

# Greek goddess casts her spell over Cyprus

*Cyprus is the island of Aphrodite. That original "super babe" of antiquity, the subject of a myriad lifelike fleshy sculptures, the woman whom the Romans renamed Venus and made synonymous with all matters erotic and sensual, wasn't merely born on this southeastern Mediterranean island; her birth created it.*

Mythology tells us the gruesome facts of that divine birth. Cronos (Saturn), a terrifying god, once patricidal then infanticidal, fought his father Uranus to gain supremacy of all the gods. Father and son battled mightily across the galaxies, Cronos finally proving the victor when he tore off Uranus's genitals with his bare hands.

Cronos then hurled the titanic testicles from the heavens into the sea, causing a tidal wave of foam, from which rose Aphrodite (The One Given from the Foam). When the briny foam subsided it encrusted itself to form an island, the place we know as Cyprus.

Love and her offspring Sex (Agape and Eros), as all the gods, of both history and literature will attest, are demanding masters. Tricksters and heartbreakers, unreliable and irascible, shrill and unruly, and utterly irresistible.

I arrive in Cyprus in the late afternoon. It is no light matter to visit a location of such sensual pleasures. I can feel them in the jasmine-scented air, on the playful wavelets of the emerald sea, the pastels and impending violent reds of pre-sunset clouds.

The November sun is still warm. I have a lot of Cyprus to choose from, but I settle on Paphos because of Aphrodite. In this southwest corner of the island - according to legend, the place of her birth - the ancients built their greatest monuments to her and the most imposing temples to her worship.

It is rumoured that to this day Aphrodite cultists come and pray in the Paphos area locations consecrated to the Goddess of Love; and it is a documented certainty that all of antiquity (Egyptians, Greeks, Romans) made pilgrimages to her at these same locations starting at 1000 BC, all the way to the third century AD and the beginning of the island's Christian era (when

love, and especially sex, were reassigned as vulgar, rather suspect, human instincts).

I begin my pilgrimage to the Beautiful One about 15 kilometres east of the modern town of Paphos, on the very spot of the beach - marked by a chunk of evocatively eroded marble boulder - where the foam gave birth to her (inside a half-shell if we believe Botticelli's vision). The site has been mercifully left free of artifact and tourist-style installations. There is a snack-bar/souvenir store and also a huge parking lot, but otherwise it is just a beach and a rock and a heck of a lot of legend. In summer, the parking lot is jammed with tourist buses, while close to a thousand thrill-seekers at a time shuffle on the beach hoping to grab some sensual favour.

Now in late fall, I am one of only three tourists, and as Cyprus has it, it is warm enough for a swim in the turquoise waters. I swim for Aphrodite, I daydream her embrace, I hear her laughter in the ripples of the gentle surf. She causes a slightly more rambunctious ripple and some foam washes over my face, sneaks into my mouth. I taste the goddess, I take it a sign that she likes me.

It is ever closer to sunset now, and I'm walking in the "magic" photographic light of elongated, pink-tinted shadows as I visit Palaepaphos (Old Paphos) in modern-day Kouklia, only a short drive from the birth-beach. Here, an articulated ancient city lies in ruins, dominated now, as it has been since the dawn of Western civilization, by Aphrodite's Sanctuary. Just enough of the temple's columns and parapets remain standing to evoke its ancient splendour. It was here that elaborate rites and sacred ceremonies were held for the benefit of an endless stream of our ancestors making pilgrimages to the governess of their favourite pleasure.



*A modern Aphrodite strolls on Aphrodite's birth beach in Cyprus. Photograph by : Photo by Algis Kemezys*

Dark descends quickly and aromatically as all those delicious Mediterranean night flowers come into their own. I proceed to my hotel in the tourist zone of modern Paphos. The original town, which existed in the area of Aphrodite's Sanctuary, was moved for reasons diluted over time some kilometres west to create "New" Paphos about 2,000 years ago. By the Middle Ages, an even "newer" Paphos grew around that location, and now a spiffy cornice stretches down the beach from there to accommodate the tourist influx that literally never stops: There is no real winter in Cyprus.

