

Dispatches



There are warning signs everywhere. "Attention! This Building May Collapse." CREDIT: Nick Squires

How a Las Vegas-style refurb of an abandoned Cypriot suburb is reigniting troubles on the island



By Nick Squires
In Varosha, Cyprus

For nearly 50 years it was abandoned, frozen in time. Now the ghost town of [Varosha in Cyprus](#) has become one of the world's most unusual tourist attractions.

A high-rise suburb of the city of Famagusta, on the east coast of the island, Varosha was once inhabited largely by ethnic Greeks.

They built luxury hotels and restaurants along a broad, two mile stretch of golden sand. It was hugely fashionable, the phalanx of glittering high-rises resembling a little Miami in the Mediterranean.

Then came the cataclysm of 1974 when Turkey invaded in response to a Greek military coup which aimed to unite Cyprus with mainland Greece.

There was a bloody war, with many deaths, which ended with the island being divided in two – the northern part occupied by Turkish Cypriots, the southern part by Greek Cypriots.

Ethnic Greeks fled Varosha, leaving behind their businesses, to be replaced by Turkish troops, sandbagged positions and barbed wire.

But Varosha – which Turkish Cypriots call Maras – is now a tourist draw.

In 2020, the Turkish Cypriots decided to open up a few roads that thread through the suburb. It was a unilateral decision which infuriated Greek Cypriots.

According to UN resolutions, Varosha should not be resettled by anyone other than the Greek Cypriots who were forced out of it half a century ago.

The Turkish Cypriots claim that while ethnic Greeks owned the property of Varosha, the title to the land was in fact owned by an Islamic religious foundation. The argument is highly disputed.

That has not stopped tourists from exploring what was for decades a dangerous no man's land, a place where it is eternally the mid-1970s.

Entrance is free and you can either stroll the newly asphalted roads, hire a bicycle or hop on board a golf-cart with a guide.



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CREDIT: Nick Squires

Rusted signage still adorns the facades of businesses like the Edelweiss Café, Smokey Joe's Restaurant and the King George Hotel.

There is a dilapidated branch of Barclays Bank and a British post box made by McDowall, Steven & Co, from London and Falkirk – Cyprus had only achieved independence in 1960.

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A red and yellow sign announces the Cleopatra Bazaar, offering "Egyptian leatherwork and Cyprus pottery. Manager: M Papachristodoulou." They are all reminders of lost lives and shattered dreams.

Despite staunch Greek Cypriot opposition, the Turkish Cypriots

want to restore Varosha to its former glory, turning it into a Las Vegas-style resort full of smart hotels and casinos.

The cost will be colossal – many of the buildings will have to be torn down. Infrastructure, from water and sewage to the supply of gas and electricity, will have to be rebuilt. The figure of \$30 billion is being bandied around for the whole project.

Ersin Tatar, the president of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, a statelet that is recognised only by Turkey, is nevertheless optimistic that Varosha can rise again.

“If we have a fair, sustainable agreement (with the Greek Cypriots), then Cyprus in 15 years could be bigger than Dubai! Where is Dubai? It is far away and in the middle of the desert. This place is a magnet.”

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