



3 CRUSADER CASTLES WALK

NOTES AND ITINERARY

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DAY 1 - ARRIVAL AT KANTARA RESTHOUSE. After settling in there will be a short introductory talk and time permitting a drive out to Kantara Castle, followed by a 2 mile stroll back to Kantara Village. Dinner and a pleasant evening in the company of Hilal and Mehmet, your hosts, and a chance to meet your fellow walkers.

DAY 2 - KANTARA VILLAGE TO TATLISU PASS 15.7miles/24.3km

After an excellent breakfast we walk straight out of the door and head west on to the trail. Kantara at 700m is poised high over the Mesoria plain far below. To the south Famagusta, some 32miles distant, shimmers in the distance across the plain, which is the backdrop for most of the day's walk. Unfortunately the average rainfall over many decades has decreased and whereas the central plain previously remained green all year it is now not the



case. However, after the autumn rains the greenery returns and through to April the lush green splendour is apparent. The Romans were well impressed with the greenness of Cyprus and called it 'heaven on earth'. The Mesoria plain is exceptionally fertile; it only needs water which unfortunately is in shorter and shorter supply. The new project to bring a water pipeline in from Turkey is an interesting concept: the proposal is to provide 80% of the water for agriculture which would bring this farming area to life. The grain harvest starting at the end of April is rather sad, the yield per acre is sadly low and the grains are small never having had the chance to swell to their potential and one must assume that it is only the subsidies that keep such marginal farming going.

Kantara Village is a little wooded haven on the ridge and we soon pass out on to the open bare mountainside. Even in this harsh area flowers abound and passing around one headland after another there are intense areas of flowers and carpets of colour. As with all the trail the going is on firm clear tracks and whereas maintenance has probably never been carried out on the path its initial construction has ensured it remains excellent. Not much chance of water damage!

The path remains at a pretty average height with not much ascent. High above us on the peak to the north are some aeriels, radio masts and other paraphernalia, all part of the important strategic military position that Cyprus has in this corner of the world.

The trail slowly wends down to the pass where the Mersinlik to Iskele road climbs up and over the range, a short tarmac stretch brings us back to the trail. To the north and south the place is littered with little churches and chapels, many are very small, not much bigger than a domestic living room and one wonders where all the people who used them lived and worked. Nearly all the churches in the area are of the Greek Orthodox faith and even though the Muslim faith has always been well established here there are few remains of Mosques, and it is maybe indicative of the relaxed and kind brand of Islam on the island and the rather more force-



ful Orthodox faith that has given rise to the current Cyprus situation.

The trail here is in areas of forestry. Following some disastrous fires over the years the trails are now well maintained and firebreaks have been created to enable fire fighters to access the area. The wild sage and pine woods provide a lingering scent, astonishingly strong in certain areas and the rock roses provide a palate of colour to the walk.

The navigation of the trail is all too easy; there are no alternatives. However the famous blue tree at D26 is important as a south turn will lead you off the mountain. After a slow steady in-

cline the trail passes for the first time to the northern face of the escarpment and soon the ever present Mediterranean shimmers below. The woods here are much more mature and the path is pleasantly shaded, there is also an increase in birdlife with which the area teems; all the woodland birds, jays, magpies, crows and hopes fly to and fro as you pass by. The path is only just below the ridge and exquisite vistas mean the camera will be kept busy. After a long straight section there is an option to climb up 50 metres to the fire watch tower on Mount Olympos at 740m, from which a wonderful 360 degree panorama is available with views over to Turkey some 50 miles distant to the north on a clear day.

From here the path twists and turns on a long slow descent through a most picturesque area before passing through some derelict mining areas to the flat carob and olive areas adjacent to the road from Tatlisu to Gecitkale, which climbs through the pass here. Transport awaits to take you back to the ever friendly Kantara Rest House for unwinding and a convivial dinner on the vine bedecked terrace.



DAY 3 - ANTIPHONITIS CHURCH TO BUFFAVENTO PASS 14.2miles/22.7km

After breakfast we drive down to the coast road and climb up through the old village of Esentepe to the Antiphonitis Church.

