



Agia Napa Monastery

CYPRUS TOURISM ORGANISATION

The monastery of Agia Napa and its namesake village are located in the Famagusta district, in southeast Cyprus. The name Napa derives from the ancient Greek word “Napi”, which means wooded valley or canyon. The word is mentioned in Homer’s *Iliad*, in Pindar’s *Pythian Odes*, and later in the Christian hymnology. In the past, there was lush vegetation in that part of the Famagusta district, whereas in the area where the village and monastery exist today there used to be an idyllic wooded valley with springs. In ancient times there was a Greek city named Thronoi in that valley, and a temple dedicated to Aphrodite. With the advent of Christianity, the city declined and all that remained eventually was ruins. However, the valley with its dense forest and plentiful water supply became popular with hunters, who converged here in search of game.

When the miraculous icon of Virgin Mary was found, the word spread quickly to the neighbouring villages and the cave in that remote valley became a shrine and a sacred pilgrimage for the Orthodox Christians of the area. That icon was named “The Icon of Agia Napa”, i.e. the icon of Virgin Mary of the Forest, and the shrine was named “Agia Napa”.

The area around the Monastery was uninhabited until 1790, when a group of people arrived there, having fled Thessaloniki because of an outbreak of cholera. Of that group, only Nicholas Kemitzis and his son survived. The son later married a Cypriot girl from the village of Panagia, located in the hills north of the monastery, where the water of Agia Napa flows from. However, the young couple did not settle in Panagia because of a fierce dispute between the villagers and the Turkish authorities of Famagusta over the water supply. Instead, they decided to find safe haven outside the monastery, thus marking the beginning of the village eventually named after the Monastery of Agia Napa.

We are not certain when exactly the monastery was founded.

The cave, the hiding place and the well on the monument’s grounds all bear witness to the settlement of a Christian community in the area since the Byzantine era. The monastery was named “Agia Napa” before 1366.

However, the existing monument is a 15th century building, when Cyprus was under Venetian rule.

Agia Napa is first mentioned in 1366, when, according to Leontios Machairas, “... ***the king*** (Peter I) ***wrote a letter to the pope and gave it to the admiral ... and the admiral left Famagusta and came to Agia Napa***”

Machairas mentions Agia Napa again in 1373, describing the wreck of five ships laden with booty seized by the Genovese during the looting of Cyprus. Strambaldi also provides an account of those events. We have no other written record regarding Agia Napa during the Frankish occupation (1192–1489). It is mentioned again in the report on Cyprus submitted to Venice in mid-16th century, and in Venetian maps, also of the 16th century.

Local tradition has it that a hunter found the miraculous icon of Virgin Vary in the cave which was subsequently turned into a church. It is said that the hunter’s dog was the first creature to lay eyes upon the glowing icon and began barking insistently, calling his master. Upon hearing of the discovery, swarms of faithful Christians started visiting the sacred site. The icon had probably been carried to the cave during the Iconoclasm (7th–8th centuries) to save it from destruction. In the 14th century, the cave was expanded into a church.

Also according to local tradition, the daughter of a noble Venetian family took refuge to that place because she would not obey her parents who refused to bless her marriage to a non-aristocrat. Around 1500, the wealthy Venetian lady financed the building of the church, the cells for the nuns, and an oil mill. She also planted a sycamore tree close to the south entrance of the monument, next to the water cistern. In all likelihood, however, the oil mill was erected in the monastery during the Ottoman occupation (1571–1878). The monastery seems to have been built gradually and research has confirmed that a part of the church was used as a Latin chapel. According to a study sponsored by the Municipality and the Church of Agia Napa, that chapel operated in the right aisle.

When the wealthy lady's days were drawing to a close, she had the vaulted stone monument built in the centre of the courtyard. She wished to be buried there, next to the cooling fountain. On the north side of the cloister there is a second fountain shaped like a wild boar's head.

The view that Agia Napa was the site of the monastery of Sancti Georgi di Dadi is considered groundless. Consequently, the theory based on that view as well as on the inscription mentioned by the Englishman Drummond, i.e. that originally the monastery was Latin and not Greek orthodox, is erroneous. Besides, there are references to the St. George monastery in the Dades Promontory (or Cape Pyla) already in the 7th century. That monastery is far away and its church is orthodox. The only established fact is that the right aisle of the church was used as a Latin chapel. It is also a fact that Latin monasteries did not operate again during the Ottoman occupation, not even as orthodox ones; they were abandoned and gradually fell in ruins. The Agia Napa monastery is mentioned as a convent already in 1625 by Pietro della Valle, who visited it. This is also corroborated by Stefanos Louzinianos's reference to the miraculous icons of Virgin Mary.

