

Cyprus Turns Towards Religious Tourism



In striving to attract at least 3.5 million visitors a year by 2010, Cyprus is keen to present itself as more than just a Mediterranean hotspot of sun, sea, sand and sex. Unfortunately, this is what many islands around Europe and Africa tend to be known for these days. However, the Cypriots aim to change this unfair though profitable reputation and introduce religious tourism as one of the island's main sources of income. It is currently estimated that 100,000 out of 2.5 million tourists visiting Cyprus each year come to visit some sort of religious monument.

Cyprus holds the advantage of having churches, temples and monuments belonging to both Christianity and Islam since the island is split between Turkish and Greek communities. The Orthodox (Catholic) side has received a boost in popularity amongst visitors thanks to Dan Brown's recent bestseller 'The Da Vinci Code'. The 10 medieval timber churches situated in the mountains, having been awarded the UNESCO label, are particularly popular. Besides these attractions, Cyprus offers the possibility of following in the footsteps of St. Paul, who, around 45 AD, was said to have traveled to the island and was tortured for preaching Christianity. Tourists can also visit sites associated with the famous saints Lazarus and Helen.

For Muslim religious tourists, Larnaca is a particularly special place, hosting the 648AD Hala Sultan Tekke temple. The Cypriot tourist organisations see religious tourists as more important than sun-seekers as they tend to spend more money, behave themselves accordingly and do much more than simply wander from the hotel to the pub. This is the reason why religious tourism is near the top of the list of priorities.

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