The Antiphonitis Church, squat and strong, was originally built by a 12th century monk from Asia Minor. Antiphonitis means loosely translated 'Christ who responds' and is home to some famous icons. Some others have unfortunately been subject to looting, vandalism and theft. There has been a whole saga of international legal action which has resulted in prosecutions and the return of some of the missing icons - could be the basis for an exciting novel! From here we drive up to meet the Kyrenia Mountain Trail on the top of the ridge.



The initial stage winds along the southern face of the ridge, again through picturesque mature shaded woodland. Round every corner there is a vista of sea, mountains and woods, this is a very beautiful area. The path wends upwards before a zig zag climb though the summit to a view of the central plain far below to the south. In the distant haze the Troodos mountains of South Cyprus are clearly visible, rising to some 6000ft, twice as high as the Kyrenia Range. All along this ridge there are many little springs all

coupled up to provide water for the villages far below. It is very noticeable that the vegetation on the southern face of the ridge is less prolific than to the northern face which receives the incoming rains which accounts for the lush greenery. We enter some mature woodland again and slowly trail down through the woods passing to the north of the Yayla summit, at 936.9m the second highest peak of the range, again bristling with aials.

We descend to the Alevkaya Forest Station, a base for the forestry department and also the Herbarium set up by Dr.Deryk Viney. This interesting project contains detail of over 800 plants indigenous to Cyprus. Dr.Viney is very much the expert on the famous orchids of Northern Cyprus and his original drawings are a delight to see.

At this point there is a popular picnic area with a small café serving local food and a pass where the road from Besparmark climbs over the range to the south. A short detour takes us down to the Sourp Magar Monastery, another special site of interest.



SOURP MAGAR - ARMENIAN MONASTERY

The monastery of Sourp Magar is situated at a height of 510 meters above sea level, on the northern slopes of the Kyrenia mountain range. Sourp Magar means "Saint Makarios the Blessed". It could refer either to a 4th century AD Coptic hermit who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, or to another 4th century AD Coptic hermit who was a pupil of St. Anthony of the Desert. The feast days of both these saints are observed by the Armenian Church. Thus, it is quite probable that this monastery, which is thought to have Coptic origins, came into the hands of Armenians at a later stage. The date and circumstances of this transfer are unclear. Close relations between so-called "oriental" Apostolic Churches e.g. the Coptic, Armenian, Syrian and Ethiopian churches, began soon after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. Tradition states that Christianity was brought to Armenia by Bartholomew the Apostle, and Thaddeus, one of the Seventy. But it was St. Gregory the Illuminator who brought about the Royal Edict of 301 AD which proclaimed Christianity as the established official religion of Armenia, the first country in the world to do so. Sourp Magar has been a religious centre for Armenians for centuries. Although under the jurisdiction of the Catholicosate of Cilicia, residing at present in Lebanon, it has had close ties with St. James' Monastery in Jerusalem and with the Catholicosate of Ejmiatsin in Armenia. The quiet surroundings have for centuries provided a haven for clergymen and laymen alike. At the beginning of the 20th century thousands of Armenian refugees fled to the island. The monastery opened

its doors to orphans and to those in need. It also developed farming to help feed the hungry. Today it is largely in ruins with a small cafe providing light refreshments.

Regaining the KMT we proceed along tarmac. We asked for the trail to be improved but we did not expect tarmac! It is however quiet and pretty and a small diversion at Lovers Leap enables you to stand on a balcony with a drop off of hundreds of feet. The trail follows the road round the various mountain headlands before we have a chance to take a small diversion under the southern face of the Five Finger Mountain (Besparmark). This is followed by a small



climb to the Buffavento Café for a welcome drink. Transport awaits to take you on to the Riverside Holiday Village, our base for the next five nights.

