



# Snow on the Sun Loungers

*Travels in  
Cyprus*

*Mark Moxon*



C O M M O N S D E E D

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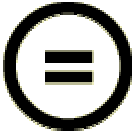
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# Foreword

This book is a collection of writing from the road, covering a two-week trip I made to Cyprus in 2003 with my partner Peta.

This travelogue and more can be found at my personal website at [www.moxon.net](http://www.moxon.net), where you can also find travel tips, recommended journeys and further free books for you to download. If you enjoy reading this book, then I'd be delighted if you would sign my website's Guestbook.

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Finally, please be aware that this book is highly satirical, which means there's a slight chance that it might cause offence those who think my sense of humour is amusing as a puddle of mud. On top of this, some parts will be out of date – which is why each article is dated – and others will betray the naivety of a

traveller who discovered his way in the world by throwing himself into it headfirst. It is, however, an honest account of how I felt as I travelled, and as such, I hope you enjoy it.

Mark Moxon, September 2004

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# Map



# Cyprus

## Pafos

*Written: 19 February 2003*

As a place to start and finish our tour of Cyprus, Pafos was an excellent choice, quite a relief as I'd only bought flights to Pafos because everywhere else was sold out. Pafos seems to have managed a balance between package tourism and historical interest that you simply don't find in places like Larnaka and Agia Napa, and because of this it's a great introduction to Cyprus.

Pafos repays a bit of investigation, though, because a cursory glance at its harbour won't reveal all its charm, even though the harbour is one of the more pleasant tourist havens on the island. Where Larnaka's promenade is bordering on the tacky and Agia Napa doesn't pretend to be anything else, Pafos is still rather charming, with its old fort perched at the end of the harbour wall and lots of pretty little fishing boats anchored around the cove. OK, so the shops lining the harbour sell the usual tourist rubbish – I've never really gone for novelty pottery ashtrays or T-shirts with slogans that weren't funny the first time round – and the restaurant we wandered past was unbelievably trying to entice us in by playing David bloody Essex on its hi-fi,

but despite some amazing accidents of modern architecture that are worth visiting in their own right, it's the ancient ruins of Nea Pafos that are the real draw-card.

## **Magical Mosaics**

Out on the headland just behind the harbour, Pafos has its very own World Heritage site, and it's absolutely stunning. Even compared to the much-touted Kourion, which the guidebooks tend to gush over in more lavish detail, the ancient site of Nea Pafos is amazing, and I vastly preferred it to the Cyprus' other archaeological treats.

The main attraction of Nea Pafos is the collection of Roman mosaics that lay undiscovered under the headland until a farmer accidentally found them with his plough back in 1962. Since then archaeologists have been slowly unearthing the most amazingly detailed mosaics, along with the ruins of the magnificent buildings that used to house them. The art of the mosaic isn't something that's ever lit my fire before, but when you're faced with huge stretches of patterned artwork that turns out to be made from surprisingly large chunks of glass or rock, it's hard not to be impressed.

It's useful to have some kind of guidebook when exploring the ruins of Pafos, as explanatory signs are limited to the names given by the diggers to the various

houses that have been found (the House of Dionysos contains lots of mosaics on the subject of wine and partying, the House of Theseus has a fantastic one of the minotaur and its maze, and so on).

But throw in an amphitheatre, a mediaeval Lusignan fortress, a modern lighthouse, and the windswept vista of Pafos' headland, fortunately protected from development by the potential of more archaeological discoveries under its grassy hills, and you've got a fantastic spot for an afternoon's exploration.

On the other hand, I presume the summer months would be less kind to casual wandering round the ruins. When we sauntered out to check out the mosaics, the wind picked up and the rain started spattering in a way that would become depressingly familiar over the next two weeks, and apart from a few hardy souls and a few complaining children, dragged out by parents who must have been regretting the decision, we had the place to ourselves. No doubt in the package season Nea Pafos is completely chocka-block with tourists, which would change the experience somewhat. Not that this should be an excuse for avoiding the headland, but I'd pack lots of water and take a sun hat; for us, though, it was Gore-Tex jackets and gloves, followed by a thawing meal of suckling pig by the fire in the unadventurously named but very tasty Mediterranean Tavern, back in the middle of town.

As a place to start our exploration of Cyprus, Pafos did the trick nicely.

## Place Names in Cyprus

*Written: 2 March 2003*

With Cyprus being so bitterly divided, it comes as no surprise to find that a bit of geographical revisionism has been going on, on both sides of the Green Line. In the north, all Greek writing has been obliterated from signposts, and place names have officially been changed to reflect the Turkish occupation of that part of the island. Similarly, the south has implemented its own renaming scheme, leaving each place in Cyprus with a number of different names, depending on whom you ask.

To make things worse for foreigners, the southern part of the island uses the Greek alphabet, which doesn't have an exact transliteration into the Roman alphabet at the best of times (for example the letter  $\gamma$  is sometimes like a 'y' and sometimes like a 'g', and the letter  $\pi$  is often a 'p' but also, at times, a 'b'). But to make things really confusing, the Cypriot government adopted a new transliteration scheme in 1994 that totally changed the way Cypriot place names are written in the Roman alphabet. By all accounts the Cypriots themselves aren't terribly impressed with the new versions, even though

their road signs have almost all changed to the new scheme; however, foreigners *really* have a problem with the new system, as the previous names were relatively phonetic, unlike the new ones.

One good example is Agia Napa, which was known as Ayia Napa before 1994 (and that's how you pronounce it, as the  $\gamma$  after the A in Αγία is pronounced as a 'y' in this case). Another cracker is Lefkosa, which used to be known as Nicosia; in this case those behind the change felt that Nicosia was a hangover from British rule (despite the fact that the name was adopted by the Lusignans), so the change to the Greek version of Lefkosa wasn't so much to do with transliteration as nationalism.

So what's a writer to do? Well, I started writing these articles with a modern map in front of me, and therefore I've ended up using the new versions, even though most UK tour operators, Friends of the Earth, some guidebook publishers and a number of important international organisations have decided to ignore the new scheme and stick to the old versions. The only place where I use the old version in preference is in the article on Nicosia, because nobody I've met uses the new version, and the internationally accepted name for the city is still Nicosia. Where possible I've pointed out the previous spelling in a footnote, but that's about as much as anyone can do without including the old name

in brackets every time, and that would make it unreadable.

Still, Cyprus isn't the first country with variable spelling, and it won't be the last, so it's not worth getting in a strop...

## Troodos

*Written: 20 February 2003*

If there's one thing you mustn't do when shacked up in an isolated and empty hotel in the middle of a snowstorm, it's to think about *The Shining*. Make sure you don't think back to the chilling moment when the little boy rides his tricycle round the corner and sees the ghosts of the two twins at the end of the corridor, or that painfully narrow escape the terrified wife makes through the too-small bathroom window away from the mad axe-wielding of Jack Nicholson. Oh no, don't think about it, or the chances are you'll end up scared out of your wits...

OK, so the manager at the Jubilee Hotel in Troodos<sup>1</sup> turned out to be really lovely, and he ran a great little hotel without even a hint of ancient Indian burial sites about it, but imagination is a powerful thing. Driving up

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<sup>1</sup> Known as Troödhos before the name change. Troodos is supposedly pronounced 'Tro-o-dos', though I never heard anyone refer to it as anything but 'Troo-dos'.

from Pafos we'd scoffed at the guidebook's insistence that we'd be able to go skiing on nearby Mt Olympos, and as the road signs counted down the distance to Troodos towards the 10km mark, there wasn't even a hint of snow, let alone isolation.

And then suddenly, as we turned a corner on the winding main road over the Troodos mountains, snow flakes started falling from the grey sky, and within ten minutes there was snow drifting along the side of the roads, settling on the trees and getting heavier and heavier until the visibility was absolutely terrible. By the time we reached Troodos, I was driving as slowly as I could get away with, because with absolutely no warning at all, we'd driven bang into a blizzard.

This, apparently, is relatively common on the mountains of Cyprus, though perhaps not to the degree we would end up enjoying. The snow line on Cyprus is tangible, and once you've seen it, it's easy to understand how, given the right weather conditions, you can be skiing in the morning and lazing on the beach in the afternoon. Pafos had been full of people wearing shorts and wandering along the seafront in T-shirts, but here, 1700m above sea level, we were in a winter wonderland. Through the driving snow we could make out pine trees frosted with heavy layers of snow, their needles and trunks looking jet black in the surrounding glare. Troodos village, if it can be called that, is nothing more

than a main road flanked by a handful of small cafés, a post office, a sculptured park containing swings and seesaws for the coaches of package tourists that swarm here in the summer, two hotels and a Youth Hostel. And, of course, the more central hotel had closed down through lack of business and was almost invisible behind mounds of packed snow thrown up by the snow ploughs, and the Youth Hostel only opened in the summer, so this left only one option for accommodation, the Jubilee Hotel, out to the north of town along the less-used road towards the summit of Mt Olympos.

On checking in, we asked the manager about the chances of us getting our bog-standard two-wheel-drive car up to the top of Mt Olympos, and he shrugged and said the only thing we could do was give it a go, so throwing caution to the wind in the way all drivers of hired vehicles are morally obliged to do, we slid our way up the short road to the Cyprus Ski Federation hut, not far from the top of the mountain. It was a little late in the day for skiing – instead we entertained ourselves with a little sledding back down in the village – but happy that we now knew where to go to ski, we settled in for a solitary night in the Jubilee.

The first thing that caught our attention was a terrible smell from the room next door. In Cyprus you often find your room is attached to the next door room by a double door, which can only provide a through

passage if both doors are opened; through a small gap under this door leaked an utterly putrid smell that, I assured myself, had absolutely nothing to do with the word ‘decomposing’. This wasn’t a horror movie, and that’s exactly what I told Peta, who shot me a glance that made it clear in no uncertain terms that if I mentioned *The Shining* once more, she’d be the one wielding the bloody axe. Luckily the manager tracked down the smell to the drains next door, and while we went in search of food he aired the room and made things much more bearable.

The kitchens in the Jubilee weren’t open that night (not surprisingly, as we were the lone tenants), so the only option for food was the snug little Fereos Park restaurant back down in the village. Deciding that driving through the snow after dark was probably a bad idea, we trudged through the blustering blizzard down into town, where the restaurant’s gas-fired stove and chilled beer helped wash down a more than passable mixed kebab while the snow levels outside continued to rise. Walking back, the part of the road that had been cleared by a snow plough only an hour or so before was an inch deep in fresh snow, and all the while more snow tumbled out of the sky, dulling our crunchy footsteps and blanketing the mountains in complete silence.

