

## Cyprus: A Divided Island

In Nothing Ventured: Disabled People's Experiences of Travel Worldwide  
Ed. Alison Walsh, Rough Guides, 1990

The number of visitors to Cyprus annually is now roughly twice the entire population of the country. Tourism has only recently become a major industry in Cyprus and tourist information was not widely available prior to our arrival, particularly with respect to women or disabled travellers. Our advantage was that we arrived with relatively few preconceptions, enabling us to come closer to experiencing 'real Cyprus'. (We seemed to visit 'just in time' as the harbour is very much beginning to absorb the homogenous look of other holiday resorts.)

The priority during my stay was convalescence. I travelled with a friend and we planned to 'enjoy' the island, but were quite content to go no further than a sun, sea and sand holiday. This removed all the pressure and temptation to rush everywhere and experience everything. In practice, we developed an extremely vague and flexible 'routine' - a bit of culture in the morning after a 7.50 swim, home for lunch, and siesta, return to the pool for a tea-time swim and sunbathe, home for pre-prandials, salad-supper and early, early bed!

On our arrival at Paphos Airport we were met by the architect-builder of the villa in which we were staying, also the relative of the car hire firm we used. Unfortunately he couldn't remember where he'd built the villa so in the early hours of the morning we had one-and-a-half hours' complete mystery tour, discovering dead-ends, dirt tracks and numberless houses before we came across the villa we wanted, definitely more by luck than design.

The villa belonged to a friend of a friend of a friend, and was part of the Leptos Kamares Village (estate) around 11km from Paphos, the nearest town. Michael Leptos must be a multi-millionaire by now going by the number of developments which carry his name. The extent of building is extraordinary and must be the major industry on the coast. Immediately next door, about ten yards from my left ear when lying down, they were building another villa. The bulldozers started at 6.30 each morning - a rude awakening, but a good incentive to get up and out early before the main heat of the day.

My feelings about where we stayed were ambivalent. We would have preferred to have stayed in Cypriot accommodation with a local family, but in practice, we didn't have a lot of choice. In order to ensure I had at least a minimum of wheelchair access, and could also rest or swim as needed, we had to opt for either a hotel at the more expensive end of the range or make arrangements through personal contacts. The villas and plots of land are predominantly owned by foreigners, mainly British. There is the Kamares Club, restaurant, bar, pool table, swimming pool - very British, very colonial, frequented by

some very swanky Brits full of superiority and condescension towards the locals employed there. Perhaps the main advantage of this arrangement is that the negative impact of outside cultures is relatively confined. However, driving down from the hills towards Paphos, through local and traditional villages, life seems much harder. It's difficult to know what people's standard of living is like, and of course where we are staying is hardly 'Cyprus lifestyle', but it must be really galling to watch foreigners snapping up retirement homes, bringing their wealth and alien cultures, etc. But even that isn't clear-cut, because of the economic contribution made by the tourists.

We hired a car, but only a manual transmission was available so I could not drive. The hire charge almost doubled the cost of the holiday for the two of us, but was essential being situated so far from town. The villa had 15 steps down to the front door and so, although within a couple of days I discovered I could circumnavigate them by scaling a very low wall and be collected from the bottom of the hill instead, we had to be very organised in our coming and goings to keep the effort to a minimum. It did mean I was made very dependent and that all of our time outside the villa had to be spent together.

Access was a constant issue. Very few places were adequately wheelchair-accessible, although as tourism becomes established the situation is improving. As a rule poor access did not prevent us from visiting the places we chose, although at times it did demand a fair degree of initiative and determination and biting of tongues.

Our visit to the Tombs of the Kings, a burial ground with underground chambers for Roman VIPs, required great staying-power. That the terrain was rough was an understatement. We tackled the vast area, stretching for one-and-a-half miles, down steep hollows and over mini-boulders and scrub, through sheer will-power. As we went - for an hour-and-a-half - my friend shoving, me pushing with all our might - I counted at least 100 people, hulking, fit and healthy, and they just watched. Spectator sport. At times the people watching us outnumbered those looking at the tombs.

However, the Department of Antiquities curators at the House of Dionysus and Paphos District Museum were particularly helpful, organising people-lifts competently and hassle-free.

Another very constructive approach came from the leader of Exalt, offering jeep excursions to remote and often uninhabited areas of western Cyprus. I had read about the tours, but had decided to commit myself only if the tour guide was prepared to think in terms of solutions rather than problems, because I didn't want the risk that the hassle might outweigh the benefits. Imagine my delight when the guide was totally up-front - never taken a disabled person on a tour before, but you tell me what you need and let's get on with it. So we booked and I was not disappointed!