DAY 4 - BUFFAVENTO PASS to BELLAPAIS 12.9miles/20.6km

After breakfast we drive down to the coast road and climb back up to the Buffavento Pass the finish of the previous day's walk. From here we stride west of along the ridge path. The ground here is open and bare and we soon snug under the southern face of the escarpment. To the south Nicosia is spread before us as we proceed. We move down the hill into a slightly gentler topography but still the slightly scrubby stony landscape is the norm. Below us the Ayios Epiphanius ruins can be seen as we proceed under the ridge until we find a small diversion up to Buffavento Castle itself. The castle is an integral part of the rocky summit and is perched on the very crest, hence superb views north and south over all Cyprus. I cannot verify the story but I am assured that there is line of sight between Kantara, Buffavento and St Hilarion castles. This supposedly enabled signals to be passed along the chain specifically to warn of the Arab raiders, which were a serious menace along the whole of the North Cyprus coast. Certainly since the invention of mobile phones there have been no raids.

Also at the site of the castle there is a rather sad little memorial to a plane which flew into the mountain in the late '90s, killing all on board.

After visiting the castle we resume on the trail. From here we lose height as we zig zag down the face of the mountains where the vegetation resumes, albeit with a slightly scrubby look with limited areas of forest. We pass the Panayia Apendrika Monastery, a popular picnic area before continuing down to the habitation all along the bottom of the range and we skirt just to the north of most of the villages. This is a fairly poor area and limited poor quality farming is undertaken, one feels that it is more of a dormitory area for Nicosia with incongruous new cars in the drives of mud shacks.

We take a small diversion through a quarry to save a mile of tarmac through one of the villages. From here



we start a long very slow ascent behind some forestry, climbing slowly until after bearing north for a couple of hundred yards we have the chance to leave the main KMT and take the way marked trail down to Bellapais (Abbey of Peace) some 4 miles distant. The trail through the mountains is uneventful but soon there is a chance to catch a glimpse the ever present Mediterranean to the north. Rounding the corner the full panorama over Kyrenia is superb: the harbour, castle, mountains striding into the distance and all the villas and villages spread below. The trail winds down the hillside and soon you are in the village of Bellapais itself with its wonderful Abbey and adjacent old village. The Abbey constructed in 1198 was home to monks of the Augustinian order who used it for several centuries until the Ottomans gave it to the Greek Orthodox Church who 'removed' the monks - sounds familiar. A visit to the Abbey is well worthwhile, a real gem of medieval tranquillity. Opposite is the 'Tree of Idleness', the popular restaurant immortalised in Lawrence Durrell's 'Bitter Lemons of Cyprus', complete with the famous tree, reputed to induce a relaxed torpor, in my experience hard to disagree!



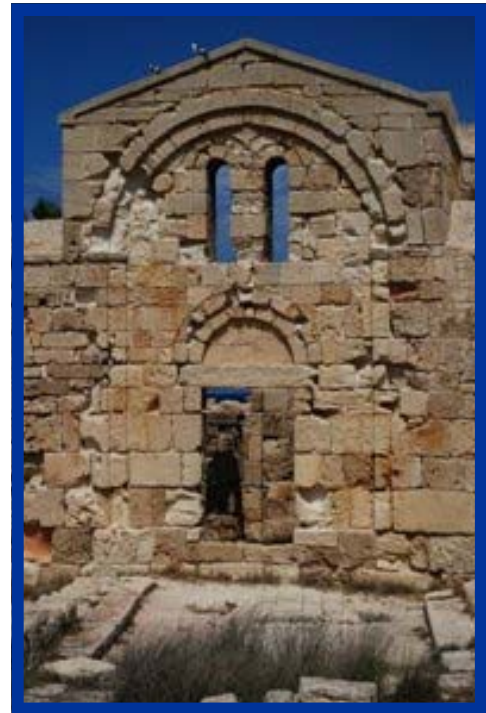
DAY5 - REST DAY

Breakfast is provided, but the rest of the day is yours to do as you wish. Chill by the pool or use the shuttle bus into Kyrenia, provided by the hotel. Alternatively you can use one of the two beach clubs on the island to which you have free access. There are many bars, restaurants and cafes so there is a chance to try some of the famous local food.

