

# A VISITOR'S REFLECTION ON NORTHERN CYPRUS

*Words and pictures: Claire Durkin*

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his is crying out for a bit of a history lesson but firstly, the name 'Cyprus' is thought to have come from the word 'copper', of which

there is plenty buried under the surface of this rugged island. As you probably know, Cyprus has a history beset with invasions and conquests. After the Phoenicians, Assyrians, Egyptians and Persians, Richard the Lion Heart popped in for an invasion in 1192 because he liked the wine, which is a good enough reason I suppose. He sold the island to the Knight Templars and they sold it to Guy de Lusignan. The Venetians saw the island as the last bastion against the Ottoman Empire in the Eastern Mediterranean and in classic invader style, knocked down many beautiful buildings of note so that they could surround the major cities with fortified walls. The Ottomans then hung on for over three centuries and brought in two communities, Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots. In 1871 the Ottoman Sultan leased the island to the British but when the Ottomans entered the

First World War as allies of Germany, Britain annexed the island officially.

After the Second World War, the Greek Cypriot independent movement was launched in 1955. The Turkish Cypriots were up in arms because it intended to annex Cyprus to Greece. Anyway, in 1959 Britain, Turkey and Greece signed the Zurich Agreement and founded the Republic of Cyprus in 1960. This only lasted three years because the Greek Cypriots wanted to control the state. In 1974 attempts to overthrow Makarios and unite the island entirely with Greece, failed. The Turkish Army's Peace Operation assembled Turks in the North and Greeks in the south, hence, the island became physically divided. The Turkish Cypriots who gathered in the north established the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in 1983. There have been long standing negotiations over the conflict but after half a century, a compromise has yet to be reached. This is a shame and the Northern Cypriots feel sensitive and marginalized by the embargos in place that have a hold over them.



Ok, so, "hos geldiniz", or welcome. If visiting Northern Cyprus you might fly from Stansted to Izmir and then on to the island, or you could hop off in Southern Cyprus and continue your journey by coach. The journey isn't too bad, and certainly made more interesting when your aircraft sustains a puncture on the way home and (allegedly) has two stowaways onboard. That's a first for me. When I was there I stayed in Kyrenia, which is a beautiful and romantic Mediterranean port and best known for its authentic harbour. I was a guest of the Rocks Hotel

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and Casino. This is a five star hotel right on the coast and has been set up in three different buildings so when it's raining, which unfortunately it was, (apparently we brought it with us, as if!) you trot from one to the other with someone sheltering you under an umbrella, or you can go it alone. Actually, it doesn't rain very often and when it does the locals are

Bottom: Breakfast at Rocks Hotel and Casino; Below from left: Staircase of Esentepe Caretta Villa; Interior of Esentepe Caretta Villa



pleased and grateful, so I adopted their positive attitude and tried to be pleased and grateful too. The restaurant in the hotel was excellent and I was constantly ignoring the 'full stomach' signals and defiantly returned for more. Christmas was approaching and although the traditions there are mainly Muslim, there were masses of Christmasy decorations lying around. They continued lying around for the four days I was there and I liked that. I asked if the decorations would be going up and was told that Christmas would come when they were ready and that they were mainly going up for the New Year, but they weren't in any hurry. How refreshing after the ridiculous frenzy that we subject ourselves to and for far too long. The Casino is upstairs in the hotel and to be allowed to enter you need ID and suitable footwear. I know that because I was sent back to attire myself more appropriately. Even the sparkly, lustrous pink nail polish failed to impress. The hotel itself seemed pretty quiet but the casino, on the other hand, was the life and soul. So when the chips are down you know where to come. There is no gambling on the mainland, so those who fancy



having 'the house always win', need to flutter over here.

