

AN ORTHODOX EASTER IN CYPRUS

My goal in visiting Cyprus was to further experience the multiplicity of civilizations that were based there. Since I had just spent three months in my own resort city of Agadir, Morocco, the resorts that stretch for several kilometers on each side of the three coastal cities I visited were of no interest to me.

Cyprus also made a nice transition from Muslim Morocco to mostly Christian Eastern Europe with both religions present. The balmy weather, similar to Agadir, and the sea always present cushioned the upcoming shock of early spring in northeastern Europe where I would visit Belarus, Lithuania and Romania.

When scheduling, I forgot that Orthodox Easter was a week later than Rome Easter. Fortunately, my first day, Holy Thursday, the tourism office in Larnaka was open. They have great maps of each part of (non-occupied) Cyprus and I collected them all. It turned out that because of the proximity to the May 1 Labor Day holiday this was an exceptionally long holiday for people – Good Friday extended past Easter Monday to encompass an Easter Tuesday this year before Labor Day on Wednesday. Bottom line, NO museums are open, and many restaurants and cafes are closed! Easter greetings are everywhere.



Having arrived in the wee hours of the morning on Thursday I was still able to enjoy a full first day. Originally known as Kition, Larnaka was established in the 14th C **BC** and was a trading port exporting copper. Ruled by Phoenicians then Persians it flourished during the Greek period as well as under Ottoman rule from the 16th to early 19th C. During British rule, however, trade was moved to the port at Limassol (now Lemesos) and the city declined. But the 1974 invasion of Northern Cyprus by Turkey sent thousands of Greek Cypriots south increasing the population dramatically. Today its residents include Armenian, Lebanese, and Palestinian settlers with tourism the main industry.

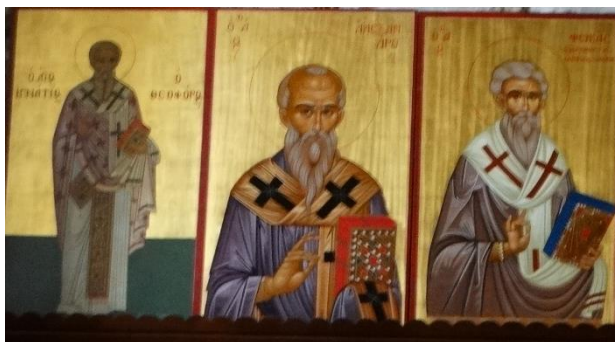
I also noticed significant populations of guest workers (80% of all domestic workers in Cyprus are Filipinas) including Indians working in IT, studying in private universities, and businessmen taking advantage of the tax incentives for investment in Cyprus.

The most important site in Larnaka is Agios Lazarus, a 9th C church built on the site where Lazarus was buried for the second time. Shortly after Jesus resurrected him from the dead in AD 30 he was forced to flee and landed in Kition where he spent his remaining 30 years. When his tomb was discovered in 850 AD his remains were shipped to Constantinople and the church was built. An empty tomb remains below. The bell tower is 17th C replacing the prior one destroyed by the Ottomans and has magnificent details.



I visited the church and tomb on Thursday and found certain icons covered in black cloth. I went back again early Good Friday morning during a mass where people were passing through to kiss icons. Because there was a Mass I took no photos. However, I returned again in the evening when there was supposed to be a major procession and took some photos of people passing the white-flowered (what I assume was Jesus' tomb). I hung out until long after the 8 pm appointed

hour while the crowd grew and procession participants gathered (band, paramilitary, scouts) but finally walked home before seeing the actual procession in order to get an early start the next morning for Nicosia.





I liked Larnaka, the low rise and varied neighborhoods. The former Turkish quarter near the Grand Mosque (originally built in the 16th C as the Latin Holy Cross Church) and the Castle/fort on the edge of the bay were a ten-minute walk from my guest house.



High end shopping and dining occur along Emrou Street and then a short walk and you're back at the bay with a marina and long wooden pier.



