



## Seeing Contrasts Along Two Sides of Cyprus

Alexandros Demetriades spent his childhood summers in Kyrenia, a picturesque resort town in Cyprus nestled between the rugged Besspark Mountains and the sparkling blue waters of the Mediterranean. He would awaken to the smell of warm bread from the bakery next door and, if he was lucky, go for a ride with his father in the family's small motorboat.



All that changed in 1974, when Turkey, in response to a Greek-backed coup attempt in Cyprus, invaded the island and cleaved it in half, claiming the north — including Kyrenia — for Turkish Cypriots and leaving Greek Cypriots the south. Like hundreds of thousands of people who owned property on the wrong side of the dividing line, Mr. Demetriades, a Greek Cypriot, never stepped foot in his family's home again.

"You can't even see it now," he said. "It's part of a military base that we have no access to."

Although he never returned to the house in Kyrenia, Mr. Demetriades, 45, recently embarked on a two-year journey that took him to almost every other corner of the island. All told, he has covered more than 22,000 miles around Cyprus. In his pictures, it appears as a land of stark contrasts — deep shadows and blinding white light, great beauty and real ruin.

"I'm trying to understand the people living here," he said. "I think in many ways I was trying to see if there is a reconciliation possible between the two sides."

In fact, there is more to it than that. Mr. Demetriades was 7 when Cyprus was split in two, and a high school student when his family left for the United States. He became an American citizen, attended college and graduate school in the United States and found work in finance. In 1994, he returned to Cyprus, devoted himself to fine art and

founded a multimedia company.

Then, hoping to "figure out my place in this place," he began taking pictures.

"I always have a little mix when I'm here," Mr. Demetriades said. "Sometimes I feel I belong and sometimes I feel I don't. When I came back I decided I wanted to do something photographically. I thought this would be a good place to start."

Each of his trips around Cyprus began and ended at his home in the capital, Nicosia, which itself is divided by a United Nations-patrolled buffer zone that stretches across the island. Although the border opened in 2003, traversing it is still limited to designated checkpoints and requires a valid identification or passport.

Throughout Cyprus, he said, the news is not good. The country has been blindsided by the European financial crisis. And ever since reunification plans were scuttled in 2004, there has been little real hope of reconciliation.

"I always felt like I was crossing into another country," Mr. Demetriades said of his excursions to the north. "I felt both overwhelmed by sadness but I think hopeful at the same time. I can't say that I'm very optimistic."

Chief among the things that trouble Mr. Demetriades about the state of affairs in Cyprus are the lack of trust and the mutual suspicion that still exist between inhabitants on both sides of the island. "Something has

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broken, and I'm not sure if it's fixable," he said.

Even more striking to him was the quiet acquiescence of both Greek and Turkish Cypriots to a political stalemate that has kept them estranged from one another for decades. "Things aren't really moving in any direction," he said. "There's been a lot of talk by different political players in the region who influence the situation. But the people are always the ones who bear the brunt of what's going around."

All of this is what Mr. Demetriades tried to capture. "My goal is to bottle up as much emotion as I can," he said. "In Cyprus, which is part of this larger family of the Balkans and

Middle East, there's always a lot of emotions running."

While photographing his homeland, Mr. Demetriades rarely set out with a specific mission. He started shooting early and kept going until his batteries ran out.

"I usually just aimlessly wander until I feel something wakes me up, something moves me," he said. "I try not to think about it too much. The minute I see something, I react. The more unfocused you are at the moment, the more startled you are when things happen around you. I let things startle me."

Everywhere he went, Mr. Demetriades saw symbols of conflict and compromise. In both the north and south, he took pictures of young children with flowers — a Greek Cypriot boy smelling a lily (above), a Turkish Cypriot girl holding a carnation in her mouth (Slide 15).

"I felt that it was symbolic of the younger generation maybe moving towards bridging the gap between the two sides," he said.

But another shot showed a different mood that persists: when four young boys played along a concrete wall, a child's hand dominated the foreground.

"I was shooting in the buffer zone on the north side and at some point this kid just pulled out his hand and said, 'Enough. Stop,'" he said. "I clicked the shutter and that was the picture. That was kind of symbolic. There's still a barrier to a lot of things. There's a wall that sits between the two sides even though the borders are open."