



If you enjoy all things equestrian, then Cyprus is the place for you. *Chrissie Flint* invites you to saddle-up and explore.

SADDLE UP

A CYPRUS WINTER HOLIDAY IN THE SUN IS AN opportunity to enjoy many different activities. But if you enjoy being with horses, this is the perfect time for a hack in the countryside. Or, if you prefer something a little less strenuous, like a day at the races, you can enjoy a day at the Lefkosia Race Course which, with the Pentadactylos mountain range as its magnificent backdrop, is acknowledged by many to be one of the prettiest race courses in the world.

Although horse riding and racing really began in Cyprus in the late 19th century, the roots of these popular sports can be traced back to the Hellenistic period through the archaeological artifacts on display in the Cyprus Museum in Lefkosia. In those days, horse riding was described as 'the Sport of Kings' and certainly the horses belonging to the Kings of Ancient Salamis were always buried with their masters.





HACKING COUNCIL OF BRITAIN CYPRUS

The sport of horse racing was established by the British, in the early days of their colonial administration of the island. In the days before motorized transport, horse racing was a popular pastime for the troops stationed on the island. But the sport really became popular in the 1930s when the only racecourse on the island was built in Lefkosia. Today, most of the breeders and trainers there are Cypriots and the course is used throughout the year except in August when temperatures are a little too high for the horses. In 1997 the racecourse was refurbished and the spectator areas upgraded.

The racecourse is popular with everyone and welcomes more than 250,000 visitors each year

One of the main breeder/trainers who can be found in the Owners' Enclosure is Elias Onoufriou, who well remembers how he and friends held donkey races between the villages in the Pissouri area and how impressed they all were at the speed of the 'poulari' (mules) which were half horse, half donkey. He worked in London for a few years and his spare time was spent riding and going to the races at Newmarket. When he returned to Cyprus, he opened the first Cypriot-owned stables, to encourage youngsters to enjoy the sport. In 1987, he chartered a Jumbo Jet from Britain to bring 36 breeding mares and Welsh Cobs for riding lessons. He takes his racing very seriously and was the first trainer to establish stables outside Lefkosia and to transport his horses to the races from his stables in Parekklesia. Like their British contemporaries, the stables are well-equipped with exercise yards, race tracks and exercise pools for the horses that are cared for by grooms from all over the EU. There are currently about 40 trainers and 40 jockeys working in Cyprus with Thorough-

bred and Countrybred horses, which means that it's easy for regular visitors to the course to get to know both.

Certainly, since those early days, racing has become very popular and there are now six stud farms. Kokos Nicolaou was one of the best jockeys along with Demetrakis Shiakalis but both have retired and are now trainers, whilst Marios Minas and Akis Petris are currently the leading jockeys in Cyprus. Akis represented Greece in the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. The Lefkosia racecourse is popular with everyone and welcomes more than 250,000 visitors each year to its twice weekly race days which each have a card of ten races.

The benefits of riding have been well documented worldwide and following the success of the Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) in the UK, the RDA was established in Lefkosia and Episkopi in 1984. One of the young jockeys to benefit was Kokos Christodoulou, who was

The following riding clubs and schools offer lessons and hacks for all ages and abilities

- Amathus (Parekklesia) 99-604109**
- Amazone (Tseri, Lefkosia) 22-371797**
- Cavalier Riding Club (Lefkosia) 99-611398**
- Curium (Lemosos) 99-564232**
- Dhekalia Saddle Club (Larnaka) 24-744293.**
- Drapia Farm (Larnaka) 24-332998**
- George's Ranch (Peyia, Pafos) 26-621064/99 647790**
- Lapatsa (Lefkosia) 99-622 758**
- Moonshine Ranch, Cape Greco, Protaras 99-605042**
- Nicosia Riding Club 99-623292**
- Notorious (Lefkosia) 99-673 333**
- Oroklini Donkey Park 24-819904.**
- Ride in Cyprus (Pafos area) 99-777624**
- Santa Marina Retreat, Parekklesia (Lemosos) 99-545454**
- Semphera (Geroskipou, Pafos) 26-934094 / 99-414814**



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARISSA DODD

The Race Course

Situated in Agios Dometios on the outskirts of Lefkosia, this popular racecourse is open on Wednesdays and Sundays through the winter and spring and on Wednesdays and Saturdays in the summer and autumn. Races are also held on all Public Holidays. The course is closed throughout August. There are ten races on each meeting which take place between 2.30-7.00 p.m. and have tote betting facilities. For further information, please telephone 22-782727.

the first Cypriot to represent his country in an international equestrian event at the Paralympic Olympic Games. To everyone's delight the then 30-year old rider, returned to Cyprus from Belgium in 2004 with both gold and silver medals. In 1999, the people working with Riding for the Disabled in Episkopi's Happy Valley, welcomed HRH the Princess Royal to one of their working mornings at the stables.

If you would like to enjoy a few days riding during your holiday, there are stables to be found in many areas and they are all operated to European standards. Most offer lessons for all ages and abilities and the instructors carefully select a horse that will best suit the rider – both in size and temperament! It is certainly a fun place to learn how to ride as the paddocks are outside and of course the backdrop is usually pretty scenery. For those who can already ride there is the chance to enjoy dressage or jumping lessons. Several stables have recently joined the 'German Junior Passport Scheme' which means that any lessons completed in Cyprus are recognised and can be credited to the young rider.

With plenty of winter sunshine, Cyprus is the ideal place to enjoy a hack in the countryside – and what countryside! There is the chance to follow the old Venetian camel trail in the Pafos Forest, where copper ore was once carried by

camels and mules down to the waiting boats at the ports. Or, you can discover the spectacular coastline at Cape Greco, or the Pegela Sea Caves. Each riding school/club offers a variety of hacking trails with most of them through rolling countryside with the reward of a panoramic view of the coast or one of the freshwater dams. Hacks can be tailored according to individual requirements and experience, including the length of the hack. 'Ride in Cyprus' also offers the chance to enjoy an two-day hack with overnight accommodation in one of the villages. All hacks are accompanied by competent riders who know the area like the back of their hand and who recount the area's colourful stories from history, mythology and local folklore.

A hack in the countryside is particularly good fun at this time of year as the first spring flowers like wild crocuses, anemones, dwarf hyacinths and cyclamen are appearing and many of the rare and beautiful migratory birds that winter in Cyprus can be spotted. In the fields, the newborn lambs and kids are taking their first wobbly steps amidst the asphodel and golden crown daisies as the shepherd leads his flock home for milking – there are certainly many bonuses to enjoying Cyprus on horseback... **CHRISSE FLINT**

