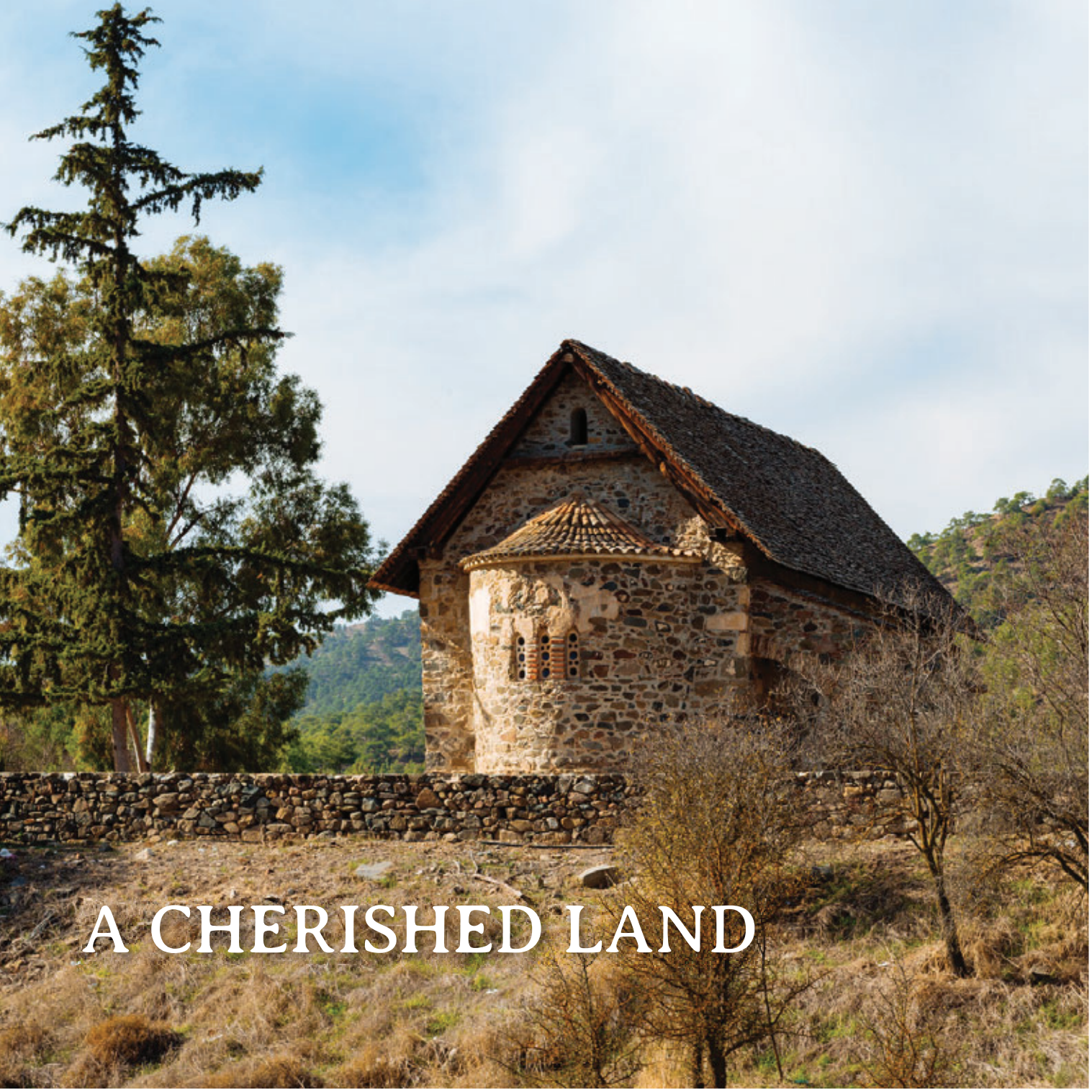
LOVE
CYPRUS
religious
pilgrimages
CYPRUS
a Spiritual Journey



A CHERISHED LAND

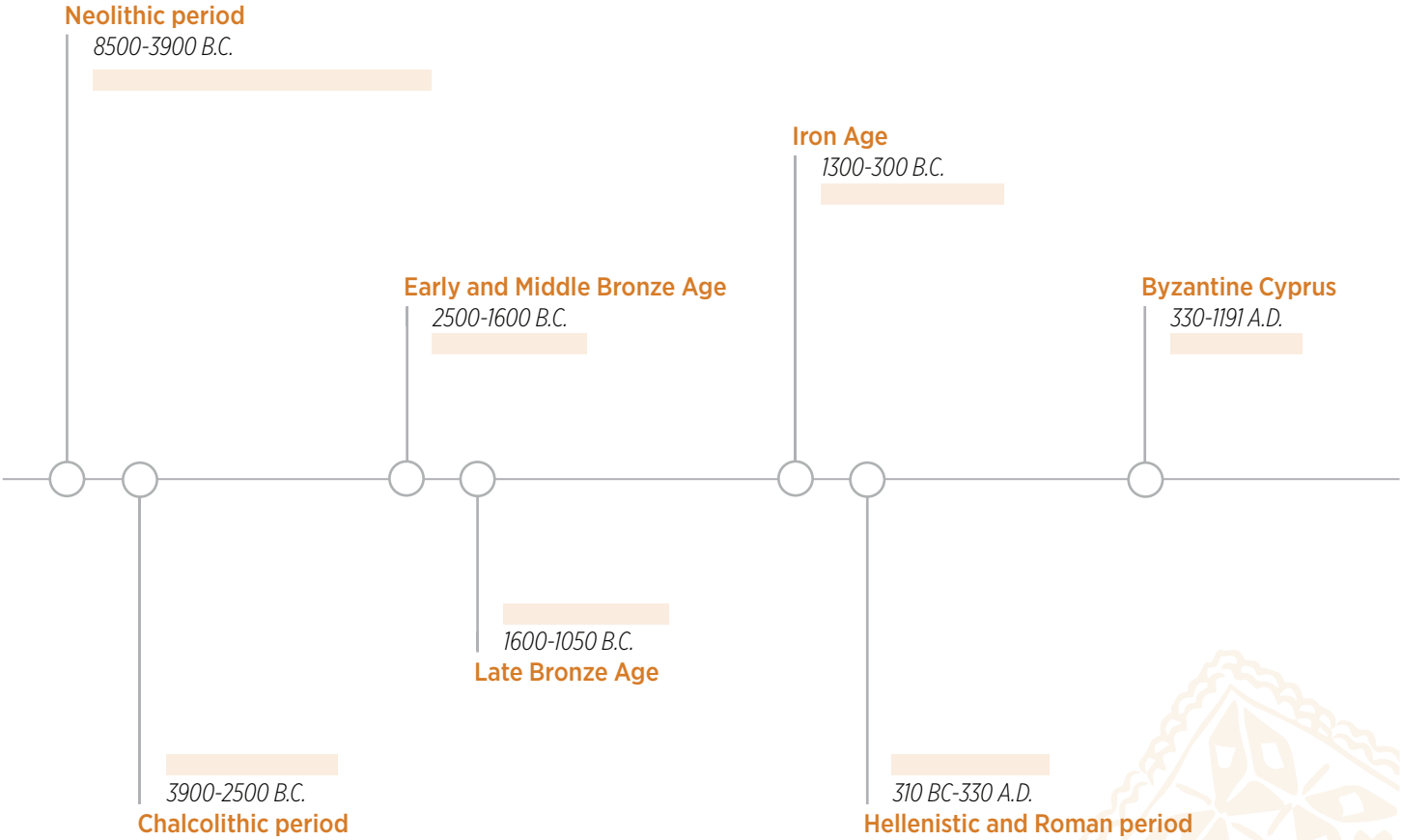
An island of profound natural beauty situated at the crossroads of the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus exudes a romantic and mythical appeal and is revered as the legendary birthplace of Aphrodite, goddess of love, beauty, and fertility.