The beach has all necessary amenities and a fine corniche extends south along the bay to the fishing port. I enjoyed a lunch of grilled octopus and grilled vegetables at a restaurant at the fishing port along with many local families enjoying the Easter weekend holiday.



There are plenty of historical buildings to see, some restored and some not. I did walk to the salt lake which earlier in the spring would have hosted thousands of migratory birds including flamingos. Archeologists have determined that in prehistoric times this was a natural port hosting trade. After it dried up salt was harvested for centuries up until the 1980's.

Most handy of all, the intercity and airport buses leave from right in the center on the main cornice. I regret that I did not allow time in the itinerary for a driving tour of nearby traditional villages, but given the holiday period they probably would not have been active!

Ever-present were cats, who seemed to rule their respective spaces (one for the terrace of my room, for example) and flowers beautifully planted wherever possible



On Saturday I headed to the capital, Nicosia, about an hour on the local bus.

When arriving at the main bus station on the Tripoli bastion of the 16th C Venetian wall I was greeted by a massive construction project. Eleftheria Square, master-planned by (Dame) Zaha Hadid Architects aims to connect the ancient city's walls and moat with the modern city.



The site is overlooked by (French architect) Ateliers Jean Nouvel Tower 25, a mixed use “green” building perforated with planted balconies on the east and west walls and a virtual “living wall” of balconies on the southern façade.

I spent only a small amount of time in the narrow pedestrian streets of Laiki Geitonia neighborhood as most of the artisan products were more touristic than my taste. An interesting surprise was a shop devoted to selling Moroccan Argan Oil products.



From there the Ledra main pedestrian shopping street features all the international brands that one sees everywhere. Due to the holiday weekend the shopping area was mobbed with Cypriot and International shoppers, however the rest of the old city was virtually empty of pedestrians since nothing was open. I could photograph all the important buildings but not go into any of them, and wander through neighborhoods feeling more local.



Nicosia is the only green line), with a on Ledra Street to

There are restored areas, areas being demolished for new construction and yet-to-be-rehabilitated areas. I like cities with that mix. There is a UNDP master plan (1979) for restoration with the aim of promoting understanding of the history shared by the two sides. Close to 100 buildings have thus been restored.

divided capital remaining in Europe (the so-called pedestrian UN-controlled passport-access crossing Lefkosia which I was not interested in visiting.



As I wandered close to the “green line” I couldn’t help hearing the call to prayer and seeing mosque minarets on the other side including the double minarets of the Selimye Mosque.



However, there are also active mosques in Nicosia. That-el-Kala is one in a transitional neighborhood, whereas Omeriye Mosque, which was originally the Augustinian Church of Saint Mary, welcomes all visitors (Muslim and non-Muslim) offering free hot and cold drinking water, bathrooms, and a book. It is opposite the Omeriye Hamam which I understand is very beautiful with traditional hammam and spa services, but “closed” that day.



A highlight was finding an alley with a local snack food place, perfect for lunch with some street



art located nearby.

My wanderings took me to the Faneromeni Church, built in 1872 on the site of an Orthodox nunnery. This is the largest church inside the walls and a mixture of neoclassical, Byzantine and Latin styles in a neighborhood of many restored buildings.



As I approached Famagusta gate, the easternmost and best preserved of the original three gates leading into the old city, I was reminded of Cyprus' history. These walls were built by the Venetians in the late 16th C but did not withstand the Ottomans who took control in 1570 until the British arrived in 1878. In the 1950's violence erupted against the British and in 1963 between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. This led to the partition of the city, the "green line". The Turkish invasion of 1974 resulted in a division of the island into the Republic of Cyprus and "Occupied Cyprus". The British remain the most numerous tourist nationality to the island.



Nearby the Liberty Monument represents Greek Cypriots' liberation from Britain with figures of fighters being released from prison in 1959 alongside peasants and priests.

From there I happened into the Antoniou neighborhood anchored by its church and antique shops.



My next stop was Lemesos (also known as Limassol), about an hour's bus ride further west along the coast through beautiful rolling farm land. A hay crop had already been harvested, the

bales neatly encased in white plastic.