This trip was primarily to promote the extensive building projects underway on the island. Land for these is abundant and there are clear signs of holiday villages, apartments and villas being erected. There are some major developers here and the president of the Contractor's Association, Soner Yetkili ([www.ktimb.org](http://www.ktimb.org)), is adamant about the high standards of construction and rigorous upholding of superior working ethics. Only Turkish-Cypriot builders may work here and the main markets for sales are the English, Russians and Scandinavians. Mortgages are thin on the ground so people wishing to invest will be well advised to use private funds. Despite the difficult political history, the developers have noticed the keen interest shown in the property market, brought about by the comparatively low prices due to Northern Cyprus as yet not being in the Eurozone. Good value for money is a good incentive, so what else are you getting? Well I'll tell you. This island is mainly unspoilt, the weather is generally fantastic wild flowers are so prolific and interesting that there is now a research centre for botanists. There is an exciting cultural side with festivals, concerts, folk dancing and handy crafts. The food is mouth-wateringly fresh and tasty, there are many magnificent historical ruins to visit, the properties are well built and the people are absolutely delightful (and good looking). Also it is an important emerging market. Got your cheque book out yet?

We viewed one of the Esentepe Caretta Villas, which are just by the sea, roomy and nicely finished off. Rather charmingly, there are seahorse fossils embedded in the stonework ([www.propertyunturkey.com](http://www.propertyunturkey.com)). The nearby Kyrenia Golf and Country Club (there are two golf courses on the island) was awash with rain but it didn't stop us borrowing some towels to cover the seats and going for a race in the buggies (much more fun). Did you know there is a 45hole golf course now in Turkey (I bet it was designed by a woman). After this we had one of our lunch meetings at Bellapaise Kybele Restaurant with (amongst others) Mr Ersan Saner, who is Minister for Tourism and Environmental Culture, Mr Sunat Atun, who is Minister for Economy and Energy and Mr Soner Yetkili. Bellapaise is the Peace Monastery which takes its name from the French "Abbaye de la Paix". It is a lovely example of Gothic architecture and positioned below the Five ➔



Above from left: Kyrenia at a distance from St Hilarion Castle; A reminder of times gone by; Below right: Bellapaise Monastery, a lovely example of Gothic architecture

Finger mountains to the South-East of Kyrenia. The main part of the monastery was built between 1198 and 1205 by King Hugh III of France. When the island was taken by the Ottomans, the building was handed over to the Orthodox Church.

We continued our earlier lunch conversation that evening on national television and we discussed economics, geographical aspects, sourcing of materials, crime, education and how to deal with an ageing population. Primarily, Northern Cyprus attracts people approaching retirement age looking for somewhere warm with an affordable and high standard of living. This isn't to say that it doesn't also attract younger generations, of course it does. But then they also, God willing, will get older. Just for the record, there are excellent new caring facilities and hospitals to deal with this. While we are on the subject



of ageing, if you fancy being "freshened up", cosmetic surgery is a fraction of the price that it is elsewhere. The Ministers and construction specialists were really breathing life into the advantages of purchasing property in Northern Cyprus and high-lighted what would be a safe and secure investment and huge economic contribution. The ministers for energy have taken on board the green issues and properties being built now are fitted with wind turbines and solar panels. This is going hand-in-hand with new power station projects for coping with energy requirements.

Famagusta is one of the most important fortified ports on the Med. There are spectacular ruins which shine light on to lost civilizations. There is a magnificent amphitheatre, Roman baths, a gymnasium, mosque and royal tombs. I went to what seemed to me a magnificent coffee shop. The coffee is served in tiny china cups in a silver case with a lid to keep it warm and the choices of sweets and cakes is out of this world. The Lala Mustafa Pasha Mosque is huge which makes it appear stark but there are massive carpets, richly coloured icons,

paintings and alters. Don't forget that some these mosques started out as cathedrals, so the interiors were re-jigged to accommodate worshippers from a different belief. Prayers are delivered when facing to the East and women are still encouraged to remain in a small side room, where their prayer scarves wait patiently for their owners on pegs, to say their prayers so as not to be a distraction to the guys.

