breakfast cafes, but you don’t have to wander far to find ancient history. The rocky headland to the north of the harbor is one big historical adventure playground. The ruins scattered across the Pafos Archaeological Site were once the capital of Cyprus, before an earthquake toppled the columns and cracked the arches in the 4th century.

Myriad magnificent mosaics
Pafos' archaeological ruins serve up a full hand of Greco-Roman treasures - arcades of columns, thermal baths, an ancient amphitheatre - but the main attraction here is underfoot. The undisputed highlight of the site is the House of Dionysus, a Roman villa whose lavish mosaics could have graced the front cover of the AD 200 edition of Ideal Home. The elaborate floor decorations cover everything from the changing seasons to depictions of Dionysus, rambunctious god of wine, and neighbouring villas have mosaics of Poseidon, Achilles and Theseus and the Minotaur.

A short wander east from the archaeological zone, the Hrysopolitissa Basilica was constructed at the height of the city's power, before tremors and Arab pirates reduced ancient Pafos to rubble. The current church sits on just a tiny part of the vast area covered by the original basilica which, like many churches in Cyprus, has Bible credentials. One of the columns in the grounds was allegedly used for the torture of the apostle Paul, whose resilience to persecution inspired the Roman governor to convert to Christianity.

If the rulers of ancient Pafos lived well, they died in luxury. Around 2km north of the Kato Pafos archaeological site, the Tombs of the Kings were hollowed out over six centuries to accommodate the highfliers of the ancient city on their final journey to the afterlife. Carved into a rocky outcrop, these handsome mausoleums followed the Egyptian tradition of making tombs as grand as the homes of the living, with vast atriums ringed by colonnades and carved niches that could accommodate whole families. Warm, dry winds rustle across the site, which is charmingly overgrown and often overlooked by the package tour groups.

Meeting Aphrodite
Since time immemorial, visitors to Cyprus have been obsessed with Aphrodite, and the ancient Greek goddess of love is eternally associated with Pafos. According to which Greek scribe you believe, this mighty madam was born either from the union of Zeus and Dione, or from foam on the sea after Uranus, the god of the sky, lost his manhood to the scythe of Cronus. The location of this miraculous conception has been mapped to the shoreline east of Pafos at Petra tou Romiou, where a marble sea stack rises dramatically from the sea beside a lonely pebble beach. It’s an undeniably pretty spot, but you may get a better feel for the cult of Aphrodite at Kouklia, site of the original Greek settlement at Pafos. Set in a handsome Lusignan mansion, the Palaipafos Museum (mcw.gov.cy) marks the site of the original Sanctuary of Aphrodite, one of the most important pilgrimage centres in the ancient world. It takes a bit of imagination to make sense of the scattered ruins, but the displays inside are a good primer on the cult of Aphrodite.

To get even closer to the goddess of love, cross the isthmus to Polis on the far side of the Akamas Peninsula. Just beyond the town limits, a walking trail winds between carob trees and clumps of wild thyme to the Baths of Aphrodite, a hidden spring where the goddess is said to have bathed under the lustful eyes of Adonis, god of beauty and desire.

Time for one more meze
Finish your journey into Cypriot culture back in Ktima, at the quintessentially Mediterranean Kiniras Garden Restaurant. Set in the tree-shaded atrium of a traditional stone townhouse, this family-run affair is a proud member of the Vakhis scheme, established to preserve traditional Cypriot recipes and island cooking know-how. Surrounded by statues and water features, you can sample such delights as zalatina, traditional Cypriot head cheese with spiced pig trotters, preserved in aspic.

Downhill in Kato Pafos, you can try a similarly authentic Cypriot menu at Hondros, just meters from the Kato Pafos Archaeological Site. Here, the dish everyone is drooling over is oftō kleftiko (lamb in the well, or thief’s kebab) - a shoulder or leg of lamb, slow-cooked with lemon juice and cinnamon in a clay oven until the meat slides tantalizingly off the bone. Drawing influences from Greek, Roman and Ottoman empires, this is Pafos’ history on a platter. (www.lonelyplanet.com)