

Hiking the Kyrenia Mountains of Northern Cyprus

'Heaven for Hikers'

A treat for wildlife spotters, the 143-mile trail through the Kyrenia Mountains of North Cyprus is still one of the Med's best-kept secrets.

It is a hiker's paradise, with a rugged coastline stretching for more than a hundred miles, unspoilt by the Med's usual high-rise international hotels and sprawling tourist villas. Its walking credentials are still relatively unknown. Just one company offers walking trips here: this is cyprusactive.com owned and run by Richard and Amy Fairley.

Richard and Amy maintain the way marking of the Kyrenia Mountain Trail named after the mountain range it runs through, and have begun taking groups on walks along it. Their popular Three Crusader Castles Walk runs along the most scenic sections of the route. The walks are accompanied by an experienced TRNC guide and a safety vehicle that is never too far away.

The guide is needed not so much for navigation (the trail is very well marked and, in any case, is one straight line) but to point out and identify the indigenous wildlife, which includes some 280 species of bird. There are the familiar crows, magpies and jays but more enticingly, the roller and the hoopoe.

At its start, the trail meanders along the ridge, teasingly revealing views of the twinkling Med between tall, spindly pine trees on our right, while the flat Mesaoria plain is laid out on our left like a mustard yellow tablecloth. The air is pine- and eucalyptus-scented and filled with the constant chirping of cicadas. Every few minutes a lizard can be seen darting across the path and there is a constant rustling in the trees as birds land just far enough away not to be seen.

Formed by earthquakes centuries ago, the ridge has kept the rain that sweeps across the Mediterranean from falling any further south. Consequently, the landscape on one side is considerably more verdant than that on the other, and as the trail dips down each side it offers two strikingly different landscapes, both harbouring a wide variety of wildlife. Hares and foxes are common on the trail, as are partridges and scorpions and several different snakes will occasionally slope out from the undergrowth. There are a great variety of lizards and geckos as well as butterflies flying en masse, like delicately coloured clouds lighting up the sky in creamy white, cornflower blue and lemon yellow.

Each day's walk is about 14 miles, with minimal ascents and descents. The wide path is compacted limestone, which makes for easy, if dusty, walking, and accommodation is exceptionally clean and comfortable.

Five of the seven nights are spent in a good hotel in the Kyrenia region offering all the facilities you would expect whilst on holiday. The other two nights are spent at the Kantara Rest House in the tiny village of the same name, although a more basic hotel. It's a truly restful spot high above the Med, rooms are equipped with only the basics but the hospitality of owner Hilal is faultless and who needs a television when the views from the window are that good anyway?

The rest house also provides easy access to the first of the walk's eponymous castles. The imposing 10th-century Kantara Castle has long been a lookout point over the Med, although its ruins are now more a place from which to take in the coastal views than a watchtower for spotting Arab invaders.

From there it's a direct line of sight to the other two castles on the walk: Buffavento and St Hilarion further to the west. The final castle, St Hilarion, is not reached until day four and it is the climb from there that is why Richard and Amy ask walkers to seriously consider their fitness level before signing up - an easy ramble this is not but the bonus is that a safety vehicle is always available to transport any weary walkers that wish to cut their walk short at any time.

The EU may not even acknowledge the existence of North Cyprus but as a result it has avoided the euro and for now at least that's all the more reason to visit.

The 3 Crusader Castles Walk with Cyprusactive.com

Available: October – June

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