Alexander Drummond, who visited Cyprus and the Agia Napa monastery twice (in 1745 and again in 1750) found a Latin inscription referring to the reconstruction of the monastery in 1530. That inscription, which has not survived, read as follows:

F. M. HE. S. A. F
HOC OPUS FIERI. FECERUNT
GUBERNATORES, FRATERNITATIS
SANCTAE NAPAE, DUCES ET.
PRO. HIERONYMUS DE.
SALASERIS OREMESIS
CIVIS FAMAGUSTANUS
AD HONOREM. BEATAE. VERGINIS
MDXXX

In other words, the inscription was about the arched southwest gate and the two-storey building facing the modern village square, which serves as a secondary entrance. These structures, especially the two-storey one with the Venetian windows, date back to the 16th century. The fountain at the centre of the courtyard must also be dated to the same period. The other buildings, including the church, are older.

As already mentioned, in 1625 Agia Napa was a convent. However, we do not know whether the same was true during the Frankish and Venetian rule. A few years later, in 1668, it seems that it had become a monastery. And yet, it never did seem to attract large numbers of monks, notwithstanding its huge landed and movable property. According to the Archbishopric Land and Property Register of 1758, the estate of the monastery of Agia Napa included many tracts of land, farms and olive trees which reached as far as Kato Lefkara. It also owned two metochia, i.e. dependencies, one in Prastio and one in Ormidia. Further, the monasteries of St. George of Chortakia, to the west of Sotira, and of St. Nikandros had been annexed to Agia Napa. There are references to sizable flocks of sheep and goats, oxen and other animals.

However, the same record includes a very small number of mattresses and oil lamps in the monastery, which suggests that only three or four monks must have lived there. For reasons unknown, the monastery of Agia Napa shut down that same year. A few years back, reference had been made to people who lived here, abbot Pieris for instance, who had travelled to Constantinople in 1668 to bring a firman issued by Sultan Mehmed confirming the ownership of the monastery's estate. Another reference is that of 1773 to the monastery's housekeeper, known as rev. Makarios.

The monastery seems to have opened again a little later. Three monks are said to have lived here in 1800 under "supervisor" Ioannikios. A year later, the monastery had employed people to do its farm work and had a boat in partnership with Antonis Zymboulous from Larnaca.

According to an inscription built into the wall of the monastery's northeast wing, chorbishop Spiridon of Trimithus ordered repair works in 1813. It was probably at that time that the entrance opposite the fountain was narrowed and the arched gate we see today was constructed. However, the monastery was dismantled again during the 1821 massacres by the Ottoman Turks, at the time of the outbreak of the Greek revolution. The Trimithus chorbishop managed to escape abroad. The monastery estate was leased out to various farmers.

In 1878, when Cyprus came under British rule, the monastery cells were in ruins. Only the church had become parish church of the village. In 1950, the monument underwent major restoration works.

The Church of Cyprus subsequently proposed that the monastery be turned into an Ecumenical Conference Centre, however life on the island was disrupted because of the 1974 Turkish invasion and no action was taken in regard with that proposal. Two years later, thanks to the generous contribution of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia, necessary works commenced and the Centre was inaugurated in 1978, becoming a meeting venue for the Christian churches of Cyprus and the Middle East.

Let us now take a virtual tour of the monument.

Starting at the village square, we take the steps or the uphill paved path and reach the huge sycamore tree, listed by the Department of Forests among the age-long trees of the island. It is 600 years old and is believed to be the tree planted by the wealthy Venetian maiden. A small monument can be seen in the shade of that tree. It is dedicated to the Greek Nobel laureate George Seferis, who visited Agia Napa and composed his poem "*Agianapa*" (part of his collection *Imerologio Katastromatos III "Logbook III"* (entitled '*Cyprus, where Apollo ordered me to live*'), Ikaros ed., Athens 1955).

We enter the monastery through its massive southern gate where the pebble-paved cloister leads our steps to the rectangular courtyard surrounded by ashlar-built structures of various periods. The north, east and south sides of

the courtyard are taken up by the monastic buildings, whereas the church, partly cut in rock, is located on the western side.

The oldest part of the monastery comprises the four cross-vaulted cells of the east wing. The two other cells, with the pointed arches, in the same wing are newer, while the cloister with the arches running its length is a later addition. A part of those cells housed the sanitation facilities.

The north-wing cells, where there is now a small shop, are also later additions. In the far right corner we see the oil mill, constructed during the Ottoman occupation. In the same wing, close to the north gate, stands the two-storey building added in 1530, according to the inscription Alexander Drummond had seen, which is probably associated with the wealthy Venetian maiden. That edifice stands out not only because of its meticulous construction, but also because of the impressive upper floor windows framed by elaborate columns supporting semi-circular arches in the Venetian tradition. The relief coats-of-arms and the flagpole holders visible in the northern wall bear witness to the past glory of this monument.

