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## CYPRUS - LAND OF LOVE AND WINE

TO BE honest, Cyprus had never been high on my travel wish list. Too many British package tourists (1.5 million a year) looking for a cheap lifestyle in the sun and too much historical baggage over the partition of the island always put me off. But these prejudices faded fast as I took a dip near Petra tou Romiu, a craggy rock off the southern coast of the island, where legend has it that Aphrodite first emerged from the sea.

If the Greek goddess of love reprised the same foam-flecked event today, she would make straight for the nearby Columbia Beach Resort overlooking Pissouri Bay, one of the most lush five-star hotels in the Med, where the clientele is much more cosmopolitan than it used to be. After a grim couple of years when tourism dipped because of the island's dependence on tourists from

I stayed in the Greek part of the island, officially called the Republic of Cyprus. The most intriguing place to explore its tangled history is Nicosia, which enjoys the dubious claim of being the only divided capital city in the world. There have been several outbreaks of harmony, as the locals put it, since 2003 and there's now six crossings which allow tourists to explore the Greek and Turkish sections.

The Greek part of the city, with Venetian ramparts and designer shops where you can buy up big in euros, is far ritzier than the "other side". It's also home to the Cyprus Archaeological Museum, the richest treasure house of Cypriot antiquities. Coffee and other necessities are much cheaper when you're paying in Turkish lira, though, and there's plenty to discover when you cross the notorious

sea views truly deserve that over-used adjective - stunning.

Limassol, like Paphos, is a major resort town and the biggest port on the island where history lurks amid the modern malls, plazas, hotels and office blocks. The oldest part of town dates back to the 13th century and there's always a crowd massed at the Byzantine castle. There's a lot more people congregating in the bars and clubs, however, where the real action starts after 2am.

Spring and autumn are the optimum times to visit Cyprus unless you prefer the 40C days of August. I planned my visit in September to coincide with the Wine Festival of Cyprus, one of Limassol's star events of the year. More than 100,000 people turned up and the Cyprus Tourism Organisation (CTO) organised bus services from all the major

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the UK, Cyprus is casting a wider net to attract visitors. Every coastal town is full of Russians, now the second largest tourism market, and the island expects to welcome 400,000 of them by the end of the year.

The main lure of Cyprus for northern Europeans is an estimated 326 days of sunshine a year, hotels that cater for all budgets and crowded beaches. But away from the bar-infested waterfronts, karaoke bars and English-style pubs of the major coastal towns, the achingly beautiful scenery of the Troodos mountains, snow-capped in winter, and the flocks of flamingos strutting across Larnaca Salt Lake in winter are major attractions for anyone keen to tour Cyprus by car.

Green Line from the restored Buyuk Han, a 16th century Ottoman inn, to equally historic hamams and street markets.

The third largest island in the Mediterranean also has three World Heritage sites - the Byzantine churches in the Troodos Mountains, the Neolithic settlement of Choirokoitia and the old town of Paphos, where ancient villas, mediaeval fortresses, tombs and Roman mosaics jostle for your attention. Cypriot food can be very good but there's a lot of dodgy moussakas and meze plates to be found in the popular tourist restaurants. Avoid taking a risk in Paphos by dining at the five-star Almyra Hotel ([almyra.com](http://almyra.com)), where the outdoor restaurant terrace serves top-notch Cypriot dishes and the

towns along the coast to swell the throng of locals and tourists.

Far from being a one-off, tasting Cypriot wine is a year-round attraction in Limassol from the four major wineries in the port area to the vine-covered hills of the surrounding region peppered with picturesque krassohoria (wine villages) where you can chat with the owners of the micro-wineries. Wine lovers can also follow the wine trails of the striking Akamas peninsula and the Troodos mountains, guided by the popular brochure from the CTO.

Call it serendipity or what you will. But a year after musician and composer, Anastasia Guy, founded the Cyprus Wine Museum in the village of Erimi on the old Limassol road in 2004, archaeologists

discovered a history of wine-making in the area dating back to 3500BC - the oldest evidence of wine production in Europe. Located in a former inn where wine merchants stayed before heading for the major markets in Limassol, the museum traces the island's 5500 year wine heritage from ancient amphorae to the wine revolution of the 1990s.

For much of the 20th century two indigenous grapes - Mavro and Xinisteri - dominated Cypriot vineyards. They still do, accounting for 63 per cent of plantings. But, like many other traditional wine-growing regions in Europe, the time came for an upgrade and many vineyards were re-planted with grapes more appealing to international wine drinkers - cabernet, carignan noir and shiraz. Up until a decade ago 95 per cent of Cypriot wine production was in the hands of the Big Four companies - Keo, Etko, SODAP and Loel. Today, around 50 boutique wineries, many the pet projects of local bankers, scientists and business people, produce chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and semillon, and have done much to lift the "Cyprus sherry" image of the island's wines.

As with most things in Cyprus, the past is very much alive in local winemaking. The island's greatest claim to oenological fame is Commanderia, the sweet dessert wine first made by the Templars and the Knights of St John in the 12th century. Richard the Lionheart drank it at his wedding and English poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, wrote: "The Cyprus wine is as sweet as the lyre of the Muses". When you visit Cyprus you can drink it made in the traditional way or sip it in strikingly modern stone and timber wineries such as the Constantinou Winery near the picture postcard village of Pera Pedi, where locals claim that Marsala is just a poor imitation of the real thing. 



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