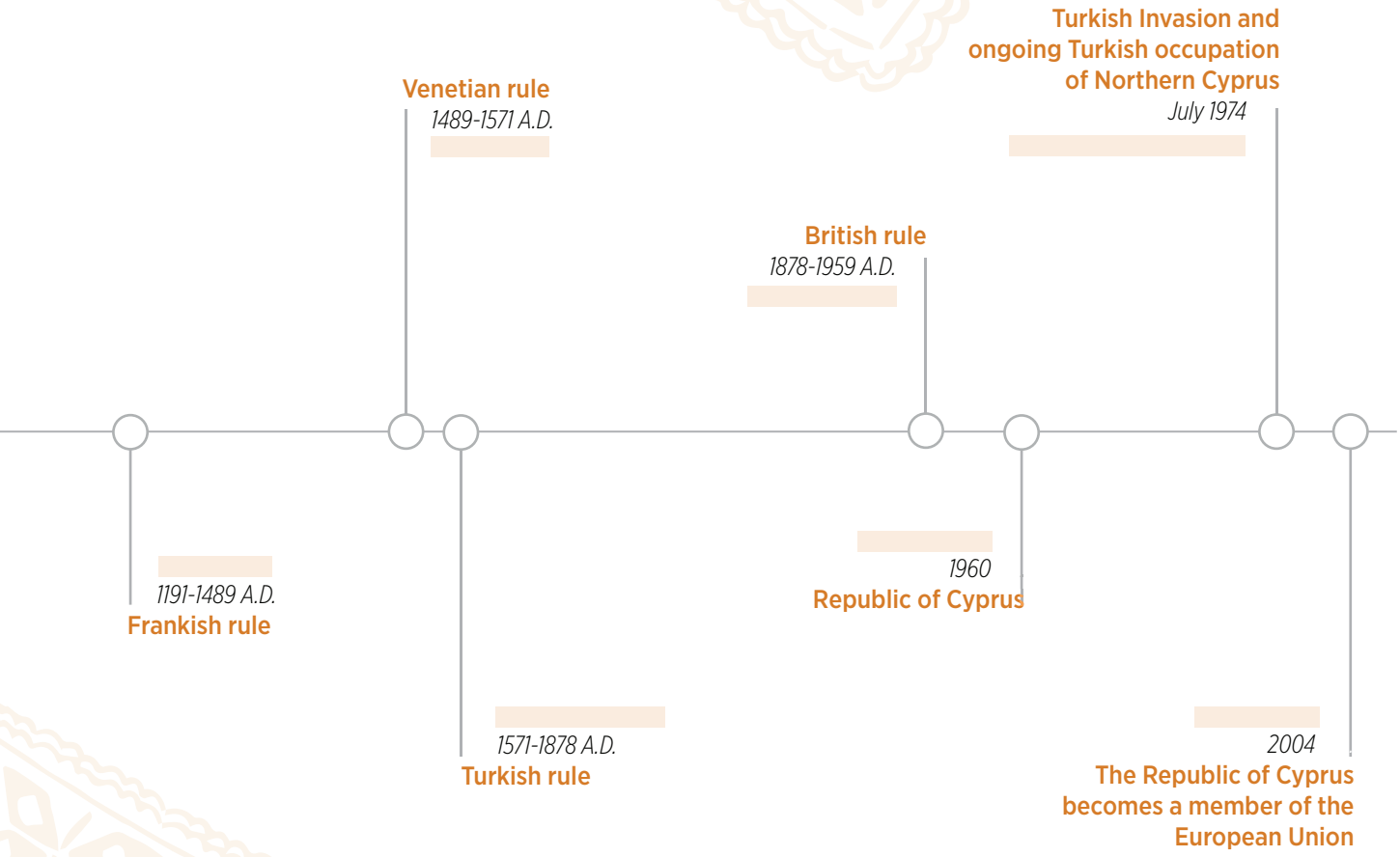
With an intricate history spanning over 11,000 years, Cyprus also boasts countless archaeological sites scattered across a rugged and varied terrain blessed with towering mountains and sunkissed stretches of sand. These awe-inspiring sites enhance the island's allure from coast to countryside and captivate visitors with intriguing stories of past conquerors, ancient rituals, and profound beliefs.

Despite widely varied influences over the years, Cyprus has successfully retained its unique character, and its exceptional historical and cultural heritage is celebrated as one of the richest in the world. Faith and religion are deeply ingrained in this honoured heritage, with countless monuments of religious devotion providing sacred snapshots of the island's journey to Christianity, from inception to the present day.

Home to one of the greatest concentrations of churches and monasteries of the former Byzantine empire, this cherished land holds endless appeal for spiritual travellers from near and far. Revered Orthodox monuments stand the test of time at every turn, world-famous Byzantine art stuns the senses in holy sanctuaries, and divine tales of saints and apostles who paved the way for Christianity on the island intrigue the imagination with each dazzling discovery.

PAST ECHOES IN THE PRESENT




Turkish Invasion and ongoing Turkish occupation of Northern Cyprus
July 1974
Venetian rule
1489-1571 A.D.
British rule
1878-1959 A.D.
1191-1489 A.D.
Frankish rule
1960
Republic of Cyprus
1571-1878 A.D.
Turkish rule
2004
The Republic of Cyprus becomes a member of the European Union

Orthodox monuments

Besides the island's golden coastlines and glistening seas, on the slopes of rugged and rocky mountain peaks, and in the heart of rural communities and vibrant town centres, countless early Christian and Byzantine churches and monasteries take visitors on a journey through centuries past. These unique monuments are preserved in excellent condition, and many are still in use to this day.

A stone's throw away from the Holy Land

Cyprus' proximity to the Holy Land facilitated the spread of Christian teachings on the island in the 1st century A.D. as it became an important centre for early Christianity and a gateway through which the message of the Gospels spread far and wide. This historical connection to the Holy Land has left a lasting legacy on the island's culture and heritage.

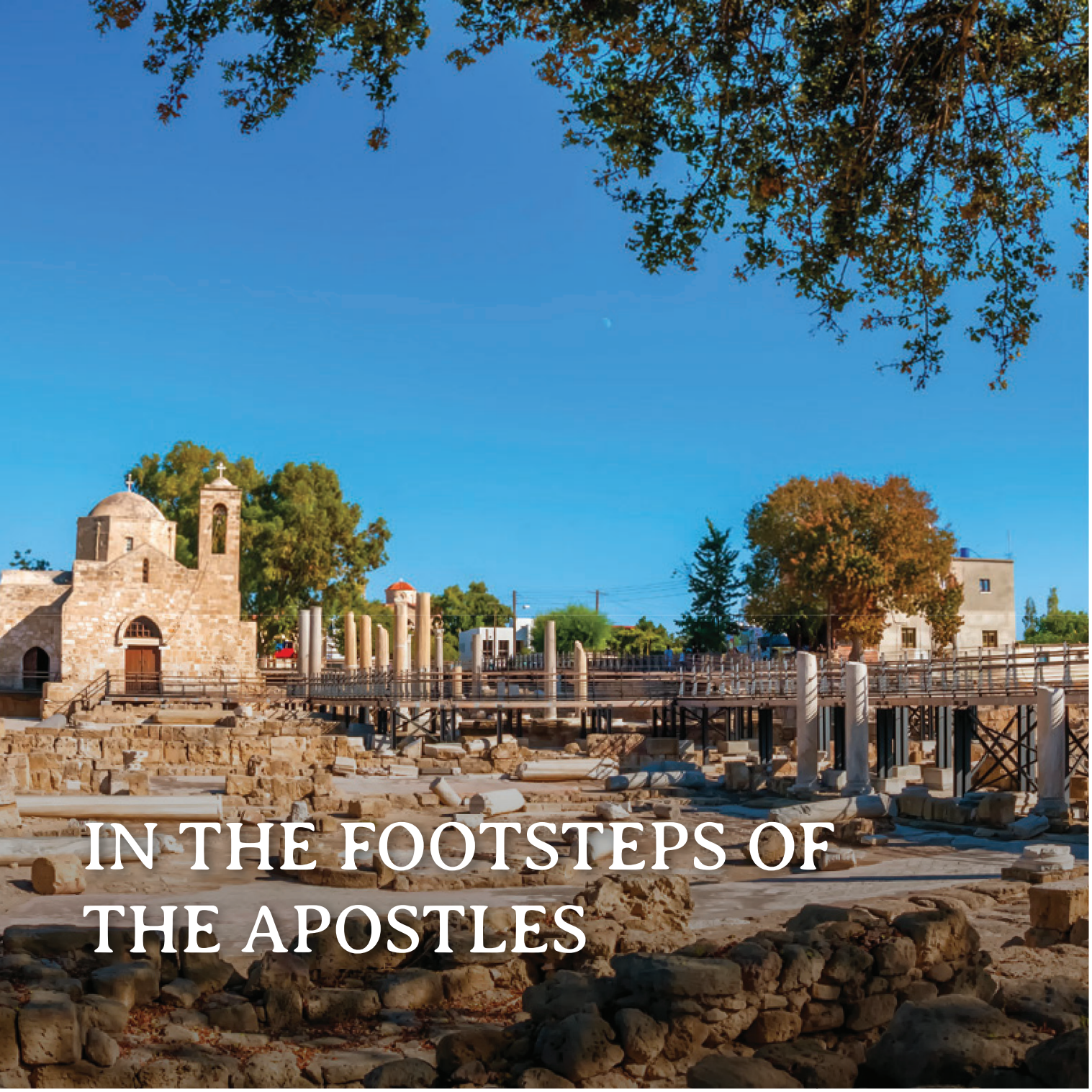
Over time, Cyprus also became an essential stop for European pilgrims en route to the Holy Land, owing to its pivotal geographical location at the crossroads of Mediterranean trade and transport networks. Pilgrims have often stopped on the island to be cured of their afflictions, rest, seek spiritual guidance, or attend religious ceremonies.