When we got back to the hotel, the only signs of life were the barman, his assistant, and a solitary local

propping up the bar; true, none of them appeared to be the ghosts of past caretakers, but just in case they had a hidden agenda involving wood-chopping equipment, we sneaked downstairs for a quick game of pool in the deserted basement, while the storm continued to batter the hotel. Throughout the night shutters banged and the wind howled and whistled, leaving us to lie wide-eyed in our wonderfully heated room, desperately trying to persuade ourselves that the squeaking sounds outside were the hinges, and not those of an axe being sharpened.

The next morning the snow had stopped, but so had all activity. The police said that even four-wheel-drives were having problems getting up to the ski slopes, and we had to abandon our plans to go skiing, at least for a day or two, and with heavy hearts we decided to head downhill to Kakopetria, below the snow line. And at least our hire car entered into the spirit of things; smothered in deep drifts of snow that hid almost all signs of bodywork from view, I'm sure his headlights glinted a maniacally frozen Jack Nicholson grin as we dug him out with the hotel's shovel.

Or was that *Christine*..?

# Kakopetria

*Written: 21 February 2003*

After the exertions of digging the car out of the Troodos snow, we realised that the only way to cope with the unexpected weather Cyprus was throwing at us was to relax. The problem with relaxing in wintry Cyprus is that the beaches, the normal route for holiday makers looking for somewhere to crash out, are far too cold and windswept to be comfortable, and the sea is distinctly Arctic. Cyprus does excel, though, in cosy little hotels with real fires, and as luck would have it we stumbled on a real gem in Kakopetria, a short drive north of Troodos on the Nicosia road.

Kakopetria means ‘wicked rock pile’ in Greek, and driving round the town’s twisting one-way system is a good way to appreciate why. A river runs through the centre of town, chopping it into three steep-sided parts, with the old town perched precariously on a ridge between the two arms of the cold mountain stream; this gives the place a certain charm, especially when the nearby mountains are smothered in clouds and the wind whistles through the valleys as sharp as pine needles. Following the advice of our guidebook, we drove in ever-decreasing circles round the streets, eventually landing up at the Linos Inn, bang in the middle of the middle of the old part of town.

We instantly fell in love with the Linos. Being the

only tourists mad enough to be exploring the Troodos Mountains at this time of year, we had the place to ourselves, and on booking in the manager gave us a choice of a room with a normal bath, a room with a one-person Jacuzzi, or a room with a two-person Jacuzzi. This was too good to be true; out here, in the middle of nowhere, we'd stumbled on somewhere that not only felt wonderfully toasty, it had Jacuzzis. Not surprisingly, we went for the latter, pushing the boat out at a respectable C£55 per night.

The rooms turned out to be full of antique furniture, from iron-framed four-poster beds to tables that turned out to be authentic Singer sewing machine tables, complete with foot pedals for operating the now-removed machines. From the balcony at the back of the room the warren of Kakopetria's old town lay sandwiched between the two rivers, and in the distance the mountains grumbled and the smell of wood smoke drifted in on the breeze. We might not have been able to hit the slopes that day, but that was no reason not to get stuck into a healthy dose of *après-ski*.

## **Around Town**

Kakopetria's old town is long and thin, following its main road (well, a one-car wide track) along the top of a ridge while the river tumbles away down a deep gorge to one side. It's a beautiful place that has been saved

from the idiocies of the coastal developers by a preservation order, but like the vast majority of places in the south of Cyprus, the old town is littered with tumbledown buildings that have been left to rot, while the other buildings have obviously had serious amounts of investment lavished on them in an attempt to preserve the historical style of Cyprus' old settlements.

On closer inspection the crumbling buildings turn out to have dates and initials scribbled on the door frames, indicating that they are owned by Turkish Cypriots who were forced to flee their homes to escape to north Cyprus; the Cypriot government has ensured that Turkish-owned property is kept for them to return to once the political atmosphere is more conducive, a compliment that hasn't been repaid on the north, where Greek Cypriot property has simply been seized. It does mean, though, that places like Kakopetria can't fully restore their old quarters while Cyprus is split, a situation that unintentionally adds to the atmosphere.

Meanwhile some of the crumbling buildings are marked not with the details of their temporarily estranged owners, but with signs saying 'EOKA', the name of the pro-Greece terrorist movement that was so key in splitting up the island in the first place; I couldn't work out whether these buildings had housed EOKA members hiding from the authorities, or whether their current state of decay was down to past EOKA activity,

but it added spice to an already delicious old town centre. Indeed, completing the picture, Kakopetria is full of concrete water cisterns emblazoned with ‘ER 1955’, evidence that the British, for whom the EOKA was a huge thorn in the side, did at least leave one useful legacy in Kakopetria – running water.

But although Kakopetria is a beautiful mountain town, and the history is visible all around, it was the Linos Inn that was the highlight. The downstairs restaurant, home to a lovely log fire and some wonderfully fresh trout from the trout farm down the road, was the perfect place to shelter from the howling February wind, and after a jug of village wine and a Jacuzzi, even the chilling weather of Troodos felt like a distant memory.

It quite put us in the mood for the morning’s improvement in the weather, which opened up an opportunity for skiing on Mt Olympos after all. If only they could move the Linos Inn to Troodos, then Cyprus would have a skiing holiday experience to rival the best of the Alps. If you ignore the quality of the ski runs, that is...

## **Mt Olympos**

*Written: 21 February 2003*

It has to rate as one of the strangest places to find a ski

run, but Mt Olympos<sup>2</sup>, the highest point on Cyprus, boasts not one but four pistes, along with three T-bar ski lifts, a ski school, a shop hiring out skis and boots, a restaurant, and even its very own club, the Cyprus Ski Federation. Nobody comes to Cyprus specifically to ski, but if you're here at the right time of year and fancy a quick slalom in between the island's more traditional sights, it's certainly a unique place in which to strap on the skis.

Comparing Mt Olympos with the Alps is a bit like comparing Manchester United with the Sunday League team from the Fox and Hounds, but because of this there's no room for ski snobbery on the gentle slopes of Cyprus; this means it's a great place for people like me who haven't been brought up in a country where learning to ski by the age of five is seen as normal (along with learning to drink sensibly by the age of ten, something the English also fail to grasp). I doubt anyone in the Alpine skiing circuit boasts about the time they conquered the daredevil slopes of Cyprus, but this isn't the point; skiing on Cyprus is a hoot, not a lifestyle for the rich, famous and expensively clad.

By the time we finally got to the Cyprus Ski Federation hut – after the effects of the previous two days' show storms had been cleared away and cars were

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<sup>2</sup> Known before the name change as Mt Olympus, or by its nickname *Chionistra*, which means 'snow pack' or, more appropriately, 'chilblain'.

again able to claw their way up the access road – it appeared that we weren't the only ones planning to slide down the Olympic slopes. After the *Shining*-esque isolation of our stay in Troodos it was a considerable relief to see other human beings braving the snow line, and although this meant the only skis available to rent were prehistoric straight behemoths that looked like they hadn't been waxed since the Byzantine era, it made queuing for the Sun Valley ski lift much more sociable. People come to Mt Olympos for one thing – fun – and that's what makes it much less daunting to those of us for whom being on the piste is strictly a Saturday night event.

It makes it highly cost-effective too. For your C£7 half-day ski pass you get access to all four runs, though when we visited one of the lifts wasn't running, restricting us to three pistes, and as two of those were on the other side of the summit to the ski hut, we didn't venture off the beginners' slope of Sun Valley. Then again, I was perfectly happy to spend the afternoon falling on my face on the easy run, and from the top of the Sun Valley T-bar I had the perfect opportunity to survey the British Sovereign Base on the top of Mt Olympos.

The Mt Olympos on Cyprus isn't the home of the gods of Greek mythology – that's Mt Olympos in Greece, after which Cyprus' peak is named – but it is

home to an all-seeing, all-hearing golf ball that does whatever it is that oversized golf balls do at 1952m above sea level (I believe it's an RAF radar dome, but as the peak of Mt Olympos is out of bounds to anyone not conditioned to react to someone screaming 'Shee-un!' at the top of their voice, I can't confirm that). The peak of Mt Olympos is home to one of three corners of Cyprus that are forever England – the others being the Akrotiri and Dhekelia Sovereign Bases – and from the top of the ski run it looks like the result of a particularly perverted ice cream fantasy. As ski settings go, it's all rather fun.

We only had a couple of hours in which to admire the British Army's balls before the clouds descended and the wind picked up, forcing us to retreat into the cosy little restaurant next to the Ski Federation hut, but by that stage the novelty of a single 200m piste was beginning to wear off, and the thought of hauling ourselves over to the runs on the other side of the mountain was just a little too much. There was absolutely no way I could complain, though; with the total cost for half a day's skiing and equipment hire coming to less than C£25, it was amazing value for money, and to top it all, the snow was surprisingly good, with lightly compacted powder covering the pistes, and some pleasant off-piste skiing to the side of the main run.

As a totally bizarre thing to do, skiing on a

Mediterranean island, especially one so close to Africa, is hard to beat. If you happen to be in Cyprus between January and March and the snowfall is good enough, I can't recommend it enough as a fun diversion for a day or two. I wouldn't come specially to Cyprus for a skiing holiday, though; it isn't the Alps, which of course is all part of the charm.

## **A Brief History of Cyprus**

*Written: 3 March 2003*

Writing a brief history of Cyprus is challenging, if only because there's so much of it. When writing about Cyprus in *The Road to Oxiana*, Robert Byron said:

*History in this island is almost too profuse. It gives one a sort of mental indigestion.*

This was written back in 1937, before the shit really hit the fan, so I hope this short history doesn't prove too indigestible, or too brief.

- **Prehistoric Period**

8000 BC – 2300 BC

Ancient settlements from this period have been found in Choiokoitia and Sotira, where copper production develops and ceramics are produced.

- **Bronze Age**

2300 BC – 1050 BC

This period is characterised by trade with Egypt and Syria, the introduction of a Cypro-Minoan script (still not deciphered), and the first fortifications in places like Kition in modern-day Larnaka.

- **Iron Age**

1050 BC – 750 BC

This is a bit of a dark age, with Cyprus being cut off from the rest of the world for a couple of centuries. Also known as the Geometric Age after the designs on contemporary pottery.

- **Archaic Period**

750 BC – 475 BC

Apart from a few decades of Assyrian rule, Cyprus flourishes as an independent state, the last time Cyprus is both united and independent until the 20th century.

