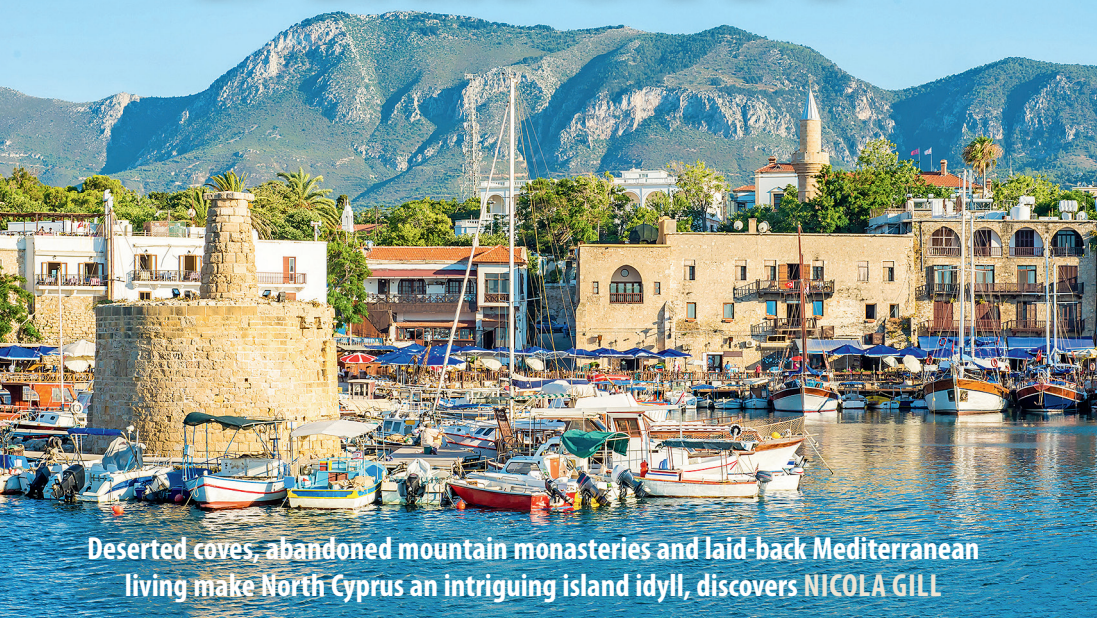


TURKISH DELIGHT



Deserted coves, abandoned mountain monasteries and laid-back Mediterranean living make North Cyprus an intriguing island idyll, discovers **NICOLA GILL**

Even if you know the Mediterranean well, and Greece in particular, North Cyprus will still prove itself a fresh twist on a familiar theme.

Yes, there are the usual olives galore, irresistibly fresh fish and a kaleidoscope of delicious straight-from-the-tree fruit everywhere you look, but there are also ancient Ottoman and Byzantine influences, minarets dotting the skyline and a Turkish

influence on the cuisine. For North Cyprus is the Turkish half (actually more like a third) of the country, the southern and central part being Greek. The island was controversially divided in two in 1974 and the UN still controls the border, known as the Green Line.

As a holidaymaker this really won't make any odds to you as there is no doubt that, in terms of beauty, beaches and breathtaking natural scenery, it's

safe to say the Turks got the better end of the bargain.

Compact enough to explore by car (at 224km long) and soaked in sun for the majority of the year, North Cyprus is still virtually empty compared to its bustling Greek counterpart.

You can choose between five-star hotels with casinos, cabaret and spas or low-key eco hotels, but even in the height of summer it's possible to bag



Get lost in the mountains

Between the north-facing coastline and the capital in the far south lie the lush, cloud-topped Kyrenia mountains. The range is home to sleepy villages time has forgotten, where locals sit in shady courtyards idling away the heat of the day, or play dominoes in tiny cafes over industrial-strength Turkish coffees. There are trekking opportunities for those with stout shoes and stoic natures, but for

the rest of us, a car, map and good guidebook will suffice.

Choose two or three villages and simply take in the scenery. If you get lost, most locals speak English and are used to tourists trying to figure out where they are. We screeched to a halt at the sight of a rare Cyprus chameleon crossing the road on one adventure and spent 20 magical minutes watching it amble onwards and up a lemon tree, eyes swivelling independently and body changing colour as it went.



a tree-fringed, sandy cove with clear turquoise water all to yourself. If you time your visit right (generally around June) you can even watch sea turtles nesting (cyprusturtles.org) – that's how pristine and unspoilt the coast is here. Take a picnic of island-grown oranges, figs and olives along with some local feta, bread and incredible pastries, and pick your private spot in paradise!

MUST-DOS

Take a tandem skydive from a mountaintop with an instructor (no training needed!) and gasp at the bird's-eye views of eagle's nests, ruined castles perched on rocky summits and that endless coastline.

