The Moscow Times
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On Caspian Shore, A Tale of 2 Turkmenistans

By The Moscow Times

June 20, 2011



Avaza is using energy revenues to become the Las Vegas of the Caspian.

AVAZA, Turkmenistan — Turkmenistan's all-powerful leader promises that, one day soon, he will build a Las Vegas on the windswept shores of the Caspian Sea.

Illuminated by distant gas flares, thousands of construction workers toil through the night to build the next stage of Avaza: a fantasy resort built on the reclusive Central Asian nation's fabulous energy riches.

Seven colossal, marble-fronted hotels ordered by President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov line the coast. At least another 23 are planned in a project that some say could divert up to $5 billion from Turkmenistan's state coffers.

But state publicity and lavish spending cannot hide the fact that Turkmenistan is one of the world's most authoritarian and secretive nations, where Berdymukhammedov's word is final

and opposition among the 5.4 million population is non-existent.

Avaza is an alien world to the 70,000 residents of Turkmenbashi, an oil-refining port 20 minutes' drive away, now bypassed by a motorway that shuttles curious visitors and officials from the region's airport.

In Turkmenbashi, shoppers in the meat section of a local grocery store are offered bones from a plastic crate or sausages covered with flies. The air is thick with sulfur from the oil refinery.

It's enough to make some residents long for Saparmurat Niyazov, Turkmenistan's first post-Soviet leader, who ruled with a bizarre personality cult and renamed the city to reflect his own self-awarded title: Turkmenbashi, or Leader of All Turkmens.

"Under Niyazov, we lived in paradise but we didn't realize it," said Vlad, a 22-year-old resident who scrapes out a living driving rare visitors around Turkmenbashi in his old Opel.

Revealing only the short form of his first name, Vlad was one of the few residents of Turkmenbashi willing to be quoted. Others, fearing recrimination, would not reveal their names.

Turkmenistan's gas export revenues are fueling breakneck economic growth.

The International Monetary Fund predicts gross domestic product will expand by 9 percent this year.

Turkmenistan itself is planning 14 percent growth this year. The long-term outlook for economic output is also strong, as it plans to triple natural gas output over the next two decades by drawing on the world's fourth-largest reserves.

Official literature describes Avaza as "a synonym for our unprecedented reforms."

The planned tourist zone will cover an area of 5,000 hectares, and Berdymukhammedov has said, "In the third stage of the project, a Turkmen Las Vegas will appear here, with numerous casinos and other entertainment centers."

A fountain gushing from the Caspian will evoke images of Geneva's Jet d'Eau, while a 7-kilometer canal filled with yachts is designed to bring to mind Venice or Amsterdam.

A huge portrait of the president in parade uniform greets guests at the largest hotel in the complex, the Watanchy, or Patriot. It was built by the Defense Ministry. Berdymukhammedov has ordered banks and other ministries to build their own hotels to match.

But foreign visitors, who pay up to $300 for a night at the Watanchy, must overcome bureaucratic hurdles to secure a visa and encounter hotel staff often baffled by words such as Internet and Wi-Fi or requests to send an e-mail.

Even at the Watanchy, restaurants serve a frugal choice of dishes smacking of Soviet-era canteens and usually close at 10 p.m., just like elsewhere in the country, where electricity is routinely turned off to rush out straggling guests.

The expansion has also taken place at the expense of the private summer houses built along the shore in Soviet times.

"We had a school-leaving party in a wooden two-story house owned by the parents of a girl from my class," said a security guard at a local hotel, who declined to give his name.

"Then it was bulldozed," he said, pointing to a garbage heap near the canal.

"They got no compensation. Some people created a fuss and were offered allotments, deep in the desert."

While Avaza dazzles its visitors, little has changed for the ordinary citizens of Turkmenbashi, where clothes and linen dry on ropes slung between rows of two- and three-story apartment blocks. The roads are dusty and potholed.

In the main market, buyers were far outnumbered by sellers.

Few locals would buy fresh mutton at $4 per kilogram and almost nobody approached fishmongers' stalls laden with live sturgeon offered at $11 per kilogram. But Anna, who sells poached beluga caviar from under the table at $1,200 per kilogram, was smiling after several foreign delegates attending a gas conference in Avaza paid a visit.

"They bought 50 to 100 grams of my caviar each to eat it back at their hotels," she said. She had just earned several times the average monthly wage of less than $250.

Gas, electricity and water are still free of charge for most Turkmen households, the legacy of a gift once made by Niyazov.

Avaza has given citizens its own gift, special discount room rates of $45 to $108 per night at local hotels.

"Yes, we do go to Avaza," says Anna, the caviar seller. "But no, we do not visit spas or hotels. We mainly go to see Avaza's great fountains because we have no fountains in Turkmenbashi."

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