THE TWO FACES OF Aphrodite

This church and mosque in Dipkarpaz, on the Turkish side of Cyprus, symbolize the political and religious nature of the schism on the island.

What's HOT 2000

Split between Greece and Turkey since 1974, Cyprus has finally emerged as a true Mediterranean beauty. JAMES RESTON, JR., falls for her charms

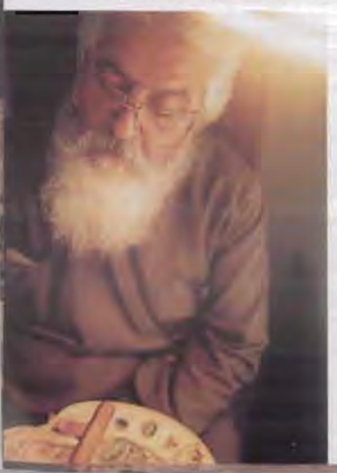
photographs by MICHEL FIGUET

HIGH ON THE WESTERN fringe of the Troodos Mountains, I thought I had finally tasted the essence of Cyprus. The tiny village of Pano Panayia was celebrating the Feast of the Annunciation, marking the moment nine months before the Nativity when the Angel Gabriel informed the Virgin Mary that she was with child. It is always a big day in Pano Panayia, and I had planned to begin it at the morning service at the nearby Monastery of Panayia Chrysorroyiatissa (Our Lady of the Golden Pomegranate). I arrived to find the church packed with villagers and filled with incense and chanting. The people streamed outside to parade behind the icon of the Virgin as it was carried once around the church. Then, in the courtyard, the icon, wrapped in its silver foil, was held high. The villagers happily passed beneath it one by one, a ritual that is said to impart the protection of the Virgin to the faithful.

Afterward, tables in the courtyard were piled high with great rounds of bread, baskets full of *koupes,* a kind of Armenian hush puppy made of minced meat and spices, and *tahinopitta,* small tahini pies. Women walked through the crowd with small baskets of boiled wheat, which you took by the handful to remember the souls of the dead. The men passed around the bottles of monastery wine, the pride of the abbot, who stood nearby in his black cape and hat, presiding approvingly over this happy occasion.

Father Dionysios is a mysterious, remote figure to the villagers of Pano Panayia. When he invited me into his sitting room, decorated with tawny Lefkara lace, I understood this to be a rare privilege. The abbot is a square-shouldered man with a splendid, full white beard and a squeaky, high-pitched voice. He is a man accustomed to silence. The halting conversation began with wine. The monastery's wine is his pride; its production, he feels, is doing the Lord's work. Wine had been central to Christ's first miracle, after all, when He turned water into wine, and the Apostle Paul had recommended wine for the good health of an ailing Saint Timothy.

If wine is his pride, icons are his passion. Father Dionysios was once the chief restorer of religious icons for the founder of independent Cyprus, Archbishop Makarios, and he had been trained at restoration studios in Rome. His high-pitched voice comes from years of laboring with paints containing harmful vapors. Along the walls of his studio hang scores of his finished work, luminous figures with gilded halos and earth-toned colors. The icons possess a deeply human quality, especially the eyes, which often have circles painted beneath them to convey sadness. On the floor were scores more awaiting his brush. On the cover of a catalog of Cyprus icons is his favorite achievement: a startling image of Saint James the Persian with an earring in his right ear, a work he completed in his heyday, before 1974, when



Shakespeare likely derived inspiration for Othello from th scandals of Famagusta's governo

Kyrenia's harbor, in Turkish Cyprus, and Father Dionysios (left), at the Monastery of Panayia Chrysorroyiatissa, on the Greek side of the island.

The food in Cyprus, like this salad at the hotel Anassa (left), is a mix of Turkish and Greek influences, as is the domestic architecture.

Archbishop Makarios planned for an icon museum in Nicosia.

