

CYPRUS

As soon as you arrive you will know you're in a very special place. There is something different in the golden light, something provocative in the scents of wildflowers, something instantly endearing in the welcoming smile of the people. This is Cyprus, the island of love – prepare to be captivated.

When Aphrodite, the goddess of Love and Beauty, arose from the sea foam at a place called Petra tou Romiou on the west coast, this sleepy backwater island was transformed. The local people welcomed her with open arms and sprinkled rose petals before her as she walked to her temple. Pilgrims began arriving in their thousands from the Mediterranean region to pay homage to the goddess. Cyprus had suddenly become famous as the place to go for an exciting romantic break.

But the island has not only attracted those seeking spirituality and love. Tucked into the easternmost corner of the Mediterranean, Cyprus was an ancient trading place, coveted for centuries by many civilisations in their quests to rule the known world. Today, again peaceful, it is an explorer's paradise, with a 10,000 year history. Almost everywhere you go you can be sure you are walking on a piece of the past. There are ancient settlements, the remains of vast city-kingdoms, Roman villas and Byzantine churches, crusader castles and magnificent Venetian fortifications.

The island's incredibly diverse scenery ranges from dramatic pine-clad mountains (at 1952 metres), lush valleys and vine-dressed foothills to fertile plains. Surrounding all is a stunning coastline where golden sandy beaches and tiny secluded coves are gently washed by the sparkling waves of the Mediterranean Sea.

Here, basking under the year-round warmth of the sun, are some of the finest hotel resorts and holiday accommodation in the world. Everything the discerning visitor requires is catered for: impeccable service, fine restaurants, clubs and pubs, water sports, walking and cycling activities, golf, sailing, organised excursions to the island's archaeological sites, even extreme sports. But for those who just want to chill out, there's dawn to dusk relaxation on the beach, by the pool, or in one of the fantastic hotel spas.

As you travel just a few kilometres inland everything changes. Now you will see orchards of citrus trees, ancient olive groves and the occasional shepherd grazing his sheep and goats. In spite of the many villages that dot the island, stretches of countryside still remain uninhabited, and it's possible to travel at leisure without seeing any real signs of civilisation. This is a nature-lovers paradise - a world of rare flora and fauna where you can walk or cycle the mountain trails, explore timeless villages and discover the true meaning of Cypriot hospitality. There's rural accommodation available in many of the villages, if you choose to stay overnight. It may just turn into an unforgettable experience, with half the village plying you with traditional Cypriot cuisine ...and a glass or two of the local firewater.

In the Troodos mountains there are monasteries to be explored and a unique collection of 10 Byzantine churches, their interiors elaborately painted with magnificent frescoes. These are so precious that they are listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Here too, orchards of cherries, apples and pears cling to the valley slopes, the scent of their blossom filling the clear mountain air during springtime. In summer, the mountains provide a refreshing respite from the heat of the lowlands, and during winter their snow-capped peaks are transformed into a fabulous ski resort – on warm winter days it is even possible to swim in the sea and ski on the mountains in the same day.

Cyprus is a great place for walking and cycling and there are many specially designed nature trails to choose from. Serious hikers can tackle all, or part of, the Pan European E4 Trail, which traverses the island. Those who wish to take a more leisurely approach can easily hire a car and visit the archaeological sites or even follow in the footsteps of the goddess, Aphrodite. Another option is to explore the vineyards and wineries on the specially designed ‘Wine Routes’. Cyprus has a long history of winemaking. The world’s oldest-named wine, Commandaria, is still produced on the island - but there are plenty of exciting new wines to be discovered too.

With its long tradition of hospitality, Cyprus is constantly seeking new ways to delight its visitors. For the business sector, it offers excellent facilities for meetings, conferences and incentives. For sports enthusiasts there are state-of-the-art sports training facilities, which are particularly popular with professional teams from abroad. They choose Cyprus as their preferred destination for winter training, because of its mild climate.

For golfing enthusiasts, there are several excellent, professional courses. And for culture buffs there’s an extensive range of events taking place throughout the year, including some great open-air musical and theatrical productions, some of which are performed under the dramatic backdrop of the island’s archaeological sites, such as the ancient theatre at Kourion and the historic fort at Pafos harbour.

Cyprus is an island of amazing diversity, famous for its legends and history, its timeless traditions, delightful cuisine and stunning scenery. Its cosmopolitan towns and resorts offer a lifestyle as sophisticated as that of any other modern European city.

No doubt Aphrodite knew what she was doing when she chose Cyprus as her home. It is an island blessed by the gods – a place to live life to the full and a place to love.

LOVE CYPRUS