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MED AND BREAKFAST
Leek and feta pie at Aigaion House in the Old Town. Clockwise from right: a one-bedroom suite at Amyth of Nicosia; its all-day eatery Amyth Kouzina; the view from a room. Opposite: an icon dated to 1280 from the Byzantine Museum collection.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOS DRAZOS (AMYTH)

CULTURAL CONVERGENCE

Nicosia in Cyprus might be the world’s last divided capital, but a new wave of cultural cross-pollination has informed the city’s gentrified precincts, artisanal workshops and a stately hotel in a historical villa.

By **Rachel Howard**

I’ll bring Champagne. Just bring your passport.” I’ve never had to show my ID to attend a dinner party before, but they do things differently in Nicosia. And this was no ordinary invitation: after a serendipitous encounter with an old Greek-Cypriot friend, I was tagging along to the housewarming of some Turkish-Cypriots on the other side of the Green Line, the buffer zone that has divided the capital of Cyprus since 1974. Our party – an architect, a fashion designer, a psychologist, a policy adviser and me – gathered at the Ledra Palace crossing, one of three checkpoints that connects the bisected city. Smartly dressed and bearing gifts, we strolled through the no-man’s land of the artificial border, past abandoned mansions with overgrown gardens, their windows filled with sandbags. The Ledra Palace – once a grand hotel, now fenced off and occupied by the UN peacekeeping force – looked forlorn, its elegant façade riddled with bullet holes. Across the street, the Home for Cooperation, a café and community centre that promotes peace-building through culture, struck a more hopeful note, despite the border fence looming behind it.

Our passports were inspected by two sets of indifferent border guards – one Greek-Cypriot, the other Turkish-Cypriot – and then we were through to the leafy, sleepy quarter of Arab Ahmet on the other side. Once the most prestigious neighbourhood of Nicosia, this is where high-ranking Turks and affluent Armenians lived in the Ottoman era. As night fell, Aida and Selim Bergsen graciously welcomed us into their glorious antique-filled home, where a feast of stuffed eggplants, pomegranate and bulgur salad, delicately spiced pilaf and roast chicken was laid out in the garden. A wall of jasmine scented the night air and snatches of conversation in Turkish, English, Greek and the sing-song Greek-Cypriot dialect elided into a kind of universal language.

A fine jeweller based in Istanbul, Aida grew up nearby in a family of artists before leaving to study in France. This cosmopolitanism is typical of Nicosia, both past and present. Successively coveted and conquered by the Persians, Egyptians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Franks, Venetians, Ottomans and British, Cyprus has been a synthesis of cultures and creeds for centuries. That intermingling ended abruptly after the Turkish invasion and occupation of the northern third of Cyprus

in 1974, when hundreds of thousands of Cypriots from both sides of the dividing line became refugees in their own country. All contact between the north and south was cut off. It was only when Cyprus was admitted to the European Union in 2003 that the free movement of people and goods tentatively began again.

Since then, political negotiations towards reunification have stalled, but bi-communal cooperation at the grassroots level has quietly flourished. As well as informal gatherings like the one I attended, there are more systematic efforts to build bridges. Every weekend, a group of Greek and Turkish Cypriots (ironically dubbed The Traitors’ Club) meet in the courtyard of the Büyük Han, a magnificent caravanserai built in 1572, to discuss truth and reconciliation over bittersweet shots of sludgy coffee. Whether you call it Greek coffee, Turkish coffee or Cypriot coffee may be a contentious issue, but the island’s distinctive brew tastes the same on either side of the divide.

“If you meet young Cypriots now, you can’t tell the difference between Greeks and Turks,” said Ruth Keshishian, an unassuming national treasure who long ran the Moufflon Bookstore (sadly, she died in August, after my visit). “They wear the same clothes, have the same sensibility, they are friends.” For Keshishian, an Armenian-Cypriot who grew up in Nicosia, it was too painful to cross into the occupied north. “It would be like stalking an ex-lover. Anyway, I know the whole city by heart – I don’t need to go back. The younger generation who haven’t really experienced the ‘before and after’ are more open to change, but they are also more accepting of the status quo.”