On the disability-front things couldn't have been easier. I was concerned about distorting

the itinerary or demanding too much of other group members, but the tour leader set the tone and everyone joined in. So with people willing to haul me over boulders and piggy-back me down cliff faces the whole experience became possible.

We took the coastal road from Paphos, and when the tarmac petered out continued along dust tracks and over fire breaks. We were surprised throughout our stay at the variety of landscape within such a small area: limestone to volcanic rock, plains to mountains, different qualities and colours of sea, changing village structure, and so on.

We stopped high above Lara beach, now a protected area because of the tourist threat to turtle breeding. The cafe lights mirror the phosphorescence of the sea, so that the baby turtles set off in the wrong direction, die and the turtle population is depleted. Lara is one of the few sandy beaches and the main turtle-breeding ground in Cyprus. The protection bans beach umbrellas and loungers from the sand, and the mooring of pleasure cruisers. However, pleasure boat trips are a boom trade and the law is flouted. Whilst there we watched a cruiser getting closer and closer to the beach, and the scientists leapt into their dinghy to fend it off and protect the turtles. Shades of James Bond.

We continued through the British military firing range ("do not pick up any round metal object - it may explode and kill you") to the most northerly tip of the peninsula and complete with panoramic view of shore and blue, blue sea. I've never seen sea of such multi and vibrant colour - blue, turquoise, ultramarine, in patches and swatches, and a pale purple tint at the horizon-sky. A cliff dropped down to a black-shingle beach close to the sea's edge, and the sea bed was white and shiny black sand. The salt-buoyancy made floating effortless and I could happily have continued swimming and bobbing up and down seal-like all day!

Our return journey took us through a Turkish-Cypriot village, abandoned in the '74 war. A few houses had been moved into by Greek-Cypriot refugees, on a no-ownership basis so that if and when the conflict is resolved Greek-Cypriots cannot be accused of occupying Turkish villages. Meanwhile the remaining homes, schools, social buildings, the majority of the village, fall into ruin.

Our second jeep trip was specifically to explore an abandoned village. The sight was really gutting. Abandoned during the Turkish invasion when United Nations troops came down and removed occupants from either 'wrong' side of the green line on a 'temporary' basis which has become 15 years. Weathering and occasional vandalism are reducing even solidly-built homes to ruin - sagging and split bamboo roofs, trees growing into rooms, main structure arches leaning and cracking. The village must have been a thriving community - winding cobbled streets, coffee shops, solid houses. Now it is used by shepherds as a staging post for their animals. We found cats and dogs and the floors of people's homes were slippery with goat dung. Amongst some tall grasses were a rusting tricycle and a decapitated plastic doll's head.

Just about everyone we met spoke nostalgically of 'before' and many long to return home across the line. People are determined things will be returned to pre-74, although even then what has happened cannot be totally erased. People fight hard to keep the determination alive in their children, but as a new generation grows up not knowing their home land can that determination be sufficient?

We went to the local high school dance-drama dedicated to occupied (Turkish) Cyprus. The Roman amphitheatre had been half restored on its original site, at the seashore, below a lighthouse, with warm sea breezes wafting through clear air in a dark and star-twinkling night... I sat on a little plinth at the end of the bottom row of the amphitheatre, feeling a little like a Grecian urn on a pedestal, especially when the spotlights were being tested. The performance was in Greek, but fairly soon I stopped trying to recognise the odd word and instead listened to the melody, lamenting lost homes and lives and renewing promises to continue the struggle.

What struck me overall was the push-me-pull-you state of Cyprus. Was the holiday exhilarating or depressing? It all felt something of a fable: an exquisite and naive island, smaller than Wales, with a tradition of hospitality, low crime rate, glorious scenery, idyllic climate, etc., invaded by the wicked, worldly-wise and corrupt, from all sides and throughout history - if it's not the British, it's the Turks or Arabs or Venetians, and if it's none of these, it's the tourists and developers. The Turkish issue, however, appears to subsume other concerns, and the implications of development are consequently not approached sufficiently critically or comprehensively.

The pressures on the landscape are immense, predominantly stemming from people who already have plenty and without profit to those who don't - the world over, I suppose. The huge building developments stretching for miles along the coast rarely benefit the local community and are often detrimental. Many ordinary Cypriots used to make ends meet by providing bed and breakfast to the, then small number of, tourists. Now the large complexes poach visitors and local people lose revenue.

