

## Join Mark Porter as he takes the new BMW X5 on a tour of Cyprus

**T**HE Forest Park Hotel is perched high above Nicosia in the Troodos Mountains. Its Olympus cocktail bar, like the rest of the place, is a perfect time capsule in which Hollywood stars once mingled with royalty in the cool Cyprus mountain air.

Back in the 1940s King Farouk, who averaged seven dozen oysters a day, asked Stelios the barman to concoct him a drink that looked like iced tea, to disguise the extent of his habit. Stelios came up with the Brandy Sour, now the island's national cocktail. To no one's great surprise the exiled King of Egypt later died in a restaurant in Monaco after a vast lunch, just short of his 46th birthday, perhaps inspiring the Monty Python character Mr Creosote.

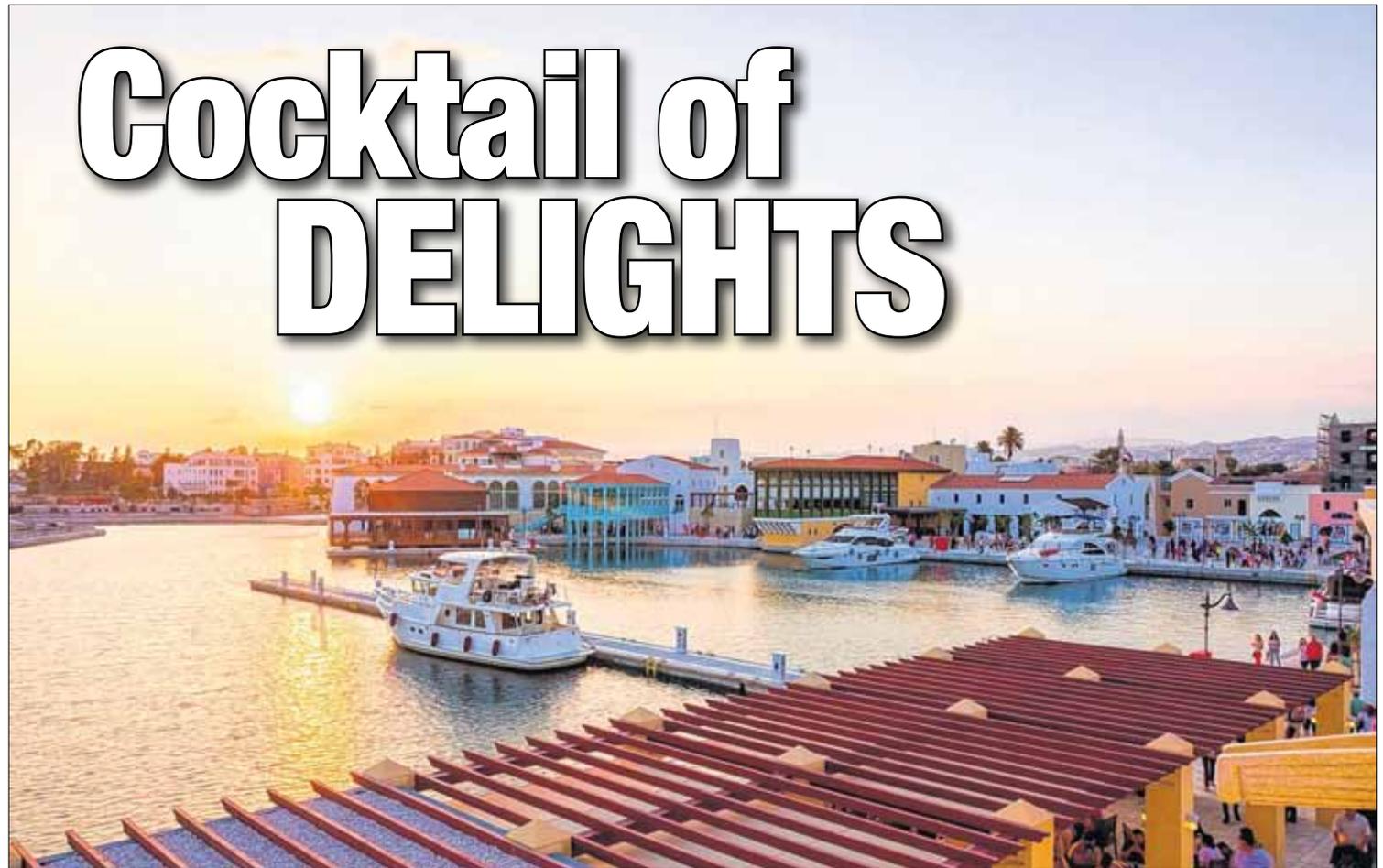
After lunch at the 80-year-old hotel, founded by the Skyrianides dynasty, I visited the Chocolate Workshop in nearby Platres, where Londoner John Adams and his Cypriot wife Praxi hand make delicious Cypriot chocolates for, amongst others, HMQ.

On the coast the temperature had been 26c but up here near the island's only ski resort, it was zero and snow covered. I was pleased to be heading back to the warmth and pointed the BMW X5 down the mountain, towards the wine town of Omodos. Here, I walked across the cobbled square to visit the 12th century monastery of the True Cross, with its medieval icons, skull of St Philip and a museum dedicated to Cypriot freedom fighters hanged and shot by the Brits in the war of independence.

