

# The Telegraph

## • TravelDestinations

### Why luxury resorts in Cyprus are installing ‘cat hotels’ for strays



Feral cats are being cared for, not banished at these hotels CREDIT: ISTOCK

We’ve all come across stray cats in European holiday destinations. They’re a dime a dozen in places like [Greece](#) and [Cyprus](#), and people tend to either love them or loathe them.

For those in the former category, seeing thin or injured felines lurking around is a sorry sight to behold. For locals and hotel managers, their presence is a nuisance. Whatever your stance, no-one wins when it comes to an oversized stray cat population.

But one organisation reckons it’s got the solution. Animal Rescue Cyprus, located in [Paphos](#), is persuading luxury resorts to take care of their feline population rather than shoo them away. By providing on-site shelter and food stations, the theory goes, cats have a safe place to eat and sleep, and will be thus less inclined to pester guests.

I flew to Paphos to investigate two hotels that operate this approach, and to visit the remarkable shelter that assists - a ten-hectare facility that cares for more than 400 cats, all free-roaming. For a dedicated animal lover, a visit to this place is pure heaven.

Animal Rescue Cyprus was founded in 1982 by businessman Christos Panatiotou and has grown to accommodate more than 1,300 animals at a time: horses, donkeys, rabbits, dogs and cats among them - the shelter never turns a rescue away.



Annabel and residents of Animal Rescue Cyprus CREDIT: ANNABEL FENWICK ELLIOTT

Seventeen members of full-time staff and hundreds of volunteers take care of the animals, all of them either abandoned, abused or injured. Once patched up, they are rehomed where possible, or live out the rest of their days at the centre.

Touring this facility was sad and uplifting in equal measure. Sad to see so many creatures who had experienced horror at the hands of humans, and uplifting to see them smiling again, in a veritable paradise for pets.

As soon as the gates flung open, donkeys plodded up to greet us in clusters and followed us everywhere thereafter. While different species are sectioned off into their own space, there are no cages or kennels (but for the animals in quarantine or undergoing medical treatment). Dogs intermingle in a spacious yard; rabbits in their own shelter; various farm animals in another. This visit though, was all about the cats.

More than 2,700 felines were rescued by the facility last year, and around 400 are still in residence. They are free to roam the grounds at leisure, but the majority spend their lazy days in a designated house, splayed out together on the cool tiles, across sofas and shelves. Every surface was occupied by cats.

You'd think it would be impossible to put that many animals in the same room without provoking a war, but curiously, save for a few minor quarrels here and there, the cats don't fight - mostly, they curl up together and snooze.

Every cat I stroked purred contentedly. Some jumped into my lap when I sat down, others joined the procession of followers as I - feeling more than a little like the Pied Piper - toured their realm. Outside in the flower garden, cats, even more of them, were tucking into a feast of home-cooked rice and gravy.

Last year, the centre got through more than 27 tonnes of dry cat food and nearly 13,000 tins of the wet variety. The medical bill, meanwhile, totalled €215,000 (£184,000) - all funded by donations.

Of all the work they do, a quick five-minute surgery on every cat they process is perhaps the most vital service of all: the spay. Nothing is more important in stemming the growth of the stray cat population than preventing them from reproducing, which ferals do prolifically without intervention.

Last year, 9,125 cats had the operation (25 per day) thanks to the rescue centre. Most were captured, spayed, then released back onto the streets.

It was with a heavy heart that I left the centre and its many furry inhabitants, but my next stops would hardly be short of them either.



Paphos, home to ruins, beaches, and thousands of cats CREDIT: LEONID ANDRONOV/LEONID ANDRONOV

First, the Columbia Beach Resort in Pissouri Bay: an opulent bolthole that pioneered the concept of cat shelters on hotel grounds nearly ten years ago.

It was the brainchild of the resort's owner, Mr. Heinrich Schoeller, who says of his approach: "The feral cat population in Cyprus was a known problem. It was growing beyond control and to the detriment of cats across the island. This area was no exception and it became my aim to somehow ensure these cats were cared for properly.

"Feral cats breed quickly, they come to be a nuisance and that can be a problem for both the cats and those people that live alongside them. I quickly understood that it didn't have to be like that. We could set the example in ensuring the cats were healthy and thriving, which made them a welcome sight in the area."