Honouring religious diversity & inclusivity

Since ancient times, Cyprus has remained a centre of Greek culture, yet its cultural landscape has been shaped by Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, French, Venetian, Ottoman, and British influences. This rich cultural landscape also determined the deep-rooted freedom of religious conscience. Over the centuries, the island became a refuge for various communities, and the island is known for its tolerance of all religions and dogmas that harmoniously practice their devotional beliefs.

Today, the dominant religion in Cyprus is Eastern Orthodox, followed by Islam. Other religious groups are also constitutionally recognised, including Armenians, Maronites, and the Latins (Roman Catholics).

Numerous well-preserved monuments and places of worship of different religions and faiths around Cyprus showcase the island's rich multicultural character. The Hala Sultan Tekke, built over the grave of Umm Haram on the palm-fringed banks of the glistening Larnaka (Larnaca) Salt Lake, is one of the most revered sites in the Muslim world and an important place of pilgrimage.



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE APOSTLES

Cyprus was one of the first regions outside the borders of the Holy Land to adopt Christianity based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. The spread of early Christianity in Cyprus is mainly attributed to the activities of Apostle Paul (also known as St. Paul), who notoriously visited Cyprus around 45 A.D. during one of his missionary journeys, along with his Cyprus-born companion Barnabas and his nephew Mark.

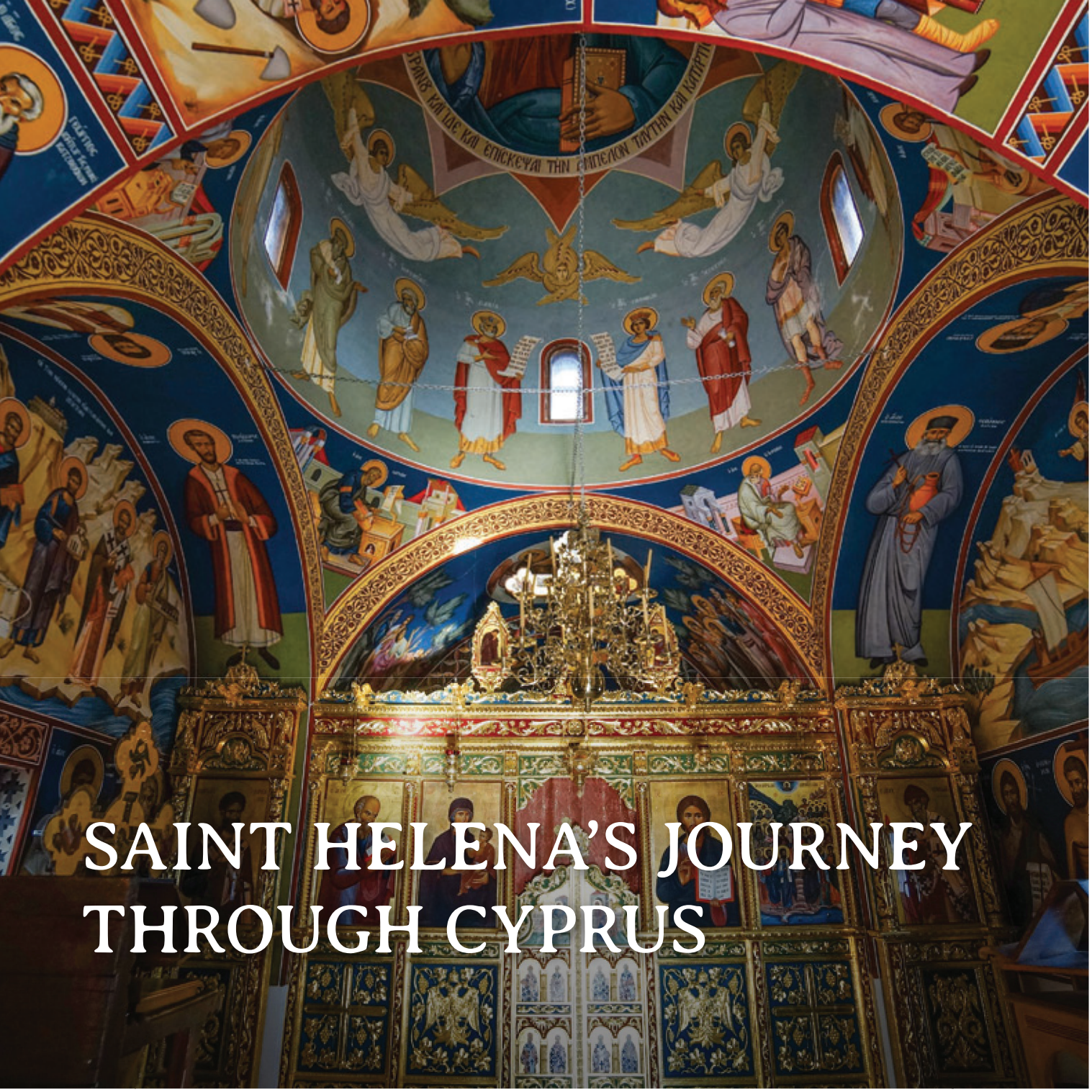
The apostles made their way from Salamis to Pafos (Pafos) – the then capital of Cyprus – preaching the new religion in the synagogues of the Hellenized Jews. Their efforts were successful, and the conversion of Sergius Paulus, the Roman governor of Cyprus, marked a significant step in the spread of Christianity on the island.

Saint Paul's Pillar & the conversion of Sergius Paulus

Kato Pafos is packed with historical and religious landmarks, but Panagia Chrysopolitissa Church is particularly fascinating, built over the ruins of the largest Early Byzantine Basilica on the island. The revered site also tells an interesting tale about Apostle Paul and Sergius Paulus' conversion.

According to tradition, Paul was tied to a stone column (now known as St. Paul's Pillar) within the church grounds and whipped thirty-nine times before Paulus converted to Christianity. This event is recorded in the New Testament's Acts of the Apostles (Acts 13:4-12). With the conversion of the Roman governor, Cyprus became the first country in the world to be ruled by a Christian leader.

