

# Crete



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50 YEARS  
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OF TRAVEL

# CRETE



**Ryan Ver Berkmoes, Andrea Schulte-Peevers**

# CONTENTS

## Plan Your Trip

Welcome .....	4
Crete Map .....	6
Our Picks .....	8
Regions & Cities .....	20
Itineraries .....	22
When to Go .....	30
Get Prepared for Crete .....	32
The Food Scene .....	34
The Outdoors .....	38

## The Guide

<b>Hania</b> .....	45
Hania .....	50
Beyond Hania .....	62
Hora Sfakion .....	66
Beyond Hora Sfakion .....	68
Sougia .....	72
Beyond Sougia .....	76
Paleohora .....	80
Beyond Paleohora .....	83
Falasarna .....	86
Beyond Falasarna .....	88



Rethymno harbour (p97)

<b>Rethymno</b> .....	90
Rethymno .....	96
Beyond Rethymno .....	106
Panormo .....	111
Beyond	
Panormo .....	114
Spili .....	116
Beyond Spili .....	119
Plakias .....	121
Beyond Plakias .....	123

<b>Iraklio</b> .....	127
Iraklio .....	132
Beyond Iraklio .....	139
Arhanes .....	143
Beyond Arhanes .....	146
Matala .....	152
Beyond Matala .....	156
Hersonisos .....	164
Beyond Hersonisos .....	167

<b>Lasithi</b> .....	172
Agios Nikolaos .....	178
Beyond Agios	
Nikolaos .....	182
Sitia .....	188
Beyond Sitia .....	191
Zakros .....	196
Ierapetra .....	201
Beyond Ierapetra .....	204
Lasithi	
Plateau .....	209



Hersonisos (p164)





Palace of Knossos (p140)

## Toolkit

## Storybook



Cretan cuisine (p34)

<b>Arriving</b> .....	216
<b>Getting Around</b> .....	217
<b>Money</b> .....	218
<b>Accommodation</b> .....	219
<b>Family Travel</b> .....	220
<b>Health &amp; Safe Travel</b> .....	221
<b>Food, Drink &amp; Nightlife</b> .....	222
<b>Responsible Travel</b> .....	224
<b>LGBTIQ+ Travellers</b> .....	226
<b>Accessible Travel</b> .....	227
<b>Nuts &amp; Bolts</b> .....	229
<b>Language</b> .....	230

<b>A History of Crete in 15 Places</b> .....	234
<b>Natural Crete</b> .....	238
<b>Crete's Minoans</b> .....	241
<b>Crete's Proud Culture</b> .....	244
<b>Crete's Soulful Music</b> .....	247



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Agia Galini (p125)

# CRETE

## THE JOURNEY BEGINS HERE

I love Crete because it is so big and yet so small. It really is a huge little island, with natural beauty, ancient history, beaches, dramatic landscapes, ferry rides (did I say beaches?), impossibly appealing old towns and villages, fabulous walks and hikes... I could just go on and on, but then we wouldn't have time to mention the wonderful food and wines.

You can spend a week driving around this ever-changing landscape, where you can trade high mountain peaks for the sea lapsing at your feet in only 15 minutes; and after exploring what feels like a continent's worth of sights, you realise that you've only driven 100km and your tank is still three-quarters full.

One day you're on a south coast ferry enjoying the sweep of sheer, multicoloured cliffs meeting the blue water and the next you're standing in awe of the Minoan wonders of Knossos. Crete can pack your days as full or as empty as you want.

### Ryan Ver Berkmoes

Ryan is an author and writer covering news and travel. He's written over 130 guidebooks. [@ryanb](#)



**My favourite experience** Getting lost in the lanes of the oldest parts of Hania (pictured above) and Rethymno, exclaiming over spectacular Venetian building details while bemused residents look on.



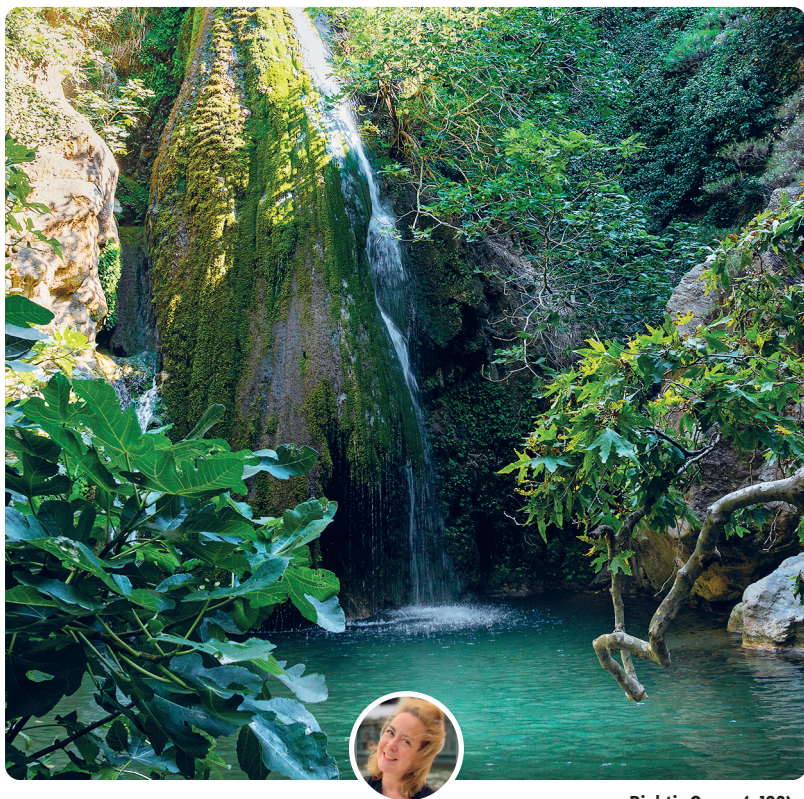
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## WHO GOES WHERE

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Our second writer and expert chooses the place which, for them, defines Crete

NICK BRUNDLE PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



**Richtis Gorge (p192)**

Among Crete's many famous gorges, Richtis Gorge on the north coast of Lassithi is an anomaly. Instead of rugged canyons patrolled by soaring birds of prey, it's a lush ribbon cutting through forest that feels beamed in from the tropics. Flowering oleander bushes flank the peaceful trail, lizards scurry up carob trees and butterflies dance along a rushing brook leading to the big payoff: a year-round waterfall whose basin is perfect for a refreshing dip.

### **Andrea Schulte-Peevers**

*Andrea has written Lonely Planet guidebooks for a quarter of a century and is a destination expert on Crete, Germany, the United Arab Emirates, California and parts of the Caribbean.*

## Archaeological Museum of Chania

Ponder Minoan sarcophagi and many more treasures in bold, new surrounds (p51)

## Rethymno's old quarter

Get lost in labyrinthine, Renaissance-era lanes (p100)



## Elafonisi Beach

Revel in pink sands and turquoise water (p84)

## Samaria Gorge

Start in the mountains and trek to the sea (p77)

## Aradena Gorge

Trek south to the Libyan Sea amid untrammelled beauty (p67)





### Palace of Knossos

Rub shoulders with the ghosts of the Minoans at Crete's marquee archeological site (p140)

### Iraklio Wine Country

Sample fine vintages on tasting tours (p147)

### Kritsa

Don't miss the all-around classic Crete village (p186)





# SANDY PLEASURES

Crete's long northern and southern coasts are bookended by short eastern and western shorelines, all of which are accented by beaches large and small.

No matter your tastes, you'll find a patch of sand to suit your mood of the moment. Some are full-on scenes, with all services and plenty of water activities offshore. Others are mellow affairs with the odd lounge and a couple of tavernas. And yet others are wonderfully remote and all but untouched.



## Beach Season

Crete's beaches can be reliably enjoyed from May to September, although March, April, October and even November can also yield balmy days.



## Remote Beaches

Crete's southwest coast has oodles of beaches that can only be reached by boat. Catch one from bases such as Paleohora (p80), Sougia (p72) and Hora Sfakion (p66).



## Beach Gear

Some Crete beaches are backed by rows of tavernas and lined with loungers. Others are blissfully wild, so always bring what you need.

LEFT: GATSI/GETTY IMAGES © CENTRE: THOMAS KAUF/SHUTTERSTOCK © RIGHT: GATSI/GETTY IMAGES ©







### BEST BEACH EXPERIENCES

❶ Revel in pink sands and turquoise water at **Elafonisi Beach**, which extends across shallow isles and is Crete's most magical beach. (p84)

❷ Shade yourself under a palm tree at **Vai Beach**, while watching out for falling dates in Europe's largest native palm forest. (p194)

❸ Hit **Preveli Beach**, Crete's 'other' famous palm beach, at the confluence of river and sea amid cave-combed cliffs and overlooked by a 17th-century monastery. (p124)

❹ For crowd-free tanning, head to the massive sand dunes at **Agios Pavlos**, which spill into this isolated southwest-coast beach. (p125)

❺ Enjoy the waves at **Falasarna Beach**, then watch the sun slip from pink to gold on this long, sandy ribbon at Crete's west end. (p87)



# ANCIENT WONDERS

Crete's colourful history goes back 5000 years and is evident across the island, which is dotted with aeons-old palaces and Roman cities. Crete's prominent place in world events begins with the illustrious Minoans, who were lording it over lavish palaces at a time when other Europeans were huddled in primitive huts. Crete's strategic location in the middle of the Mediterranean was prized by ancient civilisations that left their mark in spectacular sites that continue to astound archaeologists.



## History – In Colour

Most archaeological sites feature uniform weathered white stones. But this monochromatic tableau belies their original palette of bold colours.



## Bronze Metals

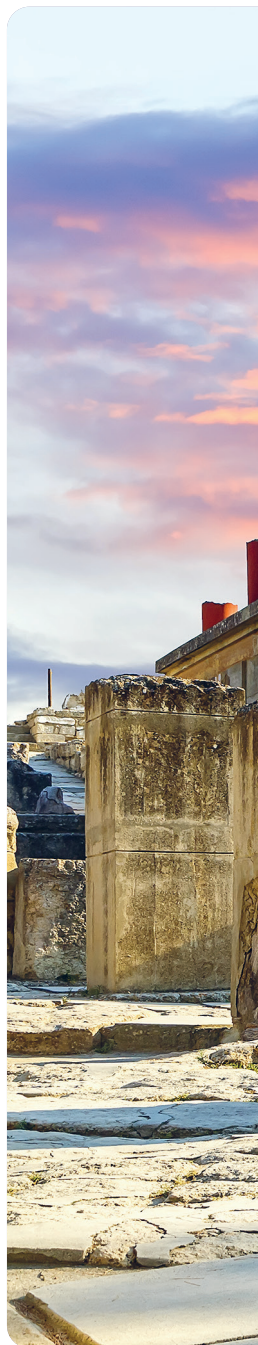
Look for beautiful bronze creations dating back 3000 years at museums across the island. Crete was a thriving centre during the Bronze Age.



## Take Cover

In summer you can easily get overheated clambering around Crete's ancient sites. Grab some shady relief in subterranean passages – and bring water!

LEFT: ARKADY ZAKHAROV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, CENTRE: OLEKSANDR PANTILIEV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, RIGHT: TIMOFEEV VLADIMIR/SHUTTERSTOCK ©







### BEST ANCIENT EXPERIENCES

❶ Don't miss the **Palace of Knossos**, Crete's top-rated archaeological site. (p140)

❷ And don't pass on **Phaistos**, the most important Minoan complex after Knossos. It has awe-inspiring panoramas of the Messara Plain and Mt Psiloritis. (pictured far left; p157)

❸ Imagine the spectacles witnessed in the amphitheatre at **Aptera**, a classical Greek and Roman city that reveals new wonders with each passing year. (p63)

❹ Watch out for ancient marauders at **Lato**, a fortified Dorian hilltop city-state in a stunning setting. It's one of Crete's best-preserved non-Minoan sites. (p186)

❺ Trek **Zakros Gorge**, past Minoan burial caves, to reach the ruins of the small coastal palace at Kato Zakros. (p197)





LEFT: PROSIG/SHUTTERSTOCK ©; CENTRE: DZIEWUL/SHUTTERSTOCK ©; RIGHT: GEORGIOS TSICHIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Samaria Gorge (p77)



# MOUNTAINS & GORGES

There's something undeniably dramatic in the way the Cretan landscape unfolds, from long beaches in the north to rugged gorges cleaving to the cove-carved, cliff-lined southern coast.

In between, valleys cradle moody villages, and round-shouldered hills are the overture to often snow-dabbed mountains. It's a nearly endless paradise for hikes and exploration.

## No Sandals

Crete's tumultuous geography is not for the faint of footwear.

Leave the flip-flops at the beach; wear serious shoes.

## Stormy Weather

The island's higher elevations can be beset by storms blowing cold rain even in summer.

Bring layers and waterproof protection.

## BEST MOUNTAIN & GORGE EXPERIENCES

- ❶ Keep your jaw in place at the gaping **Samaria Gorge**. (p77)
- ❷ Get your Zeus on at famous **Dikteon Cave**. (p210)
- ❸ Climb **Mt Psiloritis**, Crete's highest peak. (p115)
- ❹ Escape the crowds at **Aradena Gorge**. (p67)
- ❺ Make the journey to the **Lasithi Plateau** via scenic access routes. (p209)



# UNMISSABLE VILLAGES

Untouched by mass tourism, villages are the backbone of Cretan culture and identity – especially those tucked in the hills and mountains. The island's unique customs are still practised and traditions are part of daily life. Meet villagers gossiping in *kafeneia* (coffee houses), preparing their Easter feast, tending to their sheep or celebrating during Crete's many festivals.



## Take that Coffee Break

To savour the fabric of villages large and small, find the central square, pick a shady spot in a cafe and s-l-o-w d-o-w-n.



## Grab a Boat

The delightful seaside village of Agia Roumeli is one of several Cretan villages only reachable on foot or by boat. Enjoy a car-free retreat. (p78)



## Leave the Car

Most villages have plenty of places to park on their outskirts. Don't get caught in narrow lanes, where pedestrians and stone buildings will imperil your sanity.



## BEST VILLAGE EXPERIENCES

① Don't miss the classic Crete village, **Kritsa** (pictured far left), clinging to the Dikti Mountains. (p186)

② Devour trout while surrounded by rushing natural springs in **Argyroupoli**, an ancient mountain village built atop Roman ruins. (p109)

③ Try to find the best taverna at **Mohlos**, where Minoan antiquity meets waterfront vibes with some of Crete's best seafood. (p193)

④ See if you can spot Africa from whitewashed **Myrthios**, draped across a mountainside high above the Libyan Sea. (p122)

⑤ Fall in love with **Amari**, in the heart of its namesake pastoral valley. (p119)



# RICH HISTORY

Crete's incredible history started with the Minoans, classical Greeks and Romans. Its full sweep spans the centuries right up to the modern day. At the crossroads of three continents, Crete has been coveted and occupied by consecutive invaders.

History imbues Hania and Rethymno, where labyrinthine lanes are dominated by mighty Venetian fortresses, and restored Renaissance mansions rub rafters with Turkish mosques and Ottoman bathhouses. Byzantine beauty is found in magnificent frescoed churches and monasteries.



## Don't Rush

The tangles of Hania's and Rethymno's old towns are not conducive to visitors in a hurry. Each requires at least a day of wandering.



## Escape the Crowds

In high season, Crete's historic sights can seem like they're suffering yet another invasion. But choose a random alley or corner for solitude.



## Local Goods

Skip the usual souvenirs and look for small shops selling genuine Cretan foods, wines and crafts. Gift shops at historic sites are often excellent sources.

LEFT: NEIRF/SHUTTERSTOCK ©; CENTRE: MATT MUNRO/LOVEY PLANET ©; RIGHT: GEORGIOS KRITSOTAKIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©







## BEST HISTORY EXPERIENCES

① Get lost in the labyrinthine lanes of **Rethymno's old quarter** (pictured left), with its Renaissance-era buildings. (p100)

② Peer into the Cretan soul at **Moni Arkadiou**. In 1866 hundreds of locals sheltering in the 16th-century complex blew themselves up rather than surrender to the Turks. (p107)

③ Journey to the one-time leper colony at **Spinalonga Island**. The ruins of Venetian fortifications star in the acclaimed novel *The Island*. (p184)

④ At **Hania's captivating harbour** (pictured far left), historic townhouses rim the promenade and a magnificent breakwater juts into the Aegean. (p50)

⑤ Venture to the lonely 15th-century fortified monastery **Moni Toplou**. Its defences were tested by pirates, crusading knights and more. (p193)





LEFT: GEORGIOS TSICHLOS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©; CENTRE: JULIAN POPOV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©; RIGHT: MARI ZANO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Balos (p89)



# ACTIVE CRETE

Get outdoors and active in Crete to really experience the stunning island's rewards. Rugged terrain, muscular mountains, dramatic gorges and untamed coastline beyond the resorts make for an adventurer's paradise. The relative ease of access to these splendid areas opens the door to just about every outdoor adventure you could set your sights on.

## Rent Your Gear

Crete has no shortage of outlets for gear rental as well as experts and guides who can help with the most demanding pursuits.

## Active Season

April to October are the best months for activities. In winter, gear rental shops are mostly closed and the weather may preclude some pursuits.

## BEST ACTIVE EXPERIENCES

① Trek south to the Libyan Sea through the tree-lined close quarters of **Aradena Gorge**. (p67)

② Strap on your helmet and cycle among the orchards, fields and windmills of the lush **Lasithi Plateau**. (p209)

③ Fire up the adrenaline as you rock-climb around the cliffs and clefts of **Kapetaniana**. (pl62)

④ Catch Crete's wildest winds at **Kouremenos Beach**, the island's top windsurfing spot. (pl95)

⑤ Swim in the magical teal lagoons at **Balos**, on the remote Gramvousa Peninsula. (p89)



# ENGROSSING MUSEUMS

Not just for rainy days, Crete's wealth of museums big and small bring the island's dramatic history, unique culture and proud people to life. Find out who the Minoans were, revel at archaeological discoveries, see how centuries of invasions left their mark, explore the Cretan psyche and understand what makes this island unlike any other.



## Tiny Museums

When exploring villages, look for tiny museums that are truly labours of love, such as the Museum of National Resistance in Theriso (p79).



## Churches as Museums

Crete's churches are not just sacred places but are also often de facto art and history museums with treasures such as Byzantine icons.



## Gift Shops

Many museum gift shops offer hard-to-find books and guides as well as Cretan crafts, art reproductions and other goods several cuts above the typical souvenirs.

## BEST MUSEUM EXPERIENCES

**1** Ponder ancient history at the stunning new **Archaeological Museum of Chania**. (p51)

**2** Save time for the **Heraklion Archaeological Museum**, a must for every visitor to Crete. (p132)

**3** Sail into local nautical history at the **Maritime Museum of Crete** (pictured far left; p54).

**4** Discover what the famous Cretan writer was up to when not writing *Zorba the Greek* at the namesake **Nikos Kazantzakis Museum**. (p149)

**5** Immerse yourself in centuries of Cretan daily life at the **Museum of Cretan Ethnology**. (p160)



# FABULOUS FOOD & DRINK

Food lovers will be in heaven in Crete, where locally sourced ingredients are not a trend but a way of life. Traditional tavernas often produce their own meat, cheese, olive oil, raki and wine, and catch their own seafood. Create your own gourmet trail, delighting in distinctive herbs and greens gathered from hillsides, cheeses made fresh with ages-old recipes, and honey flavoured by mountain herbs. Pair your meal with excellent local wine.



## Sweet Treats

Feeling like a snack? Of course you are! Look for *zaharoplasteia*, which are Cretan bakeries that specialise in pastries, cakes and honey-filled indulgences.



## Cretan Gold

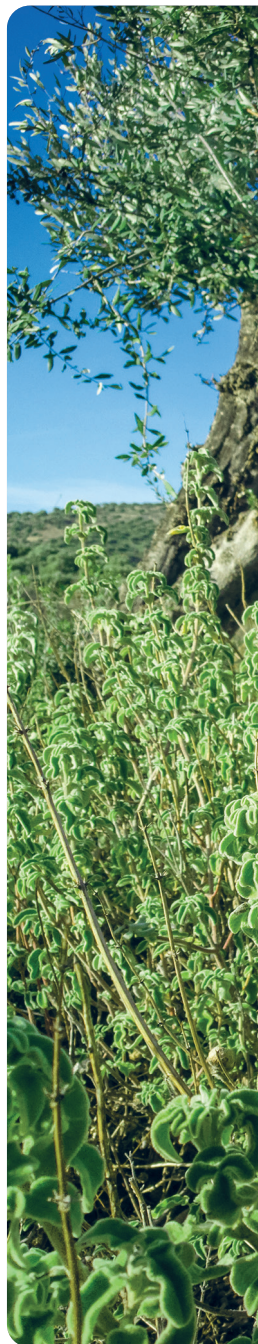
Crete is the largest producer of extra virgin olive oil among all the regions of Greece. Hillsides shimmer with the silvery leaves of olive trees.



## Cretan Nightcaps

You'll usually be offered a complimentary sweet and a shot of raki (the potent Cretan distilled spirit) at the end of a meal.

LEFT: ZAHAR MAR/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, CENTRE: NEIL SETCHFIELD/LOVE MY PLANET ©, RIGHT: ARTEM KONTRATIEV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©







### BEST FOOD & DRINK EXPERIENCES

❶ Sample fine vintages on a tasting tour of **Iraklio Wine Country**. (p147)

❷ Look for traditional restaurants nestled in Crete's daunting mountains and valleys. Typical **Elaia Thea** is renowned for its roasted meats. (p84)

❸ Savour the bounty of traditional farming at **Agreco Farm**, a replica of a 17th-century agricultural estate. (p107)

❹ Cretan hillsides are covered with sage, thyme and other herbs. Learn their many uses at a herb shop in **Maroulas**. (p109)

❺ Taste the bounty of the Michelakis' family farm at **To Stachi**, a Hania vegetarian restaurant. (p61)



# REGIONS & CITIES

Find the places that tick all your boxes.

## Rethymno

**MOUNTAIN ROADS, SOULFUL LEGACIES,  
DYNAMIC CITY**

Rethymno is peppered with historic sites and natural wonders. Ribbons of mountain road wind through the timeless interior, where you'll find Minoan tombs, Venetian strongholds and enduring monasteries, especially that jewel of the Cretan soul: Moni Arkadiou. The eponymous capital is a bustle of atmosphere-soaked lanes lorded over by a grand fortress. In contrast, the south coast boasts bewitching beaches in seductive isolation.

p90

## Hania

p45

## Hania

**STUNNING COAST, SOARING  
MOUNTAINS, HISTORIC WONDER**

The west of Crete is presided over by the alluring port city of Hania, once Venice's jewel of a capital and now a place enjoyed in equal parts by visitors and residents. The region features Europe's grandest gorge, a score of idyllic beaches, timeless mountain villages and dramatic terrain you can literally get lost in.

p45

## Lasithi

### COSMOPOLITAN GLAMOUR & UNTAMED NATURE

Crete's easternmost region is home to the island's top resorts: Agios Nikolaos and Elounda. Paradoxically, this is also the wildest region, with the richest biodiversity and the least trampled ranges. Explorers and adventurers will find much to occupy them here: great cycling, challenging trekking and a passel of historic sights, from Moni Toplou to notorious Spinalonga Island. Sandy pleasures can begin with famous Vai Beach.

**p172**



## Iraklio

### MINOANS, MYTHS & WINE COUNTRY

Iraklio is Crete's most dynamic region, home to almost half the island's population and its unmissable Minoan Palace of Knossos. A few kilometres inland from the busy coast, villages sweetly lost in time soldier on. Taste the delicious vintages from Iraklio Wine Country. On the quiet southern coast, Matala is the only developed resort and anchors walks to untrammelled beaches.

**p127**

## ITINERARIES

# Highlights of Western Crete

**Allow:** 7 days

**Distance:** 350km

This trip presents you with a mother lode of soul-stirring attractions, including the unspoiled southern coast, higgledy-piggledy mountain villages and some of Crete's best beaches, as well as spirit-lifting culture and dining treats in Crete's two most attractive towns, Rethymno and Hania. It even includes some beautiful ferry rides.



## 1 HANIA ⌚ 2 DAYS

In **Hania** (p50), stroll out on the long stone breakwater and take in the views of the beautiful, pastel-coloured old town. Visit the maritime and newly built archaeological museums. The maze of streets in the Venetian quarter will keep you wandering for hours. Gird your appetite for Crete's best food (p61).

**Detour:** Leave the crowds behind at the impressive 17th-century monastery **Moni Agias Triadas** (p65), on the Akrotiri Peninsula. ⌚ 2 hours.



## 2 PALEOHORA ⌚ 1 DAY

Hit the two main beaches at **Paleohora** (p80) and then explore the area. Start with the trip's crowning natural glory: the pinkish-white sands of **Elafonisi** (p84). On the little roads lacing this mountainous area, stop into tiny old villages such as Elos and Kefali.

Catch the car ferry for the gorgeous ride east along sea cliffs and cove beaches to Agia Roumeli.



## 3 AGIA ROUMELI ⌚ 1 DAY

**Agia Roumeli** (p78) has no road access from the rest of Crete, but it does have a few short roads accessible via the regular car ferry. It's a characterful little port town but its real appeal is that it is the endpoint for the world-class hike through the Samaria Gorge. From the waterfront, walk 2km in and back to see the best parts.

Continue on the car ferry east to Hora Sfakion and rejoin Crete's road system.



4

#### AMARI VALLEY ⌚ 1 DAY

One of the west's must-see regions is the **Amari Valley** (p119), a heady mix of traditional villages, olive groves and fruit orchards. At Thronos, the Agia Panagia church boasts 14th-century frescoes and 4th-century mosaics. Wend your way through the fruit trees to Amari, the valley's namesake town, which boasts a beautiful collection of Venetian buildings. Have refreshments in the cafe- and flower-filled main square.



5

#### MONI ARKADIOU ⌚ 1 DAY

High on a lonely plain surrounded by mountains, **Moni Arkadiou** (p107) is a deeply sacred and symbolic monastery. Take time to explore the complex, starting with the 16th-century Venetian church. Then delve into the spot where, in 1866, hundreds of Cretans blew themselves up in order to destroy a Turkish army.

**Detour:** The artists' hamlet of **Margarites** (p108) has pottery workshops and cute cafes. ⌚ 3 hours



6

#### RETHYMNO ⌚ 1 DAY

**Rethymno** (p96) is second only to Hania as a top Cretan city. Roam the Venetian-Ottoman quarter and port. Climb to the Fortezza, the vast fortress perched above the old town. Take in sweeping views of the region.

**Detour:** If heading back to Hania along the coast road, stop at **Aptera**, the ruins of an ancient city that dates to the 7th century BCE. ⌚ 2 hours



## ITINERARIES

# The Best of Eastern Crete

**Allow:** 6 days

**Distance:** 360km

Starting in Crete's main city of Iraklio, this trip visits its premier ancient site (Knossos) and then explores the mountains, valleys, islands and beaches going east. Enjoy wine tasting and then immerse yourself in more ancient wonders before heading up to mountain villages. A notorious island and one of Crete's best beaches finish off your trip.



## 1 IRAKLIO & KNOSSOS 🕒 1 DAY

In **Iraklio** (p132), the Heraklion Archaeological Museum details the Ancient Minoan culture in all its brilliance and beauty. Just south of the city, the **Palace of Knossos** (p140) is Crete's top attraction. A once-great palace of the Minoans, Knossos is a sprawling site of grand chambers, inspirational frescoes, hidden passages and much more.



## 2 IRAKLIO WINE COUNTRY 🕒 1 DAY


More than two dozen wineries spread their vines over the gently rolling landscape of **Iraklio Wine Country** (p147). Stop for tastings, wander villages such as Arhanes and pause at genteel tavernas. The grapes grown on these hills produce 70% of Crete's well-regarded wines. Don't miss the Minoan wine press in Vathypetro.

 **Detour:** Venture up **Mt Yiouhtas** for sweeping views of the region.  
🕒 4 hours



## 3 PHAESTOS 🕒 1 DAY

A trio of magnificent ancient ruins await around **Phaestos** (p157). Start at the namesake palace, which is the second-most-important Minoan site after Knossos. Continue at ruins of a palace and village dating to 1550 BCE. Finish at Gortyna, which was the Roman capital from 67 BCE to 824 CE, and rejoin Crete's road system.


 **Detour:** **Matala** is a busy beach with hikes to nearby uncrowded beaches. 🕒 4 hours



4

## KRITSA ⌚ 1 DAY

**Kritis** (p186) is an old and utterly charming mountain village in eastern Crete. The upper village with its web of narrow, car-free lanes is especially atmospheric. Look for alluring cafes, shops specialising in local products and luxe boutiques. Nearby are the Dorian ruins of Ancient Lato and the Byzantine church of Panagia Kera.

 **Detour:** Tree-lined and dramatic, **Kritis Gorge** is one of Crete's best.



5

## SPINALONGA ISLAND ⌚ 1 DAY

For much of the 20th century, Greeks with leprosy (Hansen's disease) were sent to live in quarantine on **Spinalonga Island** (p184), just off Crete's east coast. Today you can visit the site, which was made famous by Victoria Hislop's best-selling novel *The Island*. While there, stop by the Venetian fortress.

Ferries for the short hop to the island leave from Elounda and Plaka.



6

## VAI BEACH ⌚ 1 DAY

Try to catch falling dates from the largest natural palm forest in Europe at **Vai Beach** (p194). Botanists think that these trees are a sub-species unique to Crete. The beach is small but perfectly framed by turquoise waters lapping at the edges of the inlet. It's a gorgeous setting and one worth exploring. Trails lead to cliffside walks, vista points and more secluded, clothing-optional coves.

## ITINERARIES

# Best of the Island

**Allow:** 6 days

**Distance:** 445km

Bookended by two of Crete's great cities, this route is a roller-coaster ride through the natural wonders of mountain and sea and the best of the island's historical treasures. You'll get to soak up Venetian architecture, frolic on alluring beaches and feast on both mountain-village and seafront cuisine.



## 1 IRAKLIO ⌚ 1 DAY

**Iraklio** (p132), Crete's largest city, boasts superb museums. Get context on Cretan life before heading a short distance south to the world-class ruins at the Palace of Knossos (pictured) where the mysterious Minoans ruled about 4000 years ago.

**Detour:** Enjoy touring **Iraklio Wine Country** (p147), dotted with wineries where 70% of Crete's wine is produced. ⌚ 4 hours



## 2 MATALA ⌚ 1 DAY

Stake out a base near **Matala** (p152) to combine trips to Gortyna, the former capital of Roman Crete, as well as the Minoan palace-city of Phaestos, second only to Knossos in importance. Visit the outstanding Cretan cultural museum at Vori. Finish the day with more beach time and sunset across cave-dotted cliffs at Matala.

**Detour:** Have a swim at wide and sandy **Kommos** (p159). ⌚ 1 hour



## 3 RETHYMNO ⌚ 1 DAY

Travelling west, head into the mountains, where the hearty scents of traditional Cretan food waft out from tavernas. Use the quaint village of Spili as your gateway to the captivating Amari Valley. Make stops at Moni Arkadiou and the ancient ruins at Eleutherna. Overnight in **Rethymno** (p96), taking your time ambling around its mix of Turkish and Venetian buildings.

**Detour:** **Margarites** (p108) is a village of skilled pottery makers. ⌚ 4 hours





#### 4 PALEOHORA ⌚ 1 DAY

Head west and over the mountains to the port town of Hora Sfakion and catch a ferry. Chugging along the tortuously curved cliffs with their swirls of contrasting earth tones is a beautiful way to spend an hour or two. Get off the ferry in the relaxed beach town of **Paleohora** (p80).

**Detour:** Hop off the ferry in Loutro, Agia Roumeli or Sougia for some beach time and lunch. ⌚ 2 hours



#### 5 FALASARNA ⌚ 1 DAY

Marvel at the pink sand and find your own private patch at **Elafonisi** (p84), the star of Crete's constellation of beaches. Wander north via the coastal road and hamlet-hop your way through the intriguing **Innahorion villages** (p85). Catch the sunset at broad **Falasarna** (p86) with its rolling waves.

**Detour:** Take a day-trip-boat from Kissamos to the **Gramvousa Peninsula** (p89). Frolic at the spectacular lagoon-like beach at Balos. ⌚ 6 hours



#### 6 HANIA ⌚ 1 DAY

Finish at **Hania** (p50), a lively modern city wrapped around a compelling Venetian harbour and atmosphere-laden Venetian quarter crisscrossed by narrow lanes. It's Crete's most evocative city and it offers some of the island's best food and nightlife. Remnants of Venetian and Turkish architecture abound.

**Detour:** **Ancient Aptera** (p63) prospered across 1400 years beginning in 700 BCE. Visit the ruins, where archaeological work is ongoing. ⌚ 2 hours

## ITINERARIES

# Best of the Beaches

**Allow:** 10 days


**Distance:** 245km

Visit many of Crete's best beaches on this tour, which takes a sedate pace across the south coast. Why hurry when the point of a beach is to relax? More energetically, Crete's top gorge and many other hiking opportunities await. Ferries provide most of the transport, with just a couple of vehicle segments.



## 1 PALEOHORA ⌚ 1 DAY

Relaxed and appealing, **Paleohora** (p80) lies on a narrow peninsula flanked by two beaches. Shallow waters and general quietude make it a good choice for families. Walkers will find even more beaches nearby within easy and interesting hikes.

 **Detour:** Pink sands and warm waters extending across shallow isles make **Elafonisi** (p84) Crete's most magical beach. It can be reached in a rental car or on an organised day trip.




## 2 SOUGIA ⌚ 2 DAYS

**Sougia** (p72) is a delightful and not-overdeveloped beach town. Cafes and tavernas line a tamarisk-shaded beachfront promenade. Stop here to relax – you might not move on for days. Besides the very long and mostly empty beach, there are lots of active pursuits. Hike to the cove and valley of Ancient Lissos, which has Roman ruins in a remote setting, or tackle Agia Irini Gorge.



## 3 AGIA ROUMELI ⌚ 1 DAY

From Sougia, get a ride into the mountains to the start of the world-class Samaria Gorge walk. The 18km trek ends in the humble – and car-free – port town of **Agia Roumeli** (p78). Most people catch the ferry out after the gorge. Instead, stay and enjoy the very relaxed vibe and family-run tavernas.

 **Detour:** Hike the untrammelled coast 21km west to **Hora Sfakion** instead of taking the ferry.



#### 4 GAVDOS ISLAND

🕒 3 DAYS

Catch the ferry to the ferry hub of Hora Sfakion (or hike) and then transfer to a boat for **Gavdos Island** (p71), the southernmost spot in Europe that exudes a sense of idiosyncratic isolation outside of busy August. It's a blissful setting with just a few rooms, tavernas and unspoilt beaches, some accessible only by foot or boat. There's little to do here except swim, walk and relax.



#### 5 PLAKIAS

🕒 2 DAYS

Take a boat to **Plakias** (p121), a laid-back favourite for those who equate 'beach' with 'relax', although this is another seaside town that also offers the option of a lot of water sports. The region is dotted with beaches, from buzzy to utterly deserted and idyllic. Preveli Beach has date palms at the confluence of river and sea.

👉 **Detour:** **Agios Pavlos** (p125) is one of the most charming of the southern coast beach towns.



#### 6 MATALA

🕒 1 DAY

On summer days, **Matala** (p152) feels far from its roots as an escape for hippies, but you can recapture the spirit at other nearby beaches. At night, the town empties out of day-trippers and the stunning sunsets are all yours.

👉 **Detour:** The crystal-clear water of **Agiofarango Beach** (p160) is the reward for hiking through Agiofarango Gorge, one of Crete's easiest treks.

# WHEN TO GO

Visit Crete in summer for playful crowds and warm water; go in winter for pensive solitude.

If your image of Crete is beaches lined with sweaty bodies roasting during long days of blasting sunshine, well you've got summer correct. But the island is seasonal, and in winter it is often quiet, chilly and wet – but rewarding for those looking beyond a suntan.

Sights and businesses are often open longer, or only open at all, in the warmer months when people enjoy endless festivals and long nights on taverna terraces.

In the shoulder seasons (April to May and September to October), much is open, temperatures are pleasant and crowds are moderate. Important festivals and celebrations occur year-round.

## Want a Bargain?

Despite Crete's summer popularity, you can find great places to stay across the island even from June to September when prices peak. Book as far ahead as possible to score deals, but know that even last-minute bookings can be reasonable in mountain villages and more obscure beach towns.



I LIVE HERE

## SUMMER PARTY

**Kostas Aloupis** lives in Rethymno and is the co-owner of **EcoEvents**, which organises activities that celebrate Cretan culture.  
@ecoevents\_crete

'In July and August, Crete becomes one big party. The peak of this season is the Assumption of Mary on 15 August, when most Cretan villages organise enormous feasts in the village centre with wine, traditional dishes and, of course, live Cretan music by musicians and dancing by all. I love to visit the villages in Amari or Mylopotamos because they host the liveliest *panigyria* and their food is amazing!'

## WINTER JOYS

Languid beach days are far removed from wintertime Crete, but an off-season visit to the island can be very rewarding. Historic places like Knossos and Rethymno are uncrowded and easily savoured. Traditional tavernas in the countryside are warmed with crackling wood fires.



