

A new place in the sun

Samantha Patrickson - The Sunday Times

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Make a dash for Northern Cyprus before everyone else does, says

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A big part of me doesn't want to tell you about Northern Cyprus. Described as paradise lost by the few guides you will find on the region, it has entirely escaped the march of mass tourism.

Three decades ago, when the Greeks attempted to annex the island, Turkish troops landed in response and Cyprus was partitioned. That marked the end of the north's prospects of a thriving tourist industry. Now, that's all set to change. Last week, a deal to unite the island was rejected by Greek Cypriots in the south. But following the overwhelming support of Turkish Cypriots for the peace plan, the EU is set to reward them with financial aid and possibly direct flights. All of which means you should go now — because as soon as everyone else finds out how beautiful it is, it will be too late.

Why go? Well, first of all, there are the beaches. Northern Cyprus has more than 150 miles of gorgeous sandy coastline in the shape of the Karpas Peninsula. The sea is crystal clear, the sunshine is uninterrupted and you're almost guaranteed to have the whole place to yourself.

Then, there's the culture: the enchanting 13th-century abbey that dominates Bellapais; the imposing castle and perfect horseshoe harbour in Kyrenia; the ruins of Salamis and the fortified city of Famagusta to the east. Nicosia, Europe's only divided capital, reflects Cyprus's history of invasions by the Venetians and Ottomans.

And, of course, there's the food: you can find good French and Italian restaurants, but traditional Turkish cuisine, including meze, still reigns supreme. At Niazi's in Kyrenia, you can gorge yourself on an overwhelming selection of kebabs and meze, cooked on an open fire in the middle of the restaurant, for less than a tenner a head.

Beyond that, a serendipitous approach to cuisine is a good idea. Restaurants will crop up on quiet hillsides or little-travelled back roads. You'll be the only customer. You might even sit at a table for an age, debating whether the place is open at all. Don't worry — you're on Cyprus time, and as long as there are guests, the kitchen will be open.

There is no Ayia Napa in Northern Cyprus, no clubbers' paradise or neon bar-crawling. But what it lacks in drunken Brits, it makes up for in thriving tavernas, particularly in Kyrenia and Famagusta. Not a bad swap, really.

Here's a complete guide to the hows and wheres of a trip to Northern Cyprus.

KYRENIA

On the north coast, Kyrenia is framed by the Five Finger mountain range and the crusader castle. Its fishing harbour is charming; you'll have to battle the urge to surrender each day to brandy sours in one of the harbourside bistros.

For the ultimate view of Kyrenia (and arguably its best cocktails), try the rooftop pool and garden of the recently opened Colony hotel (815 1518, <http://www.parkheritage.com/>) in the centre of town.

In the late afternoon — only mad dogs venture out at midday — wander around the narrow, cobbled alleys behind the harbour for shops selling wooden crafts and art at good prices.

Lawrence Durrell fans should take a 10-minute drive to the sleepy village of Bellapais, star of Bitter Lemons of Cyprus. If you can draw yourself away from the Tree of Idleness, it is worth exploring the remains of the gothic abbey, which hosts regular classical concerts in its illuminated ruins (see www.cyprustoday.net for listings).

Further out into the mountains west of Kyrenia lies Lapta, where waterfalls shoot down to irrigate the olive groves.

Where to stay: the best beaches in the Kyrenia region are the Escape and the Denizkizi, which both offer scuba-diving. Stay at the stylish Denizkizi Hotel (821 8710, www.denizkizi.com doubles from £30), and enjoy the Sunday tradition of lamb cooked in a well.

Or, to get away from it all, book into the Bellapais Monastery Village (815 9171, www.bellapaismonasteryvillage.com doubles from £24), four miles from the nearest beach. This peaceful hideaway has 16 rooms and some small villas, set around lush gardens and a pool.

Further up the mountain is the Hilarion Village (822 2772, www.hilarion-cyprus.com), which has eight simply furnished villas (from £25 a night) and a pool.