The drive back to Paphos along the Wine Route as the brilliant orange sun sank into the Mediterranean will forever remain with me, though I have never been able to fathom why Homer insisted upon calling it 'wine dark'. Did the Ancient Greeks drink blue wine?

Cyprus is a place of charm, hospitality and spectacular roads. Never mind the occasional sprawling architectural mishap; never mind the lager and chip joints built to cater for British 'tastes'; there is plenty more to the place.

My base was Paphos in the southwest, at the Almyra and Annabelle hotels, both of which were 5-star and have commanding views across the Med, towards Port Said and Alexandria. Ana and I enjoyed some fine classical cooking at the Annabelle's Amorosa restaurant, while Lawrence, the maitre d, chose some fine local wines to accompany our meals.



# Cocktail of DELIGHTS

Paphos, which will be the European Capital of Culture next year, was once the centre of the cult of Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love. Archaeological remains, mosaics, palaces and a small township of tombs, surround you. And the coastline is as magnificently rugged as the mountainous interior, which looms threateningly across the horizon.

My 2-litre X5, kindly provided by the Pilakoutas dealership in Nicosia, was ideal for the purpose. The next morning, after breakfast on the seaview terrace of the Almyra, eagerly watched by a cat in a tree, I headed up the coast to Polis, via the Akamas peninsula. But not before stopping off to admire the fabulous mosaics at the House of Dionysos, where the god of wine is seen on a chariot drawn by two panthers, flanked by satyrs and slaves.

I had an appointment with the UN in Nicosia that afternoon and decided to take the coastal route as my iPhone satnav informed me it was only an hour longer than the motorway. This was a big mistake. It took four hours instead of one and a half. The road was as vertiginous as it was sinuous and just beyond Kato Pyrgos I found myself at a customs outpost for the Turkish occupied northern territory, where an unsmiling guard demanded money and documents.

I reversed out quickly and took a 50km detour through the mountains, a serious test for any vehicle and one that the new model SUV passed with flying colours. I put the 8-speed automatic into Sport mode and gleefully wound it round hundreds of hairpins, seeing not a single vehicle until I reached the main B9 into the capital. Though a big car with a modest four cylinder

2-litre engine there was easily enough power and acceleration, a great return of nearly 50mpg and the cockpit has clean and elegant lines that put me in mind of a Cunard liner.

After a couple of hours in the splendid isolation of the buffer zone with the UN spokesman, where I visited the disused airport and abandoned Trident passenger jet, I headed back south on the motorway for Larnaka after stopping for a coffee at the Nicosia

Hilton, a famous watering hole for spies. All it lacked was Humphrey Bogart and a pianist called Sam.

I was pondering the prospect of the island's reunification when a policeman leapt out from the hard shoulder and flagged me down. I had been clocked at 123kph, a lot faster than the limit, but was let off after explaining it was impossible not to speed in such a car. The policeman laughed and asked me if I knew where the brake pedal was.

Larnaka is the second biggest

**SUNSET: Limassol marina in Cyprus and Mark with his trusty BMW X5 chariot.**

port on the island and enjoyed fabulous wealth during the time of the Phoenicians, who exported copper (the word Cyprus comes from the Latin word 'cuprum' for copper). Mycenaean remains dating from the 2nd millennium BC make it the oldest continuously inhabited city in Cyprus.

In the heart of the old town I checked into the Opera House hotel, ideal as a base for exploring. My room looked across at the magnificent three-tiered campanile of the Agios Lazaros church, whose adjoining museum is free.

After this I wandered into the old town and stopped for an aperitif at Coffee Shop 29, where a Nigella Lawson lookalike poured me a colossal ouzo before dinner at the bohemian Art Café 1900. The 1900, run by Maria and Marius for the last 22 years, is well worth a visit – a downstairs bar with 100 beers and 150 whiskies, and a cosy restaurant above, with a short and well executed menu. It conjured up London's Soho of old, and both hosts were a mine of information.

Back to Paphos via the magnificent port of Limassol to check in at my last port of call, the wonderful old-fashioned Kinaras hotel in the heart of the old town, where the gracious owner George invited me to join him and his friends for a slap-up seafood meze, caught that morning by the chef's husband.

It was with sadness that I loaded my bags into the capacious boot of the X5 and bade farewell to my hosts, before whistling back to Nicosia – eyes peeled for the police – to hand back the keys.



### Drivefacts

**Make:** BMW  
**Model:** X5 xDrive25d  
**How much:** £42,940  
**How fast:** 130mph.  
**0-62mph:** 8.2 secs.  
**Economy:** 47.2mpg.  
**Emissions:** 156g/km CO2

Mark stayed at the Almyra and Annabelle hotels in Paphos  
[www.thanoshotels.com](http://www.thanoshotels.com)

Kiniras Hotel & Restaurant,  
 Paphos, 91 Makarios Ave,  
 CY8010  
[www.kinirashotel.com](http://www.kinirashotel.com)

Hotel Opera, 11 St Lazarus  
 Square, Larnaca 6025  
[www.hoteloperalarnaca.com](http://www.hoteloperalarnaca.com)

Mark flew with Pegasus Airlines  
[www.flypgs.com](http://www.flypgs.com)