

Winner World's Best Food
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Good Things

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AIKENS**

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A PLACE IN THE *sun*

Cyprus is no longer the home of stodgy food and dodgy wine. Luxurious resorts and fine dining are definitely on the menu, as Carole Hamilton discovers



The Annabelle's main pool and tropical gardens, below



Steeped in ancient mythology, Cyprus's landscape is dotted with castles, churches and monasteries bordered by pretty beaches and impossibly blue seas. Mark Antony once gave the island to Cleopatra in an attempt to woo her, and I can see why she might have been impressed.

The island feels very British – they drive on the left, they use roundabouts, and you'll recognise many of the shops in the busier towns. It's perhaps not what everyone is looking for in a holiday, but the sense of the familiar is strangely comforting. So it's no surprise that more than 30,000 Brits have made Cyprus their home, enjoying an average 300 days of sunshine a year – although my advice would be to avoid the summer months when the heat can become unbearable.

Home from home

Our experience begins in Paphos, a harbour town with a definite laid-back charm, a great range of restaurants and bars, a smattering of decent

shops, and a second-century Roman villa to satisfy your culture cravings.

The Annabelle is a rather grand hotel close to the harbour which has welcomed guests since the 1980s. It's a favourite with Brits who appreciate the friendly staff and comfortable surroundings. The lush, tropical garden setting is dotted with several swimming pools and a waterfall, and many of the 218 rooms have a sea view. Spoil yourself and request one with a private plunge pool – perfect if you want to escape the heat with a glass of wine mid-afternoon.

There's ample choice when it comes to eating at the hotel, along with a selection of bars serving excellent cocktails. Breakfast on the Fontana terrace is a highlight, with a vast buffet serving up all the usual favourites; mountains of fresh fruits, charcuterie, pancakes, a live-cooking griddle and eggs any way you fancy.

If you enjoy casual dining, the beachfront, taverna-style Mediterraneo restaurant has a more relaxed atmosphere, with outside tables that >>

overlook the beach. Specialities include fresh fish and charcoal grills, and once a week there's a Cypriot-style buffet accompanied by Greek folk dancing which is a lot of fun.

We love Amorosa, the hotel's signature fine dining restaurant which serves modern food with an imaginative French twist. The room is delightful; decked out in cream tones with swathes of voile fluttering in the evening breeze. Both the food and the wine list are equally impressive and offer excellent value for money considering the quality of the cooking.

This is probably the moment to mention Cypriot wine, some of which is really rather good. You're in luck here, since George Kassianos, aka The Godfather of Cypriot Wine, is also the hotel's operations manager. Track him down and ask him to share his passion for the local wines. George learnt his trade in Michelin-starred establishments in London and is now the president of the Cyprus Sommelier Association, so he knows his stuff. Our wine tasting evening was a revelation. Should you want to discover more, there are several wineries a short drive from Paphos offering guest tours and tastings.

Jewel in the crown

The Anassa is about an hour's drive from Paphos, and the second hotel in the Thanos group. And it's a must for a luxurious, away-from-it-all experience. The first thing that strikes you is the stillness; it's so quiet, you can't help but relax. Resorts this good don't come cheap, but it pretty much ticks all the boxes for wow-factor. Built to make the most of the spectacular location, everything about this hotel is impressive and, despite being open for nearly 20 years, it's immaculate. With luxurious treatment rooms, a stunning indoor pool and tempting, dimly-lit chill-out zones, the award-winning spa is a big selling point.

Take a wander around the jasmine-scented paths that surround the main hotel, and I defy you not to take a selfie or two in front of the purple explosions of bougainvillea. Every room has a balcony that either overlooks the sea or the pretty gardens, and some of the suites have a spacious deck complete with a plunge pool. As you soak up the morning sun, it's hard to imagine a more relaxing place in the world.

It's a toss-up whether to laze by the infinity pool with the tempting swim-up bar or wander to the beach to settle onto a sunlounger. The sea is ideal for swimming and, for the energetic, there's a variety of watersports and excursions including a trip on the hotel's stunning yacht.

Food of the gods

But we're here to talk about the food, and a good place to start is a cookery class with David Goodridge, the executive chef for the hotel >>



The Anassa, main picture and below





The Anassa and the resort's private yacht

group Having worked with Raymond Blanc at Le Manoir and at The Peninsula Hong Kong, David is passionate about using local produce; working with fruit and vegetable growers in the area, as well as beekeepers who supply the delicious honey. One of his team will happily show you how to make classic Cypriot dishes, after which your culinary efforts are served on the terrace with a chilled glass of the local wine.

Spoilt for choice

In Cyprus, the cooking is all about ingredients, and I love the simplicity of many of the dishes on the menu at the poolside Pelagos restaurant. Choose your fish from the daily selection and enjoy it charcoal grilled with herbs and olive oil with a huge salad. At breakfast on the sun-drenched terrace, ignore the piles of pastries and start your day with a big bowl of delicious local yoghurt with a drizzle of that local honey and a handful of almonds.

In the evening, the olive trees are decked out with lanterns that twinkle in the darkness in the atmospheric Helios restaurant. The French-Mediterranean menu is of a very high standard, and I'd happily recommend the king crab salad with avocado and Oscietra caviar, and the oven-baked seabass in a simple, herby shellfish broth.

The most intimate hotel restaurant is Basiliko, whose gourmet Asian-fusion menu includes grilled Wagyu beef and Alaskan black cod, as well as a good range of sushi and sashimi. Spicy soft-shell crab tempura and tiger prawn tails with wasabi-soya are both excellent, while the crispy pork belly with tamarind and apple salsa and wok fried lettuce leaves us both wishing for more.



More online...
The ultimate Cypriot feast

Make it real

Rates at **Anassa** start from €420 per room per night for a Garden View Room, or from €900 per night in a Garden Studio Suite with private pool. anassa.com.

Rates at the **Annabelle** start from €212 per room per night based on a Garden View Room, or from €348 per suite per night based on a Junior Suite. Both options include breakfast. annabelle.com.cy
British Airways and EasyJet fly direct to Paphos from Gatwick.

Eating out in Paphos...

NIKOS TYRIMOS

Despite its inland position in the centre of Paphos, this restaurant has a long-standing and excellent reputation for seafood. Squid and octopus both melt in the mouth, and the catch-of-the-day fish is fairly priced. A delightfully old-fashioned place with smartly liveried waiters ensuring you have a memorable meal.

SEVEN ST. GEORGES

A favourite meze house in the Paphos district, with George Demetriades and his sons at the helm. Platters change constantly, and the team is committed to local sourcing and growing vegetables on a farm nearby. Favourite dishes include pickled cauliflower, tsamaréll (goat salami), fried agrélla (wild asparagus) and a host of other treats you're unlikely to see on other menus.

TA PERIX

Paphos town's best meze venue, offering titbits such as quail's eggs, in-season, brawn, grilled quail, spicy cheese dip, snails, chicken livers, pastourmás (a Cypriot sausage), cured pork in wine, wild greens and mushrooms. Tick off your choices on the order sheet – either small or large platters, a relief from the mandatory buffet at other meze houses. Try kalopráma (a local sponge cake) for dessert.

DORIA

Another hugely popular seafront restaurant, run by Panikos and his attentive team. The fresh fish and meze are excellent, and it's definitely one of the best places to watch the sunset with a glass of local rosé.