

In the palm of your hand

With a fresh look and a burst of boutique hotels, Larnaca's fortunes are on the rise

@Katie_McGonagle

It's quiet in the old town, with nothing to disturb the early-morning stillness but a headscarf-clad woman sweeping her front step, and a solitary car easing its way through the narrow streets.

Yet down on the seafront, it's a different story. Fresh from a makeover of the two-mile stretch between Larnaca's medieval castle and trendy McKenzie Beach, the promenade is positively bursting with life.

Two flat-cap-wearing gents have cast their fishing rods into the waves in the hope of an early-morning catch, walkers stroll past taking in the fresh sea air, and there's even the occasional

jogger or cyclist enjoying the sea views as they whizz by.

A simple facelift has breathed new energy into this part of Larnaca, extending the seafront promenade and making it more accessible for parents with pushchairs or people with limited mobility. Yet this is just the start of a new wave of investment.

With the help of an €18 million grant just awarded by the EU, the city is primed to start rebuilding its sports facilities, creating two new squares in the town centre, beginning archaeological excavations at the site of the old port, and renovating a workspace for its budding community of craftsmen and artisans.

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Don't expect a radical transformation – like most things in Cyprus, change is reassuringly slow – but this is a town with its sights set firmly on the future.

▶ A NEW ORDER

Larnaca is many things, but 'trendy' probably wasn't one

of them – until now. Between cocktail bars that spill out on to the streets (several have opened along Kleanthi Kalogera, a small street just off the seafront, and there are more springing up all over town), regular events at Ermou Square, and super-cool McKenzie Beach attracting big-name DJs such as Armin van Buuren, Larnaca is shaking off its somewhat staid reputation. It might not quite rival nearby Ayia Napa on the party circuit, but the year-round population means it's lively even in the off-season, and its growing foodie scene is a real draw, especially since food and drink is generally cheaper than elsewhere on the island. →

TOP TIP

Jet2.com has added an Edinburgh-Larnaca flight, operating on Wednesdays from May 25

RIGHT: McKenzie Beach



FAR RIGHT: Diving the Zenobia



ABOVE: Larnaca's salt lake



Olympic Holidays offers seven nights' B&B at the three-star Amorgos Boutique Hotel from £446, departing June 15, including flights from Gatwick and transfers. olympicholidays.com

Classic Collection Holidays features a week's B&B at Palm Beach Hotel & Bungalows from £632 in April, including flights and private transfers. classic-collection.co.uk

Planet Holidays offers a week's B&B at Ciao Stelio over Valentine's Day, priced from £477, flying on February 9 from Gatwick with Norwegian Airlines. planet-holidays.co.uk

→ Visitors looking to get their bearings should start with the castle. It's the best vantage point to look across palm tree-lined Finikoudes Beach in one direction and the new promenade in the other, plus it affords some of the best sea views in Larnaca. No wonder it's becoming increasingly popular as a wedding venue, offering an atmospheric spot for the ceremony plus spectacular backdrops for the wedding album.

This stretch of sea also hides the famous wreck of the *Zenobia*, the ferry that sank in June 1980 on her maiden voyage, earning the nickname 'the *Titanic* of the Med'. Now one of the best wreck-diving spots in the world, the *Zenobia* has become a habitat for

“**The wreck of the *Zenobia* is a huge driver for tourism, bringing 40,000 divers and €14m to the Larnaca economy**”

barracuda and turtles, with coral even starting to form on its surface.

Not only that, but the wreck is also a huge driver for tourism, bringing an astonishing 40,000 divers each year and an estimated €14 million to the Larnaca economy, not least during

Zenobia Week each June. There are sites accessible to everyone from novice divers to the advanced, plus glass-bottomed boat tours from the marina for non-divers.

That's not the only opportunity to spot wildlife: Larnaca's salt lake is famous for the huge flocks of flamingos that pass through on their annual migration, turning the lake into a swarm of pink. With one of Islam's holiest sites, the mosque of Umm Haram, in the background, it's a sight well worth the short drive out of town.

▶ **PAST TIMES**

Chances are, most Larnaca visitors will be more interested in bars and beaches than history, but there are some cultural highlights for those who wish to delve a little deeper.

At the heart of the old town lies the ninth-century Church of St Lazarus, which was built over the believed burial site of the saint. It holds some fine examples of Greek Orthodox icons, plus it's the starting point for a huge procession on St Lazarus's feast day, eight days before Easter. Even if clients simply want to sit in the square outside with a cup of coffee, it's a pleasant alternative to the busier seafront.