I asked Father Dionysios where his studio was before Cyprus was partitioned. In the north, he replied, at a church called Ayios Spyridon, near a town called Tremetousia. The abbot's old church was named for Saint Spyridon, a popular Greek Cypriot saint who had been at the Council of Nicea in the year A.D. 325. But the town is now in what the Greeks call the occupied territory, Father Dionysios said, and he had had to leave abruptly when the Turkish army came. What happened to the church and his unfinished icons? I asked. He shrugged his shoulders. I told him that I was going to the north in a few weeks and would try to find out for him.

"I don't think you'll succeed," he said. "The church is in a military district."

"What if I can find out?" I insisted. "What would you like me to do?"

"Light a candle for the saint," he said.

CYPRUS IS THE ISLAND OF APHRODITE, BUT THE Greek goddess of love and beauty has a broken heart. For thirteen centuries this lovely island in the eastern Mediterranean, the third largest in that cerulean sea, has been invaded and occupied by outsiders. The curse of geography is partly the reason for its sad history. Cyprus's location off the coast of Turkey and Syria and Palestine has made it the military base for Greeks and Romans, Crusaders and Venetians, Ottomans and British. And so it seems even to Cypriots that their island is forever destined to be someone's victim.

In modern times the ethnic differences of its own people have marred the island's history. To the outside world, Cyprus became "a trouble spot." Eighty percent of Cypriots are ethnically Greek, and they argue that because their island was part of the Hellenic world in the days of Alexander the Great, it is Greek and rightfully theirs. But the remaining twenty percent are of Turkish extraction. These Cypriots argue that the Ottomans ruled the island for three hundred years (from A.D. 1571 to 1878), whereas the Greeks never ruled Cyprus in modern times. So the Turks say that they have an equal claim, or at the very least the right to coexist in peace with their Greek neighbors.

During the years 1963 to 1974, there was no peace. These claims came into tragic conflict, culminating in a 1974 invasion by Turkey, ostensibly to protect the Turkish minority from arbitrary discrimination as the Greek majority sought to become part of Greece with a movement called enosis. The invasion divided the island along a cease-fire line (called the Green Line in Nicosia itself) that is patrolled by the United Nations. It is a line that only foreigners can cross, only in one direction (from south to north), and only for the day, never overnight. The northern thirty-seven percent of the island became Turkish in character, the rest Greek. In both sections, tens of thousands of people were uprooted from their villages and driven north or south. This split, with its melancholy similarity to Kosovo today, leaves Cyprus in the dubious company of Korea, among the last of the world's divided lands.

After twenty-five years, the partition has settled into a calm permanence. Southern Cyprus is bustling, prosperous, connected, and intensely political. Northern Cyprus lives comfortably, remotely, and securely in a time warp. From the standpoint of the traveler, the island has long ceased to be a trouble spot. If we hear about the "Cyprus problem" or the "Cyprus question," it is usually the empty talk of politicians and diplomats. While rela-

