



Keep going! You're halfway there

Dry January: the expert guide to finishing it

Weekend

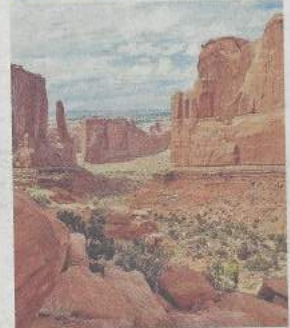
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Crowd-free tavernas, great walks — and it's still warm enough to swim.

Louise Roddon visits the island's Akamas peninsula

How do you convince an old Cypriot woman that you're happily married? No, this isn't a riddle — it's a serious question, because I'm trying to explain to tiny 84-year-old Chrystalla that I cannot wed her bachelor son. With her long blue shawl and wispy white plaits, this woman has the ethereal delicacy of an elderly Madonna — until she slaps my arm. "So you're married?" she cries. "So what? Take two husbands!"

I'm in the village of Ineia, above Cyprus's rocky Akamas peninsula. It's the middle of winter and the sun is gorgeously hot, the sky a savage blue, and from Chrystalla's hobbit-high stone cottage I can see sparks of honeyed light pricking over Chrysochou Bay. It's a lovely sight and the winter warmth is an unexpected bonus, but Chrystalla won't be deterred. "You'll at least have dinner with me then, heh?"

Matchmaking aside, in Cyprus I'm learning that hospitality, or *kopiaste*, to strangers is normal. It becomes impossible to ask for directions or call out a greeting without someone offering coffee or food. However, it is Chrystalla's weaving I've come to see. She is one of the island's few remaining traditional weavers, and soon I'm watching her crank her wooden loom into life, the rough cotton yarn transforming into densely coloured striped cloth.

I buy a small rug and we part on good terms, Chrystalla telling me she misses her visitors. "Why don't more people come in winter?" she asks. It's a fair question, and one I've been pondering during my tour of the island's northwest. The previous time I was here, summer music blared from beach bars and holidaymakers broiled under Coral Bay's striped umbrellas. However, today, as I leave Ineia and dip past orange and lemon groves to Coral Bay's wide sands, there's hardly a tourist to be seen.

Later, in Kato Arodes, a small village farther north, old men are spinning out the afternoon in the local *kafeneio*. It's a typical Cypriot scene: the ritual of countless black coffees, the gossip and backgammon

games. No women — only sleek cats seeking shade. I'm shy about interrupting, but my guide, Alexia, insists. "If you want to know what's going on, then the coffee shop is the place to go," she says.

She's only half-right. Unless you can converse in Greek, having a local guide for a day or two is an amazing way of getting under the island's skin. Cyprus may be relatively large, but the sense of village intimacy spools wide, and whenever we butt in on conversations Alexia finds a connection — a cousin in common, a snippet of interesting news — all of which she shares.

Take George, a retired butcher, sitting under the mulberry tree, offering us coffee

while his grandsons skid pushbikes to a halt. He tells us about his daughter's wedding, how 700 guests assembled in the square dancing the night away.

Kato Arodes is typical of the Akamas region — a village where blue-shuttered limestone houses encircle its terracotta-tiled church. Yet the island's prettiest villages are hidden in the Troodos, so it's to this jumble of mountains that I head the next morning. Gnarled carob trees and terraced vineyards stripped of their fruit give way to bracken and pine. The air is



Almyra Hotel, Paphos

Michael Owen lives here with his wife Jacqueline — and I admire Michael's canvases, which range from dramatic images of the north's buffer zone to a wave-dashed sea off Fontana Amorosa Bay. And it's to this nibbled northwest coastline that I head midweek. First, though, a stop in Latchi, a fishing village on the eastern edge of the peninsula. It is Sunday and Cypriots have gathered for seafood meze, while in Latchi's limestone-bouldered harbour, yachts strain against their anchors and fishermen darn their nets. To the west, I can make out the Tylliria mountain range. Ahead lies Turkey, grey-ghosted against a cerulean sea.