Venetian harbour (p97), Rethymno

## Weather through the year



### JANUARY

Ave daytime max: **16°C**

Days of rainfall: 14



### FEBRUARY

Ave daytime max: **16°C**

Days of rainfall: 11



### MARCH

Ave daytime max: **17°C**

Days of rainfall: 8



### APRIL

Ave daytime max: **20°C**

Days of rainfall: 6



### MAY

Ave daytime max: **24°C**

Days of rainfall: 3



### JUNE

Ave daytime max: **28°C**

Days of rainfall: 1





## GO FOR A SWIM

Crete's beaches enjoy warm water in summer, with an average temperature of 26°C. In winter, temperatures plunge to a brisk 16°C, although hardy Cretans will scoff at any notion that this is too cold for a dip.

## Big Festivals & Celebrations

**Pre-Lent** is celebrated with Crete's own Carnival, featuring three weeks of dancing, masquerade balls, games and treasure hunts. It culminates in a grand street parade. The biggest party is in Rethymno (p96). ☀️ **February**

It's a double whammy on 25 March: military parades and dancing commemorate the beginning of the **1821 War of Independence** (experience it in Hania, p50), while the **Feast of the Annunciation** celebrates the day when Mary discovered she was pregnant. ☀️ **March**

The most important religious holiday in Greece, **Orthodox Easter** services (which can be enjoyed all over the island) include a candlelit procession on Good Friday evening and fireworks at midnight on Easter Saturday. On Sunday, feast on roast lamb. ☀️ **April or May**

**Assumption Day** (15 August), when Mary ascended to heaven, is a major celebration that sees everyone on the move back to their villages for family reunions. ☀️ **August**

## Local & Quirlier Festivals

The **WWII Battle of Crete** and Cretan resistance are commemorated in the last week of May with ceremonies, re-enactments, athletic events and folk dancing. Check it out in Hania (p56) and Rethymno (p110). ☀️ **May**

Relive the past at the huge **Rethymno Renaissance Festival**, a celebration of cultural heritage. Look for performances by top Cretan musicians. ☀️ **July**

Another summer highlight, the **Summer Arts Festival** in Iraklio features top classical music, dance, art, films and more. ☀️ **August-mid-September**

The **Moni Arkadiou Anniversary** (p107), November 7–9, recalls the time in 1866 when Cretan defenders blew themselves up at the sacred 16th-century religious complex, taking many Turk invaders with them. ☀️ **November**

## I LIVE HERE

### AUTUMN SUNSETS

**Eugenia Sivitou**, of **Yoga Holidays on Crete** in Hora Sfakion, loves hiking the southern coast of Hania. @yogaoncrete

'For sunset on an autumn evening, I love hiking up to Agia Aikaterini (St Catherine) church, situated 600m above sea level at the edge of the Anopolis plateau, where ancient Anopolis used to be. At the top of an almost vertical cliff over the gorgeous Loutro Bay, you get a 180-degree sea view and the vista of the majestic White Mountains.'



Loutro (p69)



### MELTEMI

Southern California has Santa Ana winds, Provence has the mistral and Crete has the *meltemi*. These winds blow across the Aegean in summer when hot temperatures create low-pressure zones that draw cooler air from the north. South coast beaches are more protected than the north.



#### JULY

Ave daytime max: **29°C**

Days of rainfall: 1



#### AUGUST

Ave daytime max: **29°C**

Days of rainfall: 1



#### SEPTEMBER

Ave daytime max: **27°C**

Days of rainfall: 2



#### OCTOBER

Ave daytime max: **24°C**

Days of rainfall: 6



#### NOVEMBER

Ave daytime max: **21°C**

Days of rainfall: 8



#### DECEMBER

Ave daytime max: **17°C**

Days of rainfall: 9



LEFT: HERACLIS KRITIKOS/SHUTTERSTOCK © RIGHT: CARON BADN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Cretan taverna

# GET PREPARED FOR CRETE

Useful things to load in your bag, your ears and your brain.

## Clothes

**Go casual:** Cretans wear simple clothes. In summer bring quick-drying tops and cool dresses. Many visitors never get more formal than simple cotton tops or T-shirts with shorts or skirts.

**Add some style:** Clubs or fashionable restaurants require more effort – the scene is stylish rather than dressy; think tops and trousers rather than T-shirts and shorts.

**Be respectful:** Don't wear swimsuits into shops and tavernas or anywhere away from the beach without a cover-up. Cretans will not go nude on beaches; you'll see some Europeans do it, but it pays to be discreet – look for clothing-optional beaches. Dress respectfully in churches.

## Manners

**Body language is important.** 'Yes' is a swing of the head and 'no' is a curt raising of the head or eyebrows.

**When visiting churches,** carry a shawl or wear long sleeves and a long skirt or trousers to cover up.

**Don't refuse coffee or drinks.** Cretans value hospitality; not accepting refreshment when offered is considered very rude.

**Be prepared:** Sturdy walking shoes are essential for the many treks available, as well as for exploring gorges and ruins.



**The Life of Ismail Ferik Pasha** (Rhea Galanaki; 1989) A story about the clash of Christianity and Ottoman Islam in Crete.



**The Island** (Victoria Hislop; 2007) An award-winning historical novel set in the leper colony on Spinalonga Island, off Crete.



**The Girl Under the Olive Tree** (Leah Fleming; 2013) The novel links events in Crete during WWII to modern-day drama.



**The Life and Adventures of Alexis Zorbas** (Nikos Kazantzakis; 1946) Crete's most famous writer's landmark novel, aka *Zorba the Greek*.

## Words

**‘Γειά σας’** (ya-sas) Interchangeable with ‘hello’ or ‘goodbye’ and is the most common greeting.

**‘Καλημέρα’** (ka-li-me-ra) Literally ‘good morning’ but can be used throughout the first part of the day. Begin any encounter with this or when entering stores where a shopkeeper notices you.

**‘Καλησπέρα’** (ka-li-spe-ra) Good starting from the late afternoon to say ‘good afternoon/evening’.

**‘Παρακαλώ’** (pa-ra-ka-lo), ‘Please’; should be sprinkled throughout your interactions.

**‘Ευχαριστώ’** (ef-ha-ri-sto) How you say ‘thank you’.

**‘Ναι’** (ne) May sound ‘no’ in many other languages, but in Greek it means ‘yes’.

**‘Όχι’** (o-hi) Means ‘no’ and is often accompanied by an upward tilt of the head.

**‘Συγγνώμη’** (si-gh-no-mi) A humble ‘sorry’ works wonders in any interaction going off the rails.

**‘Μιλάτε αγγλικά’** (mi-la-te an-gli-ka) Appreciated even if the answer to ‘Do you speak English?’ is likely ‘Yes’.

**‘Δεν καταλαβαίνω’** (dhen ka-ta-la-ve-no) The essential ‘I don’t understand’.

**‘Καταλαβαίνω’** (ka-ta-la-ve-no) ‘I understand’ brings smiles all around.

## WATCH



**Zorba the Greek** (Michael Cacoyannis; 1964) This remains the quintessential Crete-filmed movie.

**Night Ambush** (Michael Powell; 1957) Kidnapping of Nazi Heinrich Kreipe by British forces in 1944.

**El Greco** (Yannis Smaragdis; 2007) Greek-made biopic about Cretan-born Renaissance painter El Greco (aka Domenikos Theotokopoulos).

**Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations** (2008) Beloved food adventurer explores Cretan cuisine at the Iraklio food market.

**The Bachelorette** (2019) Contestants cruise Crete's coast aboard a luxury yacht.

## LISTEN

**Tis Kritis Ta Politima** (Various; 2009) A good overall introduction to Cretan music; stream it as you explore the island.

**Dimotiki Anthologia** (Nikos Xylouris; 1976) The album of folk music that shot Crete's legendary musical son to stardom.

**Anastorimata** (Psarantonis; 1982) Landmark album heralding Psarantonis' performance with the *lyra*, a Cretan bowed string instrument.

**To Stelaki apo tin Kriti** (Stelios Foustalieris; 2007) A master of the *bulgari* (a Cretan stringed instrument) playing beloved folk songs.



HERACLES KRITIKOS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Cretan mezedhes, Ierapetra (p201)

# THE FOOD SCENE

Crete has some of the best food in Greece, thanks to the local bounty and centuries-old traditions of great cuisine.

Cretan food is distinct from Greek food in general. This rustic but rich cuisine combines seasonal ingredients and balanced flavours that reflect the riches of Crete's sun-blessed fertile land. Across the island, regional variations create myriad opportunities for delicious adventures.

One of the delights of travelling through Crete is coming across family-run tavernas where traditional local dishes are made from ancient recipes using farm-fresh, homegrown produce; where the wild aromatic greens were picked in the mountains earlier that day; and where the oil and cheese are homemade, the tender lamb is from a local shepherd and the fish was caught by the owner.

Cretan cuisine gained legendary status for its health benefits following scientific studies of the Mediterranean diet in the 1960s that showed Cretans had the lowest levels of heart disease and other chronic illnesses. This was largely attributed to a balanced diet high in fruits, vegetables, pulses, whole grains, virgin olive oil and wine, and few processed foods.

## Cretan Cuisine

Cretan cuisine evolved from the abundance of local produce coupled with enormous ingenuity. You'll find not only all of the Greek staples but also a wonderful array of Cretan specialities, such as dozens of delicious cheeses. The cuisine still has influences dating to antiquity and has

### Best Cretan dishes

#### ARNI ME STAMNAGATHI

Lamb cooked with wild greens called *stamnagathi*.

#### GAMOPILAFO

A deluxe risotto prepared in a rich meat broth and a goat's milk roux.

#### HIRINA APAKIA

A multiday process creates this delicious marinated and smoked pork.

#### OFTO OR ANTIKRISTO

Big chunks of meat are slow-roasted around hot coals.



been influenced by all the visiting cultures over time.

Don't miss Cretan cheese. Beyond the ubiquitous fresh feta (in stores, get the kind wet from the barrel, not packaged), Crete produces its wonderful cheeses primarily from goat's and sheep's milk, or a combination of the two. Many Cretan villages have their own signature cheese.

Another part of the magic of Cretan cuisine is the ingredients gathered from hill-sides and around villages. For centuries Cretans have been gathering extremely nutritious *horta* (wild greens) and boiling them for warm salads or cooking them in pies and stews.

And don't miss the range of grilled meats served in village tavernas across the mountains.

## Small Plates

Cretans love to share a range of mezedhes (small plates), or mezes for short. Think tapas, Greek style. Eateries that serve only mezedhes are called *mezedhopoleia*, *ouzeries* or *rakadhika*, and typically offer raki or ouzo along with the morsels.

Common mezedhes include dips such as *taramasalata* (fish roe) and *tzatziki* (yoghurt, cucumber and garlic). Hot mezedhes

include *keftedhes* (small tasty rissoles, often made with minced lamb, pork or veal), *loukanika* (pork sausages), *saganaki* (skillet-fried cheese) and *apaki* (Cretan cured pork), as well as a full range of bite-sized seafood. Also look for rice-filled *dolmadhes* (vine leaves), deep-fried zucchini (courgette) or eggplant (aubergine) slices.



## MARKETS & SHOPS

**Iraklio Market** (p137) An Iraklio institution, this busy market is one of the best in Crete. Stock up on creamy cheeses, honey, succulent olives, fresh breads and much more.

**Jane's Fish Market** In Agios Nikolaos (p178) since 1925, Jane's is a handy spot to peruse the sea's bounty.

**Bougatsa Iordanis** (p56) A bakery dedicated since 1924 to making the finest *bougatsa* (pictured above). The flaky treat is filled with sweet or savoury cheese.

**Spanioiakis** (p104) Hidden away in Rethymno's labyrinth of alleys is this bakery that's been at it since 1958. It's famous for its bread shaped like dinosaurs and flamingos.

**Cretelaio Olive Oil Mill** Learn about olive oil production, then sample from the varieties on sale. It's located approximately 4km northeast of Frangokastello (p71).



Raki (p37)

### HOHLIOI

Snails are prepared in dozens of ways. Cretans eat more snails than the French.

### SOUPIES

Cuttlefish stewed with wild Cretan fennel.

### VRASTO

Traditional mutton or goat stew found in mountain village tavernas.

### DAKOS

Popularly called 'Cretan salad', wholegrain rusks moistened with tomatoes, olive oil and cheese.

## Cretan Gold

The Minoans were among the first to grow wealthy by exporting the olive, and Crete remains an important olive-growing area, producing the largest quantity of extra virgin olive oil in Greece. Today, with an estimated 30 million olive trees in Crete, it works out to 48 olive trees for every citizen. Crete has scored well in international competitions: recent winners have included Pamako, Critida Phenoi, Terra Creta and Physis of Crete.

### Cretan Cheeses

**Anthotiro:** Buttery white cheese that can be soft or hard.

**Graviera:** Nutty, mild Gruyère-like hard sheep's-milk cheese.

**Pichtogalo chanion:** Hania's famous thick yoghurt-like sheep's-milk or sheep's-and-goat's-milk cheese.

**Xigalo:** Creamy cheese from Sitia in eastern Crete with a rich, slightly acidic flavour.

**Yaurti:** Thick, tangy sheep's-milk yoghurt, best eaten with honey, walnuts or fruit.

### Quick Eats

**Kalitsounia:** Cretan-style pastries, usually filled with cheese or served sweet and drizzled with thyme honey.

**Pies:** Bakeries make myriad variations of *tyropita* (cheese pie) and *spanakopita* (spinach pie). *Boureki* is a layered pie.

**Souvlaki:** Greece's favourite fast food, in both the gyros and skewered-meat versions.



Graviera

**Koulouria:** Fresh pretzel-style bread, often made into sandwiches.

### Dare to Try

**Ameletita:** Literally, 'unspeakables'; fried sheep's testicles.

**Gardhoumia:** Stomach and offal wrapped in intestines.

**Kokoretsi:** Heart, lung, sweetbreads, kidneys and other innards wrapped in lamb or goat intestine and spit-grilled over charcoal; eaten at Orthodox Easter.



## MEALS OF A LIFETIME

### Hiona Taverna (p194)

Count the shades of blue while feasting on their celebrated *kakavia* (fish soup) and other inspired seafood dishes at this cliff-top outpost.

**Peskis** (p134) Empty tables are rare in this beautifully revamped Venetian villa serving robust, slow-cooked Cretan recipes with produce from their own farm.

### Taverna Knossos (p97)

The closest you can get to a Crete family without being Cretan. The clan here cooks remarkable seafood, served with love and, more importantly, character.

**To Stachi** (p61) The Michelakis family grow much of the food used in this vegetarian restaurant that celebrates Crete's bounty of produce.

## THE YEAR IN FOOD



### SPRING

Easter feasts feature tender lamb, *kreatotourta* (meat pies), *kokoretsi* (grilled innards wrapped in intestines) and *tsourekhi* (brioche-style bread) decorated with red-dyed boiled eggs. Spring brings edible wild plants, herbs and artichokes.



### SUMMER

Cheesemaking is in high gear; watermelon, peaches and other fruits fill markets; mussel season peaks. In August come-of-age festivals: Sitia pays homage to the raisin, Tzermiado the potato, and Arhanes grapes/wine.



### AUTUMN

Grape harvest begins. In October sample sweet chestnuts in Elos, with its quirky Chestnut Festival. Raki distilling hits its peak in November with raucous festivals all over, especially in mountain villages.



### WINTER

Sugar-dusted *kourabiedes* (almond shortcake) and honey-dipped *melomakarona* are top Christmas cookies. *Vasilopita* (New Year's cake) comes with a hidden coin promising a year of good luck.

LEFT: ANNAJZ/SHUTTERSTOCK © RIGHT: NAKELKEZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Winery, Lasithi

## HOW TO...

# Taste Crete's Liquid Specialities

Some of Crete's most celebrated specialities come in liquid form. Expect to enjoy the ubiquitous olive oil as a part of nearly every meal. Also be prepared for raki, the strong local spirits, and look for examples of the island's fast-growing variety of microbrews.

However, easily the most ubiquitous local liquid is wine. Cretan winemaking is going from strength to strength with a new generation of vintners and a growing number of wineries offering tasting rooms and vineyard tours.

The island has three wine-producing areas and more than a dozen types of wine. The largest is Iraklio Wine Country (p147), which makes about 70% of Cretan wine. The smallest wine region is east in Lasithi where vineyards cluster primarily around Sitia. In western Crete, the main grape-growing region is west of Hania.

## Enjoying Raki

Raki (also known as *tsikoudia*), the Cretan pomace brandy, is an integral part of local culture. A shot of the fiery brew is offered as a welcome, at the end of a meal and pretty much at any time and on all occasions.

Each October, the raki distilling season starts, with distilleries and private stills around the island producing massive quantities. Expect lots of drinking and feasting; if you pass a village distilling raki, you may well receive an invitation. Good raki has a smooth mellow taste with no noticeable after-burn. Note that much raki is homemade and that complimentary shot at the end of your meal may come from the taverna owner's tightly guarded family recipe.

## Tasting Olive Oil

Olive oil runs through Crete's DNA like blood through veins. Mills where you can taste the 'Cretan Gold' dot the countryside. Besides learning about how local oil is made, you can sample different types. Many mills also sell other local specialities, from cheese to honey.

One classic tasting room is **Fabrica**, at the old oil press of Moni Toplou (p193). Guided by the staff, you get to taste three oils of different qualities: traditional, organic and premium. A glug of each is poured into bulbous blue glasses; warm it up in your hand, then swirl it and sniff to identify the aroma: citrusy, grassy, fruity, peppery... Only then do you take a sip, letting it slowly roll over your tongue. It's truly a magical experience.



## CRETE'S WINES

No Cretan meal is complete without a local wine.

**Dafni:** A lively white with subtle acidity and an aroma resembling laurel.

**Kotsifali:** Indigenous red with high alcohol content and rich flavour, often blended with Mandilaria.

**Liatiko:** Very old indigenous red with a complex character, found mainly around Sitia.

**Malvasia:** Original Cretan white; strong floral aroma with notes of muscat.

**Mandilaria:** Dark-coloured but light-bodied red.

**Romeiko:** Red grape mostly grown around Hania and turned into robust red, white and rosé wines.

**Vidiano:** White indigenous grape with intensive and complex peach and apricot aromas; often blended with Vilana.



ZOBILINSKI/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Imbros Gorge (p70)

# THE OUTDOORS

Crete's outdoors is extraordinary – with mythical mountains to tackle, gem-coloured seas to sail, gorges where the Minoans buried their dead to hike, and underwater wonderlands to discover.

There are many special rewards on this stunning island for those who reach beyond the relaxed pleasures of sun and sand. Many of the dramatic gorges, burly mountains and untamed coastlines have relatively easy access, making for an adventurer's paradise. Whether you have just an afternoon or several days, there's an outdoor pursuit (or several) for you. Get outdoors and active to truly appreciate the land- and seascapes.

## Hiking

Crete offers an enormous variety of options for walkers of all skills and fitness levels, with trails passing through remote villages, across plains and into gorges. Popular

routes are well walked and maintained.

Spring is the best time for hiking and trekking; the countryside is green and fresh from the winter rains and carpeted with wildflowers. Whatever the season, come equipped with a sturdy pair of walking boots or shoes to handle the rough, rocky terrain.

Crete's many gorges attract hikers from all over the world. The walks can be a breathtaking and sometimes hard-going experience, but well worth it for the sheer pleasure of the spectacular surroundings accented by the aroma of wild herbs.

Gorge walking involves a bit of planning if you want to use your own transport. You will either have to backtrack to your vehicle,

Even  
More Fun

### SEA KAYAKING

Paddle along the stunning south coast with a kayak from **Loutro** (p69).

### CYCLING

Get high riding the maze of great trails on the **Lasithi Plateau** (p209).

### ROCK CLIMBING

Take inspiration from an ancient church as you scale the peaks of **Kapetaniana** (p162).



## FAMILY ADVENTURES

**Scale Rethymno's Venetian fortress** (p96) and pretend you see pirates off the horizon.

**Hop a boat along the southwest coast from Sougia** (p72) or other beach towns and peer into the crystal-clear waters and revel at the sheer cliffs.

**Hike the 'wrong way' up Samaria Gorge** (p77) from Agia Roumeli. When little feet get tired, turn around.

**Frolic on family-friendly beaches** with calm water such as Bali (p114), Elafonisi (p84), Paleohora (p80) and Voulisma (p207).

**Plunge into a water park** in and around the tourist hub of Iraklio (p132).

**Spelunk your way into Dikteon Cave** (p210) with its soaring caverns and impressive mythology.

arrange for someone to collect you at the other end or take a taxi. Buses can sometimes get you to within striking distance of a gorge entrance.

World-famous Samaria Gorge can get very crowded; other southwest-coast alternatives are uncrowded and nearly as rewarding. Consider Imbros and Anydri Gorges.

## Diving & Snorkelling

Crete sees a range of different sea conditions on its various and varied coastlines that lend themselves to all sorts of watersports, including diving and snorkelling. There is nothing

quite like cruising gently through water with visibility at times well over 30m.

The diving landscape is superb, with a mix of natural features, rocks, reefs, caverns, cliffs and shining sand. Sea life on view includes the beautiful 'wallpaper' of marine plants, red and green algae, corals, sea anemones and sponges that coat undersea rocks and reefs, while the often variegated volcanic rocks of Crete create their own kaleidoscope of undersea colour.

Some of the more interesting snorkelling is around the remains of the sunken city of Olous near Elounda. However, you'll find masks and fins for rent at nearly any beach with watersports operators.

## Windsurfing & SUP

Windsurfing and kitesurfing are easily enjoyed off many of Crete's beautiful beaches. The 360° coastline means you can find an ideal strand no matter the conditions.

The best windsurfing is at Kouremenos Beach. It's affected by the *meltemi*, the summer north wind that blows fiercely throughout the Aegean, creating often ideal conditions. You'll find sailboards for hire almost always at busier beaches with watersports operators. Many give lessons.

Stand-up paddling (SUP) is also growing in popularity, especially on the north coast.



### BEST SPOTS

For the best outdoor spots and routes, see the map on page 40.



**Waters off Falasarna (p86)**

### MOUNTAINEERING

Climb Crete's tallest peak, **Mt Psiloritis** (p115).

### HORSE RIDING

Hit the trails with a steed from Odyssea Stables in **Avdou** (p171).

### CANYONING

Venture through the rocky clefts in the **Thripti Mountains** (p205).

### BIRDWATCHING

Spot rare species while hiking the **Samaria Gorge** (p77).

# THE OUTDOORS

Where to find Crete's best outdoor activities.



## National Parks

Crete has only one national park, but it's a doozy:

- 1 **Samaria Gorge National Park** (p77)



### Hiking

- 1 Paleohora (p80)
- 2 Sougia (p73)
- 3 Loutro (p69)
- 4 Plakias (p122)
- 5 Mt Yiouhtas (p145)
- 6 Selekano Forest (p206)
- 7 Pelekita Cave (p199)



### Windsurfing & SUP

- 1 Paleohora (p80)
- 2 Loutro (p69)
- 3 Palekastro (p191)
- 4 Falasarna (p87)
- 5 Kouremenos Beach (p195)

Sea of Crete



Mediterranean Sea



### Gorge-trekking

- 1 Samaria Gorge (p77)
- 2 Imbros Gorge (p70)
- 3 Aradena Gorge (p67)
- 4 Agia Irini Gorge (p73)
- 5 Zakros Gorge (p197)
- 6 Rouvas Gorge (p150)
- 7 Agiofarango Gorge (p160)



### Diving & Snorkelling

- 1 Sunken city of Olous (p184)
- 2 Elounda (p183)
- 3 Kolokytha Beach (p183)
- 4 Agios Nikolaos (p180)
- 5 Hania (p56)







CRETE

# THE GUIDE

THE GUIDE



Chapters in this section are organised by hubs and their surrounding areas. We see the hub as your base in the destination, where you'll find unique experiences, local insights, insider tips and expert recommendations. It's also your gateway to the surrounding area, where you'll see what and how much you can do from there.

**Hania (p50)**

HERACLES KRITIKOS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Above: Waterfront, Hania (p50); right: Samaria Gorge (p77)

# HANIA



## COAST, MOUNTAINS, HISTORY

Crete's most appealing city, Hania, is paired with its most attractive coast on the southwest. World-class sights like Samaria Gorge and Elafonisi Beach are bonuses.

The west of Crete stands apart in so many ways. A land of giant mountains, grandiose legends and memorials to great battles past, it's presided over by the beguiling port city of Hania (also spelt Chania). Once Venice's jewel of a capital, Hania is now home to top museums, entrancing historic quarters and some of Greece's best restaurants. You could easily spend your entire trip here, but don't!

The rugged, jagged and sheer-cliff-faced mountain ranges that dominate the centre of this region and end at the Libyan Sea are not just the geologic heart of western Crete, they are the soul of the Cretan people. Generations have taken refuge in this forbidding landscape during myriad invasions, and the tough, independent spirit forged



here is at the heart of local identity. Cretan families tap into this inner spirit when they settle into a mountain-village taverna for an hours-long feast of roasted meats.

The mountains end abruptly at Hania's other great feature: the glittering

water and untrod beaches of the south coast. Dotted with characterful towns like Paleohora and Sougia that are linked by ferries, it's yet another place where you could spend your entire trip.

Add in Greece's grandest gorge walk, yet more beaches on the west coast, Europe's southernmost possession (tranquil Gavdos, a remote island nearer to Africa than to Greece) and mountain villages that are like a step back in time – and it's a region your heart may never leave.

### THE MAIN AREAS

**HANIA**  
Unmissable historic city. **p50**

**HORA SFAKION**  
Hub for the south coast. **p66**

**SOUGIA**  
Sensational coastal hikes. **p72**

**PALEOHORA**  
Watersports and mountain villages. **p80**

**FALASARNA**  
Beaches and more beaches. **p86**

### Falasarna, p86

Spectacular sunsets cap days spent on a long series of idyllic beaches. From here you can reach even more remote and beautiful beaches.



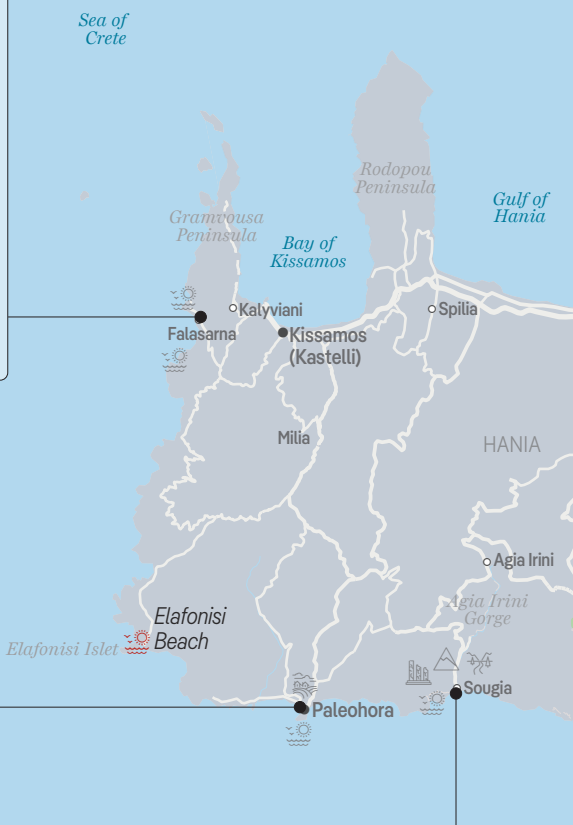
### Paleohora, p80

An inviting town on an isthmus with beaches in stereo. A gateway to beguiling mountain villages and unmissable Elafonisi Beach.



### Sougia, p72

A perfect beach town with an end-of-the-road vibe. A base to explore mountains and gorges plus hikes to Roman ruins.



## Find Your Way

The Hania region covers the westernmost quarter of Crete. The northernmost strip that includes Hania city is fairly flat. The entire southern region is dominated by soaring mountains that wrap around the west coast. You can get from the north to the south coast in under two hours via numerous mountain passes.



## Hania, p50

The port city proudly wears its Byzantine, Venetian, Ottoman and Greek heritage for all to savour. Seek out Crete's best restaurants and linger in its cafes.



### CAR

Having your own wheels is the best way to explore Hania's vast rural areas, with their sinuous mountain roads and cosy, timeless villages. But you won't need one for your entire trip as Hania city is a place for walking and ferries link the beaches.



### BUS

Crete's bus system is comprehensive and links all the major destinations. From Hania city, buses radiate out to the region's main towns. There are usually a couple of buses to any point each day. However, this precludes spontaneous and off-the-beaten path travel.



### FERRY

Running from Hora Sfakion west to Paleohora, a comprehensive network of ferries serves beach towns, including those unreachable by road. Other boats serve Gavdos Island and make day trips to otherwise inaccessible beaches. As a bonus, the ferry rides themselves are great fun.

## Hora Sfakion, p66

The gateway to the south coast is a hub for ferry services running west and south to Gavdos Island. Treks hit remote beaches and towns.



Mesara Gulf

Paximadia Islands

Gavdopoula

Gavdos ○ Karabe

# Plan Your Time

Western Crete is the place not to plan your time. Its myriad charms reward languid exploration, whether it's the city, the mountains, the gorges or the beaches.



J.EKATARNIA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Hania (p50)



## Seasonal Highlights

Summer brings hot temperatures, warm seas and big crowds. Late spring and early autumn are the best times for everything to be open but also enjoyably crowd-free.



### FEBRUARY

The first hints of spring weather blow up from Africa and early wildflowers carpet hillsides. People bundle up and go for hikes.



### APRIL

Crete shuts down for the week of Orthodox Easter – excepting tourism businesses – and families savour hearty meals in villages.



### MAY

Hania celebrates the anniversary of the WWII Battle of Crete with a week of ceremonies that include folk dancing and festivals.

## If You Only Do One Thing

● Explore the lanes and alleys of Hania in the morning. Visit the **Venetian fortifications** (p50), then have coffee at a cafe with a view of the **Venetian harbour** (p50). Visit the fascinating and newly built **Archaeological Museum** (p51).

● In the afternoon, walk to one of the local **beaches** (p58) for a break or, if you're more energetic, take a drive east to **Ancient Aptera** (p63), a well-preserved Roman town. Back in Hania, walk out the long **breakwater** (p60) to the iconic lighthouse to watch the sunset. Then do your best to choose from the many excellent **dinner options** (p56). Afterwards, a bar with music, or some gelato, or both?

## Three Days to Travel Around

● After a day in Hania (see left), head down to **Hora Sfakion** (p66) and catch the ferry to **Sougia** (p72) for a close-in tour of the sheer south coast cliffs plunging into the sea. In Sougia, chill out on the beach, then choose from one of the many beachfront tavernas.

● On day three, your choices include: hiking the famous **Samaria Gorge** (p77), hiking one of its less famous siblings for a far less-crowded and **intimate trek** (p73) or walking up a short gorge and over a knoll to **Ancient Lissos** (p75), a Roman town on an isolated and deserted bay. Then return to Hania.

## If You Have More Time

● Follow our three-day itinerary, then go to **Paleohora** (p80) and use it as a base to explore the mountain villages that define the Cretan character. Have a traditional meal in a family-run taverna. Head over to superlative **Elafonisi Beach** (p84) at the island's western edge for its improbable pink sand. Wander to the islet for some solitude. Get a 4WD and venture out onto the **Gramvousa** (p89) and **Rodopou** (p65) peninsulas for ancient ruins and idyllic beaches.

● If you haven't hiked Samaria, pick a gorge...any gorge...to get intimate with Crete's natural splendour. Wind down and gain spiritual insight at the monasteries in the **Akrotiri Peninsula** (p65).



### JUNE

The sea is wonderfully swimmable. Hania's Summer Festival kicks off with three months of open-air theatre, concerts and more.



### AUGUST

Peak summer heat means peak summer visitor season. Residents not working in tourism businesses flee to quieter places.



### SEPTEMBER

The crowds disperse on their budget flights home, yet the weather and water remain lovely. It's an ideal time on Crete.



### NOVEMBER

Shorter days mix brisk north winds with balmy breezes from the south. It's a time to seek out year-round pleasures across the region.

# HANIA



Hania (also spelt Chania) is Crete's most evocative city. Historically the seat of Venetian, Turkish and then Cretan rule, remnants of Venetian and Turkish architecture abound, with old townhouses now transformed into atmospheric restaurants and boutique hotels.

Although all this beauty means the old town fills with tourists in summer, it remains a great place to explore. Wandering Hania's tangle of alleys and lanes is one of the island's great pleasures, with rewards like a surprise gem of a hidden church or ancient synagogue and a plethora of characterful shops.

The waterfront wraps around Hania's greatest feature, its Venetian harbour, where museums dot the centuries-old buildings and a long breakwater arrows out through the water. The views, especially at sunset, are extraordinary.

When it's time to pause, you'll find myriad choices of places to eat and drink, many celebrating Cretan cuisine. Hania is arguably the best place on the island for a superb, locally sourced meal.

## GETTING ORIENTATED

From Plateia 1866, the harbour is a short walk north up Halidon. The headland on the harbour's west is Topanas, which has remnants of massive old fortifications. West is the modern Nea Hora quarter, and east of the port is modern Koum Kapi.

## Venetian Harbour

### STUNNING FOCAL POINT

There are few places where Hania's historic charm and grandeur are more palpable than in the Venetian harbour. Pastel-coloured buildings punctuate a maze of narrow lanes lined with shops and tavernas, the oldest parts dating to the 15th century. The eastern side of the oldest part is dominated by the domed **Mosque of Kioutsouk Hasan**, now an exhibition hall. On the west side, short and steep streets lead up to the remains of the Venetian fortifications.

Heading east around the harbour, the restored Grand Arsenal houses the **Centre of Mediterranean Architecture**. Continuing on, the somewhat dilapidated **Neoria**, or Venetian shipyards, are a historic treasure hiding in plain sight.

Following the waterfront out onto the 14th-century **breakwater**, which is over 500m long, you can clamber over the huge blocks of stone as you take in captivating views back to the old town or out to sea and the iconic lighthouse.



Firkas Fortress

## Venetian Fortifications

### FENDING OFF PIRATES, WELCOMING TOURISTS

Part of a defensive system begun in 1538 by Michele Sanmichele, who also designed Iraklio's defences, Hania's massive fortifications – built to protect the city from marauding pirates and invading Turks – remain impressive. Known as Topanas, the area is now one of Hania's most appealing neighbourhoods. The name derives, appropriately, from the Turkish word for gun.





Hania's old town

The best-preserved section of the fortifications is the western wall, running from the **Firkas Fortress** to the Siavo Bastion. The Turks invaded anyway, in 1645, and turned the fortress into a barracks and a prison. Entrance to the fortress is via the gates next to the Maritime Museum. Follow lanes to the top of the bastions for sweeping views down into the moat, which was recently restored with a park along the base.

Looking down over the east end of the harbour is the hulking Sabbionara Rampart, which bookends the more extensive ramparts at the west end. Narrow paths lead down to tiny beaches where residents escape the heat.

## Archaeological Treasures

### A BOLD NEW HOME FOR ANCIENT FINDS

The setting alone in a striking new building is reason enough to seek out the **Archaeological Museum of Chania**. Treasures from across Crete are displayed in two light-filled galleries, with plenty of signage offering details and context. Artefacts from Neolithic to Roman times fill the main floor, with pride of place given to Roman mosaics that astound with their detail. Nearby, an engrossing display recreates



### HANIA IN...

**One day:** Stroll along Hania's wonderful Venetian harbour and out to the lighthouse (p60). Wander the Old Town and get lost in the little lanes. Visit the Maritime Museum (p54), explore the ruins of the Venetian fortifications and have a meal in Topanas.

**Two days:** On day two, enjoy a seaside stroll to the impressive Archaeological Museum. Delve deeper into the Old Town at the churches and mosques (p57) plus the synagogue (p58). Seek out local foods (p61) and designer wear (p61) and cool off at one of the beaches (p58).



### WHERE TO HAVE COFFEE IN HANIA

#### Marina Sailing Club

Wonderful views and fewer crowds at the east end of the harbour near the breakwater.

#### Monogram

Grab a street-side table for beans sourced globally, then roasted locally in Iraklio.

#### Bohème

A pretty and pastoral tree-shaded terrace overlooks lush church gardens.