- **Classic Period**

475 BC – 325 BC

Cyprus becomes a Persian naval base, and Cyprus gets involved in the struggle between Persia and Greece, which will characterise the island's tug-

of-war position for the rest of its history.

- **Hellenistic Period**

325 BC – 294 BC

Cyprus becomes a province of Greece after siding with Alexander the Great against the Persians.

- **Ptolemaic Period**

294 BC – 58 BC

After Alexander's death, Cyprus is witness to a brief civil war in which Ptolemy I of Egypt prevails. Egyptian rule is relatively peaceful and prosperous.

- **Roman Empire**

58 BC – 395 AD

In 58 BC Cyprus becomes a province of the Roman Empire, during which time the mosaics of Pafos are built, and Christianity comes to the island.

- **Early Byzantine Period**

395 – 647

Ruled from Constantinople as part of the Empire's Byzantium area, many Christian basilicas are built after a number of earthquakes decimate the island's Roman cities.

- **Arab Rule**

648 – 963

Under the Arab-Byzantine treaty, the island accepts Muslims and remains demilitarised. However, Arab rule is based on raping and pillaging the island, and during this time many religious icons are hidden in caves to avoid not only the Arabs, but also the iconoclasts, who believe in the destruction of all religious iconography.

- **Middle Byzantine Period**

963 – 1184

Byzantine Emperor Nikiphorous II Phokas drives the Muslims out of Cyprus, leading to two centuries of relative calm and prosperity.

- **The Crusaders**

1184 – 1192

In 1184 the greedy and cruel Isaac Komnenos seizes power and breaks from Constantinople, but in 1191 Richard the Lionheart takes Cyprus after his sister and fiancée are nearly taken hostage there. After plundering the island, Richard sells the island to the Knights Templar and continues crusading, and they then sell it to a minor French noble and crusader, Guy de Lusignan.

- **Lusignan Rule**

1192 – 1489

Descendants of Lusignan rule the island and marry into European royal families, signalling a decadent ruling class while the Greek Orthodox population bides its time. A war with Genoa in 1373 seriously weakens the Lusignans' position, and when King Kames II marries a Venetian royal in 1472 and then dies, it paves the way for the Venetians to force an abdication of the last Lusignan.

- **Venetian Rule**

1489 – 1571

Byzantine painting flourishes under the Venetian Republic, but Venetian rule is seen as even more oppressive than the Lusignans, and in 1562 a popular uprising helped weakens the Venetians. Egypt falls to the Ottoman Empire in 1517, surrounding Cyprus on three sides with Turkish rule, and when the inevitable Ottoman invasion comes in 1570, Cyprus only holds out for a few months.

- **Ottoman Rule**

1571 – 1878

Ottoman rule tolerates both Muslim and Christian

beliefs, but Cyprus becomes one of the worst ruled and most neglected parts of the Ottoman Empire. The people suffer under huge taxes, and regular rebellions ensue. In 1878 the Anglo-Turkish Convention is signed, in which Turkey hands over administrative and occupation rights on Cyprus to the British, in return for the British helping to stop the Russian advance on Istanbul the year before.

- **British Rule**

1878 – 1960

The Cypriots hope that the British will do the same with Cyprus as they did with the Ionian islands – hand them over to Greece, in other words – but instead the British formally annexe Cyprus in 1914, and alongside a reasonable governmental system, they impose crippling taxes on the population, partly due to the wording of the Anglo-Turkish Convention, which precludes Britain from spending too much on Cypriot development. In the 1930s, calls for *enosis* (union with Greece) reach fever pitch, resulting in the first of many civil disturbances. After World War II an offer from the British for limited self-rule is rejected by the *enosists*, and by 1950 Archbishop Makarios III calls a referendum that shows 96 per

cent of Greek Cypriots support *enosis*; however the Turkish minority (18 per cent of the population) are strongly opposed to union with Greece, and combined with a little ‘divide and conquer’ politics by the British, this sets the scene for arguments between Britain, Greece and Turkey on the issue. In 1954 EOKA (National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters) is formed by Makarios and General George Grivas, and starts a campaign to oust the British and bring about *enosis*. The British arrest and deport Makarios, but the British finally accept the concept of independence ‘in principle’ and he returns in 1957. In 1958 the TMT (Turkish Defence Organisation) is founded to counter EOKA activity, and a bomb in June 1958 outside the Turkish press office in Nicosia (later shown to have been planted by the TMT) sparks off Cyprus’ first intercommunal riots. After the riots are quelled and EOKA and TMT sign a truce, the British finally hand over control of the island on 16 August 1960, apart from three sovereign bases, which remain British. Archbishop Makarios is installed as the first President, and as part of the constitution Britain, Turkey and Greece are appointed as guarantors of peace in independent Cyprus, and Grivas leaves for Greece in disgust at

Makarios' sell-out of the *enosis* cause.

- **Early Independence**

1960 – 1964

Peaceful independence proves impossible under the constitution drawn up as part of the independence process, and Makarios' proposal of thirteen amendments, which remove the power accorded by the constitution to the minority Turkish Cypriots, is met with disdain from Turkey. On 21 December 1963, shots are exchanged between Greek-Cypriot police and a Turkish-Cypriot motorist, and within hours EOKA and TMT are back in action. Chaos strikes the capital Nicosia, and a UK-brokered cease-fire on Christmas Day brings the Green Line into being. The UN is brought in to maintain the peace.

- **Self-imposed Segregation**

1964 – 1974

Although this period is relatively stable, the Turkish-Cypriots maintain their own self-contained areas of the island, preferring to live in enclaves that are separated from the Greek-Cypriot majority, the division in Nicosia being a prime example. In 1971 Grivas slips back into

Cyprus and forms EOKA-B with support from Greece's military junta, but he dies in January 1974 while still in hiding. Makarios writes to the Greek junta asking them to remove their EOKA-B troops, but in response the junta authorises the overthrow of Makarios, installing their own puppet President, Nikos Sampson. This gives Turkey an excuse to invade the island, in their role as guarantor of peace, and Cyprus becomes the battlefield for EOKA-B and Greek forces on one side, and the Turkish army on the other. The whole affair topples the Greek junta from power, and at the UN-brokered cease-fire on 16 August 1974 the island remains split between Turkey in the north and Cyprus in the south. Makarios is reinstalled as President, and the blueprint for the current situation in Cyprus is set.

- **A Split Country**

1974 onwards

Despite periodic pressure from the UN, Cyprus remains split in two. The south experiences a massive boom in tourism, while the north fares less well. Pressure to unify before joining the EU brings about unification demonstrations in Nicosia in 2003, but nobody really knows what will happen.

# War Zone Accommodation

*Written: 22 February 2003*

We arrived in South Nicosia in the middle of the most miserable rainstorm we'd seen since landing in Cyprus. The clouds that had smothered Mt Olympos in snow had decided to lurk around for a few more days, and whereas the storm was beautiful and entertaining above the snow line, it was downright depressing in the central plains. I was determined not to let this get to me, though; my research had painted such a bleak picture of the political state of Nicosia that it would have been easy to let the rain dampen my spirits, and although Nicosia would turn out to be one of my personal highlights of Cyprus, our first hurdle turned out to be rather high. I'm referring to our home from home in Nicosia, Tony's Bed and Breakfast.

Nicosia's lack of tourist industry is on one hand a blessing, and on the other hand a pain. The lack of tourists creates an atmosphere in which it is easier to appreciate the seriousness of the political situation in Cyprus, but by the same token it makes finding good quality but affordable accommodation surprisingly hard; we ended up picking Tony's place because the other options in the book all sounded like the kind of hotels that only expense-account businessmen would enjoy. Indeed, the old man in the glass-fronted booth at the entrance to Tony's was all smiles when we staggered

into the shelter of his hotel, and even though he asked us to pay up front for both nights before we'd had a chance to go upstairs, I didn't smell a rat. After all, C£26 per night sounded OK for a bed right in the centre of the capital city.

The first thing that went wrong was the electricity key fob. Almost all Cypriot hotel rooms have a small slot just inside the door into which you push your room's metal key fob; this turns on the electricity, and ensures that when you leave your room, you can't accidentally leave the lights on. It's a good idea with ecologically sound roots, but like most technical gizmos, it's a nightmare when things don't work properly. I shoved the key fob into Room 20's slot, and nothing happened. I tried again: zilch. It was pitch black and bloody freezing, and for the next five minutes the only thing we could see was our breath frosting in the sliver of light coming in from the hall, while I wiggled the fob and prayed for light. I began to wonder whether they'd forgotten to turn on the supply, and popped down to the old man to ask him what the problem was.

'Ah, I wondered if you'd know what to do,' he said. 'Come, I'll show you.' And hobbling up the stairs he smiled at me with a grin that would haunt me for the next two days. It was the grin of a man being polite while quite obviously thinking I was a complete prat.

'I've already tried putting in the fob,' I ventured.

‘Heh, yes,’ he said, and flashed me a knowing look that meant, ‘I have just totally ignored what you have said, or perhaps I have simply not understood you, but whatever the case, I am right and you are wrong and guess who wears the trousers in this establishment? Exactly. Now wait while I show you what to do, you ignoramus.’

It therefore gave me no end of pleasure to see him brandish the key fob and plunge it into the slot, only to have absolutely nothing happen. ‘I tried that,’ I said, ‘and I had the same problem. It doesn’t work.’

This earned me another look that felt older than history itself, and pretending that I hadn’t spoken, he started wiggling the fob. I thought about telling him that I’d also tried doing that, but I figured that we’d already paid for two nights in advance, and the last thing I needed was an enemy living downstairs. And then, after a few minutes of wobbling and twisting, the lights suddenly flashed on, and the old man looked at me as if to say, ‘See? It works! You fool! All you had to do was push it in the slot! Bloody idiot...’ And with that he shuffled down the stairs, back to his glass booth, leaving us to look around at our home for the next two days.

The first thing we spotted was a stand-alone gas heater, the kind that has a gas cylinder in the back and four ceramic heating panels on the front. Seeing that Peta was starting to turn blue round the edges, I pushed

down the gas knob, twisted it to spark the ignition flame on the front, and sat back to enjoy the sight of precisely nothing happening. It turned out that there wasn't a gas cylinder in the back, just a hose that disappeared into the wall, so I turned the tap on the hose and tried again; nope, there was definitely no gas coming into the heater, and this was the only visible means of heating the room. I looked at Peta and she looked at me; there was nothing else for it except to ask the old man how we heated the room. Already scarred by his withering looks, I decided it was Peta's turn to fetch him up, and retreated into the bathroom.

