

Silk Road Palaces, Scarves, and Saffron

By Tricia A. Mitchell



It was late afternoon in Sheki, northwestern Azerbaijan. The mirrored sections of the Khan's Palace twinkled in the golden sunlight. Shadows from nearby trees cast additional shapes on the geometric designs and wooden latticework of the palace exterior.

Near by, a grandfatherly man played a woodwind instrument called a *tutek*. His high-pitched music sparked my imagination. I wondered if the palace's original inhabitants were treated to a similar performance over 250 years ago.

Today, the city of Sheki is home to about 65,000 people. Situated among the foothills of the Greater Caucasus Mountains, Sheki has been a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) since 2019.

Centuries ago, Sheki held a strategic spot along lucrative trade routes and had a thriving silk industry. Thanks to these traits, Sheki achieved great wealth. During this time, a handful of roadside inns cropped up called *caravanserai*. These guesthouses gave traders a safe place for their goods and camels for the night.

One of Sheki's historic caravanserai—the [Karvansaray Hotel](#)—still functions as a hotel. We stayed there for one night and paid roughly \$30 for an unforgettable adventure.

Make a point of visiting this 18th-century caravanserai, even if you opt for a hotel with modern amenities. The courtyard's brick and stone arch-work is impressive.

The Khan's Palace is the premier attraction

in Sheki. Built in 1762, the royal structure was home to Sheki's khans (a title given to rulers in Central Asia and beyond). The exterior alone is worth a peek. However, to truly appreciate its brilliant stained glass, you must venture inside (entrance is \$3). This glass and latticework combination—called *shebeke*—is unique because no metal or glue is used. Instead, master artisans make the shebeke with precise wood fittings, glass, and much patience.

Beyond shebeke, there's even more creativity in Sheki, including jewel-toned silk scarves called *kelagayi*. To make them, artisans use wooden stamps, melted paraffin, and dye.

When I dropped into a scarf shop called [Kalagayici Ziya](#), the family of artisans invited

me to their workshop so I could watch them make *kelagayi*. I bought a beautiful cobalt-blue scarf adorned with a paisley design. This pattern is known in Azerbaijan as a *buta*.

After our scarf shop visit, my husband and I stopped into the neighboring [Yahya Sweets](#). We bought a box of Sheki's famed *halvasi*, a dessert made with hazelnuts, cardamom, syrup, and saffron. You can also buy a large amount of luxurious and locally grown saffron here for about \$12.

Later, as we enjoyed tea in an outdoor café, we again encountered the grandfatherly musician with his wooden *tutek*. He had stopped for a cup of tea but was missing a sweet accompaniment. We smiled and offered him a square of our *halvasi*. He mischievously accepted.

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