

Crossing the line into North Cyprus

There's plenty to discover in the cheaper, lesser-known Turkish part of the island, from turtles to ancient towns



A few of my friends looked at me a little bit blankly when I told them I was going to North Cyprus. Cyprus was for them automatically the area in the south of the Island - the Greek part; the Turkish territory was not as familiar.

Ironically it is this, the very politics of the place, that has led it to being so unspoilt as a tourist destination. It is true, it is a tad annoying to have to arrive via Turkey (its lack of recognition by the British government means that there are no direct flights) but on landing at Ercan airport, this is soon forgotten.

Long hours of sunshine, a fantastic history, and beautiful natural fauna and flora immediately makes up for the inconvenience of sitting slightly longer on a plane.

The third island of the Mediterranean segregated since 1974 has the dubious distinction of its capital, Lefkosa (Nicosia) now being the only divided city in the world.

In spite of that, in recent years there has been open access to both sides via five crossing points, and although the Green Line is in itself a tourist attraction, I was told quite forcibly exactly where to point my camera, "only pictures of the road, please".

In common with most first time visitors, my base was to be Kyrenia on the north coast, with its 6,000 year long history, remains of countless civilisations and peaceful harbour framed by a 7th century castle.

The service at the stylish Rocks Hotel, known for its sophisticated casino, did not disappoint, while the backdrop of the Five Finger Mountain Range with parts of it floodlit at night, adds to the enchanting atmosphere.

Eating at one of the harbour restaurants is a must and the hospitality is unstinting to a fault. Plates come constantly piled with delicious local food. It is easy to get enticed at the beginning of a meal and it took a few eateries for me to realise that it is necessary to hold back to be in with a chance of

dealing with the bountiful choice. My particularly favourite was the dessert delicacy, Ceviz Macunu – green walnuts in syrup.

Visitors who come between May and August may have a chance to see one of the most spectacular natural wonders of the island. For millions of years, the deserted Alagadi beach, just east of Kyrenia has been visited by two species of presently endangered and severely threatened turtles, the Green and the Loggerhead.

After sunset, in the darkness, the adult females, sometimes with a carapace of more than a metre, make their way up the beach to find a suitable nesting place. There they lay 65 to 110 eggs, depending on their species and age, and this can be repeated three or five times for each, 10-15 days apart. When the nesting is done the exhausted mother returns to the sea.

Incubation is entirely due to the warmth of the Cyprus sunshine and after nearly 50 days the small hatchlings depart their Ping-Pong sized eggs and begin to emerge from the surface of their sandy nests.

Hundreds, not more than 6-7 cm long, then fight their way down to the sea. Visitors are allowed to witness this in silence and from a distance, although it is a tragic reality that only one in a thousand survive and even less would live if it were not for the special conservation project that is in place.

Another must for lovers of the natural world is the Karpas Peninsula or the “Pan Handle” as it is locally known, the eastern most part of Cyprus where the land tapers into a thin strip reaching out towards Turkey. Here can be found a plethora of wild flowers, birds, sea fossils and deserted sandy beaches such as Nangomi Bay and Cape Apostolos Andrea.

One of the best views of the island and certainly worth the climb is the scenic setting of St Hilarion Castle in the mountains outside Kyrenia and first referred to through contemporary accounts of Richard The Lionheart's campaign in Cyprus. The castle is named after a hermit monk who fled from persecution in the Holy Land and lived and died in a cave on the mountain. Later in the 10th century the Byzantines built a church and monastery in the same spot.

Further afield the east-coast town of Famagusta and the nearby ancient capital can be seen in a day. Salamis became the most important place in Cyprus as far back as 1100 BC. The site covers an area of one square mile extending along the seashore, and there is still a large area awaiting excavation. Trajan and Hadrian built the Gymnasium with its colonnaded Palaestra and there is a Roman theatre with a seating capacity of 15,000.

Famagusta is a good example of medieval architecture in the eastern Mediterranean, although much of its history is unclear as there are no written records. It is thought that it owes its prosperity to the destruction of Salamis.

The natural harbour meant that by the year 1300 A.D the town was one of the principal markets of the area, the meeting place of rich merchants and the headquarters of many Christian religious orders. Today Famagusta is also a busy university town but parts of the city are uninhabited and effected by the uncertainties of the legal status of ownership of the buildings.

Though the bigger picture is at times difficult, North Cyprus is not exempt from normal parochial disputes. On the drive back from Farmagusta, in the coastal village of Tatlisu, the bus suddenly had to slow down because of 10 metres of untarmacked track. It seems that the local landowner has absolutely refused to sell his ground to the local municipality.

I spoke to the new government's Minister of Tourism, Ersan Saner, who is working on expanding the average tourist stay in his country, currently just three and a half days, through publicity extolling the health properties of the sunshine and the sea. He said that the majority of people who come for the first time are pleasantly surprised and there is a saying in North Cyprus that no one ever visits just once.

In the present economic climate, the fact that it is not in the Eurozone and prices are more than competitive can only add to this persuasive argument.

Getting there

CTA-Cyprus Turkis Airlines

www.kthy.net

Where to stay

Rocks Hotel

www.rockshotel.com

Further information

www.northcyprus.cc