Contemporary with the two-storey building is the equally impressive fountain in the centre of the courtyard. It is an octagonal structure of limestone blocks, with a low enclosure forming stone benches. The fountain is covered with a cupola standing on four pillars supporting pointed arches. At the centre of the enclosure there is a marble fountain with a short column crowned with an Ionian capital, out of which water used to spring. The outer sides of the fountain are decorated with a garland in relief and with three faces. According to tradition, they are the portraits of the Venetian lady and her parents. The coats-of-arms which were also part of the decoration are too damaged to shed any light on the identities of those faces. Only one coat-of-arms, according to R. Gunnis, belonged to the de Bries or the de Veit family.

The water that springs up in the fountain and spouts out of the Roman period boar head in front of the two-storey building is channelled here via the medieval aqueduct which is two kilometers long. From those points, an underground conduit diverts it to the large cistern outside the monastery's south wing, next to the main gate.

The south gate building is finely constructed and simple. It consists of three adjacent open rooms with cupolas resting on vaults. By contrast, the western room is an enclosed one and occasionally serves as a venue for a “charity bazaar” with handicrafts.

Concluding our tour inside the monastery, we come to the truly impressive church on the west side of the courtyard. In actual fact it is a cluster of churches. Facing the courtyard, with the rosette and the frame above its original door, it is a typical example of a 14th century medieval monument. Descending several steps, we enter the church, which is divided into two unequal naves. The first one is a large, simple square area with just a few contemporary icons of saints on the walls. This nave serves as a sales point for icons and ecclesiastical utensils. The nave on the right is narrower. It is the one used as a Latin chapel during the 16th century. In the far-right corner there are some half-damaged murals of the 15th century, with marked Italian influence, depicting three sainted women. In the back of the first nave, two steps lead down to the rock-cut church, believed to date back to the Byzantine era. It was there, as tradition has it, that the hunter and his dog found the miraculous icon of Virgin Mary. A feeling of true religious devotion emanates from that place, enhanced by the simple iconostasis separating the sanctuary from the nave, where there are wooden seats for the worshippers and the visitors. On the wall to the right of the iconostasis we see a large votive icon of Virgin Mary dedicated in 1962 by a Famagusta family prompted by the Virgin, who appeared in a vision. Around and below the icon there are silver and wax votive offerings by believers who have asked for the Virgin’s help. Various sacraments, such as marriage and baptism, continue to be celebrated at this oldest among the monastery churches, and Mass is held on minor holidays falling on weekdays.

The miraculous icon of the Virgin found in the cave is now on the iconostasis of the large church to the southwest of the monastery, built in 1990 and also dedicated to Virgin Mary.

The belt of the Saint of Agia Napa is considered miraculous as well. It is kept in a large adjacent church, to the southwest of the monastery. Many women

who are infertile or experience pregnancy difficulties come to the church every day to gird the belt. The church celebrates on 8 September, on the nativity of Virgin Mary, and a large fete is held. The interior of the church is also impressive, with the murals painted by religious artist Sozos Giannoudis and his team.

The monastery site attracts not only many profoundly religious worshippers, but also visitors who are interested in ancient monuments. Moreover, many young, newly-wed couples come to be photographed in this idyllic environment.

It should be noted that many festivals take place at the Monastery throughout the year. It is an ideal venue for the “Medieval Festival”, which is organized by the Municipality of Agia Napa every October. It has been established as an annual event since 2006, lasts one week and includes musical, theatrical and dance performances.

The September “Agia Napa Festival” is another established event since 1985. It takes place in the square, at the southern gate of the Monastery, and lasts three days.

Many other art and cultural events take place at the same square in May, June, July and August, the peak tourist period.

Exiting the monastery through the southern gate, we can see at a glance that the buildings surrounding this ancient monument have one feature in common: almost all are contemporary, since they were built after 1974. The Turkish invasion destroyed 95% of the island’s tourism. Consequently, we had to develop the free part of Cyprus. The small fishing village of Agia Napa was turned into a major tourist destination in record time. During the first years of development, Agia Napa attracted visitors mainly in the summer. Now, several hotels operate all through the year, thanks to winter and sports tourism.