## HANIA

Sea of Crete

Lighthouse

8

Byzantine &amp; Post-Byzantine Collection



Venetian Fortifications

16



Maritime Museum of Crete

9

Topanas

15

37

Ritsou

23

Angelou

43

29

Theodoropoulou

32

Parodos

21

48

Portou

46

Akti Kondourioti

25

Slouton

20

Zambeliou

39

I Kondylaki

6

Hania

Archaeological

Museum

3

Etz Hayyim

Synagogue

3

Portou

Siavo

Bastion

Dourapapa

Piga

Pleios

Skalioti

Korkidi

Zmyrakidon

Kydonias

P Koroniou

Korkidi

Plateia

1866

Koraka

Mykonogianni

Karaiskaki

Peridou

Apokoronou

Vatodaidon

Stratigou Tzanakati

Plasira

Tsouderon

Chatzimichali Daliani

18

45

49

44

Plateia Venizelou

(Central Market Sq)

27

31

47

20

47

42

42

19

Sarpaki

30

Karaoli Dimitriou

Kaitre

Kanevaro

Lithion

Sourmeli

17

Venetian

Harbour

10

Mosque of

Kioutsouk Hasan

7

Kastelli Hill/

Ancient Kydonia

35

Akti Tombazi

Plateia

Katehaki

Agou Markou

Kallergon

36

Artoleon

36

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Byzantine & Post-Byzantine Collection
- 2 Church of Agios Nikolaos
- 3 Etz Hayyim Synagogue
- 4 Greek National Football Museum
- 5 Greek Orthodox Cathedral
- 6 Hania Archaeological Museum
- 7 Kastélli Hill/Ancient Kydonia
- 8 Lighthouse
- 9 Maritime Museum of Crete
- 10 Mosque of Kioutsouk Hasan
- 11 Playground
- 12 Saturday Market
- 13 Terra Verde
- 14 To Stachi
- 15 Topanas
- 16 Venetian Fortifications
- 17 Venetian Harbour

## SIGHTS

- 18 Ahmet Aga Minaret

## ACTIVITIES

- 19 Blue Adventures Diving
- 20 Mountain Services Trekking Plan Outdoor Activities

## SLEEPING

- 21 Casa Delfino
- 22 Hotel Filoxenia
- 23 Iason Studios
- 24 Ionas Hotel
- 25 Serenissima Boutique Hotel

## EATING

- 26 Apostolis
- 27 Bougatsa Iordanis
- 28 Christostomos
- 29 Domenico
- 30 Gelato follia Chania
- 31 Giannoulis Ice Cream
- 32 Kalderimi
- 33 Kouzina EPE
- 34 Marina Sailing Club
- 35 Pallas
- 36 Pork to Beef Wild
- 37 Pulse
- 38 To Maridaki

## DRINKING

- 39 Bohème
- 40 Kleidi
- 41 Monogram
- 42 Plaka

## ENTERTAINMENT

- 43 Fagotto Jazz Bar

## SHOPPING

- 44 Agora
- 45 Georgina Skalidi
- 46 Mediterraneo Bookstore
- 47 Pelekanakis
- 48 Philly
- 49 Sifis Stavroulakis

## MINOANS, VENETIANS & TURKS

The important Minoan settlement of Kydonia was centred on the hill to the south of Hania's harbour. It later flourished as an Ancient Greek city-state during Hellenistic times and continued to prosper under Roman and Byzantine rule.

Hania, along with the rest of Crete, was claimed by Venice following the Fourth Crusade (1204). The Venetians constructed massive fortifications to protect the city from pirates, the remains of which you can still see today.

In 1645 Hania was captured by the Ottoman Empire, which maintained control until it was forced out in 1898. During the Turkish occupation, the city's churches were converted into mosques and the architectural style received some Arabic flourishes.

Hania was Crete's capital until 1971 when the administration was transferred to Iraklio.



ASKACULIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

### Kydonia (p56)

the archaeological dig that uncovered a family home destroyed in a 365 CE earthquake. Look for details such as the little bag of coins they'd secreted away.

Other highlights include Late Minoan clay baths used as coffins and an entire herd of clay bulls (used to worship Poseidon). You'll also find Hellenistic gold jewellery, clay tablets with Linear A and Linear B script, and a marble sculpture of the head of the Roman emperor Hadrian. Upstairs is a private collection of Minoan pottery, jewellery and clay models. When you need some time out, relax in the breezy cafe with views from the deck to the Aegean.

The museum is 1.5km east of the Old Town in the historic Chalepa neighbourhood. Come in the afternoon, then walk back along the shoreline for pre-sunset views, plus glimpses of hidden beaches below a tiny park and the remains of waterfront tanneries that were a major Hania industry 100 years ago.

## Maritime Heritage

### SHIPS AND BOATS THROUGH THE AGES

At the base of the Venetian-built Firkas Fortress at the western harbour entrance, the **Maritime Museum of Crete** celebrates the island's nautical tradition with model ships, naval instruments, paintings, photographs, maps and memorabilia.



## WHERE TO GET GELATO IN HANIA

### Domenico

In Tapanas artisans make your ice cream or gelato right in front of you.

### Giannoulis Ice Cream

A local fave in the commercial district south of the Old Town.

### Gelato follia Chania

A narrow shop you can't miss near the harbour. Try the banana gelato.



## EXPLORING HANIA WALKING TOUR

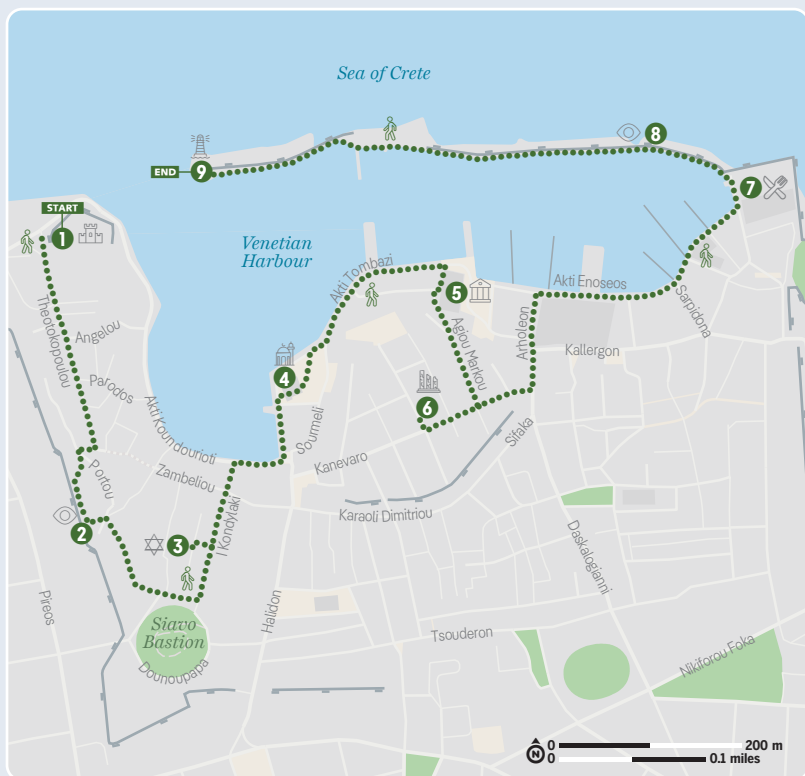
Begin at the far western end of the Venetian harbour, where the old **1 Venetian fortifications** (p50) meet the sea. Walk up Theotokopoulou street, a buzzy lane lined with a fine mix of shops serving both residents and visitors. Continue deeper into the Topanas neighbourhood – one of Hania's most appealing – and follow tiny alleys to the top of the fortifications, with their views west over the **2 moat** (p51).

Curve down through vine-shaded lanes to Kondylaki and find your way to **3 Etz Hayyim Synagogue** (p58), which documents the once thriving local Jewish community. Walk north through the shop- and taverna-filled lanes to the harbour. Turn east and loop around to the prominent **4 Mosque of Kioutsouk Hasan** (p57), which symbolises one of the many cultures that have held sway in Hania.

Continue along the waterfront to the 17th-century **5 Grand Arsenal**, which often has interesting cultural exhibits. Follow streets south, away from the water, to **6 Ancient Kydonia** (p56). People have lived here since Minoan times.

Make your way back to the waterfront and head towards the base of the breakwater, where you can take a breather at the **7 Marina Sailing Club** (p51), a cafe with superb harbour views.

Refuelled, begin your walk along the 500m-long **8 breakwater** (p50), which dates back centuries. The going can get tough here, so take your time: the huge rocks require care – and good coordination – to manoeuvre around. If it's summer, bring water as the sun is relentless. Finish at the **9 lighthouse** (p60), with its 360-degree views.



## TOURS & ACTIVITIES

**Boats** of every shape and size tour the harbour and coast, especially at sunset. Touts line the harbour. Some tours are all-day and visit remote beaches difficult to reach via land.

**Tours on land** cover much of western Crete. Check durations carefully, eg the hike in the Samaria Gorge lasts from dawn until after dusk.

For serious **hiking and trekking** adventures contact Mountain Services Trekking Plan Outdoor Activities ([www.cycling.gr](http://www.cycling.gr)).

**Diving** around Hania is good. Blue Adventures Diving has an office at the east end of the harbour.



### MORE ON THE MINOANS

Discover more about this rich ancient Cretan culture, which believed in gender equality, peaceful relations and scientific achievement, on p241.



KAYALENKAA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

**Greek Orthodox Cathedral**

A highlight is a large model showing Hania and its harbour and fortifications in the 17th century.

Historical sea battles are thoroughly covered, including the WWII-era Battle of Crete. Scores of elaborate models depict ships from ancient through modern times.

Across the harbour at the base of the breakwater, in a renovated 17th-century *neorio* (Venetian shipyard building), a museum annexe houses the *Minoa*, a painstaking replica of a Minoan ship, which sailed from Crete to Athens for the 2004 Olympic Games. Tools used in its making and photographs from the epic journey bring this remarkable feat to life.

## Finding Ancient Hania

### DIGGING THROUGH 12,000 YEARS

The discovery of clay tablets with Linear B script during ongoing excavations on **Kastélli Hill**, just east of the centre, has led archaeologists to conclude that present-day Hania sits atop an important Minoan city and palace site called **Ancient Kydonia**. Information boards in English at the site of the ruins give a wealth of detail about the site and Hania as it existed



### WHERE TO EAT IN HANIA

#### Kalderimi

Traditional taverna in Topanas; always busy. Cretan standards with creative flair. €€

#### Bougatsa Iordanis

Since 1924 the faithful have salivated at the mention of the fine *bougatsa* here. €

#### Pulse

Near Firkas Fortress; much-loved vegan fare and outdoor tables. €€

upwards of 12,000 ago, during the Neolithic period, which was not long after the Stone Age.

You can often see archaeologists working their way down through the extraordinary number of layers that have built up over the millennia. The finest among the unearthed artefacts, such as Neolithic shards of pottery, are displayed in the Archaeological Museum of Chania.

## Churches & Mosques

### HISTORY IN THE NAME OF GOD

The Christian Venetians and the Muslim Ottomans, among others, have left their mark on Hania in myriad ways, not the least being their houses of worship. Legacies of the two major faiths collide across the Old Town, including at one of Hania's most intriguing buildings.

The Venetian-era **Church of Agios Nikolaos** has both a bell tower and a double-balconied minaret – the latter replaced a second bell tower during the building's stint as a mosque under Turkish rule. Inside this working church, admire the massive bronze chandeliers dangling from a barrel-vaulted coffered ceiling. The church was originally part of a Dominican monastery founded in 1320, but the only section left from this era is the cross-vaulted arcade on the north side.

One of the prettiest and most dominant vestiges of the Turkish era is the **Mosque of Kioutsouk Hasan**, a dusky-pink multi-domed former mosque on the eastern side of the harbour. It was built in 1645, making it the oldest Ottoman building in town and, structurally renovated, it is now used as an events space. Soaring above the rooftops of the charismatic Splantzia quarter on the south edge of the Old Town, the **Ahmet Aga Minaret** is the one other remaining minaret from the Ottoman era.

The restrained, three-aisled **Greek Orthodox Cathedral** with its prominent bell tower is dedicated to the Virgin of the Three Martyrs, Hania's patron saint. The present 19th-century structure sits atop an older church dating to the 14th century that was demoted to a soap factory during Turkish rule.

In the impressively restored Venetian Church of San Salvatore, the small but fascinating **Byzantine & Post-Byzantine Collection** is a museum filled with artefacts, icons, jewellery and coins spanning the period from 62 CE to 1913. Its highlights include a segment of a mosaic

## WHERE TO HIKE IN HANIA



**Vangelis Stavroulakis** is a guide and instructor with the Hellenic Federation of Mountaineering and Climbing. *trek@cycling.gr*

Beyond the obvious, Samaria Gorge, I like exploring the following – all have many different types of trails depending on your ambition and skill:

**Mt Gigilos** as far as the summit. You start at the same place as Samaria Gorge, but go up instead of down. The trek into the gorge from the Kallergi hut is incredible.

**Figou Gorge** is on a hiking loop with Agia Irini Gorge near Sougia. It is a beautiful way to link both.

**Falasarna** Hike up the Gramvousa Peninsula to Balos. It's stunning!

### Pallas

One of the better port options, enjoy modern takes on Cretan fare in wicker chairs with views. €€

### Pork to Beef Wild

A luxe variation on a corner souvlaki joint. Everything is top-quality; fries are sublime. €

### Apostolis

In the quieter eastern port, one of the best bets for a waterfront seafood feast. €€€



## BEST RESTAURANTS

### To Maridaki

This modern seafood *mezedhopoleio* (a restaurant specialising in *mezedhes*) is usually packed. Excellent locally sourced fare. €€

### Kouzina EPE

Stylish cafe serving a creative mix of modern options and blackboard-listed daily specials. €€

### Thalassino Ageri

A delicious fish taverna among the vestiges of Hania's old tanneries near the Archaeological Museum. €€

### Christostomos

Tucked away from the crowds behind the harbour, popular with residents and visitors for its classic Cretan cuisine. €€



Thalassino Ageri



## WHERE TO STAY IN HANIA

### Serenissima Boutique Hotel

Tranquil Venetian townhouse with plenty of design cachet. Centrally located. €€€

### Casa Delfino

Elegant 17th-century mansion in Topanas, has a range of rooms and a rooftop terrace. €€€

### Iason Studios

Wonderfully located in Topanas; small apartment-style rooms have balconies. €€

floor from an early-Christian basilica, an icon of St George slaying the dragon, and a panel recently attributed to Crete-born El Greco (p244).

## Crete's Last Synagogue

### RECALLING A LOST PEOPLE

Crete's only remaining synagogue, **Etz Hayyim**, was badly damaged in WWII and reopened only in 1999 with a *mikveh* (ritual bath), tombs of rabbis and a memorial to the local Jews killed by the Nazis. Today it serves a small congregation and has excellent exhibitions, including one on the huge effort that went into its restoration.

During WWII, all of Crete's 300 Jews (mostly from this synagogue) were rounded up by the Nazis and put on the military tanker *Tanais*, for transport to Auschwitz. But they never made it; as the ship approached the port of Pireaus on 9 June 1944, a British sub torpedoed and sank it, killing all aboard. There's a **memorial** to those killed just east of the harbour, at the north end of Koum Kapi.

An exhibition in Etz Hayyim covers this tragedy, but it also looks beyond Crete and documents the plight of the Jewish Sephardim people of North Africa. Many suffered grievously at the hands of the German army in WWII but have never been officially recognised as victims of the Shoah (Holocaust).

Finding the synagogue is a worthwhile adventure: follow ever smaller lanes from Kondylaki until you discover it nestled among other 15th-century buildings.

## Beaches Great For a Dip

### SANDY ESCAPES RIGHT IN TOWN

You don't need to drive or hop a bus to get to some fine strands of sand. Walk west from the Venetian fortifications along the filigreed shoreline to a wide bay and **Nea Hora Beach**. The 500m-long yellow-sand strip is backed by popular seafood tavernas and holiday-apartment rentals. Fairly shallow, it's good for kids and popular with residents from April to October.

East of the Venetian harbour, **Koum Kapi Beach** is a long and narrow crescent of sand that partially vanishes at high tide. Scores of cafes lure people to sip refreshments and gaze out at the crystal-clear water. Longer coastal walks west from the Old Town yield yet more lovely escapes (you can also hop on a bus). **Hrysi Akti** (which





Greek National Football Museum

translates aptly as Golden Sands) is a lovely 500m arc just 2.5km west; the shallow waters are suitable for families with young children.

Two small beaches make up the **Agioi Apostoli** (Holy Apostles) area, sheltered coves that are perfect for families, around a 3.5km bus ride west of Hania. A further 1.5km on, small **Kalamaki** has calm, shallow waters, making it a good choice for families with young children.

## Goal! All About Greek Football

### MORE MEMORABILIA THAN WILL FIT

The tiny (and free) **Greek National Football Museum** might look like a shop, but it's actually crammed with more than 2000 items of soccer memorabilia. Run by Nikos, the passionate president of the Greek Football Supporters Club, it houses signed shirts by legendary players such as David Beckham, Pelé and Zinedine Zidane, as well as the Euro 2004 cup won by Greece – an event still remembered as if it was just yesterday by many Greeks.



### TOP GUIDES & MAPS

For the many trekking adventures long and short across Crete, it's good to have a quality map as the data in apps can be spotty. Also, mobile signals are often nonexistent and batteries often fail. Plus, there's the joy of unfolding a big map to get the big picture.

Excellent sources for Crete maps in Hania include Mediterraneo Bookstore. It's on the west side of the harbour and is a real treasure for its range of maps and local guidebooks. Another good source is Pelekanakis, on the south edge of the Old Town.

Also highly recommended are the *Discover... On Foot* walking and hiking guides. There is a range of titles covering Crete, including an excellent one for Hania city.

### Cocoon City Hostel

Modern, tidy hostel with well-equipped dorms and private rooms. Great location. €

### Ionas Hotel

In the quieter Splantzia quarter, a historic building with nine contemporary rooms and a rooftop terrace. €€

### Hotel Filoxenia

A fine midrange, modern hotel close to the beach and cafes of Koum Kapi. €€



## HANIA FOR KIDS

If your youngster has lost interest in Venetian architecture, head to the **park** between Tzanakaki and A Papandreou, where there's a fun playground, small pond with turtles and a shady cafe.

**Glass-bottom boats** are always a captivating window into the briny depths and there are plenty of **beaches** (p58) requiring but the shortest of walks.

On rainy days, head to the **Maritime Museum** (p54) for its array of models; if it's sunny, imagine fending off gaggles of pirates in the **Venetian fortress** (p50).

The giant water park **Aqua Creta Limnoupolis**, 8km south of Hania, has enough slides and pools to keep kids delighted, plus cafes and pool bars so adults are placated.

Or go on a **gelato**-based tour of the Old Town (p54).



GEORGIOS TSICHILIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Lighthouse, Hania harbour

## Admiring Sunsets

### GREAT SPOTS FOR THE EVENING SPECTACLE

Hania's position makes it a natural for savouring sunsets over the Aegean. There are myriad places to enjoy the spectacle of colours, from flamingo pink to fireball orange. The best is the landmark **lighthouse**, parts of which date to the 16th century, out on the breakwater; the dusk experience here is sublime. Many cafes on the harbour and up in Topanas also have good views, but get packed in summer.



## WHERE TO DRINK IN HANIA

### Kleidi

There's no sign, look for the keyhole (*kleidi*) logo. Tree-shaded tables outside.

### Fagotto Jazz Bar

Tables spill down the hill to the port at this Topanas classic. Fine tunes.

### Plaka

Choose from an array of Greek microbrews while the owner spins from his vinyl collection.

## Finding Local Food

### THE BEST FARE CRETE HAS TO OFFER

Thanks to long culinary traditions, Crete is renowned for its food, and Hania is known for having some of the best food on the island. The mountains and fertile plains yield all manner of foodstuffs, from prized meats to luscious, seasonal vegetables. Cheeses, preserves and extra virgin olive oil are all superb.

In Hania, residents revere **Drandaki Bakery**, which still uses a wood-fired oven fuelled by logs from the hills. Batches of different breads appear throughout the day and sell out quickly. A visit here puts you right with bakers as they knead dough.

For the full range of local foods, you can't beat the **Saturday Market** along Minoos at the east end of the Old Town. Dozens of vendors offer the very best that Crete has to offer. Or head to **Terra Verde**, a small shop in the heart of town that specialises in locally produced organic foods. Its cheese selection comes from tiny dairies up in the mountains.

At **To Stachi**, almost everything used in the excellent vegan and vegetarian dishes is grown on the nearby farm of Stelios Michelakis and his family. Stelios arrives each day at 5am to start baking the excellent whole-grain bread.



### BEST SHOPPING

#### Philly

Say goodbye to anaemic pastels at this clothes shop with the motto 'Life is too short for boring clothes'.

#### Sifis Stavroulakis

Beautiful naturalistic jewellery made in this workshop takes on floral and human forms.

#### Georgina Skalidi

This renowned local designer creates wonderful contemporary leather bags, jewellery and accessories.

#### Agora

Watch for the reopening of the famed cross-shaped, central marketplace, home to myriad vendors.



### GETTING AROUND

If you're **driving** to Hania, don't even try to park in the Old Town. You'll need to park on the periphery and walk in; there are parking lots to the south. Even **taxis** may drop you a healthy walk from your hotel if it's atmospherically buried deep in the tangle of cobblestoned lanes. From the airport, insist that your driver

sticks to the posted fixed price before you set off.

There are no local buses, but everything in Hania town is easily reached by **walking**, though note that the lanes in Topanas and the Venetian fortress can be steep. For **buses** serving the wider region, the busy bus station is just south of the Old Town.



# Beyond Hania

Easy day trips around Hania yield ancient ruins, characterful villages, important monasteries and sweeping views. The more adventurous can venture to hidden beaches.

The northeastern corner of Hania prefecture includes the Akrotiri Peninsula. It's a barren, hilly stretch of scrub-covered rock and Chania's airport, but it also features two isolated, moody monasteries. Further east, the village-dotted Apokoronas Peninsula is rich with day-trip possibilities. Highlights include the restored village of Vamos. Overlooking it all, including the busy port of Souda, is the unmissable ancient site of Aptera.

To the west of Chania, there are long beaches, some dominated by package tour hotels, some mellow. Beyond this is the barren and rocky Rodopou Peninsula. This is 4WD country but, with guile, you can discover inaccessible beaches and important ruins.



## TOP TIP

For a quiet beach holiday, you'll find tidy hotels on coves along the west coast of the Akrotiri Peninsula.

## Aptera



GEORGIOS TSICHLIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



## Ancient City Ruins

### A WINDOW INTO ROMAN LIFE

The ruins of the ancient city of **Aptera** – a window into Roman Crete – are less than an hour by car from Hania. The site is spread over two hills that lord it grandly over Sou-da Bay. Founded in the 7th century BCE, Aptera was one of the most important city-states of western Crete and was continuously inhabited until an earthquake destroyed it in the 7th century CE.

Excavations have exposed the remains of a fortified tower, a city gate and a massive wall that surrounded the city. You can walk into Roman cisterns and follow paths around the main sights. Close by and surrounded by olive trees, an amphitheatre has been sensitively restored, as has a 2nd-century-BCE Greek temple. At the western end of the site a Turkish fortress, built in 1872, enjoys a panoramic view of the bay.

Archaeologists suspect that only a fraction of Aptera's ruins have been excavated. Be sure to pick up the excellent brochure from the ticket office. It's about 13km east of Hania.

## Traditional Villages

### SAVOUR TIMELESS CRETAN LIFE

A troika of villages on the Akrotiri Peninsula, seemingly untouched by the 21st century, are easily reached from Hania by car in under an hour.

The charming village of **Gavalohori** makes a compelling stop. There's a Folklore Museum located in a Venetian-era building, with exhibits including examples of pottery, weaving, woodcarving, stonemasonry and other Cretan crafts. Don't miss the Byzantine wells, Venetian arches and Roman tombs about 1.5km above the village. A twin-vaulted olive oil mill dating back to Venetian times is usually open. It's a short walk signposted from the main square, which also has a handful of simple, yet inviting, cafes.

**Vamos**, a pretty 12th-century village of restored stone buildings, was the scene of a revolt against Turkish rule in 1896. Vamos embraces traditional life and showcases the crafts and products of the region. In the town's main square you can buy local raki (distilled spirit), herbs, organic olive oil and other Cretan products. Tables at traditional cafes spill across the pavement – regulars seem permanently rooted to their favourite seats.

Stop for excellent yoghurt and honey at **Vryses**, a centre for the region's agricultural products. Taverna Progolis has



### BEST RESTAURANTS BEYOND HANIA

#### Leventis Taverna

Award-winning taverna in Ano Stalos attracting residents and visitors for refined Cretan cuisine. €€

#### Manousakis Winery

Family-run business for 30 years; winery in Vatolakos known for its rosé and its good restaurant. €€

#### I Sterna tou

##### Bloumosifi

Old stone taverna in Vamos serving excellent Cretan cuisine. Try the *gavros* (anchovy) in vine leaves. €€

#### Patrelantonis

On Marathi beach; fine seafood taverna shaded by tamarisk trees. Good wine list. €€

#### Tzitzikas

Near Aptera; organic Cretan fare served along a river, under shady trees. Goats frolic nearby. €€



### WHERE TO SLEEP

#### Lena Beach Hotel

On a quiet beach cove, all rooms have balconies. Very low-key yet welcoming. €€

#### Vamos village

The village ([www.vamosvillage.gr](http://www.vamosvillage.gr)) rents restored homes, traditionally decorated. €€

#### Giorgi's Blue Apartments

An immaculate complex on a private rocky cove. Owner can advise on outdoor activities. €€



## SOUDA BAY'S LEGACY

Souda Bay is a deep natural harbour that has been an important strategic base for centuries. As such, it's seen more than its share of fierce battles. Old fortresses still dot the surrounding hills, and even today it is the site of large Greek and NATO bases.

In the 19th century the Turks built up Souda Bay as a replacement for the overcrowded and shallow port in Hania. It was the scene of much fighting during WWII.

At the head of the bay on a quiet beach, the Allied War Cemetery is a striking memorial with 1500 white crosses against a backdrop of blue water and flawless green grass. You'll soon notice how many of the dead are either very young or unnamed. Battle of Crete ceremonies take place here each May.



DMITRY FESENKO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

**Moni Agias Triadas**

tables under the trees next to a pebbly riverbed that often flows with water. Its roasted meats are excellent.

## Day-trip Beaches

### SANDY ESCAPES UNDER THE SUN

Little coves of sand can be found around the Akrotiri Peninsula, a short drive from Hania. **Marathi Beach** is a lovely spot beyond the airport with two sandy coves and turquoise waters on either side of a small pier. The ruins of Ancient Minoan are next to the car park and it has a couple of tavernas.

While it might be a white-knuckle drive down hairpin bends to reach **Seitan Limania**, the incredibly vivid turquoise waters of this secret cove are more than worth it.

Near the peninsula's northern tip, **Stavros Cove's** sandy beach is covered with umbrellas and dominated by a mammoth rock. It famously served as the dramatic backdrop for the final dancing scene in the classic movie *Zorba the Greek*.



## WHERE TO SHOP

### Moni Agias Triadas

The monastery shop sells wine and olive oil made from the surrounding produce.

### Women's Cooperative

On Gavalohori's main square, shop for *kapaneli* (intricate silk lace) made by local women.

### Kanakis Olive Oil

An old-fashioned olive oil press and factory in Apokoronos. Gives tours and tastings.

## Monastic Life

### LONELY AND EVOCATIVE SACRED SITES

Only 30 minutes by car from Hania is one of the best reasons to explore the Akrotiri Peninsula: the impressive, beautiful 17th-century **Moni Agias Triadas** is an active monastery with an opulent library, magnificent altarpiece, Venetian-influenced domed facade, Cretan School icon paintings and flower-packed gardens. The shop sells wine made from the surrounding vineyards.

A sinuous 4km north, the 16th-century **Moni Gouvernetou** may date as far back as the 11th century, from a time when an inland sanctuary was an attractive refuge from coastal pirates. The building is under restoration; there are fabulous hikes with brilliant Aegean views in the surrounding barren hills.

## Remote Peninsula Drive

### LEAVE POPULAR CRETE BEHIND

Barren, rocky **Rodopou Peninsula** is 4WD country and an all-day outing from Hania. There are a few villages clustered at its base, but the rest is uninhabited. A paved road goes as far as Afrata, but then becomes a dirt track that meanders through the peninsula.

The Roman-era **Diktyнна ruins** at the end of the peninsula feature the namesake temple for the Cretan goddess of hunting. It's a wind-blown site that seems far from the rest of the island. When you grow weary of ancient civilisations, there's a fine beach. Some boat trips from Hania come to Diktyнна.



### CRETE'S ONLY LAKE

Despite being surrounded by some of the Med's best beaches – or maybe because of it – Cretans flock to the island's only natural, freshwater body of water, Lake Kournas. It's about 1.5km in diameter, 45m deep and fed by springs. A narrow, sandy strip encircles the lake and you can walk part way around.

The crystal-clear water changes colour according to season and time of day. It's off-limits for swimming (to protect the environment) but you can hire pedal boats and canoes. Kids love spotting the turtles, crabs, fish and snakes that make the lake their home.

Buses crowd the lake in the peak of summer. Visit at other times, when the wind rustles the leaves and you'll truly be able to commune with nature.



### GETTING AROUND

Much of the region immediately around Hania is best explored with your own wheels. There is scattered bus service to major points on the Akrotiri Peninsula, such as Stavros Cove and Moni Agias Triadas.

Should you drive, note that the many narrow roads are often jammed with traffic in summer as residents and visitors compete with farm vehicles for right of way. What seems like a paltry 20km can easily turn into an hour-long slog.

# HORA SFAKION



Hora Sfakion has long been renowned in Cretan history for its streak of rebellion against foreign occupiers. Today the tiny fishing village is an amiable place that caters well to visitors using the numerous ferries. Many are Samaria Gorge hikers stumbling off the Agia Roumeli boat on their way back to Hania. Others are day-trippers intent on beach time at Loutro. Most pause just long enough to catch the next bus out or find their parked rental, but there's sufficient appeal here to tempt you to stay, from boat trips to nearby isolated beaches to hiking the Aradena Gorge.

Lovely Sweetwater Beach is reason enough to stay local. It's on a sheltered cove and never gets crowded. Take the small ferry or hike the somewhat vertiginous 3.5km coastal path. A small cafe rents umbrellas and sun chairs. If you're pressed for time, Vrissi Beach is just west of the port.

## PAUSE FOR A MINUTE

The semicircle of cafes overlooking the harbour provides stadium seating on all the action as packed boats come and go from destinations up and down the coast. Cafe Despina is a top choice for its excellent baked goods and coffee.





## Village Life

### SWEEPING VIEWS AND ROASTED GOAT

A scenic, winding, hair-raisingly steep 12km road west from Hora Sfakion takes you to **Anopoli**, a quiet village in a fertile plateau at the base of the Lefka Ori (White Mountains), with a memorial to resistance fighters in the main square. It was one of the few areas that did not fall to the Venetians or the Turks. In keeping with the hardy populace, tavernas serve hearty meals featuring lamb roasted over wood fires, a Cretan favourite.

**Cretan Divine Family Bakery** is known for cookies and *kalitsounia* (Cretan cheese pies), just the thing if you're hiking one of the local gorges. Or enjoy homemade ice cream at outdoor tables in summer. The views around the plateau are divine.

## Take the Gorge Plunge

### BUNGEE JUMPING AND HIKING

The abandoned stone hamlet of **Aradena**, about 14km west of Anopoli, is famous for the Vardinogiannis bridge, which crosses the Aradena Gorge. Look down into the depths with fascinated horror as the structure rattles under your wheels. You may see people jumping into the gorge from the bridge – at 138m, it's the highest bungee-jumping bridge in Greece. For details, contact **Liquid Bungy Aradaina**, which runs the show.

The popular Aradena Gorge hiking route to Marmara Beach goes through the gorge and is a two-hour (3.5km) trek that's not suitable for novices. It's steep in parts and the footing can be dicey. From the beach, you can walk to the glittering nearby port of Loutro and catch a ferry back to Hora Sfakion.



Vardinogiannis bridge,  
Aradena

## LOCAL FIGHTING SPIRIT

Under Venetian and Turkish rule Hora Sfakion was an important maritime centre and (with Anopoli high in the mountains) the nucleus of the Cretan struggle for independence. The town played a prominent role during WWII when thousands of Allied troops were evacuated by sea after the Battle of Crete.

The interior of Sfakia is known for being the only part of Crete never subdued by the Arabs, Venetians or Turks. It was the centre of resistance during the island's long centuries of domination by foreign powers, and its steep ravines and hills made effective hideaways for Cretan revolutionaries. The Sfakiot people are renowned for their independence and fighting spirit. You'll notice there's nary a road sign that hasn't been shot full of holes across the region.



## GETTING AROUND

Hora Sfakion is a hub for the Anedyk ferries that serve the southwest coast. In the summer, even the largest – which also carry cars – can get completely jammed. Buy tickets as far in advance as possible, to avoid the inevitable crush at the ticket booths when your ship comes in.

Schedule information, especially for journey times and distance, can be hard to nail down; fortunately, the agents are usually willing to help

you sort things out.

The town becomes packed with day-trippers heading west to Loutro and other points. Parking becomes scarce, thus the many signs for pay lots (from €3 per day). If you are not putting your vehicle on a ferry, don't drive close to the port or you could get stuck in traffic.

You can also avoid car hassles as there are buses to/from Hania.



# Beyond Hora Sfakion

Beyond the gateway of Hora Sfakion are many adventures along Crete's most beautiful coast and soaring mountainous interior.

The mountainous province of Sfakia extends from the Omalos Plateau down to the southern coast and has some of the island's most spectacular landmarks, including the Lefka Ori and Mt Gingilos (2080m) in the rugged interior. The memorable drive down to Hora Sfakion – descending through the mountains on numerous loopback turns overlooking the sea – is one of the most stunning sights in Crete. From here, there are short drives to the fortified outpost of Frangokastello, scenic ferry rides or hikes to the popular car-free beach town of Loutro and adjoining beaches, and real adventures trekking the Imbros Gorge or making the boat trip out to remote Gavdos Island.



## TOP TIP

Beyond the gateway of Hora Sfakion are many adventures along Crete's most beautiful coast and soaring mountainous interior.

## Loutro



GEORGIOS TSICHLIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



## HIKING THE COAST

The best way to explore the south coast is by combining ferry rides with hikes, such as along the long-distance E4 trail.

The 30-minute walk from Loutro to Likos Beach is easy. Continue on for another 15 minutes to reach mostly undeveloped Marmara Beach. From here, heading west, the path gets rockier and more rugged, but if you're reasonably fit and have sturdy footwear (plus a lot of water), you'll find the route rewarding.

You can then go another 9.5km along the coastal path to lonely and isolated Agios Pavlos Beach, with its tiny 10th-century chapel. Another easy 4.5km takes you to Agia Roumeli.

Going east from Loutro, spectacularly sited Sweetwater Beach is midway on the 7km path to Hora Sfakion.



Church of Sotiros Christou

## Fishing Village

POPULAR, WITH GOOD ESCAPES

Outside of summer, the pint-sized fishing village of **Loutro** is a tranquil crescent of flower-festooned white-and-blue buildings hugging a narrow pebbly beach between Agia Roumeli and Hora Sfakion (a 30-minute ferry ride). It has no road access, which should make it isolated and mellow; however, in peak season it is massively popular with day-trippers, and means oiled bodies so fill the narrow beach that they mirror the grilled sardines in the packed tavernas.

Escape the mobs on an easy dirt path west. Walk 10 minutes to the iconic **Church of Sotiros Christou**, which overlooks the sea from its prominent knoll. From here, agile hikers can scramble up to the remains of a **Venetian castle**. A further 20 minutes along the easy coastal path and you reach **Likos Bay**, a beach area that's fast-growing thanks to its road access.

The best beach near Loutro is **Sweetwater**, a stop for some ferries between Loutro and Hora Sfakion or a 3.5km coastal walk east.

And if you're ready for some action on the sea, you can rent gear for windsurfing and SUP in Loutro.



## WHERE TO STAY

### Rooms Sofia

Quiet family-run guesthouse in Loutro; simple rooms share a terrace with sweeping views. €€

### Georgoshouse Taverna

Family-run taverna with basic rooms right on Likos Beach. A sublime getaway. €

### Consolas Gavdos Studios

Comfortable studios perched right above Sarakiniko beach on Gavdos Island. €

## FUN ON THE FERRY

Ferries along the south coast are highly practical, but they are also immensely enjoyable – if you travel with the right attitude.

Much of the coast is uninhabited, with a stark beauty from the multicoloured sheer cliff faces and the occasional isolated and idyllic-looking beach. The large ferries of the main carrier Anendyk and the many smaller, independent boats are all open-air, allowing you to relax on deck while you glide past the incredible scenery at a blissfully sedate pace. The large ships also have snack bars, so sipping your beverage of choice adds to the pleasure.

However, boat travel along the coast requires patience and understanding. Schedules are elusive and punctuality uncertain. In summer, boats can get very crowded, but you should still be able to find a peaceful corner of a deck.



LEFT: BIERKOPF/SHUTTERSTOCK © RIGHT: SASAKI/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Frangokastello

## Beautiful Gorge Hiking

BEST FOR CLASSIC CRETE BEAUTY

The **Imbros Gorge** hike is easily reached on a day trip from Hora Sfakion and is the best reason for staying in that mellow port town. Often compared to the famous Samaria Gorge hike (p77), this walk is much recommended entirely on its own merits. At 8km it is slightly less than half the length of the Samaria hike yet still packs in a lot of natural wonders. Most importantly, it is far less crowded than its nearby famous counterpart.

The old mule path (which was also used by thousands of British troops evacuating Crete in 1941) is bracketed by 300m-high walls lined with fig and almond trees, cypresses and oaks. At one point the sheer cliff faces are only 2m apart. Another highlight is an arch of stone over the path.

