



Rustic CHARMIS

Escape the hustle and bustle of city life for a respite in the pristine villages dotting the slopes of the Troodos mountains in Cyprus
Words by Hala El Khoury

WE ARE DRIVING THROUGH open plains heading towards the Troodos Mountains, and I am starting to think that this magnificent mountain range, which rose from the water some 40 million years ago, is formed upside down. Unlike your average mountain, where the higher you go the younger the land formation, the peaks of Troodos are actually the oldest parts, a phenomenon which has captured the interest of geologists for many years. But apart from being a geological wonder, these mountains are home to idyllic villages where life goes on at a very gentle pace.

Within minutes of leaving the capital Nicosia, the sights and sounds of the city become a distant memory; out with buildings and street signs, in with bales of hay and tall trees throwing their shadows on sun-parched grass. We keep moving towards greener landscapes where cedar and pine trees thrive in rich oxidised turf and pockets of olive groves appear on the hillsides.

RURAL RAMBLINGS

We make our ascent along the winding road up to the village of Kakopetria, peacefully nestled on the slope of Mount Olympus between the two streams of the river Klarios. At sunset, as birds flock back to their nests, the village residents prepare to go out. The cool climate is perfect for an evening stroll, so we head into the old part of the village: Beautiful traditional houses are closely huddled along narrow cobbled streets with huge stones protruding from their bases. The scent of jasmine fills the air as we pass lace-curtained windows, homemade products proudly on display in neat colourful jars and old ladies sitting outside their doors, delicately coring small limes destined to become delicious preserves.

On a small balcony, two young boys play backgammon with much enthusiasm

★ Wanderlust

*There's always
more to explore*

The Cyprus Agrotourism Company website (agrotourism.com.cy) offers an extensive list of properties with information about various geographical locations and an online booking service.

FOOD TO FITNESS

The Cyprus Tourism Organisation (www.visitcyprus.com) is your best source of information on various rural regions and their ongoing activities, from cycling to gastronomy. You are never too far from nature trails, cycling routes and fabulous beaches, and each region takes pride in its culinary specialties, from carob products to cheeses and preserves.

BLISS AND REJUVENATION

Even in the heart of the countryside you can find a spa where you can relax and rejuvenate. Of particular interest are the spas of Casale Panayiotis and The Library Hotel. If you yearn for five-star luxury, head to Hébe Spa at the Columbia Beach Resort.

One of Pissouri Bay's best kept secrets, the resort is frequented by the likes of Kim Cattrall. With prior arrangement, your children can be happily engaged in the kids' club while you enjoy a relaxing treatment followed by a blissful rest in the relaxation area, which opens up to a fabulous pool overlooking the Mediterranean.

CULTURE AND FESTIVALS

Visiting during a festival is one of the best ways to mingle with the villagers and get a real taste of rural living. Among the most popular are the Rose Festival of Agros, the Herbs Festival of Korakou, and the Traditional Products Festival of Galata.

in keeping with old village tradition. Wooden doors are flung open welcoming visitors into traditional inns and taverns. With its modern taverns and scenic views, the newer part of Kakopetria is popular, but it's no match to the charm of the old town whose traditional houses have stood the test of time.

Not far from Kakopetria lies the sleepy village of Kalopanayiotis, quiet, pristine and welcoming. It is home to Casale Panayiotis, a complex of six traditional houses which have been beautifully restored to receive guests in comfort and style. It stands testament to a growing tourism trend that has been flourishing



Cycling through rural Cyprus



Casale Panayiotis

After a day of mountain air, enjoy a quiet stroll down cobblestone streets

hill of mesmerising greenery. With majestic cedars towering over the entrance of a mountain trail and an orchestra of chirping cicadas filling our ears, it becomes difficult to imagine that any other world exists.

Nothing escapes the attention of our expert guide Zenonas, who stops every now and then to point out the indigenous "golden oak," which takes its name from the golden-coloured lower surface of its leaves, and the curry-smelling "everlasting plant," whose leaves add rich flavours to soups and sauces.

With some regret we begin our journey, this time heading towards Kathikas village. Here we pass one of the many interconnecting dams dotting the mountain slopes (the giant reeds clustered here were once used by villagers to thatch their roofs). Fittingly, we spend the night in Michalis' Anoyia, an almost 70-year old country house which has been carefully restored with its traditional arches and straw-covered ceilings intact.

