

Paradise

CARL THOMPSON
experiences a
warm welcome in
the Turkish part
of Cyprus after
the border opens



ANCIENT: The amphitheatre at Salamis

THE Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) was born in August 1974, the war child of a conflict that split the island into Greek and Turkish enclaves. Shunned by the world, this tiny territory of 1,300 square miles promptly dropped through a loophole in the fabric of time, joining a select band of places seemingly immune from the march of history.

However, as the people of East Germany know, the world comes calling sooner or later. History repeated itself here on April 23 when, to most of the citizens' amazement, the much vilified Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktas suddenly reinstated free movement across the border with the Greek-ruled southern part of the island.

The days following this seismic shift were frenzied. Up to 30,000 people per day, many of them tearful, squeezed through checkpoints to revisit homes they had thought lost for ever. Some stayed behind, reluctant to show their passports and thereby acknowledge the

legitimacy of TRNC. Other less principled souls headed straight for the casinos and cabaret bars of the south. Many packed free buses to ogle the sprawling changes of the island's Greek area as almost everybody grabbed the chance to do something denied them for 29 years.

As the wave of euphoria subsided, I ventured in the opposite direction to the island's original glamour resort of

dinner plates festered on tables and Seventies cars disintegrated in decades of dust.

More surreal still were a handful of apparently oblivious tourists perched on the white sands, sipping cold drinks. "We come here for the peace and quiet," one explained to me. I had to concede that, if it's tranquillity you want, a ghost town takes some beating.

Expect the unexpected. Even in the hushed

Kyrenia hills, a distant pretty village church may be a desecrated shell, filled with rubble and graffiti. Equally unforeseen is the warmth of the Turkish Cypriot welcome. On one occasion, my car was surrounded

by schoolchildren, delighted to meet a stranger and wishing me "welcome". I heard the word many more times from passing drivers on my journey to Kyrenia and felt like someone's long-lost relative.

Kyrenia turned out to be the jewel of the north, a picture perfect harbour town already geared for the tourist influx it

Famagusta. At first, everything seemed disappointingly normal but a closer look revealed the beach hotels to be bombed out carcasses, every window long since darkened by shellfire. Beyond a chainlink fence marking the buffer zone stood an entire ghost city where tattered rags still hung on washing lines,



n's The Word...

why those discerning travellers who covered NORTH CYPRUS try to... And who can blame them, when left in the Mediterranean which and untouched by commercialism, is a charmed land. A land where on the crowds, and discover miles of

deserted golden, sandy beaches lapped by the clear, warm waters of the Mediterranean. A land with a treasure trove of castles, abbeys and palaces, which you can explore at will. A peaceful haven where your children can experience the wonder of allowing their imagination to roam freely. A land where you will experience a holiday so special that you will definitely want to spread the word...



lost and found

Picture: WORLD PICTURES



JEWEL: The picture perfect port of Kyrenia is geared for tourists now northern Cyprus has opened up

deserves. I recovered from my initial disorientation by indulging in some mock-serious haggling with the kind of back street tailors rarely found by sticking up on sticky Turkish delight (referred to as "Cyprus delight" in the south).

I then turned inland for a whistle stop tour of the north's historical highlights. The city kingdom of Salamis, the main archaeological site on Cyprus, boasts a Roman gymnasium and a fully intact amphitheatre. The present capital, north Nicosia, is dominated by the glorious Selimiye Mosque alongside the fine Ottoman era Great Inn. Famagusta's Venetian walled city is notable for Othello's Tower, so called because Shakespeare's character was apparently based on a Venetian soldier serving there.

The north's pristine environment is the main benefit coming from its lack of development. Many visitors trek through the orchid-filled forests of the Kyrenia hills or dive in the clear blue waters. The ultimate endorsement of the fabulous beaches of the

Karpas peninsular is provided by loggerhead turtles. These magnificent creatures need absolute peace and quiet to nest and have been returning for 100 million years. The north has 88 suitable nesting beaches for them, the south just one.

With reunification under way, it's uncertain whether the north can retain such serenity. After 29 years of isolation, the lure of tourist currencies is strong but the north may avoid succumbing to the south's Ayia Napa-style excesses. The world has plenty of discos, shopping malls and high-rise resorts; what it lacks is destinations with the enigmatic charm of northern Cyprus.

● GETTING THERE:
Anatolian Sky Holidays
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40/www.anatolian-sky.co.uk) offers seven nights in North Cyprus, staying at the seafaring Dome Hotel, from £389pp (two sharing) for half-board accommodation, return flights and transfers. North Cyprus Tourist Office: 020 7631 1930/www.holidayinn-northerncyprus.com

NORTH CYPRUS ESSENTIALS

THERE are two north-south checkpoints in Nicosia, at the Ledra Palace Hotel for pedestrians only and Agios Dometios for car passengers only.

The Pergamos and Strovilia crossing points cater for both pedestrians and cars. Present your passport along with CY£10 for third-party insurance.

You may cross from 8am to 1pm and must return by midnight through the same checkpoint. Keep the map given to you at the border as places in the north have been redesignated with Turkish names. The exchange rate is 3 million lira to CY£1 so, unless you're happy dealing in millions, take a calculator.

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