The route begins in the tiny village of **Imbros**. A small market has supplies and snacks for your walk, and be sure to bring a lot of water. Wear sturdy shoes as the path has many large and loose stones. The starting point is at 780m and the route descends 130m to the finish point in **Komitades**,



## WHAT TO DO BEYOND HORA SFAKION

### Hotel Porto Loutro

Rents canoes, sea kayaks and personal pedal-boats for exploring Loutro's coast.

### Chania Boat

Rents out small powerboats from Loutro, no licence needed.

### Stavros Taxi Boat

Offers custom trips all along the south coast, including hidden beaches.



which also has a small market. From there you can follow the narrow road 4.6km down to Hora Sfakion.

A plethora of road signs at tavernas at both ends of the walk claim to offer the best access to the gorge.

## Beachside Fortress

### IMPOSING FORTRESS AND EXCELLENT BEACH

A 30-minute drive east from Hora Sfakion following the south coast takes you to **Frangokastello**, a massive 14th-century Venetian fortress (recently refurbished), which was constructed soon after the Fourth Crusade (1204) by the Venetians, who sought a stronghold against pirates. Nearby, **Orthi Ammos Beach** is a fabulous wide and sandy beach that slopes gradually into shallow warm water, making it ideal for kids.

## Europe's Most Southerly Point

### AN OFFBEAT, IDIOSYNCRATIC ESCAPE

In the Libyan Sea, a 45km ferry ride from Hora Sfakion, **Gavdos Island** is Europe's most southerly point and as much a state of mind as it is an island. It's a blissful spot with only a few rooms, tavernas and unspoilt beaches, some accessible only by foot or boat. There's little to do here except swim, walk and relax. Gavdos is said to be the home of the legendary Calypso of Homer's *Odyssey*. The nymph held Odysseus captive on her island for many years. And, indeed, the offbeat pleasures of Gavdos may hold you captive as well.

The island is surprisingly green, with almost 65% covered in low-lying pine, cedar trees and other vegetation. Most of the electricity is supplied by generators, which are often turned off at night and in the middle of the day. There are no villages per se on the island, just hamlets and loose encampments.

Boats land on the island's eastern side. The teeny capital, **Kastri**, is in the centre of the island. The biggest beach community is at **Sarakiniko**. In the north, **Agios Ioannis Beach** has a ragtag summer settlement of nudists and campers. **Lavrakas Beach** offers one of the most remote beach encampments.

## WHERE TO EAT BEYOND HORA SFAKION

### Oasis Taverna

At the western end of Frangokastello Beach; sea view from the flower-festooned stone-floor terrace. €€

### Taverna Stratis

Just above Loutro's crowded waterfront fray, serves all manner of wood-fire-grilled meat. €€

### Cafe-Taverna Drosia

Good place in Imbros village for a coffee or a meal before descending into the Imbros Gorge. €

### Taverna Sarakiniko

A Gavdos Island taverna serving a daily fresh catch from the family fishing boat. €



Grilled sardines



## GETTING AROUND

For the Imbros Gorge hike, taxis can be arranged at both ends to handle getting to/ from Hora Sfakion.

Anendyk serves Gavdos from Hora Sfakion (2½ hours) and in peak season offers trips from other coastal towns. The Anendyk ferry

schedule does not make it possible to visit Gavdos on a day trip, but other operators – like Gavdos Cruises – may offer day trips. Note that bad weather can suspend service, so be prepared to stay longer than you expect.

# SOUGIA



Sougia is one of the most chilled-out and refreshingly undeveloped southern beach resorts on Crete. Well-spaced, mellow cafes and tavernas line a tamarisk-shaded waterfront promenade along a grey pebble-and-sand beach that has a smattering of rental loungers. Besides lazing on the long and uncrowded beach, this is the place to hike. The impressive ruins of Lissos are easily reached on the long-distance coastal path that runs east and west.

For such a small coastal town, Sougia offers some great dining. You can spend a week working through the options. Tavernas on Sougia's waterfront are also great spots for a drink and sometimes host bands. But an even better option is to order your drink of choice and relax on a quiet lounge under the stars.

Sougia offers several appropriately low-key places to stay. There are a couple on the waterfront, while the rest are on the main strip about 100m to 200m from the water.

## R-E-L-A-X

It's easy to wash ashore in Sougia and never leave. Rooms are reasonable, and there's good food, markets, ATMs and other services. Ferries and hiking paths connect you with popular and hidden highlights. And the long beach makes it easy to laze away your days.



### SLEEPING

**1** Aretousa Studios & Rooms

**2** LOTOS Seaside Hotel  
**3** Oceanis

### EATING

**4** Diktamo  
**5** Omikron

**6** Taverna Rembetiko  
**7** To Tzitziki



Sougia

## Quiet Beach

NEVER A CROWD

Sougia's 1km-long grey sand-and-pebble beach is ideal for leaving other people behind. It gets some decent surf at times. The drop-off is steep, so it's not ideal for families with small children. A small settlement of campers and nudists frolics at the eastern end of the beach.

## Uncrowded Gorge Hike

PLENTY OF SHADE, FEWER PEOPLE

Lush vegetation, including a forest of trees, is just one of the highlights of the **Agia Irini Gorge** hike, which is blissfully unvisited. As you descend, look for small caves dotting the cliff walls. The air is redolent with wild herbs much of the year – smell the sage in summer! Places where you can enjoy a picnic under a tree close to the sound of babbling water are sublime.

Conditions along the 7.5km trail, which descends 500m, make it unchallenging for most active people, although you will have to clamber over boulders at times. In spring, the



### BEST RESTAURANTS IN SOUGIA

Most of Sougia's tavernas have beachfront tables.

#### To Tzitziki

Refined daily Cretan specials backed by a good and varied menu. €€

#### Omikron

Noted chef Jean-Luc Delfosse serves a refreshing change from taverna staples. Try the *Flammekuche* (Alsation-style pizza). €€

#### Taverna Rembetiko

Cretan mountain fare from a wood-fire grill is served in a homey setting back from the beach. €€

#### Diktamo

A waterfront cafe with a small market of organic foods, perfect to take on hikes. €



### WHERE TO STAY

#### Oceanis

Most rooms have balconies with views of the beach at this comfy, low-key spot. €€

#### Aretousa Studios & Rooms

Back from the sea, bright and comfortably furnished studios and garden with playground. €€

#### Lotos Seaside Hotel

Bright and large rooms with balconies overlooking the beach. €€

## WALK TO ANCIENT RUINS

The ruins of Ancient Lissos are a superb 3.5km hike from Sougia on the coastal path to Paleohora. The best way to do it is to set out in the morning before the heat of day so that you can explore the ruins at your own pace and lounge around the beach in the perfect little cove. Before setting out, confirm when small boats will make the 15-minute return trip from Lissos to Sougia.

The walk starts at the far end of **1 Sougia's tiny port**. Enter **2 Lissos Gorge** and follow the yellow and black trail markers, which will lead you to Lissos. There are a few boulders to scramble over on the dry riverbed, and it's mostly shady, with some dramatically overhanging rock cliffs.

After about 1100m the trail ascends the west bank through a fragrant **3 pine forest**. You emerge onto a **4 wide plateau** open to the sun. Cross this diagonally for

about 750m until you reach a spectacular **5 viewpoint** from where you can see the small cove and valley of Lissos. The views only get better on the steep but well-maintained switchback trail down.

The first sight as you reach the valley floor is the 3rd-century-BCE **6 Temple of Asklepion**. It was built next to one of the springs and named after the Greek god of healing, Asclepius. Work your way south, encountering **7 Agios Kirkos**, a Byzantine chapel. Next is the recently excavated **8 Greco-Roman theatre**. Nearby is a shady **9 rest area** with drinking water and information boards about the town that flourished here until the 9th century. Head towards the **10 beach**, looking for marble artefacts, ruins of a bathhouse and ancient gnarled olive trees that wouldn't be out of place in a Tim Burton movie.





river can rise and wash out parts of the trail, which will make the overall rating difficult. There is plenty of shade along the route and the path is well maintained. It's open year-round and the entrance is just below its namesake village. You can easily arrange a ride from Sougia to the starting point. The end point is some 7km from Sougia along a sun-drenched but mostly traffic-free road. However, if you don't want to hike this segment, a taverna at the exit is a good place for a break and summoning a taxi back to Sougia.

## Coastal Treks

### UNTROD BEACHES AND WILD WONDERS

Like most south-coast villages, Sougia has great access to hiking territory. The most popular walk is to the archaeological site of **Lissos**, some 3.5km away. It's on the coastal E4 path to Paleohora (though much of it is somewhat inland from the coast), which is 13km west.

Past Lissos, you'll walk along a plateau carpeted with brush that weaves to and from the coast and some breathtaking views over the Libyan Sea. Eventually, you'll pass over Cape Flomes. Your reward for the effort is several hidden coves and beaches before you reach **Paleohora**.

Allow five to six hours for the nearly shadeless walk and take plenty of water plus sturdy footwear and a hat. In summer it's best to start very early in order to finish before the heat of the day.

Going east from Sougia, it's a strenuous but rewarding 11km out-and-back trek to a solitary chapel, **Agios Antonios**, on the uninhabited bay of the same name. Besides the little rose-hued church that could be out of a movie set, the water here is refreshingly brisk, as it's fed by springs. This is one of the wildest stretches of the south coast, with few signs of habitation. For a mythological detour, head up on the 2.5km round-trip trail to **Polyphemus Cave**, which is named for the Cyclops giant that Odysseus ran into on his trip from Troy.

## WHY I LOVE SOUGIA



By Ryan Ver Berkmoes

Spending a day amid the ancient splendour of Lissos before savouring the views on the lovely walk back to Sougia is about as good as travelling gets for me. Everything about the town is idyllic, especially when I can lose an afternoon on the beach. My joy is confirmed in the early evening when scores of huge tour buses descend on the harbour to pick up the hundreds of weary Samaria Gorge day-trippers from the ferry for the long ride back to Hania. They rumble away, and I get to stay in paradise.



## GETTING AROUND

Sougia is 67km south of Hania on a good but winding road. Expect to take at least two hours for the drive, or you can catch a bus. It's also on the Hora Sfakion–Paleohora car-ferry route.

Signs posted around town give the contact info for local boat owners who can take you to remote spots on the coast or pick you up from places such as Lissos and Agios Antonios.

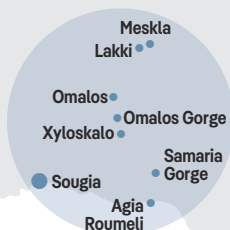


# Beyond Sougia

From the perfect beach town of Sougia, you can easily reach the world-class Samaria Gorge and other mountain treats.

A stunning mountainous drive from Sougia, the Omalos Plateau breaches the towering Lefka Ori. Most people come here for the world-class Samaria Gorge hike, an all-day adventure and one of the best outdoor activities in Greece. The trail follows a dramatic cleave in the mountains right down to the coast. At the base, little Agia Roumeli is a ferry hub and an appealing stop in its own right.

From here there is an excellent walk along the unspoiled coast to Loutro. In the hills, little villages are redolent with the scents of orange trees and the many other crops grown in this region.



## TOP TIP

For gorge walks with solitude, but scenery that rivals Samaria, consider Imbros (p70), Agia Irini (p73) and Aradena (p67).

## Agia Roumeli (p78)



RICHARD WHITCOMBE/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Samaria Gorge

## World-Class Gorge Hiking

HIKE CRETE'S FAMOUS NATURAL WONDER

**Samaria Gorge** is one of Europe's top geological wonders. The best way to experience the gorge is by hiking its 18km-length from the starting point in the hillside village of Xyloskalo near Omalos. You begin at an elevation of 1230m and end at sea level in Agia Roumeli (p78).

The first segment is a steep, serpentine stone path that descends 600m into the canyon. Continue on to arrive at the simple, cypress-framed **Chapel of Agios Nikolaos**. Beyond here the gorge is wide and open for the next 6km until you reach the abandoned settlement of Samaria, whose inhabitants were relocated when the gorge became a national park. This is the main rest stop.

Next is a 14th-century chapel dedicated to St Maria of Egypt, after whom the gorge is named. Further on, the gorge narrows and becomes more dramatic. At 11km, the walls are only 3.5m apart and you'll find the famous **Sideroportes** (Iron Gates), where a rickety wooden pathway leads hikers the 20m or so across the water.



### SAMARIA'S WILDLIFE

Besides remarkable geology and scenery, Samaria Gorge is also home to some of Crete's most interesting animals.

Consider yourself a lottery winner if you spot the *kri-kri* or *agrimi*, a wild goat with sabre-like horns, a brownish coat and a dark ring of fur around its neck. It's very rare but has been spotted in the gorge. Given the goat's striking appearance, it's no wonder that it features in so much Minoan art. Today only a few survive in the wild.

You may also spot a lammergeier (bearded vulture) – one of the rarest raptors on the continent. It has a wingspan of nearly 3m, so there won't be any doubt if you do see it.

Finally, watch underfoot for the non-venomous European rattlesnake.



### WHERE TO GET COFFEE

#### Xyloskalo

Serves hot drinks and breakfast at the entrance to Samaria Gorge.

#### Paralia Taverna

Views of the sea as you wait for a morning ferry in Agia Roumeli.

#### Antartis

Take a pause from the day's explorations in Theriso.



## BEST RESTAURANTS BEYOND SOUGIA

### Rousios

At the base of the Samaria Gorge trail; serves food from the farm in a lovely garden. Try the honey. €

### Botanical Park & Gardens of Crete

Serves regional dishes using locally sourced ingredients, some grown in the park. €€

### Leventogiannis Taverna

Has a lovely courtyard under a giant canopy of plane trees in Theriso; serves classic mountain fare. €

### Saint Paul

Idiosyncratic but delicious cafe with stunning views, 4km east of Agia Roumeli on the Loutro trail. €€



LEONS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

### Lakki

The national park ends at the 13km mark just north of the almost abandoned village of Palea (Old) Agia Roumeli, where it's a further 3km to the sea. All along the route stay alert for *kri-kri*, a mountain goat that's native to Crete, and enjoy the wildflowers blooming in profusion.

Day trips to the gorge are heavily marketed to tourists across Crete and it is crowded in summer. Start as early as you can manage to literally get ahead of the crowds.

Crucially, the park is only open from May to mid-October, although it may sometimes open earlier in April. After mid-afternoon, visitors are not permitted to walk the entire trail as everyone needs to be out of the park by 4pm. Sturdy shoes are a must (note the sad faces of those trying to hike in flip-flops).

## Underappreciated Port Town

RELAX AFTER THE THRONGS DEPART WITH THE FERRIES

Most people just pass through **Agia Roumeli** after they've hiked through Samaria Gorge and are waiting to leave. But the town – accessible only by ferry or on foot – is worth more than just a fleeting visit. Away from the cafes swamped by ferry passengers, there are some fine tavernas. There are also



## WHERE TO SLEEP

### Hotel Neos Omalos

Stolidly built in local stone; balconies give inspiring views of the region. €€

### Ártemis

Excellent studios in an untrammelled corner of Agia Roumeli. €€

### Camping

You can pitch a tent at any of the deserted beaches along the south coast. Free



modest guesthouses, some with sea views. Rather than flee with the masses on the late-afternoon ferries to Hora Sfakion and Sougia, you can relax in this quiet port town with its pebble beach lapped by the sparkling sea.

Note: the village is also popular with those doing the gorge the 'lazy way', by hiking just a short distance north, and is also the end point for the 14km hike east to Loutro (p69). This excellent hike passes idyllic beaches and tiny churches.

## Mountain Villages

### GEMS AMONG THE MISTY MOUNTAINS

Off the main road from Sougia to Hania are sinuous mountain roads leading to the start of the Samaria Gorge. The sights and villages are varied and often spectacular.

On the main Hania–Omalos road, about halfway between Fournes and Lakki, you'll find the gorgeous **Botanical Park & Gardens of Crete**. Built by a family with green thumbs, the 15 hectares of lush gardens have themed sections that include medicinal, tropical, ornamental and fruit trees, all well signed and beautifully arrayed from mountaintop to valley floor. The shop sells goods grown here and the restaurant is excellent.

If you detour up a left fork in the road after Fournes, you'll twist and turn along a gorge offering beautiful views of **Meskla**. Next to the modern Church of the Panagia is a 14th-century chapel built on the foundations of a 6th-century basilica that might have been built on an even earlier temple of Aphrodite. The main road continues to the unspoiled village of **Lakki**, 24km from Hania, which affords stunning views in all directions and has a striking church.

Most people hurry through **Omalos** on their way to Samaria Gorge 4km further on, but for those inclined towards solitude or the outdoors, this plateau settlement warrants a longer stay. During summer the air is bracingly cool compared with the steamy coast, and there are great mountain walks. Omalos is also a good base to overnight and wake up early to hit the Samaria Gorge ahead of the crowds.

## THE ROAD TO THERISO

At the foot of the Lefka Ori, at 500m above sea level, Theriso holds a special place in the hearts of Cretans. The site of historical battles against the Turks, it's famous for its connection with statesman Eleftherios Venizelos and Crete's late-19th-century revolutionary period. These days it's popular for its fine tavernas that host marathon Sunday lunches. The small **Museum of National Resistance** chronicles Crete's resistance movement from 1941 to 1945, but there's limited information in English.

From the north, the drive to Theriso via Perivolias is spectacular: a steep and winding road follows a coursing stream through a green oasis and the 6km Theriso Gorge. The rugged mountain terrain features an ever-changing landscape and is a good way to reach Omalos.



## GETTING AROUND

Day trips to Samaria Gorge start at the park entrance and include a pickup from either Sougia or Hora Sfakion, after a ferry ride from Agia Roumeli (p78).

It's possible to hike the gorge on your own combining public buses to and from Hania with a ferry ride, but you'll have to start very early – although this is a plus in summer as it

gets you on the trail ahead of the masses. From Sougia you can hire a taxi for the trip to the gorge entrance and then return on the ferry. Ask around, as often you can put a small group together to share the cost.

To properly explore the nooks and curving crannies of the mountains looming behind Sougia, you'll want to rent a vehicle.

# PALEOHORA



Appealing, laid-back yet buzzy and full of character, Paleohora also has a stunning setting. It lies on a narrow peninsula jutting out into the Libyan Sea, flanked on one side by a long, curving, tamarisk-shaded sandy beach (Pahia Ammos) and on the other side by a pebbly beach (Halikia). Shallow waters and general quietude make the village a good choice for families with small children.

The most picturesque part of Paleohora is the maze of narrow streets below the castle. Cafes spill out onto the pavement and morning coffees seem to never end. Paleohora attracts many walkers for loops in the area and longer-distance jaunts, including the excellent trail to Sougia.

At dusk scores of seafood tavernas set up tables along Halikia. Competition is fierce and Paleohora easily has the best eating on this far west end of the island. The nightlife in the narrow lanes and at the beach clubs while not manic is, well, intoxicating.

## TOP TIP

Even in summer Paleohora has so many places to eat that you'll never need to book. Rather, wander around the centre, where you'll find dozens of choices. At night the streets and lanes west of the ferry dock are closed to cars, and tables cover the pavement.



### BEST BARS IN PALEOHORA

#### Monika's Garden Wine Bar

One of the town's best spots; a modern wine bar with a delightful garden courtyard.

#### Nostos Club

Facing Halikia Beach with a huge, open-air terrace.

#### Agios

Raconteurs cocktail their afternoons away watching the world go by from street seats.

#### Jetee

The place on Pahia Ammos Beach for sunset; dozens of tables on the sand.

## Sandy or Pebble Beaches – Your Pick

### NOT ONE, BUT TWO

The liveliest town on the southwest coast boasts two beaches, each with a name that tells you all you need to know about its character: Pahia Ammos Beach (Sandy Beach) and Halikia Beach (Pebble Beach).

**Pahia Ammos** has a wide and long stretch of fine, tan sand. When the winds kick up it's good for windsurfing and other watersports, but the drop-off is gradual, so it's also great for kids. It also has the best sunsets in town. You'll find it on the western side of Paleohora's peninsula.

**Halikia** is on the eastern side of the peninsula. It can be better protected from the wind than Pahia Ammos, but often disappears during high tide for the 300m north of the ferry dock.

## Hikes & Walks

### A BEACH, A CHURCH AND VIEWS

About 5km east of Paleohora, lovely Anydri Gorge snakes from the namesake village 3km along a riverbed to the gorgeous Gialiskari Beach. It's an easy walk, but there isn't much shade, so prepare accordingly.

From Paleohora, take the road that goes past the campground and follow the paved road (which is bordered by steep rocks) that forks to the left to the village of **Anydri**, some 5km northeast of Paleohora. The founding fathers of the village were two brothers from Hora Sfakion fleeing a murder-

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- 1 Halikia Beach
- 2 Museum of the Acritans
- 3 Pahia Ammos Beach
- 4 Venetian Fort

**SLEEPING**

- 5 Anonymous Homestay
- 6 Casbah Boutique Hotel
- 7 Soula Rooms and Apartments

**EATING**

- 8 Cafe Almyrida
- 9 Taverna Methexis
- 10 Third Eye

**DRINKING**

- 11 Agios
- 12 Jeteer
- 13 Monika's Garden Wine Bar
- 14 Nostos Club
- 15 To Peiratiko Bar

ous vendetta, which is why most villagers have the same surname. A path from the village leads to the **Church of Agios Georgios**, which has 14th-century frescoes.

Signs in the village direct you to **Anydri Gorge**. After a few hundred metres on a footpath, you'll encounter an overgrown path on the left. Red markers direct you to the lush gorge. After walking along the usually dried-out riverbed, signs point to wide and curving **Gialiskari Beach** at the end of the gorge. The nicest stretch is the area with coarse sand at the eastern end, left of the beach bar. There are several inviting coves where people may be getting an all-over tan. From here you can head west back to Paleohora.

**WHERE TO STAY****Anonymous Homestay**

Simple, good-value pension with a well-travelled owner ready with great advice. €

**Soula Rooms & Apartments**

At the quiet south end of town, a small complex of large studios and apartments. €€

**Casbah Boutique Hotel**

Modern, luxurious, stylish; right between the two beaches and close to the nightlife. €€



## BEST RESTAURANTS IN PALEOHORA

### To Peiratiko Bar

Its motto is 'funky tavern', but there's much more here than drinks. Excellent modern Greek cuisine. €€

### Taverna Methexis

At the south end of town, tables spill across the street and encircle a tiny lagoon. Good Cretan fare. €€

### Cafe Almyrida

South of the centre, a terrace with water views, superb coffee and excellent breakfasts. €

### Third Eye

A local institution; a changing daily vegetarian menu with Asian and Middle Eastern accents. €€



HEAPLES KRITIKOS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Pahia Ammos beach (p80), Paleohora

Alternatively, you can just walk directly east on the E4 footpath for an all-day hike that follows a 13km trail running mostly along the coast to Sougia (p72). From Paleohora follow signs to the campsites to the northeast and turn right at the sign for Anydri (which is to the left). After a couple of kilometres the path climbs steeply for a beautiful view back to Paleohora. You'll pass Gialiskari Beach then continue east, eventually reaching Ancient Lissos (p75) and then Sougia.

## Fort & Fighters

### HOW AND WHERE HEROES FOUGHT

The mustard-yellow **Museum of the Acritans of Europe** is dedicated to the border fighters and heroes of Europe's medieval and Byzantine times. It has a small but well-displayed historical exhibition, along with musical instruments, weapons and other artefacts. Up the hill at the south end of town, there's not much left of the **Venetian Fort**, but the views are grand.



## GETTING AROUND

Paleohora is flat and walkable from one beach to the other. It's the western terminus of the south coast car ferries run by **Anendyk**. Buses come from Hania.

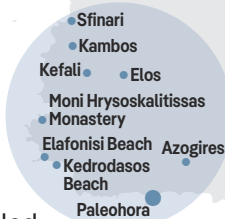
**Notos Rentals** offers affordable one-way car rentals between Hania and Paleohora if you want to create a complex route with cars, ferries and buses for your western Crete adventures.





# Beyond Paleohora

Magical beaches and little winding roads filled with sea views, villages and lofty peaks.



Paleohora makes a fine base for exploring some of Crete's most rewarding back roads and for visiting one of its most extraordinary natural wonders, Elafonisi Beach. Crowded in the summer, it's deserted in the spring and autumn when it is one of the Mediterranean's most magical spots.

Small but easily driveable roads lead to bucolic villages, past stunning ravines where olive trees cling to precipitous cliffs and the passage of time seems a foreign concept.

Back roads yield sublime charms. A good one runs northwest from Paleohora to the road for Elafonisi. Skip the main road and take this more pastoral alternative via the nearly imperceptible villages of Voutas and Kamatera. You'll pass minor gorges, streams and fragrant orchards.

## TAKE YOUR TIME

Leave your schedule behind. Whether it's wiggling your toes in Elafonisi's pink sand or tasting honey in a mountain village, you'll need extra time.

## Elafonisi Beach (p84)



## HOW TO ENJOY ELAFONISI

Elafonisi is less than idyllic in high summer when hundreds of umbrellas and sunbeds clog virtually every available square metre of sand and cars form an immobile conga line. But you can fully enjoy this natural gem, even on the busiest days:

- Arrive by 10am to avoid getting caught in a seething scrum of small, brightly coloured rental cars moving at cross-purposes.

- In the parking areas, weave around cars stalled fruitlessly waiting for the closest spots and head to the usually open furthest reaches.

- Watch out for unmarked sand hazards in the parking areas that trap rental cars. We watched one local entrepreneur tow three cars out of one area.

- Head to the islet! Relatively few make the short walk through the water, so its sand is wide-open (and lounge-chair-vendor free).



VASILIKI/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Kedrodasos

## Sublime Beaches

### PINK SAND, BLUE WATER

About an hour's drive through appealing mountain villages (p85) from Paleohora, **Elafonisi** is a stunning beach with a swirl of fine pinkish-white sand, turquoise water and gentle dunes tucked into Crete's southwestern corner. A string of semi-secluded coves stretches out beyond the long, wide strand where Elafonisi Islet lies, occasionally connected to the mainland by a thin, sandy isthmus or easily reached by wading through 50m of metre-deep water. And that water! It's absolutely clear and usually quite warm in summer.

The many separate beaches at Elafonisi mean that you can usually find one sheltered from any wind. In summer, however, you may find it harder to escape the crowds that descend upon the area in huge numbers. Yet, there are ways to still enjoy it. For a real escape, head 1km east to similarly gorgeous **Kedrodasos**, a soft arc of sand favoured by nudists and backed by junipers. You can reach it via 2.5km of dirt lanes through the greenhouses behind the beaches and then a 10-minute walk down a rocky path, or by the E4 coastal trail.



## WHERE TO EAT

### Alfa Restaurant

A community-run gem in Azogires, with rural Cretan fare, drinks and a welcoming vibe. €

### To Skolio

Learn about local fare with the daily changing menu at this Anydri perch. €€

### Elaias Thea

Join happy Crete families at this trad mountain restaurant near Anoskeli (30km from Hania). €€

## Mountain & Coastal Villages

CHARM, MOUNTAINS AND HUGE VIEWS

In the hills above Paleohora, you'll discover some of western Crete's most scenic and unvisited mountain villages. The **Innahorion villages** (derived from Enneia Horia, meaning 'nine villages') are spread across the far-western region, along the road connecting the main Paleohora road with the west coast and Falasarna. This lush, quiet area is renowned for its chestnuts and olives and you won't want for opportunities to purchase olive oil, honey, dried herbs and raki.

The coastal road from Kefali to Sfinari is one of Crete's most beautiful: it winds around cliffs with magnificent coastal views unfolding after every bend.

An eccentric hill village 9km north of Paleohora, **Azogires** and its sylvan valley are the places of legends involving river Nereids (nymphs) in its waterfalls and medieval ascetics who inhabited cave dwellings. Both the waterfalls and the caves can be visited today. Stop in at Alfa Restaurant for information.

**Elos**, some 31km northwest of Azogires, is the Innahorion region's largest town and the centre of the chestnut trade. The plane, eucalyptus and chestnut trees around the main square make Elos a cool and relaxing place to stop. Behind the taverna on the main square stand the remains of an aqueduct that used to power the old mill.

Some 2.5km west of Elos, and immediately west of the turn-off for the Elafonisi road, is atmospheric **Kefali**, with its 14th-century frescoed church and lofty views.

Going north, the villages lining the coast enjoy stunning locations between mountains and ravines. The hamlet of **Papadiana**, about 2km west of Kefali, has a cute cafe with good coffee. Some 5km further on, the road rises into the mountains before manifesting superlative sea views from a bluff at barely there Amygdalokefali.

Continuing along the now-descending coastal road, good hiking, beach access, good accommodation and two competing tavernas can be found at **Kambos**, a tiny village at the edge of a gorge. Finally, **Sfinari** – 9km further north – is a languid, laid-back agricultural village with a long grey-stone beach. The cove has several excellent beachside fish tavernas.



### STAIRWAY TO GOLD

Five kilometres north of the beach on the Elafonisi road, beautiful **Moni Hrysoskalitissas Monastery** is

perched on a rock high above the sea. The church is recent, but the monastery is allegedly 1000 years old and may have been built on the site of a Minoan temple. The monastery has two small museums on-site: one with a selection of weavings and objects from rural life and one with mostly icons and manuscripts.

Hrysoskalitissas means 'golden staircase'. Some accounts suggest that the topmost of the 98 steps leading to the monastery was made of gold but could only be seen by the faithful. Another version says one of the steps was hollow and used to hide the church's treasury.



### GETTING AROUND

Check for summer boats to Elafonisi from Paleohora for a gorgeous ride and a way to avoid the driving and parking hassles at the beach.

# FALASARNA



Crete's best sunsets are refracted into millions of vermillion sparkles at Falasarna, a growing beach town with an alluring – and popular – long beach. This broad sweep of pink-cream sand is considered among the island's finest and is famous for its clear water, rolling waves and watersports. Spread your towel on the Big Beach (Megali Paralia) at the southern end or pick a spot in one of the coves separated by rocky spits further north.

Falasarna has no centre as such – rather, there are hotels, tavernas, cafes and small supermarkets scattered about the sandy hills behind the beaches. Options multiply each year. In the evening, the thump, thump of dance music at beach parties reverberates around the shallow bay.

Aside from the beaches, Falasarna is famous for the ruins of a 4th-century city-state and trading centre with its own harbour. Wandering among the ongoing excavations and seeing the latest discoveries is a window to Roman times.

## MEANDER THE BAY

Arriving via the main road from Hania, take a detour on the looping road south following the shallow bay of Falasarna back north. You'll pass through dense olive orchards before reaching a tiny fishing harbour. From here, the beaches only get wider as you reach Falasarna.







Falasarna

## Marvellous Beaches

### PINK SAND, ROLLING WAVES

This broad sweep of **beaches** has magical pink-cream sands and teal waters. Along with superb water clarity, Falasarna can see wonderfully big waves: long rollers coming from the open Mediterranean, but it's generally still good for swimming. It gets busy from mid-July to mid-August, but as the main beach fills, you can move south to less crowded alternatives.

Loungers are easily rented and there are watersports agents right on the beaches. Windsurfing, SUP and sea kayaking are a few of the active pursuits available.

## An Ancient City-State

### CAPTIVATING ROMAN RUINS

Steady research by archaeologists reveals more of **Ancient Falasarna's** fascinating truths with each passing year. Look for useful info boards and the 'stone throne' near the entrance. Further on are the remains of the wall that once fortified the town and what was the small harbour. Notice the holes carved into the wall, which were used to tie up boats. Stone blocks excavated around the entrance may indicate that the Romans tried to keep pirates out.

At the top of the hill are the remains of the acropolis wall and a temple, as well as four clay baths. Other discoveries include towers, a public road, water tanks and a wine factory.

The ruins are reached via a 2km dirt road through olive orchards that starts where the paved road ends. A handy app provides plenty of information and gives an idea of what the ancient city looked like. A QR code posted at the site entrance provides a link.

### THE LOST PORT

The Falasarna area has been occupied since at least the 6th century BCE, but it reached the height of its power as a city-state in the 4th century BCE. Although Ancient Falasarna was built next to the sea, its ruins are now about 400m inland because the coast has risen over the centuries.

Ancient Falasarna owed its wealth to agricultural produce from the fertile valley to the south. It was the west-coast harbour for Polyrrinia but later became Polyrrinia's chief rival for dominance over western Crete. The Roman invasion of Crete in 67 BCE destroyed Ancient Falasarna. It was rebuilt but was finished off for good by the 365 CE earthquake, which raised the harbour 6.5m out of the sea, making it useless.



### GETTING AROUND

Falasarna is linked to Hania by bus, so there's no need to drive here. If you do, parking is ad hoc, so travel light in case you have a long walk.

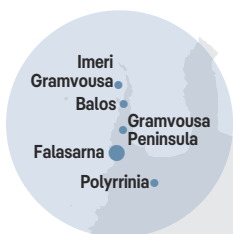


# Beyond Falasarna

Remote, rugged and famous, the beach at Balos is a Crete icon. Base yourself in beguiling Falasarna and journey north.

Far northwestern Crete is little affected by tourism. The coast here is defined by the virtually uninhabited Gramvousa Peninsula, with Balos Beach and the offshore islet Imeri Gramvousa and its Venetian fortress. Balos is gorgeous and seems to feature in every Cretan tourism marketing campaign. The catch is you either come by 4WD or join a crowded day trip by boat.

Falasarna is a good base for exploring the region. Far more developed is the major town Kissamos (Kastelli), which has scads of hotels, holiday apartments and restaurants, although not much more of interest. To the south, the redoubtable mountaintop ruins of Polyrrinia make for a rugged and adventure-some day trip.



## TOP TIP

Hold on tight for the rocky drive to Balos and bring a good picnic and plenty of water.

## Balos



## Remote Sandy Fun

STUNNING BEACHES, VENETIAN FORTRESS

The beautifully wild and remote **Gramvousa Peninsula** razors up into the Aegean. Its star attraction is the stunning beach of Balos, at Cape Tigani on the west side of the peninsula's pointy tip.

The offshore island of **Imeri Gramvousa** is a major stop for day-trippers arriving by boat. It was of strategic importance to the Venetians, who built a **fortress** here that today is a major attraction. Outfitted with a huge cache of armaments, the fortress remained in Venetian hands until the Turks conquered it in 1691. Next it fell into the hands of Cretan rebels, who took it over in 1821, resorting to piracy when cut off from the western part of the islands by the Turks during the War of Independence. Local legend has it that the pirates amassed a fabulous fortune that they hid in caves around the island. Try your luck on the hunt!

The lagoon-like sandy beach of **Balos** on the mainland is compelling. Its shallow, shimmering turquoise waters draw huge crowds in summer. At its best, this remote beach is a heavenly scene, with lapping waters shimmering with darting fish; however, if the tide is out, the wind is whipping up or it's overrun by day-tripping visitors off the boat, it can be a letdown.

Note: there's no shade at Balos, but there are loungers and umbrellas. Getting here requires a 4WD and a walk.

### ANCIENT POLYRRINIA

The wonderful mountaintop ruins of the ancient city of Polyrrinia are both a compelling immersion in history and a hiking adventure.

Views from this defensible peak are stunning. Its most impressive feature is the acropolis, built by the Byzantines and Venetians, while there's also a church built on the foundations of a Hellenistic temple from the 4th century BCE. When you arrive in the namesake town, a 24km drive from Falasarna, there's a small cafe where you can get some information before you head up. It's a 15-minute scramble up a challenging path from town to the church, and from there another 20-minute climb to the acropolis.

Polyrrinia was founded by the Dorians in the 6th century BCE and coins from the period depict the warrior-goddess Athena, who was evidently revered by the warlike Polyrrinians.



### GETTING AROUND

From May to October day-trippers from Kissamos (Kastelli) – who make a 90-minute stop at the peninsula's offshore island of Imeri Gramvousa – deluge Balos between 11am and 4pm. To avoid the crowds, get there by 4WD

before or after the boats arrive (regular cars can't handle the rugged drive). It's a 12km drive north off the main road between Falasarna and Kissamos, followed by a 1km walk to Balos Beach.

# RETHYMNO

## MOUNTAIN ROADS, SOULFUL LEGACIES, DYNAMIC CITY

An unmissable namesake city, verdant valleys, mountains filled with soulful meaning, and beaches – from ones for a party to ones for the ultimate escape.

Rethymno is peppered with historic sites and natural wonders. Ribbons of mountain roads wind through the timeless and wild beauty of the interior's deep folds of land. Fields of wildflowers and traditional hamlets cradled by olive groves are scattered with Byzantine churches and ancient sites. Rethymno city and oodles of beaches provide a magnetic pull to the coasts.

The eponymous capital on the northern coast is a bustle of atmosphere-soaked cobbled lanes – laden with shops, restaurants and bars and flanked by a wide, sandy beach. With Hania, Rethymno is one of Crete's two deeply alluring cities that reflect the island's sweep of history in all its glory.



Follow the paths of the ancients linking the villages of the Amari Valley; explore steep, lush gorges such as Kourtaliotiko; and rest in the shade of lofty Mt Psiloritis, Crete's highest peak. Visit enduring monasteries like historic Moni Arkadiou, Minoan tombs such as those at Eleutherna and tackle Venetian strongholds. Rethymno is a major

draw for artists, many practising age-old trades with modern twists in villages like Margarites.

