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WORDS BY GAIL TAYLOR

When you visit the idyllic island of Cyprus you'll hear the word 'kopiaste!' perhaps more than any other. It's meaning, loosely translated, is 'come join us' which perfectly reflects the warm and sunny welcome you can expect throughout this lovely destination.

Combining modern European culture with ancient heritage, beautiful Cyprus lies in the eastern Mediterranean and boasts an enviable climate. For centuries visitors have fallen in love with its varied landscape: from glorious sun-kissed beaches and rugged stretches of coastline to fragrant wooded mountains, vineyards, citrus groves and tiny stone villages untouched by time. More than 17% of the island is classified as woodland, and in all there are 1,750 species of flowering plants, 127 of which grow nowhere else in the world. It's also interesting to note that the sun shines an average of 300-plus days a year.

So delightful is Cyprus that it was here the Greek goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite, is said to have first emerged from the jade-green seas around Petra tou Romiou, a boulder that juts up from the south coast of Cyprus. Other legendary figures associated with the island include Alexander the Great, Cleopatra and even the apostles of Christ.

Cyprus then...

The illustrious history of Cyprus dates back some 10,000 years. Take the ruins of Kourion with its ancient theatre where music concerts and plays are still held to this day; the sanctuary of Aphrodite; the antiquities of Paphos; the Neolithic settlement of Khirokitia and a number of amazing Byzantine churches in the majestic Troodos Mountains. It's little surprise that these feature on UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage list.

The ancient, inland capital of Nicosia (also known as Lefkosia) with its winding streets and quaint shops is a "must-visit". There are no less than 18 intriguing museums in and around the city.

It is against this fascinating historical backdrop that current-day Cyprus reveals an array of leisure, gastronomic, cultural and natural attractions to suit all tastes.

And now...

During your stay, make the most of fresh, mouth-watering Mediterranean cuisine. Although the choice is broad,

three firm favourites include meze – a collection of up to 20 small dishes of different foods, moussaka – layers of baked mince and aubergine, and souvlakia – delicious kebabs of pork, lamb or chicken. Tuck into healthy salads and olives, enjoy fresh fish and seafood, and don't miss out on the locally produced fruit - which the government protects with a ban on imported products.

Cyprus also produces some excellent wines from its extensive vineyards. For a taste of timeless tradition, it's often possible to take a comfortable room in a village house close to the wineries. And don't be surprised to see donkeys and oxen still working the land in places!

Something for everyone

By complete contrast, the popular resort town of Aiyia Napa is home to many of Europe's top nightclubs and entertainment venues. For a good family destination, try nearby Limassol with its wonderful beaches.

Cyprus is an active participant in the European Blue Flag Campaign and in 2006 an impressive 49 Blue Flags were awarded to it. Whether it's safe family bathing you're after or the craggy coves of areas like Cape Greco with its sea caves and crystal blue waters, you're sure to find a spot that fulfils your dreams of sunshine and relaxation. Just close your eyes and drift to the »



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sound of the waves lapping the shore.

There's plenty to do for the active as well. Try sailing, parasailing, body surfing, scuba diving or fishing. Away from the water, the island boasts over 200 kilometers of fabulous nature trails. The Troodos mountain range is one of the most popular hiking regions with its towering peaks dressed in golden oak, plane trees and pines. Well-marked paths criss-cross the area. In the Akamas peninsula, take a hike along the Aphrodite Trail or Adonis Trail. Organised walks are often staged by local tour operators if you prefer not to go it alone.

On the piste and beyond

Cyprus is becoming increasingly popular as a winter resort and The Troodos Mountains provide good skiing from January to March. The Cyprus Ski Club operates four runs for either skis or toboggan, together with instruction,

on Mount Olympus. However, winter on the island is brief, and activities best suited to fair weather include horse-back riding, golf, tennis and cycling.

Many visitors are discovering that Cyprus can be used as an excellent base for exploring further afield: from Larnaca, take a two day cruise over to Egypt. In season, this tour goes far enough up the Nile to see the pyramids at Giza. There are also a number of boat excursions along the coast of Cyprus – some of which enable you to see the ghostly resort town of Famagusta, empty and abandoned since 1972.

To get a proper feel for local tradition and culture, there are numerous city walking tours year-round, many of which are hosted in English. Also, if you're lucky enough to be in Cyprus during March, don't miss the colourful festivities of Carnival in the lead up to Lent. In 2008, this runs from 2-12 March. Although the celebrations take place in towns and cities all over the island, Limassol hosts the most famous, but for parades and fancy dress balls go to Lamaka and Paphos. During Carnival, Green Monday marks the actual beginning of Lent and in Paphos, everyone celebrates with picnics and a kite-flying competition.

A little local knowledge

The island enjoys one of the highest standards of living and lowest crime rates in Europe. Its time zone is 2 hours ahead of GMT. Electricity runs on 240 volts AC and square 13-amp three-pin plugs such as we have in the UK are used. Hire car is definitely one of the best ways to explore Cyprus and the good news is that they drive on the left-hand side of the road, the same as in the UK (which makes life easy)!

Most locals – around 80% – speak Greek, with around 11% speaking Turkish in the north of the island. English, German and French are widely spoken in the main tourist centres throughout the southern part of the island. Respect should always be shown for the religious beliefs of the locals. It is also viewed as impolite to refuse an offer of Greek coffee or a cold drink.

However you choose to spend your time on Cyprus, you'll still feel the grace and charm with which Aphrodite herself imbued the island and its people so long ago.

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