GETTING INTO THE KITCHEN

From Kathikas village, you are within easy reach of the Akamas peninsula and the stunning beach of Coral Bay, but today we are after historical sites and gastronomic experiences. We head towards the coast to the famous Paphos mosaics, then on to Geroskipou village to see first-hand how *loukoumi* (the Cypriot form of Turkish Delight) is made. Aphrodite Delights is a family business that takes pride in using the same secret recipe since 1895. An array of mouth-watering products is on display, from *soutzoukos* (a confection made of grape must, nuts and flour) to almond preserves.

Peeking into the workshop below, we

and breathing new life into Cypriot rural areas in recent years, where town squares, old taverns and traditional homes are being salvaged and returned to their former glory, and Cypriots and tourists alike are finding new appreciation of these rural havens where they can enjoy a tranquil way of life.

Casale Panayiotis is an elegant retreat where you can simply relax with a good book or venture out to explore the countryside. Nature trails are all around, and family trips can be arranged to a nearby farmhouse to visit an orchard or even fish for trout, which is then barbequed on the farm. The in-house restaurant uses local produce to serve sumptuous platters like mushrooms stuffed with feta and anari cheeses, and grilled halloumi drizzled with local home-made marmalade. And for optimal relaxation, Casale's spa offers relaxing treatments in a uniquely refurbished stone-walled barn.

After a refreshing morning coffee on the terrace, a leisurely drive takes us on the long winding road through Cedar Valley, where we feast our eyes on hill after

see potfuls of thick loukoumi oozing into cooling racks where they are left to set naturally without additives, the old fashioned way.

The drive towards Arsos traces a beautiful path between the hills. Free-roaming goats cross the road unaccompanied. We learn that the area has very few springs, so farmers can let their goats wander about, knowing that they will eventually return for water. Beautiful brick roofs greet us on both sides of the narrow streets as we enter the charming village of Arsos. Flower pots adorn the local bakery and teashop, and a group of men gather in the shade of a vine as if framed in a postcard.

Zooulla welcomes us to her great grandfather's home, which she has lovingly restored to receive tourists in beautifully decorated apartments. The outdoor clay oven is still warm from the last family gathering. Hospitality is at the heart of village tradition and we are offered a fiesta of homemade treats, including the delicious *palouze* (a thick, jelly-like sweet), which merits its own annual festival in the village.

👉 Houses huddle along cobbled streets and the scent of jasmine fills the air👈

We are equally well-received in Pachna village where our host Troodia is busy making halloumi cheese, one of the island's best gifts to the culinary world. With a heartwarming smile, she tends to the blocks of cheese cooking in whey. Once ready for the draining platform, they are flipped and salted and are soon ready to serve alongside the freshest anari cheese drizzled with homemade honey. The produce in Troodia's family workshop is like no other: Her husband tends the goats and bees and her daughter's specialty is fruit preserves. We wish we could carry home truckloads.

FAMILY CIRCLES

Family businesses are the very pulse of the rural areas, and we witness this again at Zambartas winery in Ayios Amvrosios village. Marcos Zambartas has roamed the world bringing his knowledge and experience back home to work in the business built by his father. A hands-on man, he carefully oversees the manual processing of grapes, ensuring no stems are left behind. There is no compromise in



Cypriots take great pride in their regional specialities, such as olives

any step of the process, and the combined efforts of father and son have won them awards for their products.

A trip to Omodos takes us back in time as we visit a historic wine press and stroll down the streets where old ladies sit in archways and shop doors working their needle lace. You simply cannot resist picking up a beautiful handmade piece from these village artisans.

At Lofou village, we are greeted again with true family hospitality. We are staying at Agrovino Traditional House and dining at its 20 year-old traditional tavern. It is pomegranate picking season and proprietor Costas Violari is in the

orchards till late. His wife and daughter treat us to platter after platter of authentic country food as more tourists and villagers come in to dine.

At the other end of Lofou, an old school master's house and a surrounding cluster of old stone houses have been renovated and transformed to the elegant Apokryfo boutique hotel. Lofou is making a new reputation for itself as a cherished country hideaway.

The treasures of Cyprus may be countless, but when you spend time exploring the rural areas you will soon realise that the island's real gems are its warm and welcoming village people. ■

Fast Facts

Getting there: Emirates Airlines and Etihad Airways fly to Larnaca International Airport from Dhs2,175. The journey takes less than 4 hours.

When to go: Cyprus villages can be enjoyed year round. In winter, the villages in the Troodos mountains attract ski

enthusiasts from January to March. Most mountain resorts get particularly busy during July and August, when city folk head upwards to escape the summer heat.

Visas: All members of the European Economic Area (EU states plus Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein)

as well as Switzerland, the US and the UK are among those who don't require a visa for a stay not exceeding 90 days. For further details on visa entry requirements for Cyprus, please consult the Travel Information section in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (www.mfa.gov.cy).