

Nicosia:

The smiling face of the renovated past

Nicosia - Karen Dabrowska

Nicosia's old town has the smiling face of the renovated past. The tourist information centre was once the watch tower at Edirne Gate (now Kyrenia Gate) of the Venetian Wall which surrounded the city. A quaint room in the watch tower with nostalgic photographs from days gone by was the home of the watchman, Horoz Ali, who passed away aged 146. The British demolished sections of the wall during the colonial period but much still remains.

Nicosia (Lefkosa in Turkish) was once the ancient kingdom of Ledra. The old town was surrounded by a star shaped wall of about three miles in circumference, which was further fortified by the Venetians in 1567 and flanked by eleven bastions. The British brought the eucalyptus trees to help with drainage. The small old town is rich in heritage. It is very 'user-friendly' and is best explored on foot. Many of the historic, architectural treasures were damaged during the inter communal fighting which led to the separation of the island into Greek and Turkish zones in 1974. Today it is the world's only divided city but the Turkish-Cypriot border police are only too happy to let tourists photograph the check point – as long as their cameras are pointed at the sign welcoming them to the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (TRNC).

Among the most impressive restorations is the Great Inn (Buyuk Han) whose construction was ordered by the first Ottoman governor of Cyprus, Muzaffer Pasha, in 1572. Its architecture resembles many other inns from this period in Anatolia. Around the inner courtyard and store inn are 68 rooms and a number of unique arts and craft shops rich in local paintings, ceramics and embroidery. After years of restoration the inn was opened to visitors in 2002. It is a spacious, pleasant place to relax over a cup of coffee and traditional, super-sweet Turkish cakes and desserts. Near the Great Inn, stands the Selimiye Mosque which started life as St Sophia Cathedral, the most important

example of gothic architecture in Cyprus. It was built by the Louisianans between 1208 and 1326. The monumental main door and the carved stone window above it are spectacular works of gothic art. After the Ottoman conquest of Nicosia in 1570, a minaret was added to the cathedral and thus it was transformed into the Hagia Sophia Mosque, which was renamed Selimiye Mosque in 1954. Nearby is the covered bazaar with everything from designer jeans to fresh produce and souvenirs, both tasteful and cheap and gaudy.

Two other notable restorations are the mansion of Dervish Pahsa and the Lusignan House near the Ministry of Tourism, a historical building in its own right. The 19th century Dervish Pasha Mansion belonged to the publisher of the first Turkish newspaper Zaman in Cyprus. It has been transformed into an enchanting ethnography museum with life size models of men and women in ethnic costumes and a collection of everyday items, including colourful costumes and lamps with intricate designs in bright colours. The mansion is part of the conservation project of the historic Arab quarter on the western edge of Lefkosa's walled city which was falling into disrepair. In order to address the severe deterioration of the quarter, the Arab Ahmet conservation project was instigated with the help of the UN. The focus of the project, which is aimed at both the historic quarter



Buyuk Khan in Lefkosa خان بيوك في ليفكوسا

and the contemporary city of Lefkosa, is primarily economic. Balanced development has, with the backing of the whole community, allowed the area to benefit from widespread regeneration and, more importantly, to attract an inward flow of investment. A large park is being developed, local artists work in the area and the 21st century with an internet café blends effortlessly into a street with old, restored houses. Restoration at its best can be seen in the Lusignan House, a 15th century mansion with its Gothic-arch entrance door and coat-of-arms as well as the Ottoman era addition of a kiosk and decorated wooden ceilings. It is filled with authentic furniture from the Lusignan and Ottoman periods. The place for lunch, or dinner, is certainly Boghjalian ➤

City Tourism



Mevlevi Tekke- Lefkosa

تكية المولوي - ليفكوسا



Grine Harbour

ميناء غرينه

Konak Restaurant in what used to be the Armenian Quarter of the Arab Ahmet area. Once owned by the Armenians who left the area, the Turkish-Cypriot owner Sevil-Zihni Turksel is proud he now manages one of the top ten restaurants on the island. Generous hot and cold starters precede a main course fit for a pasha and a selection of sweets and fruits. Cheaper restaurants line the road from

the tourist information centre to the Saray Hotel, one of the only two hotels in the old city. It is also a street for gold jewelry and Rustem's Bookshop, the largest and best-stocked in North Cyprus. After the immersion in Turkish - Gothic architecture a soak in a Turkish bath may be welcome. It is possible at the Grand Baths (Buyuk Hammam) whose entrance has sunk well below pavement

level, the level of the street in the 14th century. The elaborate entrance portal carved in stone is now all that survives of the Church of St George of the Latins.

The old city, like the rest of the island, is friendly and relaxed. Visitors are made welcome and it is easy to think of North Cyprus as a home away from home, a small slice of paradise neglected and isolated by the international community due to the embargo which prohibits direct flights.

But as the renovations of historic buildings and sites continues and more hotels and restaurants are built, Mehmet Basel, the Director of the Tourism Promotion and Marketing Department at the Ministry of Economy and Tourism is convinced that tourist numbers will rise from 240,000 in 2003 to 600,000 in the next five years and one million in 2020. "Why not?" he asks answering his own question. "South Cyprus has 2.6 million visitors a year".

Mevlevi Tekke Museum, a monastery of the whirling dervishes, the mystic order founded by Mevlana a Persian/Turkish poet of the 13th century, is in the road which leads to the heart of the old city. The people of North Cyprus seem to have taken the order's code of conduct to heart:

Be like a river when it comes to generosity and help,

Be like the sun when it comes to affection and mercy,

Be like a night in covering up the faults of others,

Be like a dead body when it comes to fury and nervousness,

Be like the earth when it comes to humility and humbleness,

Be like a sea when it comes to tolerance,

Either appear as you are or be as you appear.

Getting there: The cheapest and most direct flights (with a 40 minute re-fuelling stop in Turkey) are offered by Cyprus Turkish.

Where to stay: The elegant 72 room Saray Hotel in the old city is Lefkosa's best. It has a roof top restaurant with magnificent views.

Who to contact: Tursan Tourism and Travel Agency(www.tursantourism.com) established in 1973 by the father of tourism in North Cyprus, Ahmet Necati Ozkan and now run by his son Ali, offers tours of the old city (and the rest of the island) led by expert guides. ■