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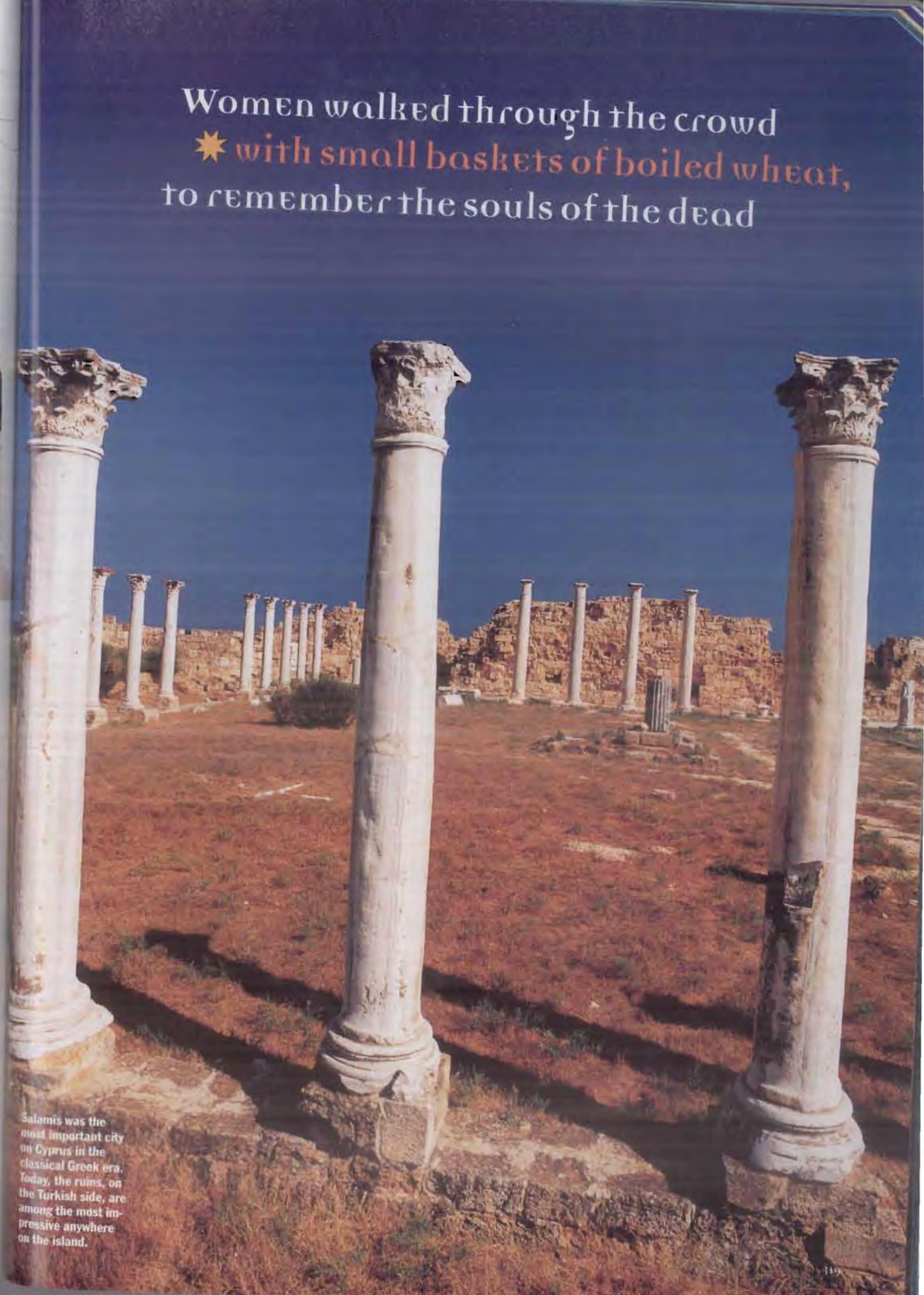
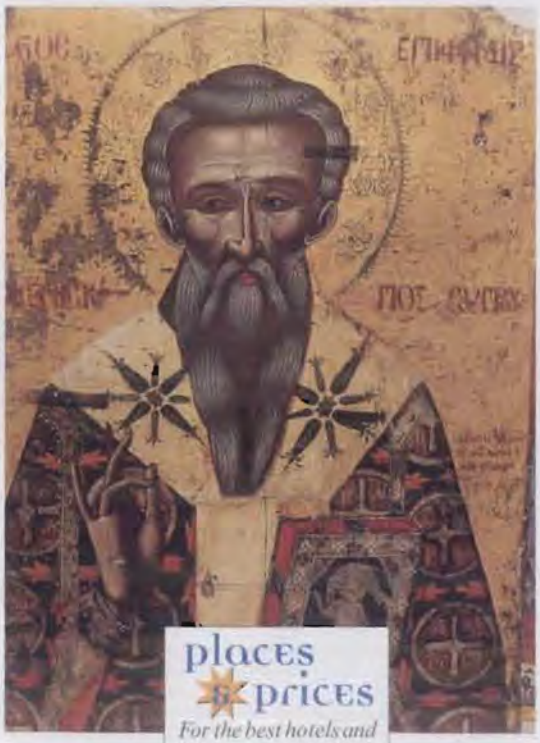