The north coast is popular with summer tourists who get their taste of Cretan life in towns such as Panormo. The southern coast is graced with bewitching beaches in seductive isolation and accented by delightful towns like Plakias and Agios Pavlos. Get to know spell-binding Rethymno as you weave your way from north shore to south shore.

CARON BADKIN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

### THE MAIN AREAS

#### RETHYMNO

History, food and drink. **p96**

#### PANORMO

Beaches and a traditional town. **p111**

#### SPILI

Lush countryside beauty. **p116**

#### PLAKIAS

Appealing centre for southern beaches. **p121**





DZIE WUL / SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Souda Bay

**Rethymno, p96**

The region's unmissable and historic hub will lure you into its tangle of lanes and alleys. Top sights like Moni Arkadiou await nearby.



Almyros Bay

Vryses

Georgioupoli

Lake Kournas

Episkopi

Armeni

Moni Arkadiou

HANIA

RETHYMNO

Meronas

Amari

Selia

Myrthios

Spiti

Plakias

Lefkogia

Moni Preveli

Akoumia

**Plakias, p121**

A laid-back beach town that defines mellow. Use it as a base for watersports and exploring even more alluring beaches to the southeast.

**Spiti, p116**

From this cute mountain hamlet you can wind your way through the pastoral and historic delights of the Amari Valley.

Libyan Sea

## Panormo, p111

Beaches in coves combine with an atmospheric old village. Further afield are the forbidding slopes and welcoming villages of Mt Psiloritis.



### CAR

Hitting the road is the best way to explore Rethymno. You can flip a coin when you reach the fork in a twisting mountain road and see what surprises await. There's no better way for prowling the coasts to find your own perfect beach.



### BUS

Crete's efficient bus system maintains its standards in Rethymno. Regular buses (usually two to five per day) fan out from Rethymno city on routes serving Panormo, Plakias, Spili and Agia Galini. For smaller and isolated places there may be little or no service.



### HIKING

Hiking between locations is both a viable and enjoyable way to travel about the Rethymno region. You can walk from Spili down to the coast at Preveli, and from Plakias you can reach many southern beaches. Hiking the Amari Valley may be a trip highlight.

• Agia Varvara



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LEONS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©; JAROSLAV MORAVCIK/SHUTTERSTOCK ©; K. ROY ZERLOCH/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

# Find Your Way

Rethymno comprises about a quarter of Crete. Distances are deceptively short, with the dramatic terrain laced by circuitous roads that offer grand views of this lovely land bookended by the north and south coasts.

# Plan Your Time

Rethymno is a place for enjoying summer to its fullest when the sea on both coasts is warm. However, spring and autumn are best for seeing the valleys and mountains at their greenest.


GEORGIOS TSICHLIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Fortezza (p96), Rethymno



## Seasonal Highlights

Summer gets hot along the coasts. Higher elevations can be milder. Spring and autumn feature lovely weather. Winter is the time to hunker down in front of a wood fire.



### FEBRUARY

Pre-Lent **Carnival** celebrations bring four weeks of dancing, masquerading, games and a grand street parade in Rethymno.



### APRIL

Delight in the galaxy of **wildflowers** that bathe hillsides, olive groves and roadsides in an intense glow.



### MAY

In the weeks after Orthodox Easter, Rethymno completely opens up for the **summer season**. Loungers are ready.

## If You Only Do One Thing

- Spend a day walking **Rethymno** (p96). Don't miss the stunning **Venetian fortress** (p96) with its vistas across the region.
- Then wander the town's labyrinth-like **historic quarter** (p100) and stroll along the picturesque **port** (p97). Take time with **the** treasures in the **Archaeological Museum** (p101) and then check out the **museums** (p104).
- Seek out timeless **bakeries** (p104), duck in and out of old **churches and mosques** (p102) and **get lost** in the quiet **streets** (p103). Regroup over **coffee** (p104) and consider hitting the **beach** (p103), which is right in town.
- At night, try to choose from the many fine **cafes**, tavernas and restaurants for a **meal** (p97).



## Three Days to Travel Around

- After a day in Rethymno, head to the **beach**! On the drive south, stop off in **Armeni** (p110) for the Late Minoan Cemetery and a glimpse of Ancient Crete.
- On the south coast, get a room in laid-back **Plakias** (p121) and find a perfect spot on the long beach.
- Take some time to explore the region, which includes hidden gems like **Ammoudi Beach** (p122). On quiet **days**, don't miss **Preveli Beach** (p124) with its palm trees and river, then head uphill for a dose of history at **Moni Preveli** (p125).
- Heading back north, stop off in **Argyroupoli** (p109), which was built on the ruins of the ancient city of Lappa.

## If You Have More Time

- Beat the bus crowds to **Margarites** (p108) to browse for handmade pottery. Next, visit the world-class archaeological site of **Ancient Eleutherna** (p107) and its excellent museum. A short distance away, history-soaked **Moni Arkadiou** (p107) is a monastery whose violent past is ingrained in Cretan souls.
- Glimpse traditional Cretan life by driving through the picturesque **Amari Valley** (p119), with cobblestone villages, Byzantine churches and grand views of lush expanses. In **Spili** (p116), take a break at one of the fine tavernas and then consider hiking challenging **Kourtaliotiko Gorge** (p117).
- For a deep dive into Crete's mountain culture, head to **Anogia** (p115) and **Mt Psiloritis** (p115).



### JUNE

Serious runners tackle the **Mt Psiloritis Race** ([www.psiloritisrace.com](http://www.psiloritisrace.com)), a 35km run that begins on the Nida Plateau.



### JULY

Cretan folk music is celebrated at the **Yakinthia Festival** ([www.yakinthia.gr](http://www.yakinthia.gr)), featuring concerts at Mt Psiloritis near Anogia.



### SEPTEMBER

Enjoy ideal **beach** conditions, with fewer crowds, warm water and – often but not always – gentler winds.

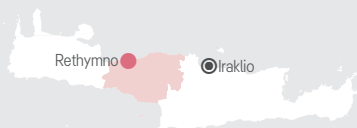


### NOVEMBER

Rethymno hunkers down for the **winter**. Autumn colours are passing in the Amari Valley, and most tourist businesses are closed.



# RETHYMNO



Basking between the commanding bastions of its landmark 15th-century fortress and the glittering azure waters of the Mediterranean, Rethymno is one of Crete's most enchanting urban centres. Its Venetian-Ottoman quarter is a maze of lanes draped in floral canopies and punctuated with graceful wood-balconied houses, ornate monuments and the occasional minaret.

Rethymno rewards those ready to just stroll with forgotten architectural details accenting streets where residents go about their lives, oblivious to summertime tourist throngs. Crete's third-largest city has excellent food: the lush countryside produces quality foodstuffs and local chefs are skilled at using them. Here, again, your willingness to wander will pay off.

The narrow, cobbled pedestrian streets of the old quarter are packed with mainly tourist-gearred restaurants and stores, but look beyond the gloss for Rethymno's timeless character. And don't overlook the long beach, right in town and backed by the region's liveliest cafes and bars.

## GETTING ORIENTATED

Rethymno is compact, with most sights, accommodation and restaurants wedged within the largely pedestrianised old quarter, which runs from the Venetian harbour to the Fortezza and south to the Municipal Garden.

## Fortezza

### IMPOSING, INTRIGUING LANDMARK

Rethymno's greatest monument is like no other in Crete: the 300m-across, star-shaped **Venetian fortress** looms over the old quarter. It cuts an imposing figure with its massive walls and bastions, but was unable to stave off the Turks in 1646. Over time an entire village took shape on the grounds, though much of it was destroyed in WWII. Views over the town, the Mediterranean and mountains are fabulous; exploring the ramparts is a Rethymno highlight. It's also a wonderful place to pause under the palm and fragrant pine trees and soak up the atmosphere. You can easily spend a couple of hours here.

Right in the centre, the 17th-century **Sultan Bin Ibrahim Mosque** and its huge dome dominates the fort's interior. Head inside to admire its impressive mosaic ceiling, with wonderful acoustics that are perfect for the occasional musical event held here (check to see if any of the many summer evening concerts are scheduled for the fort's grounds while you're here).

Starting at the fort's entrance and travelling in a clockwise direction, additional highlights include the 1581 **Artillery Magazine**, the oldest surviving building. The bastions are the points in the fort's huge star shape and are named for saints. At **St Lucas Bastion**, archaeologists have found traces of a settlement from about 200 BCE.



Venetian fortress



## BEST RESTAURANTS IN RETHYMNO

### Taverna Knossos

The one good harbour restaurant is a great one, and the Stavroulaki family will feed you well. €€

### Byraki

Tables filled with residents spill out into the street, a classic – and excellent – Cretan taverna. €€

### To Pigadi

On an attractive lane out of the fray, it has a short menu of seasonal Cretan fare. €€

### Avli

Lovely atmospheric garden off the street, offering daring, creative takes on fresh local fare. €€€

### Meli

Gorgeous mountains of ice cream made with goat's milk from the family farm; by the Rimondi Fountain. €



Lighthouse, Rethymno harbour

The stolid **Councillors' Residence**, with its rough stone walls, was used by Venetian rulers. Walk north towards **St Sozen's Bastion** and one of the surviving powder magazines; the best 360-degree views in the fort are from the nearby hill. To the east, St Nikolas Bastion has fine views over the harbour.

## Venetian Port

### RETHYMNO'S FOCAL POINT

Rethymno's small 14th-century **harbour** would not have held many boats back in its day, but the surrounding Venetian-era precinct is a Rethymno highlight, even if many of the cafes and tavernas are not.

Although the modern harbour precludes any sweeping views, it's worth clambering along the historic breakwater to take in the scene. The **lighthouse** is 9m tall and was built by Egyptians during the 1830s; it seems few cultures in the Mediterranean didn't leave their mark on Crete at some point. (Britain forced Egypt to give Crete back to the Turks in 1840.)

Note the handful of fishing boats in the harbour. Many of the captains seem to spend their days drinking coffee and lounging around the old **Fish Market**, where on occasion there are actually a few fish for sale.



## WHERE TO EAT IN RETHYMNO

### En Pio

One of several tavernas at the water's edge below the fortress does creative Cretan fare. €€

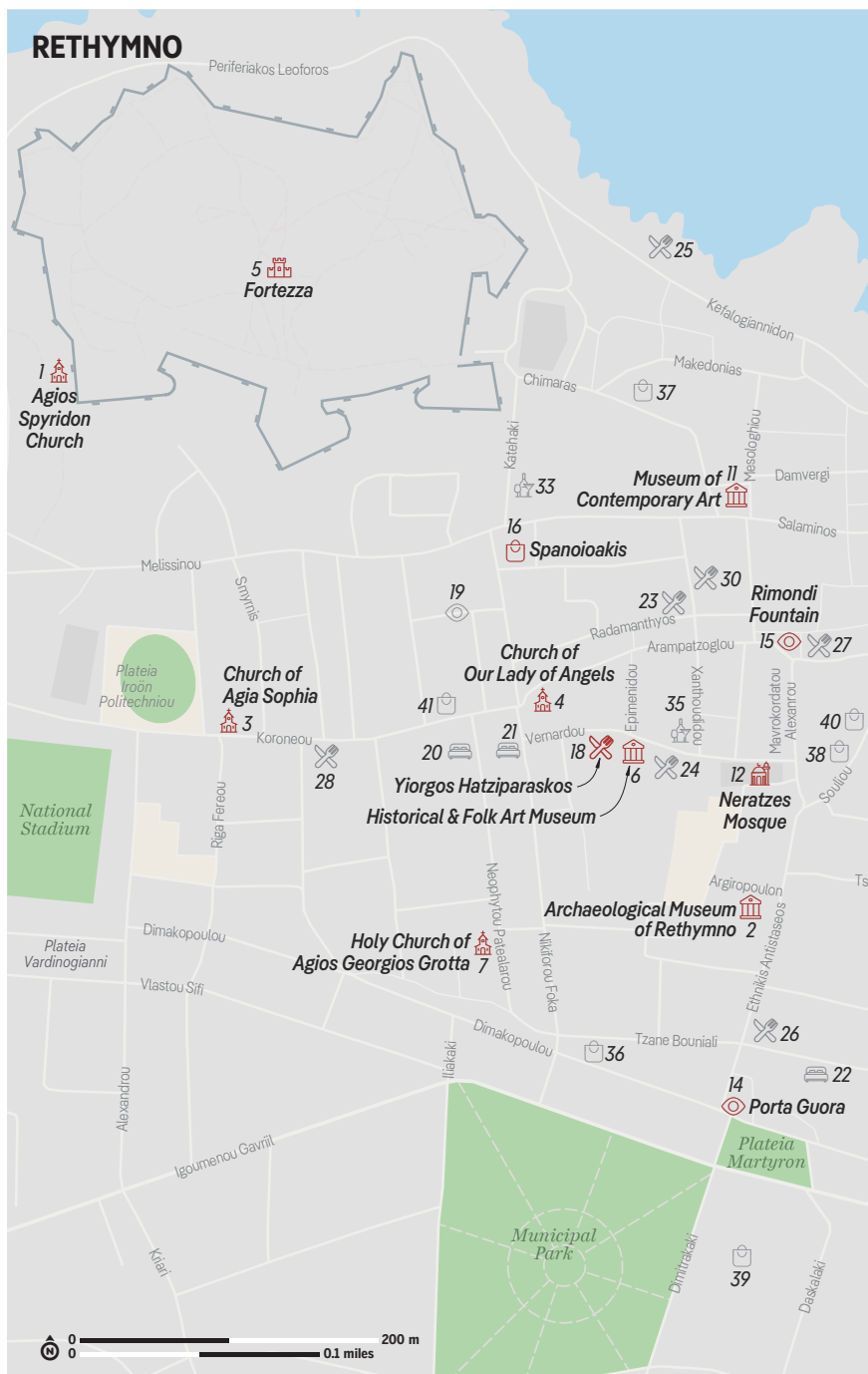
### Syn-trofi Cooperative Grill

A top-notch corner souvlaki outlet, with excellent food cheerfully served by the worker-owners. €

### Gaias Gefseis

The scent! This bakery creates some of the city's best traditional cakes and biscuits. €

## Periferiakos Leoforos





## HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Agios Spyridon Church
- 2 Archaeological Museum of Rethymno
- 3 Church of Agia Sophia
- 4 Church of Our Lady of Angels
- 5 Fortezza
- 6 Historical & Folk Art Museum
- 7 Holy Church of Agios Georgios Grotta
- 8 Kara Musa Pasha Mosque
- 9 Lighthouse
- 10 Loggia
- 11 Museum of Contemporary Art
- 12 Neratzes Mosque
- 13 Palazzo
- 14 Porta Guora
- 15 Rimondi Fountain
- 16 Spanioakis
- 17 Venetian Harbour
- 18 Yiorgos Hatziparaskos

## SIGHTS

- 19 St Kleidi St

## SLEEPING

- 20 Casa Vitae Villas
- 21 Hamam Oriental Suites
- 22 Rethymno Youth Hostel

## EATING

- 23 Avli
- 24 Byraki
- 25 En Plo
- 26 Gaias Gefseis
- 27 Meli
- 28 Syn-trofi Cooperative Grill
- 29 Taverna Knossos
- 30 To Pigadi

## DRINKING

- 31 Arokaria
- 32 Bricks Beers & Tales
- 33 Chalikouti
- 34 Kimolia
- 35 Monitor

## SHOPPING

- 36 Cooperative Grocery Store
- 37 Frosso Bora Pottery Studio
- 38 Ilias Spondidakis
- 39 Laki
- 40 Leather Studio Kanakakis
- 41 Spantis

## A STROLL IN RETHYMNO'S OLD QUARTER

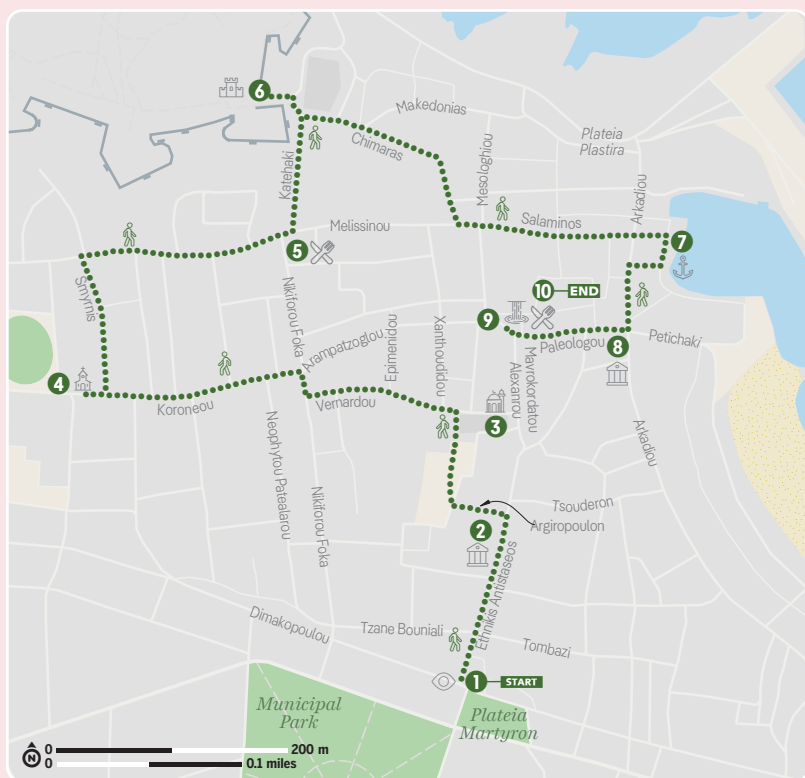
The old quarter of Rethymno is made for walking. Think of this stroll as just a framework to begin your explorations, especially down the quiet back streets (p103).

➊ **Porta Guora** (p104) has been the gateway to the city for over 400 years. Walk north on Ethnikis Antistaseos, the main shopping street, which arrows right up into the heart of town. But turn west for the ➋ **Archaeological Museum of Rethymno**, notable both for its collection and its location in a grand Venetian-era church.

Cross Mikrasiaton Sq to minaret-accented ➌ **Neratzes Mosque** (p102). Make your way to Koroneou St, spotting Venetian palaces on the way and the ➍ **Church of Agia Sophia** (p102) with its arch over the street. Return west and take the smallest lanes you can find to ➎ **Spanoioakis bakery** (p104) on Nikiforou Foka. Find yourself the perfect

snack, then walk up Katehaki to the landmark ➏ **Fortezza** (p96). Do the clockwise fort tour and try to decide what's your favourite view; imagine looming Ottomans approaching across the Sea of Crete. Exit and follow curving Chimaras down past arty shops to Melissinou and walk east to the ➑ **Venetian harbour** (p97).

Smile benignly at the taverna touts even as you shrug off their entreaties and envisage the small port busy with Venetian sailing vessels bearing riches from across the Mediterranean. Turning west, pass the ➒ **Loggia** (p103) where these fortunes were discussed. Finish the walk at the troika of basins at the ➓ **Rimondi Fountain** (p104). Turn around and step right into ➔ **Meli** (p97) for the best ice cream in the region. Flavours include delectable honey and whatever fruit is fresh at the moment.





## FROM MINOANS TO TURKS

Archaeological findings suggest that the site of modern Rethymno has been occupied since Late Minoan times. Around the 4th century BCE 'Rithymna' emerged as an autonomous state of sufficient stature to issue its own coinage. It waned in importance during Roman and Byzantine times but flourished again under Venetian rule (1210–1645) when it became an important commercial and cultural centre, along with Hania.

The Venetians built a harbour and began fortifying the town in the 16th century against the growing threat from the Turks. Nevertheless, the Fortezza was captured by the Ottomans in 1646. Rethymno was an important government centre under the Turks.

The Ottomans ruled until 1897. The town's reputation as an artistic and intellectual centre grew from 1923, when the mandated population exchange between Greece and Turkey brought many refugees from Constantinople.



Rimondi Fountain (p104)

## Archaeological Museum

### MINOAN, BYZANTINE AND VENETIAN TREASURES

Don't miss the bronze lamp from the 1st century BCE depicting Dionysus riding a panther at the well-curated **Archaeological Museum of Rethymno**, which features exquisite relics unearthed from important archaeological digs around Rethymno Province.

The collection offers a comprehensive snapshot (without leaving you overwhelmed) that predominantly covers pieces from the Minoan, Byzantine and Venetian periods. Highlights include exquisite hand-painted Minoan ceramics and a 9000-year-old limestone deity statue.

The museum's building, the Venetian-built Church of St Francis, also has a tale to tell. It was built as a monastery by the Franciscans and later converted to a poor house by the Turks before being used as a tourist bazaar in the 1970s.

The elaborately carved main doorway gives a sense of its grand past.



## WHERE TO STAY IN RETHYMNO

### Casa Vitae Villas

Exquisitely restored Venetian palace that dates to the 15th century, superb rooms and service. €€€

### Rethymno Youth Hostel

One of Crete's best budget hotels, centrally located in a quiet street, has a lovely courtyard garden. €

### Hamam Oriental Suites

A former Venetian-Ottoman bathhouse converted to a boutique hotel. Many rooms still have historical details. €€

## CYCLOPS & CRETE

The Rethymno region seems to have more than its fair share of fossil-filled caves. In fact, it's the richest area in the Mediterranean for endemic fossils, including those of the dwarf elephant.

Some scientists link the Ancient Greeks' discovery of dwarf-elephant skulls with one of the more lurid mythological tales: about twice the size of a human skull, a dwarf-elephant skull has a large, central nasal cavity for the trunk, which may well have been interpreted as a single enormous eye socket.

The possible result? The birth of the Cyclops, which went on to play a huge, as it were, role in Greek mythology, including an episode in Homer's *Odyssey*.

The Paleontological Museum (p104) has skeletons, so you can decide for yourself.



LEFT: DIGITAL PEARL/S/SHUTTERSTOCK ©; RIGHT: STAMATOS MANOJIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Neratzes Mosque

## Churches & Mosques

### HOLY PLACES OF MANY FAITHS

Rethymno's convoluted history plays out in its churches and mosques. The holy highlight is appropriately nicknamed 'the cave church'. Built right into the rocks beneath the Venetian fortress, tiny **Agios Spyridon Church** has enough atmosphere to fill a cathedral. This Byzantine chapel boasts richly painted icons, swinging bird candleholders and the sound of the nearby pounding surf. You'll see pairs of slippers, baby shoes and sandals in crevices in the rock wall, left as prayer offerings for the sick. Find the chapel at the top of a staircase on the fort's western side (but note it's often closed).

Built as the **Church of Agia Sophia**, the much-altered building on Koroneou St was turned into a mosque during Ottoman times. Windows were added so that passersby could see people praying inside and feel guilty enough to join them. Look for the elaborate 1863 inscription over the fountain built into the wall near the arch. It reads in part: 'May he who drinks from it and quenches his thirst pray for the soul of the man who built it.'



## WHERE TO SHOP IN RETHYMNO

### Spantis

John Spantidakis works with raw leather here – not pre-dyed or pre-cut – to create handmade bags, belts and wallets.

### Leather Studio Kanakakis

Workshop where you can watch leather goods being made in all sorts of colours and designs.

### Frosso Bora Pottery Studio

The namesake artist crafts beautiful creations from local clay using the wheel or slabs.

The triple-domed **Neratzes Mosque** began life as an Augustinian church and was converted by the Turks in 1657, although the recently restored minaret wasn't added until 1890; while the **Kara Musa Pasha Mosque** began life as a monastery but was turned into a mosque by the Turks, who added domes and a minaret, of which only bits remain. It is named after the Ottoman admiral instrumental in the capture of Rethymno.

## Quiet Streets

### SURPRISES AMID EVERYDAY LIFE

Leaving the busy precincts of the old quarter behind and setting off on an adventure of discovery on the city's many quiet lanes and alleys is one of Rethymno's great joys. Here life goes on behind heavily curtained ground-floor windows, barely a metre from their neighbours across the lane. Gossip is exchanged in excited whispers and people line up for haircuts after 10pm.

Expect to be surprised and delighted by your discoveries, whether it's an elaborately carved Venetian window or a tiny hidden church, such as the **Holy Church of Agios Georgios Grotta**, found by following a series of alleys until you reach its namesake lane. Rarely will you see anyone there. Trees provide shade over a few candles always burning outside the tiny door.

Or seek out a quiet lane, like **St Kleidi Street**. At number 13, pause at the remains of a once grand palazzo. Cherubs still surmount the doorway even as cats feed from bowls at the base. The Latin inscription reads 'He who hopes in God will be relieved'.

Other quiet lanes worth a stroll include Minoos, Neophytou Patealarou, Patriarch Gregory and Vivylaki.

## Beaches for Everyone

### SEA AND SAND, CLOSE TO WHEREVER YOU'RE STAYING

Rethymno's in-town beach is pretty basic but it's large, has good sand and views of yachts. It has a pleasant palm-lined walk and is backed by a long crescent of lively cafes and bars.

From here, beaches both busy and quiet stretch nearly uninterrupted all the way to Panormo, some 22km east.

## Venetian Buildings

### TIMELESS, ORNATE SURVIVORS

Major Venetian sites bookend the old quarter. By the port, the **Loggia** is a restored 16th-century landmark that originally

## TOURS & ACTIVITIES

### Eco Events

Specialises in small-group English-language tours that get you in touch with land, people and culture ([www.ecoevents.gr](http://www.ecoevents.gr)).

### Mountaineering Club of Rethymno

Can advise on treks in the region (<http://www.eosrethymnou.gr>).

### Cretan Ski School

Offers equipment hire, lessons and guided trips to Mt Psiloritis ([www.facebook.com/skiicrete](http://www.facebook.com/skiicrete)).

### Popeye Watersports

On the west end of Rethymno's beach, offers all the usual aquatic thrills plus cave tours. (<https://popeye-watersports.gr>).



Rethymno beach promenade

### Cooperative Grocery Store

At Tzane Bouniali 54, features organic foods from small, local producers; excellent selection.

### Laki

A huge open-air food market in the parking lot east of the Municipal Garden on Thursday mornings.

### Ilias Spondidakis

Down a souk-like alley, the place for books and maps on Crete.

## COFFEE & CAFES

Like any Greek town, city or village, pausing for a cup of strong coffee at any time of day in Rethymno is an essential tradition.

At the west end of the historic quarter, a row of classic cafes face the **Heroes of Polytechnio Square**. Each has a large terrace of well-spaced tables where families gather for languid, convivial meals starting around 10pm. Coffee is enjoyed throughout the day.

On the serene hidden square, 25th Martiou, **Kimolia** is tiny, shady and a real treasure on days when the streets are thronged. For a lofty drink, the cafe within the Fortezza is an atmospheric pause.

A big pine tree signals you've found your sanctuary in the heart of Venetian Rethymno where **Arokaria** has tables set above the street. It roasts its own coffee.

served as a meeting house for Venetian nobility. Arcaded on three sides, it now houses the archaeology museum's shop.

Just west, one wonders what the 17th-century sponsors would have thought of the daily scores of selfie-takers posing in front of their ornate **Rimondi Fountain**. Originally, animals drank from the smaller of the three basins fed by water flowing from lions' heads.

At the southern entrance to the old quarter, the arched stone **Porta Guora** gate is the only remnant of the Venetian city wall. And don't miss the grand three-storey palazzo at 154 Arkadio St.

## Museums

### COMPELLING ART AND PYGMY HIPPOS

Rethymno's sweep of history and culture also plays out in its museums. The highlight of the dusty old **Paleontological Museum** is the displays of fossilised tusks and bones from the dwarf Cretan elephant and pygmy hippopotamus. Both were endemic to the Rethymno region before becoming extinct around 12,000 years ago. The museum is in the restored 17th-century Temple of Mastaba (aka Veli Pasha Mosque).

The cornerstone of the collection of the **Museum of Contemporary Art** is the works of local painter Leferis Kanakakis. Other works represent the arc of art in Greece since the 1950s. On a hot day, it's literally a cool stop.

In a lovely 17th-century Venetian mansion, the five-room **Historical & Folk Art Museum** embodies its name with exhibits on rural Cretan life.

## Traditional Bakeries

### FILLO DOUGH AND DINOSAURS

You can taste Rethymno's traditions in its historic bakeries. Yiorgos Hatziparaskos and his family are some of the last traditional filo masters in all of Greece. They still make superfine pastry by hand in his **bakery workshop**, which is through a Venetian doorway.

Watch the spectacle when they whirl the dough into a giant bubble before stretching it over a huge table, and try some of the sublime baklava and *kataifi* ('angel hair' pastry).



## WHERE TO DRINK IN RETHYMNO

### Chalikouti

Under a quilt of bougainvillaea, this cooperative-run cafe serves organic Cretan wines and raki.

### Bricks Beers & Tales

Shaded by palms, choose from dozens of top Greek microbrews.

### Monitor

Tables of loquacious partiers spill out onto both sides of the street.

## TURKISH WOODEN BALCONIES

Although there's plenty to attract your gaze at eye level in Rethymno, make sure to look up from time to time. Among the surprises you may see is one of the city's enduring architectural details: Turkish wooden balconies. Dating as far back as the 18th century, they boast large multi-paned windows and hang right over the streets in the old quarter.

Elaborately carved supports add interest. Their exact purpose is debated, although one theory is that they were added to old Venetian mansions by wealthy Turks so that their wives could take the sun without being seen from the street.

You'll see them in all states of repair, from rotting away to newly restored. A good place to start your search is at the small plaza in front of the Church of Our Lady of Angels.



**Rimondi Fountain**

A couple of streets north and hidden away on an alley, **Spanoiakakis bakery** has been at it since 1958. As well as freshly baked pastries, it's famous for its bread shaped like dinosaurs and flamingos, as well as *kouloures*, a lacquered, intricately decorated (but inedible) embroidered bread.

This fading tradition has its roots in Crete. Each design is symbolic: pomegranates bring luck; trees, longevity; and rings, an eternal bond. All are part of the original Greek wedding cake.



## GETTING AROUND

The historic quarter of Rethymno is mostly car-free and best enjoyed on foot. It's fairly compact and the distances are short. Parking is always a problem; try the huge lot east of the Municipal Park or the pay lot on Kriari, which generally has room.

The bus station is at the western edge of the commercial centre and is a minor hike from the historic quarter.





## Beyond Rethymno

Put Rethymno in your rear-view mirror as you discover the deeply symbolic places, fine crafts, traditional food and surprises to the south.

Rethymno's mountainous hinterland offers lots of compelling routes and detours. In a single day you can easily combine a visit to the iconic Moni Arkadiou with a stop at the pottery village of Margarites while also taking in the ruins of ancient Eleutherna.

To the southwest, the villages in the foothills of the Lefka Ori (White Mountains) make for a lovely drive. The main destination is the mountain village of Argyproupoli, built on an ancient settlement and famous for its springs and waterfalls.

As you drive the back roads across the folds of the landscape, you'll discover even smaller villages, family-run tavernas with sweeping views, and much more.

### TOP TIP

If you like sweet treats, vendors dot the region's roads selling honey made from local wild thyme.

### Moni Arkadiou



GEORGIOS KRITSOTAKIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

## Historic Monastery

PASTORAL MEMORIAL TO CRETE'S SOUL

The 16th-century **Moni Arkadiou**, 23km southeast of Rethymno, has deep significance for the Cretan people. As the site where hundreds of cornered locals massacred both themselves and invading Turks, it's a stark and potent symbol of resistance and is considered a catalyst for the island's struggle towards freedom from Turkish occupation.

In November 1866 massive Ottoman forces arrived to crush island-wide revolts. Hundreds of Cretan men, women and children fled their villages to find shelter at Arkadiou. However, the monastery was soon besieged by 2000 Turkish soldiers. Rather than surrender, the entrapped locals blew up stored gunpowder kegs, killing nearly everyone, Turks included. An **ossuary** with skulls and bones of the 1866 victims arranged in a glass cabinet is just outside the monastery.

Arkadiou's impressive **Venetian church** (1587) features a striking Renaissance facade topped by an ornate triple-belled tower. A profusion of roses and olive trees fill the lush grounds, and a small **museum** holds fascinating exhibits on the preservation of old vestments.

Moving around the cloistered monastery, it's impossible to escape the events of 1866. The austere refectory was a scene of slaughter while remains of the **gunpowder magazine** feature a moving mural under the open sky.

## Ancient Eleutherna

COMPELLING RUINS AND A GREAT MUSEUM

Only 25km southeast of Rethymno, the archaeological site of **Ancient Eleutherna** was a Dorian-built settlement that was among the most important in the 8th and 7th centuries BCE. It also experienced heydays in Hellenistic and Roman times.

The most easily accessible section of the confusing and sprawling site is the **acropolis**, with the remains of a tower atop a long, narrow ridge behind a taverna. From here, an uneven, overgrown path leads down to vast and forbidding **Roman cisterns** carved into the hills and, further along, to a **Hellenistic bridge**.

Down in the valleys flanking the ridge, active digs include the 2800-year-old **Necropolis of Orthi Petra** to the west, where findings have produced evidence of human sacrifice. A small road running north from the village of **Katsivelos** (a fine stop if you need coffee) accesses the heart of the ancient city, which is the current focus of archaeologists. From here, there's a trail with great views of the city site up to the Acropolis.

## ADVENTURES NEAR RETHYMNO

Explore Rethymno's landscape at sites close to the city.

Only 7km south of Rethymno, lush, leafy **Mili Gorge** is a popular, 4km hike that follows a stream. You'll encounter stone houses from an abandoned village, 16th-century Venetian watermills and a church built into a cliff.

Continuing on into the countryside, embedded in rolling hills near the village of Adele, about 13km southeast of Rethymno, **Agreco Farm** is a replica of a 17th-century estate and a showcase of centuries-old, organic and eco-friendly farming methods. It uses mostly traditional machinery, including a donkey-driven olive press and a watermill.

You'll also find small shops selling local produce and artwork, plus a fenced area with *kri-kri* (Cretan goats) and wild boar. Some tours end in a 30-course feast.

The farm is usually open from May to October, but be sure to check ahead.



## WHERE TO EAT BEYOND RETHYMNO

### Veranda Cafe-Taverna

Sip a homemade lemonade, savouring the views and traditional cooking in Margarites. €€

### Watermills Valley Myle Cafe

Near the end point of the Mili Gorge hike, beloved for (cold!) drinks and fare aimed at hikers. €

### Tavern Arhaia Lappa

Daily specials cooked on a wood-fired grill in Argyroupoli. Try the deep-fried peppers. €€



## MARGARITES' POTTERY SHOPS

Cheerfully drawing from what's described locally as '7000 years of pottery history', the workshops of Margarites do more with the local clay than most people could imagine. Among the dozens of shops, the following are favourites; note that many shops are only open from Orthodox Easter to October.

### Keramion

Much of Keramion's pottery is created using Minoan techniques and designs, and is fired in wood, resulting in a brown finish.

### Ilys

Ilys is an explosion of colour. Brightly glazed housewares and whimsical items line the shelves. Watch Manolis at work at his wheel, from where he's happy to share his local knowledge.

### Gallios

Down a side road at the top of the village (look for the sign 'Ceramic Art'), Konstantinos Gallios makes beautiful pieces at his namesake shop.



JACOSIAV MORAWICZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Pottery shop, Margarites

Excavations have been ongoing at Eleutherna since 1985 and archaeologists continue to make new finds. Many of the treasures are showcased at the impressive **Museum of Ancient Eleutherna**, which provides great context for the site. Located 3km west from the ruins, the collection covers artefacts ranging from the early Iron Age and Minoan periods to the Hellenic, Roman and Byzantine eras. Its showpiece is a bronze shield with a protruding lion's head, dating to the 8th century BCE; it sits alongside a polished, gleaming replica of how it could have originally looked. The museum makes an essential first stop at Eleutherna as you can take a picture of the large, wall-mounted map of the site – a helpful detail missing from the spotty and rudimentary signage at the ruins.

## Village Full of Ceramics

### POTTERY WORKSHOPS AND VIEWS

Tiny **Margarites**, 26km southeast of Rethymno, is famous for its pottery, a tradition that can be traced back to Minoan times. The village has only one road and more than 20 ceramic shops and studios. Most studios source their clay locally by



## WHERE TO STAY BEYOND RETHYMNO

### Arcus Villas

Five luxe suites in a 14th-century Venetian home in the heart of Argyroupoli. €€€

### Kapsaliana Village

Once a hamlet whose olives supplied nearby Moni Arkadiou, the entire village is now stylish villas. €€

### Kouriton House

Beautifully restored 1750 stone manor with atmospheric rooms near Margarites. €€

hand (the area is known for its clay) and offer unique, bright, good-quality usable pieces.

Try to avoid mornings and lunchtime, when tour buses flood the town. By afternoon, all is calm and you can explore the atmospheric alleyways, wander through the studios and enjoy wonderful valley views from the eucalyptus-lined taverna terraces on the main square.