Meantime, the landscape is being destroyed, along with some of the country's history. Proposed ecological legislation is announced without stop-gap restrictions at planning stage. This allows developers to make their mark quickly before the laws are finalised. A large area by 'our' idyllic beach had been purchased by the owner of a multi-national corporation. He had chopped down large areas of indigenous woodland, replacing it with fruit trees so that under the guise of agriculture he can stay the wrath of the law. Then just before the Akamas becomes a protected area (if it does) his building will commence. Goodbye to the perfection of the north-west peninsula.

I still find it hard to believe that governments can be so naive or negligent as to allow this to happen. The situation feels more acute in Cyprus because of its scale - a small amount

of development can squeeze the whole country; one misplaced villa can destroy an entire coastline. The developers benefit whilst the real people are more often forced to compromise their lifestyles to accommodate the tourist-invasion.

A concerted effort is now being made to preserve Cypriot culture, hopefully not just for the sake of tourism. There are Roman sites, mountain monasteries, restored frescos and a folk art museum. The most outstanding of these, for me, was the Ethnographic Museum in Paphos, a 'living' exhibition of Cypriot civilisation. It was our final visit and drew together the threads of much of what we had seen and learnt. The museum was set up by Professor Eliades who married into a family home which turned out to have second century tombs in the garden, now partially excavated. The whole shebang is critically under-funded, but kept going by his wife, Chryso Eliades, who runs it on sheer devotion. She gave the two of us a personal detailed tour, explaining everything from traditional baskets and bed linen, to cart and chapel, displayed throughout their home. The family squeezes into around a third of the upstairs of the house, with at least half of the rooms they inhabit open to museum visitors. Mrs Eliades gives guided tours from 10.00 to 7.00, with a couple of hours off in the afternoon, seven days a week. In her spare time she runs the home and family...

It was during our tour that I began to understand the significance of the reactions I had received as a disabled person throughout my stay: consternation, averted eyes, a physical drawing back, sometimes accompanied by muttering, particularly amongst middle-aged and older people. It is not as if we don't receive similar reactions in Britain, but these were somehow even deeper, more like an impenetrable wall.

What I initially interpreted as hostility stems from the Greek Orthodox religious significance of disability. Reactions were muttered prayers and sorrow for my 'sickness', prayers for healing, and counting personal blessings. I don't pretend to feel comfortable with such reactions, as they don't relate to my experience as a disabled person, but understanding their origins places them more into perspective.

The religious influence is deep and even in the most remote and derelict church we found offerings of wax effigies of limbs or heads or whole babies to ask for healing or a safe passage after death. Similarly, bits of fabric from the ill or disabled person's clothing or even bits of plastic carrier are tied to holy trees in church grounds.

I scarcely saw another disabled person in a whole month, although of course there must be disabled people, if only as a result of the '74 war. We did eventually find an accessible (tourist) toilet down by the harbour and I couldn't have been alone because there were tyre tracks before me! Yet I was intrigued to discover where we are all - Cypriots and visitors. Yellow Pages seemed like a good beginning for finding out about disability provision in the area. I looked up disability (handicap, invalid, health, blind, etc), but found not a single reference, direct or indirect. I then learnt that Cyprus has no state disability

welfare system, leaving disabled people entirely dependent on family and benefactors. The tiny number of segregated institutions appears to be privately run. I imagine from that, that wheelchairs and sundry equipment just doesn't exist amongst the vast majority of Cypriots, hence Disabled people's almost total invisibility. The unusual event of a disabled woman out of doors, wheelchair and all, must explain local people's consternation.

As two women unaccompanied by men and one of us disabled, we often felt conspicuous and found it surprisingly difficult to make contact with Cypriot women. It is a very a macho society. All the villages we passed through, day and evening, had street-side cafes full of men, talking, talking, but no women in sight. As men we could probably have stopped off for a drink and discovered much more of 'real Cyprus', and this is the vein of some of the more imaginative travel books, but it is unlikely we would have been welcomed as women. Reading between the lines, there is the beginning of a women's movement in Cyprus, evidenced a few months earlier in a march of 3000 women to the green line which divides the country.

Like so many countries, Cyprus and Cypriot people are undergoing rapid change. The fundamental issues affecting the country are similar to so much of the world, but the scale of change and sense of urgency seems particularly visible in such a compact geographical area. Even within one month I was able to experience and learn a great deal and left inspired to both to return and to travel further afield.