The southern-most city (nearby Cape Gatos the southernmost point) in Europe, Lemesos is nicknamed Little Dubai, probably because of the high rises under construction stretching east of



Old Town and the oil platform anchored in the bay. Oil and gas explorations has been happening here for over a decade and judging from the amount of tanker traffic, with good success. Not surprisingly given this activity there was also a Greenpeace ship present!



Lemesos is the international business capital of Cyprus.

In 1191 Richard the Lionhearted defeated the then-ruler of Cyprus and there followed 200 years of rule by a succession of Knights Hospitality and Templar. However, a series of earthquakes, invasions by Genoese and Saracens reduced the city to virtual oblivion by the 15th C. Lawrence Durrell, writing in 1952 in Bitter Lemons of Cyprus noted upon arrival in Lemesos that “we berthed towards sunrise in a gloomy and featureless roadstead, before a town whose desolate silhouette suggested that of a tin-mining village in the Andes”. While not all of the buildings that would have been there at the time of Durrell’s visit have been restored, I think there was plenty of evidence of a more prosperous past than his analogy!

After the 1974 Turkish invasion, Lemesos replaced Famagusta (Magusa) as the country’s main port. The British still maintain a military base just west of town.

The old town clusters around the Castle, now the medieval museum, and the Grand Mosque.



The Grand Mosque used the building of a former Christian Basilica, foundations of which still remain, and was only newly built after the 1894 flood. At the museum there is a recreation of a 7-9th C olive press. Other active mosques are also present throughout town.



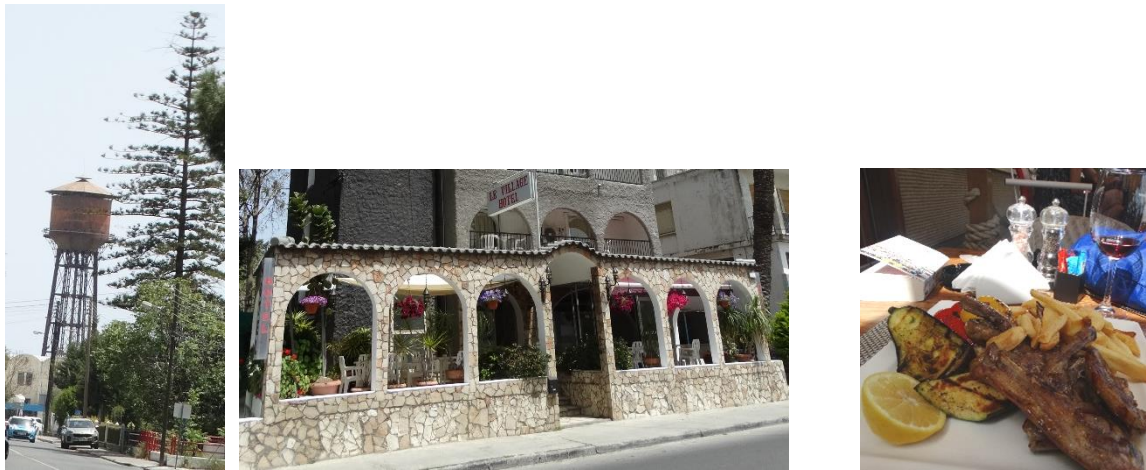
The modernization of the marina and corniche are very attractive. The Old Carob Mill there houses temporary exhibitions but I also learned the importance of the carob crop for multiple uses as animal feed, gum, confectionary ingredients and flour.



Since I arrived on Easter Sunday morning, nothing was open when I made my way through the



old town, about 1.5 kms past the old water tower (1930) to my hotel, again with the excellent Cyprus Tourism Office map guiding me. The hotel was virtually adjacent to two 24-hour minimarkets and a 24-hour bakery with perhaps the largest variety of baked goods I have ever seen, so I did not lack for provisions. The hotel's lovely porch was perfect for eating my olive



and cheese pies. I was fortunate to find just one café on the corniche open for lunch on Easter Sunday and had wonderful lamb chops.