Salamis was the most important city on Cyprus in the classical Greek era. Today, the ruins, on the Turkish side, are among the most impressive anywhere on the island.

tions between Greece and Turkey have grown warmer recently, largely because of the help each country gave the other after the terrible earthquakes last summer, the truth is that there is no "solution" in sight to the division of Cyprus. Both sides of the island are reasonably satisfied with what they have.

This contentment with the status quo was evident during my days in Pano Panayia. I stayed in a stone apartment with a fireplace and a kitchen opening onto a lovely courtyard, where the cheery owner, Yiannoula Katselli, tends her spice garden. Yiannoula grandly calls her four rooms the Palati. It is a palace that you can have for forty dollars a night.

Yiannoula and her bright, red-haired daughter, Elena, took me into their family. We had breakfast in my apartment and dinner down the street at the local restaurant, where Mrs. Leonidas brought out her best *stifado* (beef cooked with onions), which we washed down with the heavy red wine from the nearby hillside. A portrait of Archbishop Makarios, whose childhood was spent in Pano Panayia, smiled down on us. It was signed in red ink, a privilege originally granted to all Orthodox archbishops of Cyprus by the fifth-century emperor of Byzantium to underscore the autonomy of the Church of Cyprus.



On my second evening, they took me to dinner at Yiannoula's mother's house, a short walk up the hill. Since it was Lent and Yiannoula was not eating meat, we dined on fava beans and *trachanas*, the national soup of Cyprus, made of crushed wheat and yogurt. For Elena's generation, I assumed, the political passions of the past had waned. To my surprise, her lack of political passion did not translate into an eagerness for reunion. "I was twenty-four years old before I ever met a Turkish Cypriot," she said. "I don't know how they think or what they feel. Our government makes no effort to get young people from both sides of the country together. I would be very scared to live close to Turkish Cypriots, especially now when they are importing so many poor and fanatic Turks from mainland Turkey." This slight against the north is often voiced in the south, even though the charge of wholesale immigration from Turkey to northern Cyprus is overblown. So much in Cyprus seems to exist on the level of psychology.

"They say a person should love their homeland," goes a popular poem by an activist Turkish Cypriot poet, Neshe Yashin, now living in southern Cyprus. "That's what my father often says. My homeland has been divided into two. Which of the two pieces should I love?"

UNLIKE THE LIMESTONE RANGE THAT traces the northern coast of the island so majestically, the Troodos seem more like a region than a chain of mountains. Volcanic in origin, they are less well defined than the Kyrenia peaks, and they spread over most of the southern part of the island. You can meander aimlessly through these steep valleys, having your coffee with old men who sun themselves on the terraces of the village restaurant, and visiting the many tiny village churches, with their priceless Byzantine frescoes and icons.

The highest peak is Mount Olympus, which rises more than six thousand feet. On a day-trip through these uplands, I plunked myself down in a snowdrift and pulled out my picnic lunch of *halloumi* cheese (the goat cheese that is the standard appetizer), my full-bodied Cyprus sausage, called *loukanika*, my oranges, and a jar of olives. Cyprus olives, I knew from Lawrence Durrell's book *Bitter Lemons*, are small and flavorless compared with their Greek cousin the *kalamata*. But in that snowbank, they were just right, especially after I uncorked my bottle of local cabernet, Despotika, which a restaurant owner in Paphos had recommended. I was saving the bottle of Monastiri that Father Dionysios had given me upon my departure from his monastery in Pano Panayia, because he had recommended another four years of aging.