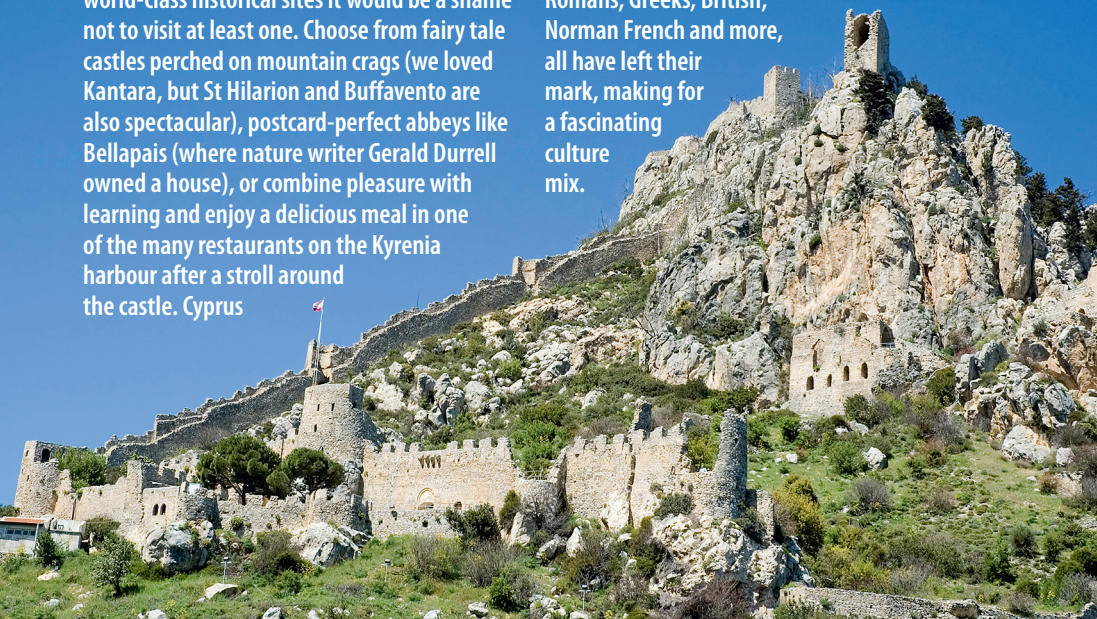


Coincide your visit with a village festival – apricots, olives, tulips, orchids and walnuts all have their own. Check with the tourist board in advance for exact dates.

MARVEL AT ANCIENT RUINS

Even if ancient history isn't your thing (or you don't like the idea of tearing yourself away from the beach) North Cyprus is so stuffed with world-class historical sites it would be a shame not to visit at least one. Choose from fairy tale castles perched on mountain crags (we loved Kantara, but St Hilarion and Buffavento are also spectacular), postcard-perfect abbeys like Bellapais (where nature writer Gerald Durrell owned a house), or combine pleasure with learning and enjoy a delicious meal in one of the many restaurants on the Kyrenia harbour after a stroll around the castle. Cyprus

has always been a strategically coveted stepping stone between East and West. Various ruled or occupied by the Phoenicians, Assyrians, Persians, Romans, Greeks, British, Norman French and more, all have left their mark, making for a fascinating culture mix.



Feed wild donkeys on the Karpas Peninsula

A long, thin finger sticking out of the north-eastern corner, the Karpas Peninsula is a must-visit. Declared a nature reserve, it's home to herds of wild donkeys – not the shaggy, dusty, grey variety plodding slowly along under improbably heavy loads – but majestic, fleet-footed chocolate brown ones. Looking and acting like zebras without the stripes, they gallop

freely through the hills but will also happily nibble a carrot from your hand (be careful, they are still wild animals). Apart from a growing handful of small, friendly eco hotels and family-run restaurants, the peninsula is blissfully empty. Dotted with abandoned Greek churches and unfeasibly beautiful ruins silhouetted against the coastline, its miles

of golden sandy beaches are safe, people free and yours for the taking. Make sure you take plenty of water as you are truly in the wilderness out here.



Explore the capital

Inside the high city walls of Lefkoa (known to the Greeks as Nicosia) four great civilisations have left their mark – the Lusignan, Venetian, Ottoman and British. The overall impression is of wandering through a city from the Middle Ages, with flashes of contemporary culture in the trendy cafes and bars springing up here and there. Although the population is predominately Muslim, North Cyprus is a secular country and tourists will agree that religion is not



at the forefront of its cultural identity. Stroll around, soak up the incredible atmosphere and architecture – but don't miss the beautifully restored Great Khan (Büyük Han), the town's most important Ottoman building and now home to many excellent craft



stalls. The Lusignan cathedral of St Sophia, old Ottoman mansions of the Arabahmet neighbourhood with their elaborate latticework windows (so women could lean out without being observed by passing men) and Selimiye Mosque are also highlights.

WHERE TO STAY



North Cyprus has a good selection of great value five-star hotels. One of the best is the **Acapulco**, brilliant for families with its on-site waterpark, huge swimming pool and private beach (acapulco-cyprus.com). Doubles with a sea view balcony and half board from £90 a night. For a different experience, at one with nature, there are several eco resorts springing up on the Karpas Peninsula. Expect to pay between £50 and £75 a night for your own private, stylish cabin with uninterrupted sea views right on the deserted beach.

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FACTFILE

CURRENCY Turkish Lira (TRY)

TIME DIFFERENCE GMT+2

GETTING THERE You can't fly direct to North Cyprus from the UK but don't let that put you off – it's a seven-hour flight with a short stop at one of several mainland Turkish airports (you don't have to leave the plane). Or you can go via Greek Cyprus (four-hour flight) and then take a pre-booked, hour-long taxi ride across the border. Pegasus Airlines fly via Turkey and most UK airlines fly to Larnaca.

VISA Not required

CLIMATE Hot, dry and humid summers (24°C to 40°C) from June till September. It's wet in December and January and it can even snow high in the mountains. Spring and autumn are mild but great for walking.

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