



coast. And everyone I met – the hoteliers, barmen and restaurateurs – seemed flattered that I had turned my back on the sea to feel the earth beneath my feet.

The Troodos Mountains are a summertime place, really, an easy escape into the cool heart of the island. 'It's nice to get away from the humidity of the coast,' said the first person I met in the foothills, 'and not to feel that you need a shower the moment you get out of the shower.' And it's wonderfully still. The Greek poet George Seferis said of the high village of Platres (which I was looking forward to seeing) that 'you cannot sleep for the songsmith nightingales'. But in fact the tranquillity on the southern slopes was total – and I slept like a hibernating bear.

My first stop for the night was at the lowland hamlet of Lofou, where there is very little to see apart from a church that is never open, a quiet *kafeneio* (coffee shop) and a couple of friendly tavernas. But that was the point. I was staying at Apokryfo, a lovely little hotel overlooking the village from the rim of a broad hollow. As with most hotels in the Troodos, the rooms are laid out through a collection of

stone houses. (This practice of rural reinvention has saved many villages that were all but abandoned in the 1950s and 1960s, and turned the Troodos into a destination.) One of the suites at Apokryfo used to be the holiday retreat of the owners, Cypriot architect Vakis Hadjikyriacou and his British wife Diana. 'This is Cyprus's Cotswolds,' Vakis says, with the sandy stonework in mind. But he might equally have been referring to the chic interiors of his own hotel, which wouldn't be out of place in Barnsley House. There is a lantern-like window that lets in a shaft of light through an ancient hole in the wall, a bedstead that Vakis has carved out of an old door, and a huge spade-shaped interior arch, like the vault of a Norman church, which is the mark of the buildings in this part of the island.

At the same time it is all very homey. 'There are two ways to go about looking after people,' says Vakis. 'You can dress the staff in uniforms and train them to be waiters. Or you can just tell them to treat everyone who comes here like family. I say: be generous with everything. Some of

From top left: a bridge in Kalopanayiotis, Cyprus; Casale Panayiotis hotel; fruit salad at Apokryfo. Opposite, the hotel pool. Previous pages from left: the Troodos Mountains; Vlassides winery

MINUTES AFTER arriving at Paphos I was bowling along the empty coast road, bound for Mount Olympus. I knew I was supposed to go as far as Limassol before turning inland, but the satnav thought otherwise and told me to hang an early left. This turned out to be a slower but much more scenic route, wriggling up into the Troodos uplands – a massif of forest-covered rock that stretches across the southern half of the island. I stopped on the way to take in a wonderful Mediterranean sunset. As the sun had rolled down behind the heights, it left a colourful horizontal stripe across the sky, like the pink ribbon on a blue-wrapped birthday present. It felt like an omen: this place was going to be special.

Here they like to call the Troodos 'the Switzerland of Cyprus'. This is a forgivable overstatement. You'll see plenty of snow in winter and can ski on the mountain-top in January and February, but Olympus is the only peak, and it is no alp. However, the elevated centre is a real find. As so often on islands, the inland parts feel more real and rooted than the light friskiness of the

those who work here don't speak much English, but I tell them not to worry. Where there is goodwill, people will understand. Do whatever it takes to make them happy.'

It became clear what he meant at suppertime. I spent a few minutes looking at the menu, thinking I might toy with a small Greek salad, but it turned out that the menu was actually more of an agenda, a list of the meze that would be coming my way. I had some fabulous dishes, all of them prepared with love and imagination. My favourites included a well-tempuraed courgette flower filled with halloumi, sweet battered pumpkin with bitter chicory, a dark casserole of lamb and goat... The plates kept coming until there was no room on the table. I could only manage a curious mouthful of some and by the time we got to the baklava and fresh fruit, I was as stuffed as that zucchini. Then suddenly, as I sipped a coffee, the ambient bouzouki music was interrupted for a choral rendition of 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen', as if acknowledging, in the height of summer, that this was a blowout of Yuletide proportions.

'These mountains are about wine and monasteries,' Vakis had said, and I was planning to get a taste of both. Dotted all over the Troodos are painted churches, many of them UNESCO World Heritage Sites. On the outside they are not especially



THE SETTING SUN LEFT A COLOURFUL STRIPE ACROSS THE SKY, LIKE THE PINK RIBBON ON A BLUE-WRAPPED PRESENT

striking, not at all like the domed cathedrals you see on the coast or in Greece. With their wattle-and-daub walls and pitched roofs, they look more like barns or byres than churches or chapels. The wonder only becomes apparent once you get inside, for every inch is covered with paintings: icons of haloed saints and saintly kings, scenes from the lives and deaths of stoical martyrs, tales of Jesus presented as a kind of pious comic book for the unlettered.

The most spectacular of the painted churches is Agios Nikolaos tis Stegis, just outside Kakopetria. Inside, the walls are crowded with doleful, pasty-faced saints in colours so vivid that it is hard to believe these anonymous works of art have been here for hundreds of years. There are some striking individual images, including



From top: Vlassides winery; courgette flowers stuffed with halloumi at Apokryfo. Opposite, the Schoolmaster's house in the hotel





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