One of the reasons for basing here was to visit the Troodos Mountains, the high point of which is Mt Olympus (1952 meters), the island's highest peak. A large area is protected natural park with many hiking, cycling and camping areas. Unfortunately, the usual tour that stops at many of the charming villages and wineries en route was not on offer due to the holiday, nor could my hotel secure a driver who wanted to work that day! So, I took the public bus and could photograph the dramatic scenery and gaze longingly as we passed the villages.



On the return there were many inviting destination-type restaurants and wineries open and full of (mostly Cypriot) families enjoying a holiday meal. There are many wineries



in this region and mapped driving wine routes.

I spent a few hours between buses in the village of Troodos itself, almost at the summit at 1900 m. It is primarily the departure point for hiking trails, all of which were too steep for me to attempt and, in any case, just after my arrival it started to pour rain, also obstructing the views! But I had a delicious soup and dessert crepes at the hotel restaurant before taking the bus back. In addition to pine forests, olive and almond orchards there are two large reservoirs along the



way.

In Lemesos the Greek Orthodox Cathedral presides over the corniche and an itinerant market in a parking lot below.



Other churches include Roman Catholic St Catherine's, adjacent to the Franciscan Monastery celebrating 800 years since St Francis's pilgrimage of peace to the middle east.

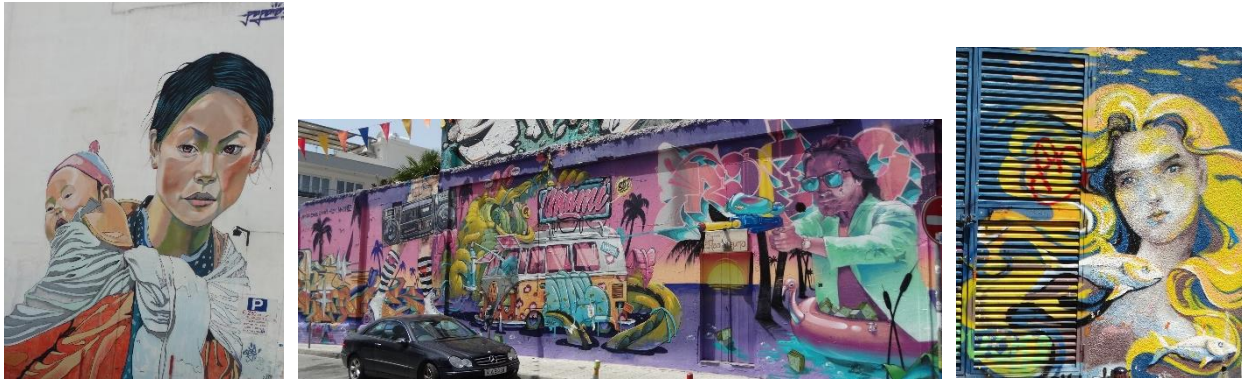


I saw two significant art deco buildings in town, the Rialto Theater and the Town Hall.



The ornate Municipal University Library housed in the historic Pilavakis Mansion recently went through a seven-year restoration project and is open to the public.

As always, I searched out street art and in Lemesos there is a street dubbed “grafitti street” but works appear elsewhere as well.



And, of course, there are cats, not only in the street art.



Time now to move on to Paphos, another hour west along the coast. The main reasons to visit Paphos are archeology and Aphrodite.

Aphrodite is an ancient patron goddess of Cyprus (known as Venus in Roman mythology). En route in the bus I saw Aphrodite’s rock and beach but didn’t know that was what I was seeing until I took a bus there from town a few days later.

Legend has it that the goddess was born from the waves at this point, and escorted ashore on a shell with help from soft breezes created by the Zephyrs. If you manage to swim three times around the rock then your beauty will never fade.



The Paphos archeological park entrance is next to the harbor presided over by the 14th C fort and a coast guard ship.



The area is quite large with sites from the Hellenistic/Roman period 300 BC to 300 AD and was originally encircled by massive walls. For me the highlights were the mosaic floors in the homes of the ruling upper class, the best I have ever seen.

In the house of Theseus (that of the Roman governor of Cyprus until the 7th C AD) is a medallion depicting the duel between Theseus and the Minotaur in a labyrinth of Crete.



