

Love island

Roman remains, timeless villages and majestic mountains all conspire to make Cyprus one of the most sought-after destinations in the Mediterranean.

Jane Archer is your guide to Aphrodite's island





Anassa Hotel, Paphos



The Elysium Hotel, Paphos



If you think Cyprus is all about sun, sea and sand, you are in for a wonderful surprise. It has all three, of course, and it's what many visitors come for, but there is so much more to this little island, famous as the birthplace of Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love, as well as for the gnarled olive trees that dot the countryside.

Go in high summer when the fields are dying of thirst and the big attraction is the cool of the hotel pool, but in spring this is a green and pleasant land, when the trees are bursting with oranges and lemons ripe for the picking, and when blankets of wildflowers are in full bloom. It's warm and sunny, but not blisteringly hot, a good time to get out and about in a hire car, discovering villages that time forgot, making new friends over never-ending *meze* in a local taverna. In the majestic Troodos Mountains, park the car and set out on foot beneath towering pine trees that reach high into the always-blue sky.

Tucked away at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, with Turkey to the north, Syria and Lebanon to the east and Egypt to the south, Cyprus has a fascinating history, dating back tens of thousands of years, over which time many empires and civilisations have come and gone, each leaving its cultural brush stroke on the country.

The Romans were here for 600 years – Mark Antony gave the island to Cleopatra as a token of his love – and it was later captured by the English king Richard the

Lionheart. He sold it to the Knights Templar for 100,000 gold pieces. The Venetians visited in the 1400s but only to offer their lace-making skills to village women already adept at this painstaking craft (the legacy of the two traditions, called *lefkaritika*, thrives in the village of Pano Lefkara, where mothers and grandmothers sit in the shade of their houses stitching impossibly intricate patterns for passing visitors to buy). Later, between 1570 and 1914, Cyprus was ruled by the Ottoman Empire.

Yet, despite all these comings and goings, the Cypriots have stayed faithful to their traditions, proud of their heritage and warm in their welcome of passing strangers. Away from the hectic pace of town life, there is always time for coffee – or something stronger – and a dish of the ubiquitous olives.

Look at the island from above and you can make out a basking lizard, with the Karpas Peninsula in the northeast corner forming the tail and the northwest tip of the Akamas Peninsula at the head. Other peninsulas, north and south, make up the feet, the Troodos Mountains down the middle its backbone.

As with the scaly reptile, it is hard to imagine what Cyprus would do without its backbone, the Troodos Mountains – at once a source of life to the island and an area of outstanding beauty for all who live and visit here. It is the Troodos that provides Cyprus with its life-giving

water, and where pilgrims go, to the Kykkos Monastery, high in the hills, to pray in times of drought.

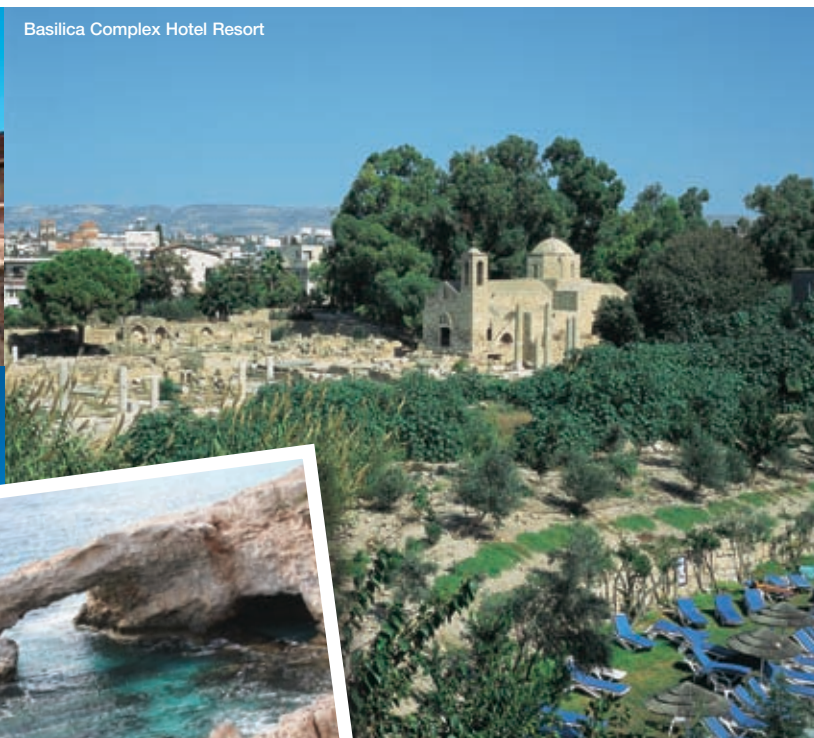
The Troodos also provides a home for a myriad of indigenous plants (some edible but do get advice before you start to snack) and the foothills of the Troodos are favoured by flourishing vineyards.

But the mountains are not just about nature and nurture. They provide the locals with winter days out – would you believe skiing on Mount Olympus, the highest peak on the island? – and visitors who dare to tackle the winding roads and hairpin bends with a cool hideaway as the thermometer starts to creep up in the summer sun. It's a slow drive if you want to make it alive, but the reward is the chance to leave the car behind and set off along one of the numerous trails through the pine forest, sometimes climbing, sometimes descending, often scrambling over boulders, log bridges and streams. Just remember to stop and listen to the sound of silence. In this noisy world, it can be quite overwhelming.

