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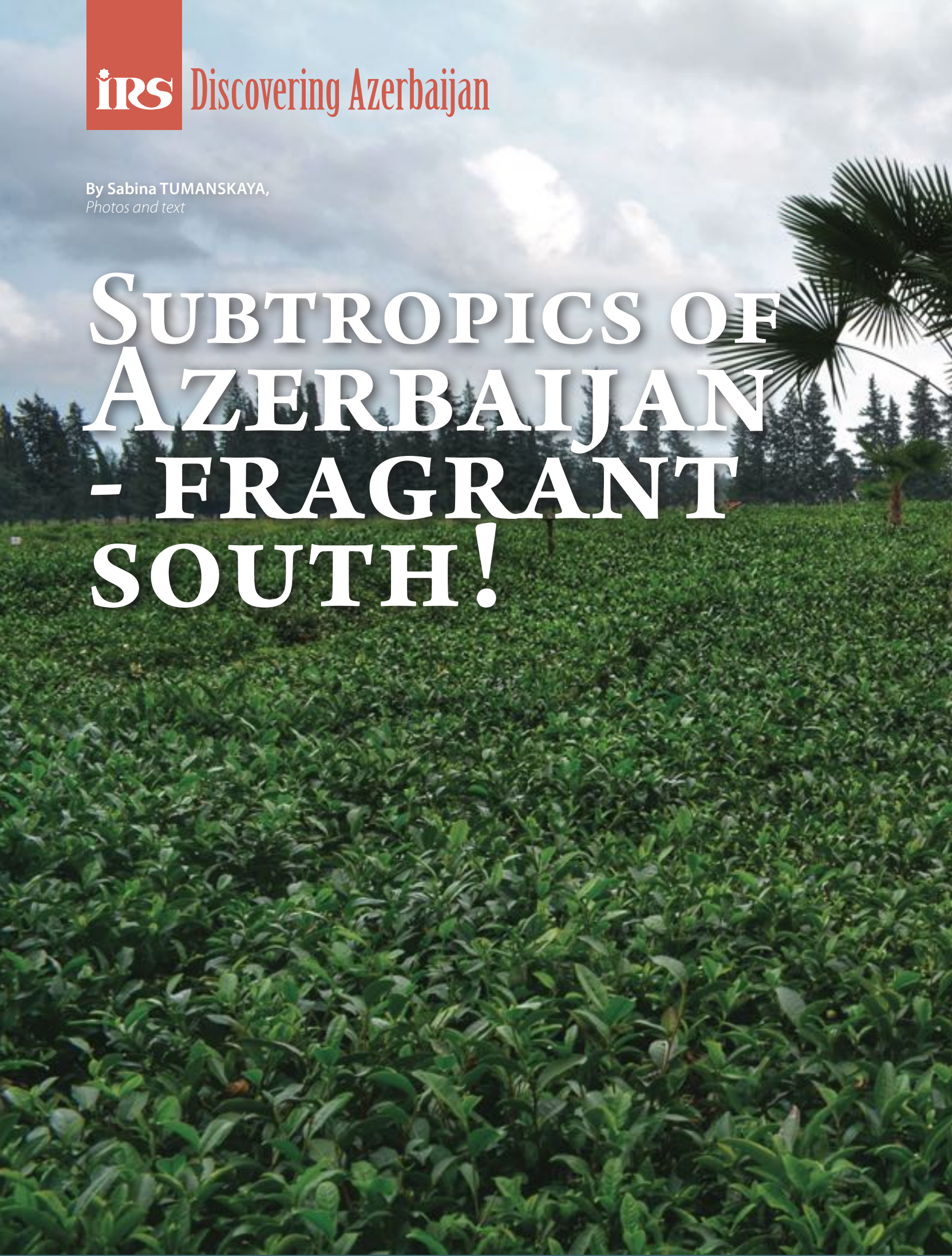
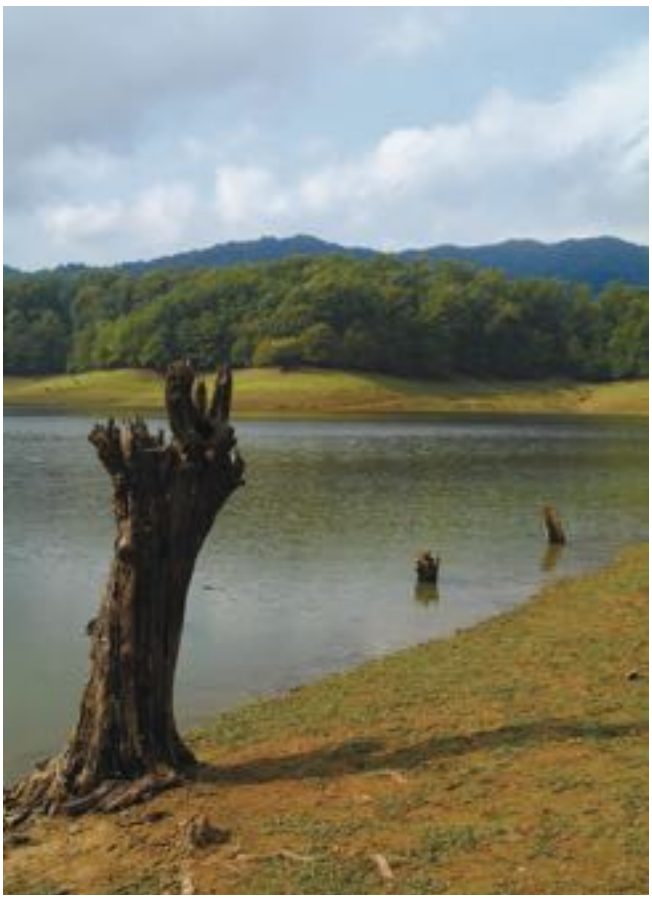
Photos and text