DAY 6 - DIKMAN to LAPTA CROSS ROADS 11.8miles/18.5km

Today we drive straight up the hill from Riverside Holiday Village over the pass on the road to Lefcosia (Nicosia). Over the summit we head east along the foot hills to Dikman where we climb up to the start of the trail. Being on the South side of the range the landscape is dry and scrubby with limited areas of juvenile forest. With views over Nicosia and the Troodos beyond we proceed along the edge of foothills before dropping down onto the main Nicosia/ Kyrenia pass through the mountains. This valley is a popular picnic area and Turkish Cypriot picnics are large family events, often parties of around 20 with all the extended family attending, a charming feature of Turkish Cypriot life. We await here as the huge climb up to the St Hilarion Castle is up through a military area so transport takes us up through the restricted zone, a saving of over 1,000ft of climb, which is welcome anyway! St Hilarion is the most intact and interesting of all the Crusader castles and repairs and sensitive renovations have enhanced the experience. Though there was obviously some structure prior to Richard the Lionheart's interest, maybe as a lookout for the frequent Arab raiders to the island, some further works were undertaken by Guy de Lusignan and his followers who had prepared the Castle for the 1228 raid by Emperor Frederick II. It was after 1489 that the Venetians dismantled some of the castle to save money!

The Castle today is magnificent and perched on the rocky craig overlooking Kyrenia and the coastal plain spread far below. From here the trail passes through heavily scented pine woods with the odd view overlooking the south but mainly along the northern side of the ridge. Part of the improvement of the trail has included tarmac some of the trail which is a great shame. We finish the day's walk at Lapta Crossroads where a track from Lapta winds over the summit before passing down through various quarries arriving on to the agricultural areas below. Transport awaits for the long descent and return to the Riverside Holiday Village.



DAY 7 - LAPTA CROSS ROADS to GECIT-KOY 13.4miles/21.5km

From Riverside Holiday Village we climb straight back up the hill and along the ridge to Lapta Crossroads the end of the previous days walk. From here there has been a retaining safety wall built alongside the trail as the trail, though tarmac in parts really does hang on the very cliff face. Very twisty and winding, hugging the contours it provides spectacular views over Al-sancak, Lapta and Karsiyaka and beyond. Even with the supposedly chronic overdevelopment

the overall vistas are of green olive groves and agriculture. From 2,500 ft it is wonderful, in the spring when the air is clear and there is no humidity nor heat haze Turkey is clearly visible, some 48 miles distant. The part of Turkey in view is a mountainous plateau at around fourteen thousand feet and the snow covered tops shining in the sun seem much nearer than 48 miles. After a short while a track leaves the trail to ascend to the listening station on the peak of the mountain, the highest point of the whole range at 1024m. It seems incongruous that this little selection of aials could listen into the Eastern Block as was, to monitor missile testing, military communications and generally eavesdrop of what was, and probably is a relatively unstable part of the world. Before leaving the southern face there is a Turkish Army Tank of 1974 crashed over the edge. The crew were killed and are honoured with a plaque and flags. A quick twist of the trail brings us out on the southern face and we slowly wend our way down. The descent seems to go on for ever and becomes intensely wooded and twisty until we meet the pass between Karsiyaka and Kozankoy. Here is a little mountain restaurant called Kozan. Savash the owner, previously a vet in Finland prepares traditional lunches and we join him sitting on his beautiful terrace with its breathtaking views over the valley. From here the trail descends from the end of the mountain ridge towards the end of the trail at Cape Korucam. The whole area is heavily wooded and eventually joins the trail around the dam at Getickoy. We follow the shoreline of the dam before reaching the dam wall itself. Over the dam we enter the village of Getickoy before finishing at Ozyarali Market, a little shop and restaurant, the end of the stage and the end of the walk. Transport awaits and we return along the coastal road to Riverside Holiday Village for unwinding and a final dinner at which certificates of the Kyrenia Mountain Trail Association are given out.