The floor of Panagia Chrysopolitissa Church was once covered in colourful mosaics, some of which are still preserved. Over one hundred Christian basilicas have been found or excavated across Cyprus and highlight the strong influence of Christianity on the island.



SAINT HELENA'S JOURNEY THROUGH CYPRUS

Throughout history, Cyprus has served as a significant waypoint to and from the Holy Land, profoundly influencing its historical narrative and the rich Christian heritage it embodies.

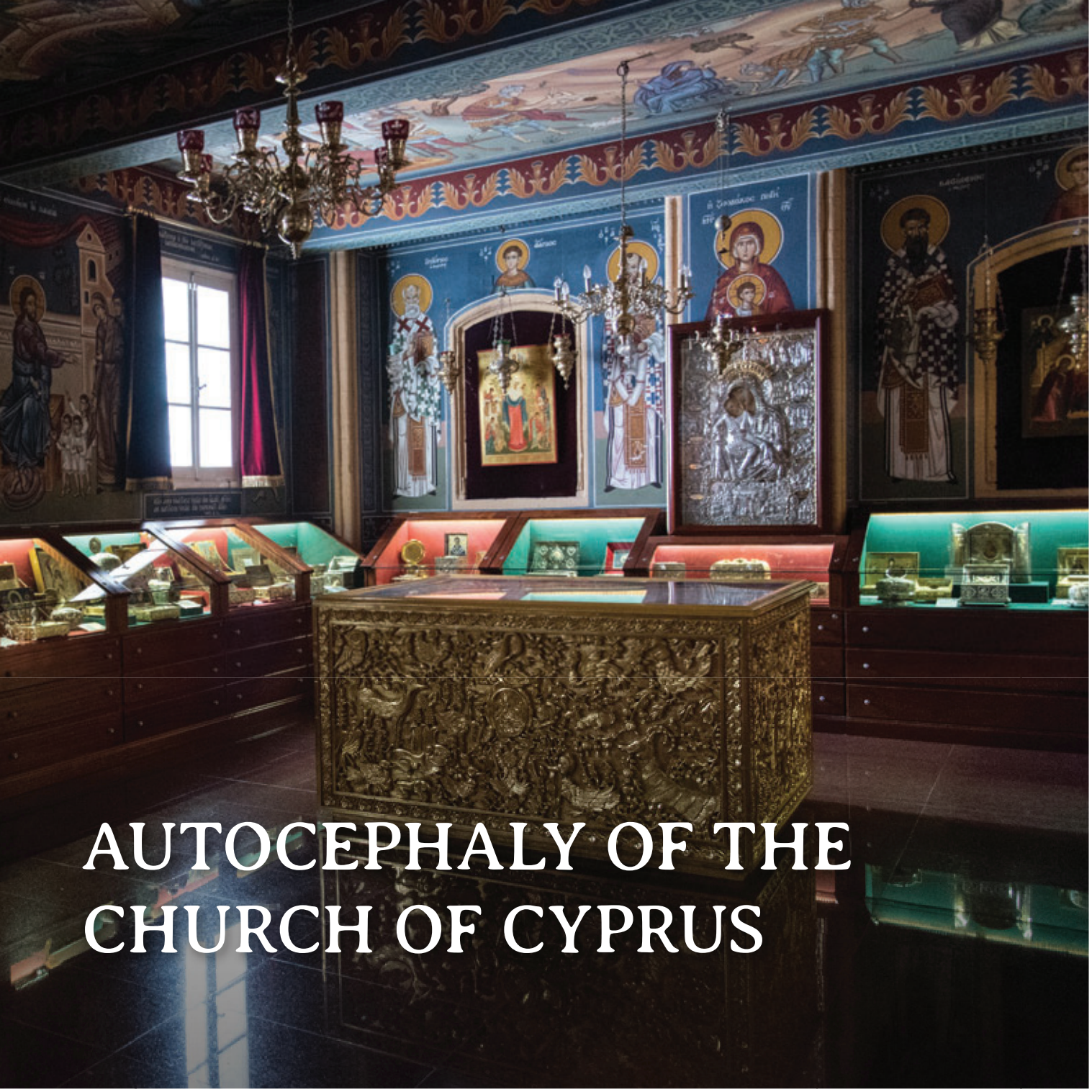
In the 4th century, Saint Helena, Mother of Constantine the Great, was integral to the development of Christianity on the island. Known to have travelled through Cyprus on her return from the Holy Land while transferring fragments of the Holy Cross to Constantinople, she is credited with starting the construction of many monasteries and churches around the country.

Worship of the Holy Cross

Saint Helena is renowned for establishing Stavrovouni Monastery, where she bestowed a piece of the Holy Cross. The monumental monastery is perched on a rocky cliff 750 metres above sea level in the Larnaka district and now attracts visitors from around the world.

The Saint is also famed for building other noteworthy churches in Cyprus, endowing them with holy symbols of the Passion of Jesus. Visitors today can follow a sacred route that begins at Stavrovouni Monastery and ends in Tsada.

The route leads to the church of the Holy Cross in Tochni (the only church built on a bridge), Lefkara, Pelendri with its magnificent frescoes from the 12th, 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries, Kouka, and more. Along this route, the historic Monastery of the Holy Cross in Omodos – tucked away in the centre of this quaint winemaking village – is also a splendid site to see. The monastery famously houses part of the Holy Rope and the Holy Rood left behind by Saint Helena.



AUTOCEPHALY OF THE CHURCH OF CYPRUS

The Church of Cyprus has been a cornerstone of Cyprus' cultural and religious life for centuries. It has also steadfastly maintained its independence and autonomy within the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Most notably, it is one of the most ancient ecclesiastically independent (autocephalous) churches, signifying its self-governance and distinct hierarchical structure. Autocephaly was granted in 431 A.D., first recognised by the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus.

The discovery of the tomb of St. Barnabas

In the year 487 A.D., Archbishop Anthemius of Cyprus experienced a divine vision that led him to the sacred resting place and relics of St. Barnabas, the esteemed founder of the Church of Cyprus, located near Salamis. On his chest laid a copy of the original and oldest of four gospels: the Gospel of Matthew. Anthemius then presented this gospel to the Emperor Zeno (474-491) in Constantinople.

Emperor Zeno confirmed the ratification of the autocephaly of the Church of Cyprus at the end of the 5th century. According to tradition, he granted the archbishop three imperial privileges: to wear a tyrian purple cloak instead of black during the divine service, to bear the imperial scepter instead of the Episcopal crosier, and to sign his name with red cinnabar ink.

HOLY SANCTUARIES

From the towering pine-clad peaks of the Troodos mountains to cobblestoned squares in quaint stone-built villages and vibrant streets in historic city centres, Cyprus is dotted with countless Orthodox churches taking visitors on a journey back in time.

Built to meet the needs of Christian worship, Cypriot churches stand as a distinctive feature of the local landscape. They have always been spaces of contemplation, celebrations, gatherings and an important reference point for the community, with their atmosphere evoking a deep feeling of admiration and an overwhelming feeling of tranquillity. Shedding light on the island's fascinating historical, religious, and cultural heritage, many churches around the country also hold great artistic significance and architectural value.

The architecture of Cyprus' churches is incredibly diverse, a testament to the island's long and complex history. They reflect centuries of varied influences, from austere, single-nave chapels to inscribed cruciform temples and impressive multi-domed buildings. Their decoration, paintings, and murals are also indicative of various periods and artistic movements.

Cyprus' many early Christian and Byzantine-style churches are particularly awe-inspiring, typically featuring domes, apses, and intricate mosaic decorations. Be sure to visit Agios Nikolaos tis Stegis in the Solea Valley, Panagia tou Moutoulla in the Marathasa Valley, the Church of Agia Paraskevi in Geroskipou, and the Church of Saint Barnabas and Hilarion in Peristerona.