Subtropics of Azerbaijan - fragrant south!



Discovering Azerbaijan

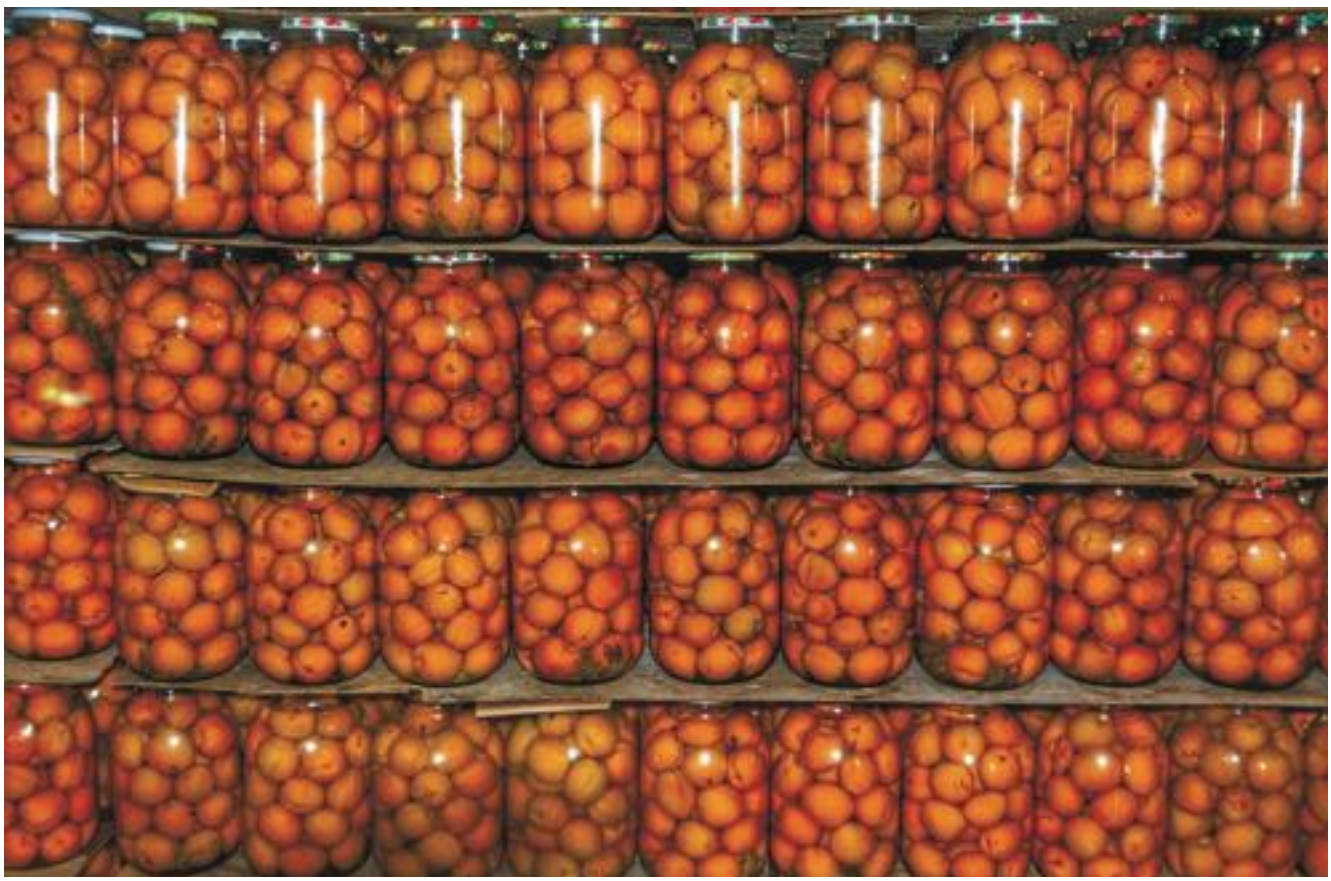


Just three or four hours of drive south of Baku, and you find yourself in another world. Lankaran and Astara are real subtropics with an extremely rare species of flora, and the Hirkan National Park has been established to protect it. In the park, one can see the forest as it was 13 million years ago. Fantastic iron trees, chestnut-leaved oak, Caucasian hornbeam, alder, figs, boxwood, ferns – more than a thousand species of unique plants. One of the most beautiful lakes of Azerbaijan, Lake Khanbulan, is also located here. To be precise, it is not a lake, but a reservoir created in the 1970s. It has quite a serious depth, about 80 meters, but there are occasional ebb tides that completely change the appearance of Khanbulan. The water has recently receded, exposing the skeletons of trees that have turned the shores into a surreal landscape. Anyone traveling from Lankaran to Astara is sure to stop near the reservoir to admire the beautiful views and breathe clean air. Many even pick mushrooms and berries here, because everything that grows in this zone has a unique taste. Back in the days of the Soviet Union, Lankaran and Astara were the centers for growing a huge number of exotic plants and fruits. Juicy and sweet tangerines, oranges and medicinal feijoas have become highly sought after products. From the

south of Azerbaijan they were taken to Moscow, the centers of other republics and even abroad. There was huge demand and therefore local citrus fruits became fairly scarce domestically. The situation began to improve only after Azerbaijan gained independence, when appropriate conditions and a good material and technical basis was created for the development of farms. Private plantations appeared in the region, where people began to grow not only citrus fruits, feijoa, medlar, persimmon, but also kiwi and bananas. Experimental plots in Lankaran cultivate even guava, which is completely uncharacteristic for the region.

While Azerbaijani scientists are "taming" overseas fruits, it is worth taking a walk through the orange and tangerine plantations. What a flavor there is! They ripen in fall, as tree branches bend under heavy fruits. What an incredible pleasure it is to pick ripe fruit right from the bush and eat as much as you like! Many private farmers provide this opportunity to tourists in exchange for help in harvesting. One should also pay attention to the local varieties of rice, which are famous for their aroma.