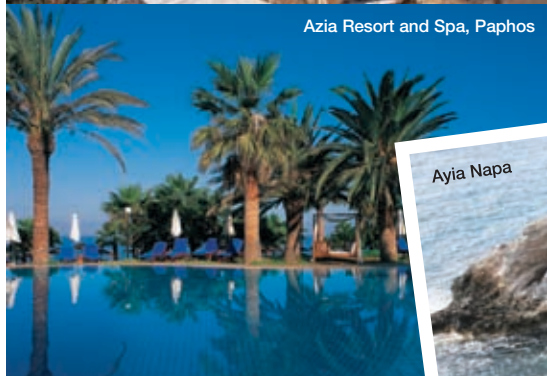
Cyprus might be very small, but the great outdoors is something it does well, with the Akamas Peninsula offering some of the most superb views out to sea from anywhere on the island. This is the area along the west coast, stretching between Paphos and Polis, and is one of the island's last great wildernesses, uninhabited by man but home to a fantastic array of flora and fauna – around 600 plant species are found here,



Kamare Tourist Villas



Basilica Complex Hotel Resort



Azia Resort and Spa, Paphos



Ayia Napa

66 species of bird, countless butterflies, reptiles and mammals – that comes to life in early spring.

You can do a bit of sightseeing from the cabin of a 4x4, bouncing along unmade tracks, or get the muscles into gear on a mountain bike, but the best way to admire this rough terrain is by setting off on foot with a backpack and stopping to picnic along one of four hiking trails.

For the best views, follow the Aphrodite Trail from the Aphrodite Baths, where the Goddess of Love is said to have come to bathe and where countless tourists pay their respects to the island's patron. Legend says she rose out of the sea on the south coast of the island – Aphrodite's Rock marks the spot and is

another place of pilgrimage for visitors and newly-weds alike.

The trail, which is a fantastic walk on a spring day, takes about three hours and has spectacular views of the Mediterranean as you climb higher and higher, through the flowering heather and gorse and past grazing goats, to the top of Mouti tis Sotiras, then back down the other side, when the vista switches from blue sea to green countryside.

Cyprus is also pretty good at history – well, it would have to be with so many different rulers popping in to make their mark. As home to a fabulous collection of mosaics, the town of Paphos was clearly a Roman favourite long before

21st-century tourists discovered its picturesque harbour, overlooked by an Ottoman fortress, where gleaming white boats bob in the sparkling blue sea. Discovered by accident in the mid-1900s, having been unwittingly preserved from the ravages of time by the overlaying of different civilisations, the mosaics depict hunting and winemaking scenes, triumphal processions and much more.

There's a lot more history at the Cyprus Museum in Nicosia, the island's capital, called Lefkosia by the Cypriots, where you can spend hours browsing through priceless archaeological exhibits that date back 6,500 years. But the real jewel in the Cyprus crown is Kourion, a treasure trove of the remains of ancient



Thalassa Spa at the Anassa Hotel



Londa Hotel, Limassol

Anassa Hotel, Paphos



cultures perched on a hillside site just outside Limassol (called Lemesos in Cyprus) that surely must have been picked by the builders on the recommendation of the best photographers of the Roman Empire.

Just imagine: as the sun starts to sink into the Mediterranean Sea, thespians spring into action on the stage of the Greco-Roman theatre, their voices carrying high up the rows of stone benches to the ears of an admiring crowd of 3,500 without so much as a microphone or loudspeaker. But why imagine when you can enjoy the real thing? On warm summer evenings you can bask in the orange glow of the setting sun while watching one of the musical or dramatic productions once again being staged in this fabulous setting. The theatre is the first stop for everyone visiting Kourion, but there is a lot more to see, including more mosaics at the House of Eustolios, the remains of the Roman Forum and a basilica, said to date back to the fifth century.

Limassol is one of the three big resort

towns on the south coast – the others are Paphos and Larnaka – and they are home to fabulous hotels that guarantee sumptuous surroundings, super service and spas that spoil and pamper, but for something more authentic you can stay in a restored village house in Tochi or Kalavassos, or in a country inn. While they may not be chic they're certainly comfortable and at least you're in the right place to get out and visit the little village tavernas and sample a legendary Cypriot *meze*.

You can get a *meze* – short for *mezedhes*, which means 'little delicacies' – wherever there's a restaurant in Cyprus, but many usually serve just a few items. For the real thing you have to dine in a taverna away from the tourists (if you see the name *Vakhis* on the door, by the way, it means the food served has been grown on the island and cooked in traditional ways, and it will also probably be served with local wine).

Be warned, though – once your order is in, up to 30 different dishes will wend their way to your table. It usually starts off with bread and dips, moving on through salads, grilled halloumi goat's cheese, stuffed vine leaves and stuffed

peppers, to *kalamari* (deep-fried squid) and meat balls, and ending with *stifado* (beef and onion stew) and *kleftiko* (lamb baked in herbs).

You won't be out of the restaurant in less than three hours, and you'll probably be groaning under the weight of so much food. But, as with the island itself, after one taste of a *meze*, you're almost certain to be back for more. **DV**

➔ GETTING THERE

Emirates Airlines flights depart from Dubai at 8:35am on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. The flight takes three hours and 40 minutes and a return economy ticket costs Dhs2,840.

Cyprus Airlines operates two weekly flights via Bahrain, leaving Dubai at 12:05am on Mondays and 12:15am on Fridays. The total flight duration including stopover is around four hours and 55 minutes. A one-month special return fare in economy starts from Dhs1,160, while a three-month special fare costs Dhs1,570.