ICONIC ARTISTRY

The transition from paganism to Orthodox Christianism has left traces in every corner of Cyprus. With churches and monasteries erected throughout the country following the prevalence of Christianity, many were decorated with meticulous wall mosaics, murals and icons.

One-of-a-kind mosaics

In the Church of Panagia Angeloktisti in the village of Kiti outside Larnaka, art enthusiasts stand back in awe at the sight of one of the finest pieces of early Christian art on the island – a unique 6th-century wall mosaic covering the half-dome over the sanctuary aps. The mosaic portrays the Virgin standing against a backdrop of shimmering gold, cradling the infant Jesus, accompanied by the Archangels Michael and Gabriel. It is renowned for its exquisite artistry, the expressive depiction of its subjects, and the skillful incorporation of gold, silver, and a vibrant array of mosaic hues. To this day, mosaic art is actively preserved in Cyprus, with old techniques maintained and new ones developed.

Mural masterpieces

Many churches around Cyprus showcase artistic masterpieces that have stood the test of time and are famed as some of the best-preserved examples of Byzantine art worldwide. The Church of Agios Antonios in Kelia village, one of the most important Byzantine churches on the island, features impressive murals (wall paintings) from the 9th to the 13th centuries. It is famed for featuring one of the oldest surviving depictions in monumental art of the Crucifixion (10th century).

Cypriot church murals are famed for their rich symbolism, vivid colours, and intricate details, reflecting the art of Constantinople. They mainly feature scenes from The Twelve Great Feasts (the so-called 'Dodekaorton') and highly honoured saints. Some also include the names of patrons, as evident in Panagias Forviotissas Church in Nikitari, better known as Panagia Asinou, the Church of Panayia tou Araka in Lagoudera, and the Church of Timios Stavros (Holy Cross) in Pelendri. Others bear the painter's name, as seen in Ayios Neophytos Monastery in Tala and Archangel Micheal Church in Pedoulas. As the years went by, paintings were enriched with scenes from the life of Christ – with particular emphasis given to the divine Passion – and that of the Virgin Mary.

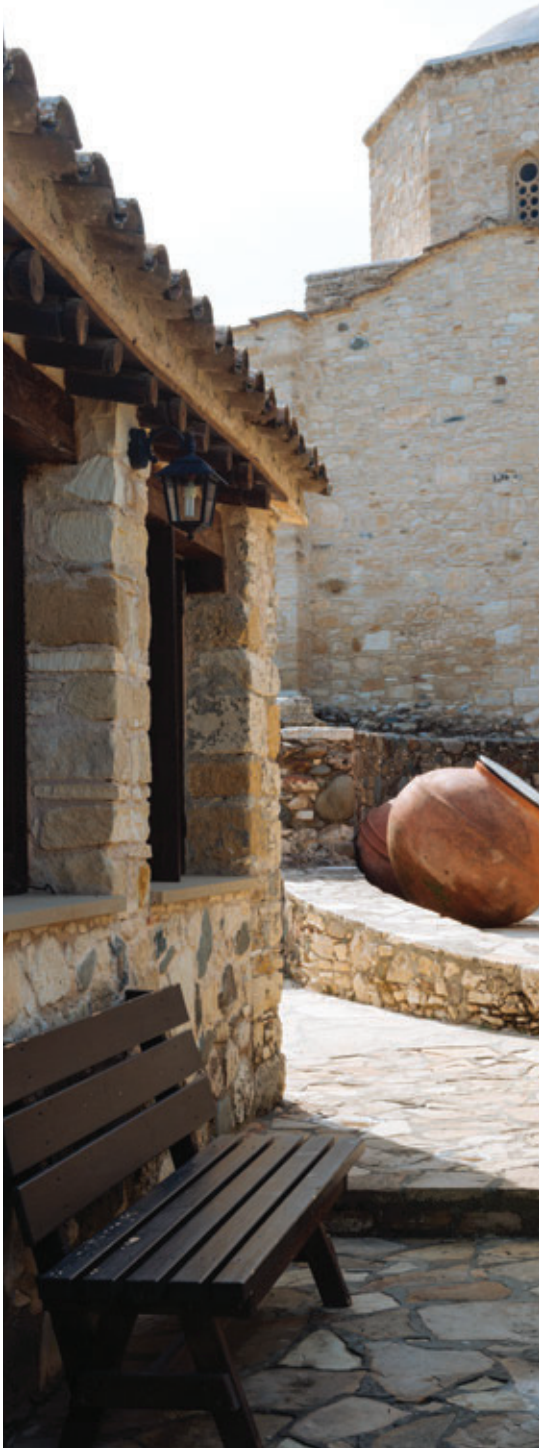
MONASTIC MARVELS

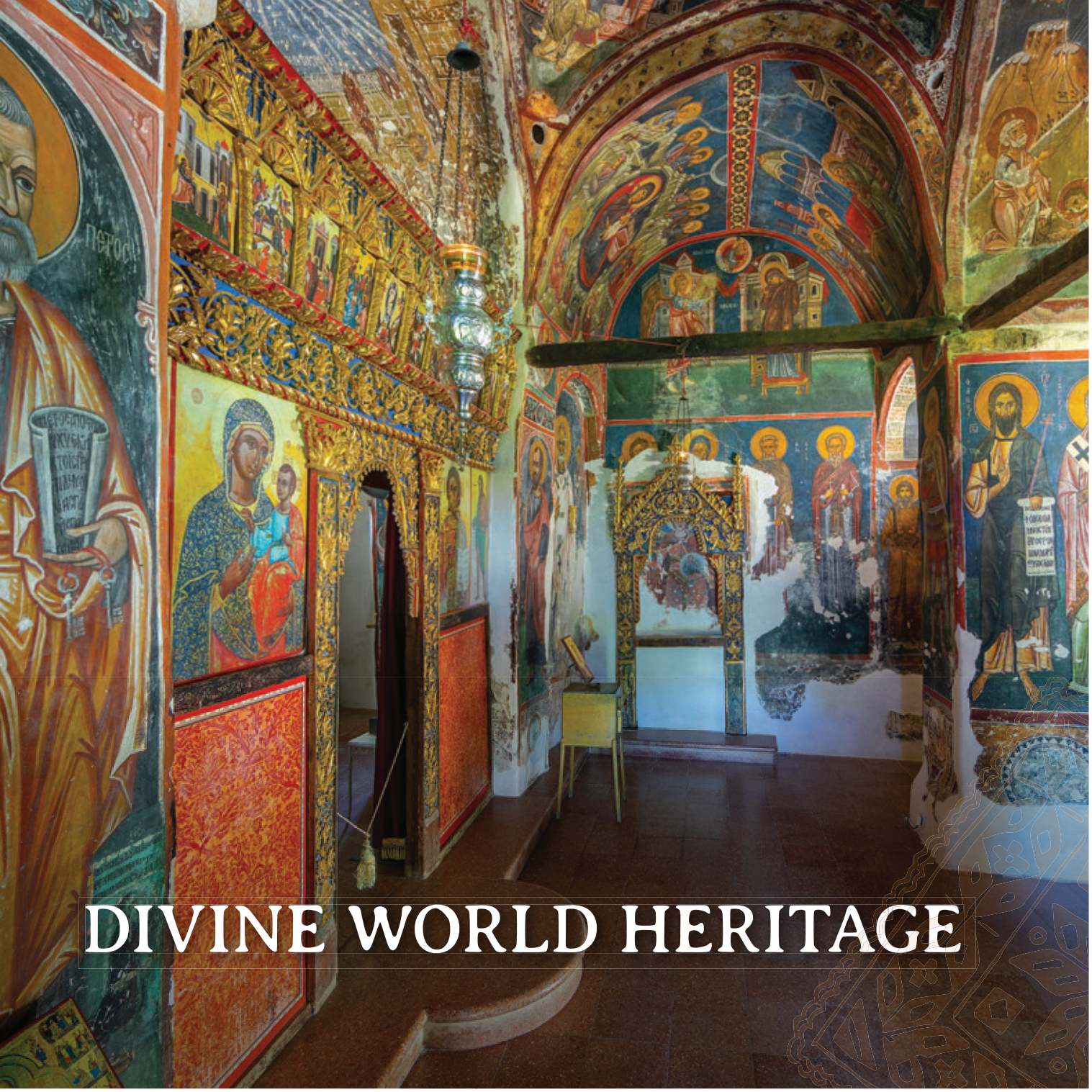
The monasteries of Cyprus, poised upon rugged cliffs and ensconced amidst slopes and plains, stand as a testament to humanity's eternal pursuit of connection with the divine through silence, mystery, and harmony. These heavenly spaces have long been associated with studies, understanding, and spiritual empowerment. But they are also inextricably linked with the country's abundant nature, rich culture, and intricate history.