The mosaics in the House of Dionysius (so-named because so many mosaics feature this god of wine) include hunting scenes and numerous myths.





Elsewhere on the site are an open-air theater, and remains of the Forum, along with a



plethora of wildflowers.

After a light lunch of calamari I explored the sites of the early Christian period, 4th C, including the ruins of Basilica of Chrysopolitissa, the small Church of Agia Kyriaki (now used for Anglican, Lutheran and Greek Orthodox services), and St Paul's pillar where St Paul was tortured by the Roman governor whom he ultimately converted to Christianity.



I did not attempt to descend into the nearby catacombs but instead continued onwards to the Tombs of the Kings. Except no kings were buried here, only high officials and wealthy citizens. These tombs followed the Egyptian tradition of tombs built to resemble the residences of the



living.

The upper, or old town of Pafos is undergoing a complete re-do of its streets. There are a few handsome old buildings and a new active plaza with views out to the lower town, archeology



park and the Mediterranean.

There is a lot of street art in this neighborhood, although some in other parts of town as well. There was one piece by the Italian street artist Millo, whom I only learned about when on a walking tour in Vilnius a couple of weeks later.



The cementography art was created during an exchange between Greek and Turkish Cypriot youth sponsored by Search for Common Ground (www.sfcg.org) when Paphos was a European Capital of Culture in 2017 (along with Aarhus, Denmark). Each group created with sand from the other's part of the island. As an aside, I was really happy to see that this organization is still going strong in its efforts to bring together people in conflict through contact and communication as an alternative to violence.



Another significant feature of the upper town is a large municipal square surrounded by handsome buildings mostly devoted to government functions. A pillar contains a 1941 quote from

Winston Churchill “Hence we will not say that Greeks fight like heroes, but we will say that heroes fight like Greeks.”

Fortunately, the Ethnographical Museum was open with its charming folkloric exhibits, following which I enjoyed a lunch of fish cooked in a paper bag at nearby Muses restaurant with great views over Paphos.



Paphos is the gateway to the Akamas peninsula, at the westernmost tip, one of the island’s last remaining



wildernesses. Its position and preserved status protect an environment of three major plant-life zones of Europe. While there are quad tours, one needs to walk, or ride a trail bike to enjoy its abundant wildlife. I saw its entry points from Agios



Georgios, a bus ride past Coral Bay to the west of Paphos.

On another day I took the bus north to Polis with more beautiful views along the way, including



a mosque and quarries which I had noticed elsewhere. Th built environment contained a lot of



contrasts.

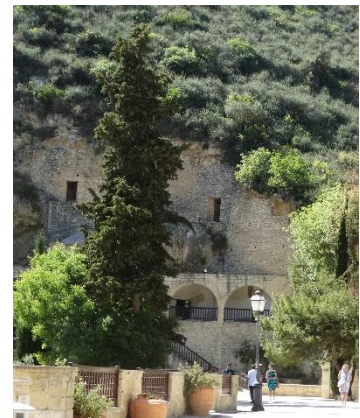
The bath of Aphrodite is set in a lovely botanical garden on the Akamas peninsula.



Although I wasn't up for the walks from the baths, I was able to enjoy the views which are towards the north across Chrysochou Bay.



There are a number of other interesting sites that are easy bus rides from Paphos. These include the St Neophytos Monastery, founded by a hermit monk born in 1134 and died as planned in his cave ~1214.



I had one other little-known (at least to tourists) site to find. My last morning, I matched up map and a magazine article with address, to find the tiny Greek Orthodox chapel of Apostle Peter and Saint Helen the Martyr by Cypriot architect Michail Georgiou.



It is on a small lot in a residential neighborhood, and could use someone caring for its maintenance.

The architect combined the barrel vault feature of Byzantine architecture with the angular roof line of a double-aisle church. It was completed in July, 2015.

My Cyprus visit now complete, I am off to Belarus on Lot Polish Air with a long enough layover in Warsaw to have scheduled a four-hour walking tour.