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Cities of Cyprus

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Introduction

Cyprus sits at the crossroads of continents, seas, and civilizations, a unique island bridging Europe, Asia, and Africa. For millennia, its cities have played pivotal roles in the narrative of the Mediterranean—shaped by empires, sanctified by myth, marked by conflict, and continually reinvented as centers of culture, commerce, and community. "Cities of Cyprus" is a non-fiction exploration of these urban landscapes, weaving together the stories of ancient settlements, bustling ports, and contemporary cities that define the island's identity.

Few places offer such a dense convergence of heritage as Cyprus. From the ancient city-kingdoms of Kition and Amathus to the vibrant quarters of Nicosia and Limassol, each city tells its own story—a mosaic pieced together from Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Frankish, Venetian, Ottoman, and British pasts. Walking through the cities, visitors tread on layered histories, where medieval walls enclose labyrinthine old towns and modern boulevards pulse with twenty-first-century energy.

The cities of Cyprus, however, are not only monuments to the past. They are living, breathing spaces where the rhythms of local life unfold amid a backdrop of archaeological wonders and sun-soaked coastal beauty. Bustling markets, contemporary art scenes, annual festivals, and burgeoning café cultures bring together residents, visitors, and diasporas alike. Longstanding traditions—culinary, religious, artisanal—interact with the forces of globalization, technology, and migration, forging dynamic communities that are as forward-looking as they are rooted in history.

Yet the reality of Cyprus is also shaped by division. Nowhere is this more evident than in Nicosia, the world's only divided capital, but echoes are found in Famagusta, Kyrenia, and Morphou, cities whose destinies were altered by conflict in 1974. These cities, and the stories of their displaced populations, serve as reminders of both the fragility and resilience of urban life on the island. Despite separation and loss, the intangible links of memory, culture, and aspiration endure, uniting the cities of Cyprus in a shared, though complex, national heritage.

This book serves as both a historical exploration and an accessible guide for travelers, scholars, and all those curious about Cyprus's great cities. Each chapter delves into a city or town's unique evolution, prominent landmarks, economic life, and contemporary character. Practical tips for visitors, highlights of what to see and experience, and insights into local customs provide both context and inspiration for further discovery.

Whether you are strolling along Larnaca's palm-lined promenade, exploring Paphos's archaeological parks, getting lost in the tangled streets of old Limassol, or contemplating the silent cityscape of Varosha in Famagusta, the pages that follow invite you to experience the multifaceted urban heart of Cyprus—an island whose cities continue to blend history, hospitality, and vitality as nowhere else in the Mediterranean.

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CHAPTER ONE: Nicosia: The Divided Capital

Nicosia, or Lefkosia as it is known to Greek Cypriots, stands as the unique heart of Cyprus, not merely geographically central but also historically and politically pivotal. It holds the rather poignant distinction of being the world's last divided capital, bisected by a buffer zone famously dubbed the "Green Line." This invisible yet palpable boundary cuts through the very fabric of the city, a legacy of intercommunal strife in 1963 and the Turkish invasion of 1974. The division is a constant, stark reminder of the island's complex past, but within its ancient walls and sprawling modern suburbs, Nicosia pulsates with an energy that belies its fractured reality.

To truly understand Nicosia, one must first grasp its profound historical roots. For over 5,500 years, this land has been continuously inhabited, a testament to its strategic location and fertile surroundings. In antiquity, it was known as Ledra, a city-kingdom that quietly thrived while others like Salamis and Kourion dominated the coastal narrative. It wasn't until the 10th century that Nicosia truly stepped into the limelight, assuming its role as the capital of Cyprus. This elevation marked the beginning of a golden age for the city, particularly under the Frankish Lusignan rule. The Lusignan kings transformed Nicosia into a dazzling European capital, replete with magnificent royal palaces and an abundance of Gothic churches, rivaling many contemporary cities in Western Europe.

The legacy of these periods is still remarkably visible. The most striking reminder of Nicosia's medieval past are the Venetian walls. These imposing fortifications, built in 1567, were an ambitious project designed to protect the city from Ottoman incursions. They form a near-perfect circle, punctuated by eleven arrow-shaped bastions and pierced by three grand gates: Famagusta Gate, Paphos Gate, and Kyrenia Gate. Walking or cycling along these walls today offers a tangible connection to a bygone era, allowing one to imagine the city's inhabitants peering out, bracing for siege. Inside these walls, the old quarter of Nicosia retains its labyrinthine charm, a fascinating maze of narrow streets, traditional houses, and hidden courtyards.

Among the architectural treasures within the old city, the Church of Saint Sophia stands out, even though it now functions as the Selimiye Mosque. Dating back to the 13th century, this grand Gothic cathedral was once the site where Lusignan kings were crowned kings of Cyprus. Its transformation into a mosque after the Ottoman conquest in 1570 is a powerful symbol of the city's layered history and successive rulers. Nicosia also holds deep religious significance for Greek Cypriots as the archepiscopal seat of the autonomous Church of Cyprus, further cementing its role as a spiritual and cultural heartland.

Beyond its historical grandeur, Nicosia is a vibrant and dynamic modern capital. As the largest city in Cyprus, it serves as the island's primary commercial and business hub. The streets outside the old city walls hum with activity, lined with sleek, state-of-the-art buildings that house government offices and the headquarters of numerous major local and international companies. This economic vitality is further bolstered by its role as a significant trading hub for the surrounding Mesaoria Plain, a fertile agricultural region known for producing wheat, olives, almonds, and various fruits. The city also hosts light industries, manufacturing everything from machine tools and textiles to tobacco products, pottery, and leather goods. Tourism, while not always the first association with Nicosia compared to the coastal resorts, plays an increasingly important role, drawing visitors keen to explore its unique history and cosmopolitan atmosphere.

The population of Nicosia reflects its status as the capital. In 2021, the population of the government-controlled area was approximately 351,600. Other estimates place the population at around 186,000 or 330,000, depending on the precise area covered in the count. This substantial population contributes to the city's lively ambiance, a blend of traditional Cypriot life and modern European influences.

Venturing into modern Nicosia is to experience a city that seamlessly blends its ancient past with a sophisticated present. Beyond the historic core, wide avenues are flanked by fashionable shops, bustling cafes, and an array of restaurants serving both traditional Cypriot fare and international cuisine. The cultural scene is equally rich, with art galleries, theaters, and music venues contributing to the city's cosmopolitan vibe. For those interested in delving deeper into the island's past, the Cyprus Museum in Nicosia is an absolute must-visit. It houses the finest and most comprehensive collection of archaeological artifacts found on the island, offering an unparalleled journey through Cyprus's long and captivating history, from the Neolithic period to the Roman era.

Perhaps one of the most poignant and compelling aspects of Nicosia is the "Green Line" itself. While it represents division, it also serves as a point of curiosity and reflection for many visitors. Established as a ceasefire line, it is monitored by the United Nations and consists of a demilitarized zone that cuts through the city center. While crossings for pedestrians and vehicles have become more accessible in recent years, allowing for passage between the southern and northern parts of the city, the presence of the line remains a powerful symbol. It's a reminder that Nicosia, for all its vibrancy and modernity, carries the weight of a history that is still very much alive and unfolding. Exploring both sides, where possible, offers a rare glimpse into two distinct cultural expressions shaped by the same shared island. The Nicosia experience is therefore not just about history or commerce, but about confronting a unique geopolitical reality in a city that nevertheless thrives with an undeniable spirit of resilience and adaptation.

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