Following the end of Arab rule in 965 A.D. and the reunification of Cyprus with the Byzantine Empire, numerous treasured monasteries were established, still operating to this day. The Emperor of Constantinople funded some of the most famous, housing miraculous icons connected to the Byzantium. These include the extravagant Kykkos Monastery and the humbling Machairas Monastery. Others, including Stavrovouni Monastery, were reputedly founded by Saint Helena when she visited the island in the 4th century.

Over the ages, monasteries in Cyprus were pivotal in shaping the island's social fabric while protecting and preserving the native language, arts, and customs. Although the monasteries of Cyprus have weathered numerous challenges throughout history, their enduring presence reflects the country's deep-rooted religious and cultural heritage.

Today, Cypriot monasteries remain important centers for worship, knowledge, and cultural preservation, drawing in visitors and pilgrims from across the globe. Within numerous monasteries on the island, time-honoured traditions, artisanal crafts such as iconography and art preservation, and outdoor activities like winemaking, organic farming, and agriculture are passed down from generation to generation. Visit the charming Chrysorrogiatissa Monastery to taste the fine wines produced in its old winery, or head to the Monastery of Saint Herakleidios to get better acquainted with hagiography and gold embroidery.





DIVINE WORLD HERITAGE

A country where East meets West, located at crucial crossroads in the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus has developed a unique culture over the centuries that mesmerises visitors with every turn. As one of the first countries to inscribe monuments on the UNESCO World Heritage List, revered archaeological sites and churches off the beaten track stand testament to the island's fascinating past, shedding light on the island's deeply religious roots and fascinating heritage.

Acclaimed Troodos painted churches at a glance

Deep in the Troodos Mountain range, nestled among scented pine forests and ancient olive groves, a Byzantine treasure trove awaits, where the island's religious heritage reveals itself through Holy buildings that have remained largely unchanged for centuries.

With ten of the island's beautifully painted churches included on the UNESCO World Heritage List, visitors can embark on a journey of discovery through the lush areas of Pitsilia, Solea, and Marathasa to uncover their unique stories.

Most of these Byzantine structures may seem modest on the outside, with stone walls, steep-pitched timber roofs, and chunky wooden doors painting a pretty scene amid the rural landscape. But the real treasure is revealed once inside, with the muted light revealing richly coloured and remarkably ornate frescos and icons depicting saints, apostles, and vivid stories from the bible. A humbling site to behold and treasure!