From the heights of Mount Olympus, I mused upon the political situation in this compact, divided island. In the distance, I could see the Kyrenia Range, upon which the Turkish Cypriot authorities have brazenly painted an enormous flag of their pseudo state. The symbol of the crescent and the star, so associated with Turkey, seems like a thumb-in-the-eye provocation. After the shock of the 1974 invasion and the partition of the island, Greek Cyprus woke up to find what it had lost in the north: the most spectacular mountains, the most charming harbor (Kyrenia), the most beautiful abbey (Bellapais), the most important archaeological site (Salamis). *(Continued on page 367)*

places & prices

For the best hotels and restaurants on both sides of the island, plus recommended books, see "Cyprus, Double Time," on page 348.

(Continued from page 322) the best relic (the 2,300-year-old Kyrenia ship), the spectacular Crusader castles of the northern range (Buffavento, Kantara, and St. Hilarion), the most important pilgrimage site (the Monastery of St. Barnabas), and the best beaches (around Famagusta). Along with these prime attractions, eighty percent of the tourist infrastructure disappeared overnight. This shocking realization led to a binge of seaside building, especially along the beach near the port of Limassol and in the southeastern corner around Ayia Napa. Only the Paphos area in the southwest quadrant of Cyprus escaped overdevelopment.

Now southern Cyprus realizes that it overlooked its greatest asset: three thousand years of rich history, with a series of diverse epochs that are well represented in the icon and Byzantine museums of Nicosia, the art of the ancient village churches, the Greek ruins and well-preserved mosaics of Paphos, the museum at the Kykko Monastery (full of exquisite silver chalices, reliquaries, miters, and sumptuous brocaded capes and stoles). When these treasures are combined with the food, the wine, the traditional mores, and the friendliness, southern Cyprus can slow down a bit as it moves into the new century.

To no one's surprise, culture still clashes with commercialism. On May 12, the forty-ninth annual Miss Universe Pageant will be beamed around the world from Nicosia to an estimated 2.4 billion viewers—under the appreciative gaze of co-sponsor Donald Trump. In the premillennial planning, the pageant was linked to another brainstorm that did not pan out quite so well: to hire the magician David Copperfield and have him make the massive Rock of Aphrodite on the south coast disappear for five minutes. Whatever the feasibility, the price of this stunt—designed to make the point that Cyprus is not a town in Florida—turned out to be too high.

No one seemed too upset about how this tampering with Aphrodite's sacred waters might affect the well-known powers of the rock itself. It has long been acknowledged that if a woman swims around the small rock to the sea side of the big rock—and does so three times counterclockwise, naked, under a full moon, at midnight—she will attain eternal beauty.

Aphrodite, it is said, emerged from the sea at this rock on the south coast, but she bathed beneath a gentle waterfall a hundred miles to the north, near the Akamas Peninsula. It was at the Baths of Aphrodite that Adonis first came upon her, emerging naked from the water. He was smitten, and after he was smitten, he was gored by a wild pig. As a result of this sad death, the blue anemones turned red in Cyprus: "Some born of Adonis's blood," goes the saying, "some of Aphrodite's tears."

THE AKAMAS PENINSULA IS THE last unspoiled strand in southern Cyprus. Most of its twenty miles of small bays and rocky beaches and high, tawny hills and headlands are accessible only by dirt pathways. On the fringe of this wild preserve, the gorgeous and controversial Anassa hotel opened its doors two years ago. This gleaming white palace dominates the uncluttered coast, looking out to the barren headland of the Akamas point. Its units are clustered to give the feel of a village rather than a hotel, and its elegant, simple corridors, softly lit with recessed sconces and decorated with portraits of Cypriot saints, reminded me of Crusader catacombs I have seen in the Middle East. But the designers actually looked to the hanging balconies and simple roof lines of old Nicosia for their inspiration.

The Anassa is the creation of Alecos Michaelides, himself a displaced person from the city of Famagusta. In Greek Cyprus, Michaelides has been the foreign minister and the speaker of Parliament, and he could be a presidential candidate. It is, of course, his political stature that makes his hotel the source of so much gossip, with the persistent rumor that the permission to build a castle of such size in this pristine area came only as a result of his political clout.

