

Travel and Adventure: Cyprus - A mosaic of travel options

by Sandra Scott

The Republic of Cyprus has a lot in common with the mosaics found in the second century House of Dionysus, an archaeological site near Pafos. Both are colorful with many intricate parts and a pleasure to view. The mosaics have all the colors of Cyprus: the blue of the Mediterranean Sea, the greens of the Troodos Mountains, the browns of the sandy beaches and the warm colors of the setting sun, plus they represent Cypriot history that dates back to mythical times.

CYPRUS: OPEN-AIR MUSEUM - Near the Hrysopolitissa Basilica in Pafos is St. Paul's Pillar, where it is said St. Paul was tied and scourged 39 times before he converted his tormentor, the Roman governor Sergius Paulus, to Christianity. CNS photo by Sandra Scott. **LE MERIDIEN** - Accommodations on Cyprus range from the high-end resorts like the Le Meridien (pictured) and the InterContinental Aphrodite Hills to farm stays in the quiet countryside. CNS photo by Sandra Scott.

GODDESS OF LOVE - The 2,000-year-old marble statue of Aphrodite of Soli is referred to as 'The goddess of Cyprus' and is one of the most popular icons of Cyprus. Aphrodite (Venus to the Romans) is the Greek goddess of love and beauty. CNS photo by Sandra Scott. **ANCIENT WARRIORS** - These terra cotta figures were discovered in 1929 at Agia Irini. There are about 2,000 figures that date to the seventh and sixth centuries, B.C. The figures are displayed in the same position as they were found. Most of the figures are male warriors. CNS photo by Sandra Scott. With its strategic location in the eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus has been the crossroads between three continents from the time of Aphrodite. Cyprus was the first country visited by apostle Paul on his mission to spread Christianity, and crusaders stopped on their way to Jerusalem. Today, tourists enjoy the travel mosaic that is Cyprus, marveling at the sites of antiquity, exploring traditional country villages and basking by the Mediterranean Sea.

A HISTORICAL MOSAIC

People have been living the good life in Cyprus for centuries. The large, palatial House of Dionysus shows the level of wealth during the Roman era. It is so named because one of the many mosaics depicts Dionysus, the Greek god of wine.

At the neolithic settlement of Choirokoitia, dating back to 6,800 B.C., there are reconstructed round, stone huts that give evidence to a relatively sophisticated lifestyle at an even earlier time. Just as intriguing are the sites associated with Aphrodite, Venus in Roman mythology. At a breathtakingly beautiful spot on the Mediterranean coast between Lemesos and Pafos is where legend has it that Aphrodite, the goddess of love, emerged from the sea. West of Polis is the grotto Aphrodite used for secret trysts with her many lovers.

Cyprus is an open-air museum that will intrigue both the history buff and the casual tourist. The magnificent amphitheater at Kourion, the Tomb of Kings, St. Paul's Pillar, medieval castles and frescoed Byzantine churches are just part of the mosaic of the past. Currently, Cyprus has three UNESCO World Heritage sites, with other sites on the waiting list, plus new archaeological discoveries being unearthed on a regular basis.

A COASTAL MOSAIC

Exploring the antiquities is a perfect diversion for sun worshippers, but the beaches are the main draw. With 400 miles of coastline, there is a beach for everyone. Forty-nine of the country's beaches have been awarded the exclusive Blue Flag, an eco-label given to beaches that maintain high environmental standards. Visitors can choose from campsites on the beach to tourist resorts to temples of luxury that would please Aphrodite.

Resorts are truly full-service, offering a plethora of watersports, golf, hiking, biking, diving, horse riding, tennis courts, spas and even skiing. At certain times of the year it is possible to ski in the morning, golf in the afternoon and spend the night at the disco. All resorts are close to one of the coastal cities, which offer shopping, museums, dining and theme parks.

Keeping in mind that Aphrodite is the goddess of love and Cyprus is where Richard the Lionheart married Berengaria in the 12th century, Cyprus ranks high on the list of the world's most popular destinations for weddings and honeymoons. Luxury resorts like Aphrodite Hills, Le Meridien and Anassa have on-site chapels, plus there is an abundance of churches with exquisite Byzantine artwork that make a perfect setting for a wedding.

A PASTORAL MOSAIC

Visitors looking for respite from the beach or city can relish the gentle pace of life in the countryside. Only an hour away from any part of the island, the Troodos Mountains, home to Mount Olympus and at 6,400 feet the highest point on the island, are home to painted Byzantine churches listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites. Plus there are traditional villages with cobbled streets to wander, wine tasting at vineyards and serenity that is seldom found in today's manic world. Cyprus has an agrotourism program that encourages restoration of traditional houses, making them fully equipped to receive guests. It is a great way to get in harmony with Cypriot lifestyle, stop to smell the jasmine, enjoy the nature trails, visit historical monasteries and chat with the locals at the local taverna.

A CAPITAL MOSAIC

Dating back 1,000 years, the capital Lefkosia is both old and new. It is the commercial and business heart of the country. Located in the middle of the island, the city was once enclosed by a star-shaped Venetian fortress and moat. The moat is often the site of concerts and the old city is a restored pedestrian area with shops and restaurants.

The mosaic of Lefkosia is comprised of palm tree-lined streets, modern shops, mosques, beautiful frescos in St. John's Cathedral, a museum with Byzantine icons and the must-see Cyprus Museum. The museum has the best collection of archaeological artifacts, including terra cotta figures that predate those in China and the sublimely beautiful, 2,000-year-old statue of Aphrodite. At the Handicraft Center, the artistic heritage is preserved and promoted by bringing craftsmen together in one location. Visitors can watch artisans weaving, producing leather articles, fashioning pottery and creating other traditional items, plus purchase authentic items from the shop.

A GASTRONOMIC MOSAIC

With its crossroads position in the Mediterranean, Cypriots have added an exotic flavor to their cuisine, creating a unique dining experience. The best way to sample the mosaic of Cypriot food is with a meze, which means "little delicacies." Meze is a meal of as many as 30 small plates of food, from savory dips and vegetables to a wide range of fish and meat dishes. It is enjoyed "siga, siga" (slowly, slowly), taking time to savor such delectable dishes as octopus in red wine, traditional grilled cheese, smoked sausages and other dishes served with salad, fresh baked bread and wine.

Pharaohs consumed them and King Solomon waxed lyrical about Cypriot wines. Commandaria is considered the oldest named wine, dating to the 12th century. Wine enthusiasts will love Cyprus, where wine making goes back to 2000 B.C. There are winery tours and annual festivals plus a wine museum near Lemesos (Limassol).

EXPLORE THE MOSAICS

Out of all the islands of the Mediterranean, it is no surprise that Aphrodite chose to live on Cyprus. Today, European vacationers often return to Cyprus to retire. For such a small island country, there is something in the mosaic of Cyprus to tickle the fancy of every visitor.

IF YOU GO

Connections to Greece, Egypt and the Middle East are quick and convenient. One of the many tour options is a day trip to Alexandria, Egypt. Cyprus is a tourist-friendly, four-season destination, where English is widely spoken and excellent roads make it easy to get around, keeping in mind that driving is on the left. For more information, visit www.visitcyprus.org.cy

Sandra Scott is a freelance travel writer. Â© Copley News Service

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