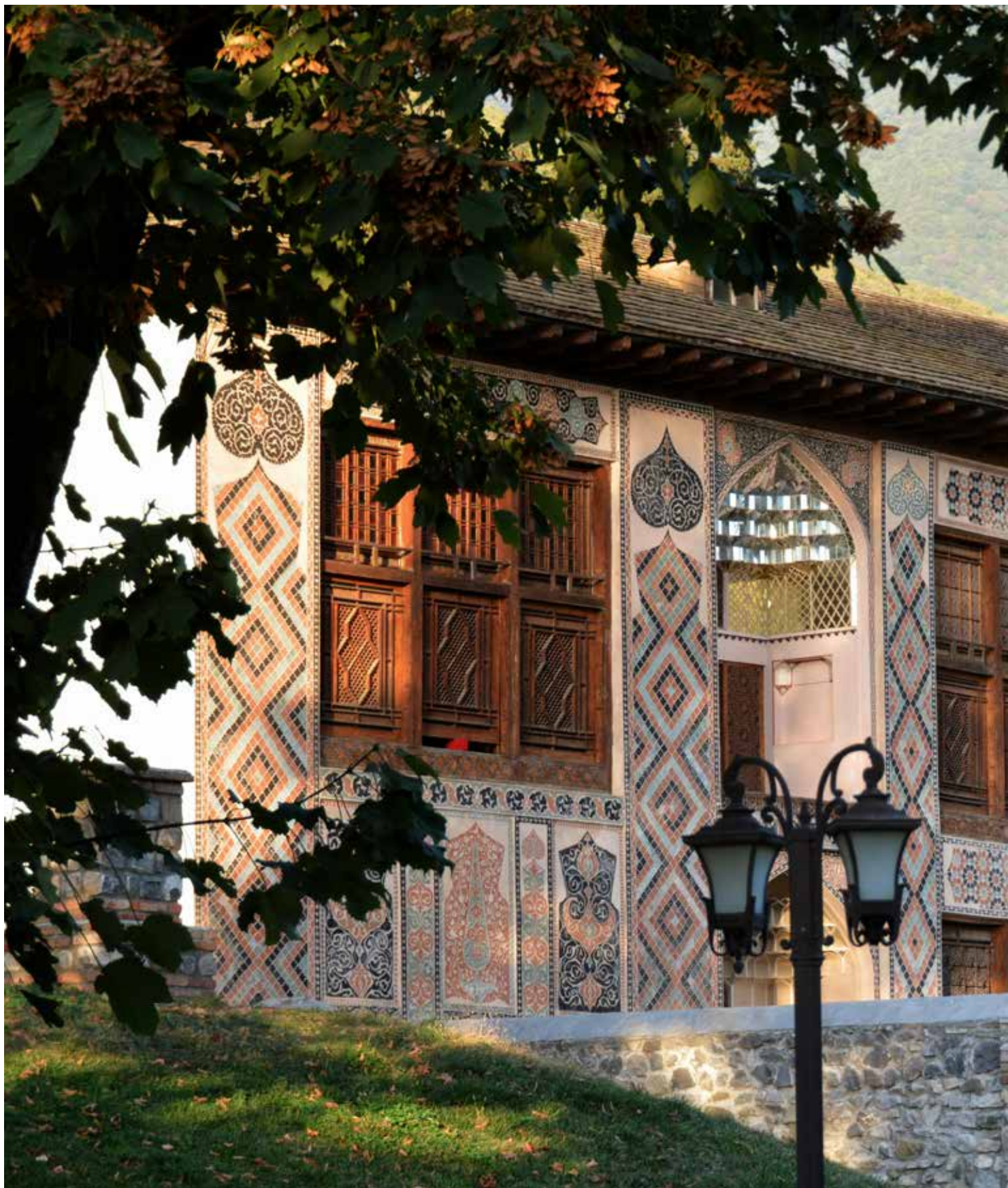
The building of the orthodox church of the "Three



