

The Revival of Cyprus

Journalists - and spouses - Rick Nieman and Sacha de Boer visit the island that has been divided in two for decades and discover a new fire.

Photo caption: Erica Vassiliou, owner of The Gym, a new restaurant annex bar annex gallery in Nicosia's old center

Text: Rick Nieman

Photography: Sacha de Boer

On the doorstep where the hip cafe should be, sits a young man wearing a black T-shirt with the text 'Against modern football'. On his arms tattoos, in his ear a small diamond. With a twinkle in his dark brown eyes he looks at me. 'It depends', he says. While my question was simple enough: 'Are you open?' Then he gets up and shakes my hand. 'Stavros. For you, I'm open. Coffee?'

While Stavros makes Cypriot coffee in a traditional copper jug - black, strong, a few scoops of sugar, don't drink the residu at the bottom! -, he tells me his story. 'Five years ago there was nothing here. This entire area around the buffer zone between the Greek and Turkish parts was deserted. I was the first one to start a bar here. Now the entire street is renovated.' He chuckles. 'It's a pity, actually. I thought it was prettier before, with the graffiti and dilapidated houses everywhere.'

Photographer - and wife - Sacha de Boer and I visit Nicosia, 'the last divided capital of Europe'. Even though it has been more than forty years ago since Turkey invaded Cyprus and occupied a third of the island, the border still runs straight through the capital. The most important shopping street of Nicosia, Ledra street, abruptly ends in a border crossing, with guardhouses and customs officers. If you turn a corner somewhere, you suddenly find yourself in front of a barrier of oil drums filled with concrete, painted blue and white. Or the road suddenly comes to an end at a towering wall, topped with rolls of corroded barbed wire. In a subsequent street stands a guardhouse with in it a bored, but heavily armed soldier. Above his head the Cypriot and Greek flags are waving, behind him lies a hundred meters of uninhabited no man's land. The imposing facades give away that once the notables were living there, but the window frames have long lost their windows, the streets are overgrown with weeds, and trees grow out of the collapsed roofs. On the other side of the abandoned - and forbidden - zone, a big Turkish flag is waving.

It has been more than a quarter of a century since the Berlin wall fell, but the capital of Cyprus - an independent country that is a full-fledged member of the European Union - is still divided. It is no coincidence that the Turkish troops came to a halt precisely here. After the independence of Cyprus (from Great Britain) in 1960, clashes erupted between the Greek and Turkish populations. In 1964 British major-general Peter Young, charged with preserving the peace, drew a line on the map with a green pencil to separate the two groups. From that moment, the island has been divided by the 'Green Line'. After a civil war erupted amongst the Greek-Cypriots - provoked by the dictatorial military regime in Athens - Turkey invaded the island in 1974, under the guise of protecting the Turkish minority. To this day the Turks occupy the entire north-eastern tip, up to the Green Line in the capital.

For decades the inhabitants of Greek-Nicosia avoided the old city situated within the Medieval Venetian ramparts. They did not want to be confronted with the visible consequences of the division of their land. The area fell into disrepair. Businesses and nightlife moved to the modern outskirts. But since a few years there has been a reverse movement, and the old city is coming back to life.

'I have started coming here again only recently', says banker Dimitri Sparsis. I know Dimitri from Amsterdam, where he lived in the '90s. We dine in The Gym, a restaurant situated in the previously neglected Onasagorou street. It would not be out of place in New York, with its bare brick walls, sturdy steel beams and modern industrial interior. 'Because of the buffer zone the Cypriots ignored the old centre', says Dimitri. 'But that has changed because of the economic crisis. The posh shops and restaurants in the modern city started experiencing difficulties, and the house prices and rents in this part of town were still absurdly low.'

The owner of The Gym, Erica Vassiliou, seems to have walked straight off a catwalk. Designer clothes, piercing in her nose. After having run a popular coffee shop for twenty years in the new part of Nicosia, she bought the building of a carpet dealer and started a new restaurant. On the menu you find dishes such as linguine with crayfish, and cocktails like the Penecillin: whisky with honey and smoked ginger syrup. The background music is jazzy lounge.

The next morning Sacha and I visit the neighborhood of Chrysaliniotissa, right next to the buffer zone in the eastern part of Nicosia. In the car-free streets old, dilapidated buildings stand next to beautifully restored homes. Thanks to the European Union, which donates money to the Nicosia Master Plan, intended to restore the city to its former glory.