## Traditional Maroulas

### EVOCATIVE GEM OF A VILLAGE

Just 10km drive southeast of Rethymno, **Maroulas** is a preserved village with panoramic sea views and excellent traditional tavernas. It has a mix of nicely restored late-Venetian and Turkish architecture, including 10 old olive presses. A 44m-high Venetian tower juts above the village and still has a vestige of its old drawbridge.

Just up from the main square, tiny **Marianna's Workshop** is run by Marianna Founti-Vassi. She collects aromatic medicinal herbs from the mountains to make teas and oils from natural extracts using traditional methods.

At the main square, down from the Orthodox church, is **Zamaros**, a cheesemaker known for its homemade halloumi, *graviera* (a type of yellow cheese) and summertime ice cream.

## Roman Ruins & Byzantine Churches

### INTRIGUING ARGYROUPOLI

Located 25km southwest of Rethymno, **Argyroupoli** is built on the ruins of the ancient city of Lappa, one of the most important Roman cities in western Crete and a one-time rival to Knossos. It's a riddle of cobblestone alleyways lined with Venetian-era stone houses and Byzantine churches.

The upper town's main square is dominated by the Venetian church of Agios Ionnis. Nearby, a Roman portal has the inscription 'Omnia Mundi Fumus et Umbra' (All things in this world are smoke and shadow).

Other don't-miss highlights include the Church of St Paraskevi, where the lid of a baby's sarcophagus now serves as the entrance step to the courtyard. Stop in at the atmospheric 13th-century Church of Panagia Barotsiani on your way down the lane to view the impressive 7000-piece Roman mosaic floor.

At the bottom of the town is a watery oasis formed by springs that keep the temperature cool here. Aside from tavernas, you'll find the overgrown remains of a Roman bath and St Mary's church, built atop a temple dedicated to Poseidon.



### LOCAL LUNCHES

Some of Crete's best restaurants for traditional meals can be found in the villages across a broad swath of the hills south of Rethymno.

#### Maroulas

Maroulas is a prime town for a lunch break. From the centre, head up the hill to **Taverna Fantastiko**, which lives up to its name with fantastic views of the countryside from its expansive terrace. Most dishes use produce sourced from its farm. Just above the main square, relaxed **Taverna Mylopetra** is revered for its traditional foods. Nearby, lunches at **Katerina** can last for hours. An outdoor taverna with sublime sea views, the owner is a delightful character.

#### Episkopi

Meanwhile, in the village of Episkopi near Argyroupoli, vibrant **Garden Arkoudenas** serves organic meals amid fruit trees. The gracious family here define hospitality.



### WHERE TO SHOP BEYOND RETHYMNO

#### Agnofisi

In Koumou village, east of Argyroupoli, family-run farm selling olive oil, honey, pickled vegetables, herbal products, etc.

#### Lappa Avocado Shop

Across from Ancient Lappa in Argyroupoli; sells organic cold-pressed avocado oil and avocado-based unguents.

#### Creta Carob

Often peddled as a (disappointing) chocolate substitute, carob comes into its own here in Argyroupoli.



## REMEMBERING 1941

A little over 8km from Rethymno, the **Military Museum of Chromonastiri** offers a sobering account of the Battle of Crete – one of WWII's most notorious battles. It was waged in 1941 across the island, including here around the village of Chromonastiri.

The museum provides a day-by-day account of the conflict, mixed with graphic imagery and displays of the poignant personal effects of Allied and German soldiers. There's also a film of the dramatic German airborne invasion, which was the first large-scale use of paratroopers. The museum is run by the Greek military and soldiers in uniform double as tour guides.

Today, even the smallest town in Crete has a prominent WWII memorial listing the citizens and partisans killed during the nearly four years of fighting.



Military Museum of Chromonastiri

## Ancient Minoan Tombs

### PEER INTO ANCIENT CRETE

South of Rethymno, the **Late Minoan Cemetery** in Armeni was created by the Minoans between 1600 and 1150 BCE. You can practically sense the presence of uncounted souls once buried in the more than 200 rock-cut tombs.

Today the tombs' *dromos* (long, sunken corridors) are open for exploration – tombs 159 and 200 are particularly impressive.

Some of the grave offerings unearthed at Armeni – including pottery, bronze ornaments, weapons, jewellery and a boar's-tusk helmet – are now at Rethymno's Archaeological Museum (p101).



## GETTING AROUND

Eleutherna is 7km east of Moni Arkadiou, and the pair are close to Margarites. The trio is one of the most popular day trips from Rethymno.

Most of the towns see at least a couple of buses per day, which use Rethymno as a hub, making it hard to move laterally across the region. However in summer, tour buses ply the most popular routes.



# PANORMO



Panormo is one of the few relatively unspoilt beach towns on the northern coast. Despite a couple of big hotel complexes, it retains an unhurried, authentic village feel with a very old centre that's compact and charming. In summer, concerts and other events are held in a carob mill turned cultural centre.

Coins unearthed in Panormo indicate that a village flourished here between the 1st and 9th centuries CE, but the only in situ evidence from this period is the crumbling bits and pieces of the 6th-century **Basilica of Aghia Sophia** on the slopes above the village.

For wonderful views overlooking Panormo's port and waterfront, head up the hill to a tiny segment of stone wall that's all that remains of the 13th-century fortress **Castel Milopotamo**. It's believed to have been built by the Genoese during their fleeting rule in 1206 before the Venetians took over.

## TOP TIP

The dry, brown land up and down the coast from Panormo is riddled with generic holiday apartment complexes located far from any points of interest. Stay in or near the town centre to at least get a sense of Greek village life.



### HIGHLIGHTS

1 Paralia Beach

### SIGHTS

2 Castel Milopotamo

### ACTIVITIES

3 Atlantis Diving Centre

### EATING

4 Angira

5 George & Georgia's

6 To Steki Tou Sifaki

### DRINKING

7 Elia Cafe



## BEST EATING & DRINKING IN PANORMO

### George & Georgia's

Husband-and-wife team George and Georgia serve superb homestyle Cretan food; book to get a table in summer. €€

### To Steki Tou Sifaki

Another standout taverna in the village centre. Huge trees provide shade on the small square. €€

### Angira

Seafood doesn't get any fresher than at this taverna right at the harbour. Good for sunset glow. €€

### Elia Cafe

Relax with your beverage of choice at the town's top coffee venue. Tables line the narrow lane. €

### Dalabelos Estate

A luxe holiday rental complex 5km south of town. Fabulous lunches worth the short trip. €€



Dalabelos Estate

## Pretty Beaches

PICK A COVE, ANY COVE

There's no one main beach in Panormo but a series of small, attractive coves with brown sand and a brilliant turquoise sea. The tiny swoop of sand at the harbour, with its calm waters, is perfect for families. It's within a minuscule walk of cafes, tavernas and – perhaps crucially – ice-cream vendors.

Ignoring a large resort to the west, **Paralia Beach** has a pastoral feel with trees back from the water providing shade, and just a few loungers scattered about. If the beautiful water lures you under, **Atlantis Diving Centre** in the resort runs trips up and down the coast to dozens of sites.

For isolation, narrow **Koukistres Beach** is in a tiny cove backed by cliffs. It's a hot 4.5km walk east from town. You can reduce that distance by driving part way but the last stretch is 4WD-only. That means that even in summer you may have this vendor-free strand to yourself.



## WHAT TO DO IN PANORMO

### Tourist Train

Kids and less-mobile folks enjoy scooting around town on this faux choo-choo train.

### Aitidis Travel

Offers tours and excursions across the region, some by foot and bike.

### Atlantis Diving Centre

Leads tours underwater and offers courses and certification for all levels.

## DINING & NIGHTLIFE

The touristy harbour tavernas in Panormo serve standard Greek and international dishes as well as fresh fish. If you want more authentic Cretan fare, more traditional places can be found a block or two inland.

Panormo isn't known as a party town, but if you're after a drink the tavernas overlooking the picturesque waterfront are hard to beat.



Vineyard near Rethymno

## Taste Award-Winning Wine

### DRINK LOCAL, BUY LOCAL

Despite Iraklio's profile as Crete's main wine producer, Rethymno was the first place in Greece to be named a 'European City of Wine' (2018).

Much of the credit for this honour goes to the hard-working **Klados** family, who are hailed for their very drinkable Vidiano, a dry white produced from grapes grown only in this area, some 2km east of town.

On a visit, you'll get to taste their full range of organic reds, whites and rosés.



Cretan wine



## GETTING AROUND

If you're staying in or near the centre, you can enjoy your stay without wheels. For a day trip

out to the hinterlands, you can rent a car for a day or two.

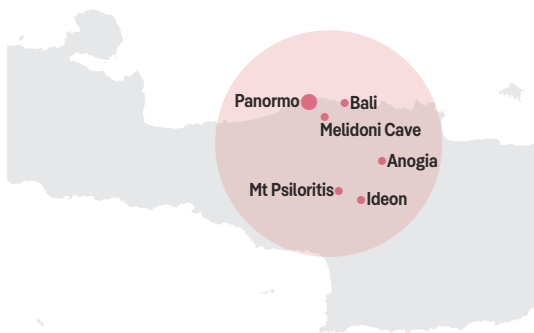


# Beyond Panormo

To the east, beaches are more crowded, while inland is the island's musical soul and Crete's highest peak.

East of Panormo, Crete's Bali once had one of the most stunning settings on the north coast. And the filigreed coast of caves and beaches is still there somewhere under decades of massive development. If hugely popular resort areas are your thing, you'll enjoy the watersports, beach tavernas and night-time partying at Livadi and Varkotopo Beaches.

Inland from Panormo couldn't be any more different, with stoic villages dotting the ever-higher hillsides.



## TOP TIP

Anogia is an historic hillside village famed for folk music, and a good place to try *ofto* (flame-grilled lamb or goat).

## Mt Psiloritis



GP PHOTO/RENDUS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

## Rainy-Day Diversion

NATURAL BEAUTY WITH A SOMBRE PAST

Close to Panormo, the cathedral-like **Melidoni Cave** is a geological wonderland with a dark history: it was the site of an 1824 massacre during the Turkish occupation.

## Deeply Traditional Village

THE ESSENCE OF THE CRETAN SPIRIT

Perched beside Mt Psiloritis, 38km southeast of Panormo, **Anogia** is a wonderful glimpse of authentic rural Cretan life. Here locals cling to time-honoured traditions and it's the norm to see men gossiping in the *kafeneia* (coffeehouses) while elderly women sell traditional woven blankets and embroidered textiles. The town's turbulent history – it was the centre of resistance in WWII – has instilled a legacy of rebelliousness and determination.

Anogia is known for its stirring folk music and is the birthplace of a large number of Crete's best-known musicians, such as the legendary Nikos Xylouris (1936–80).

## Mountain Climbing

CRETE'S LOFTIEST PEAK

At 2456m, **Mt Psiloritis** (also known as Mt Ida) is Crete's highest peak. At its eastern base is the **Nida Plateau** (1400m), a wide, fertile expanse reached via a paved 21km-long road from Anogia. The road passes several round stone *mitata* (traditional shepherds' huts).

From the Nida Plateau it's a short walk to the **Ideon Cave** (1538m). Also on the plateau is **Andartis**, an impressive landscape sculpture honouring the WWII Cretan resistance.

If you're planning to do some mountaineering on Psiloritis, know that conditions can change quickly. The classic route to the summit follows the east–west E4 European Path and in summer can be hiked in a round trip of about seven hours. Note: the views from the summit may be marred by haze or cloud cover.

### BIRTHPLACE OF ZEUS – MAYBE?

Although just a huge and fairly featureless hole in the ground on Mt Psiloritis, **Ideon** has sacred importance in mythology as the place where Zeus was reared by his mother, Rhea, to save him from the clutches of his child-devouring father, Cronos. Some also believe it's where he died and is buried.

Only spoilsports will note that Dikteon Cave in Lassithi makes the same claim. Ideon is 15km from Anogia; it's a 1km uphill walk along a rocky path from the parking lot. In winter (and sometimes until May) the cave entrance can be blocked by snow.



### GETTING AROUND

Bali is right on – really right on – the main Hania–Rethymno–Iraklio highway. It's spread out and it's a long and undulating walk from one end to the other – 25 minutes or more.

Tackling the mountains up to and including Mt Psiloritis requires your own vehicle, although there are a couple of buses a day from Rethymno to Anogia.



# SPILI

Spili is a charming mountain village with cobbled streets, big old plane trees and flower-festooned whitewashed houses. Most people just stop for lunch on a trip between Rethymno and the south coast but longer stays are rewarding. The rugged and unusual Kourtaliotiko Gorge starts west of town.

Spili's centre is very compact. The main road may snake through a fair bit of development, but all that matters is within a 300m radius. The absolute highlight is the restored **Venetian fountain** that spurts water from 19 stone lion heads into a long trough. Fill up your own bottle with some of the island's best water, which gushes after rain. A walkway leads uphill to the village's picturesque back streets.

The **Folk Museum of Spili** holds a trove of treasures from bygone days, including a traditional kitchen from well over 200 years ago.



## TOP TIP

This sunny, lush region in Crete's interior is well worth at least a few nights' stay. It is a centre for hiking and the gateway to the deeply interesting Amari Valley.



### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Folk Museum of Spili
- 2 Maravel Garden
- 3 Venetian Fountain

### EATING

- 4 Maravel Garden Cafe
- 5 Platia Cafe
- 6 Taverna Sideratico



## BEST RESTAURANTS IN SPILI

### Taverna Sideratico

In an appealing location 500m south of town. There's no menu, so you'll be guided through the day's offerings by chef-owner-farmer Nico. €€

### Maravel Garden Cafe

Has a deck overlooking the gardens, serves fare grown on-site, as well as herb-infused iced tea and superfood smoothies. €€

### Platia Cafe

Perched above the Venetian fountain on a sunny terrace, and run by a well-regarded husband-and-wife culinary team. €€



Venetian fountain,  
Spili



Kourtaliotiko Gorge

## Fascinating Gorge Hike

### WET HIKING ON THE WILD SIDE

It's a paradox: one of Crete's more interesting gorges is also one of its least visited. **Kourtaliotiko Gorge** starts in the tiny village of Koxare, just 7km west of Spili. The trail within then runs for 3km down to the beach at Preveli (p124). Along the way it follows rushing rivers; there's even a spring-fed 40m-high waterfall at one point that plummets into a large pool that's pure pleasure for hot and weary hikers.

Tiny churches and groves of date palms dot the route. Experienced hikers will have no problems, with typical journey times of about 2½ hours. However, the less experienced should know that there is a significant amount of clambering up and over large boulders, and while the water is lovely, it's also a hazard that requires respect.



## WHERE TO STAY IN SPILI

### Hotel Herakles

Classic whitewashed small guesthouse in the heart of town; relax on the balconies. €

### Panorama Luxury Rooms

Modern and comfortable apartments in varying sizes with terraces and grand views; near the centre. €€

### Angela's River Paradise

Lives up to its name, just west of the centre in the lush, hilly countryside. €€

## SHUTTERBUG FAVOURITE

Spili is a pretty mountain village and shutterbug favourite thanks to its cobbled streets, big old plane trees and flower-festooned whitewashed houses.

Although most people just stop for lunch on a coast-to-coast trip, it's well worth staying a day or two to explore the trails weaving through the local mountains, which offer further fabulous photo ops.



V.ADMIR194/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Outdoor drinking and dining, Spili

## Botanical Gardens

HEADY SCENTS, LUSH BEAUTY

Otherwise known as the empire of Spili, **Maravel Garden** is on the western outskirts of town. Botanical gardens feature an aromatic variety of plant species from Crete and across the globe. Sit for a moment and let the heady scent of spearmint wash over you and your cares will disperse.

You're free to wander and check out the herbs and medicinal plants staff use to distil essential oils and produce the organic products sold in Maravel's shops here at the garden and in town near the fountain. In summer there are regular free concerts. And there's a hotel.



### GETTING AROUND

Spili is well connected to Rethymno by bus and is on the main route to Agia Galini. The compact town centre is only walkable, but you'll want a vehicle to reach Maravel Garden.

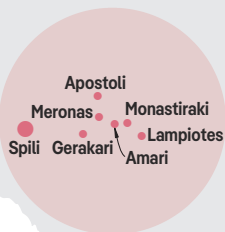
For Kourtaliotiko Gorge hikes, you'll need to arrange a taxi either to bring you back to Spili from Preveli or vice versa.



# Beyond Spili

Shadowed by Mt Psiloritis, the Amari Valley and surrounding region will delight any traveller who savours country roads and tiny villages.

Immediately east of Spili, the **Amari Valley** is a quilt of unspoilt villages punctuated by Byzantine churches and framed by olive groves and orchards. It's the verdant centre of a fertile region that has supported tiny farming villages for centuries. A tangle of narrow roads wanders between sights, but the omnipresent views are an experience of their own.



## TOP TIP

Cyclists will find the back roads challenging yet very rewarding. Drivers in small cars will be happiest.

## Amari Valley







## BEST EATS IN THE AMARI VALLEY

### Taverna Evgoritis

Small taverna just off Apostoli's village centre, owners proselytise for Cretan cuisine. €

### Moschovolies Taverna

Accented with flowers, a cosy stop for home cooking in Meronas. €

### Turn of Taste

Dine under a mulberry tree or on a cosy terrace just west of Fourfouras. €€

### Taverna Aravanes

Wonderful valley views in Thronos, plus traditional food cooked in a wood-fired oven as well as cooking classes. €€

### Alekos Kafeneio

Armeni's top lunch choice, small but superb daily selection of mains; don't miss the homemade sheep's-milk cheese. €€



CARO FROLICH ©

Moschovolies Taverna

## Green Quilt of Unspoilt Villages

### ANCIENT CHURCHES, HUGE VIEWS

Driving into the Amari Valley from Spili, the road to **Gerakari** is stark and rocky, with a remote grandeur. Gerakari was destroyed during WWII by the Germans, but it has been resurrected as a modern market town with the nicely frescoed 13th-century Church of Agios Ioannis.

In **Meronas**, the 14th-century Church of Maria and its frescoes are a highlight. Note the lavish royal blue altar vestments.

**Thronos** is a tidy one-taverna hamlet perched on a hillside. The Agia Panagia (Church of the Assumption) has extraordinary, if faded, 14th-century frescoes. The mosaics on its floor are even older, remnants of the much-larger 4th-century wood-framed basilica that Agia Panagia was built upon.

The valley's namesake, **Amari**, has an enchanting medley of Venetian buildings and a square framed with cafes and overflowing flowerpots. Climb the 19th-century bell tower to share beautiful views with the pigeons.

**Monastiraki**, home to a Minoan site, is poorly signposted, so ask for directions – and keys if it's locked. In **Lampio**, stop at the remains of the 7th-century Bizari Basilica (Rimokklisa), destroyed in 824 by the Arabs.



## GETTING AROUND

You'll need a good map to navigate around the Amari Valley, where few useful road signs exist and directional arrows may point two ways to the same destination.

A map app (download mapping data in advance) or GPS are essential.



# PLAKIAS



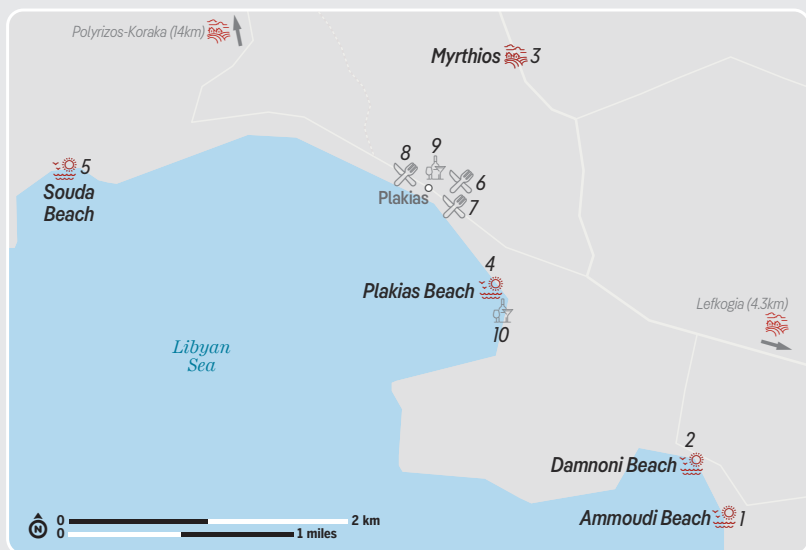
From the Rethymno–Agia Galini road, it's a fabulous drive through the rugged Kotsifou Gorge to Plakias, a laid-back travellers' favourite. While the village itself is bland, it's set beside a sweeping, sandy crescent of beach backed by soaring rocky escarpments. It's an excellent launch pad for regional excursions and hikes through olive groves, along seaside cliffs and to some sparkling hidden beaches.

Much of Plakias' accommodation is spread along its seafront promenade, ensuring that most visitors get a sea view. There are plenty of tavernas and cafes, many with prime locations on the beach. Owing to its mostly mature visitors and families, nightlife is sedate, although a few bars and cafes cater to the jovial masses.

Many travellers not on the package deals that so many are in Plakias still find the combination of mellow vibe with a good choice of diversions, activities and nightlife to be reason enough to wash ashore here longer than they intended.

## TOP TIP

Don't just bring your bathing suit to Plakias, but bring some good hiking shoes or sandals as well. From town you can set out into the rocky peaks that make Plakias' setting so dramatic. On the coast, you can access one beach after another.



### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Ammoudi Beach
- 2 Damnoni Beach
- 3 Myrthios
- 4 Plakias Beach
- 5 Souda Beach

### EATING

- 6 L'Etoile du Sud
- 7 Lysseos
- 8 Tasomanolis

### DRINKING

- 9 Armyriki
- 10 Mes Tin Ammo Beach Bar



## BEST RESTAURANTS & BARS IN PLAKIAS

### Tasomanolis

Nautical-themed family taverna with a colourful patio and seafood caught locally. €€

### Lysseos

Unfussy restaurant with its own herb garden and excellent homestyle fare. €€

### Mes Tin Ammo Beach Bar

One of few bars right on the sand, has a thatched roof vibe towards the beach's north end. €

### L'Etoile du Sud

Tables in a garden back from the beach; the menu offers a break from taverna clichés. €€

### Armyriki

Bar overlooking tide pools; the outdoor tables get good sunset ambience. €



LEONIS /SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Plakias Beach

## A Beach for Everyone

### FROM LIVELY TO UNTROD

Nearly 1km long, **Plakias Beach** has a split personality: near the centre the beach is narrow and busy, while to the south the sand widens out, there is little development and the views of the buttressing rocky outcrop are fabulous.

To the southeast are some superb beaches, all under 5km from Plakias. Most are reached by narrow roads radiating out from the tourist hamlet of **Lefkogia**, which has some good cafes.

**Ammoudi Beach** is an idyllic Eden, even in busy August. Set in a cove, it features powdery sand, plenty of shade, a taverna renting watersports gear and easy parking. One cove north, **Damnoni Beach** is more developed but pleasant out of high season.

## Activities On- & Offshore

### WATERSPORTS, HIKING AND DIVING

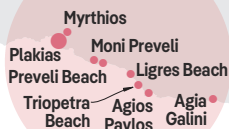
Several diving operators run shore and boat dives to nearby rocky bays, caves and canyons. It's easy to rent gear for **windsurfing and SUP** on all but the most isolated beaches; the wind is often strong. Popular **hiking** paths include an easy 30-minute uphill jaunt to Myrthios and a 4km adventure around the knoll to Damnoni Beach.



## GETTING AROUND

Small boats link Plakias to Damnoni Beach and other sandy coves to the south.

A scooter or e-bike would be ideal for seeking out hidden coves in the area. Otherwise, Plakias town is completely walkable.



# Beyond Plakias

Beaches are the main draw here, but the mountains also offer stunning scenery.

The coast south of Plakias is dotted with marvellously isolated beachy coves all the way to Agia Galini. Highlights include the famous palm beach at Preveli. Frequent summertime winds help keep the area from being overrun (except Agia Galini) while giving windsurfers and paddle boarders great joy.

Approaching from the north, the scenery becomes increasingly dramatic and takes in marvellous views of the Libyan Sea. The road to Preveli travels via the equally spectacular Kourtaliotiko Gorge. The monastery at Preveli is a popular stop.

Foodies will want to visit Myrthios, which has renowned tavernas.

## TOP TIP

Have plenty of water and anything else you might need at hand for when you find the isolated beach of your dreams.

## Moni Preveli (p125)





## BEST RESTAURANTS BEYOND PLAKIAS

### Taverna Panorama

Shaded terrace in Myrthios with intoxicating views. Farm-fresh homestyle cooking including don't-miss apple pie. €€

### Restaurant Vrisi

In Myrthios, serves delicious Cretan cuisine with panache. Tables on a secluded patio; service is first rate. €€€

### Taverna Gefyra

Tree-shaded tables in Preveli. Has a view of the river and a stone bridge built by local monks. €€

### Sleepy Dragon

Contemporary cafe with a clifftop patio and views overlooking the bay in Agios Pavlos. Great for breakfast. €€

### Kantina O Petros

Behind Damnoni Beach, small trailer serving excellent Greek fast food; tables under olive trees. €



GEORGIOS TSICHLOS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Preveli Beach

## Savour the Sand

### BEACHES, FAMOUS AND OBSCURE

**Preveli Beach** is one of Crete's most famous strands (and is also known as Palm Beach). At the mouth of the Kourtaliotiko Gorge (p117), where the river Megalopotamos empties into the Libyan Sea, the palm-lined riverbanks have freshwater pools good for a dip. The beach is backed by rugged cliffs and punctuated by a made-for-selfies heart-shaped boulder at the water's edge.

The main beach area has the usual umbrella and snack vendors. There's no permanent village, so out of season the entire area is nearly devoid of people. It's a steep 1km walk down from the car park, but once you reach the bottom it's worth walking a bit more as the furthest reaches are some of the most appealing and sandiest. Some of the best stretches are beyond an ankle-deep river flow.

Now the bad news: in summer, Preveli can be jammed to the point of misery. The access road and parking area get coagulated with rental cars filled with impatient holidaymakers. At these times, consider instead the uncrowded beaches near Plakias and southeast towards Agios Pavlos.



## WHERE TO STAY BEYOND PLAKIAS

### Stefanos Village

On the northern outskirts of Myrthios, sprawling hillside hotel with luxe rooms and views. €€€

### Villa Maria

Waves and a rushing creek are the soundtrack at this family-run pension on an isolated beach near Ligres. €€

### Pavlos' Place

Right above the beach in Triopetra, a perfect chill spot. Rooms shun TVs but have wi-fi. €€

A little over 8km southeast of Preveli, serene Ligres Beach has a long sweep of greyish sand with some good swimming. Access is via a tiny, winding road.

On a good day, the long, brown-sand beach at **Triopetra** is a real crowd-pleaser, featuring magnificent crystal-clear waters. However, it's often buffeted by winds. Instead, the attraction here is more about an unhurried pace of life with unassuming pensions and tavernas.

Cradled by cliffs, **Agios Pavlos** is little more than a couple of tavernas with rooms set around a picture-perfect crescent with dark, coarse sand backed by dunes, and the distinctive silhouette of Paximadia Island looming offshore. If it gets crowded, escape to the beaches behind Cape Melissa. A steep staircase at the bay's western end leads up the cape to some intricately pleated multi-hued rock formations.

For the beaches west of Agios Pavlos, be aware that getting there involves a scramble down (and up) a steep sand dune; bring water and snacks, since there are no facilities.

## Refuge of Legends

WHERE ICARUS AND DAEDALUS FLED

One of southern Crete's most touristy seaside towns, the erstwhile fishing village of Agia Galini is a handy base for exploring miles of remote beaches and mountain villages. But it's also grievously overdeveloped, which has diluted much of its original charm.

The town can feel claustrophobic in high season. But if you're thinking of an escape, don't emulate its two most famous characters: in Greek mythology, Agia Galini is where Icarus and Daedalus are believed to have taken their ill-fated flight from Crete. The moment is marked at the far-western end of the harbour, where you'll find statues depicting the two preparing for the journey at the hilltop amphitheatre.

### MONI PREVELI

Historic Moni Preveli cuts an imposing silhouette high above the Libyan Sea. It consists of the ruined lower monastery of St John the Baptist, and the upper monastery of St John the Theologian.

Like most Cretan monasteries, Preveli was a centre of resistance during the Turkish occupation and also played a key role in WWII, hiding trapped Allied soldiers from the Nazis until they could escape to Egypt by submarine.

A small museum features exquisite icons and embroidered vestments. But it's really the view from this isolated bluff that entrances.



### ICARUS & DAEDALUS

Learn more about mythical master craftsman Daedalus, father to Icarus, who designed the Palace of Knossos (p140).



### GETTING AROUND

In summer, small boats linking beaches and coves along the southern coast are the way to go. Roads and parking areas can get clogged. Reaching remote coves can require long and winding (but scenic and thrilling!) drives off the main road.

Agios Pavlos and Triopetra have 13km and 12km access roads respectively.

Agia Galini is well-linked by bus to Rethymno, Iraklio and Matala. Otherwise, you can walk everywhere.





ANDREI NERASSOV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Above: Church of Agios Titos (p135), Iraklio; right: Matala (p152)

# IRAKLIO

## MINOANS, MYTHS & WINE COUNTRY



Big-city charm, mysterious ruins, rows of vines marching up rolling hillsides and storied beaches: welcome to Crete's heartland.

Iraklio is Crete's most dynamic province, home to almost half the island's population and its top-rated tourist site, the Minoan Palace of Knossos. Priceless treasures unearthed at Knossos and other sites such as Phaestos and Gortyna are displayed at the unmissable Heraklion Archaeological Museum, the globally famous gem of the region's eponymous capital city. Bustling and down-to-earth, Iraklio boasts thriving cafe, restaurant and nightlife scenes and has some fun shopping in its mostly pedestrianised historic centre.

The coastal stretch east of Iraklio, with Hersonisos as its hub, is given over almost entirely to package tourism – with nonstop partying in a near continuous band of hotels and resorts. Just

inland, though, hillside villages sweetly lost in time provide pleasing contrast while cave explorations add a delightfully eerie element to your holiday adventures.

South of Iraklio you can taste the sophisticated tipple produced in Iraklio Wine Country, get acquainted with 'Zorba the Greek' writer Nikos Kazantzakis, hike up sacred Mt Yiouhtas or watch a potter create Minoan-style jars.

A worthwhile side trip as you head south across the fertile Messara Plain is Zaros, a rustic village in the foothills of Crete's highest mountain, Psiloritis. On the quieter southern coast, the ex-hippie hang-out of Matala is the only developed beach town, while in the hinterland village life unfolds in a charmingly unhurried way.



GEORGIOS TSCHIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

### THE MAIN AREAS

#### IRAKLIO

Energetic capital  
**p132**

#### ARHANES

Wine and antiquity  
**p143**

#### MATALA

Beaches and ruins  
**p152**

#### HERSONISOS

Party central  
**p164**

# Find Your Way

From the eponymous capital and the coastal tourist centres in the north, Iraklio segues into hilly wine country and the fertile Messara Plain down to the rugged Asterousia range rising up above the southern shore, all experienced in just a 65km, two-hour drive.

*Sea of Crete*



## Iraklio, p132

Crete's dynamic capital captivates with authentic urban flair, one of Greece's best archaeological museums, and a foodie and nightlife scene that keeps it real.

## Hersonisos, p164

A quintessential tourist town complete with a beach promenade lined with hotels, bars and restaurants; family-friendly waterparks and easy escapes to tranquil hamlets in the hills.



### CAR

Hitting the road with your own wheels is the best way to explore Iraklio, especially if you want to discover the many pockets of charm away from the main communities. The E75 highway runs along the north coast, and there are major roads heading south to Knossos, Iraklio Wine Country and coastal Matala.



### WALKING

Be wary if driving in villages: the often narrow historic streets were not made for cars. It's best to park at the entrance to any village and get around on foot.



### BUS

Iraklio has one of the densest bus networks on Crete, with all major communities served regularly in summer. Service is especially frequent from the capital to Hersonisos and Malia along the north coast. The schedule thins out notably in the off season and on weekends.

## Arhanes, p143

A hub of the Iraklio Wine Country, this charismatic village is cradled by not only vineyards but also by Minoan sites and a mountain steeped in mythology.



Chrissi Island  
(Gaidouronisi)



# Plan Your Time

Iraklio is like an overstuffed sandwich with tonnes of tasty morsels packed between its two coasts. Enjoy cosmopolitan Iraklio, meet the Minoans, sample superb wine, tackle rugged gorges and relax at dreamy beaches.



GEORGIOS TSICHLIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Knossos (p140)



## Seasonal Highlights

Festival season peaks in summer, while spring and autumn are perfect for hiking and island explorations. Autumn also brings wine and raki celebrations. In winter, locals have Crete to themselves.



### JANUARY

Visit Crete's blockbuster sights like Knossos and the Heraklion Archaeological Museum **without the crowds.**



### MAY

The mild temperatures and profusion of wildflowers and herbs make this the perfect month for **hiking and gorge walks.**



### JULY

July spoils the region with the **Dafnes Wine and Thrapsano Pottery Festivals**, as well as the start of the high-calibre **Iraklio Summer Festival.**

## If You Only Have One Day

- With one day only, focus your explorations on Iraklio (p132) and Knossos (p140). Fuel up with strong coffee and bougatsa at Kirkor (p135) overlooking Morosini Fountain, then make a beeline to the Heraklion Archaeological Museum (p132) to stand in awe of the Minoan artistry before the crowds arrive. Decompress on a walk (p135) along the waterfront and through the historic centre, then refuel on Greek bistro fare at Apiri (p134).
- Deepen your appreciation of the Minoans on a spin around the **Palace of Knossos** (p140), ideally arriving after 3pm when the tour buses have left. Wrap up the day with a slow-food gourmet dinner at **Peskesi** (p134).



## Three Days Around Iraklio

● After a day in Iraklio and Knossos, you've earned some R&R. Point the compass south for Matala (p152) to laze on the beach below the caves where hippies hung out in the 1960s. Max on relaxation over a pre-dinner cocktail at a waterfront tavern before watching a magical sunset over a fish dinner at Scala (p153).

● Heading back towards Iraklio, give your nose and tastebuds a workout on Crete's famous vintages in **Iraklio Wine Country** (p147). Soak up the wine with a leisurely lunch at **Bakaliko** (p144) in pretty Arhanes, then get your intellectual fix at the **Nikos Kazantzakis Museum** (p149).

## If You Have More Time

● Lucky you, with more than just a few days you have time to embark on such adventures as driving up Mt Yiouhtas (p145) where the ancients believed Zeus to be buried, hiking down rugged Agiofarango Gorge (p160) to a secluded beach, or braving the mountain road leading to the remote hamlet of Kapetaniana (p162).

● Foodies should feast on trout in Zaros (p150) and stock up on local herbs at Botano (p160).

● Ruin groupies, meanwhile, can feed their cravings at countless sites, including the Minoan palace of **Phaestos** (p157) and the Roman town of **Gortyna** (p158).



### AUGUST

The **Assumption of the Virgin** on 15 August is a major religious holiday celebrated with church services followed by a huge feast.



### SEPTEMBER

Winds die down, the sea is still warm and the **harvest** of sun-plump grapes kicks into high gear.



### NOVEMBER

**Raki distilling** hits its peak in November with raucous festivals called **rakokazana** all over, including Pitsidia.



### DECEMBER

Christmas time can be magical when streets are decorated and a **Christmas market** takes over Plateia Eleftherias in Iraklio.

# IRAKLIO



Crete's capital, Iraklio (also called Heraklion), is Greece's fifth-largest city and the island's economic and administrative hub. It's also home to one of Crete's blockbuster sights: the must-see Heraklion Archaeological Museum, which – together with the nearby Palace of Knossos – provides a fascinating window into the island's ancient past.

Though not pretty in a conventional way, Iraklio definitely grows on you if you take the time to explore its layers and wander its backstreets. You'll discover a low-key urban sophistication with a thriving cafe and restaurant scene, good shopping and bustling nightlife. A revitalised waterfront invites strolling, and the pedestrianised historic centre is punctuated with bustling squares flanked by buildings from the time when Christopher Columbus first set sail.

Called Candia back then, and under Venetian rule, the city became a centre for the arts and home to painters such as Damaskinos and El Greco. The magnificent Koules fortress and many of the great public buildings and lofty churches in the historic centre date to this period.

## ORIENTATION

Iraklio's historic centre is hemmed in by the harbour and the old city walls. Its main thoroughfare, 25 Avgoustou, skirts the Plateia Venizelou (also called Lion Sq after its landmark fountain). Cafes and bars cluster east of here towards the Archaeological Museum and central Plateia Eleftherias.

## Treasures of the Ancients

### DEEP DIVE INTO THE PAST

Snake goddesses, bull leapers and the Prince of the Lilies are among the intriguing characters you'll encounter in the essential **Heraklion Archaeological Museum**. Even if archaeology exhibits don't usually excite you, do not skip this one!

The museum's 27 rooms show off the most beautiful and well-preserved pieces of art and artefacts unearthed on Crete – pottery to jewellery, sarcophagi to frescoes – spanning 5500 years from the Neolithic period (7000 BCE) to Roman times (200 CE). A spin around here will greatly enhance your understanding of Cretan history, help put any archaeological site in Crete in context and bring to life both aspects of daily life and the development of Cretan societies.