This time the old man thought he'd spice up his utter disdain with a bit of good old-fashioned sexism, and as he demonstrated exactly how to light the fire, he told Peta, 'You push this down like this and you twist this. Your man will know how to do it. You should ask him.'

'He already tried,' said Peta, obviously made of sterner stuff than me. 'It doesn't work. You do it. It's cold.'

Of course the old man couldn't get it working either, so instead he fished out the remote control for the ageing air-conditioning unit on the wall, and pressed a few buttons. 'This will heat the room,' he said in a tone that didn't encourage a response, and stomped back down the stairs. In a sense he was right; it did heat the

room, so long as you could levitate and sleep right in front of the air vent as it dribbled tepid air like an asthmatic smoker trying to blow out the candles on his last ever birthday cake. The rest of the room remained absolutely bloody freezing until our eventual escape from Tony's two days later; thankfully they supplied blankets.

Luckily we would warm to Nicosia in a way that Tony's place never did, and in retrospect the room's worrying smell of gas and the pathetic hot water supply helped put us in the right mood for contemplating the city's turbulent past. Nicosia may not be a war zone any more, but Tony's Bed and Breakfast sure felt like one, and as a place to sleep after a day exploring the shell-shocked metropolis outside, it was, in its own way, utterly Nicosian.

## **Nicosia**

*Written: 22 February 2003*

There are many unique aspects to Nicosia<sup>3</sup>, but to the casual visitor one of the most obvious differences between the capital of Cyprus and the settlements on the coast is just how little impact tourism has had here. Not

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<sup>3</sup> Since the introduction of the new transliteration scheme, Nicosia has been known as Lefkosia. However the internationally accepted name for the capital is still Nicosia, with Lefkosia reserved for road signs in Cyprus, so for this article I'm using the old name.

many package tourists make their way into the centre of Cyprus to explore the island's landlocked capital, and a quick glance at the history of Cyprus tells you why: Nicosia is the last remaining divided city in the world, now that the likes of Berlin and Beirut have broken down their barriers, and whatever your reason for visiting, you simply can't avoid the fact that Nicosia is a city that has been split into two completely separate halves, with the two halves barely communicating. It makes the place utterly fascinating.

The fascination of Nicosia is not only the physical division of the city into South Nicosia (in Cyprus) and North Nicosia (in the Turkey-occupied northern part of the island), but the fact that locals can't cross the borders. Most foreign tourists are allowed to go from South Nicosia to North Nicosia, as long as they make sure they're back in Cyprus by 5pm, but nobody except for a handful of officials are allowed to cross from north to south; meanwhile, locals aren't allowed to cross in either direction, and neither are tourists with Greek or Armenian surnames, even if they're not Greek, as the Turks simply won't let them in. The result is a genuinely sealed border, creating a city that is totally split into two separate halves; the fact that, at points, you feel you could push your hand through the barricades and shake the hand of the people on the other side only adds to the surreal nature of Cyprus' capital.

## **Eating Out in South Nicosia**

As our lodgings were about as comfortable as the inside of a fridge, we decided the only thing for it was to wrap up warm and start exploring the Friday night experience of downtown Nicosia; so, armed with a map and a hint in the guidebook that the best restaurants could be found in the northeastern section of South Nicosia, we struck out. We were staying right in the middle of the large pedestrianised section of the city, and heading towards the bright lights we stumbled towards the shopping street of Lidras, where we'd spotted various well-known brand names such as Marks and Spencer and the Body Shop, surely signs of some kind of activity. This was six o'clock on a Friday night, and there was the street, all lit up like it was Christmas, and from where we stood we could see... precisely nobody. It was completely deserted, and not for the first time in Nicosia, I was totally wrong-footed.

As we wandered down the road, things got weirder. Occasionally, out of the corner of my eye, I'd see what I thought was the blur of movement, but however fast I turned my head, I wouldn't actually see anyone. Streets ducked off to either side of Lidras, disappearing into darkness after a few metres, and as we headed north through the eerie silence, we approached the Green Line for the first time.

The Green Line is the barrier that divides Nicosia

into two, and despite its flimsy-sounding name it's a genuine barrier, not unlike the Berlin Wall. It's made up of the Turkish and Greek lines, with a buffer zone between that's controlled by the UN, and sometimes the buffer zone is so thin that you realise that those buildings just through there, the ones sporting a red and white Turkish flag, are actually in northern Cyprus. As we innocently ambled north, looking for signs of life, suddenly out of the dark loomed a barrier blocking off the end of Nicosia's prime shopping street, and in the murky street lights we could make out an armed soldier standing guard under the blue and white flag of Cyprus, ready to stop us trying to scale the walls into Turkey-occupied Nicosia. Coming so soon after the familiar sights of Woolworths and Toni & Guy, it felt like turning a corner in London and bumping into a tank. It was utterly bizarre.

But this was just the start of it. Map in hand and woolly hats firmly jammed on, we started weaving east through the streets of Nicosia city centre, and *still* nobody appeared. The odd car screeched through the thin streets, and every now and then we'd wander past a building with an open door and a housewife sitting inside, flicking idly through a magazine, but it felt like a ghost town. Even the sudden realisation that the housewives were sitting under red lights and had their doors open *despite the cold* didn't explain why nobody

was around; most of the red light districts I've pointed and stared at in other cities were positively bustling, but Nicosia was really quite eerie in its silence.

We wandered past buildings that looked as if they'd had bombs dropped on them – which they quite possibly had, of course – and as they gently crumbled back into the mud and bricks from which they'd been made, light flickered from welding torches in rows of workshops. At last there were signs of life, but even the sight of men crowded round lathes in their workshops didn't look terribly promising; it felt as if we'd stumbled on an industrial zone rather than the restaurant strip, even though we were near Famagusta Gate, supposedly the best place for restaurants in South Nicosia. By this stage I was seriously wondering whether Nicosia was the only place on earth where people didn't bother to eat, but then, as luck would have it, I spotted polished stainless steel shelves through a crumbling wooden door in an otherwise shabby-looking street. The style of the shelves rang bells, and those bells sounded like food.

'Do you think it's a restaurant?' I asked Peta.

'God knows,' she said. 'It doesn't look like one, but it's not like we've seen anything else. Let's have a look.'

As we walked into the empty courtyard through the door, a kindly woman waved hello, and we wandered over. 'Is this a restaurant?' asked Peta, and she beamed

back with a ‘Yes’ and explained that it didn’t open until eight o’clock. This was music to our ears, and she went on to explain that the menu was different every day and was based round what they’d bought from the market that day. I couldn’t believe it; after wandering through the most desolate city streets I’d ever seen, we’d accidentally stumbled on a mouth-watering Cypriot restaurant where they not only spoke fantastic English, but they obviously knew how to cook. It looked like Nicosia was going to be more than deserted streets and dysfunctional hotels after all.

In the end, the meal turned out to be something really special. By nine o’clock the restaurant, the Aegean on Ektoros Street, was packed to the gills with trendy locals, and the *meze* that the friendly *maitre d’* created for us was superb. It was interesting to note the Turkish influence on the food, despite the extremely pro-Greek posters adorning the walls; among the dishes in our *meze* was *iman bayaldi*, a mixture of aubergine, tomato and onion, which, it is said, was once given to a Turkish prince who swooned with delight on eating it, and bulgar wheat, a kind of cracked wheat that’s a staple in Turkey.

The Aegean was also a good place for watching the people of South Nicosia, as it quickly filled up with trendy young locals, sporting designer handbags and a talent for continuous cigarette smoking. On one table the

group of ten diners purposely rearranged themselves to have the women down one end of the table and the men on the other, something you'd rarely see in London, and adding to the strange flavour of the night, it turned out that the woman who had first explained the menu to us had lived in Kentish Town for years, one of the waiters was originally from Canterbury, and another of the restaurant's extended family used to live a stone's throw from where I used to live in West London. It was all very strange, but that, it seemed, was Nicosia all over.

### **Crossing into North Nicosia**

The strangest experience was yet to come. It's impossible to wander round Nicosia without bumping into the Green Line quite regularly, and even though crossing into northern Cyprus isn't something the Greek Cypriots really want you to do – it's not quite seen as endorsing the Turkish occupation, but they would rather you didn't cross, as that does imply a kind of acceptance of the *status quo* – it's almost impossible to resist. Tantalising glances of Turkish flags beyond the buffer zone naturally make you curious as to what it's like on the other side, and the unmissable minarets of the mosques in North Nicosia are far too tempting for the curious tourist to resist. Being weak, we just had to see if the grass was greener over the Green Line.

The Green Line has been in existence since

Christmas Day in 1963, when fighting between the Turkish and Greek communities of newly independent Cyprus resulted in the self-imposed partition of the city into two halves. The UK brokered a cease-fire between the two sides, and the Green Line, named after the green line drawn on a map by a British officer to show the division between the Greeks and Turks, came into being. Since then the barrier has grown from the odd overturned bed and oil drum into a genuine barrier, with a UN-controlled buffer zone that ensures the two sides don't meet. There's only one way to cross the Green Line, through the checkpoint at Ledra Palace, and that's where we headed on the morning of Saturday, 22 February.

Previously we'd only witnessed the Green Line as home to a collection of blue and white sentry posts, with a few flags fluttering over crumbling buildings and empty streets, but as we approached Pafos Gate and turned left to head towards Ledra Palace, the reality of the Green Line hit home. Signs banning photography were tacked to the sandbagged remains of an old building, wracked by the decay of decades and still pockmarked with bullet holes and shell blasts. In the blink of an eye we'd wandered from a relatively normal city centre, where signs enticed us to enjoy Polynesian Cuisine or the delights of yet another tacky nightclub, to something that looked exactly like a war zone. All the

colours had long since evaporated; this building, right there on the main road in from the west, had the hue of trenches and the texture of decay. The sign proclaiming ‘UN Buffer Zone, No Parking’ seemed rather redundant; you would think that nobody in their right mind would park a car in an apparent battlefield, right under the nose of a blue and white Cypriot sentry post, but I guess familiarity breeds a sense of ease that a visitor can’t have. As if to emphasise the point, right there, in the middle of all the mouldering chaos, sits the still-functioning Holy Cross Catholic Church, forcing the Green Line to take a detour round its back buttresses; it’s these constant contrasts – working church, desolate war zone – that make Nicosia so surreal.

