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PAST LIVES

A cross section of histories and cultures, Cyprus is still making sense of its modern identity. Selina Denman reconnects with the complex isle that shaped her

Photographs by Owen Tozer

Palms shade the courtyard at Old Port Hotel in Lemesos

Opposite page: Sun loungers beside The Agora Hotel's pool





The marble plaque is improbably specific. The Greek inscription, from 2013, reads: “On this beach, on 9 January one thousand years ago, Aphrodite stepped onto the shores of Pafos.” A hulking rock formation marks the spot where the Greek goddess of love is said to have emerged off the coast of Cyprus in a flurry of sea spray and spume, posing naked, at least according to Botticelli’s 15th-century rendering, on a giant scallop shell. She has long demanded deference on this sun-hardened island at the far-eastern edge of the Mediterranean—the ancient temples at Palaipafos, Amathous, and Kition, where she was once worshipped and has been downgraded over the ages into the bare-chested Aphrodite statuettes sold in souvenir shops across the land. As the sun rises over distant hills (slow and unhurried, as is the Cypriot way), throwing her birthplace into relief against a gray-hazed horizon, I cast a silent challenge to the notoriously capricious deity: Can you help me fall back in love with this place I once called home?

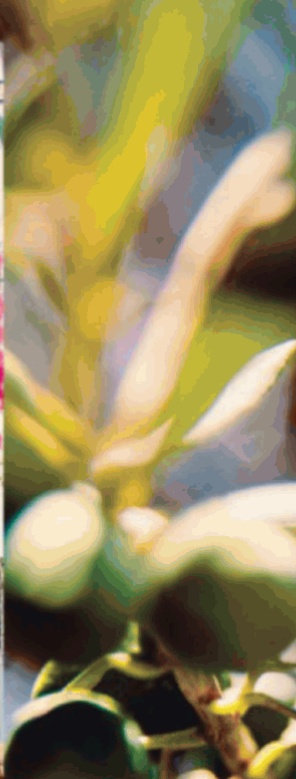
I grew up not far from here, in Cyprus’s second-largest city, Lemesos, or Limassol. My English father and Kenyan Indian mother arrived in the late 1970s and never left. A saucepan-shaped mass 140 miles long and 62 miles wide, Cyprus is the third largest island in the Med, after Sicily and Sardinia. But by my mid-20s, it had started to feel small. Like I didn’t quite belong. Surrounded by sea, I grew restless, even resentful. So I left for Dubai, an inconsequential footnote in a long history of outward and inward migration.

Cyprus’s strategic location has attracted plenty of unwanted admirers over the ages: the Assyrians, Egyptians, Persians, Romans, Arabs, Byzantines, Crusaders, Venetians, Ottomans, and British all passed through, and then, in 1974, Türkiye invaded and continues to occupy 36 percent of the island, rendering Lefkosia, or Nicosia, one of the last remaining divided capitals in the world, forever altering the Cypriot psyche. The result is a knotty, fractured identity. Cyprus is a member of the EU but not quite European. It is Greek-speaking and -leaning but not part of Greece. Though many will try to deny it, it feels undeniably Middle Eastern, closer geographically to Beirut or Amman than Athens or Thessaloniki.

It is pointless, perhaps, to try to untangle my own sense of identity in a place that so struggles with its own. I have returned regularly since I moved away 17 years ago, but this time I set out to properly explore and reconnect. I start in Lemesos’s historical heart, where breakfast in the square in front of Old Port Hotel comes with an archetypal Cypriot view. In the shadow of the 16th-century Kebir Mosque, a remnant of those pre-invasion days when Greek and Turkish Cypriots used to live side by side, old men gather in a kafeneio, an old-school coffee shop, sipping silt-like brews, the clack of backgammon pieces echoed by the sound of prayer beads spun rhythmically around idle fingers. We didn’t come to this part of town in my youth—too rough, too run-down—but regeneration co-funded by the EU has swept out the air of neglect, restored the pretty British-accented neoclassical Venetian- and

From top: Vineyards at Marathasa Wines near the 11th-century village of Kalopanayiotis; one of many cornflower blue doors in Pano Lefkara

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: A narrow Lefkara street; an olive tree in Lemesos; the mosque in Lemesos’s old town; small plates at Alley restaurant; Aphrodite’s Rock at dawn; a view of Lefkara through the ruins of a house



Ottoman-influenced buildings, and pedestrianized the streets around the Cyprus University of Technology and the medieval castle, where shiny restaurants, breweries, and cafés unfurl onto pavements like the city’s army of stray cats. Amid the concept stores and gelato joints, there’s enough of Lemesos’s grit to keep things interesting: the odd building still boarded up or surrendering to decay, its mud-brick innards on show; or the snarl of street art imprinted on walls, including pro-Palestinian graffiti signed “Eiba” that appears almost nightly.