Pride of place goes to a **Minoan collection** of unparalleled richness, which takes up the entire ground and part of the upper floor. Pieces are grouped chronologically and by themes such as settlements, trade, death, religion and administration.

Top 10 must-see lists usually include the tiny golden bee pendant from Malia (room II), the elaborate Kamarese tableware (room III), an ivory-and-crystal-inlaid draughts board (room V), the famous Phaistos disc (room V), a delicate bull-leaper sculpture (room VI), the buxom snake goddesses and the stone bull's head (both room VIII), Linear B clay tablets (room IX), a painted sarcophagus (room XII) and the famous frescoes in room XIII upstairs.

### GOOD TO KNOW

- Rooms are colour coded with displays arranged both chronologically and thematically and presented with English descriptions.
- Allow at least two hours for this extraordinary collection.
- Visit after 3pm when it's less busy.
- Save with the combined ticket to Knossos, valid on three consecutive days.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- 1** Agios Markos Basilica
- 2** Breakwater
- 3** Church of Agios Titos

- 4** Heraklion Archaeological Museum
- 5** Historical Museum of Crete
- 6** Iraklio Market

- 7** Kotsanas Museum
- 8** Koules
- 9** Lakkos
- 10** Loggia
- 11** Morosini Fountain

- 12** O Kafenes Tou Kagiampi
- 13** Plateia Eleftherias
- 14** Plateia Kornarou



## BEST RESTAURANTS IN IRAKLIO

### Peskesi

Culinary magic forged from family-farm ingredients and served amid relaxed sophistication in a candlelit Venetian mansion. €€

### Thigaterra

Rustic-elegant slow food champion in Ammoudara Beach gives traditional Greek dishes the next-gen workout. €€

### Vourvouladiko

Crisp Turkish-infused Cretan cuisine in an enchanted Lakkos garden with jukebox and historic photographs. €€

### Apiri

Handsome bistro with a tightly curated menu of modern Greek cuisine, cocktails and craft beer. €€



D. RYAN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

### Loggia

Items displayed in the remaining upstairs rooms and two more on the ground cover the period from the early Stone Age to the Roman period and would be the pride of every other museum but here pale in comparison to the magnificence of the Minoan objects.

## Glorious Venetian Vestiges

### STROLL IRAKLIO'S HISTORIC CENTRE

This scenic walking tour through Iraklio's car-free old centre kicks off on **Plateia Eleftherias** next to the Heraklion Archaeological Museum (p132). Start off by wandering along Dedalou, the main shopping street. Arriving at always bustling **Plateia Venizelou**, you should sample the local treat *bougatsa* at one of the side-by-side cafes Phyllosofies or Korkor, which both provide front-row views of the landmark **Morosini Fountain**. Ringed by four water-spouting lions, the fountain was built in 1628 to dispense fresh water brought in by an aqueduct from the nearby mountains.



## WHERE TO STAY IN IRAKLIO

### Intra Muros Hostel

Family-run, central hostel with air-conditioned dorms, a fully equipped communal kitchen and a veranda for socialising. €

### Pagopoieion Suites by Enorme

Stylish adult-only retreat comes with plenty of elbow room, Netflix, free soft drinks and a popular restaurant. €€

### Capsis Astoria Heraklion

Hulking landmark gets top marks for the rooftop pool, main-square location and spruced-up rooms. €€€

From the square, Iraklio's main commercial artery, 25 Avgoustou, leads straight down to the port, passing such magnificent Venetian buildings as the **Agios Markos Basilica**. Built in 1239 at the beginning of Venetian rule, it is dedicated to St Mark, the patron saint of Venice, and now houses an exhibition hall.

A few steps further, your eyes will be drawn to the **Loggia**, a 17th-century mansion where Venetian nobles once gathered for drinks and discussion and that now houses the town hall. Be sure to step inside the courtyard and look up for an unexpectedly photogenic perspective of the building's architecture.

Close to the waterfront, the majestic **Church of Agios Titos** dominates the eponymous, palm-studded square surrounded by cafes and bars. Its most revered possession is the gem-encrusted skull relic of St Titus, returned here in 1966 after being spirited to Venice for safekeeping during the Turkish occupation. It's in the chapel on the left as you enter.

Wrap up the walk at the **Koules**, Iraklio's landmark fortress.

## Castle by the Sea

### EXPLORE A MIGHTY CITADEL

Fishing boats bob gently in the harbour, looking dainty compared to the **Koules**, the massive fortress built by the Venetians (who called it Rocca al Mare) that has guarded the port's entrance for the past 500 years. Inside its metres-thick walls, it's fun to poke around its exhibit and discover that the castle held back the Turks for 21 years, served as a prison for Cretan revolutionaries and was big enough to house ammunition, officers and its own mill.

Muted light filtering in through skylights and old cannon holes illuminates ancient amphorae, cannons and other finds recovered from nearby shipwrecks by Jacques Cousteau in 1976. Wrap up your tour on the rooftop with panoramic views over the sea and the vaulted arcades of the Arsenal, the dockyards built by Venetians to shelter and repair its fleet of ships.

## Walking on Water

### A BREAKWATER STROLL

Let the wind tousle your hair as you walk from Koules fortress to Iraklio's lighthouse along the 2km-long **breakwater** protecting Iraklio's old port. About halfway you'll pass some

### A TASTE OF SWEET HISTORY

It's a traditional breakfast food but, quite frankly, any time is perfect for scarfing up creamy *bougatsa*, a sinfully delicious filo pastry stuffed with either *myzithra* (sheep's-milk cheese similar to ricotta) or a sweet creamy custard dusted with powdered sugar and cinnamon.

With tables sprawling next to the Morosini Fountain, side-by-side **Phyllosofies** and **Kirkor** are Iraklio's top spots to try this typical Cretan treat along with a strong Greek coffee (locals seem to slightly favour Kirkor but either one is fine). Both bakery-cafes were founded a century ago by refugees from today's Turkey, where the dish originated.

In a tradition special to Iraklio, *bougatsa* consumption peaks on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day in an attempt to ensure good luck for the following year.



### WHERE TO FEAST ON FISH AND SEAFOOD IN IRAKLIO

#### Ligo Krasi Ligo Thalassa

Locally adored fish temple with Koules views; the service is impeccable and the preparation inspired. €€

#### Ippokampos

This long-running *ouzerie* with a covered waterfront terrace has simply but expertly prepared fare at fair prices. €€

#### O Vrakas

From octopus to seabass, this Venetian harbour charmer is a great value-for-money pick with fortress views. €€



## SUNSET WALK ON THE WALLS



**Pan Kostami**, actress and yoga teacher, and **Jerry Vlachogiannakis**, engineer and electronics tinkerer, share their favourite walk around Iraklio.

On a clear day, our favourite walk is along Iraklio's **Venetian walls**. Ideally one hour before sunset, climb the stairs at **Kenouryia Porta**, a historic city gate opened after WWII next to the existing Jesus Gate. Walking northwest (clockwise), catch a glimpse of the distant mountains, including distinctive **Mt Yiouhtas**.

The old town is on your right as you pass the Martinengo Bastion and the **tomb of Nikos Kazantzakis** (p148), inscribed 'I hope for nothing, I fear nothing, I am free'.

Continue walking above Bethlehem Gate and Chanioporta (Pantokrator Gate) until the **St Andreas Bastion** to watch the sun drop into the sea.

murals and a filigree metal statue called *The Mermaid*. The stroll is especially lovely around sunset.

## Pioneering Engineering

### SECRETS OF ANCIENT GREEK TECHNOLOGY

Who knew that it was actually the Ancient Greeks who invented alarm clocks, robots and computers? There to spread the word is the pint-sized **Kotsanas Museum** in a gorgeous Venetian stone house near the port. This two-room cabinet of curiosities is packed with models, videos and information panels that explain the science behind dozens of inventions made thousands of years ago.

Marvel at the mechanics of the crane used to build the Parthenon, the Antikythera Mechanism (the 'first laptop') or the wine-pouring automatic servant. Staff demonstrations of the ingenious Pythagoras Cup never fail to elicit oohs and aahs from young and old. Wrap up with a game of Trias, an ancient version of tic-tac-toe, in the upstairs cafe.

## Communist Cult Cafe

### CRETAN FARE WITH A SIDE OF ANARCHY

Dimitris Kagiampi does not bother making bones about his political leanings. Every centimetre of wall space of his always-packed **O Kafenes Tou Kagiampi**, about 350m south of the Morosini Fountain, is plastered with photographs, posters and paintings of famous leftists, revolutionaries and anti-fascists.

But even if you're not a fan of Marx, Fidel or WWII resistance fighter Aris Velouchiotis (that's him with the magnificent beard to the left of Che), you'll find it hard to resist the free-flowing raki, the feel-good atmosphere and the tasty small plates of honest-to-goodness Cretan home-cooking pouring from the pint-sized kitchen.

## Keeping Track of History

### A CHRONICLE OF CRETAN MILESTONES

If you're wondering what Crete's been up to in the millennia between the Minoans' demise and today, set aside some time for the engaging **Historical Museum of Crete**.

Get up to speed in the first room, which charts the island's major historical phases (Byzantine, Venetian, Ottoman) through maps, books, artefacts and images. A real eye-catcher is the giant scale model of Candia, as Iraklio was called in Venetian times.



## WHERE TO GET GREAT GYROS IN IRAKLIO

### Hovoli

This family-run place is always busy as a beehive thanks to its baseball-mitten-sized gyros servings. €

### Politia

Its huge portions and late hours draw night-owls hoping to restore balance to the brain. €

### Thraka tis Plateias

Order your gyros with *thrakopsomo*, a crusty bread only available at this place. €



## BEST BEACHES AROUND IRAKLIO

### Ammoudara

Well-organised long, wide and golden sands about 4km west of Iraklio.

### Amissos & Karteros

Just east of the airport, so a bit noisy but sandy and good enough for a quick dip.

### Mononaftis

Calm waters in a protected bay with scenic, but often crowded, small-pebbled beach; 28km northwest.

### Lygia

Stick to the western end of this popular local beach with coarse sand and clean water 21km northwest.



Windsurfing,  
Ammoudara



Iraklio Market

Standouts among the many highlights on the upper floors include the only two El Greco paintings on view in Crete, the study where Nikos Kazantzakis penned many of his famous works, and a chronicle of the bloody 1941 WWII Battle of Crete.

## Fun, Food and Knick-Knacks

### FORAGE FOR TREATS AT A LEGENDARY MARKET

**Iraklio Market**, set up in the alleyway called Odos 1866, is a local institution. Ignore the tourist tat and focus instead on stalls laden with a profusion of farm-fresh produce, meats, fluffy breads and artisanal goodies like local cheeses, thyme honey and olives. Sniff around aromatic herbs and leather goods or try on silly hats and gaudy jewellery, then cap your spree with a strong Greek coffee at **Koudoumas**, a time-tested cafe entered via a Venetian-era arch.

Odos 1866 culminates on **Plateia Kornarou** dominated by a hexagonal Turkish *sebil* (pump house). Also note the **Bembo Fountain** behind it, which was cobbled together in the 1550s from scavenged antique materials, including the headless Roman statue.



## WHERE TO DRINK IN IRAKLIO

### Beer o'clock

Rock-themed burger and beer bar with 100 brews, from local Solo to Belgian lambic.

### Xalavro

Lounge bar in a roofless stone ruin with creative cocktails, mellow lighting and a diverse crowd.

### Levare

This cult spot is the local fave for after-hour partying with jumping action until mid-morning.



## BEST THIRD-WAVE COFFEE IN IRAKLIO

### Crop Roastery Brewery

Get your third-wave jolt at this pioneering local roastery also famous for its pancakes and craft beer.

### Hacienda

Buzzy all-rounder with hand-harvested single estate coffees by Athens-based roastery Taf, along with breakfast, homemade sweets and global treats.

### Think Tank

Relax with a cuppa on the plant-filled rooftop or the courtyard of an updated neoclassical building.



Greek coffee



Bembo Fountain (p137)

TOP LEFT: APHOTOGRAPH/SHUTTERSTOCK © BOTTOM LEFT: DMITRY NAIMOV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

## Sex, Drugs and Rembetika

### A NEW CHAPTER FOR THE RED-LIGHT DISTRICT

Changes are afoot in tiny **Lakkos**, a long-neglected quarter just north of the Cultural Conference Centre on Nikolaou Plastira. From the early 1900s until WWII, this area teemed with hash dens, brothels and bars populated by a demimonde of outlaws, misfits, soldiers, prostitutes and refugees and pulsating to the rhythm of *rembetiko*, the 'Greek blues'.

Although a long way from full-on gentrification, this former red-light district is slowly being spruced up, spurred on by the **Lakkos Project** ([thelakkosproject.weebly.com](http://thelakkosproject.weebly.com)) conceived by Australian artist Mathew Halpin.

Let your imagination drift back to those lawless days on an aimless wander around the dusty maze of crooked lanes where street art adds splashes of colour to the still mostly derelict house facades. Some of the finest murals grace the central square off Taxiarchou Markopoulou where **Kafeneio Lakkos**, the unofficial community hub, makes a great beer-and-mezedhes stop.



## GETTING AROUND

Most places of interest in Iraklio are within the city centre, which is not only flat and compact but also largely pedestrianised, making walking a joy. If you have a rental car, drop it in your

hotel garage, a 24/7 car park or use the free parking at the Cultural Centre on Giannikou (watch out for the hours, though, so you don't get locked out).



# Beyond Iraklio

Iraklio's countryside is a tapestry of rolling vineyards, majestic gorges, impressive historical sites and glorious beaches – easy living at its best!

If you only see one of Crete's attractions from antiquity, make it the Palace of Knossos. A quick 5km south of Iraklio, it was the largest of the palaces built by the Minoans, a Bronze Age people who attained an astonishingly high level of civilisation and ruled large parts of the Aegean some 4000 years ago. Until the site's excavation by Sir Arthur Evans in the early 20th century, an extraordinary wealth of frescoes, sculptures, jewellery, seals and other remnants lay buried under the Cretan soil.

Before heading to Knossos, we highly recommend taking a spin around the Heraklion Archaeological Museum (p132), where the original objects unearthed at Knossos and other Minoan sites are exhibited. It will help you make better sense of what you're looking at and add a meaningful layer to your exploration.

Iraklio

Palace of Knossos

## TOP TIP

Note that some sections of the Knossos grounds may be closed for restoration.

### Minoan artifacts, Heraklion Archaeological Museum (p132)





# Palace of Knossos

## THE HIGHLIGHTS IN TWO HOURS

The Palace of Knossos is Crete's busiest tourist attraction, and for good reason. A spin around the partially and imaginatively reconstructed complex (shown here as it was thought to be at its peak) delivers an eye-opening glimpse into the remarkably sophisticated society of the Minoans, who dominated southern Europe some 4000 years ago.

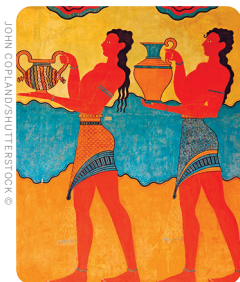
From the ticket booth, follow the marked trail to the **1 North Entrance** where the Charging Bull fresco gives you a first taste of Minoan artistry. Continue to the Central Court and join the queue waiting to glimpse the mystical **2 Throne Room**, which probably hosted religious rituals. Turn right as you exit and follow the stairs up to the so-called Piano Nobile, where replicas of the palace's most famous artworks conveniently cluster in the **3 Fresco Room**. Walk the length of the Piano Nobile, pausing to look at the clay storage vessels in the West Magazine. Circle back and descend to the **4 South Portico**, beautifully decorated with the Cup Bearer fresco. Make your way back to the Central Court and head to the palace's eastern wing to admire the architecture of the **5 Grand Staircase** that led to what Sir Arthur Evans imagined to be the royal family's private quarters. For a closer look at some rooms, walk to the south end of the courtyard, stopping for a peek at the **6 Prince of the Lilies Fresco**, and head down to the lower floor. A highlight here is the **7 Queen's Megaron** (Evans imagined this was the Queen's chambers), playfully adorned with a fresco of frolicking dolphins. Stay on the lower level and make your way to the **8 Giant Pithoi**, huge clay jars used for storage.

### PLANNING

To beat the crowds and avoid the heat, arrive bang on opening or two hours before closing. Budget one or two hours to explore the site thoroughly.

### South Portico

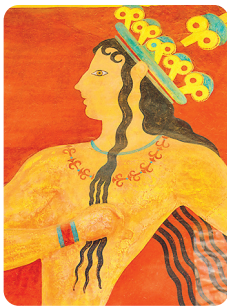
Fine frescoes, most famously the Cup Bearer, embellish this palace entrance anchored by a massive open staircase leading to the Piano Nobile. The Horns of Consecration recreated nearby once topped the entire south facade.



JOHN COFFMAN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

### Fresco Room

Take in sweeping views of the palace grounds from the west wing's upper floor, the Piano Nobile, before studying copies of the palace's most famous artworks in its Fresco Room.



MICHAEL RUMEL/GETTY IMAGES ©

### Prince of the Lilies Fresco

One of Knossos' most beloved frescoes was controversially cobbled together from various fragments and shows a young man adorned in lilies and peacock feathers.



## FOOD TIP

Save your appetite for a meal in the nearby Iraklio Wine Country, amid sunbaked slopes and lush valleys. It's just south of Knossos.



ANTON CHIGAREV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

### Throne Room

Sir Arthur Evans, who began excavating the Palace of Knossos in 1900, imagined the mythical King Minos himself holding court seated on the alabaster throne of this beautifully proportioned room. However, the lustral basin and griffin frescoes suggest a religious purpose, possibly under a priestess.



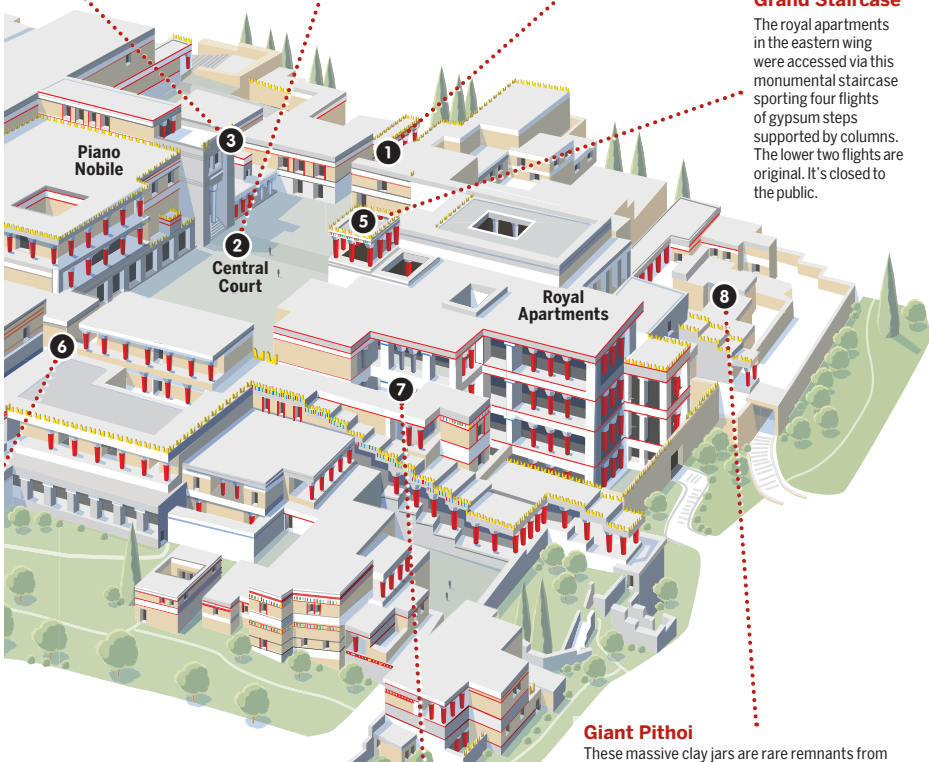
BRUNO MORANDI/GETTY IMAGES ©

### North Entrance

Bulls held a special status in Minoan society, as evidenced by the famous relief fresco of a charging beast gracing the columned west bastion of the north palace, which harboured workshops and storage rooms.

### Grand Staircase

The royal apartments in the eastern wing were accessed via this monumental staircase sporting four flights of gypsum steps supported by columns. The lower two flights are original. It's closed to the public.



### Giant Pithoi

These massive clay jars are rare remnants from the Old Palace period and were used to store wine, oil and grain. The jars were transported by slinging ropes through a series of handles.



ANDREI NIKRASOV/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

### Queen's Megaron

The queen's room is among the prettiest in the residential eastern wing thanks to the playful Dolphin Fresco. The adjacent bathroom (with clay tub) and toilet are evidence of a sophisticated drainage system.



LEJOCH/GETTY IMAGES ©

## DON'T MISS

See p140 for a detailed illustration of the palace.

### West Court

This may have been Knossos' marketplace or the site of public gatherings

### South Propylaion (portico)

### Piano Nobile

Evans supposed the reception and staterooms were located here

### Central Court Rooms

Facing the western side of the courtyard, these had official and religious purposes, while the residential quarters were on the opposite side

### Throne Room

### Residential Quarters

### Northern Area



Fresco, Throne Room



Palace of Knossos

## Crete's Top Historical Attraction

### THE CAPITAL OF MINOAN CRETE

Crete's must-see historical attraction is the **Palace of Knossos**, 5km south of Iraklio and the capital of Minoan Crete. Combining a visit here with a spin around Iraklio's excellent **Heraklion Archaeological Museum** (p132) is highly recommended (and reduced combination tickets are available).

Knossos' first palace (1900 BCE) was destroyed by an earthquake around 1700 BCE and rebuilt to a grander and more sophisticated design. It was partially levelled again between 1500 and 1450 BCE and inhabited for another 50 years before finally burning down. The new palace was carefully designed to meet the needs of a complex society and featured domestic quarters for rulers, officials, priests and common folk as well as public reception rooms, shrines, workshops and storerooms.

Knossos was mainly excavated between 1900 and 1930 by British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans. His reconstruction methods remain controversial, with many modern archaeologists believing that he sacrificed accuracy to his overly vivid imagination. For the casual visitor, though, the reconstructions are helpful for visualising what the palace might have looked like at the peak of its glory.

To beat the crowds and avoid the heat, get to Knossos either at 8am or after 3pm. You can even skip the ticket booth by buying tickets online at [www.etickets.tap.gr](http://www.etickets.tap.gr). Reckon on spending a couple of hours to do the place justice. Human guides or a guided-tour tablet can be hired on the spot for a more in-depth experience.

Bus No 2 runs frequently to Knossos from Plateia Eleftherias. There's free parking near the ticket office.

# ARHANES



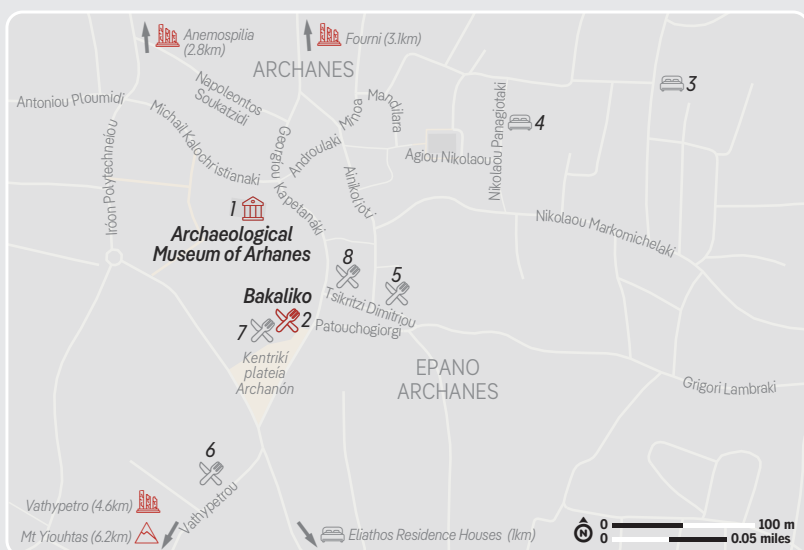
Lorded over by Mt Yiouhtas (811m), picture-perfect Arhanes, 15km south of Iraklio, is a wine-country hub with Minoan roots. Its maze of narrow, flower-filled lanes and meticulously restored houses is considered a model of rural town redevelopment and invites an aimless wander, perhaps capped by a leisurely lunch on the tree-shaded main square.

Archaeological excavations suggest that Arhanes was most likely part of a major Minoan settlement. Aside from a palace in the village itself, a huge cemetery at Fourni, the Vathypetro residential area and the Anemospilia sanctuary have thus far been discovered.

Another sanctuary crowns Mt Yiouhtas and is reached either on a sweat-inducing hike or a bumpy car ride.

## TOP TIP

Arhanes is divided into upper and lower sections, with most sights of interest clustered in the latter. Getting around the one-way streets and narrow alleys can be confusing, so it's best to park your car and explore on foot. The Minoan ruins are just a short drive away.



### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Archaeological Museum of Arhanes
- 2 Bakaliko

### SLEEPING

- 3 Arhontiko
- 4 Troullos Traditional Houses

### EATING

- 5 Agora
- 6 Kritamon

### 7 Likastos

- 8 Ploumi

## MY FAVOURITE WINERIES



**Pierre Graff**, owner of Malia-based wine-tour operator **Made in Crete** (p148), shares his favourite wineries in Iraklio Wine Country.

**Douloufakis, Dafnes**  
Nikos Douloufakis is the third-generation maker at this big winery that consistently produces quality wines. He's especially knowledgeable about the Vidiano grape, which is made into wines including one aged in oak barrels and a sparkling version.

**Idaia Gi, Venerato**  
This small winery in the Dafnes wine valley bottles a dozen labels featuring eight of the 11 grape varieties grown in Crete.

**Stilianou, Kounavi**  
One of Crete's smallest wineries, Stilianou produces 20,000 bottles of traditional and organic wines. Now on its fourth-generation of winemakers, it also makes hard-to-find natural and orange wines.



PETER MARKY/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Afentis Christos Chapel

## Life & Death in Minoan Crete

### TRACKING DOWN GEMS OF THE PAST

Steps from Arhanes' main square, the imaginatively curated and free **Archaeological Museum** packs some extraordinary finds from the Fourni cemetery, the Anemospilia temple and the Arhanes Palace into a single room that was once the town's first primary school.

A glass case sparkling with gold jewellery suggests that ancient Cretans had both wealth and good taste, while a tambourine-like instrument called a *sistro* points to their musical side. More gruesome is a copy of a dagger found at the Anemospilia temple and a set of funeral vessels, complete with 4000-year-old skeletons in foetal positions, from Fourni.

## The Art & Pleasure of Slow Eating

### MECCA FOR FLAVOUR HUNTERS

Arhanes' leafy main square is the ideal setting for a leisurely lunch with a long parade of courses and superb wines flowing as freely as the conversation. A fantastic place to indulge in this tasty ritual is **Bakaliko**, run by the affable Giorgos.

Bakaliko means meeting point; traditionally, that meant *kafeneio* (coffee shop) and grocery shop in one, a concept revitalised here. The menu features updated traditional dishes imbued with organic richness; handpicked wines – mostly from Crete – complement local products such as olive oils and marmalades.

Wine and olive oil tastings, as well as cooking classes (minimum two people), can also be booked.



## WHERE TO STAY IN ARHANES

**Throullos Traditional Houses**  
Laid-back place set around an attractive stone courtyard with five units featuring period furniture and decorations. €€

**Eliathos Residence Houses**  
Sleek apartments in four hillside villas wrapped around a swimming pool with grand views of Mt Yiouhtas. €€

**Arhontiko**  
Charming 1893 villa exuding sophistication in three bilevel apartments with traditional decor and furnishings. €€



## 'Holy Mountain' with Panoramic Views

### EXPLORING A MYTHICAL MOUNTAIN

The distinctive profile of **Mt Yiouhtas** (811m) dominates the landscape around Arhanes. About 4km south of the village you can pick up a narrow 5km track leading to the top of this muscular mountain with mythological roots as Zeus' burial place. After a bone-rattling drive (or thigh-burning hike), you'll be rewarded with mesmerising, near 360-degree views over Iraklio, out west to Mt Psiloritis and east to Mt Dikti.

Right on top, fronted by a massive cypress tree and next to a giant cross that's lit up at night, looms the petite **Afentis Christos Chapel**. On the eve of 6 August it's a major place of pilgrimage for locals, who make the uphill procession by the hundreds. Behind the church, the craggy rock face drops near-vertically – keep an eye out for circling vultures.

Sadly, the idyll is somewhat marred by telecommunications towers here and on the other side of the mountaintop where you can visit vestiges of a **Minoan peak sanctuary** (sacred place located near a summit) that is believed to have served the inhabitants of Arhanes and Knossos. A paved path leads up to the fenced-in excavation area, but there's little left to see.

## Arhanes' Minoan Roots

### WINE, DEATH AND SACRIFICE

Winemaking has been part of the local economy since Minoan times as you will discover when visiting **Vathypetro**, one of a trio of important Minoan archaeological sites within easy reach of Arhanes. The main draw of this residential complex is the world's oldest wine press, although it's worth coming for the splendid views of Mt Yiouhtas and the surrounding hills alone. Vathypetro is 5km south of Epáno Arhanes and easily accessed by car. It's open year-round and admission is free.

On a hill north of Arhanes, **Fourni** is the most important Minoan cemetery in Crete with burials going back to 2500 BCE. The most sensational find here was the unlooted tomb of a noblewoman whose jewellery is now on display at the Heraklion Archaeological Museum (p132). From Kato Arhanes, it's just a 1.2km walk to the site via a small forest.

Finally, on the northern slopes of Mt Yiouhtas, about 3km northwest of the lower village, the site of **Anemospilia** encompasses a small sanctuary that yielded evidence that human sacrifice might have played a role in Minoan society.

Since excavations at Fourni and Anemospilia are ongoing, it's best to check with staff at the Archaeological Museum in Arhanes about visiting hours and directions.



### BEST RESTAURANTS IN ARHANES

#### Agora

This family-run foodie outpost gets a huge thumbs up for its soulful Cretan mezehes, including lots of vegan options. €

#### Kritamon

Ancient Cretan meet creative modern recipes, giving this taverna down a cobbled alley near the main square a spirited twist. €€

#### Likastos

This place hums with people appreciative of the earthy Cretan cuisine and the signature orange cake dessert. €

#### Ploumi

Run by a cooperative, this down-to-earth cafe (<https://ploumi.blogspot.com>) has tasty small plates and sometimes hosts live music (usually on a donation basis) featuring Cretan talent. €



### GETTING AROUND

Arhanes is tiny and best explored on foot. The surrounding archaeological sites are all within an hour's walk or a short drive. Buses

from Iraklio's port station stop near the main square. There's free street parking throughout the village.





## Beyond Arhanes

Lift your spirits tooling along undulating country roads through a mosaic of bucolic villages and hills robed in lush vineyards.

Arhanes is an ideal launchpad for touring Iraklio Wine Country, a harmonious landscape of round-shouldered hills, sunbaked slopes and lush valleys. Literature lovers can immerse themselves in the genius of Cretan-born author Nikos Kazantzakis at a museum dedicated to him in the sleepy, white-washed village of Myrtia. A bit further east in Crete's pottery centre, Thrapsano, you can peek into workshops that still produce huge Minoan-style *pthoi* (storage jars) by hand.

For a total change of scenery, head southwest to Zaros at the foot of Mt Psiloritis. The village is not only famous for its natural spring water, which is bottled here and sold all over Crete, but also boasts some fine Byzantine monasteries, excellent hiking and delicious farm-raised trout.



### TOP TIP

To fully partake in a proper day of wine tasting, book a guided tour, for instance with Made in Crete (p148), or hire a private driver from such outfits as B&S Luxurious Tours (crete-taxi-service.com).

### Vineyards, Iraklio Wine Country



TIMOFEEV VLADIMIR/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



## BEST WINE COUNTRY RESTAURANTS

### Kritiki gi

This cosy lair in Skalani gets punters salivating over native cuisine jazzed up with global touches. €€

### Onisimos

A top pick in Peza, this handsomely stone-walled taverna produces flavour-packed Cretan classics with passion and panache. €

### Earino

Feast on mouthwatering mezedhes, feather-tender meats and hearty stews in this gorgeous spot above the vineyards in Kato Asites. €



Cretan wine

## From Vine to Bottle

### EXPLORING IRAKLIO WINE COUNTRY

Kotsifali, Mandilari and Liatiko are not characters in an Italian opera but three of Crete's indigenous wines that anyone with a penchant for fermented grape juice should give a try. Handily, just beyond Knossos, Iraklio's suburban sprawl rolls itself into luscious wine country with sun-dappled vineyards, snug villages, and Mt Yiouhtas looming above it all.

Winemaking in Crete dates back some 4000 years to Minoan times – pop by the world's oldest stomping vat found at the ruins of Vathypetro (p145) near Arhanes. Today a dozen or so wineries turn out some 70% of Crete's wine, with most clustering around Arhanes, Peza and Dafnes. A visit is especially delightful during the spring bloom and the late-summer harvest.

Most estates run vineyard tours and/or operate tasting rooms where you can sample the local product, usually for a fee. Booking ahead online or by phone is recommended in



## TOP WINERIES

Pierre Graff of Made in Crete shared with us his favourite wineries in Iraklio Wine Country (p144).



## WHERE TO TASTE GREAT CRETAN WINE

### Diamantakis Winery

Kato Asites estate famous for its Liatiko, best tasted sitting among olive trees surrounded by vineyards.

### Minos-Miliaraki Winery

This pioneer in bottling Cretan wine (since 1952) has a tasting room in Peza that doubles as a museum.

### Stilianou Winery

Down-to-earth, boutique Stilianou above Kounavi specialises in organic wines made only with local varietals.

## THE REAL ZORBA

Nikos Kazantzakis modelled Alexis Zorbas, the protagonist of his 1946 novel *Zorba the Greek*, on a real person named **Giorgos Zorbas**. He met the workman from Macedonia during a stint at the Mt Athos monastery in 1915, then hired him two years later to help him set up a lignite mine in the Peloponnese to supply coal during WWI. The two became close friends and spent much time together. Kazantzakis greatly admired Zorbas' exuberant spirit and larger-than-life personality.



Grave of Nikos Kazantzakis

high season. Some estates also have small museums showcasing historic tools, machinery and the winemaking process.

To put your day in an expert's hands, **Made in Crete** ([madeincrete.com](http://madeincrete.com)) – run by the affable Pierre Graff, a chef and former journalist – leads highly recommended wine-tasting tours around Iraklio Wine Country. Tours take in two wineries as well as lunch at **Bakaliko** (p144) in Arhanes. The price includes transport, tastings (olive oil in addition to wine) and lunch paired with five wines. Groups top out at six, so it's always a small and intimate experience.

Unless you're hiring a private driver or take an organised tour, having wheels (and a designated driver!) is essential to fully partake in a proper day of wine tasting since the wineries are spread out and not served by public transport.



### KAZANTZAKIS' FINAL RESTING PLACE

Fans of Nikos Kazantzakis can pay their respects to the man at his grave in Iraklio located atop the Venetian Walls near the **Martinengo Bastion** (p136).



### WHERE TO TASTE GREAT CRETAN WINE

#### Domaine Zacharioudakis

Boutique winery in Plouti near Zaros; has a tasting room with views out to sea.

#### Rhous Winery

Next-gen winery in a dazzling location above Houdetsi with Bordeaux-trained winemakers and visitor-friendly facilities.

#### Silva Daskalaki Winery

Mother-and-daughter-run biodynamic winery in Siva with cultivation and harvesting according to the lunar calendar.

To DIY, check **Wines of Crete** ([winesofcrete.gr](http://winesofcrete.gr)) for additional background info and route suggestions. Throughout the region, burgundy-red road signs direct you to local wineries.

## Life, Liberty & Passion

AN ENCOUNTER WITH ZORBA'S 'FATHER'

Myrtia would just be another cute, whitewashed Cretan village were it not for the small and well-curated **Nikos Kazantzakis Museum**, which documents the life and work of Greece's 20th-century literary lion, author of the novel *Zorba the Greek*.

Don't miss the excellent documentary that charts the arc of Kazantzakis' life and compresses his philosophy, influences and works into a mere 20 minutes. Afterwards, use the audio guide to add additional depth to the exhibits, which include letters, photographs, personal effects and an overview of the Nobel-nominated writer's best-known works.

Also note the two **sculptures** outside the museum and **street art** referencing some of his books splashed onto facades around Myrtia.

## Farmer for a Day

GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY!

If you're a city slicker curious about the time-tested rituals of living off the land, consider playing farmhand for a few hours at the family-run **Kamihis farm** near the village of Zaros, some 50km southwest of Arhanes.

The farm's patient and passionate staff let young and old in on such secrets as how to milk a goat, turn the milk into a soft cheese and then make a pastry from it. You get to pick fruit and vegetables, learn which wild greens growing on Crete's hills are edible, and interact with a motley crew of adorable farm animals.

For the full immersion, book an overnight stay by candlelight and oil lamps in their stone lodge.

