



Geoff Crimmins/Daily News

Rockford Weitz, left to right, Lala Suleymanov and Elin Suleymanov talk during an interview in Moscow on Friday. Elin Suleymanov is Consulate General of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

From Azerbaijan to Idaho

Even on vacation in Idaho, Azerbaijan's consul general builds relationship between his country and the United States

By Tara Roberts, for the Daily News

Monday, July 9, 2007 - Page Updated at 12:00:00 AM

Idaho is one of Elin Suleymanov's favorite places in the United States.

He rode four-wheelers in Viola, ate elk and buffalo burgers, visited the Coeur d'Alene resort, watched fireworks, and helped teach his wife, Lala, to shoot a gun when he vacationed here last week.

"It's good to be here and I'm very impressed," Suleymanov said. "It is here in the West you understand how beautiful the United States is."

Suleymanov is the consul general of Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic that borders the Caspian Sea and is known for its oil. Suleymanov came to Moscow to visit his college friend Rockford Weitz, a Moscow native, and to travel the area for the first time.

Suleymanov represents his country to 13 states in the American West. The Los Angeles-based consulate was formed in 2005, and he was hired to lead it after graduating from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Medford, Mass.

His mission is to boost political, social and economic relationships between the United States and Azerbaijan.

"The most important thing to know is Azerbaijan is one of the friends of the United States, which you do not immediately presume to be a friend," Suleymanov said.

Azerbaijan has troops serving alongside Americans in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Balkans. Unlike many other countries in the region, it has a good relationship with Israel - about 20 percent of Israeli oil comes from Azerbaijan, Suleymanov said.

Azerbaijan is a predominately Shiite Muslim country, but has a secular government and is culturally moderate. Suleymanov said his country does not have a Middle Eastern culture.

"When you look at the Muslim world, it's not always as simple as Muslims and non-Muslims not liking each other," he said.

"In a way, the way an alliance and friendships are built has nothing to do with religion."

Neighboring Iran also is Shiite Muslim, but more conservative. About 20 million Azerbaijanis live in Iran, but there is conflict between the two countries.

Iran sees Azerbaijan as "not a good example," Suleymanov said.

"We try not to ignite it very much, but there is a limit to how much pressure you can tolerate," he said.

Azerbaijan is instead closest culturally with its ally and neighbor, Georgia, an Orthodox Christian country.

Suleymanov said Azerbaijanis generally have a favorable view of the United States.

There have been some low moments, such as when the Abu Ghraib photos were released, he said, but America has been helpful to Azerbaijan, particularly around its 1991 struggle for independence.

"America is one of the nations who has supported us," Suleymanov said. "If you look at that, at the end of the day, America has helped us achieve our objectives. Why should we not like them?"

The good relationship between the United States and Azerbaijan should show Americans that more people like them than many think, he said.

"As much as (America) has been put down and very, very justifiably criticized, it's not a failure," he said.

It's important for people to realize they can turn others' opinions about Americans around, Suleymanov said. Places like Idaho are important because they show the world an image beyond major East Coast cities and "Die Hard" movies, he said.

"Take a normal Arab peasant who hates the United States, somewhere in the desert, and bring him to Idaho. He'll come back and say, 'Americans are good people.' "

This desire to get a bigger picture of the United States prompted the Azerbaijani government to open a West Coast consulate, he said.

"You don't understand the United States if you only stick to New York and Washington," he said. "The infrastructure, even in the rural areas, remote areas, that's where the real America is. That's what makes America different from the rest of the world."

Suleymanov said Americans also could improve their image by having "more attention span for things which matter and (be) less susceptible to the glimmer, the glamorous news."

Americans should realize their country was built by commitment and is strengthened by its diversity and openness, he said.

"Even though there is a pronounced effect of Sept. 11 the U.S. is probably the most tolerant and the most open (country)," he said.

"Freedom is not only the laws. It's also the way you feel. ... I think that's probably the most valuable thing Americans should protect."

■ On the Web

Azerbaijan's consulate home page: www.azconsulatela.org

About Azerbaijan: www.azerbaijan.az