

Lefkosia: The Heart of Cyprus

It's certainly no secret. Destinations packed with tourists are somewhat surreal. Open-air museums that have somewhat lost their tradition, culture and real flavour. Enjoyable in their own right sure, but perhaps not always the real thing. Think Venice, parts of Paris and London, as well as many Greek islands during summer. Hordes of tourists and facilities made to cater; long lines, repetition, same, old.



Hidden Treasure

It is a common secret to visit the other smaller and perhaps unknown destinations, as it will offer you a sense of the real thing, of proper local culture, people, food and way of life.

In Cyprus, tourists have always come for the sun and sea, staying along the coast in places such as Pafos, Agia Napa and Limassol. Indeed, the capital Lefkosia (Nicosia) goes unnoticed, rarely visited, barely known. At most a day trip, or only for those with inside tips, i.e. visiting friends and relatives. In truth, tourists think why visit a city in the centre of the island where there are no beaches. Besides, so many tourists are on packages, restricted and inflexible. However, as new low cost flight connections encourage more short breaks and individual travel, opportunities to visit different parts of the island grow. Take advantages of this and see more.

For centuries, Lefkosia was established as an inland safe haven, isolated from foreign invaders – later protected by its Venetian fortress walls and labyrinth of small streets. In many ways this isolation continues and is what allows the city to maintain its authenticity and uniqueness. Indeed, a day-to-day lifestyle unaffected by mass tourism.

Lefkosia is now a candidate for European Capital of Culture in 2017 and following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the only divided capital city in the world – for good or bad it has made some sense of this title.

Lefkosia has a long history, yet is also Cyprus' most modern and culturally diverse city. It continues to grow as economic progress fuels foreign investments, with companies establishing a base here and in turn bringing new expatriate communities. Meanwhile, others come seeking work or education.

Everything Starts in the Capital

Actually, Lefkosia is geographically the best base to explore the entire island – as it is more or less in the

centre. Easy access to all other coastal cities, many other inland historic attractions, such as forests, archaeological sites, monuments, traditional mountain villages, as well as agrotourism, sporting and adventure options. Lefkosia is even quite close to unique and raw coastal villages on the top end of the island, such as Pyrgos and Pomos, where mountain meet the sea and is one of the best places to see the Eastern Mediterranean sunset; epic blood orange, lighting the sky with shades of warm-colored light.

Various roads lead out of Lefkosia into the foothills of the Troodos Mountains, through olive groves and orchards, into pine forest via many villages, such as Kakopetria, Kapedes and Flassou. Another great example is the impressive monastery of Machairas. On the way are places of interest like Tamassos, an ancient copper producing city associated with the cult of Aphrodite, and nearby Agios Irakleidios convent, built in honor of Cyprus' first bishop saint. Fikardou is another beautiful example of a traditional mountain settlement, which has preserved its 18th and 19th century character and architecture and remains in complete harmony with the surrounding countryside.

Within Lefkosia city there is much to see and do. What's important to highlight is that the city might first appear to be daunting and undercover. There is no major tourist precinct to head towards, with many interesting places hidden in side streets, and in places you wouldn't know were there – hidden secrets. Don't be afraid to speak to people and ask around. Everyone is friendly, and everything is safe.

In terms of accommodation, there are a number of good quality hotels, including Hilton, Hilton Park, Holiday Inn, Cleopatra and Royiatiko Hotel. For more budget minded travelers there are Castelli, Centrum, Classic and Europa, among others.



In general, Lefkosia is divided into two main sections: Old Town and the modern areas. And one of the best things about both is that everything is within easy reach.

A Touch of Tradition

Old Town Lefkosia is historic, surrounded by Venetian high walls and dense traditional architecture, influenced by Cypriot, Frankish, Venetian, Ottoman and colonial British styles. Although some are aged, worn-out, and with traces of war and division, they maintain a certain character and charm – signs of alternative, avant-garde, rough and brash. No doubt, Old Town Lefkosia is a photographer's delight, capturing earthy colors and unique styles, together with bright streaming rays of sometimes harsh sunlight, gilded motes and patterned shades.