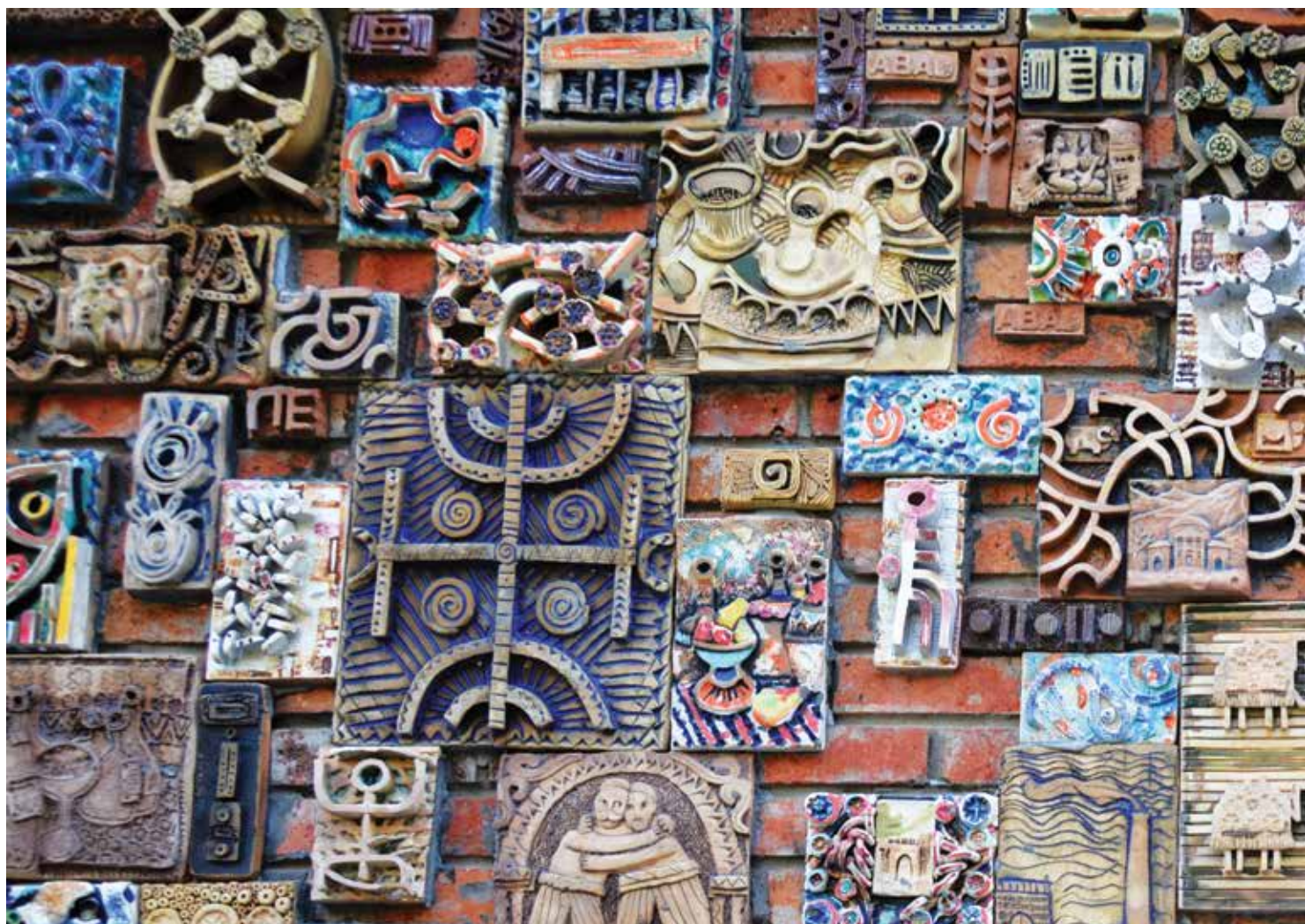
Saints Church" now houses the Museum of Folk Applied Art. Here one can look at the traditional life of Sheki people and, of course, familiarize oneself with the samples of ancient crafts. As before, jewelry, chasing, woodworking, production of copper and clay utensils are well developed in Sheki. The production of hats, musical instruments and traditional embroidery tekelduz, which used to be practiced mainly by men, are especially noteworthy. But the symbol of Sheki at all times were and will be silk products, namely the famous silk shawls kalaghayi. In the 19th century, the world's largest silk factory operated in Sheki. In Soviet times, a silk mill was built here and still produces carpets, shawls and fabric. Outsiders can't visit the production site, but can buy original goods in a local store.

When it comes to the products that can be brought from Sheki, shebeke souvenirs and, of course, local sweets take the first place. Next to the Palace of Sheki Khans there is a handicraft center of shebeke where these unique products are created. Cut-to-size pieces of glass are inserted into prepared pieces of wood without