Despite the political deadlock, Nicosia is a city in flux. Outside the medieval Old Town, the capital feels more like the rest of Cyprus – moneyed, modern, a magnet for wealthy exiles from shady regimes and war zones. There are no shopping malls or trendy concept stores within Nicosia’s star-shaped defensive walls, built by the Venetians in the 16th century. The faded charm of the Old Town lies in the meandering lanes, the slow pace, and the palpable cross-currents of history. With its vaulted Gothic arches, minarets sprouting from medieval churches, and palm trees punctuating hans and hammams, this Nicosia still resembles the city that Archduke Louis Salvator of Austria visited in 1873: “It’s like a dream of the



Arabian nights come true – a bouquet of orange groves and palm trees in a landscape without verdure, an oasis encircled with walls framed by human hands. Great is the contrast between the town and its surroundings, and greater still between the elements within the city.”

When Salvator toured, there was only one hotel in Nicosia, the Locanda della Speranza, “an idyllic hideaway for pilgrims and painters”. Now the only boutique hotel in the Old Town is Amyth of Nicosia, which threw open its baby-blue shutters earlier this year. A former girls’ school built around 1900, the 10-room townhouse blends contemporary interiors with original features: patterned floor tiles in the lobby, painted ceilings in one room, a grand staircase snaking up to the penthouse suite. In the courtyard restaurant, bartenders knock up brilliantly unconventional cocktails and chef Andrew Michael Smith presents a masterfully unpretentious menu to a lively, multicultural crowd. Intimate and urbane, the Amyth is a surprising move from Thanos Hotels, the leading hotel chain on Cyprus, better known for its trio of upmarket resorts in the south. It’s a sign of the ongoing transformation of this underrated European capital, still largely undiscovered by mainstream tourism.

The Amyth is situated in what Ruth Keshishian jokingly referred to as “the Vatican”. The Archbishop’s palatial residence is right around the corner, a complex that includes the stunning Byzantine Museum, which reopened recently after a meticulous five-year restoration. The extraordinary collection of Greek Orthodox iconography includes many treasures recovered by dogged art sleuths after they were looted from Northern Cyprus by smugglers.

In Cyprus, even art is political, as I discovered at the inspiring Cyprus Insula exhibition, which is on show until June 2026 at the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation. Designed to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Turkish invasion, the exhibition takes a long view of history. Ancient figurines are mixed with contemporary sculpture, archival ethnographic footage and a virtual recreation of Nicosia International Airport, a Modernist landmark now marooned in the buffer zone. (Today, visitors must fly to Larnaca airport, a 45-minute drive from the capital.) “We wanted to embrace the ideas of both rupture and continuity in our common culture and to emphasise the island’s inherently insular identity,” says Demetra Ignatiou, one of the show’s two curators. (The other is Dr Yiannis Toumazis, the foundation’s director, who previously ran Nimac, a groundbreaking art centre in a converted power station.)

As well as shedding light on the island’s complicated past, Cyprus Insula looks ahead with a guarded sense of optimism. The exhibition’s final act, Reflections into the Future, includes a vintage textile embroidered with the phrase: “We became refugees 14-8-1974”. The artist, Mariandrie, has created three more versions of the embroidery, erasing one word in each iteration until the last panel is a blank canvas. “We didn’t want the show to end on trauma and pain, which are part of our history,” says Ignatiou. “We invite people to engage with it, but also to try to compromise or come to terms with it.”

