

EASTER IN CYPRUS

By Carol Lovegrove – updated by the Editor

Of all the periods of fasting during the Greek Orthodox calendar, and there are a great many, none is taken more seriously than Lent. To prepare the body for this frugal time, Lent is preceded by ten days of fun and feasts in the period known as Apokreo, or Carnival.

Carnival begins on a Thursday (24 February 2011), which the Cypriots call Tsiknopefti, or smelly Thursday (Tsikna comes from the classical Knisa, which means the smell of cooking). On Tsiknopefti, and the days which follow, everyone grills meat. Suckling pig is the most characteristic Carnival dish. Carnival is the occasion for fancy-dress and parades, most notably at Limassol. The essentials are plenty of wine, food, song and dance! Carnival ends on Tyrofagos, or cheese-eating Sunday, with the biggest and best parades of all. All tables must be cleared of rich feast foods before Lent the following day.

The first day of Lent is called Green Monday (7 March 2011). This was formerly called Clean Monday as, traditionally, after an early rise, the Cypriots would wash their houses top to bottom and would clean all the kitchen utensils to get rid of the last traces of Carnival food. Families and friends head to the mountains or the beach (weather permitting) and spread out picnics of salads, vegetables, fruit, seafood, olives, and pulses. No meat is permitted during the Lent period. The centrepiece is the Green/Clean Monday loaf, the Lagana, which is only produced by the bakeries on this one day in the year.

Easter week (Holy week) arrives accompanied by the smells of Spring, and the rebirth of nature, with wild flowers in bloom everywhere. During this final week of Lent people go to church in the morning and evening, and the fast becomes harder, even olive oil is forbidden. But the end is in sight and every housewife equips herself to make the traditional Easter specialities. The feast of Easter is called Lambri.

The most conspicuous customs are the dyeing red (using a root called rizari) of hard-boiled eggs on Maundy Thursday, and the baking of special holiday cakes, Flaounes, on Good Friday. At lunchtime on Good Friday the traditional Faki Xidati, vinegar and lentil soup, is eaten, because it is said that when Christ asked for water on his way to Calvary he was given vinegar instead.

On Saturday huge bonfires are set and lit in the evening to signify the burning of Judas. After midnight the red Cyprus eggs are cracked together by children and adults alike, and the fast is broken with avgolemono (chicken broth with egg and lemon) or mayeiritsa (soup made from lamb's intestines).

And finally, on Easter Sunday (24 April 2011) lamb souvla is widely eaten. After the strict regime of Lent, the aroma of roasting meat wafts from one end of the island to the other. Everyone sings, dances and relaxes with vast quantities of wine, as the spit slowly revolves.

'Kalo paskha'
(Happy Easter)

FESTIVAL OF THE FLOOD

By Carol Lovegrove

Unique to Cyprus is Kataklysmos or the Festival of the Flood, seven weeks after Easter. Elsewhere in the Orthodox world it is simply Pentecost or the Feast of the Holy Spirit. The festival starts with an ecclesiastical ceremony when the priest proceeds to the local harbour, carrying a cross. After saying prayers, he throws the cross into the sea for eager swimmers to retrieve and the diver who brings back the cross receives the priest's blessing and a prize sovereign. At all coastal towns people then crowd into the sea and throw or sprinkle water over each other.

The festival commemorates the salvation of Noah and his family from the Flood, but it is likely to have originated from an ancient pagan rite in celebration of Aphrodite's birth, or in honour of Aphrodite's purification after sleeping with Adonis. The ceremonies may well last for a few days, depending on the town (2006: Larnaca 9th – 14th June, Ayia Napa/Limassol/Paphos 10th – 12th June). Expect dancing, boat races, swimming, games and singing of songs, such as tchattista (a sort of banter back and forth between groups).

The Ayia Napa Municipality organises folk dancing and performances from musicians and artists, from Cyprus and abroad. For further information on this festival and other local events contact them at 25 Ayias Mavris St., tel. 23816300.

FLOWER FESTIVALS

By Carol Lovegrove

In addition to the strict ecclesiastical holidays, municipalities and tourist boards lay on a number of other events, with an eye toward the foreign audience.

The most reliable of these include the Anthistiria or Flower Festivals. The best of these are usually held in early May at Larnaca, or mid-May at Paphos. This year 2011 Limassol, Larnaca and Paphos are holding their Anthistiria on Saturday 14th – Sunday 15th May (starting at 1900 on Saturday), celebrating in Limassol with a procession of floats and an exhibition of beautiful flowers and plants to be found in Cyprus.