Where to eat: the Brasserie (815 9481) is set in the former summer residence of Archbishop Makarios, above Kyrenia's castle. Outside, its biscuit-coloured stone walls are weathered, but inside, the wood-panelled bar and dining rooms are elegant — it's a place to dress up for. Cyprus is all about views, and you'll get a great one here if you bag a table on the stone-arched terrace. Great steaks cost about £9.

On Thursdays, the Jasmine Court Hotel (815 1450, www.jasminecourthotel.com) serves up an extravaganza of 300 Turkish dishes to the sound of folk singers in its courtyard above the sea. And the Ani Fish Kebab Restaurant (824 4355), in Catalkoy, is fantastic and ridiculously cheap.

For breakfast, pop into the Courtyard (815 3343), where the owner, Mo, serves delicious scrambled eggs and home-made lemon curd.

THE KARPAS PENINSULA

MODERN LIFE has passed the Karpas by. The region, also known as the panhandle, is at the eastern end of Cyprus, where the land stretches out towards Turkey. It is almost unpopulated, save for the tiny fishing villages of Bogaz and Kumyali. Birds aren't quite so scarce — the area is home to more than 300 species, as well as a sanctuary for sea turtles.

The wild beaches here — some sand, some rock — are great for walking, although there's little shade in the height of summer. In fact, the best time to visit the Karpas is in spring, when the temperatures are lower and the surrounding hills are carpeted in wild flowers. Ancient tombs, ruins and Byzantine churches, such as the Monastery of Apostolos Andreas, are scattered across the region.

Stop off in Bogaz for lunch at Kemalin Yeri (371 2515) and explore the harbour, which was paid for by local fishermen who sell their catches from the boats there.

Where to stay: the small and charming Theresa Hotel (374 4266, www.theresahotel.com doubles from £15) offers up the catch of the day at the restaurant above its private beach in Yeni Erenkoy. It's a good base for travelling around the peninsula.

FAMAGUSTA

THE MEDIEVAL town of Famagusta is rich in cultural sites — explore it on foot and make sure you tick off the Lala Mustafa Pasa Mosque, which dates from the early 1300s and is considered to be one of the most beautiful gothic structures in the Mediterranean.

Take a day to see the nearby ruins at Salamis. They include a Roman villa, several basi-licas, a theatre and a stone forum for 15,000 spectators.

The ghost town of Varosha, a few minutes' walk from the Palm Beach Hotel, is worth a visit, too. The town's four miles of beaches and once-modern hotels have stood suspended in time since the Greeks fled amid fighting in 1974. It now forms part of the Green Line, the border that bisects the island.

Where to stay: for something that mirrors the larger resorts in the south, stay on the beach at the five-star Salamis Bay Conti Resort Hotel (378 8201, www.salamisbayconti.com doubles from £68). The 404-room hotel has a sauna and massage room, tennis courts and a casino.

Where to eat: opposite the hotel, the Akdeniz Tavern (378 8227) serves delicious, inexpensive seafood. Or there's Eyva (378 8235), at Salamis Junction, considered one of the most traditional restaurants in Famagusta. Try the famous Hirsiz ("Thief's") kebab.

Travel brief

Getting there: all flights to Northern Cyprus currently touch down in Turkey en route, though in light of the recent "Yes" vote, nonstop flights may well be established in the near future. Until then, Cyprus Turkish Airlines (020 7930 4851,

<http://www.kthy.net/>) is the main carrier, offering flights from Heathrow, Stansted, Gatwick, Manchester, Glasgow and Belfast. Return fares start at £219.

Getting around: a car is by far the best way to explore; expect to pay about £25 a day. Taxis are widely available in towns. Public transport consists of minibuses that can be very hot. Most of the larger hotels have their own rental facilities, or you can book in advance through a tour operator.

Further information: call the North Cyprus Tourism Centre on 020 7631 1930 or visit www.go-northcyprus.com