Cyprus' ten must-visit UNESCO World Heritage churches

Church of Panagia Asinou, Nikitari

Church of Agios Nikolaos tis Stegis, Kakopetria

Church of Panagia tou Araka, Lagoudera

Monastery of Agios Ioannis Lampadistis, Kalopanayiotis

Church of Panagia tou Moutoulla, Moutoullas

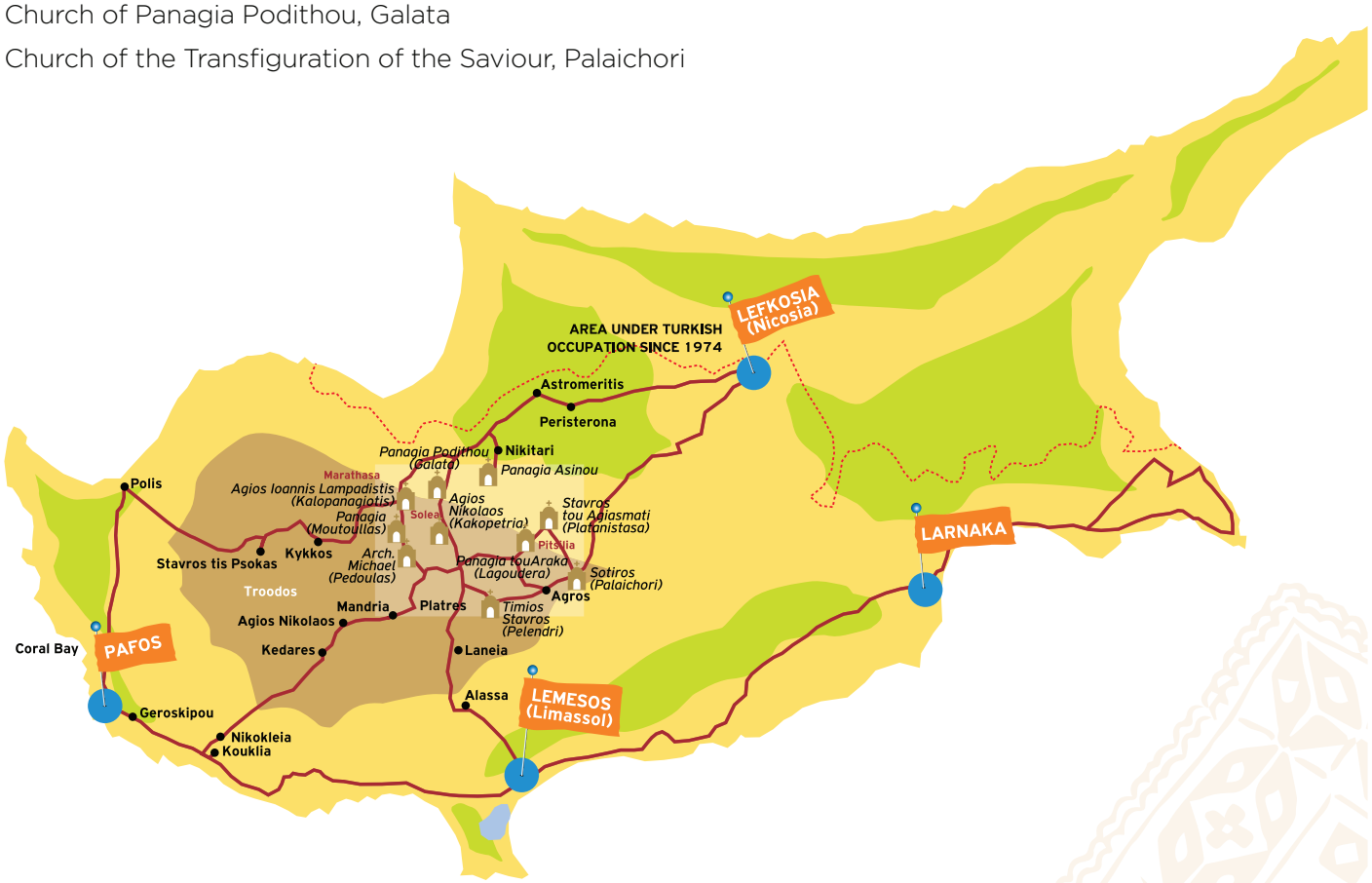
Church of the Holy Cross, Pelendri

Church of Archangel Michael, Pedoulas

Church of the Holy Cross of Agiasmati, Platanistasa

Church of Panagia Podithou, Galata

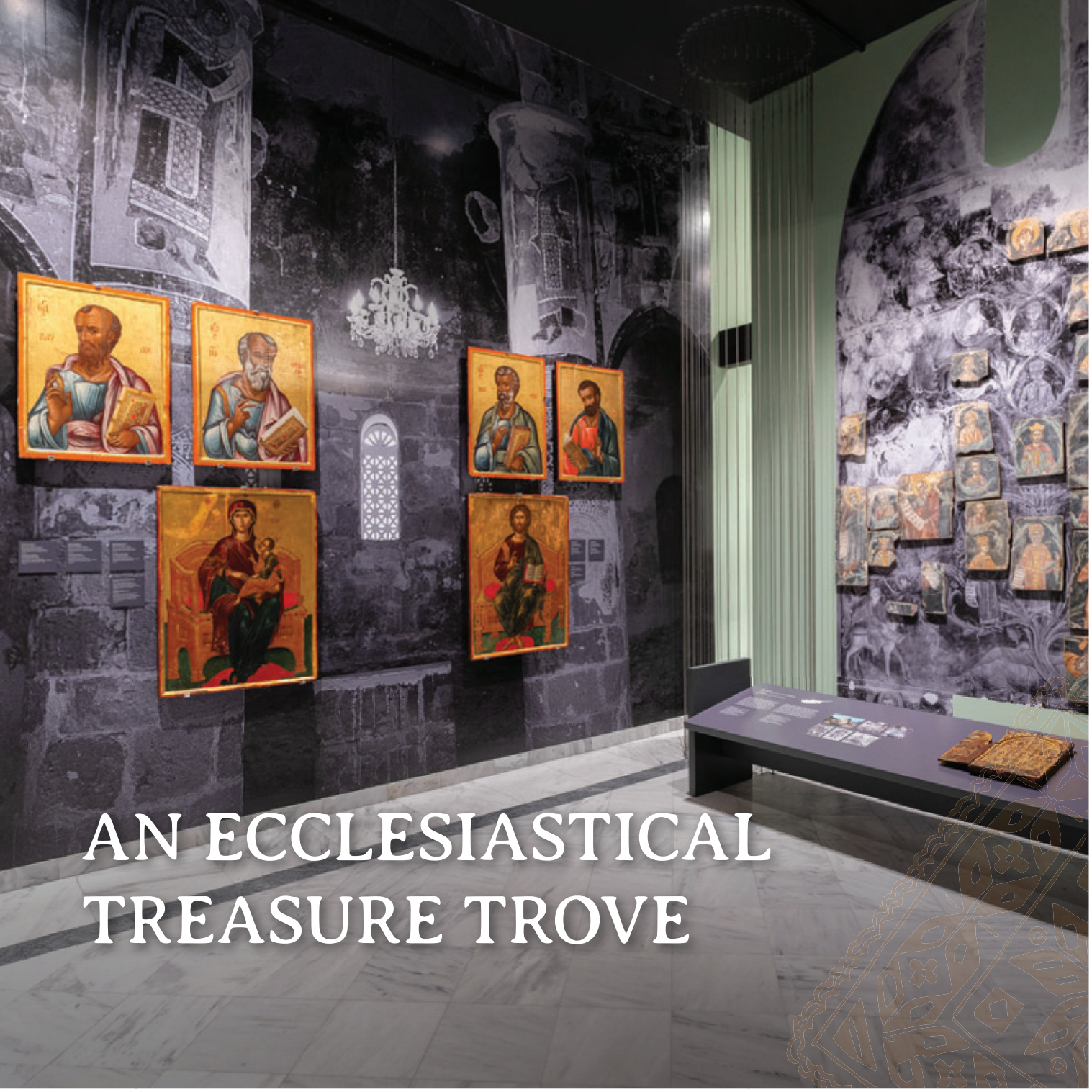
Church of the Transfiguration of the Saviour, Palaichori



The Europa Nostra awarded Panagia tou Sinti Monastery

Hidden away from civilization in a serene natural landscape on the banks of the Xeros River southeast of the village of Pentalia, Panagia tou Sinti Monastery beckons pilgrims with its majestic beauty.

Dedicated to the Virgin Mary (Panagia) of Sinti, this once-abandoned monastery dating to 1542 is a highly treasured building of the Venetian period and one of the most significant examples of monastic architecture in Cyprus. In 1997, it earned the Europa Nostra Award for the use of good restoration techniques and preservation of its original character.



AN ECCLESIASTICAL TREASURE TROVE

Cyprus boasts an abundance of sacred churches and monasteries, illuminating the island's profound religious heritage and the paramount role of Christianity. However, a truly comprehensive exploration of religious history remains incomplete without visiting one of Cyprus' remarkable Byzantine and Ecclesiastical Museums. Highlighting the richness, depth, and importance of Byzantine culture, these museums bring an entire era to life in the most comprehensive and enlightening manner.

Many possess a remarkable collection of icons, mosaics, liturgical vessels, coins, ceramics, manuscripts, and vestments, each with a story to tell about the island's religious heritage. The Museum of Kykkos Monastery was built to reflect the magnificence and majesty of the Byzantine Empire, uniquely showcasing a priceless collection of icons, consecrated vessels, manuscripts, and other artifacts. Most of the rare and unique exhibits are made of precious materials such as gold, silver, enamel, ivory, silk, and valuable stones.

The Byzantine Museums in Lefkosia (Nicosia) and Pafos are also well worth a visit, showcasing a rich Byzantine history and spiritual artistry while reflecting a deep faith. Notably, the Byzantine Museum in Lefkosia houses the island's richest and most representative collection of Byzantine art. Valuable religious treasures also command attention in the Byzantine Museum of the Holy Bishopric of Tamasos and Oreinis, within the Bishopric Palace in Episkopeio village.

THE ISLAND OF SAINTS

"It is necessary to boast about this holy island,
but as much as I do, I do not wish to lie."

Leontios Machairas, 15th century, Cypriot chronicler

A profoundly spiritual country, Cyprus has deservedly earned a reputation as the 'The Island of Saints'. With connections to over 300 saints – a truly unique phenomenon in the Christian world – the Autocephalous Church of Cyprus has seen many devout individuals, both known and unknown, sanctify the Church with their ascetic life. The name of Saint Barnabas, the Patron Saint of Cyprus, shines brightly throughout the ages and is believed to have introduced Christianity to the island in the 1st century.

The settlement of Saint Hilarion of Gaza (3rd-4th century) in Cyprus was also a significant milestone in the foundation of asceticism in the country. The miracle worker and healer is renowned for his monastic lifestyle and believed in a strict and disciplined life of solitude and prayer. At the same time, his practices and teachings greatly influenced the development of Christian monasticism in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Saint Hilarion lived his final years in the Diocese of Pafos, where he established a monastic community.

Several Cypriot saints and bishops achieved widespread recognition throughout the Apostolic Age and the formative years of the Church of Cyprus until the 10th century, many gaining renown beyond the island's shores and earning reverence throughout the Orthodox world. Among these notable figures are Saint Epiphanius, the Bishop of Constantia (4th century), and Saint Spyridon, Bishop of Tremithus (4th century).

GROUNDED IN FAITH

With religion deeply embedded within Cypriot society, many sacred celebrations in honour of a saint, the Virgin Mary, or Jesus Christ have become cherished highlights on the annual calendar, observed and celebrated by people of all ages.

Travellers from near and far are often attracted to the exceptional atmosphere of these great religious festivals, immersing themselves in rituals, traditions, and customs deeply rooted in history.

Pulsating 'Panigiria'

Throughout the year, notable Orthodox saints, often patrons of cities or villages, are honoured triumphantly with small or large religious festivals, known locally as a 'panigiria' (fetes). A procession of the saint's icon takes place during an evening's church service, culminating in a 'panigiri' held on the grounds of Monasteries or churches, spilling out onto surrounding squares and streets. These include annual panigiria at Kykkos Monastery, Chrysorrogiatissa Monastery, Agia Napa Monastery, and Panagia Angeloktisti. The Feast of Saint Phocas in Athienou village is another notable event, included on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage.
At every event, numerous vibrant stalls showcase an abundance of locally sourced produce, offering visitors an immersive experience of distinctive local flavors. Be sure to try the dried fruits, 'shoushoukos'(made with grape juice and threaded nuts), and spoon sweets.
Local street vendors frequently whip up additional enticing delights on the spot, such as the delectable honey-infused dough balls and 'shamishi' (fried pastry envelopes filled with sweet semolina paste). Some panigiria in the Pafos and Limassol district still serve Resi, a traditional porridge-like wedding treat made from ground wheat boiled in meat broth.

