Kyrenia’s harbour, the centre of most tourist activity in the North, ranks as one of Cyprus’ most beautiful vistas – even though it’s been thoroughly commercialised in recent years, and thus ceased to be particularly romantic. Furthermore, the Gothic Kyrenia mountain range that forms the city’s backdrop still has a bewitching effect on visitors and offers excellent hiking opportunities.

This area was long ago ‘discovered’ by British civil servants, many of whom retired here, after years of service for the former British Empire, to enjoy the region’s mild climate. Kyrenia became a literary starlet in *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus*, written by Britain’s most famous colonial son, Lawrence Durrell, who lived in Bellapais (Beylerbeyi), where he wrote his slow-paced novel.

Bellapais, one of the island’s most mesmerising villages, features the fascinating ruins of Bellapais Abbey, built in the 12th century by exiled Augustinian monks. Along the Kyrenia (Girne) Range, a displaced French dynasty left behind three Gothic castles, so dreamlike in appearance that one apparently inspired a fairy tale production. The strategic position of the castles on the vertebra of the mountain range was carefully arranged so that the three forts could communicate and warn each other of dangers by lighting torches.

The north coast, from Kyrenia to Kaplıca (Davlos), is changing fast and the last traces of unspoilt, green, empty fields and village houses are disappearing thanks to a large new road ploughing through olive fields and the once wide landscape. Dozens of new tourist villages are cropping up, ghostly in their lack of population and tragic in their disregard for the environment, sustainability and individuality, and ancient olive trees have been bulldozed out of their multicentenarian existence. For more, read our Local Voices interview on p138.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Explore the nooks and cells of Kyrenia Castle and see one of the oldest shipwrecks ever recovered off the coast of Cyprus at the Shipwreck Museum (p193)
- Soak up the beauty of Bellapais (Beylerbeyi; p198): its abbey, the home of Lawrence Durrell, and its breathtaking views
- Get breathless climbing the many steps of the fairytale ruins of St Hilarion Castle (p201); then scale the wind-buffeted heights of Buffavento Castle (p201) and see Cyprus at your feet
- Drive west, down Koruçam (Kormakitis) Peninsula (p203) for a stretch of deserted beaches and gorgeous land’s end views
- Explore the sites of Ancient Vouni (p207) and Ancient Soloi (p206) on the northwest coast
KYRENSA (GIRNE) KEPEYNEA
pop 22,000

Backed by its wide-bellied sand-coloured castle, Kyrenia’s crescent-shaped harbour is like a sacred image among Cypriots. Promoted and praised by the Turkish Cypriots, and remembered in wistful songs and poems by Greek Cypriots, this small town is the centre of the North’s tourism and home to the biggest British expat settlement on the island, with its own church and community centre.

However, perhaps Kyrenia is ‘sold’ too well to tourists. Many of them arrive expecting the place to look the same as it did on the black-and-white photographs from the ’50s, where a barefoot boy helps his fisherman father pull the fishing nets out onto a wooden boat, with the burly castle brooding in the background. But arriving at Kyrenia at midday, one discovers the charming harbour jam-packed with bars, restaurants, cafes, boat-excursion touts, and waiters beckoning to the passers-by in their broken English. And not only that. This small town, no more than a 30-minute drive from the centre of the island’s capital, is the place where North Nicosians come for the nightlife and good restaurants. Kyrenia (and its coastal surroundings) is lively and busy, with more hotels, restaurants and bars per square kilometre than anywhere else in the North. A picture-postcard, quaint seaside town it’s not, but hey, you might have some fun.

HISTORY

Kyrenia’s history is closely linked to the fortunes of its castle. Before the building of the castle, little is known about the town. It’s thought that it was settled by mainland Greeks around 1000 BC. Kyrenia was certainly one of the city kingdoms of ancient Cyprus, but there is little left to document the town’s earlier history. Arab raids of the 7th and 8th centuries AD levelled what there was of the settlement. It was only in the late 12th century, when the Byzantines built the castle, possibly over the remains of an earlier Roman fort, that Kyrenia’s fortunes took an upward turn.

The Lusignans had a hand in the development of the castle, and it was used by them both as a residence and as a prison. During the course of their 82-year tenure, the Venetians extended the castle and built the bulbous seaward bulwark that can be seen today.

During Ottoman rule, Kyrenia functioned primarily as a port – effectively the only port on the north coast. The harbour has long since ceded its role as the main port of the town; it’s now far too small to service any craft other than the tourist boats and small yachts that crowd its cluttered quays. Two kilometres to the east, a large purpose-built harbour now receives commercial and passenger shipping, mainly from Turkey.

During British rule, the town became a favourite place for retiring ex-colonial British civil servants. Almost all Greeks and many British retirees fled in 1974 following the Turkish invasion, when the beaches to the west of Kyrenia were used as the prime beachhead for the landing of Turkish forces.

More than 25 years later, Kyrenia has recovered from the turbulence, and supports a growing tourist influx mainly from Britain, Germany and Turkey.

ORIENTATION

Kyrenia is spread out over a wide area, but the central Old Town – the tourist area – is fairly compact. Taxis and minibuses arrive at and depart from along Ecevit Caddesi and stop near the main square (Belediye Meydanı), which is about 200m immediately south of the Old Harbour. To the west of Belediye Meydanı runs Ziya Rızkı Caddesi, where you’ll find shops and money-exchange offices. To the southeast runs Mustafa Çağatay Caddesi, which takes you to the New Harbour and the ferry to and from Turkey.

Long-distance buses arrive at the station on Bedrettin Demirel Caddesi at the junction with İnönü Caddesi, 1km south of the centre. If you arrive by car, there’s a handy free car park immediately east of Belediye Meydanı.

Maps

The North Cyprus Tourism Organisation (NCTO) publishes a free city map in English and Turkish. While it is lacking in detail for the streets of the Old Town, it does give a good overall view of Kyrenia and most of the main regional destinations on a smaller inset.