Walking on to the checkpoint was, for me, an exercise in increasing paranoia. I found myself wishing there were at least some signs saying ‘Keep Out!’ but the road up to the Cypriot checkpoint was unnerving precisely because it was a totally normal road, just one with bales of barbed wire pulled aside to let pedestrians and cars through. Not that many vehicles were taking this route, though; the odd black and white UN Land Rover would burn through, heading for the UN headquarters in the buffer zone, but it really felt as if we were walking out of the safe haven of South Nicosia and into a dead zone where anything could happen. Nobody ran out to tell us to turn around and nobody pointed a

gun our way, but the atmosphere was suddenly thick with the weight of nearby firepower – in an area like this, the tension might be under the surface, but it's still there, and it quite clearly isn't a place for civilians. Even before you reach the Green Line, you know it's not the kind of place you take lightly.

But we soldiered on, eventually spotting a café full of dark-clothed men drinking coffee, with a large building opposite on which hung posters, slogans and graffiti protesting about what the Greek Cypriots insist is the illegal occupation of northern Cyprus by Turkey. A groups of about ten black-clad women sat in silent protest at the loss of their loved ones, not pestering us in any way but just sitting there, letting their presence make the point that, in crossing into North Nicosia, they felt we were effectively acknowledging the legitimacy of what they viewed as a military occupation of their island.

In the event, crossing the Green Line was simplicity itself. We handed over our passports to the man at the Greek-Cypriot immigration post, and he simply scribbled our names in his book, warned us to be back by 5pm, and waved us on into the no man's land of the UN buffer zone. There was no critical stare, no grilling, and not even a raised eyebrow; as border crossings go, it was a breeze.

The UN buffer zone, though, is harrowing. After

walking through a concrete wall chicane – there to stop people joy-riding through the border as well as providing a useful surface for blown-up pictures of Greek Cypriots being battered to death by Turkish police – you enter a 100m-wide zone that can only be described as utterly bizarre. Before the Greek-Cypriot border post there are plenty of buildings with the scars of war still plainly visible, but once you're in the buffer zone you can really appreciate the seriousness of the unrest that kicked off in 1964. Almost all the buildings carry some kind of battle scar, whether it's a beautiful mansion with overgrown gardens hiding a shower of bullet holes in the sandstone, or the Ledra Palace Hotel, previously Nicosia's largest hotel and now the headquarters of the UN in Cyprus, which has an amazing array of bullet holes sprinkled between its balconies, as well a graphic collection of mortar explosions, where you can clearly see the scars from flying debris etched into the side of the building, radiating from the explosions of yesteryear.

The buffer zone is unlike anything you've ever seen, but just as you start getting used to the destruction all around, the weirdest sight of all appears: there, on the right, just after the UN headquarters, is a shop selling T-shirts, and it's *still open*. T-shirts for sale hang up in its dusty but functional windows, and although nobody seemed to be around when we sauntered past, it looked

for all the world as if it was business as usual. Meanwhile, across the road, a relatively new sign announced a car hire shop, and there, in the distance, a huge sign proclaimed, ‘Welcome to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’. After the sensory overload of the lonely walk through the battlefield of 1964, the whole thing was utterly bizarre.

Getting into northern Cyprus was as easy as leaving the south; the policemen typed our details into a computer and sent us upstairs to get a visa, where a woman wrote out a visa form, smiled, and we were in. As long as we got back by 5pm, it looked like our visit to North Nicosia was going to be a breeze.

## **North Nicosia**

Exploring South Nicosia and continually bumping into the Green Line makes you appreciate the physical division of Nicosia, but only by crossing the buffer zone into North Nicosia can you appreciate the social division. Nicosia is a genuinely divided city, and while it’s easy to see that the two halves are a part of the same city, they feel remarkably different from each other. Architecturally there are obvious similarities – of the eleven Venetian bastions in the circular city walls, five are in South Nicosia, five are in North Nicosia, and one lies in the buffer zone – but culturally the differences are obvious. If you imagine taking two twins and separated

them at birth, with one growing up in Greece and the other in Turkey, then you won't be far off understanding why Nicosia is a tale of two cities.

Some differences are instantly visible. North Nicosia has absolutely no Greek lettering anywhere, instead using the Turkish alphabet, with its Roman letters littered with cedillas, circumflexes and umlauts; the currency is the Turkish lira, which, when we visited, had a rate of 2,550,000 lira per UK pound, a world apart from the C£0.85 per UK pound of South Nicosia; the people look Turkish, with darker skin and leaner features than the distinctly Greek look of the south; and instead of churches peppering the streets, mosques are everywhere, their minarets instantly making North Nicosia feel more like the Middle East than the Mediterranean.

But perhaps the most obvious difference is the attitude of the people towards tourists. Southern Cyprus has grown used to tourists, and as a result you can wander round the south without a second glance from the locals; people are lovely in the South, and are more than happy to stop for a chat or help you out with directions, but southern Cyprus is content to leave tourists to their own devices. North Nicosia is different, and it's instantly apparent in the way that kids run after you and wave 'hello', or the way that people in shops are obviously delighted that you've wandered in to their

establishment. This is no doubt a reflection on the lack of tourism in the north, as opposed to differences in hospitality, but it makes a visit to the north particularly delightful. The people really are wonderful.

As far as tourism is concerned, the sights of North Nicosia are on a par with those in South Nicosia, and both sides have put a lot of effort into building up attractions for foreign visitors. The difference, of course, is that while South Nicosia gets a small but steady trickle of tourists, North Nicosia really struggles to pull anyone in, so when you wander into an old building that's been restored as a museum, the woman at the counter will be genuinely delighted to see someone coming in. This concurrent development of amenities is one consequence of the Nicosia Master Plan, which coordinates key development work across the two halves, but you can't help feeling impressed by the efforts on the Turkish side; they've done a great job, but with practically no tourists. It means visiting the tourist spots of northern Cyprus feels less like following the tour guide's red umbrella, and more like discovering a charming little side street all on your own. If the latter is your scene, then North Nicosia is a great spot.

Each half of Nicosia is perfectly sized for easy exploration on foot, and even after one of Club Med's spinning-round-a-pole drinking games, you'd be hard pressed to lose your sense of direction. Dominating the

centre of North Nicosia, and conveniently close to the Green Line (assuming the *muezzin*'s broadcasts are designed to irritate the Orthodox Greek Cypriots to the south), is the Djami Selimiye, an old cathedral dating from the 13th century that had two gargantuan 50m-high minarets added by the Ottomans. It's now a hugely symbolic sight, with the minarets looking very much as if they've been stuck onto a Christian cathedral, and wherever you are in the city – north or south – you can see it poking above the houses.

Minarets are definitely the fashion in North Nicosia, and throughout the Turkish half of the city they point towards the sky, some ancient, some defiantly modern. Within a few minutes' walk of the Belediye Pazari – the covered market that sells meat, vegetables, Turkish sweets and some half-hearted tourist trinkets – are perhaps ten beautiful minareted mosques, a number of them clearly visible from the other side of the Green Line, which backs right onto the southern wall of the market. In comparison there's just one functioning mosque in South Nicosia, and, not surprisingly, there are far more churches in the south than the north. It's as if neither of the two halves of Nicosia are in themselves complete, but they add up to make a whole.

All this was food for thought as we asked the incredibly friendly proprietor of a randomly chosen kebab house what he would recommend for lunch.

Hugely overweight and with a larger-than-life personality to match, it was good to see someone who blatantly ate far too much of his produce, and after a delicious lunch of various types of kebab, he plied us with complimentary Turkish coffee as business boomed. The most popular order of the day was a complete roast chicken, vertically sliced open from tip to tail and stuffed with a mixture of rice and vermicelli; the number of people who turned up at the door and left with a wrapped-up rice-stuffed roast chicken was impressive, and I could only assume that this was a traditional Saturday night meal for those too busy to cook.

Just north of the kebab shop the streets snaked between buildings that looked as if they'd seen far better days. Some buildings, like the Büyük Han (a mediaeval travellers' inn), have been restored over the years as funds have allowed, and in the main square near the Djami Selimiye a bunch of smiling workmen in baggy Turkish trousers were chipping away at an old building, gradually restoring it to its former glory. If and when the tourist industry picks up in North Nicosia (which realistically will only happen if the two halves of Cyprus are united once again) then these restorations will no doubt bring in the visitors, but away from the main attractions North Nicosia is as war torn as its southern neighbour, and is arguably in an even more dilapidated state. These crumbling buildings, though, exude

character, and where South Nicosia's architecture has flirted just a little too much with modern concrete as a panacea for its war wounds, North Nicosia feels older, more run down, and therefore a bit less spoilt.

Nicosia is a city that's had a tough time, and the constant reminders of conflict have a funny effect on the mind. Despite the utterly charming people and the tangible sense of history surrounding you, you can't help feeling that the city is precariously balanced. As we wandered through the northern part of North Nicosia, ambling randomly with the mosque's minarets as our guide, three little children burst out of a side street, each of them brandishing a plastic gun, and for a moment my heart leapt into my mouth. After a whole day of seeing armed soldiers policing the buffer zone, and a noticeable amount of camouflage clothing on both sides of the border, my instant reaction was one of panic, irrational though it seemed afterwards. I wouldn't think twice about kids with toy guns at home, but Nicosia, for all its wonders, had me on edge.

That's probably why the old man who wandered up to us and tried one of the oldest cons in the book didn't get anything other than polite smiles and knowing nods from us. Starting with some flattery about how much he loved the English, he then told us he was supposed to be flying to Manchester, but that last night someone had stolen his money and his tickets from under his pillow.

Perhaps we could lend him some money, and give him our address, and when he got to England he could reimburse us? Perhaps not, we replied nicely, but with his threadbare suit and his false teeth that didn't quite fit, I admired him for trying; there can't be many tourists wandering North Nicosia who are ripe for the picking. Besides, this was the only con man we encountered on our entire visit to Cyprus, and a few minutes earlier in north Nicosia I'd seen a man run after a fellow Nicosian to hand him a wad of money he'd dropped on the pavement. Cyprus really does seem to be free of the kind of tourist hassle you encounter with irritating frequency in other parts of the world, and that's a blessing.

Perhaps it was because of this false sense of security that I decided to buy a can of Coca-Cola in North Nicosia. You are expressly forbidden to bring items bought in North Nicosia back into the southern half – the customs men at the Greek Cypriot border confiscate anything you buy from the Turkish side – but I felt the Coke situation summed up the insanity of the Cypriot split, and I wanted a souvenir to take home. The main Coke factory for southern Cyprus is in Nicosia, and Cypriot Coke cans list their ingredients, not surprisingly, in Greek. However, if you buy a can of Coke in North Nicosia, literally a stone's throw from the southern half, you find it lists its ingredients in Turkish, and has been

imported all the way from Istanbul. This, to me, sums up the division of Nicosia rather well.