"Once you dip your finger in the honey, it's hard not to lick" goes an old Cypriot proverb, and it is often invoked in relation to Michaelides.

I spent a delicious night at the Anassa, walking its corridors and grounds, relaxing on its comfortable, spacious terrace above the Mediterranean, and discussing the world scene with the suave Mr. Michaelides. That night, I learned what a small island Cyprus is: Michaelides had put up the seed money for Father Dionysios to begin his winery at the Monastery of Panayia Chrysorroyiatissa in Pano Panayia.

I COULD HAVE LIMITED MY VISIT to northern Cyprus to a day-trip over the Green Line, but I sensed that this would not do justice to the north. I wanted to experience the languor of the Turkish side, unconstrained by the dictates of the Greek Cypriot authorities in the south. When, two weeks later, I flew from Istanbul to Ercan, the airport for northern Cyprus, my prom-

ise to Father Dionysios to investigate his lost monastery and missing icons weighed heavily on me. First, I needed to disabuse myself of certain notions about the north that had been planted in my mind in the south.

Northern Cyprus purports to be a full-fledged country. With a population the size of a small American city, it has a president, a parliament, a foreign ministry, and a somewhat spotty government bureaucracy. By all accounts, it is trying hard to be a democracy—despite the presence of thirty thousand Turkish soldiers. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus may have the best tourist attractions on the whole island. All it lacks is respect.

In southern Cyprus, the drum beats relentlessly about northern Cyprus being "occupied territory," a "pseudo state" with a "so-called president" and a "phony bureaucracy." I was soon to find out that these scolds are treated with good humor in northern Cyprus. "They refer to our pseudo state, our pseudo president, our pseudo parliament," a British expat told me over cocktails, "but when they refer to our pseudo police, they've gone too far." The northern side calls the events of 1974 the Turkish Peace Operation.

When I awoke in Kyrenia and walked out onto my terrace, with the sea to my right and the Kyrenia Mountains rising dramatically from the coastal plain, I was reminded of the Grand Tetons and of Byron: "The mountains look on Marathon, and Marathon looks on the sea," he wrote of a different Hellenic spot, although he could have written that line about Kyrenia. The play of light on blue water, green coastline, white houses, and spiny gray mountains was a feast. To the east, the trademark of the northern range, the five-fingered mountain known as Pentadaktylos (Besparmaklar), rose distinctively, bringing to mind another literary line, this one closer to home—Lawrence Durrell's gasp when he first took in this panorama: "Could one ever do any work with such scenery?"

Kyrenia's tiny harbor is often called the Jewel of Cyprus. Outdoor restaurants, excursion boats, and small hotels surround it, but there is no amplified music and no establishment that is part of an international chain. At a candlelight dinner, the only sounds are conversation, laughter, and the clattering of the boat lines in this quiet, understated place. On the harbor's far side looms the immense, twelfth-century Kyrenia Castle, the best preserved of all the Crusader castles I visited in a month in the Middle East. Here, Richard the Lion-Hearted supposedly tarried on his way to the Holy Land in the year A.D. 1191.

To visit northern Cyprus is to go back in time, to return, some say, to the way Cyprus was when it was a united and peaceful backwater. One does not come to northern Cyprus for a wild and merry time but for simple pleasures. Yet there is progress. "We've moved from the 1930s to the 1950s," an ancient Brit told me at a cocktail party of the British Residents Society. A retired RAF officer remarked over his brandy sour, "There's nothing quite like watching squadrons of cranes flying in low for a landing on their refueling stop between Europe and Africa."

ON THE CRAGS OF THE KYRENIA Mountains are three of the most fascinating Crusader castles in the entire eastern Mediterranean. St. Hilarion, Buffavento, and Kantara are within sight of one another for tactical reasons, and it is not hard to imagine Crusaders signaling the other garrisons at the approach of an unidentified ship.