Within the Agia Napa Municipality, there are other monuments and interesting sites that attract visitors:

- The Agia Napa aqueduct is one of the few that survive in Cyprus. It is also known as the Medieval Aqueduct, although its foundations date back to the Roman period. It is two kilometers long, from “Mana tou Nerou” (i.e. “Water Spring”, to the northeast of the Ormidia village) to the Monastery, and follows the easiest route possible given the existing topography. The water was channelled to the centre of the monastery courtyard and to the huge cistern, under the sycamore tree, in front of the southern gate. It was used for the irrigation of the vegetable gardens on the slope between the Monastery and the sea. Effective 2006, the Department of Antiquities undertook the excavation and maintenance of the aqueduct, under the INTEREG III programme.
- The “Thalassa Municipal Museum” is housed in an interesting polyvalent building, around three hundred meters to the east of the Monastery. The focus of the museum is the sea and its role and importance in the history of the island, since antiquity.
- The Makronissos Tombs are located to the west of Agia Napa in the Makronissos locality. Seventeen tombs have been uncovered there, dating from the Greco-Roman period (4th century BC – 4th century AD). Movable finds are scant as a result of illegal excavations in 1872 (during the Turkish occupation). The Department of Antiquities excavated the area in 1974, and more recently, in 1989-90. The finds that came to light date back to the Cypro-Classical and Hellenistic periods, i.e. from the 5th to the 1st centuries BC.
- Our eyes are drawn to small churches and chapels: St. Mavra, St. Anthony, St. Barbara, Agioi Anargyroi, St. Epifanios, St. Thekla, cut in the rock by the sea, a few kilometers to the west of Agia Napa, St. George, St. Paraskevi, St. Timothy and Mavra, St. Apostle Andrew and Prophet Elias.
- The rocky Cavo Greco Cape, located between the popular resorts of Agia Napa and Protaras, constitutes a major attraction, both for the endless view it offers, and for its hiking trails. It is a wilderness of rare natural beauty, which has been declared a National Forest Park and

nature reserve. One of its trails is part of the E4 European long-distance path, extending from Gibraltar to Cyprus. The trail is two kilometers long and goes through the southeast coast of Cavo Greco, which is included in the Aphrodite Cultural Route, since the area is associated by tradition with the existence of the Sanctuary.

Sea lovers can luxuriate at the golden sand beaches that offer unique experiences and magic moments: Agia Napa, Agia Thekla, Nissi, Konnos, Makronissos, Londa, Vathia Konia, Pernera, Katsarka, Pantachou, Glyki Nero, Ammos tou Kampouri, and Kermia. All these beaches are regularly awarded the EU Blue Flag.

The view from the sea can be just as spectacular. You can admire places such as “Palatia” and the “Thalassines Spilies” sea caves, between Kermia beach and Cavo Greco. Ten-metre high caves carved by nature in the limestone rock so masterfully that they were deservedly named “Palatia” (Palaces) by the locals.

Agia Napa is truly ideal for sea sports fans, whilst its crystal clear blue waters hold a breathtakingly beautiful wealth which will enchant even the most seasoned divers.

But if you are simply looking for a spot to relax while basking in the sun and enjoying the view and the caress of the light sea breeze, you are at the perfect place. The cozy harbour of Agia Napa is the starting point for a brief boat ride along the coast.

There is an indoor track for sports lovers, whilst there is a wide choice of open-air activities as well: archery, soccer, nature trails, especially the “Kermia–Ormidia” E4 trail, bicycle tracks, especially the 32-kilometre circular route starting at Agia Napa and terminating at the Xylofagou Medieval Tower.

The area is also famous for its “Amusement Park”, known as Luna Park, as well as for its “Waterpark”. Agia Napa nightlife is a reference point, mainly for the young during the summer months.

Letting our thoughts drift back to the Agia Napa Monastery, and in particular to its gate with the sycamore tree, let us dwell for a moment on George Seferis's poem "Agianapa", part of the 1955 collection "*Imerologio Katastromatos III*" (*Logbook III*) which he dedicated to Cyprus. (*)

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*Under the ageing sycamore
madly the wind was playing
with the birds with the branches
but it never spoke to us.*

*Welcome and good luck O breath of the soul
we opened our hearts to you
do come in, do drink in
your fill of our desire.*

*Under the ageing sycamore
the wind rose up and left,
gone to the northern castles,
and never touched us even.*

*O my rosemary, O my thyme,
Bind your breast tightly
and find a cave, find a lair
and hide away your light.*

*This is no Palm Sunday wind
no wind of the Resurrection
but a wind of fire, a wind of smoke,
a wind of joyless life.*

*Under the ageing sycamore
the wind returned dry,
reeking of florins everywhere,
and bartered us for gold.*

(*) As translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard.

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The poem was set to music by Elias Andriopoulos and was included in his work "Argonaftes" (Argonauts), along with poems by Manos Eleftheriou and Nikos Gatsos. "Agianapa" was first performed by Nick Xylouris and subsequently by Nena Venetsanou.