Through a narrow passageway off Agiou Andreou Street, where people have come to shop since the early 20th century, Cypriot chef Christoforos Tofaridis and his business partner, Christos Yiallourous, are preparing to serve their first guests at Alley. Tofaridis cut his teeth in kitchens in London, at the Michelin-starred Sketch, Ottolenghi’s Nopi, and Maltby Street Market, but moved back to Cyprus after Brexit, with no intention of opening his own restaurant. Yiallourous, along with the venue’s potential—then a derelict kafeneio turned drug den with an outdoor space that “was just soil and cat litter,” now an unpretentious collection of white chairs and tables, greenery hugging a stone perimeter wall, and fairy lights twinkling in the dusk—convinced him otherwise.

Childhood visits to farmers markets with his father shaped his food philosophy: simple, honest fare that uses local, seasonal ingredients, a common premise but a novelty on a smallish island that does not have the climatic or agricultural abundance of Italy or Greece. As Tofaridis talks about the challenges of sourcing the ingredients, I feast on roasted cauliflower doused in almond sauce and charcoal-cooked sea bass with a salsa verde made from local capers, parsley, lemon juice, and chile. Alley’s menu feels at once forward-thinking and like a return to the old ways.

Tourists have traditionally come to Cyprus for its beaches: the translucent-watered bays of Ayia Napa and Protaras in the east or the wild coves of Pafos in the west. Sunbeds and towels jostle for space like life-size Tetris pieces on the volcanic slate-gray sands of Lemesos’s Dasoudi beach; farther along the coast, Malindi, a beach bar and restaurant, attracts a lunchtime crowd that lingers long after the sun has set. I tend to head to the western pebbly beaches of Pissouri Bay and Cape Aspro, where, on January 1 each year, my dad and I would go for a bracing swim to ring in the new year. But Cypriots are as connected to the mountains as they are to the sea—and things are happening up in the hills. Pano Lefkara is tucked into a valley 2,100 feet above sea level. Its match-stick-thin streets are lined with terra-cotta-roofed houses, their doors and shutters painted a shade of cornflower blue known in Cypriot dialect as loulladji. In the 15th century the wives of Venetian courtiers came here to escape the heat, and their influence remains in the stitches of the UNESCO-listed Lefkaritika embroidery for which the village is famous. Women sit outside their homes and shops, sewing intricate geometric motifs onto soft linen tablecloths or napkins, as they have for centuries, such as the potamoi, or river pattern, distinct for its triangular zigzags.

These are the crafts Christina Socratous has set out to preserve. As we eat perfectly pink watermelon and freshly picked figs under the shade of

Clockwise from top left: Lefkara artisan Christina Socratous; a piece of Lefkara lace; bathers at Pissouri Beach; Alley’s courtyard; inside The Agora Hotel

Opposite page: Marathasa Wines, overlooking its vineyards and Kalopanayiotis village







a mandarin tree in her late grandfather's Lefkara home, she talks about the potters, basket makers, weavers, embroiderers, and other artisans she commissions. She is dressed in white, from her clogs to the headscarf holding back her waist-length hair—an ethereal antithesis to the black-clad widows associated with Cypriot villages. The Liverpool accent is a surprise, but she was born in the UK and studied at London College of Fashion before returning and launching her clothing and homeware label, Tradition Now. Her aim was to reinvigorate Cyprus's crafts—reshaping earth red terra-cotta jugs into glazed tableware and sculptural vases, or placing Lefkara lace on linen separates and bags. The sturdy cane baskets used to transport potatoes that she has recast as lampshades hang in the restaurant at The Agora Hotel, a boutique in the center of the village.

Aphrodite might have been up to her old tricks on the day Aleksander Eng happened across this historical building, wiped the dust from its windows, peered inside, and fell in love with its long-abandoned bones. The now 36-year-old Dane, who made his fortune as an early investor in Joe & the Juice, and his partner Emilie Green Novél set about converting the former village marketplace into a hotel where 18 rooms frame a courtyard. Midcentury design pieces bump up against vintage dial-up phones and heirlooms, including a tiny pair of scuffed riding boots Eng wore as a child. It feels personal, and a far cry from the soulless resorts that dominated in my day when prawn cocktail was deemed the height of sophistication. Red-and-white-striped loungers under ivory umbrellas surround the pool.