At more than three thousand feet, Buffavento is the highest of the three. The romantic, swirling mist parted from time to time there, revealing an astounding panorama. To the north, the crenulated coastline is graced by Alagadi Beach, a perfect and protected horseshoe strand also known as Turtle Beach, for the green and loggerhead turtles that emerge from the sea there every year to lay their eggs. The view to the south across the vast, wheat-covered Mesaoria Plain, with Nicosia at its center, is extraordinary. Nowhere in Cyprus can one escape recent history, it seems. The Crusader castle at Buffavento had been a garrison for Greek soldiers in the 1960s, and all around the next castle to the west, St. Hilarion, just visible in the distance, Turkish paratroopers had dropped in from the air. On my visit to St. Hilarion, I preferred to think of its dreamy connection to Walt Disney, who imagined its spires and towers as the inspiration for the castle in *Sleeping Beauty*. And at the colossus of Kantara, also known as the Fortress of a Hundred Chambers, copper-faced boys were selling the wild pink irises that abound in springtime.

COMMUNICATION, I FOUND, WAS harder in northern than in southern Cyprus, because the sound of Turkish is even more foreign to my ear than Greek, and in the isolation of the north, English can be just as incomprehensible to the natives. One evening in Bellapais, listening to the strains of an English girls' choir from Cambridge wafting over the village, I ordered a plate of

olives and got a candle instead.

My drive up the hill from Kyrenia to Bellapais was a literary pilgrimage. Lawrence Durrell had spent four years in Bellapais in the 1950s, writing his *Alexandria Quartet* by night because by day he was the official apologist for British colonial rule. His house is on a steep slope above the village, and its vine-covered terrace looks down on the graceful, Gothic Abbey of Bellapais and the expanse of Mediterranean beyond.

The Bellapais of today is, of course, much different from Durrell's village. In *Bitter Lemons*, his book about his years in Cyprus, Durrell wrote about his conversations with the *muhtar*, the mayor of Bellapais, as he contemplated purchasing his villa on the hill. That gentleman, of course, had been Greek and had warned Durrell of how strongly the villagers opposed the British and supported enosis, the movement to join the Greek state.

Now, such sentiments are long forgotten. No Greeks live in Bellapais. The current *muhtar* is a stylish, handsome Cypriot named Nazmi Kabadayi. His roots in Bellapais are new: His entire village was transplanted here wholesale, from its original location near the southern Cyprus city of Larnaca. The *muhtar* himself had been a Greek prisoner of war and had been held for some months in a football stadium in Limassol, before he was released in 1974. His preoccupations now are mundane in comparison—like parking for the concerts at the abbey. We drank coffee across the street from the Tree of Idleness restaurant, since the *muhtar* was in a spat with the owners over the hoarding of charcoal.

THE NEXT DAY, I FULFILLED MY promise to Father Dionysios. The drive over the Kyrenia Mountains took my guide and me through a series of hamlets. We then came upon Athlar, Murataga, and Sandallar, where memorials commemorate the massacre of Turkish villagers by Greek troops more than thirty years ago. In many of these villages, small Orthodox churches have been transformed into mosques. On their distinctive bell towers, loudspeakers now hang to blare the call to prayer in Arabic over the rooftops.

"You see," my guide said, "nothing has changed with these village churches. Everything has been saved. Only carpets have been put on the floors." I was entering sensitive turf. For some years, the propaganda war between the two sides of Cyprus has featured the question of whether the cultural heritage of the north was being sold wholesale on the international black market, with the complicity of the Turkish authorities. Ancient treasures from Orthodox churches in Cyprus had turned up on the black market. Who was to blame? Each side pointed to the other, and UNESCO currently has an investigation under way. The government of the south, in a booklet called "Flagellum Dei," purports to chronicle not only negligence but the theft and sale of priceless antiquities from the churches in the Turkish north.