A walk around the old town is cultural in itself – as an organized tour or on your own – with many small

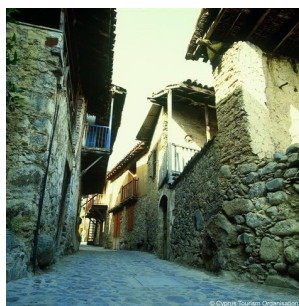
galleries and museums, as well as regular local events throughout the year. In and around Old Town there is the Cyprus museum (the island's largest archaeological museum), the Byzantine Museum, Nicosia Municipal Arts Centre, Famagusta Gate Cultural Centre and Leventis Museum, among other.

For more hands-on culture, immerse yourself in a traditional Turkish bath at the historic Hamam Omerye, awarded first prize of the Europa Nostra Award for cultural heritage. This building dates back to the 13th century, and is truly unique and enjoyable for both men and women.

There are also many cafés, bars and restaurants, from laid back to bustle. For quality traditional food there are loads of taverns. Some of the more renowned venues include Zanettos, Stou Sala and Loxandra. Actually one of the best places you can enjoy local fast food (if you can call it that) is Christakis at the corner of Agalma of Solomou where the municipal bus lines end. Order a 'mix' (souvlaki and sheftalia); you will not be disappointed.

For a more relaxed coffee, venture slightly off the main walking strip of Ledra and visit places such as Kalakathoumena and Ifantourgio, where the more alternative and bohemian culture congregate, or to some of the Shisha café-bars.

At night, options multiply. Depending on your style, some of the best spots include Oktana, Uqbar, Platos, Brew lounge, Erodos, Ithaki, Enalax Café-theatre and Domus lounge. Each is unique in its own right.



Modern Cyprus

The more modern parts of Lefkosia might not always have the architectural charm and character of Old Town, however there is just as many, and even more places of interest. New attractions are also opening all the time, whilst the city is clearly starting to develop into a true European gateway to the Middle East and Africa. Modern Lefkosia is categorized by a high standard of living, diversity, excellent food and great nightlife. Streets Makariou and Stasikratous, together with the surrounding area are where to find the main fashionable retail outlets, as well as trendy cafes, bars and restaurants.

Meanwhile, each suburb – ex villages that have merged into Lefkosia city – has its own version of an Old Town, such as Agioi Omologites and Strovolos, with interesting buildings, cultural attractions, as well as places to eat and drink. Similarly, the area of Aglangzia also has Skali amphitheatre with regular events, as well as Athalassa forest park. Athalassa (meaning 'without the sea'), used to be, like the rest

of Cyprus, at the bottom of the sea. Tectonic movement pushed it up and it is now one of a handful of places in the world where geologists come to study the ocean floor without having to get wet. In fact, you can still find fossilized shells in stones on the ground.

Slightly further out is Dali, an area with signs of human habitation dating back around 4,000 years. An ancient city kingdom, currently being excavated, once flourished here as a result of its strategic position and the presence of water and fertile land. Monuments from all periods of Cyprus' history can be found in the region.

Indeed, there are countless Byzantine and Gothic churches, as well as other ancient monuments scattered throughout Lefkosia and the region, including UNESCO World Heritage sites.

In terms of places to eat around town, highly recommended is the Syrian Arab Friendship Club. Although not Cypriot cuisine, the food here is arguably better than in Syria. Other local places include Pixida fish tavern, Plaka and Tavernaki tou Pambou. Top night picks are Babylon, Hustle, New Division and Vinyl.

Overall, Lefkosia is an enjoyable city, with much local tradition and culture. It is a great place to include in your itinerary when visiting Cyprus, as well as an ideal hub to see the rest of the island.

Photos: Cyprus Tourism Organization

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