

Travel

BEACH GODDESS:

Yvonne at the spot where legend says Aphrodite was born

Falling in love with the mighty Aphrodite

Yvonne Gordon hits the beaches of Cyprus – but not before taking a spiritual tour through the island's classic past

I'm standing in line to see a painting that is covered by a curtain. The two veiled women in front of me sob quietly into handkerchiefs. The painting is an icon of the Virgin Mary, one of just three said to have been painted by the apostle St Luke while she was still alive.

It is covered because it is said to be so holy, nobody is worthy enough to see it. I'm so curious to see what is underneath that I'm tempted to pull back the curtain, but the last person to do this had their hand chopped off.

However, even just to be in the presence of something so significant, and to witness the emotions of the devout pilgrims in front of me who have travelled all the way from Russia to worship the icon,

brings an overwhelming feeling of awe.

In a room next door in Kykkos Monastery are more holy relics: bits of the bones of St Luke, St John the Baptist and St Jason. I never expected a visit to Cyprus to be so spiritual but in just a few days, we have seen the Tomb of Lazarus, part of the cross that Jesus died on and the rope that tied him to it, and now this.

I never expected so much history and culture: to stand at the birthplace of the legendary goddess Aphrodite; to see real relics from biblical stories I'd heard as a child; to visit Roman ruins, Byzantine churches, medieval castles and prehistoric settlements.

We start out at Limassol on the south coast, the centre of the wine

industry and full of beach resorts. The castle, which dates back to 1228, is home to the Cyprus Medieval Museum but has a wealth of older, well-preserved artefacts – pottery, weapons, crosses and coins – dating from the third to the 19th centuries, covering the early Christian, Byzantine, Frankish, Venetian and Ottoman periods.

The exhibits give a glimpse into the island's past. However, the story of Cyprus goes back way beyond that – evidence of human presence dates back 10,000 years and with many well preserved antiquities, the island has many

Unesco World Heritage Sites. One of these is the archaeological remains of Kourion, near Limassol, our next stop. This ancient city was inhabited from 4,500BC. In the House of Eustolios, evidence of baths, heating pipes and ornate mosaic floors date back to the fifth century and there is also a beautifully restored Greco-Roman theatre from 2BC. When I stand in the centre of the theatre and talk, the sound is amplified back as if through a speaker.

Lying at the crossroads of three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa, Cyprus has been ruled by everybody from the Greeks,

Persians, Egyptians, Romans, Venetians and Ottomans and even the British (1878 to 1960). It's this mix of influences that contributes to its rich cultural mix. The island is now officially an independent republic, apart from the north, which has been occupied by Turkey since 1974.

From Kourion, we drive up through the lush vegetation into the Troodos Mountains and arrive at the picturesque village of Omodos, whose monastery dates back to 1735. The centrepiece is an ornate Greek Orthodox church.

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BLESSED: A child kisses an icon in Cyprus, which has a wealth of classical ruins