The further south you go, the more exotic plants you see along the way. Do not be surprised to see bamboo, eucalyptus, different varieties of palms and cacti. You are still in Azerbaijan – so diverse and amazing! It is because of the diversity of nature and the hospitality of the local population that our country is so popular with tourists. Wherever you go, you will definitely be treated to tea, which grows here too, on the plantations of Lankaran and Astara. It began to be grown in Azerbaijan at the end of the 19th century. Then it was an experiment of landowner Mikhail Novoselov, who settled down near Lankaran. He grew 2,000 tea bushes from the seeds he had brought from Georgia. In 1937, Azerbaijani tea began to be packaged in different cities

IRS Discovering Azerbaijan

of the Union up until a tea factory was finally built in Lankaran in 1949, supplying all 15 republics for many years. Poland, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Finland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and a number of Asian countries were also consumers of Azerbaijani tea. As was the case in all republics after the collapse of the Union, an economic crisis set in and the tea industry almost disappeared. In the early 2000s, tea plantations and businesses began to revive. Now we can enjoy the numerous tastes of tea grown in the south of the country. Today, green fields of tea bushes stretch over many hectares. This is the pride of the southern region. Tea picking season starts in the middle of summer and lasts about 20 days. The work is difficult and highly responsible – everything is done manually. Only the two most tender upper leaves are removed from the tea bush. Tea pickers are usually women, who begin to carefully move along the tea rows early in the morning, collecting leaves in bags attached to their belts. Then the tea leaves, which still have a delicate floral aroma, go to the workshops where they are dried and packaged. It is an incredible pleasure to drink tea right where it is grown! To do this, all you need is get into the car and drive south with its flagrant green plantations – a citrus-tea paradise!