Luxury, and not just for humans CREDIT: COLUMBIA BEACH RESORT

The key aim of their program, dubbed the Columbia Cat Care Project, is to neuter and vaccinate the strays that frequent the resort, and to feed and monitor them on an ongoing basis. Any unneutered cats that wander in are captured, sterilized and released with a heart-shaped stamp in their ear to indicate that they've had the operation.

Several food stations, or 'cat tavernas' are situated in the quieter corners of the grounds, equipped with dry food and fresh water, and tinned food served twice a day.

Since its founding, a spirited staff member called Ani has been at the helm, feeding and treating minor injuries in conjunction with the resort's vet. She knows all the cats by name, and they know her.

Within minutes of checking into my suite and stretching out on the balcony's sun lounger, I had my first feline encounter in the shape of Leo, an amorous ginger fellow who dropped from the wall and trotted into my room for a snooze. We crossed paths several times more over the course of my stay.



Kanella, who doesn't look like your average stray CREDIT: COLUMBIA BEACH RESORT

It's not uncommon, I'm told, for guests to befriend particular cats during their stay. Some have ended up so attached they've taken them home, mainly to Germany and the UK. Others sign up to the CCCP mailing list for regular photos and updates of their feline friends, and many continue to sponsor the organisation for a fee of €25 per year.

So what of the guests who aren't partial to cats? It rarely presents a problem, Ani tells me - cats by their very nature being far more likely to ignore than approach someone unless beckoned.

It's something I discuss with the general manager of the other resort in Paphos to have taken up a similar policy and installed feeding stations, the [Aphrodite Hills Hotel](#) - a sprawling compound of villas, pools and golf courses where Britons make up the majority of summer guests.

It was the discovery of a dead cat on the manicured grounds last summer that persuaded Nicholas Kittis to change the hotel's approach to the local stray population.



One of the dedicated hotel cat shelters CREDIT: APHRODITE HILLS

“Before that, we fed some of them but the purpose was to keep them away from dining areas,” he told me. “It sometimes worked, other times not. We’ve always had people that will feed them from the table, and then other guests complain. It’s a delicate balancing act.”

The dedicated feeding stations are certainly helping redirect the cats away from the outside restaurant space, according to Mr Kittis, but he has even larger ambitions. “I want to build an entire cat hotel,” he says, “to create a fenced, protected complex where they can eat, sleep and play, and where guests can visit and spend time with them should they wish.”

Later, I had lunch with British cat enthusiast Sara Blunt, who has a holiday home in Cyprus next to the Aphrodite Hills Hotel and works tirelessly to champion the better treatment of strays. We dined at a brilliant new vegetarian eatery called the Meraki Market Cafe - an establishment than ten years ago would never have survived the typically carnivorous Cypriot culture but is today thriving.



The 290-room Aphrodite Hills Hotel

Animal welfare in Cyprus still has a long way to go, sadly, and the majority of locals view cats as vermin rather than pets or simply wild creatures to be left alone. There are frequent cases of poisoning, with no clear motive as to why, as well as grim incidences of cruelty which all too often go unpunished.

Cynthia Smith, a British expat who runs the Farriers Vegan B&B in neraby Kouklia, rescued a tiny stray kitten last year whose paw had been cut off by thugs. It's just one of the many disabled cats she's taken in over the years.

But there are signs of progress. The younger generation of Cypriots, I'm told, tend to be more concerned with the better treatment of animals and the environment in general. And that two of the most lavish resorts in Paphos and Pissouri Bay areas are taking care of their strays with such a concerted effort has created a blueprint that has a real chance of spreading beyond the shores of Cyprus.

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## **The essentials**

A seven-night stay at Columbia Beach Resort starts from £1,121 per person. This price is based on two adults sharing a Junior Suite, Garden View, on a bed and breakfast basis, departing on 25 April 2019. It also includes direct, return flights from London Gatwick and private resort transfers. To book now visit Sovereign Luxury Holidays at [www.sovereign.com](http://www.sovereign.com) or call 01293 839 151. For more information on Columbia Beach Resort visit [www.columbiaresort.com](http://www.columbiaresort.com).

Travel Republic offers seven nights at Aphrodite Hills Resort on a bed and breakfast basis for £2,585, for 2 adults and 2 children staying in a Junior Villa with a Private Pool. Price based on departures from April 2019, including return flights from London Stansted to Paphos, Cyprus. To book, please visit [www.travelrepublic.co.uk](http://www.travelrepublic.co.uk)

You can find out more about Animal Rescue Cyprus on their [Facebook page](#) (visitors are welcome) and the Meraki Market Cafe [here](#).

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