Nicosia/Lefkosa is the capital city of Cyprus. The mayor, Cemal M. Bulutoglulari sees it as the "divided capital of a divided island". In fact, Nicosia was divided in municipal services in 1958 while it was still a British colony by the British Governor of the island. 2009 saw Nicosia celebrating the 50th year of the establishment of their municipality. It is the biggest and most densely populated city of Northern Cyprus. Richly steeped in so much history, this developing, urban, yet charming city is a major centre for arts, culture, diplomacy and business. We visited Selimiye Mosque (St. Sophia Cathedral) which was built between 1208 and 1326 and is considered to be the most important example of Gothic architecture in Cyprus. We diligently removed our shoes outside the front door and padded across the acres of deep rose coloured carpet which was being religiously vacuumed (a bit like painting the Forth Bridge).

After church we went to the "Bandabulya" covered bazaar which is bursting with, well, all the things you would expect. It is a fantastic →





Above: **Holiday Village** standard room;  
Below from left: **Kaya Artemis Hotel & Casino**; **Holiday Village duplex suite**;

bazaar with fresh meats, fruits, vegetables, souvenirs and Turkish Delights. Our patient and beautiful English shepherdess, Natalie, came with me (so that I wouldn't get lost) to help me find the authentic checked, multi-coloured scarves to take home for the family. There was a group of men playing a game of backgammon who were full of smiles and pleased to pose for a quick photo shoot.

Luckily the weather for our trip to Saint Hilarian Castle was more clement. We drove up winding hairpin bends (mmm, my favourite) to the ex monastery that towers majestically over Kyrenia. Having gone as far as we could in the vehicle, we walked up old stone steps to platforms climbing higher and higher up into the ruins. The castle is named after a saint who escaped Jerusalem after the Arab conquest and moved to Cyprus. After he died up here in a cave the monastery was built on the site. The views of Kyrenia are

spectacular. When you are in the middle of something you can never fully appreciate it but coming up and looking over, or gazing through the crumbling Gothic arches and windows in the sun and wind, makes you see it with different eyes.

Right then, now for something definitely completely different. Forget your culture, magnificent ruins and history. Behold, Kaya Artemis Resort and Casino! "Open your eyes in one of the seven wonders of the world to ultimate luxury and elegance". Well ok, I'll try. "When I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy and I said, Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never looked on aught so grand". Poet Antipater. This show stopper seemed to appear from out of nowhere and took us all by surprise. The 726 room, 5 star (10 star surely?) whopper is on a vast stretch of "virgin white sandy shore" and does offer all year round holiday entertainment. You can have it all. There is a huge casino (if you can get past the more serious than serious security guards), health and spa facilities, shopping centre, assortment of restaurants for an assortment of cuisines, a theatre, convention centre with 15 meeting rooms, Grand Ball Room, swimming pools of gigantic proportions, even the little pool

looked challenging, Las Vegas style entertainment and luxurious suites and bedrooms with 32" flat screens and a glass lift to take you up to them. I've never seen anything like it. The exterior is built to replicate the original architecture of Artemis Temple with huge pillars and statues of gods and mythical creatures. The creatures are all round the grounds too. Then on top of this you have views of the coast with 200 metres of fine sand and shimmering clear water. I think that about covers it. It hardly needs saying that of course you will be pampered to within an inch of your life. Better prepare yourself to land with a crash when you return home, or maybe not.

That last evening I went for a walk from the hotel with Seda around the little streets nearby to put our feet back on the ground. Bijou boutiques, jewellery shops, cafes and a tiny, walk in beauty parlour. I sat on the spare stool and looked at the magazine cuttings of hairstyles and make up around the diminutive room and hair pieces that looked like scalps hanging on the walls while my friend had a quick tidy up. My eyes were watering just watching. Then we made ourselves nice at the hotel and walked down to the harbour to meet the others at Canli Balik, a traditional, good fun restaurant. We were presented with the usual, hugely generous, many plates of mezes followed by gorgeous fishes and meats. This was our gang and sometimes as many as 16 of us had been more-or-

less in each other's pockets for the last four days. We had a fantastic evening swapping stories, taking photos and discussing the hopeful future for Northern Cyprus. I wish them luck but I don't think they really need it as they already have all



the ingredients for very good things to come.

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