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Here's why everyone's holidaying in Paphos this summer



Credit: Rex

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From art installations to music and dance, Paphos has become a holiday hotspot. We discover the European City of Culture 2017

Paphos is having something of a moment. A striking geometric marble installation towering over the Mediterranean and a bronze figure clinging to the rocks are clues that there is going to be more to this holiday than sea and sun-loungers. These two sculptures are part of Paphos's 'Signs In Time And Space' project, which is just one of the art events created to celebrate the city's status – alongside Aarhus in Denmark – as European Capital of Culture for 2017.

Paphos's historic architecture and vibrant contemporary art scene are being enhanced with a huge line-up of cultural happenings, which makes now a better time than ever to visit. Music and dance performances and open-air art shows will take place throughout the year, with new additions to the programme every month (see pafos2017.eu/en for regular updates). Plus, 'The Travelling Stage' is bringing musical theatre to Paphos, with spontaneous performances that add a different dimension to the city.

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Art goes pop in Paphos

Arguably the biggest and most important date on the European Capital of Culture calendar is 1 July, when 'Eternal Voyages' will bring artists from all over the world together with Cypriots to tell the stories of travellers who have landed in Paphos, using performance art and technology to pay tribute to the multicultural identity of the city. It feels particularly timely in the current political climate. Locals are also hoping that, combined with the idyllic surroundings, this art-fest might finally put an end to the misconceptions that Cyprus is all beer, kebabs and sunburn (at worst), or zoning out by the pool (at best).

The pursuit of culture doesn't mean we're not going to get to sample the joys of a five-star hotel in the Mediterranean, however. On arrival at the luxurious Almyra (almyra.com), I'm shown to my spacious, minimalist room. Beyond the sliding doors, a balcony overlooks the sea and offers glorious sunset views. The sticky air leaves no doubt that this is one of the warmest areas of the Med, and each of the hotel's four – count 'em – freshwater pools looks more inviting than the last.

Tearing ourselves from the poolside, we hit the road by Jeep to explore, cruising along a winding road with mountains on one side and sea on the other. The aridity feels more Middle Eastern than European. A 20-minute drive away is Petra tou Romiou, mythical birthplace of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty. Also known as Aphrodite's Rock, it's where she is believed to have been born from the waves. It's not unusual for the temperature to top 30°C here in the summer, and the sea is warm, crystal-clear and perfect for swimming. If you're looking for your ultimate Instagram shot, you've found it.

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Fifteen minutes north of Paphos is Lara Bay, a picturesque, sandy strip that's home to loggerhead and green turtles. Sightings are rare, as these protected animals are endangered, but we're told there's a small chance of seeing them lay their eggs on the beach during the summer months. Monk seals also live in the caves around the peninsula. The beach itself is beautiful, and because you need a four-wheel drive to make it over the surrounding potholes, it's also unexpectedly quiet. Most tourist hotspots are accessible by bus, but hiring a 4x4 will make exploring easier.

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The Cyprus food scene

Back in Paphos, the waterfront is buzzing, and we head for the hotel's Ouzerie restaurant to take our place at a table overlooking the harbour. It's the ideal spot for people-watching and whiling away the evening sampling delicious local meze such as grilled octopus, fresh sea bass, traditional meatballs and melitzanosalata (an aubergine dip), plus of course bread, hummus, taramasalata, Greek salad and grilled halloumi. One of Cyprus's most popular exports, the cheese somehow tastes best in its birthplace, especially when washed down with a cool glass of local wine.

The next day, an early-morning swim is a must – but which pool to choose? Surrounded by pristine green lawns, the main pool area is huge, shaded on one side by olive trees and on the other by a white verandah woven with pink oleanders in bloom. It's a lovely spot, but in the end we opt for the adults-only infinity pool, overlooking the sea. It's close to the hotel's spa and next to café-restaurant Eauzone where, post-swim, I tuck into a rainbow platter of mango, banana, guava and pomegranate.

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History of Paphos

Later, we go in search of ancient ruins. Paphos is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, dotted with the remains of palaces, theatres, tombs and villas. We visit the House of Dionysos, famous for its incredibly well-preserved Roman mosaics – it's easy to see why they're considered some of the most beautiful in the world. Dating from the 2nd century, they provide a unique insight into the history of the area.

One mosaic, discovered in 1962, depicts Pyramus and Thisbe, two mythological lovers believed to have inspired Shakespeare when writing *Romeo And Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Pyramus is said to have killed himself with a sword, after believing Thisbe has been slain by a tiger. When Thisbe finds him dead, she takes her life in the same way.

The ruins found around Paphos have contributed hugely to historians' understanding of Roman architecture and their way of life. And now the modern-art world has brought the city full circle. Culture vultures, book your flights now.

Where to stay in Paphos

A member of Design Hotels and operated by Thanos Hotels & Resorts, the Almyra offers a laid-back, elegant take on Mediterranean luxury. Rates start at £90 per person per night, including breakfast.

Monarch operates flights to Paphos from Birmingham and London Gatwick airports, with fares from £69 one way (£136 return), including taxes.