For a more historical take, try the small Pierides Museum (entry €3). It's a private house owned by the Pierides family – some of whom still live upstairs in rooms off-limits to the public – but has a grand collection of ancient artefacts. It's definitely quirky, dotting efforts at modern art between displays of Bronze Age pottery and ancient statues of the fertility goddess, before moving on to medieval glazed pottery made under French Lusignan rule or



LEFT: Church of St Lazarus

intricate, handmade lace painstakingly created – in true Cypriot style – by the museum director's mother.

▶ **BOUTIQUE REVOLUTION**

One of the factors holding Larnaca back somewhat has been a lack of new hotel stock, but with five properties – mostly old town boutiques – having opened in recent months, that

✔ **Tried & Tested**

HOTEL OPERA

The entrance to this 13-room hotel is so low key as to be almost invisible. Hidden away up a flight of marble stairs on the corner of St Lazarus Square (and in Larnaca's old town, it doesn't get more central than that), it's as un-showy as could be.

Yet on reaching the small but friendly first-floor lobby, that starts to make sense. Between bright and airy decor, a shaded veranda perfect for lounging on warmer days, and a self-service bar where guests can help themselves to coffee and cake, this place is all about making people feel at home.

It's been open only two years, and its simple rooms still feel remarkably fresh, filled with nautical-themed artworks created by the owner himself. They aren't plush, but most boast their own fridge and balcony, some



overlooking the lively square below. It's more likely to suit couples than families (although executive rooms can accommodate a camp bed, plus rooms one and two branch off their own lobby like a separate apartment), but it's a comfortable choice for clients who prefer to avoid the trappings of a large beachfront resort in favour of a simple but central hotel.

Book it: Rooms start at €50 in low season and €70 in summer. hoteloperalarnaca.com

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6
OF THE
BEST
WINTER
ACTIVITIES

Larnaka Tourism Board offers complimentary activities for guests staying in the region between November and April.

Mondays: Bird watching at Voroklini Lake and a basket-weaving workshop.

Tuesdays: Visit to Mazotos Camel Park.

Wednesdays: 'Larnaka: Past and Present' guided walk.

Thursdays: Halloumi-making and a traditional flour mill in Athienou village.

Fridays: Guided tour of pottery workshops in Larnaca's Scala district.

Saturdays: Villages tour with lace-making in Lefkara, wine-tasting in Kato Drys and local food in Skarinou.



→ won't be a problem much longer.

Among them are the heritage-listed Lokal, a 19th-century home that has been transformed into a stylish 17-room property; the central Josephine Boutique Hotel, just yards from St Lazarus Square; the upmarket 21-room St Elena, with an indoor pool and sauna; and the adult-only Ciao Stelio, a luxury five-star property on McKenzie Beach.

There is even more development planned, with a 105-room Radisson Blu – the first international brand for the area – set to open in 2017, plus more converted boutiques and agro-tourism-style properties in the surrounding villages.

These make an ideal complement to the classic



beach properties that line the coast above Finikoudes, and which have been the traditional draw for UK visitors. The best known in the British market are the five-star Golden Bay Beach Hotel and Palm Beach Hotel & Bungalows, which will reopen after renovation on March 1. But Cyplon has also reported strong sales for the all-inclusive Princess

Beach Hotel and Lordos Beach Hotel, which suit couples and families alike thanks to their sandy beaches and shallow waters.

Olympic Holidays has added the three-star Amorgos Boutique Hotel in the town centre, close to Finikoudes Beach, and two-star Costantiana Beach Hotel Apartments at McKenzie Beach, for this summer.

With its rising tide of unique hotels, a packed programme of cultural activities (free in winter thanks to a local tourist board initiative), and investment in activities that stretch far beyond the beach, it seems Larnaca is moving out of the simple bucket-and-spade bracket and becoming a much more well-rounded destination that is worthy of another look. 



TOP: Ciao Stelio

LEFT: Palm Beach Hotel & Bungalows



ASK THE EXPERT



Photis Lambrianides, commercial director, Olympic Holidays: "Larnaca has been the most underrated resort for a long time, but it has transformed into Cyprus's coolest and most vibrant resort, particularly the seafront area of Finikoudes. The marina has been enlarged and modernised, and the beach has been widened to offer lots of umbrellas and deckchairs. Some of the bars and cafes have big plasma TVs screening the important matches taking place in Europe – a big plus for football fans – and with its shallow waters, the McKenzie Beach area offers excellent swimming. At night, its plethora of restaurants makes it the liveliest and most popular area."