

Myra controlled the valley of the river Aedesa / Demre Çay and the route that ran up it to Arneae and the central plains; the valley is only 10m wide in places, with towering walls. Apart from this route, roads are mentioned to Cyanaea in the W and to Limyra in the E. The road to Limyra was so steep that a coastal ferryboat service was preferred. Myra's harbour of Andriake, a key calling-point both for trading ships and the oracle at Sura was a critical asset.

House tombs are Myra's most obvious feature, carved into vertical cliffs below the city, near the theatre and along the river valley. Fellows says that the inscriptions were painted with alternate blue and red letters and the friezes and bas-reliefs adorning them were also painted. His detailed drawings show that the tombs were in better condition then. Some have scenes depicting daily life; in one, the dead man is portrayed lying on a couch, with his children in front and wife sitting at his head. On another, a naked boy hands his father his helmet and shield. A magnificent peristyle tomb has a bull and lion fighting on the pediment and two strange female figures, with women's bodies with lion head-dresses springing from lotus blossoms. We know from their inscriptions that Myra was inhabited from the 5th C BC. There is no literary mention of Myra before the 1st C BC, when it appears as one of the six leading cities of the Lycian League. In 42 BC, Brutus broke the chain across the harbour entrance and succeeded in collecting taxes. In AD 18 Germanicus, Emperor-in-waiting and commander of the Roman legions in Syria, visited on his way east. The Christian apostle Paul stopped here en route to Rome; maybe this led to early Christianisation for Constantine made Myra the capital and bishopric of Lycia; one of the first bishops was St Nicholas, Father Christmas. Myra became a rich pilgrimage centre and new churches and monasteries were founded. In 809, Myra was raided by the Arab navy of Harden al Rashid and St Nicholas' church plundered; the saint's tomb avoided destruction. In the 11th C the Normans rebuilt the church as a cathedral, but Italian merchants stole St Nicholas' bones for their church at Bari in Italy. In 1362, raiders from Cyprus destroyed Myra and it lay abandoned until, in the 19th C, a Russian prince had the church restored, replacing the dome with vaulting.

The acropolis' outer defensive wall of polygonal stone can be dated to the 5th century BC. Watchtowers which could warn of attack by sea were built at Beymelek, Sura and on the outlying islands. By the 1st C AD the city had moved to the plain and acquired an aqueduct and theatre. The aqueduct channel, 60cm by 60cm. was cut into the valley wall as far as the theatre then continued on arches as far as Andriake. The theatre was built into the rock wall below the acropolis, the central part resting against the cliff and the sides supported by two great vaulted galleries which were probably added after the earthquake of AD 141; because of this the diazoma divides the seats with only 9 rows above and 29 below. It could be covered with a canvas awning, supported on timber masts and the stage building was decorated with pairs of theatrical masks, Ganymede, the Zeus eagle and the snakey locks of Medea.

Opramoas' tomb lists donations of over 200,000 denarii to Myra, to repair the theatre, Artemis temple and gymnasium and to decorate the gymnasium and surrounding peristyle with marble. Other wealthy benefactors were Jason of Cyanaea and Licinius Longus of Oenoanda. The silt which has raised the land level and provides the basis for today's farming must hide the gymnasium and stadium and other public and private buildings.

The cathedral, now excavated, restored and open to visitors, hosts celebrations for St. Nicholas on December 6th each year. As the surrounding ground level has risen so much, the church is now in a pit. You enter down a broad staircase and through the second S aisle to a central aisle and apse. The N aisle is extended to form one side of a courtyard and beyond it is another gallery. A tomb with carved figures of a couple on the lid is identified as St Nicholas'. The church is very plain but pieces of masonry from many different periods are built into the walls or lie scattered about.



70 The Lycian Way

Route from Myra to Belören, Zeytin

This is the first multi-day section. The tracks are mainly clear with loose stones. Start in April. Stock up with 3-4 days' worth of supplies. Strategy. A steep climb takes you from the river valley to the wooded highlands. Easy paths take you to a ruined church. A stiff climb leads to a plateau below the summit of Karliöz Tepesi, a small plateau land above Finike. From the ruins of Belören, the ruins and the harbour. The reward is a view of life set in the purest surrounding landscape spread out below the protective cedar forest. The mystery of ancient Christian history is visible in the misty ridges rolling to the sea and the beach. Allow a day on the beach at the end.

Walk E from the site entrance at Myra. Go L/N along the river bank, passing the well W of the river L and market gardens R, past a mosque and 300m after the mosque look R for the gorge. To reach the path, pass between gullies and built-up G3 stepped track, which leads in a gully. It crosses the tarmac road just W of the village.

The Gavur Yolu rises up more gradually and is more like a stream bed but later it flows in the valley to the once-fortified hilltops near the road, turn R and walk about 1km to the top.

The largely abandoned village of Karabel is a good grazing area. The stone houses are strikingly simple. Just off the main road, between the ruins of Karabel, the area was much richer. One, R of the road, has a frieze with crosses and had Corinthian capitals. It is at Karabel, so it is probably from the end of the 1st C AD.

At the well at the entrance to the village, the road between the houses on the road to Zeytin. The road swings L to cross the gully, turn R to the stream bed on the L, up one or two hills to a grassy plateau. Turn R on the road and follow the Zeytin. The pine-clad mountains rise behind the gorge. Red-roofed houses nestle beneath the road downhill for 100m and, just before the track. This cuts the corner and takes you to the top.