

“It’s not every day you meet a living Greek god”



Cyprus' got TALENT

Whether you're after watersports or ruins, Cyprus has it all
– plus lots of sunshine and friendly faces too

By **ROB MCGIBBON**

The bald head, cheeky grin and the London accent are big clues, but the famous tattoo across his well-irrigated beer belly quickly gives away the man's identity. The unmistakable outline of our holiday island beneath the fuzz can belong to only one person: take a bow Stavros Flatley, the legend of Britain's Got Talent 2009.

It's not every day you meet a living Greek god, but when it comes to Cyprus, Stavros is as close as you can get and he's here, in his trunks, on a beach in Paphos. Not so much Heracles, the god of sport and saviour of mankind, but Lardus, the god of good living and laughter. He charges €1 for selfies for a local charity and last summer alone he coined in €3,000 from star-struck holidaymakers.

Four years ago Stavros - real name Demi Demetriou ("Call me Fatty if you want," he chuckles) - sold up in London to move back to his motherland and be with his

beloved son and co-dancing hero Lagi. He has set up a beachside water sports business and he is offering me and my 13-year-old son Joseph and our holiday friends a ride of a lifetime - on a giant inflatable sofa. It's clear that Stavros is a sofa aficionado, so how can we refuse?

We are buckled into lifejackets and moments later our intrepid group is whooping with laughter, clinging on for dear life as the sofa hurtles across the waves behind a speedboat. A good slice of cheesy holiday fun is essential and this hits the spot perfectly.

Cyprus is not everyone's most obvious choice for a European break, but I have been coming here on-and-off since the mid 1990s and I can vouch for the warmth of its welcome, the guarantee of its sun and the scope of the offerings. It may lack the sophistication and charm of, say, France or Italy, but it always delivers when you want a relaxing and uncomplicated break.

This time we stayed at Athena Beach hotel, a few miles along the coast from the centre of Paphos on the west side of the



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island. Athena is a vast family-friendly hotel with large rooms, a big pool and sweeping views across the Med. It's a firm favourite with Brits and particularly popular with pensioners who go there on bowls tours to use its tournament-quality artificial lawns.

My wife, Emma, is an artist and the last thing she wants is daft sofas rides, or sleepy games of bowls. Give her culture, churches and crumbling ruins and she couldn't be happier. With this in mind, we took a break from our loungers and set off on a pleasant stroll along the esplanade into Paphos central.

By the harbour you find the impressive Paphos Castle, which was re-built by the Ottomans around 1592 after the original Byzantine fortification was finally destroyed in an earthquake. A few minutes away is Paphos' expansive archaeological park that has been a UNESCO World Heritage treasure since 1980.

Across nearly 300 hectares, there are ancient ruins of a Roman city with its palaces, fortresses, villas, theatres and tombs. To be honest, Joseph was non-plussed by these old wonders and went for a solo walk to a pretty whitewashed lighthouse overlooking the sea, leaving Emma and me to explore in peace.

We walked through the ruins and sighed at the beauty of a series of immaculately preserved mosaics dating from the Hellenistic period (3rd-1st centuries



PAPHOS OLD TOWN

BC) in a protective building called the House of Dionysus. You tread over raised gangplanks to view intricate mosaics depicting mythology, worship, hunting and geometrical decorations. They are truly stunning. My pick was the one of Phaedra and Hippolytus. Cupid is looking on as an embarrassed Hippolytus reads a love letter from Phaedra, his step-mum. A somewhat complicated love story, all told in fragments of tile.

Also on this archaeological site are the Tombs of the Kings, which are monumental underground Roman tombs carved out of stone. They're dark and creepy, but nonetheless fascinating. Not far from here we found a far more welcoming establishment: Hondros Taverna. It dates from 1953 and is billed as the oldest taverna in Paphos. It is certainly the best. We feasted like gods on smokey grilled octopus, succulent kebabs and enormous salads, with wine and beer and even dessert, all for €60. A bargain.

There are countless other cultural gems to explore across Cyprus, but there was enough for us in Paphos this time. The rest of the week ebbed and flowed around the beach and pool. We discovered a pretty stretch of coast at Arapis Coral Bay, a 20 minute drive west of the city, which is worth seeking out. One afternoon I took a lesson with the pro at the Elea Golf Academy in the hills overlooking Paphos, and Joseph and I ended the week with the perfect sign off to any sunshine holiday - a water park expedition.

Our last day coincided with the first day of the new season at Aphrodite Water Park, a 15 minute amble from our hotel. After a warm up on the gentle flumes, Joseph and I hit the Twister and Kamikaze chutes, followed by an exhilarating ride called Zero Gravity Free Fall. Surely, there can be no better way to prepare for the dreaded journey back to London than the adrenaline burst from a split second of free fall.

I love Cyprus because it is sunny, easy and friendly. You can have fun and you might even learn something. Cyprus has got talent. So that's three YESs from us. 🇨🇵

Athena Beach Hotel: athena-cbh.com/the-hotel/