I have chosen Alexander the Great Beach Hotel, a fully equipped six-storey resort with excellent accommodations and chocolate-on-the-pillow turn-down service, again because of the name. Aphrodite might be the greatest celebrity of this island, but she is not the only one. Cleopatra, St. Paul the Apostle, Othello and Leonardo da Vinci have all had occasion to star on Cyprus, but none were as dashing or, well, as Great, as Alexander, who also had his own (conquering) reasons to alight here.

A great night's sleep in Alexander's fold, and I'm ready for more Aphrodite. I head due north from Paphos on well-built British-style highways to Polis on the north coast. It is a pleasant town, but its primary attraction is its proximity to the seaport of Lakki (pronounced and known as "Latsi"), the gateway to

Aphrodite's Baths.

The Baths are no great shakes as a site, and certainly no match to the grandeur of the goddess's Sanctuary in Palaepaphos, but the mere idea that this is where the Gorgeous One used to share her love with Adonis has been enough to attract countless fans, including myself. Properly infatuated, I visit a nearby modern installation that even Aphrodite would have found commodious. It is called Anassa, and it is one of the most beautiful hotels I have seen.

Built on a hillock overlooking a mythological landscape of cypress-lined coastline, Anassa is a bouquet of understated luxury set among bougainvillea and birdsong and otherworldly peace and quiet. I'd recommend it unreservedly as the ideal place to romance and pamper the Aphrodite (or the Adonis) in your life, as long as the price tag is within your grasp: A couple of thousand bucks a night will get you a suitable mid-range room, with a nice buffet breakfast thrown in.

Being fresh out of suitable space on my credit cards, I console myself at a seaside table of Yango & Petro's fish taverna, located on the fishing marina of Lakki for the last 50 years. An institution, Y&P is world-famous for "fish-meze," Cyprus's generic name for its feasts of endless plates of fish and seafood. The bright sunlight spotlights every little offering, served at humane intervals allowing for a proper tasting before the next batch.

Fried calamari, cuttlefish in a sauce of its own ink, octopus in vinegar with capers, shrimps with feta and tomato, fried whitebait, tarama, Greek as well as cabbage salads, all take a bow on the way to the main event of an ideally char-grilled seabass, meticulously deboned and butterflied, every morsel of its snow-white flesh a sensual treat (probably inspired by Aphrodite herself).

I spend several more balmy days in Paphos, leisurely strolling along the cosmopolitan stretch of the tourist zone, all the way to the harbour and the extensive 2,000-year-old remains of Napaphos (New Paphos). Here a vast collection of temples to the various Olympians (including the Love Goddess) stand in fairly good shape, decorated still with original mosaics of classical icons. And for good measure, I visit the fully excavated Tombs of the Kings, with their subterranean, colonnaded mausoleums. Those ancients really had it together, they even knew how to be buried in style.

I tear myself away from Paphos, and head toward Nicosia, the national capital, which is also known locally as Lefkosia. On the way, I stop at Lefkara, a small village dedicated to the art of embroidery. This is where geometric designs have been stitched onto the finest linen for centuries. The name-dropping game here is about Leonardo, who visited in the 16th century specifically to purchase embroidered goods, and, it is suspected, to borrow from the basic patterns, which have their origins on decorated clay pots from 3,000 years ago.

The capital itself is a bustling city, with a vibrant social life and one magnificent museum. In it, I find not one but two worthwhile Aphrodites. An armless, creamy, Venus de Milo look-alike sculpture from Roman times, and a splendidly alive marble head with almond-shaped eyes and an enigmatic smile carved with precision by the Greeks about 2,000 years before Mona Lisa. I glance around furtively, and then reach out and briefly touch the slightly curved lips. I could swear the goddess's marble brow frowns for an instant, as a lingering, ever-so-thrilling shiver runs its course from head to toes.