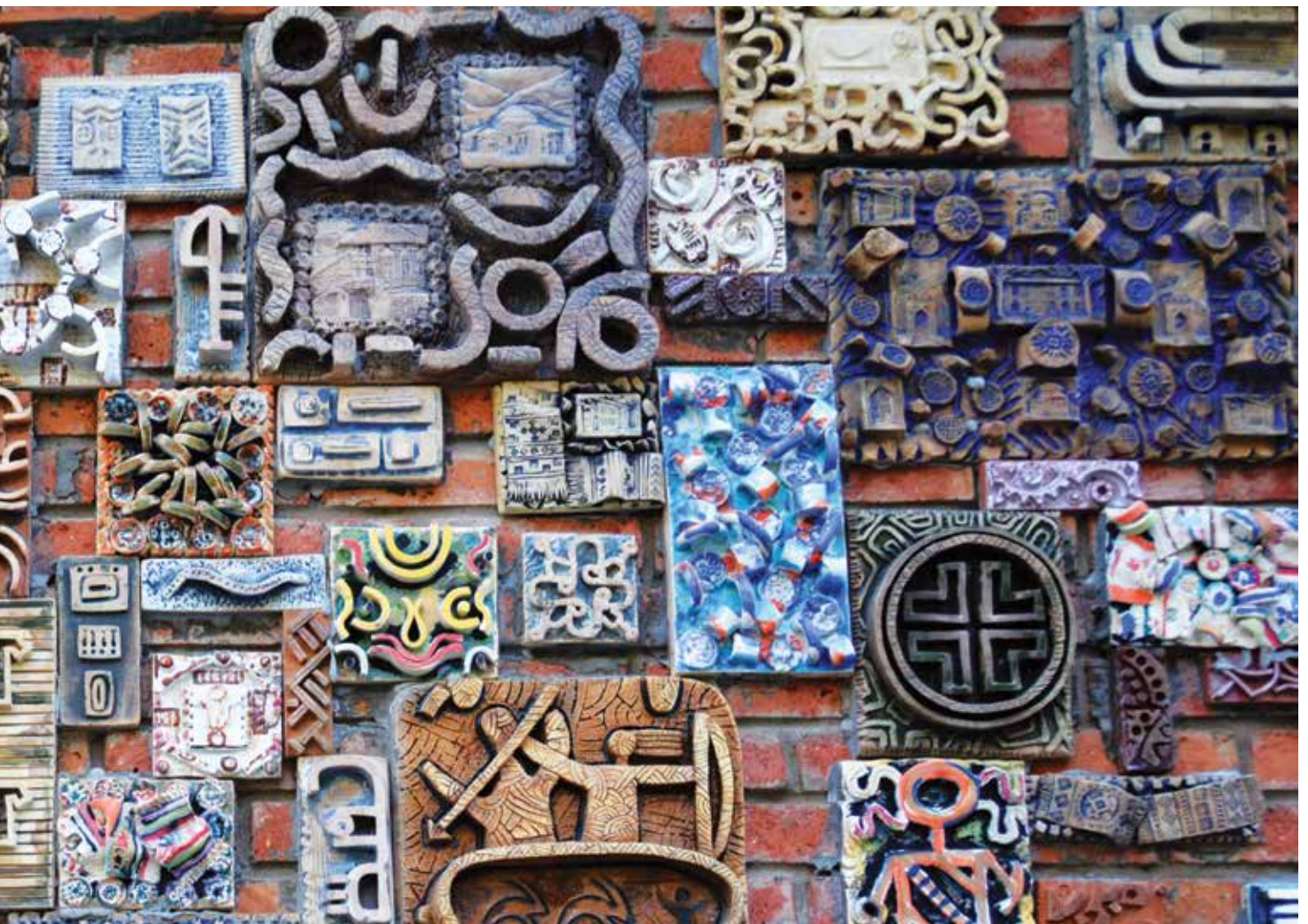








any glue or additional fasteners. All this is done with jewelry precision, and if there is a difference of even one millimeter, everything will have to be cut again. Masters are trying to find a place for shebeke in modern interiors, creating lamps, mirrors and caskets. The main street of the city sells Sheki sweets – local baklava made of rice flour, glazed nuts, bamiya (fried dough in sugar syrup), peshveng (halva made of sugar fibers) and other yummy goods. It should be noted that all of them are insanely sweet, though very interesting in taste. Sheki residents are very proud of their sweets and carefully guard family recipes. There are well-known stores of halvachi (generations of manufacturers of sweets)



"AliAhmed""Yahya", "Mahmud" in the city. And of course, you can't leave Sheki without trying the main local dish – the piti. The fatty broth with pieces of tender lamb and nokhud (chickpeas) is cooked in a clay pot. It is served with pickles and sumac (spice) and always with bread or pita. The most famous restaurant where piti is served is called Gagarin. No, the famous cosmonaut hasn't been here – the place was named after a nearby park bearing his name. It commands a spectacular view of the city, although recently it has been competing with "VIP Karvan", another restaurant of national cuisine with a wide choice of dishes and interesting interior. Piti pots and other clay utensils can be bought in stores on the tourist streets. Sheki also has a center of ceramics and applied arts "Abad", which is located on the side of the Palace of Sheki Khans. Wherever you go in Sheki, you will always find something unusual. You will definitely want to return to this old and fairy-tale like city, which still has so much to offer! 🌸