Happily, the border guards on the way back didn't even look at us, and simply smiled as we handed over our passports, got ticked off the lists, and walked through the dead zone and back into South Nicosia. It was only after I unpacked my bag that I realised what I'd achieved; I'd just illegally managed to smuggle 330g of Coke from Turkey to Cyprus – not to mention the other 330g that I'd ingested at lunchtime – and I didn't even break into a sweat. *Midnight Express*, eat your heart out.

And as if to rub in the strangeness of the Nicosian divide, as we walked away from the Greek Cypriot immigration post, we spotted a group of Turkish Cypriots standing on the top of the Venetian battlements, waving down to us through a wire fence. We hadn't realised this before, but Roccas Bastion, the section of battlements just east of the main road to the Ledra Palace Hotel, is part of North Nicosia and not the buffer zone, and here the two sides can wave and talk with only about 10m of height and a wire fence separating them. We waved back cheerily, and one of the men yelled at the top of his voice, 'Peace!' to which we replied, 'Yeah, peace!' while flicking him the peace V-sign. Everyone joined in, and everyone smiled; and this, more than anything, supported the view I'd read

and heard many times, that the division of Cyprus may have started out as a self-imposed apartheid, but the split continues to exist because it suits the politicians.

Judging by the pro-unity demonstrations on both sides of the line, perhaps it's just a matter of time before the last divided city becomes one.

## **South Nicosia**

After North Nicosia, with its distinct lack of tourism, South Nicosia felt unavoidably less adventurous. The tourist quarter of Laïki Geitonia, recently rejuvenated by extensive pedestrianising and the opening of myriad tourist-friendly restaurants, lacked the soul of either North Nicosia or the Famagusta Gate area of South Nicosia, but after a long day exploring both sides of the Green Line, it was a perfect place in which to relax with a pint of Keo, Cyprus' own beer.

As far as the casual tourist is concerned, South Nicosia has one further advantage over the north. On the eleventh floor of the tower block above Woolworths is an observation deck from which you can see the whole, undivided Nicosia, and from there the Green Line is only visible if you know where to look (at which point the defiant flags of Cyprus and Turkey and the mouldering buildings trapped in the buffer zone suddenly become painfully obvious). The sights of Nicosia are labelled and an audio-visual display explains

the history of Nicosia, surprisingly refusing to dwell on the separation of the city in anything other than cursory detail. As with all observation decks, it's a fantastic way to see the city.

But unlike most other observation decks, the binoculars are attached to just one side, the north-facing side, for this is one of the few places where the citizens of Cyprus can peer into the other half of the island (Deryneia being the chief alternative). And as if to emphasise the gulf that separates these two neighbouring cities, the Turks have painted a huge Turkish flag on the mountains to the north of Nicosia that's totally unmissable from the observation deck. The people of North Nicosia might make the V-sign of peace to their southern neighbours, but their politicians evidently prefer a totally different kind of two-fingered gesture.

## **Agia Napa**

*Written: 23 February 2003*

It didn't matter to us that Agia Napa<sup>4</sup> is stuck right out on the remote southeast coast of Cyprus, a long way

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<sup>4</sup> Before the government changed the names of places in Cyprus, Agia Napa was written Aya Napa, which is the way most tour operators write it, the way most dance compilations write it, and the way you say it. Agia is pronounced 'Aye-ee-ah' and is Greek for saint, ironically enough given Agia Napa's image.

from anywhere else, and neither did it bother us that we'd chosen the coldest and wettest February on record to visit it. We didn't care because we weren't coming to Agia Napa to lie on the beach, get bombed and embarrass ourselves in a pool of vomit; instead, we were going there to see others do it. If there's one thing Agia Napa has, it's a reputation for utter hedonism, and where hedonism thrives, hilarity is sure to follow.

Unfortunately, February isn't the greatest time to be visiting Agia Napa in search of nightlife; indeed, it's a terrible time to be searching for any kind of life in Cyprus' clubbing Mecca, because out of season Agia Napa has more in common with wintry Blackpool than larging it in the Med. In fact, it's downright turgid, and is all the more fascinating for it; wandering around the ancient ruins of Pafos and Kourion, you find yourself picturing the scene with the ruins brought to life, full of Romans and Greeks worshipping their gods and gorging themselves at legendary banquets... and wandering around off-season Agia Napa, you find yourself picturing the scene overrun with thousands of pissed teenagers, worshipping at the altars of McDonald's, Stella and Pasha.

The scene I managed to imagine looked pretty good, to be honest. OK, you're not going to enjoy Agia Napa unless you're on a mission to pull, dance, drink, sunbathe and stay up all night, but assuming that's your

bag, Agia Napa looks like a pretty pleasant place to do it. The bay curves round beautifully, facing south into the sun, and if you manage to get a room at one of the monstrous hotels lining the beach, life couldn't be simpler; you can fall out of bed and practically land on the beach, and once you've got your spot for the day, it's no more than a stone's throw to the largest collection of bars, restaurants and ATMs on Cyprus. Language is no problem, either; Agia Napa doesn't bother with that irritating Greek alphabet that you see all over Cyprus, and instead sticks to plain old English, the international language of the beach resort. You may see writing that looks like Greek, but on closer inspection it's nothing other than stylised runic English, written to look like Greek, but still inviting you in English to eat in Zorba the Greek's Restaurant, where you can choose from a massive menu that contains the usual favourites of egg, chips and burgers, along with just three Greek dishes, *kleftiko*, *halloumi* and, of course, kebab.

### **Chill-out Zone**

If the summer is Agia Napa's Saturday night, then the winter is most definitely its Sunday morning. The whole place is asleep, and although there are signs of life, they're hard to spot, and they're a mile away from the foreign tourist trade. Agia Napa in the off-season is definitely a chill-out zone, sometimes literally.

When we visited, the appalling weather we'd been enjoying throughout our visit to Cyprus continued to bluster and freeze. The crescent beach, no doubt normally obscured by the bodies of thousands of lightly fried tourists, was utterly deserted, except for a forlorn cat who mewled pathetically from the shelter of a solitary plastic sun lounger; meanwhile the sea, surprisingly a pleasant light blue colour despite the grey skies, bashed into the harbour wall, lightly soaking the two huge pleasure yachts, the *Party Cruise* and the *Napa King*, that were moored up, biding their time for the coming tourist season. In the main pedestrianised street, the signs above the closed bars reflected in the rain-flecked puddles, proclaiming that not only could you enjoy the bar's happy hour, satellite sport, fast food and late night music, but that *EastEnders* would be shown on a full-screen TV. And even though the shutters were closed, the Queen Vic bar across the road looked just as enticing as Albert Square's favourite watering hole, and just as lively. The latter's reference was amazingly apt; as we wandered round the dormant streets of Agia Napa, it felt as unreal as a soap opera, and it didn't feel like a genuine clubbers' resort, it felt like a theme park, designed to give you the full clubbing holiday experience, all under one roof. Agia Napa, even in the off-season, feels like a parody of itself.

Amazingly, though, there were other human beings

stumbling through the rain, though closer inspection of them and their cars showed them not to be foreign tourists, but Cypriot ones. Latching on to the signs of life like penguins huddling together in an Antarctic storm, Peta and I splashed our way to the Markos Restaurant right on the waterfront, no doubt a heaving mass of sun-cream-sticky plastic chairs in the summer, but now a friendly, cosy-looking restaurant that sported a healthy-looking number of clients and a roaring fire in the corner. Despite the list of available beers, which betrayed an obvious swing to north European mass tourism – John Smith’s, Stella, Guinness, Heineken, Becks, Budweiser, Sol, Carlsberg and Fosters were on offer, but no Cypriot beers – the Markos was full of Cypriots, tucking into their Sunday lunches and obviously enjoying their rainy day out in Agia Napa. Unfortunately the fish we ordered was as tasteless as the modern architecture smothering the resort, and the projection TV showing *Home and Away* with Greek subtitles rather took the edge off any atmosphere the Markos might have mustered, but even though the average age of Agia Napa’s winter clientele was at least double that of the summer, the place was still raving, in its own little way.

## **Come Down**

I presume that driving north out of Agia Napa is

something that few visitors bother to do; if they do, then they probably get as hopelessly lost as we did, and although I like a nice drive along the beach, it can get a little boring if you can't actually see the coast for hotels, fast food joints, and some stunning examples of why the architects who designed Cyprus' premier resort should be forced to explain themselves. Luckily we did end up eventually reaching the little town of Deryneia, some 10km north of Agia Napa, and I'm very glad we did.

It's interesting that Deryneia should be so close to Agia Napa, the chosen destination for holidaymakers who are only interested in the local culture if it wears a miniskirt and can down five double vodkas without chucking a whitey. 10km is not far, but Deryneia is right on the border with Turkey-occupied Northern Cyprus, and as with Nicosia, it's an amazing place to contemplate the fundamental divisions that split Cyprus in two.

As we drove into Deryneia, the weather seemed to get even bleaker, and by the time we pulled into the car park at the Cultural Centre for Occupied Ammochostos, the wind chill was utterly harrowing. Climbing the stairs onto the roof of the Cultural Centre was challenging, but it was worth it, for in the distance, blurred by the rain, was the abandoned suburb of Varosha, a symbol of how utterly devastating the partition of Cyprus has been.

By the mid-1960s, the town of Famagusta (now

known to Greek Cypriots as Ammochostos) was one of Cyprus' most popular tourist destinations; Agia Napa was still just a little fishing village with a cute monastery, but Famagusta was a boom town, with hotels popping up all along the beautiful east coast of Cyprus, catering for the slowly increasing number of package tourists visiting the island. However Famagusta had traditionally been a stronghold for Turkish Cypriots, and throughout the turbulent late 1960s and early 1970s, the town suffered from a smorgasbord of Greek-Turkish tension. Finally, during the Greek coup and consequent Turkish invasion of 1974, Famagusta was the scene of serious fighting between Turkey and the Greek Cypriots, and although Famagusta is now in the Turkey-occupied north of Cyprus, the southern suburb of Varosha falls inside the UN-controlled buffer zone. The result is a whole section of the city that is uninhabited, and which looks exactly as it did when the ceasefire came into effect on 16 August 1974.

From the roof of the Cultural Centre in Deryneia, you can see Varosha, just beyond a few green fields that mark the border between Cyprus and the occupied north. It's utterly eerie; Varosha is a ghost town, and with binoculars you can look at the remains of the 33 abandoned hotels lining the coast, crumbling slowly while rusting cranes still stand alongside buildings that were half built when everything kicked off back in

1974, and which remain in the same state today. Battered windmills gently turn in the dead zone, almost all of their sails missing, and it's easy to kid yourself that you're witnessing the aftermath of some horrible industrial disaster, or the effects of a nuclear winter. Varosha looks like something out of a particularly bleak episode of *Doctor Who*, especially on a windy day with the rain lashing down on this forgotten corner of Cyprus.