When Sacha follows one of the many neighborhood cats to take a picture, the animal slips into a residential house. An impeccably dressed gentleman appears in the doorway. Graham Colville turns out to be a retired Canadian journalist, who after a long career in the Middle East made Cyprus home. He invites us to see his house. Then Graham says: 'Come, I'll show you my backyard.' We walk through the tall grass along the border. He stops at a white marble plaque. 'On this exact spot a Greek-Cypriot soldier on guard was shot in 1983 by a Turkish sniper. When you see this, recent history comes very alive, doesn't it?', says Graham.

When I say goodbye, he points to his cats. 'They continuously slip through the holes in the wall, they don't care which part they are in'.

At the end of the street there is an unused border post. The small guard house is not occupied, so I walk through the oil drum-barrier. Suddenly I am standing in the middle of the buffer zone. It reminds me of the set of a war movie. On the ground lie stray shell casings, in the façade of a former police station I see dozens of bullet holes. Only the happily chirping birds break the silence. Then a soldier shouts: 'Please leave. You're not allowed to be here.'

Sacha and I are gripped by the unreal atmosphere around the buffer zone. When we see that the door of a dilapidated building close to the former front line is slightly open, we slip inside. In the walls between the various houses man-sized holes have been forged, allowing us to walk for hundreds of meters, from building to building. Suddenly we are standing next to artillery positions, protected by piled sandbags and improvised roofs of corrugated sheet-iron. Every few meters shooting holes have been carved, allowing us to see the buffer zone and the reinforcements on the Turkish side. While Sacha is taking pictures, I try to imagine how young soldiers fought fierce fights here. It takes me no effort at all, since it seems as if it was only yesterday that the armistice was proclaimed and the soldiers took their weapons and left.

Deeply impressed we come outside. Less than a hundred meters away there is Symbols, a hip pub with Piet Hein Eek-like tables and big film lamps. We order a beer from a local microbrewery. When we show the pictures we have just taken to the young girls behind the bar, they are astounded. 'Is that just opposite from us? Really?' As my friend Dimitri said: 'The younger generation has no ties to the war. They have not lost a family home or land, they know no one who was killed. That is why, hopefully, a solution is possible in the near future. That would be good since the conflict is costing us a lot of energy which can be better used for other things.'

That solution might just be near. The present leaders of the two populations, the Greek-Cypriot president Nicos Anastasiades and the leader of the Turks, Mustafa Akinci, get along so well that at the end of last year they recorded a Christmas message in each other's language. There seems to

be progress in the negotiations about a reunification of the island, although there are still several difficult matters to be resolved. What to do, for instance, with the belongings in the Turkish north that are claimed by their former Greek owners? But according to the most optimistic followers of Cypriot politics a deal could still be possible even this year, 2016.

Naturally, I also cross over to the Turkish side of Nicosia with Sacha. The Greek-Cypriot policemen let us through easily: they do not recognize the border, so they do not even want to see our passports. On the Turkish side a serious border post has been built, with modern equipment to scan our passports. Turkish-Cyprus proclaims itself a republic, but the only country recognizing that republic is Turkey. Once I pass through, I walk past rows of shops with fake watches and cheap training suits. Worth a visit, however, is the Büyücek Han, a sixteenth-century caravanserai where traveling tradesmen used to meet during the Ottoman era. Now you can drink a beer in the open courtyard. A laid-back atmosphere hangs in the air.

After two days we head inland. Most tourists come to Cyprus for sun and sea: we want to see the 'other' Cyprus. When we drive into the Troodos mountains, I see flourishing genista and wild fennel on the side of the road. Further on are orchards filled with oranges and lemons, impressive old olive trees, rows of cypresses and some stray palm trees. An occasional cloud floats through the blue sky, dozens of swallows hunt for insects in acrobatic flight.

Along the way, guide Christina tells us the rich history of Cyprus. About how the island has been occupied by Egyptians, Persians, Romans, Byzantines, crusaders, French kings, Venetians, Ottomans and Brits, all of whom have left their traces. Thanks to those last rulers, 'Cypriots are always on time and work harder' than Greeks, Christina laughs. And we talk about the cuisine, because wherever we come, the table is crammed within no time. A Cypriot meal is served in the form of *meze*, small bites that all are served simultaneously. 'We have a saying', I hear later. 'Not the stomach needs to be filled, but the eye.'

But the native dishes are so tasty that it is difficult not to fill the stomach, too. The grilled *halloumi*-cheese, made of sheep's- and goat milk. *Kolokasi*, the root of a plant 'that has leaves like elephant's ears', only grows on Cyprus and tastes like soft-boiled potato. Tender lamb from the *kleftiko*, a traditional brick-kiln. And sweet desserts, such as cooked walnut preserved with carob syrup from the carob tree.

