

## LETTER FROM AZERBAIJAN

Oil trader Paul McGregor, from Moreton, reports from Baku

# Golden rule on the front line: Never make an enemy

**A**S I SAT at my desk looking up at the two soldiers with machine guns, I wondered how many managers in Britain started their day trying to save an employee's life. It was in Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, and the soldiers had come to take my driver off to fight in the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. The chances of his coming back alive were slim, but I'd been in the country long enough to know that most problems can be negotiated.

When I first went to work in Azerbaijan I knew it was going to be different. I didn't realise just how different.

A lot of western companies will now be attracted to this oil rich republic since an \$8bn agreement with a BP-led consortium was finally signed to exploit the oil wealth of the Caspian Sea.

There will be huge need for support services including housing, foodstuffs, office equipment and medical supplies. The opportunities are great but so are the risks.

The biggest risk comes from thinking that you're still in the West. I was often reminded that the Orient begins in Baku. So you learn to expect the unexpected.

Two weeks after the BP deal was signed there was yet another attempted coup. I was close to getting a contract for a Dutch company with one of the refineries when the refinery director was suddenly removed.

The long process of establishing good personal relations with the new director had to start again.

This is definitely a place where you know counts for more than a superior business plan.

It also means that those companies with local representative offices like Liverpool's GPT, have a big advantage over the three-day visitor.

Another rule is not to make enemies.

**T**ODAY'S minor official can be tomorrow's government minister. Be nice to everyone but remember that decisions of any importance will only be taken at ministerial level and that's where you have to make your friends.

The place still has that frontier feel about it, especially if you try to get there via Moscow.

Unless you enjoy 12-hour waits in airports and flying on the equivalent of a cattle truck with wings then go via Istanbul.

The dollar is the operational currency and local staff expect to be paid in dollars. A reliable driver with his own car is essential.

An English speaking secretary is paid about \$150. An office normally means a converted apartment at rental rates approaching Western levels.

Compared with other capital cities in the region, it is possible not to die of boredom in Baku.

It has a pleasant promenade along the Caspian Sea and when there isn't a curfew you can go to bars and restaurants. My favourite was aboard an old schooner docked in the bay.

The British business community gets together at the monthly drinks party organised by Tom Young, the very friendly British Ambassador. It's a good place to network and learn from the mistakes and successes of others.

I learnt more about doing business in 18 months in Azerbaijan than in 10 years in Europe.

Almost everyone is into buying and selling, some just to survive, others to buy a BMW, and send their children to college in the States.

Baku's first boom was at the turn of the century when it produced half of the world's oil. The city still has a lot of European-style buildings from that period. Doing business was risky then too.

It was said that merchants from Russia made out their wills before travelling to Baku.

I don't know about writing your will but you can certainly tear up your MBA and get ready for some real lessons in doing business.

I often think of my driver and the few hundred dollars that saved his life. The last I heard he'd opened his own garage fixing cars and I still reckon the chances are he'll make his first million before I do.

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**E**X-ARMY captain Andrew McCausland not only achieved a long-standing ambition when he opened Archers Health Club in Liverpool recently, but he also presented a wonderful keep-fit opportunity for hundreds of executives and office staff.

For the club in City Buildings, Old Hall Street, is in the busiest commercial heartland of the city — a ready-made catchment area of staff who appreciate the opportunity to fit in a health session around their working day.

Not that the swish new club, skilfully blended into the palatial splendour of one of the city's typical office blocks of many decades ago, is designed purely for those locally based.

It is also attracting members from further afield, who appreciate quality equipment, excellent facilities, experienced staff and a friendly environment.

Andrew, who is 31, left the army a couple of years ago, after seeing service in many parts of the world including a spell as military adviser in Mozambique.

It had been his dream to open such a club for four years and when a redundancy opportunity came along, he spent 18 months in search of the right premises.

He has invested close on £180,000 on the venture and much of this has gone on carefully modifying the first-floor complex to provide a large gym to house the expensive state of the art equipment, plush changing rooms, mirror-lined dance studio with cushioned flooring and a welcoming reception and lounge arched flooring and also by the reasonable fees of £295 a year plus a joining fee of £45.

The gym houses equipment of all types from stack weights to those of the cardiovascular range, such as bikes and stepers.

Many of them are exercise machines which at the touch of a button will offer a variety of opportunities to test the physical

By **JOHN CLOWES**

ability of all types of users, and with computer screens with accurate read outs. Some of the equipment is more specialised than those found in bigger clubs.

But before members are allowed to use them, they undergo comprehensive fitness tests, including the use of the latest Bostat equipment. This is carried out by professional staff.

The results, covering everything from blood pressure readings, percentage of body fat, heart rate, lung function and a

● Continued on facing page.

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