It's no wonder mass tourism doesn't venture this far north, really. Deryneia represents a hard dose of reality while Agia Napa represents utter escapism, and it's no coincidence that the latter is by far the biggest draw-card in Cyprus, while most visitors blissfully ignore the Green Line. The politics of Cyprus is hardly the stuff of which happy holidays are made, though for those with an eye on history rather than hedonism, its effects are more profound than any number of peach schnapps chasers.

## Larnaka

*Written: 24 February 2003*

I really wanted to like Larnaka<sup>5</sup>, mainly because we were stuck there for two days praying for the weather to improve, but despite my good intentions, I really

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<sup>5</sup> Known as Larnaca before the name change.

couldn't get into it. Larnaka, for me, represented everything bad about the tourist bulldozer that seems to be steaming through Cyprus, obliterating everything Cypriot in its path and replacing it with the some of the worst aspects of Britain's seaside towns. For one awful moment, I thought I'd washed up on the south coast of Spain, despite the continuing drizzle.

No doubt the weather didn't help, and I'm sure that a beautiful sunny day would light up the pleasant seaside promenade and make it a pretty little place. Larnaka isn't ugly, even in the rain; the beach is a pretty little spot, although the sand is a rather putrid green at this time of year, and the marina is nice enough. But the thing that really gets me down isn't what Larnaka looks like, it's just how utterly un-Cypriot the town has become, and how it's managed to turn itself into a plastic, soulless place that could be absolutely anywhere. You really don't feel you're in Cyprus, and it's a real shame.

The problem is the proliferation of shops and restaurants that redefine the term 'bland'. Setting off to find a nice Greek restaurant in which to while away the evening, we wandered through town, past rows and rows of north European clothes shops, all completely generic and selling exactly the same goods that you find at home. This, of course, is absolutely great if you want to go shopping, and the fact that Larnaka has graduated

into a seriously impressive commercial centre is no doubt good for the local economy, and is in certainly not a bad thing in itself. However, tucked among these shops we could find precisely no hint of anything local; Larnaka has been utterly overrun by bland brand names, and while it seems right and proper for this to happen to somewhere like Agia Napa, where everything is sacrificed on the altar of the package tourist and nobody pretends that they're looking for a cultural experience, it seems a real shame to have it happen to a historical port like Larnaka.

While Larnaka has a history going back thousands of years, stretching from ancient times through to its importance as a major Ottoman city, the modern seafront only continues the depressing theme of blandification. The restaurants that line the promenade are uniformly based round junk food, with only the occasional expensive and unwelcoming foray into more sophisticated cuisine punctuating the neon lights. In one 50m stretch lurk the attractions of McDonald's, KFC and Pizza Hut, while this wall of cholesterol is glued together by less well-known restaurants sporting helpful clapper boards containing photographs of the food on offer that even manage to make bottles of beer look cheap and unappetising. If you don't fancy pizza, burgers, all-day breakfasts or kebabs, then you're seriously stuffed in Larnaka. As the leaflet outside the

seafront's Alexander Pizzeria proudly boasts, it's the 'right place for coffee time, cocktail time, beer time, sweet and dessert time, breakfast time, lunch time and dinner time.' And that's precisely the problem; I love burgers like the next man<sup>6</sup>, but not for *every* meal, and despite exploring the town for a good hour, we couldn't find anything except junk food, junk food and more junk food.

Not surprisingly, we didn't dilly-dally more than one night in Larnaka; it really wasn't my cup of full-cream, three-heaped-teaspoon tea.

## Pissouri

*Written: 26 February 2003*

From Larnaka, the drive east towards Lemesos was quick and featureless in the way that motorway drives often are, but it perked up our spirits immeasurably, because for the first time since the start of our holiday, the sun came out and *stayed* out. Even in February a week without seeing the sun is unusual in Cyprus, but as people never tired of telling us, we'd managed to pick the wettest and coldest February on record to explore the

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<sup>6</sup> OK, possibly not like the next man in Larnaka, who is probably an overweight, pasty-skinned bloater who hobbles around with the aid of a walking stick and who jokes about his beer belly being 'an investment'. I'm serious; the number of fat tourists with consequent mobility problems in off-season Cyprus is staggering, not unlike them.

island, a fact that had wormed its way into my subconscious like a precocious child screaming, 'I told you so!' On the way I idly wondered if Pissouri would live up to its name; I didn't realise it would excel.

However, just past Lemesos the clouds started piling up in the west, and we decided to shelve our plans to visit the archaeological site of Kourion for the next day, just in case the clouds turned into rain. We needn't have worried, because these clouds weren't rain clouds. They were snow clouds.

Snow at 1700m in the Troodos Mountains is one thing, but snow in a village that looks out over the coastal plains of southern Cyprus is another thing altogether. As we drove up the hill to the little town of Pissouri, the heavens opened and Christmas descended, the thick flakes landing on the car and having the cheek to *settle* there. To add insult to injury, everything in the small village of Pissouri seemed to be shut; we tracked down one hotel, but it was completely dead, and even though there were people in the second one, that too was shut for the winter. Meanwhile the snow leaked through the hole in my walking boots, the wind blew flakes up my nose, and the one-way system made it a considerable challenge to follow the directions we'd been given to a hotel that *might* be brave enough to be open at this time of year.

Luckily the Pissouriana Hotel was not only open, it

was centrally heated, warmly lit, and apparently had a fantastic view over its swimming pool to the plains below, though we could see nothing except grey mist. Snow lay on the sun loungers out by the pool, and the lady behind the bar said she'd been living here for nine years, and she'd never seen it snow in Pissouri before. 'We've been out taking pictures,' she said as she handed us the keys.

'Well, it is the coldest and wettest February on record,' I pointed out before she managed to get in there.

'And it was so *lovely* last year,' she sighed after us, as we shuffled up to our room to thaw out.

## **Put Another Vine on the Fire**

By evening the snow was still pounding down, smothering the cars and trees in a fine layer of powder that had absolutely no right to be there, so Peta decided we should pick a restaurant not by whether it had good food, but by whether it had smoke coming out of its chimney. As luck would have it this strategy bagged us an evening in a restaurant that had both.

Perry's Restaurant, owned and run by the friendly local chap in the restaurant's name, was as cosy as it's possible to be in a country that builds its buildings for hot weather. Despite the thin windows and cold tiled floor, Perry had built a massive fireplace into the wall of

his restaurant, and throughout the evening he piled on twisted bits of vine that crackled and spat, and gently roared into the kind of embers that keep the chilliest nights at bay. Apparently there is a surfeit of wine in Cyprus and it's forcing the price down too low, so the government is currently subsidising farmers to pull up their vines and keep goats instead; therefore we decided to send a small but heartfelt thank you to the government for the resulting surfeit of fire fodder, by ploughing through a couple of bottles of local plonk to keep the night at bay.

Meanwhile, locals drifted in and out of Perry's, no doubt attracted by the smoke piling out of the chimney and the increasingly boisterous conversation bubbling away behind the steamed windows. One particularly charismatic chap called Stavros said he'd lived in this area for nigh on 46 years, and he'd never seen it snow here before, which probably explained why the rest of the locals kept leaping out of the restaurant and jumping around in the snow as if they'd never seen the stuff before. I think at this point someone else chipped in that it was the coldest and wettest February on record, but by this time Perry had plied us with so much complimentary brandy that I was way past caring. Besides, there's nothing quite like good food, good wine, good brandy and a good vine fire to blow the weather blues away.

# Kourion

*Written: 25 February 2003*

Tuesday 25th awoke to weather that mirrored the inside of my head after the evening's drinking at Perry's; one minute it was dark and blustery, and the next minute the clouds had lifted and the sun was peeking through, but it couldn't make up its mind what to do. Nor could we, but we figured we might as well drive over to the ruins of Kourion, even if we risked getting caught in another snow storm.

The reason for our caution was that the ancient city of Kourion was built on a massively exposed headland overlooking the southern coast of Cyprus, and it's not the kind of place you want to be stuck if the weather turns; but fortune favours the brave, so we set out along then winding coast road, ready for an archaeological experience that the guidebooks uniformly raved about.

To get us in the mood, we tuned the radio in to BFBS Radio One, the premier channel of the British Forces Broadcasting Service. Kourion is inside the perimeter of the Akrotiri Sovereign Base, one of the three parts of Cyprus that the British kept as part of the independence deal in 1960, and although these areas are technically British soil, and military soil at that, you can merrily drive across the bases without fear of having a gun poked into your stomach. Not only that, but the British broadcast radio programmes to keep their armed

employees happy during their leisure time, and BFBS Radio churns out the usual happy-clappy entertainment that you get on most pop music channels back home, but with dedications going out to soldiers and their families, and announcements about fun social activities happening in the various bases.

It's like normal radio, but then again it's not; I got the feeling that ringing in to request a medley of *Give Peace a Chance*, *War (What is it Good For?)*, *Billy Don't Be a Hero* and *Seasons in the Sun* would be met by the same stony lack of humour that you get from airport security staff when cracking a wise one about the bomb in your bag.

Despite having my spirits lifted by the BFBS, Kourion unfortunately turned out to be less fascinating than I'd hoped, though not because of inclement weather; luckily the sun actually came out as we explored the ruins, but even this couldn't shake the feeling that whereas Pafos is home to some stunningly preserved works of true genius, Kourion suffered so much destruction in the earthquake of 365 AD that it's only of interest to the experts. What's left is genuinely ruined, and it's made worse where the archaeologists have tried to reconstruct what they thought was there; columns that clearly don't match each other have been placed in rows that don't work, some small sections have been stuck together so they look practically brand

new, and what is left sometimes feels more like the aftermath of a modern developmental disaster than an ancient city (though, given the history of rebuilding in Kourion, it's a little unfair to expect anything else). Here, more than anywhere, I would say that visiting with either a human guide or a dedicated guidebook is better than aimlessly wandering through the wind armed with only a few pages from a guidebook to Cyprus, but even without an expert in tow it's worth the detour... it's just not as impressive as Pafos.