Northern Cyprus, in turn, produced its own booklet, touting its efforts to protect the Christian heritage. The northern authorities concede that some invaluable artworks were lost in the turbulent years before the government of northern Cyprus was fully organized. But they insist that they are doing their best to protect the Christian treasures, despite their limited resources and the disadvantage of their dubious diplomatic status. And since UNESCO cannot recognize the legitimacy of northern Cyprus, its efforts are hampered.

And so for me, Father Dionysios's icon atelier in Tremetousia had become a test case.

En route, we stopped in Famagusta. It was not hard to understand why this walled city was once the most attractive destination in Cyprus. Shakespeare likely derived his inspiration for Othello from the scandals of the governor of this early-sixteenth-century Venetian port, Cristoforo Moro, the Moor. But it was not so much Famagusta's tourist sights that once attracted visitors: Othello's Tower, the impressive Venetian walls that surround the city, or St. Nicholas's Cathedral, to which the Ottomans added a tall minaret. It was the beaches. At the Palm Beach Hotel, where we lunched, you have the unsettling experience of gazing across a topless beach to the ghost town of Varosha.

In the gazetteer of the world's most bizarre sites, Varosha must certainly rank in the top ten. Before 1974, this suburb of Famagusta was a Palm Beach of luxury hotels and high-rise condominiums along Cyprus's best strand. When the Turkish planes began to drop their bombs, Varosha's well-heeled residents fled en masse. After the cease-fire, a UN resolution required that Varosha remain unoccupied, presumably to prompt a quick resolution of the Cyprus problem. Twenty-five years later, the suburb is a modern-day ruin, fenced in and empty, "protected" by a combined force of UN and Turkish soldiers as it slowly falls apart. From time to time, the status of Varosha becomes a bargaining chip between the two sides of Cyprus. Several days before my sightseeing trip to Famagusta, as the fighting raged in Kosovo, the president of Turkish Cyprus, Rauf Denktash, offered Varosha as a place of asylum for five thousand Albanian refugees. In the never-ending diplomatic game, the offer seemed intended only for local consumption.

IT WAS MIDAFTERNOON BEFORE I arrived in Tremetousia, whose newly minted Turkish name is Erdemli. The village is situated just over a low ridge from the buffer zone between the two faces of Cyprus, and it is no more than a collection of dusty houses around two small stores. In one shop, old men sat around a snowy television. After I stated my business, a boy was sent for the keeper of the town's memory, and we soon formed a knot outside in the dirt street.

A balding, portly man became their spokesman, and he did not seem pleased. The Greek monastery where Father Dionysios restored his icons still stood on the outskirts of the village, he said, but it was now inside a Turkish military compound. He advised me not to visit it. Only a few weeks before, several foreigners who had expressed the same interest were held inside the post for interrogation.

I asked about Father Dionysios. One elderly man remembered a silent Greek priest who was an artist—it had been the old man's job to provide the hermit with lambs for his table. The monks had simply left Ayios Spyridon one day in 1974, and that was that.

Outside Tremetousia, we drove slowly past the small military compound. Turkish soldiers sat languidly on the low, white wall that surrounded the post, their carbines across their laps. Behind them, the limestone walls and bell tower of the Monastery of St. Spyridon were clearly visible, a huge number four on the side door indicating its current function as a barracks. It seemed that I would not be lighting a candle to Saint Spyridon that day.

Later, back on the north coast, an official from the Department of Antiquities took me to a large, dank room in Kyrenia Castle. On the floor, hundreds of priceless icons from the Greek churches of northern Cyprus were stacked haphazardly. Next year, he said, the department hoped to add some sort of climate control, but the budget was tight. A few hours later, this same official produced a list of 147 icons that had been taken from the Monastery of St. Spyridon. "You see, they are protected," he said emphatically. "And if there is ever an agreement between northern and southern Cyprus, they will, of course, be returned." □