The Akamas, a thick finger of land that is now a national park, has lovely hiking and mountain-biking routes and I try the appealing-sounding Adonis Trail — an easy five-mile walk along an old donkey path. Pine, juniper and tamarisk trees give way to gorges and maquis-scented glades.

That afternoon I enjoy a loftier overview of the peninsula. We're joined by Andres and Stala, cousins-in-law of Alexia. We clamber to the Akamas's highest point, Moutti tis Sotiras. The views to the coast are gorgeous, a lacy network of coves scribbling out from the shallows of the Blue Lagoon and Fontana Amorosa, then west to wide Lara Bay, where green and loggerhead turtles nest in early summer.

Andres and Stala have brought a picnic. Not just any old picnic, but a proper Cypriot arrangement, with tables and chairs, barbecued haloumi and pomegranates, rough country bread and smoked fatty "lountza" pork. We eat on a bluff overlooking the Blue Lagoon, my companions marvelling at a couple of Poles who are bathing. "My God! It must be freezing — just 20 degrees!" cries Stala. I desist telling her that my own beach in Brighton rarely reaches these temperatures.

I have a chilly dip later, at fig-shaded Aphroditis Baths, where the goddess of love bathed with her nymphs before hooking up with Adonis. Actually, a dip is not quite correct but I've been told its waters can strip 20 years off your face, so splash-splash I go. I'm still waiting for the results.



Chrysochou Bay on the Akamas peninsula, Cyprus

Need to know

Louise Roddon was a guest of the Cyprus Tourism Organisation (020 7321 4183, visitcyprus.com) and of The Almyra in Paphos and Droushia Heights in Droushia. EasyJet has flights to Paphos from Gatwick, Luton, Bristol, Manchester and Edinburgh from £115 return.

Alexia Christodolou (00 357 99 698769, alexchr2010@hotmail.com), a guide, can tailor insider tours for couples and groups from €130 (£98) a day.

Where to stay

The minimalist Almyra Hotel (almyra.com) is 35km from the Akamas and has a number of spacious seafront rooms and suites with simple pastel and white-toned decor. There's a fine spa and heated indoor pool, as well as a large infinity pool. The hotel's Ouzerie is lovely for a sea-view lunchtime snack. B&B doubles cost from €130.

Although it looks incongruously modern against its Droushia village backdrop, Droushia Heights (droushiaheightshotel.com) is charmingly friendly and its best rooms have fabulous views over the Akamas and Chrysochou Bay. B&B doubles cost from €80.

Where to eat like a local

Join Cypriots in Latchi at the village's oldest, most authentic taverna. Y&P Fish Tavern's terrace overlooks the harbour and serves an amazing array of dishes: from calamari, prawns, taramasalata and Greek salad to

superbly fresh sea bream and snapper. Mains cost from €10 (latchihotel.com).

For a meatier treat, head to Smylies Tavern (00 357 99 604007) in the hilly Akamas village of Neo Chorio. It's a homely taverna, with checked tablecloths, old photos (including one of Margaret Thatcher) and wine-fuelled locals. The €13 meze includes barbecued chicken, pork, beef, grilled haloumi and spicy Cypriot sausage.

The Seven St Georges Tavern (00 357 26 963176) in Geroskipou village serves only food grown, dried, pickled and cooked by its garrulous owner, George. Mezes here cost €17 and are seasonal. The klefiko is exceptionally good and the setting — an old house with friendly cats and a vine-covered terrace — ensures a memorable meal.

What to bring home

Pop into Droushia dairy on the outskirts of Droushia village, where Maria the haloumi-maker churns out arguably the best haloumi on the island. Buy a vacuum-packed block for €3.50.

Vasilikon winery (vasilikon.com) in Kathikas village, one of the first local wineries, carries an excellent range of Cypriot grape varieties. Its Agios Onoufrios — a soft, well-balanced red — costs €5.