Kolossi Castle, just down the road, is a much more intact piece of architecture, but it's a lot more modern too, having been initially built by the knights of the Crusades back in 1210, with various collapses and restorations ever since. It's basically a three-storey castle keep, bleakly empty inside but atmospheric nonetheless, and you can climb to the top for a nice little view over the surrounding land. It's nothing mind-blowing, but it's strangely appropriate given the proximity of the heart of the Akrotiri base, a set of giant-sized antennae that are all pointed at the Middle East, and under which you can drive but not stop. Photographs in this area are also a no-no, as is any kind of exploration on foot, which is a shame because the salt lake to the north of the military town is apparently a haven for migratory birds, and at this time of year is home to flocks of flamingos, a bird I've long wanted to

see. Unfortunately I thought it a little risky to be flipping out the binoculars right under the British listening post for the Gulf, so I couldn't confirm whether those white dots on the lake actually were flamingo.

I like to think they were, though.

## **Polis**

*Written: 28 February 2003*

Driving north along the coast from Pafos to Polis was delightful, and for the first time in our trip we witnessed people sunbathing, in a pretty little spot called Coral Bay. If the weather was going to be pleasant, then I had high hopes for our planned hike round the Akamas Peninsula, just west of the town of Polis. I was getting a little tired of only being able to explore Cyprus with the bent back of the man who can't use his umbrella because it's too windy; some sunshine-soaked wandering was long overdue.

Polis is a pretty little place, even if its picturesque square is surrounded by buildings whose concrete lines defy even the most optimistic architectural fan. It's obviously somewhere that closes down in the off-season, as only the fourth hotel we tried was open, and when we wandered around town to find somewhere to eat the desperate tone of the lady who tried to persuade us to eat at her Chinese restaurant was enough to scare

us off. But we weren't here for sweet and sour pork; we were here to explore one of the last remaining wildernesses on Cyprus.

## **The Akamas Peninsula**

Of course, we woke up the next morning to rain, and as we drove west towards the peninsula, the frustrating prospect of yet another day in the driving rain irritated me almost as much as the dangerously idiotic bravado of the boy racers who make up a noticeable proportion of Cyprus' drivers. While four-wheel-drive after four-wheel-drive overtook me on blind corners, we headed west for the Baths of Aphrodite, a tourist attraction on the coach-tour circuit that nonetheless signals the start of a number of walking tracks through the unspoilt Akamas Peninsula.

Miraculously the weather cleared up as we arrived at the baths, themselves nothing more than a small pool and dripping waterfall, even if swimming there is supposed to bring you eternal life (which, I guess, is why it's forbidden, as that would only provide another excuse for the locals to drive like maniacs). From the baths two nature trails lead along well-marked routes into the heart of the peninsula, and if you're lucky enough to catch them on a clear day, they're beautiful.

We decided to spend the day walking the Aphrodite Trail, as it climbs to the top of the highest point of the

peninsula, the 370m-high Moutti tis Sotiras; the other route, the Adonis Trail, heads into the south of the peninsula and is apparently also beautiful, but for me the views from the peak were hard to top. The walking is easy enough, and after spending the first half of the walk admiring the views east over Polis and Chrysochou Bay, you suddenly come to the top of the mountain, and there, laid out before you, is the view west, its relatively unscarred bays and forest providing a stunning highlight before the descent back to the baths.

I say ‘relatively’ unscarred, because the Akamas Peninsula isn’t totally devoid of human influence, and if things take the course they appear to be taking, it might not be a wilderness for long. Currently most of the peninsula is a British Army firing range, which might sound like a disaster for such a beautiful stretch of land, but in this case it’s the lesser of two evils; having destroyed Agia Napa, Lemesos and Larnaka, and with Pafos treading the thin line between tourism and taste, Cyprus’ hotel developers are rubbing their hands at the thought of developing Akamas into their latest concrete disaster area. However they can’t so that while there’s a chance of ordnance hitting their customers, and there’s also pressure on the government to declare Akamas a National Park, but it looks like the influence of fat politicians may well spoil the party, especially now that the first hotels have actually started appearing. The five-

star Anassa Hotel, part-owned by an ex-Foreign Minister who was forced to resign under a cloud of scandal, managed to secure planning permission despite the government's apparent plan to keep the peninsula free of development, and it looks like this might be just the start. Yet again, it looks like the Cypriot tourist community is happy to cut off its nose despite its face; let's just hope that if they decide to go for the tourist dollar rather than the National Park route, they don't fill it with the kind of pap that litters the rest of the island.

## Cypriot Architecture

*Written: 1 March 2003*

In his book *Journey into Cyprus*, which follows the author on a three-month journey through the pre-invasion Cyprus of 1972, Colin Thubron wrote the following:

*[The Cypriot] is entering in thousands that trough – of how many generations? – between peasant honesty and urban refinement. ‘To be civilised,’ a Nicosia friend told me, ‘our people must first be vulgar. It is the bridge between simplicity and culture.’*

If this was the case back in 1972, then judging by the

healthy prosperity of southern Cyprus today, it's probably fair to say that a fair chunk of those thousands of Cypriots who started their journey to urban refinement have reached it. The thing that depresses me, as Cyprus gears up for potential inclusion in the European Union, is that the scars of that period of vulgarity are still there for all to see. I'm talking about the appalling state of Cypriot architecture from the 1960s onwards.

Concrete is a modern cancer that seems to have developed a taste for previously beautiful sun-drenched islands, and Cyprus suffers from the blight of grey box-like buildings in the same way that the Greek islands do. Even the most picturesque villages in the Troodos mountains are spoiled by a suburban sprawl of utterly unimaginative concrete bunkers, and although new, richer developments may well be moving away from the ghetto-esque mistakes of the 1960s and 1970s, it's a shame that Cyprus couldn't have sold its soul to tourism without bearing the scars pretty much everywhere. Even Nicosia, which hasn't been able to call itself a tourist destination since 1964, suffers from insensitive concrete development, though perhaps it's churlish to complain about the quality of redevelopment in a war zone; however it is, I think, fair game to lament the loss of traditional Cypriot stone architecture in the face of yet more concrete.

Another apparently negative aspect of Cypriot architecture, though, is more commendable on closer inspection. Even those developments that manage to capture a pleasant white-and-red villa style tend to come attached to rows of ugly water tanks, sitting on their roofs like industrial experiments gone wrong.

It would be easy to criticise this unpleasant trait as unfortunate, except each of these tanks is attached to a solar panel that heats the water in the Cypriot sun, thus saving a small fortune in electricity. It still looks awful, especially on rows and rows of apartments, but it's a trade-off that is worth the sacrifice.

### **Simply Irresistible**

There is a positive side to all this mindless development, though, and that's its comedy value. If for a moment you can forget just how sad it is to see such a pretty island being dumped on by the tackiest designers on the planet, there's a lot of hilarity to be found while wandering round the tourist areas of Cyprus.

The two best spots I found for tacky architecture were Agia Napa and Pafos, though the former does it on a far larger scale than the latter. Agia Napa's tacky buildings are too numerous to list, but special mention must go to the Acropolis Restaurant, a few kilometres west on the main coast road out of town. This restaurant has a bar area outside that's modelled on – you guessed

it – the Acropolis, and for your delectation you can sit on authentically fake lumps of ancient civilisations, assuming such woeful treatment of Greece’s past doesn’t give you indigestion.

Top of the pile, though, has to be the Roman Hotel in Pafos, and its sister hotel, the imaginatively named Roman II Hotel. These two behemoths, situated delightfully close to the ruins of Nea Pafos, are truly amazing, decked out as they are with Greco-Roman frescos on every wall (including those in the gym!), fake statues and bits of authentic ruin kicking about everywhere, and a collection of vases and pots that makes the British Museum look positively bare. Indeed, the hotel’s leaflets (which you can and should pick up from reception as a memento of your visit) have this to say, in English, German and, strangely, Russian:

*Once inside the Roman Hotel, you will be stunned, as you are immersed in centuries of Greek history and mythology. Resembling a Greek palace, the museum-like interior has to be seen to be believed.*

A Roman Hotel that’s designed to look like a Greek palace? That’s just the start. I genuinely recommend a visit if you’re in town, as it’s the funniest thing you’ll see all week (until then, feast your eyes on their

website). Only after seeing it in the flesh will you appreciate that the guy who wrote the leaflet had a masterful way with sarcasm. At least, I hope he did; I really was stunned, and it really did have to be seen to be believed. Hell, my eyes are *still* hurting...

## Thoughts on Leaving

*Written: 3 March 2003*

I liked Cyprus, though for different reasons than I was expecting to. I'm not a great beach worshipper, so visiting in late February sounded perfect, but as luck would have it (and as everyone kept reminding us) we picked the coldest and wettest February on record to explore the island. It's worth bearing this in mind when reading my travelogue; Kourion in the summer would be a totally different experience to Kourion in the winter, I'm sure.

Luckily my personal highlights didn't depend on the weather too much, and the most interesting ones – Nicosia and skiing on Mt Olympos – were positively enhanced by the bad weather, the first by increased atmospherics, and the latter by increased amounts of powdery snow. Nicosia really has to be seen to be believed, and while crossing into North Nicosia might not be approved by the Greek Cypriots of the south, it's highly recommended, if only because the North

Nicosians are so amazingly friendly.

Indeed, it's the people who really make Cyprus a great place, along with the mountains, the beaches, the World Heritage ruins, the few remaining wilderness areas and the politics. The mosaics in Pafos shouldn't be missed, and nor should the view into northern Cyprus from Deryneia, and if you're not around in the ski season, walking the trails around Mt Olympos would be a great way to spend the day (as is exploring the Akamas Peninsula). The food's not bad, either, even if there's a bit too much of a tendency towards chips, though be warned that you'll be hard pressed to find anything edible in off-season spots like Larnaka.

Would I go back, though? Possibly, but after two weeks driving round the southern half of the island, I feel that I've pretty much covered it. Of course, there's always more to see – for some reason I couldn't get excited about the World Heritage churches of the Troodos Mountains, possibly because the thought of tracking down the key-holder in the driving rain was more than I could bear – but Cyprus isn't that big, and it's easy to cover it all in a rushed week or a leisurely fortnight. This is part of its charm, of course; with a hire car, it's perfect for exploring, especially if you're from a country that drives on the left, like the UK. It's also worth pointing out that Cyprus is not a cheap place to visit; in the winter the prices do take a dive, but places

also close, and by all accounts Cyprus in the summer is just a bit too crowded and a bit too hot. Still, it depends what you're going there for, I guess; if you're off to Agia Napa to pull, it's not much use if there's nobody there.

In other words, Cyprus is a great place for a holiday. It's not necessarily a great place for mind-blowing travelling, but then again it doesn't pretend to be. If you've got the money, give it a try.

**THE END**

## Further Reading

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Happy travels!

Mark Moxon, September 2004

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