

# Love island

Culture, cuisine, royalty and romance – Cyprus offers more than beaches, finds **Russell Higham**

**T**he world has been falling in love with Cyprus for thousands of years. Mythological birthplace of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, this sun-kissed island was given to Cleopatra by her lover Mark Antony because its sweet wine was said to remind him of the taste of her lips.

Since then, generations of holidaymakers have been similarly smitten with its golden coastline, guaranteed warmth and the friendly welcome from the islanders – tourist arrivals rose 12% in 2025 compared with the previous year.

My love affair with Cyprus began in Limassol, the country's second-largest city after capital Nicosia. Its seaside promenade extends for two miles and connects the buzzy bars and restaurants around Limassol marina to the old harbour, where fishing boats ply their trade. Here, clients will find authentic tavernas serving local specialities such as *sheftalia* (spicy sausage), *afelia* (marinated pork) and, of course, halloumi.

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

Proud locals have nicknamed Limassol 'the new Dubai' for the futuristic glass-and-steel structures springing up along its shoreline. However, my guide, Myria Stasoulli, wanted to show me some of the fascinating history that draws travellers to the hills outside the city.

The first stop was Kourion, the remains of an ancient city with a magnificent amphitheatre that once held up to 3,000 spectators and has now been partially restored. "The amphitheatre regularly stages concerts, plays and shows – including Greek comedies and dramas – just as it did in the second century BC," Myria explained.

From there, it's a short drive to Kolossi Castle, which was built in the 13th century by the Grand Commandery of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem, a group of religious Crusaders who had set up camp in Cyprus. They took over ➤

Sunset over Limassol

PICTURE: Shutterstock/DedMityay



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

A vineyard producing sweet wine Commandaria; Limassol Carnival; New Helvetia Hotel

PICTURE: Shutterstock/KrakenPlaces



production of a sweet local wine that had been made there since 800BC, renaming it Commandaria. Recognised as one of the world's oldest wines, it is still made today, although production is limited to 14 villages in the Troodos Mountains.

One of those is Dhoros, where the family winery owned by Filippos Karseras is open for guided tours. Presiding over a tasting session, Filippos said: "Commandaria is in the *Guinness World Records* book as the oldest named wine in the world. Richard the Lionheart served it at his wedding to his royal guests, calling it 'the wine of kings, and the king of wines'."

**COMING ROUND THE MOUNTAIN**

Ascending farther into the Troodos, the scenery changes. Gone are the sun-scorched olive groves, replaced by a verdant alpine landscape. The Troodos Unesco Global Geopark covers 15% of the land in Cyprus, giving clients free rein to ski in winter or hike one of many well-signposted trails throughout the year. I donned my boots for the two-mile Caledonia Trail (named by a visiting Scotsman who thought it reminded him of home), leading to one of the highest and most scenic waterfalls in the country, where sparkling waters cascade 12 metres onto giant boulders.

The invigorating trail starts in Platres, which, in the days before air conditioning, was where the great and good would come to seek out the cooler mountain air. They included Queen Victoria's great-granddaughter Princess Mary and English novelist Daphne du Maurier

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who found inspiration for her novel *Rebecca* while staying here in 1936. On the route to the falls, clients pass a mountain stream aptly called Cold River and flora endemic to Cyprus, such as fragrant Troodos sage and golden oak.

Hike completed, my bed for the night was at the oldest hotel in Platres, New Helvetia. A family-owned establishment since its construction in 1929, New Helvetia offers breathtaking views of the Troodos foothills. Fourth-generation proprietor Nikos Matthaïou explained the birdsong I could hear from the terrace, quoting a 1963 poem by Nobel prize-winner George Seferis. He wrote that 'the nightingales won't let you sleep in Platres', and while I can't say they kept me awake at night, they certainly provided a natural alarm call each morning.

**CHEERS TO CYPRUS**

The final stop on my Cypriot odyssey was Larnaca, home to a picturesque salt lake where flamingos land during winter. A visit to the Pierides Museum and its ancient Cypriot artefacts was followed by a stroll along ➤



**Amathus Residences, Limassol**

This new annex of Amathus Beach Hotel comprises luxury suites and apartments along with family and fine-dining restaurants, including seafood by the water in Limanaki. Guests can use the resort's swimming pools, spa and fitness centre or book a suite with a private plunge pool. [amathusresidences.com](http://amathusresidences.com)

**Hotel Indigo, Larnaca**

This adult-only hotel combines character with a great location, offering a modern four-storey property built behind two traditional townhouses. A courtyard restaurant serves Cypriot and international dishes, and there's a rooftop swimming pool and cocktail bar offering views of the city and sea. [ihg.com](http://ihg.com)

**FESTIVALS IN CYPRUS**

Cyprus celebrates any occasion – here are just some of the annual fixtures.

**Limassol Carnival:** This early springtime bash fills Limassol's streets with colour, costumes and caricatures.

**Bee festival:** In late spring, the villages of Odou and Ora celebrate these prolific pollinators with talks, workshops and honey tastings.

**Cherry festival:** In June, four Troodos villages celebrate the harvest with music, cookery and orchard tours.

**Medieval festival:** Each October, Ayia Napa hosts five days of theatre, markets, dances and exhibitions.

**Christmas villages:** Clients can hop around festive markets from late November to early January.

[visitcyprus.com](http://visitcyprus.com)  
[heartlandoflegends.com](http://heartlandoflegends.com)

## DESTINATIONS

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#### BOOK IT

**Sunvil** sells a 10-night stay in Cyprus from £2,100 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes three nights at S Paul Hotel in Limassol, three at the New Helvetia Hotel in Platres and four nights at Kanika Alexander the Great Hotel in Paphos, all with breakfast, plus car hire, 23kg luggage and flights from Gatwick departing September 29. [sunvil.co.uk](http://sunvil.co.uk)

**Cyplon** offers a seven-night stay at Amathus Residences from £4,589 per person, based on two sharing a One Bedroom Residence. Includes breakfast, transfers and flights from Heathrow departing July 3. [cyplon.co.uk](http://cyplon.co.uk)

**Olympic Holidays** sells a seven-night stay at Indigo Hotel, Larnaca, from £1,009 per person, based on two sharing a standard room with breakfast. Includes 15kg luggage, shuttle transfers and flights from Gatwick departing November 24. [olympicholidays.com](http://olympicholidays.com)



PICTURED: Flamingos in winter; Larnaca castle; spicy *sheftalia* PICTURES: Kirill Makarov; Cyprus Deputy Ministry of Tourism

sandy Kastella beach, named for the medieval fortress that looks out over it.

There was just time to quench my thirst before dinner with a quick stop at the Sunmoon bar and event space, where owner Pan Savva offered me a lesson in making a classic brandy sour. The island's

national tippale was invented for King Farouk of Egypt, a regular visitor to Cyprus in the 1930s and '40s. "King Farouk who, by religion, was not supposed to drink alcohol, had it specially concocted to appear as though he was innocently drinking lemonade," explained Pan.

He also taught me the Greek word for cheers, *Yiamas!* It's a word I used frequently in Cyprus. Not just to accompany the delicious food I'd tasted and the friendly new faces I'd met on the way, but to toast this charming island that I, like many before me, had fallen totally and utterly in love with. **TW**

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