Joyous holidays & celebrations

Cyprus takes on an especially alluring appeal during religious holidays, with days filled with ceremonies, folk traditions, and local customs. On Christmas Eve, women in Cyprus bake a hearty kneaded bread called 'Christopsomo' (Christ's bread), decorated with a cross, and enjoyed on Christmas day at the festive table. New Year's celebrations begin with another religious tradition in every home as families and friends gather to cut the 'vasilopita' in honour of St. Basil.

The cake contains a hidden coin to bring good luck. The festive season then draws to an end with the Epiphany ('Theophania' or 'Fota' celebrated on January 6th, with celebrations taking place in many harbours around the island as many dive into cold seas to retrieve a crucifix cast by a priest to bless the waters.

While the Christmas and New Year season in Cyprus certainly holds its charm, it is during Easter that the Orthodox Church celebrates its primary and most enchanting religious celebration. Typically falling sometime between April and Early May, the faithful across every corner of the country welcome the period before Easter (Holy Week) with special reverence and deep emotion as impressive services and processions touch hearts and souls in churches and monasteries around the island. In the seaside city of Larnaka, a captivating spectacle unfolds every Saturday before Holy Week as a distinctive procession pays homage to Saint Lazarus, the revered Patron Saint of the city.

In the lead-up to Easter, many Cypriots observe a Lenten fast while restaurants dish up delectable vegetarian delicacies. As Easter Sunday approaches, families around the country clean their homes, dye easter eggs, make 'avgotes' (bagels or buns decorated with red dyed eggs) and bake 'flaounes' – divine cheese pies flavoured with mint and sultanas.

During the Holy Week, churches around Cyprus hold evening services, culminating in a midnight mass Resurrection Service on Easter Saturday. Families, friends, and neighbours head towards the local church just before midnight as church bells ring throughout the country, and everyone

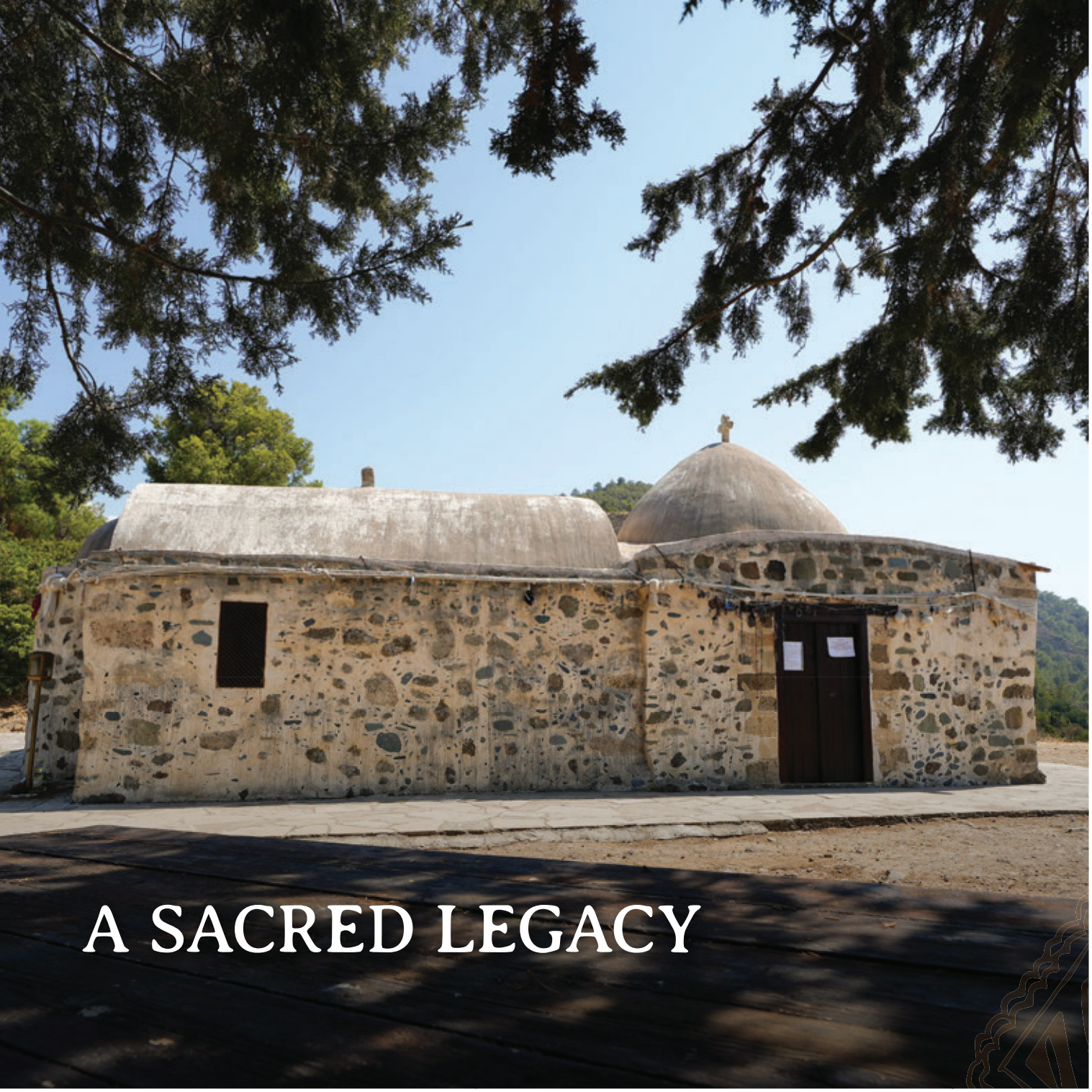
gathers to light candles and share the holy light. Families then reunite the next day to break their Lenten fast, feasting on lamb, pastries, and other indulgent dishes.

Later in the year, the so-called 'Summer Easter' is also a particularly popular occasion in Cyprus, celebrating the Assumption of the Virgin Mary on August 15th. Many churches around the island celebrate this day.

A taste of tradition

Visitors looking for peace and serenity can also enjoy the warm hospitality and spirituality of the island's monasteries, while savouring the authentic flavours of Cyprus. Many monasteries, like the quaint Panagia Chrysorroyiatissa tucked away in the mountainous Pafos region, are famed for producing their own wine, grape syrup ('epsima'), and other traditional spirits from their vineyards, including zivania and Commandaria used for Holy Communion. On the rocky peaks of Machairas mountains, monks at the namesake monastery produce a vast array of local produce, honey, herbs, olive oil, vinegar, and wine, sold at the well-stocked shop.

The scenic roads leading up to the majestic Kykkos Monastery are also packed with stalls and shops selling local treats made at the monastery or surrounding villages. To savour exquisite local marzipan, take the time to visit Agios Irakleidios Convent or Agios Georgios Alamanos Convent. The nuns at the latter are also passionate about crafting an array of tempting delights, including honey, spoon sweets and jams.



A SACRED LEGACY

Beyond Cyprus' beautiful beaches and popular hot spots, the curious and spiritual traveller will encounter a profoundly divine and peaceful world steeped in history, traditions, and religious splendour. From humble churches and picturesque chapels hidden in secluded valleys to grandiose monasteries dominating towering mountaintops, every holy site is one to treasure.

Dive deep into a journey of unwavering faith, discover one of the oldest autocephalous churches in the world, walk in the spirited footsteps of the apostles, get to know the island's many respected saints, and behold some of the best-preserved Byzantine art in the world. Or simply step into serenity in exquisite UNESCO World Heritage churches and magnificent monasteries. For an unparalleled, heartwarming experience, join the locals at a religious ceremony or celebration to truly lift the spirits and soothe the soul.

REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS
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