According to Google Maps, it'll take an hour and a half to drive from Lefkara to the Marathasa Valley. It takes closer to three—the winding road dipping, rising, and looping amid forests of pine, cypress, and cedar, through villages whose names I've never heard and past Cyprus's highest point, 6,404-foot Mount Olympus. Travelers have come to Kalopanayiotis for centuries for the healing powers of its sulfur springs. I spend the morning in the Myrianthousa Spa at Casale Panayiotis—in the herbal steam room, snow cabin, and tropical rain showers. I loiter in the hydrotherapy pool and take in the valley. Cedar, eucalyptus, oak, and poplar trees flutter hopefully in a barely there breeze, shrouding the terraced steps of long-forgotten vineyards and the timber roof of the UNESCO-listed St. John Lampadistis monastery, which has some of the best-preserved frescoes on the island. A James Bond–esque lair stands watch from up the mountain, an unapologetic slash of concrete and glass home to Marathasa Wines. Founded in the 11th century, Kalopanayiotis became a hub of agriculture and viticulture and thrived in the 19th century as Cyprus became an exporter of copper. In the 1950s and '60s people started leaving for larger urban centers, and the Turkish invasion in 1974 dealt a final blow, cutting off access to the port at Morfou and bringing mining to a halt. After decades spent working in the Middle East, John Papadouris returned to the place of his childhood and, shocked by its degeneration, started buying up old homes and converting them into

From top: Artist Elina Ioannou stands among pieces of sculpture; the pool at spa retreat Casale Panayiotis

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Grapes in Kalopanayiotis; a view of Skiplili Beach from the path to Cape Aspro; Christoforos Tofaridis, Alley's chef; sundown over Cyprus's highlands; a Casale Panayiotis salad; wine tasting at Marathasa Wines



Pissouri Beach and
Cape Aspro on the
western coast


**Opposite page,
clockwise from top:**
Inside Xeni Artspace
in Lemesos; brightly
colored bougainvillea;
a group gathers in the
shade at Dasoudi Beach;
a bather in the sea
off Malindi Beach





Casale Panayiotis, a rustic 41-room agrotourism hotel that is bringing jobs, opportunity, and life in a Cypriot story of decline and resurgence.

My own turning point comes in Pyrgos, a village outside Lemesos where I lived in my teenage years. A carpet of talc-white dust leads to visual artist Elina Ioannou's workshop. Her sculptures are shaped from Cyprus itself, she says: Her preferred material, calcareous stone, was formed when the island emerged from the sea tens of millions of years ago. Ioannou's latest work celebrates what she calls "the heroes of resistance": species able to survive the harshest conditions, be they prickly pear cacti or land snails that retreat into a dormant state when temperatures are too hot or dry and can remain in that state for up to three years. With wildfires having blackened the hills above Lemesos and years of drought making water shortages a problem, Ioannou's pieces—a chiseled prickly pear fruit strung from a metal chain or empty snail shells crowding a block of white rock—present questions about scarcity and survival that are pertinent to Cyprus. But there is tenderness here too. Prickly pears sprout; snails emerge from shells. Life persists.

From Lemesos to the hidden valleys of Troodos, new life surges from old in Cyprus, this resilient shape-shifter exploited by the whims of history. I realize that we are not so different, she and I. Both the product of myriad influences, both rooted in land and sea, both unsure where we belong. But maybe I will return for good one day and we can work it out together. 

► STAY

At the compact 22-room **S Paul Hotel** in Lemesos's old town, an ancient olive tree grows in the courtyard, and brass and metal accents give the cocoon-like Lux Bar an Art Deco sheen.

The Agora Hotel, Cyprus's most talked-about stay of late, is in Pano Lefkara, known for its UNESCO-listed lace making. In the village's old marketplace, 18 pretty rooms are arranged around a pool courtyard. Cradled in the folds of the Troodos Mountains, **Casale Panayiotis** has 41 rustic rooms, three restaurants, and a spa, all dotted across old homes in Kalopanayiotis village.

► EAT AND DRINK

In Lemesos's old town, **Alley** is a casual restaurant where Cypriot chef Christoforos Tofaridis celebrates local, seasonal ingredients. For after-dinner cocktails, there's the frangipani-scented open-air courtyard of **Library Bar**, or head to rowdy bar-lined Saripolou Street.

► SEE AND DO

Impressive works by local and international artists, including Anish Kapoor, are on show at **XeniArtSpace**, a gallery in Lemesos's soaring Trilogy West Tower. On the ground floor, *Meadow*, a custom-made kinetic installation by Studio Drift, wafts giant fabric flowers down from the ceiling that open and close in a fluid dance.

Tradition Now holds workshops in Lefkara—participants learn about Cypriot silkworm cocoon embroidery while creating bags. In Foini village the **Dio Dio Collective** organizes chair-weaving workshops, part of efforts to document and revive the island's furniture-making heritage. About an hour away is **Marathasa Wines**, which offers vineyard tours and wine tastings paired with views of Mount Olympus, Morfou Bay in the Turkish-occupied north, and Cyprus's capital, Lefkosia. Stay long enough for sunsets that splash the sky in neon orange.