It's a Small World

One woman’s unusual passion led her to open the only miniature book museum in the world – in Baku’s Old Town. Join us on a grand tour of tiny tomes.

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Within the walls of Baku’s honey-coloured Old Town – a historical cluster of observatories, labyrinth lanes and tiny mosques – blue tourist signposts announce the 18th-century Ağa Mıkalı bathhouse and the towers of the Qosha Qal’a Qapısı (the main gates). In the same direction as Shirvanshahs’ Palace, another arrow points towards the Museum of Miniature Books. To get there, you start at the south-east corner of the Old Town then, keeping the cylindrical Maiden Tower to your left, you walk under rows of latticed hanging balconies and follow the curve of the thick defence walls, built under Shirvanshah III Manuchokhr in 1138–39. Finally, a shady alleyway opens up and there is the museum.

Past its heavy wooden door, in the cool of the air conditioning, stand rows of glass cabinets, 37 in all. Each one is filled with tiny books. Famous works of literature in a multitude of languages from Azerbaijani to Vietnamese sit next to biographies of Communist Party leaders, books of famous speeches and classics by Shakespeare, Jack London and Ernest Hemingway.

On top of each cabinet a flag hints at the origin of its books. Canada, Britain and the US share one cabinet; Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel another. Japan and Russia share, too. The latter has the monopoly on the most curious titles, but more on that later – this is a place that reveals its secrets slowly.

In the corner, behind a small desk, the museum director Süad Aladdin sits hunched over a VIP visitors’ book. Above, photographs of her mother, Zarifa Salahova, hang on the wall. Salahova, the founder of the museum, stands with former president Heydar Aliyev in one photograph and in another she poses with the current president, İlham Aliyev.

Turning the pages, Aladdin pauses and beckons me to look. She points to a photograph of a smiling Boris Yeltsin, the former Russian president, dressed in an aviator-style brown leather jacket. She tells me that Yeltsin booked a private tour of the museum in 2005, two years before he died. On the opposite page is his enthusiastic handwritten note. It reads: “It is simply fantastic. I’ve never seen anything like it in the world. Glory to Zarifa and Heydar Aliyev!” Standing behind Yeltsin in the photograph, dressed in a smart black suit, Salahova looks on confidently. She, of course, knows that Yeltsin is right.

Like all visitors to the museum, Yeltsin makes reference to the fact that Baku’s Museum of Miniature Books is the only one of its kind in the world. There is a similar collection in Ukraine, but it isn’t private like this one. I mention the Ukrainian museum and Aladdin raises a pitying eyebrow.
Salahova’s collection includes miniatures ranging from classic works of literature to political speeches. This Koran (far right) was worn for years as a pendant by an elderly woman who donated it to the museum.

Salahova, an 83-year-old philologist, opened the doors of her museum on 23 April 2002, on World Book and Copyright Day. “The same day that both Shakespeare and Cervantes [author of Don Quixote] died,” Aladdin notes.

In recent years friends and visitors have mailed books to the museum, helping it to grow, but it began with Salahova bringing books home from her own travels. “As head of the Azerbaijani chapter of The Soviet Society of People Who Love Books, she travelled a lot to Moscow,” Aladdin recalls. “In November 1982, during a bookshop tour, she laid eyes on a miniature book by the Russian author Ivan Krylov. It was a complete collection of his famous fables, published in 1835. She paid 23 rubles for it and from that moment on fell in love with small books,” Aladdin says.

Today the museum has more than 7,000 books, 5,500 of which are on display. They have been sourced from more than 70 different countries and all vary slightly in size. Under Soviet rules, for a book to be genuinely miniature it should measure no more than 100 x 100mm, whereas in Europe it should be no larger than 78 x 76mm.

Standing under the Azerbaijani flag we admire a miniature version of Kurban Said’s internationally acclaimed love story Ali and Nino and a selection of miniature works that Salahova printed herself through her own publishing house, Indigo.

The most important Indigo book of all is a book of speeches by Heydar Aliyev, beginning with his inaugural speech in October 1993 (‘Vow of Fidelity to the Country, State and People’). Unsurprisingly, it caught the eye of the former president when he attended an exhibition of miniature books at the Mirza Fatali Akhundov National Library of Azerbaijan in the same year. Aliyev, impressed with the collection, vowed to help Salahova realize her dream of opening the museum.

“Under Aliyev’s instruction, the mayor’s office actually helped my mother choose the location where the museum stands today,” Aladdin confirms.

For many books in the museum, the story of their admittance to the collection is as interesting as the text within. A favourite of Aladdin’s is a mini Koran that hangs on...
a gold chain. The well-thumbed book was given to Salahova by an elderly woman in a tiny village on the outskirts of Baku. On hearing about Salahova’s collection, the old lady had unclasped the chain and insisted she took custody of it. The villager later visited the museum and saw her book lit up and centre stage in the Azerbaijani cabinet.

Next, we move on to the Japanese case. The cabinet is the museum’s showstopper, which is not surprising given that Japanese culture is awash with all things tiny, from bonsai trees to netsuke sculptures.

Aladdin tells me that Japan is the only country in the world to have a dedicated miniature bookshop, called Lilliput. It is there that, along with 4,000 miniature titles from 20 countries, a 1 sq mm micro-book of the British nursery rhyme *Old King Cole* is on display.

We pause to squint at the smallest books in the museum’s collection: *Alphabet of Flowers*, *Symbolism of Precious Stones* and *Signs of the Zodiac*. These three Japanese micro-books, each just 16 pages long and printed on wooden pages, were published (in English) by Toppan in Tokyo.

A microscope is needed to view the pages within a minuscule sheepskin cover. Despite being just 2 x 2mm, one book still has room for a surprise. Aladdin tells me that there is “an extra, hidden text on page four” – although she can’t recall in which one and for the untrained eye it is hard to see.

The British case is no less peculiar. “This recent addition has a good story,” Aladdin says, pointing to a three-tier miniature bookcase holding several 19th-century Shakespeare plays, displayed above several books dedicated to various royal weddings.

“Mother was in London for the 2012 Olympics and was accompanied on a shopping trip by a friend from the Embassy of Azerbaijan. In an antiquarian bookshop they found several mini Shakespeare plays. Mother made the bookseller an offer but he wouldn’t discount. However, once he was told about the museum he kindly reduced the price – and she received a special dispensation letter to get the books through customs,” Aladdin says.

The Cuban case further highlights Salahova’s appetite for collecting. Aladdin points to an Indigo book of Castro’s speeches, which Salahova made after receiving a recording of them from the Cuban ambassador. “In 2011 she flew to Cuba and gave the tiny book to Castro for his 85th birthday. He was ill but he was grateful and signed a couple of copies, one of which you see here.”

With only minutes left before closing time, visitors continue to wander in. Aladdin holds a ledger and points to figures that say that between 2002 and 2013 almost 39,000 foreign visitors, from countries as diverse as the Philippines and Qatar, have come to the museum. A couple huddle by the newest case, which contains several miniature Chinese poems and philosophical works, part of a collection recently donated to the museum by the Embassy of China.

The generous investment of time and money into the museum is undeniable but Aladdin laughs when I ask about finances. “We all help but my mother is never sorry for the money she spends on books. She is a charitable and modest woman. There are never any $500 shoes for her, or expensive jewellery. Just small books, and lots of them.”