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Where to Eat, Stay, and Play in Cyprus for a Time- Traveling Mediterranean Island Adventure

In all things cultural and culinary, the past meets the present on this storied island in the eastern Mediterranean.

On a recent trip to Cyprus, I had dinner at Rous, in Nicosia, where I noticed a subtle print spanning an entire wall of the foyer. It was a timeline of the Mediterranean island's history. On one end was the settlement of Cyprus by Paleolithic hunter-gatherers. On the other was Independence Day, August 16, 1960. The dotted line between them was divided between a succession of rulers from elsewhere—Phoenicians, Assyrians, Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Franks, Venetians, Ottomans, and Brits.

These overlapping and long-lasting influences, and its well-connected position in the crook of the eastern Mediterranean Sea, make Cyprus an island unlike any other. At Rous, head chef Triantafyllos Souliotis translates his country's singular context deftly in his tasting menu, with reinterpreted ingredients and dishes: tarama compound butter, dolma-like orbs of chard filled with minced octopus and mussels. But this history is also plain to see in the dripping steam of Nicosia's Ottoman-era hamams, and in the plentiful brandy sours—Cyprus's iconic cocktail, invented during the period of British colonial rule. In the villages of the Troodos Mountains, women boil Levantine-style spoon sweets and vintners bottle Commandaria, the sweet wine made famous by the Knights Templar. In the city of Paphos, columns still mark the boundaries of a Roman villa; its second-century Christian owner was likely converted by Saint Paul himself.



Cyprus is not frequently visited by US travelers, who may know it for its popularity among tourists from the UK or, more likely, for the protracted social conflict that divides it. The island is split by the so-called Green Line, a buffer zone managed by the United Nations that cuts the heart of the capital clean in half. This history is complex. Greek and Turkish Cypriots, the main ethnic groups, encountered gridlock about governing after independence. A Greek-led coup, a Turkish invasion, and a ceasefire declaration later, the conflict is long frozen and Cypriots can move freely. But the larger division remains. The northern third of the island is controlled by a breakaway state recognized only by Turkey, and the rest by an internationally recognized (Greek-aligned) government.

Still, many Cypriots refuse the idea that the 50-year-old conflict is insurmountable. There are small biocommunal efforts around the island's shared heritage, and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has expressed a measured optimism around recent talks—the first substantial negotiations between the two leaders since 2017—with more meetings set for this September.

Exciting developments have also enlivened the Cypriot tourism industry in

recent years. While the island has its share of large seaside resorts, a wave of chic boutique hotels, often housed in restored historic buildings, has come to the cities and the interior. And a €170 million project recently commenced to expand the international airports in Larnaca and Paphos, significantly increasing air traffic capacity. For travelers interested in food, history, culture, and nature, Cyprus is becoming a Mediterranean destination on par with the best of them. Keep reading for my trip highlights, plus recommendations from a couple of creative people who call Cyprus home.

Getting There and Around

There are no nonstop flights to Cyprus from the US, but you can easily fly into Larnaca or Paphos via mainland Europe. Flying into Ercan International Airport is not recommended; it is not considered a legal port of entry by the Republic of Cyprus government, which means crossing into the south can be problematic. The island is relatively small, and renting a car is the most convenient way to get around. Note that Cyprus uses left-hand traffic, and most rental agreements prohibit crossing the Green Line in your car. There are ways to do it by taxi, but booking with a tour operator helps eliminate any guesswork.



What to do in Troodos

Much of the mountain range running through central Cyprus is protected by the **Troodos UNESCO Global Geopark**. For hiking, both Eng and Soteriou like the area around Platres, including the Caledonia Waterfall trail, and Eng also recommends Dyo Mouttes, near the east end of the Troodos range. The villages here feel palpably different from the coast, some of them rich with traditional art and craft. The Painted Churches in the Troodos Region make up another diffuse UNESCO site; Timios Stavros Church in Pelendri has some of the most remarkable frescoes.

The town of Lefkara is known for its silver filigree and lefkaritika lace; be sure to stop into Rouvis Lace and Silver, which sells only verified handmade lefkaritika, no machine-made products.

Agros, near the midpoint of the Troodos range, is an informative place for traditional foods and agritourism. Worthwhile stops include Niki's Traditional Sweets, Kafkalia Traditional Meat Products, and the Rose Factory, where the Tsolakis family grows fields of Damask roses. Cyprus also has a millenia-long history of winemaking; look for wines made with local grapes at Tsiakkas Winery and other vineyards that dot the hillsides. Soteriou says the villages of Laneia and Omodos are also worth visiting.





Where to eat in Troodos

In Lefkara, **Iason Tavern** has good prices and delicious koupepia; we paired ours with white wine made by the owner's father. One of Eng's favorite spots is **Taverna Takis** in the nearby village of Vavatsinia. In Pelendri, **Symposio** offers high-quality meze, including the best halloumi of my trip.

Where to stay in Troodos

Lefkara's boutique **Agora Hotel** in the foothills near Larnaca, is one of the only properties of its caliber outside of the major cities in Cyprus and a great base for exploring the interior. It has 18 rooms, plus a beautiful courtyard pool and all-day restaurant, in what was once the town's central market hall. The contemporary design includes selections from the local brand **Tradition Now**.

