

If the car is the most important status symbol in oil-rich Baku, the car horn may be a close second and Azerbaijanis love to show off their unique noise makers at all hours of the day and night.

I live on what I thought would be a quiet narrow tree lined street one block from the Caspian Sea. I moved in on a Saturday, the quiet lasted until Monday morning when the narrow street filled with cars that seem to disappear down dead-end streets.

When a car blocks the street, a car horn sounds. When a pedestrian walks in the street – a car horn sounds. (Pedestrians have to walk in the street because the cars park on the sidewalk.) When a driver wants to make a statement – a car horn sounds. When he wants to catch the eye of a member of the opposite sex – a car horn sounds. In fact, for no apparent reason – a car horn sounds.

The car horn has been personalized in Baku. Sure, there's the standard sounding car horns, but there's also the police siren car horn, the ambulance car horn and even the barking dog car horn. They are all perfectly legal on privately-owned cars. And just when you think you've heard the oddest one – like the barking dog -- you hear another one that makes you laugh – the other day – someone had a horn that plays the first few notes from the Godfather theme. The driver was attempting to get a huge bulldozer to move out of his way.

The strangest car horn that I've heard so far would be perfect for Halloween – it's a ghoulish laugh that goes on for 8 to 10 seconds. The first time I heard it, I had no idea what it was – my colleague looked over and said "car horn."

The car horn is definitely a stress-reliever in this car-choked city. There are numerous one-way streets, but many people ignore the street signs, so you have standoffs in the narrow streets with both cars going opposite directions honking at each other and flashing their lights until one gives in and backs up or they figure out a way to narrowly squeeze past each other. Afterward, each frustrated driver presses the accelerator to the floor and speeds down the street as pedestrians dive for cover.

Strangely, I have rarely seen drivers shouting at each other despite the high-level of frustration caused by gridlock. They let the horn do the talking and then when the way is clear – the accelerator has the final word.

Washing Clothes

I'd seen this done in slap-stick comedy, but I'd never known anyone to actually do it.: wash their clothes while wearing them. One of my journalism trainers from Los Angeles came into my office in mid-October and told me he nearly died the night before. I immediately thought he'd been mugged.

He told me that he'd been washing his clothes in the hotel room shower. Since a friend in Dushanbe two months earlier had nearly been electrocuted in his shower, I assumed my trainer had had a similar experience. Wrong again. He said that he wanted to save time so he decided to put on his dirty clothes, stand in the shower and rub soap his clothes. He said everything was fine until he tried to take off the clothes. I should tell you he's a big guy, a very big guy – and he wears pullover shirts. As he was pulling the wet shirt over his head, it apparently got stuck – over his face. He panicked and he says for a few seconds he thought he'd have to rip the shirt off.

I suggested he use the hotel laundry service next time.

McDonalds

This is the first place that I have lived in five years that has a McDonalds. Actually, there are four McDonalds and they are always packed. They're also the place to be seen. People dress up to go and eat their Big Macs and Fries. On Saturday nights, the McDonalds on Fountain Square, in the city center, resembles a nightclub. It's packed with young people hanging out, sipping their cokes and listening to alternative music that is blaring from the speakers.

Out on the square, a photographer has set up a little stand where people pose in front of the McDonalds and he snaps their pictures. For an extra 40 kopeks (about 35 cents), you can get your picture taken with Mickey Mouse with the McDonalds as a backdrop. The other evening I noticed Mickey talking to a friend who was smoking a cigarette. Apparently, Mickey wanted to smoke, too, but the suit made it difficult, so they improvised: his friend was blowing cigarette smoke into Mickey's mouth.