Just as in Nicosia, modernity is also moving inland. In the village Kalopanayiotis I meet Andreas Papayiannis, manager of the Casale Panayiotis project. Enthusiastically he tells me: 'My boss was born here, moved abroad and became a millionaire. When he would come back to visit, he would see how the village became increasingly uninhabited. And he decided to rescue it.' Not only did Andreas' boss become the mayor, he also bought an ever greater number of houses which he transformed into a hotel. A restaurant, wine bar and a five-star spa followed. Now there are seven restored houses with 43 rooms, spread across the village. And because Kalopanayiotis is situated on a steep slope, a mini funicular has even been built to facilitate visitors.

We frequently encounter the contrast between old and new in the Troodos region. For instance in the case of the Greek-orthodox priests Panayotis and Nikolas, father and son, 81 and 48 years old. Son Nikolas invites us to have coffee. 'The village is aging, and therefore the church is increasingly empty', he says. 'But the youngsters who have moved away return during the summer and talk to me about their problems. I understand them. Sometimes we head into town together, to festivals. I am crazy about dancing. They call me "Father Cool!"' When our conversation lasts too long, to the youngest of his seven children tugs the grey beard of his father. We warmly say goodbye and move on.

Our last stop has a Dutch touch. During her studies in Australia, Marleen met Marcos Zambartas, who was studying viticulture there. They fell in love, and now Marleen is wine maker on Cyprus, and mother of seven-month-old Sebastiaan. Marcos recounts how his father started the vineyard, in order to revive the forgotten native grapes of Cyprus. 'In Cyprus wine has been cultivated uninterruptedly for 7000 years, longer than anywhere in the world', says Marcos. But since there

was little demand for wine under the Ottomans, and Cyprus afterwards was not able to compete with new world wines from Chile and Australia, the island mostly produces cheap bulk wine. The Zambartas family is the exception.

We taste the Zambartas wines. The white Xynisteri resembles Spanish Albariño. The robust rosé is 'a rosé for red wine drinkers', says Marcos. And the red Maratheftiko is not inferior to an Italian Amarone. 'Maratheftiko means "deceiver"', says Marcus, 'because its vines at times yield a lot of grapes, and at others very few.' Zambartas is served in the best restaurants of Cyprus: they have nothing to do with the cheap bulk wines that is served in simple taverns.

We spend our last night back in the old centre of Nicosia. In the area around the Agia Faneromeni church the terraces are crowded with young people. In the church older churchgoers kiss the displayed icons. From across the buffer zone one can hear fragments of the call for the Friday prayer coming from a minaret. Cyprus, so full of history, so full of hope for the future.

subscript: Rick Nieman is a TV journalist and writer. Photographer Sacha de Boer previously travelled to Guatemala for *Traveler*.

sidebar: Rick Nieman and Sacha de Boer were highly impressed by the hospitality of the Cypriots. Here they share some personal tips.

Mountain and City

Inland

The Troodos mountains are beautiful, and the small towns Arsos and Omodos are surely worth a visit. In Arsos you can sleep in the modernised old appartments of Arsorama. Owner Zooullaa has beautifully restored the farm of her grandmother. In Taverna Agora we ate delicious lamb.

City Walk

In Nicosia, go on a city walk in the neighbourhood of Chrysaliniotissa. Follow the signs on the walls and the tiles on the ground of the Nicosia Master Plan. It shows which traditional houses and buildings have been restored with money of the E.U.. The streets are often car-free.

Wining and Dining

Culinary feast

Definitely try Commandaria, a unique dessert wine that has been made on Cyprus for more than 2000 years, from the white Xynisteri- and the red Mavro grape. Richard Lionheart called it 'wine of the kings, and king of the wines'. Try also typically Cypriot treats such as loukanika sausages, pork marinated in red wine with coriander seeds; grilled chicken and beef souvlakis; sesame bread baked in a brick-kiln, candied walnut (photo) and taramosalata dip made of fish eggs.

Tourism

Other Cyprus

Cyprus has one million inhabitants (800.000 Greeks, 200.000 Turks). Each year three million tourists visit the island. In summer, they mainly go to the coastal towns Agia Napa, Larnaca, Limassol and Pafos. On Cyprus, in spring and autumn it is often 20 to 25 °C, somewhat colder on the mountains (reaching almost 2000 meters in height). Renting a car is no problem: the roads are good and the Greek part of the island can be traversed within a few hours. Careful: they drive on the left hand side.

Practical

The Flight

In summer Transavia (transavia.com) and TUIfly (tui.nl) have direct flights to Cyprus, off season you first fly to Athens and then with Aegean Airlines (aegeanair.com) to Larnaca.