“The past is a foreign country,” shrugs Garo Keheyan, the spry and spirited founder of the Pharos Arts Foundation. His family, who came from the coastal city of Kyrenia, just north of Nicosia, lost a huge fortune after the partition of Cyprus. Their property was parcelled out to the Turkish political elite. Undeterred, Keheyan has built a new legacy as a patron of the arts. As well as staging an annual

chamber music festival in an 800-year-old olive grove near Nicosia, Keheyan hosts recitals at The Shoe Factory, an intimate venue that resembles the New York loft of a contemporary art collector. Besides excellent acoustics and a marvellous Steinway grand piano, the audience is treated to wine and cheese with the artists after every performance.

When Keheyan found the abandoned shoe factory in 2006, the whole area was a wasteland. Once Nicosia’s main commercial strip, Ermou Street had been abandoned for decades in the aftermath of the 1974 war, when most of the street was swallowed up by the buffer zone. “Nobody had thought of opening anything in the vicinity as it’s right up against the Green Line,” Keheyan recalls. “As Armenians, we are used to living on the fault lines of empire. Instead of seeing it as a dead end, I thought the border area could become the Berlin of the Eastern Mediterranean.”

In a remarkable reversal of fortune, Ermou is now the heart of Nicosia’s new cool. Ceramics studios, bookstore-cafés and creative workshops have popped up among landmarks such as the enchanting Aigaion House taverna. Ambling around the Chrysaliniotissa neighbourhood, it’s hard to believe the pretty lanes and handsome limestone houses were once the site of fierce fighting. Like Arab Ahmet on the opposite side of the city, this quarter was revitalised as part of the Nicosia Master Plan, a scheme to encourage regeneration by restoring architecture and improving infrastructure on both sides of the Green Line.

Gentrification has not swept through all parts of the Old City. Eating *sheftalia* at the Berlin Wall No2 kebab shack under the watchful eye of a military sentry or brushing up against a makeshift blockade of barrels as you sip a Brandy Sour at Harátsi café, the sense of lives interrupted is poignant. Whole streets lie empty and silent. “We’re desperate for neighbours,” says textile designer Teresa Georgallis. “There were tailors, jewellers, and shoemakers all along Trikoupí Street until it was split in two.” She and her Ecuadorian partner, Alejandro Villacis, run workshops at their weaving and ceramics studio, Threading Stories. The pair met at art school in London and moved to Nicosia “by accident” during the pandemic lockdown. “In London, we could barely afford a shared studio – here we

have space to create and experiment,” says Georgallis, as she teaches me to weave on a miniature loom, using threads hand-dyed with local pigments. “We hope to bring artisans back into this quarter and create an inclusive community of makers.”

For now, while most affluent Cypriots have moved to the suburbs, the Old City belongs to Nicosia’s migrant labour force. On Sundays, the streets and parks teem with colourful huddles of Sri Lankans, Filipinos and Nepalis. The muezzin’s call to prayer mingles with the impassioned swell of an evangelical choir. In the municipal gardens, improvised stalls selling Nepali chatpate and Vietnamese noodles cater to picnic parties. Alfresco barber stands are set up in the dry moat of the city walls, and women in saris film one another performing traditional dances under the bastions. On the other side of the barbed wire barricade, a straggle of young men watches this spectacle with bemused curiosity. Nicosia is not a theme park for tourists; it’s a city of scars and ghosts, rippling with promise and potential. ■

The writer was a guest of Amyth of Nicosia. Double rooms are from \$600 a night (amythhotels.com). For guided tours of Nicosia, contact the quietly brilliant Titina Loizidou on titinalo@spidernet.com.cy.



GET WEAVING
Teresa Georgallis and Alejandro Villacis run a weaving and ceramics studio. Clockwise from left: in Northern Nicosia, Büyük Han (the Great Inn) was built in 1572; a suite at Amyth; Halara Café Bar in the Old City. Opposite: local candlemaker Kostas Kleitos.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOS DRAZOS (AMYTH), STEMA JOURNEYS (ARTISAN AND CAFÉ) & ARDA ALTAY/ISTOCK (GREAT INN)