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Cyprus

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Introduction

Cyprus, at once ancient and contemporary, is a land shaped by millennia of history and the intense energy of modern life. Perched at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, the island has long served as a bridge between cultures, faiths, and civilizations. From the time of the first Neolithic settlers, through the sway of Greek, Persian, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, and British influences, Cyprus has absorbed and reinterpreted the legacies of its conquerors, trading partners, and neighbors. This synthesis is visible everywhere: in the language, in the architecture, in the faces of its people.

Today, Cyprus is divided not only by political lines but also by a remarkable diversity of culture and experience. While the Greek Cypriot majority largely inhabits the south and the Turkish Cypriot community the north, the island's complex history means that both sides share deep-rooted traditions, values, and sensibilities. Despite decades of division, there remains an undercurrent of shared identity, intertwined faiths, and familial respect that continues to shape Cypriot society.

This book seeks to offer a comprehensive portrait of Cyprus as it stands in the 21st century. We will journey through its remarkable landscapes, from the sun-baked coastlines and verdant mountains to the fertile plains of the Mesaoria. We will explore the convoluted history that made Cyprus an object of desire for empires and a home for diverse peoples. Alongside its ancient temples and medieval castles, we will shine a light on the modern political realities that shape daily life — from the complexities of independence to the ongoing challenges of division and reconciliation.

But Cyprus is not solely defined by its geopolitics. Its society is vibrant and evolving, blending deep family values and religious traditions with cosmopolitan influences. We will meet its people, learn about their festivals, folk arts, cuisine, and everyday lives. We will examine the successes and strains of its economy, the drive for educational excellence, and the pursuit of quality healthcare that supports residents and visitors alike.

In addition, this book offers practical insights for those who wish to experience Cyprus firsthand. From planning a journey and understanding local customs, to exploring its natural wonders and engaging with its rich cultural life, this guide is designed both for the curious reader and the prospective traveler. Whether your interest lies in archaeology, cuisine, politics, or simply the allure of Mediterranean life, 'Cyprus: Portrait of a Country' invites you to discover all the facets of this unique island nation.

CHAPTER ONE: The Island at the Crossroads: Geography and Setting

Cyprus, officially known as the Republic of Cyprus, nestles strategically in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, a solitary jewel in a vast blue expanse. It claims the title of the third largest and most populous island in the Mediterranean, a rank it holds after its larger Italian cousins, Sicily and Sardinia. Its geographical coordinates place it distinctly in West Asia, yet its cultural heartbeat and political allegiances align firmly with Southeast Europe. This intriguing duality is a recurring theme in the Cypriot story, etched into its very landscape and the lives of its people.

Looking at a map, Cyprus appears to be at the heart of a geopolitical nexus. To its south lies Egypt, to its west, Syria and Lebanon, and to its northwest, Israel and Palestine. Turkey looms to its north, a mere 64 kilometers (40 miles) distant, making the Turkish mainland's Taurus Mountains visible from the northern stretches of the island. This proximity has undeniably shaped its history, positioning Cyprus as a coveted prize for countless empires and a vital hub for trade and cultural exchange across three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa.

The island itself is a modest but mighty landmass, spanning approximately 9,251 square kilometers (3,572 square miles). Its maximum length, stretching from west to east, is about 225 kilometers (140 miles), while its maximum north-south extent reaches 100 kilometers (60 miles). This relatively compact size belies a remarkable geographical diversity, encapsulated within a roughly 640-kilometer (400-mile) coastline that boasts a mix of rugged, indented shores and inviting, long sandy beaches.

Cyprus's interior is largely defined by two prominent mountain ranges and a fertile central plain. Dominating the southern and western landscape are the Troodos Mountains, a sprawling massif that accounts for roughly half of the island's total area. Here, the island literally reaches its peak at Mount Olympus, also known as Chionistra. This impressive summit, at 1,952 meters (6,404 feet) above sea level, is the highest point in Cyprus. In winter, Mount Olympus transforms into a snowy wonderland, even offering opportunities for skiing, a somewhat surprising activity for a Mediterranean island. The Troodos range, a geological marvel, slowly emerged from the sea due to the collision of the African and European tectonic plates, a process that ultimately formed Cyprus itself.

In stark contrast, running parallel to the northern coast, lies the narrower Kyrenia Mountains, sometimes referred to as Pentadaktylos, which translates to "Five Fingers"

due to a distinctive peak. This range stretches for approximately 160 kilometers (100 miles) from Cape Andreas in the east to Cape Kormakiti in the west. While not as towering as the Troodos, reaching a maximum height of 1,024 meters (3,360 feet) at Mount Selvili (also known as Mount Kyparissovouno), the Kyrenia Mountains rise abruptly from the coastal plain, creating a dramatic visual impact. Composed primarily of hard crystalline limestone and some marble, this range provides a natural barrier against harsh winds, protecting the fertile lands below.

Nestled between these two mountain ranges is the Mesaoria Plain, a name that fittingly means "Between the Mountains" in Greek. This flat, low-lying expanse stretches from Morphou Bay in the west to Famagusta Bay in the east, effectively serving as the island's agricultural heartland. Nicosia, the capital city, is situated roughly in the center of this plain, a testament to its historical importance as a favored settlement area. While the Mesaoria can appear arid and parched during the long summer months, winter and spring rains transform it into a vibrant carpet of green, supporting the cultivation of cereals, citrus fruits, and other crops.

Cyprus enjoys a Mediterranean climate, a fact that contributes significantly to its appeal as a tourist destination. This translates to long, hot, and dry summers, typically lasting from mid-May to mid-October, followed by mild, wet, and rather changeable winters from November to mid-March. The island basks in abundant sunshine throughout the year, with an impressive average of 11.5 hours of bright sunshine per day during the six summer months.

Summers are characterized by high temperatures, with average maximum coastal temperatures hovering around 35°C (95°F) in July and August. In the central plain, temperatures can climb even higher. While coastal areas benefit from refreshing sea breezes, isolated thunderstorms can sometimes occur over the mountains in the early afternoons. Humidity tends to be low in the central plain during midday in summer, ranging from 15% to 30%.

Winters, in contrast, are mild, with average daytime temperatures in January, the coolest month, around 10°C (50°F) in the central plain and 3°C (37°F) in the higher Troodos Mountains. Snowfall is a regular feature in the Troodos range, particularly on ground above 1,000 meters (3,281 feet), attracting skiers for several weeks during the coldest months. However, snow is rare in the lowlands and on the northern range. The autumn and spring seasons serve as short, pleasant transitions between these two extremes, with April and May offering pleasantly warm days and blooming countryside, ideal for nature lovers. The average annual sea temperature around Cyprus ranges from 17°C (63°F) in February to a delightful 27–28°C (81–82°F) in August, making swimming enjoyable for much of the year.

This intricate tapestry of mountains, plains, and coastlines, bathed in abundant sunshine and strategically positioned in the Eastern Mediterranean, has profoundly

shaped Cyprus's historical trajectory, cultural development, and its present-day situation. It is a land of striking contrasts, where snow-capped peaks meet sun-drenched beaches, and ancient history is woven into the fabric of modern life.

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