## Culinary Force of Nature

A MEAL WITH ZAROS' KITCHEN HEROINE

**Vegera**, located in a sun-yellow building right on the main street, is the friendliest restaurant in Zaros. It's presided over by the vivacious Vivi who has a knack for turning farm-fresh local produce into flavourful and creative dishes based on traditional recipes. Her philosophy is to 'cook the way

## FISH IN THE MOUNTAINS

With over 1000km of coastline, there's certainly no shortage of fresh fish in Crete. So how come Zaros became famous for its **freshwater trout**, which is hardly an indigenous species?

The answer can be found back in the 1980s when an enterprising local farmer, inspired by a magazine article, ordered some trout eggs from Canada and put them in a pond. His gamble paid off: the Canadian trout loved Zaros' abundant supply of spring water. Pretty soon locals and tourists flocked to Zaros to try the tasty *pestrofa* (trout).

Today trout flit around Lake Votomos, kept company by turtles and ducks, and also in the modern roadside fish tanks of the **Hotel Idi**, where you can also see a traditional watermill.



### WHERE TO STAY IN ZAROS

#### Eleonas Country Village

Days at this tranquil terraced garden retreat cradled by olive groves start with a sumptuous homemade breakfast. €€

#### Keramos

Old-school pension decorated with Cretan crafts, weavings and family heirlooms. Owner Katerina prepares a fabulous traditional breakfast. €

#### Idi Hotel

Sprawling modern hotel with a swimming pool, spacious balconied rooms and its own trout farm. €€





## BEST RESTAURANTS IN ZAROS

### Eleonas Taverna

Sit amid birdsong and feast on scrumptious fish, salads and grilled meats plus an excellent wine list. €€

### Votomos Taverna

It doesn't get any fresher: trout splashes in the tanks right up until ending up on your plate. €€

### Pizzaria Markos

Excellent pizza for those times when you need a change-up from Cretan cuisine. €

### Za'Rous

Trendy cafe with tempting waffles, crepes, ice cream and the best espresso in town. €



Cafe by Lake  
Votomos, Zaros

we cook in our house' and indeed her cosily furnished place quickly feels like home.

Every day she churns out a surprise buffet featuring whatever's been foraged that day. Whatever it is, it's a budget-priced bonanza of salads, cheese and olives, cooked mains, pastries and freshly baked bread.

If you want to learn how it's all done, book one of Vivi's **cooking classes**.

## Traipsing Through Zeus' Backyard

### CLIFFS, CHAPELS AND WILDFLOWERS

At the foot of Mt Psiloritis, **Zaros** is famous for its natural spring water, which is bottled here and sold all over Crete. But the quiet little town is also the gateway to the mighty **Rouvas Gorge**, a major lure for hikers, birders and naturalists.

The 10km up-and-back trek (with a 700m elevation gain) is especially lovely in springtime, when hooded helleborine orchids, poppies, irises and other wildflowers give the landscape the vibrancy of an impressionist painting.

From the trailhead at the emerald-green **Lake Votomos**, a trout-filled reservoir about 1km north of the main village, the route first climbs steeply up the mountainside. It enters the gorge 1km later just past **Moni Agios Nikolaos**, a modern monastery that wraps around a historic church replete with icons and fresco fragments.

Beyond here the vegetation becomes increasingly lush as the route skirts ancient oak trees, freshwater pools, a wooden bridge and several uncleared rock falls that require some clambering. Eventually, a gorgeous clearing emerges, home to the little **Chapel of Agios Ioannis** and benches and tables that invite a leisurely picnic.

Budget about five hours, including a break, and be sure to wear sneakers or hiking shoes, take at least 2L of water per person and pack some snacks.

## The Village of Minoan Clayware

### MEET A CRETAN MASTER POTTER

If you've ever wondered where all those beautiful Minoan-style *pithoi* that grace hotel lobbies, restaurants and homes come from, make a beeline to **Thrapsano**, Crete's 'pottery village' some 18km southeast of Arhanes. Of the several workshops here, the one of **Giorgios Koutrakis** (cretan-pottery.gr) is among the most welcoming to visitors.



## WHERE TO STAY IN WINE COUNTRY

### Earino

Family-run wood-and-stone place in Kato Asites with great views, handmade woodwork and a taverna. €€

### Villa Kerasia

Relaxed retreat in a converted 18th-century farmhouse in Vlahiana with opulent homemade breakfast. €€

### Scalani Hills Boutari Winery & Residences

Fall asleep close to the grapes in the suites of the Boutari winery near Skalani. €€€



RIGHT: GEORGIOS TSOUKAS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©  
 BOTTOM LEFT: TALVA/PHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



**Rouvas Gorge**

This bear of a man with a shy smile and a gentle touch has been turning out Cretan clay vessels in time-honoured fashion for over 30 years. If time permits, Giorgios will happily take curious visitors into his workshop to explain how the magic happens. A highlight of these free impromptu tours is a look at the traditional wood kiln fuelled, as in antiquity, by several tonnes of ground olive pits.

There's a small shop on the site as well.



## CRETE'S NEW AIRPORT

If all goes according to plan (and that's a big IF), Iraklio's aging international Nikos Kazantzakis Airport, which has been in operation since 1937, will be replaced by **Kastelli International Airport** in the coming years.

After decades of debate and delays, it is to take shape next to an existing air force base in Kastelli, some 35km southeast of Iraklio. It's expected to eventually handle up to 15 million passengers annually, which would make it Greece's second-biggest gateway after Athens. The foundation stone was laid in February 2020 with a target date for the airport to take flight in 2025. We're not holding our breath...



## GETTING AROUND

From Iraklio's main bus station buses headed to Arkalohori stop in Arhanes and Peza, while the bus for Kamares goes via Zaros. For winery

hopping, you need to organise your own transport or join an organised tour.

# MATALA

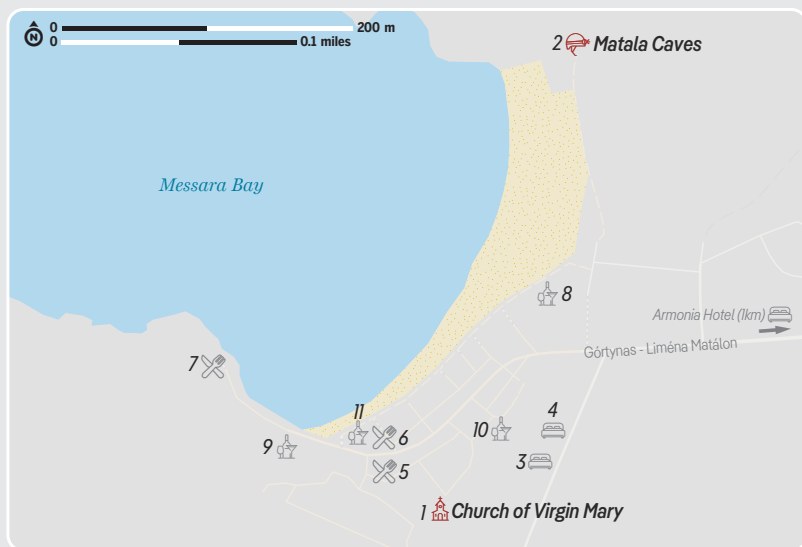


More than 50 years after Woodstock, the hippie spirit is alive and well in Matala, a beach town on the southern coast of Crete whose teensy size is disproportionate to its world-wide fame. Its unique selling point is the crescent-shaped beach bookended by cliffs, one of which is pockmarked by caves where the Romans buried their dead. In the late 1960s, scores of hippies moved in, lured by rent-free living, free love and copious pot. Among them was singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell, who immortalised the scene in her 1971 song 'Carey'.

These days, Matala manages to capitalise on its boho mystique without selling its soul. Evenings, when a tangerine sun drops below the horizon and the day-trippers have returned to their north-coast resorts, are especially magical. A chill vibe in the village's cafes and tavernas is balm for the soul, there's street art all around and live music energises the waterfront bars. Peace and love!

## TOP TIP

If you spend the night or visit during the shoulder seasons it's still possible to discern the Matala magic: the setting along a crescent-shaped bay flanked by headlands is simply spectacular, especially as the sun torches the horizon.



### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Church of Virgin Mary
- 2 Matala Caves

### SLEEPING

- 3 Hotel Fantastic Matala
- 4 Hotel Nikos

### EATING

- 5 George's Yard
- 6 Giannis Family Grill House
- 7 Scala

### DRINKING

- 8 Boho Beach Bar
- 9 Marinero Bar
- 10 Music Cafe Bar
- 11 Port Side

TOP: GEORGIOS TSICHOU/SHUTTERSTOCK ©  
 BOTTOM: IVAN BASTIEN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



One of Matala's caves

## Peace & Love in Roman Tombs

### EXPLORING THE CAVES

Matala's main sightseeing credential is its famous **caves**, where the flower children camped out in the 1960s and 1970s. The origin of the caves is still fuzzy, but they were probably hewn into the porous sandstone headlands in prehistoric times. The Romans buried their dead here when they called the shots in Crete from their capital at nearby Gortyna (p158).

Cat Stevens and Joni Mitchell were among the hippie cave residents. The latter's sojourn inspired the song 'Carey', which appeared on the 1971 album *Blue*. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine in the same year, Mitchell recalls Matala as having just four or five small buildings and a few fishermen's huts back then. Times sure have changed.

Ponder that while clambering around the caves and don't forget to snap cool pictures of the beach and village while standing inside them.



### BEST RESTAURANTS IN MATALA

#### George's Yard

Crisp salads, herb-scented meat dishes and congenial owners draw folks to this sophisticated taverna. €€

#### Giannis Family Taverna

Been-here-forever family-run place serving unfussy homemade Greek food amid cheerful blue furniture and potted flowers. €

#### Scala

Dramatically perched above the bay, this multitiered pit stop serves up a daily-changing selection of the greatest hits fresh from the sea. €€



Fishing boats, Matala



### WHERE TO STAY IN MATALA

#### Armonia Hotel

Assets of this charmer include a pool, the organic breakfast buffet and the tranquil nature setting. €

#### Hotel Fantastic Matala

Feel like family at this small hotel with balconied rooms across two traditional stone buildings. €

#### Hotel Nikos

Hotel-row veteran with modern, thoughtfully furnished rooms flanking a flower-filled courtyard. €



## POST-BEACH PARTYING

In the evenings, after the day-trippers have trundled off, Matala truly reveals its magic. The best entertainment is watching the sun drop in to the sea right from the beach or, mojito in hand, from a waterfront cafe.

For a pre-dinner drink and people-watching, stake out a spot in the **Music Cafe Bar** on the main square. At night, the action picks up in the places further along the bay like **Marinero Bar**.



Red Beach

TOP LEFT: MATTEOZ/CREATIVES/SHUTTERSTOCK ©; BOTTOM RIGHT: VLADIMIR/PA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

## Cave Chapel

### TRACK DOWN A HIDDEN CHURCH

Easily overlooked, the pint-sized **Church of Virgin Mary** was carved straight into a cliff and contains some lovely icons and a carved iconostasis. It may have been used as a catacomb at the time of Christian persecutions. And no, it's not part of the hippie cave but at the end of the lane starting near Mooz Art on the main square.



## WHERE TO DRINK IN MATALA

### Port Side

Wind down with chilled music, cold beers, wickedly good cocktails and killer cave views.

### Boho Beach Bar

Count down to sunset, toes in sand, at this breezy spot with a modern hippie vibe.

### Music Cafe Bar Matala

Belly up to the VW bus bar or get front-row views of the main square action.



## Matala's Artistic Side

### A TOWN TURNED CANVAS

When a 600-year-old **olive tree** in Pitsidia was condemned to be chopped into firewood, Cretan sculptor Spyros Stefanakas managed to convince the village mayor to spare the specimen and let him turn it into something beautiful. The result? A grand old tree carved with the faces of an A-list of Greek gods welcoming visitors to Matala (you'll see it in the middle of the roundabout by the entrance to the main village).

The tree is not the only artistic greeting in town. 'Welcome to Matala George' reads the graffiti on the sea wall on the south side of the beach. The George in question is not George Harrison of Beatles fame (as has been rumoured) but Giorgios Germanakis, the lone local who dug in with the hippies in the 1970s, coining Matala's motto 'Today is life. Tomorrow never comes'.

Plenty more flower-power art brightens Matala's web of car-free lanes. Look for psychedelic murals, cafe tabletops splashed in cheerful patterns and painted hippie-era Beetles and VW buses.

A highlight is the annual **Street Art Festival** in June. In a literal interpretation of 'street art', people of all ages turn the pavement along the main drag into a long, rainbow-coloured canvas. By the end of the season, these peace-and-love messages have mostly faded away in the sun. But no worries, the next summer is just a few months away.

## Remote Beach Beauty

### HIKE TO A DREAMY BEACH

Matala's main beach below the caves is a lovely crescent but often gets uncomfortably crammed. To escape the crowds, lace up those sneakers and work up a sweat on the 30- to 40-minute scramble along a rocky trail to **Red Beach** (look for signs in the village).

The payoff for your efforts is gorgeous views and a cove loaded with red-tinged sand and lapped by shimmering water perfect for cooling off. Also known as Kokkino Ammos, Red Beach is hardly a secret but it does get fewer people (including *au naturel* tanners). A bar sells drinks and rents sunbeds.

The carvings in the rocky wall on the northern end of the beach may look ancient but were reportedly made by a tourist.

If you're not in hiking mood, ask around for a boat to take you there from Matala.

### MATALA HIPPIE SOURCES

For a deep-dive back into life in Matala during the hippie era, check out Arn Strohmeier's book *The Myth of Matala*, which features hundreds of photographs from the 1960s and '70s.

Another elucidating source is Elzo Smid's English-language website **matala.nl** where former Matala flower-power residents take an often fascinating trip down memory lane.



Carved olive tree, Matala



### GETTING AROUND

If you're sticking in Matala itself, you just need your own two feet to get around. Buses from Iraklio's main station, some 65km away, stop

about 800m from the main village. Otherwise, there's free roadside parking and a fee-based car park next to the beach.





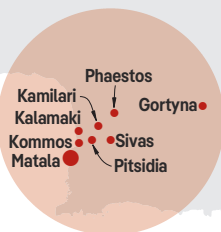
# Beyond Matala

Quiet beaches, evocative Minoan ruins, serene villages and a rugged canyon are among the diverse range of discoveries in Matala's surrounds.

Within easy reach of Matala lies a cornucopia of fun places to match all moods and interests. Quiet, sandy beaches beckon in Kommos and Kalamaki, while inland villages like Pitsidia, Sivas and Kamilari still preserve an unhurried, traditional feel. At night, locals mix with visitors for chat and sustenance in low-key tavernas on pretty squares or narrow streets lined with heritage-protected stone buildings.

Archaeology aficionados can get high on knockout views from Crete's second-most-important Minoan palace-city at Phaestos or squint at 6th-century-BCE law codes chiselled into stone tablets at the Roman-Crete stronghold of Gortyna.

A highlight for hikers is the trek through the Agiofarango Gorge, which terminates at an isolated beach.



## TOP TIP

The villages and ruins surrounding Matala are best reached in your own vehicle.

## Byzantine Basilica of Agios Titos (p158)



GEORGIOS TSICHLIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

## WHY I LOVE PHAESTOS



**Andrea Schulte-Peevers**, writer

Of all the excavated Minoan sites around Crete, I find the palace at Phaestos the most fascinating. The hilltop location alone, with that spirit-lifting view over the olive tree-studded Messara Plain, is simply spectacular. And the site itself is full of mystery and yet also evocative (the info panels help).

I love sitting shaded by the big tree below the central courtyard and picturing Minoans milling around, making huge *pithoi* in the workshops, performing sacred rituals in the shrine, perhaps watching bull leapers perform from the stone bleachers in the theatre. There's so much we still don't know about this ancient people, but the fact that such a sophisticated, peaceful culture existed on European soil nearly 4000 years ago never fails to amaze me.



**Ruins of Phaestos**

## Views, Grandeur & Mysteries

### FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MINOANS

In his ebullient Greek travelogue, *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941), Henry Miller describes how the guard at **Phaestos** begged him to stay a bit longer because he felt so lonely since there were so few visitors to see the ruins. That's definitely no longer the case today, even if Phaestos – Crete's second-largest Minoan palace complex – doesn't get nearly as crowd-deluged as Knossos.

If you only visit one Minoan site other than Knossos, make it this one, located only 11km northeast of Matala. The unique ridge-top setting and the big-sky panorama of the Messara Plain and mighty Mt Psiloritis alone are simply stunning.

Phaestos was built around 1700 BCE atop an older, previously destroyed palace. According to Greek mythology, it was ruled by King Rhadamanthus, the brother of King Minos.

If you've already been to Knossos, you will recognise many features and elements – the central courtyard, the theatre area, storage areas, shrines and private quarters. Let the palace walls rise virtually in your imagination. Trust us, puzzling it all together can feel intensely satisfying.



### WHERE TO STAY IN KALAMAKI

#### Arsinoi Studios

The epitome of *filoxenia* (hospitality) with roomy digs and free goodies from the family farm. €

#### Hotel Alexander Beach

Watch sunset from your balcony at this beachfront property at the quiet end of the promenade. €

#### Hotel Philharmonie

Modern upscale contender at village entrance with big pool, loaded breakfast buffet and sand-coloured rooms. €€

## LAW & ORDER IN ANCIENT CRETE

Gortyna's main draw is the massive stone tablets inscribed with the 6th-century-BCE *Laws of Gortyna*. The 600 lines written in an ancient Dorian dialect represent the oldest law code in the Greek world and provide fascinating insight into the social structure of pre-Roman Crete.

It turns out that Ancient Cretans were preoccupied with the same issues that drive people into court today – marriage, divorce, property transfers, inheritance, adoption, criminal offences and the like.

The code also details the different rules applying to each class within this strictly hierarchical society, which was divided into citizens, serfs and slaves. The 17,000 characters run from left to right on one line and from right to left on the next line, and so on – a style called *boustrophedon* (translation: as the ox ploughs).



Kommos Beach

A free pamphlet and insightful English panelling and graphics stationed in key spots further help demystify the ruins, while wooden benches under shade-giving trees invite taking a break.

## Mighty Capital of Roman Crete

### LIFE IN CRETE AFTER THE MINOANS

The mesmerising archaeological site of **Gortyna** (also Gortyn or Gortys), near Agioi Deka about 23km northeast of Matala, has been inhabited since Neolithic times but capped its career by becoming the capital of Roman Crete in the 1st century BCE. At its peak, as many as 100,000 people may have milled around Gortyna's streets.

The main archaeological area is north of the highway. Just past the ticket booth looms the restored apse of the mighty 6th-century **Byzantine Basilica of Agios Titos**, considered Crete's finest remaining early-Christian church.

Beyond here is the Odeion, a Roman theatre with a marble stage and crescent-shaped benches backed by a covered structure that shelters Gortyna's star attraction: **stone tablets**



## WHERE TO STAY IN KAMILARI

### Aelia

In a handsome stone building, the apartments have the character and amenities of a private home. €

### Aloni Apartments

Compact studios in a garden setting with tasteful blue-and-white decor and paintings by the owner's wife. €

### Niriida Guest House

Zen-like clarity of line meets supreme comforts, yummy breakfast and an olive-tree-framed pool. €€€

inscribed with the oldest law code in the Greek world, written in a 6th-century BCE-Dorian dialect.

Ruin fans can get another fix by roaming around the huge grove of scraggly olive trees south of the highway in search of remnants from the Roman city (free admission). Highlights are the **Temple of the Egyptian Gods**, the **Temple of Pythian Apollo** and the **Praetorium**, from where Crete's Roman governor wielded his power. Ask for directions and a map at the ticket booth.

## Sublime Beaches

### GOOD FOR A WANDER

Separated from Matala by a headland, **Kommos Beach** is a long, wide and undeveloped band of sun-kissed sand. A winding road takes you from the Matala–Gortyna Rd down to a couple of tavernas that rent sun loungers and umbrellas.

En route you can spot the fenced-off remnants of the Minoan port of Phaestos from various vantage points. From May to September, threatened loggerhead sea turtles nest in the dune belt above the beach – be careful not to disturb them.

The over 2km-long strand is tailor-made for walks to the beach town of **Kalamaki** with its taverna- and lounge-lined waterfront promenade. Note that there's a clothing-optional section about halfway along.

## A Haven for Aging Donkeys

### MAKING FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS

The passionate folk at **Agia Marina Donkey Sanctuary** feed and care for abandoned donkeys, along with a gaggle of geese, goats, dogs and assorted other critters. Horses, donkeys and mules have played a big role in Cretan agriculture for thousands of years but their jobs have gradually been made redundant by modern technology. At this nonprofit sanctuary, they get to live out their lives in comfort and company.

During visits you'll learn the story of each donkey and be able to shower them with all manner of love. Note that hours are strict: as many of the donkeys are aged, they too need their siesta.

Visits are free, but the sanctuary accepts donations. Find it 8km northeast of Matala on the Matala–Mires Rd.

## LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLES

Crete is battling to protect its population of loggerhead sea turtles, which have been nesting between Kalamaki and Matala since the days of the dinosaurs.

From late May to September, the females arrive at these beaches to dig a hole in the sand, deposit up to 100 eggs the size of ping pong balls and then cover them up again before returning to sea. After 60 days, tiny turtles hatch and dig their way out of the sand. Sadly, few hatchlings survive the long trek to the relative safety of the Med since they're considered a tasty snack by gulls, rats, cats and other predators.

For more information (including how to help) contact the **Archelon Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece** ([archelon.gr](http://archelon.gr)).



## WHERE TO STAY IN PITSIDIA & SIVAS

### Horiatiki Spiti, Sivas

Honey units in a converted house with an old well and a lovely courtyard garden. €

### Sigelakis Studios, Sivas

Spacious units in traditional Crete style with serene terraces framing fantastic hillside views. €

### Efkosmias Apartments

Plenty of elbow room in modern apartments with terraces in a stone house overlooking Pitsidia's square. €





## MARKETEERING IN MIRES

There's little reason to stop in **Mires**, the commercial hub of the Messara Plain, except on Saturday mornings when a huge **street market** takes over much of the main road and its side streets. Join locals descending from the surrounding villages to sell or stock up on local produce, clothes, textiles and other goods before catching up on gossip at the *kafeneia*.



Market produce,  
Mires

## Magic Herb Shop

MEET A MODERN POTION MASTER

The moment you step into **Botano** an aromatic melange of Cretan mountain-herbs hits your nose. This top purveyor of organic dried herbs, healthy tea blends, local and exotic spices and intriguing seasoning blends had for years been operating out of a tiny shop in Kouses but moved to Listaros about 10km east of Matala in 2022.

Dozens of red-lidded jars with labels like Mountain Tea, Dictamus and Cretan Summer Tea line up for inspection on floor-to-ceiling wooden shelves as in an old-fashioned apothecary. Many of the indigenous herbs are personally foraged by owner Ioannis and his family and staff. There's also a curated selection of cosmetics, condiments, dried fruit and books from around Greece.

## Spotlight on Rural Life

A PRIMER OF CRETE'S CULTURAL HERITAGE

You hear their clackety-clang everywhere in Crete's countryside, but did you know that there's a difference between sheep and goat bells? Yup! While the former are round, the latter are oblong.

This is just one of the intriguing insights you glean at the nonprofit **Museum of Cretan Ethnology** in Vori, a quiet village near Phaestos, about 13km northwest of Matala. Exhibits are organised around themes like food production, war, customs, architecture and music. Save for the extraordinary coppersmith's bellows, most items are rather ordinary – hoes, olive presses, baskets, clothing, instruments – but they're engagingly displayed in darkened rooms accented with spotlights.

## Canyon Meets Beach

TREKKING THE HOLY GORGE

The trek through **Agiofarango Gorge** (Gorge of the Saints) is one of Crete's most terrific and accessible hikes, culminating at an isolated and lovely pebble beach with crystal-clear water. There are caves, makeshift chapels and hermitages in the cliffs as well as a Byzantine chapel en route.

From Moni Odigitrias, 12.5km southeast of Matala, drive (or walk) on the dirt road signposted to Kali Limenes for approximately 3.5km, then turn right at a sharp fork. Continue on this rough dirt road until it dead-ends after about 2.5km.



## WHERE TO EAT IN KAMILARI

### Pizza Ariadni

Brick-oven pizzeria with a loyal local following in a lush setting on a candlelit garden terrace. €

### Kentrikon

Congenial *kafeneio* decorated with old photos that's great for breakfast, a nightcap or anything in between. €

### Taverna Milonas

Score a terrace table for tasty mezedhes and *mayirefta* (ready-cooked meals) at Kamilari's oldest taverna. €



## THE LEGEND OF XOPATERAS

En route to the Agiofarango Gorge you'll pass **Moni Odigitrias**, which is not only one of Crete's oldest monasteries but also played an important role during the Cretan revolution against the Turks in the 1820s. One monk in particular, called Xopateras, made the history books for leading the fight against a large number of Turkish troops who had laid siege to the monastery in 1828. Enconced in the tower, he bravely held them at bay for three days but was finally forced to come out after the Turks set the structure on fire. He was promptly decapitated.

Gory story aside, views of the mountains are great from the tower that now bears his name. Afterwards, take a quick spin around the monastery grounds, perhaps popping into the small folklore museum in a converted olive mill.



Agiofarango Gorge

If parking here, keep out from under the trees, as goats sometimes jump on the car roofs to reach the leaves!

Past the 'car park' it's another 2km walk along the riverbed flanked by near-vertical, red-tinged cliffs. The gorge is awash in oleander (with flowers from April to September); birdsong and the clackity-clank of goat bells provide the soundtrack. Just before reaching the little bay, you'll spot the 14th-century **Byzantine Church of Agios Antonios** (St Anthony) sitting in splendid isolation.

Despite its remoteness, the beach can get busy thanks to tour boats bringing in people from Matala and other nearby tourist towns. As so often, early morning or afternoon are the best times to visit.

## Living It Up in the Bronze Age

### NOSING AROUND A MINOAN ESTATE

In an enchanting spot 3km west of Phaestos, the **Agia Triada** site encompasses vestiges of two Minoan villas arranged in an L-shape, a ramp possibly once leading out to sea, and a village with residences and stores.



## WHERE TO EAT IN PITSIDIA

### Raftis

Kick up your heels like Zorba after filling your tummy with superb organic farm-to-table fare. €€€

### Livas

Sample made-with-love Greek-Moroccan fusion fare in a beautiful, colour-drenched setting. €€

### Mike's Taverna

Follow Mike to the kitchen to pick from the old-school Cretan recipes he's cooked up that day. €



## BEST SUNSET RESTAURANTS

### Mystical View

Blufftop spot known for its fish and meat dishes and million-dollar views over Kommos Beach. €€

### Bunga Bunga

Funky, Caribbean-vibe Kommos Beach hang-out serving tasty, fresh organic fare; it's named after the WWII bunker in the cliffs above. €

### Delfinia

Snazzy taverna on the Kalamaki beach promenade with distressed-look, whitewashed furniture and a stellar reputation for its fresh fish. €€



Agia Triada sarcophagus, Heraklion Archaeological Museum

Built around 1550 BCE, Agia Triada succumbed to fire around 1400 BCE but was never looted. Hence the plethora of Minoan masterpieces found here, including the Agia Triada sarcophagus, now a star exhibit at the Heraklion Archaeological Museum (p132).

Unfortunately, the site is not very visitor friendly as there's no labelling, but it's still a lovely place to visit: serene, dripping historic ambience and usually crowd-free.

Past the entrance, the ruins in front of you are those of the **palace**, with structures arranged along two sides of a central courtyard. The Byzantine **chapel of Agios Georgios**, on the left, has some beautiful frescoes (if it's not open, ask for the key at the ticket booth). To the right of the palace is the **village area**, while the cemetery (closed to visitors) lies just beyond the fence.

The turn-off to Agia Triada is signposted on the Matala road. There's no direct public transport, so either walk 3.5km from the Phaestos bus station or try hitching a ride.

## Remote Eco-Retreat & Rock Climbers' Paradise

### SEEK REFUGE IN A HIGHLAND HIDEAWAY

To truly leave the daily grind behind, steer towards **Kapetaniana**, a remote, car-free mountain hamlet that clings to the slopes of Mt Kofinas (1231m), the highest peak in the Asterousia mountain range. It's Crete's undisputed rock-climbing hub crisscrossed by nearly 200 developed routes.

Although only 40km east of Matala, the drive to Kapetaniana is one of Crete's most exciting, with the last 8km of road corkscrewing steeply up the mountains. The closest public transport comes to Agioi Deka, 18km north.

Though tiny (population less than 80), Kapetaniana has one of Crete's most interesting sleeping options, **Thalori Retreat**. Owners Marcos and Popi have rehabilitated the 'dying' village by renovating 22 of the original stone cottages to offer an atmospheric experience coupled with modern comforts, including an infinity pool. Horse riding, jeep tours, guided hikes and other activities can all be arranged. The restaurant serves hearty Cretan cuisine.

## Inland Villages

### TRADITION AND TRANQUILLITY

If Matala's too busy for you, seek out the cluster of charmingly rustic villages just inland. With cheaper food and lodging, they make a great alternative base for exploration.



## WHERE TO EAT IN KALAMAKI

### Delfinia

Snazzy beachfront taverna with distressed-look, whitewashed furniture and a stellar reputation for its fresh fish. €€

### Athivoles tou Kara

Cretan soulfood on the main square known for its grills (great lamp chops!) and *lyra* concerts by son Giorgios. €€

### Taverna Pelagos

Flavour-intense local dishes and pizza prepared in the wood oven, best enjoyed on the terrace above the sand. €



Kapetaniana

Choose from quiet **Pitsidia**, which is only 5km northeast of Matala but could not be more different in look and feel. Come here to enjoy an unhurried vibe, nicely restored stone buildings and a maze of narrow lanes decorated with potted flowers. Buses en route to Matala stop on the main road.

Another charmer is **Sivas**, reached in a minute after turning right at the junction 2km east of Pitsidia on the Matala–Gortyna Rd. A tranquil, homey feel pervades this village, which brims with heritage-protected stone buildings circling around its taverna-lined main square.

Turn left at the same junction and 2km later you'll be in **Kamilari**, a beautiful little village straddling three hills. It's the kind of place that keeps growing on you the longer you stay. Tavernas and a quaint *kafeneio* provide excellent nosh.



## GETTING AROUND

Buses shuttling between Iraklio and Matala also stop in Pitsidia, Mires, Phaestos and Gortyna. Getting anywhere else requires your

own wheels. Bike, car and scooter rentals are available in most villages.

# HERSONISOS



Driving east from Iraklio on the national road E75, the sweeping panorama of the Bay of Malia opens up after about 20km and you soon thereafter reach Hersonisos. It was the opening of this highway in 1972 that launched a frenzy of unbridled tourism development on this scenic coastal stretch.

Hersonisos quickly grew from small fishing village into one of Crete's largest and busiest package-tourist towns. Today the expected mosaic of hotel and apartment complexes, supermarkets, souvenir shops, car and quad-hire places, bars, cafes and nightclubs line its main thoroughfare, Eleftherios Venizelou, and the beachfront promenade. The tavernas along here also rent the sun loungers packed tightly on the narrow beach.

Peaceful and quiet it ain't, but if you've got the kids in tow you'll find a slew of family-friendly attractions in town and its surrounds, including temperature-cooling water parks. Boat trips launch from the little harbour and there's opportunity for watersports aplenty.

## TOP TIP

To escape the beachfront bustle, head uphill to Koutouloufari, Piskopiano and Old Hersonisos. Although touristy, these villages are nonetheless appealing and have some excellent tavernas and accommodation options. The best beaches, meanwhile, are in Limanakia, west of town past the Creta Maris resort.

## BEST WATERPARKS AROUND HERSONISOS

### Acqua Plus

Crete's biggest water park is divided into an adult section with 11 wicked slides and a section for kids with pools, playground and a 270m-long lazy river.

### Watercity

This compact Anopolis water park has seen better days but still offers a cool-down on summer days with most attractions geared to the pre-teen set.

### Star Beach

This seaside playground of pools, slides, a lazy river and water sports of all sorts is attached to the eponymous resort.

## Museum by the Beach

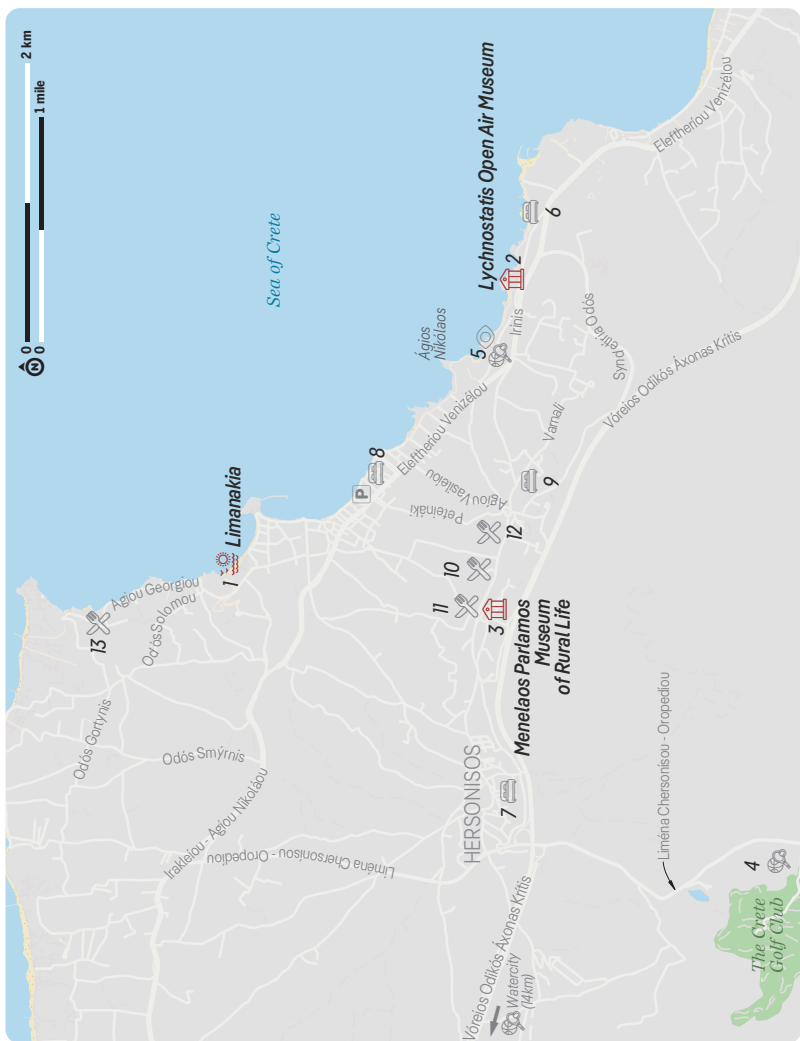
### CONNECTING WITH CRETAN FOLKLORE

In a lovely seaside setting at Hersonisos's eastern edge, family-operated **Lychnostatis Open Air Museum** recreates a traditional Cretan village with commendable authenticity. Everything you see – from farming tools to an entire chapel – is original, rescued from around Crete and moved here by the founder, the late Yiorgos Markakis, who was an ophthalmologist with a passion for preserving the past. The result is an eye-opening (so to speak) introduction to traditional Cretan life.

Start by learning about the man and his vision by watching a film made by his son (the current curator), then roam around the beautiful grounds, peeking into an old schoolhouse, studying the inner workings of a windmill and poking around a richly furnished farmhouse.

A full menu of experiences complements the exhibits, from weaving workshops, ceramics and plant-dying demonstrations to olive-oil pressing, raki distilling, cooking classes and dance performances (call or check the website for details). An audio guide, narrated by Yiorgos himself, is worth the small extra fee.

Top tip: fronting the museum is a relaxing stretch of sandy beach (open to the public) with inexpensive sun chairs perfect for enjoying refreshments from the museum cafe.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- 1** Limanakia
- 2** Lychnostatis Open Air Museum
- 3** Menelaos Parthanos Museum of Rural Life

**EATING**

- 10** Almi
- 11** David Vegera
- 12** Emmanuel
- 13** Saradari

**ACTIVITIES**

- 4** Acqua Plus
- 5** Star Beach

**SLEEPING**

- 6** Abaton Island

- 7** Baisemico
- 8** Simple Hotel
- 9** Villa Ippocampi





## BEST RESTAURANTS AROUND HERSONISOS

### Saradari

The eye-candy interior, sumptuous sea views and flawless fish and seafood give this spot A-list cache. €€

### David Vegera

Cheap, cheerful and family-owned since 1954, this place in Piskopiano serves old-school mezedhes in a buzzy ambience. €

### Almi

Warm-hearted service, great views and a pool of pleasurable Cretan dishes are highlights at this Koutouloufari spot. €

### Emmanuel

Family-run for over a century, this Koutouloufari taverna makes a mean lamb and port slow-roasted in the wood-fired oven. €€



TOP LEFT: CHATHAM172/SHUTTERSTOCK © BOTTOM RIGHT: THE PICTURES OF LIFE/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Piskopiano

## Escape to the Cape

### DESTRESSING IN CALM BAYS

For a respite from Hersonisos' crammed and music-fuelled beaches, steer towards **Limanakia**, the corrugated coast past the sprawling Creta Maris resort. A tiara of small sandy coves – some reached by stairs, some popular with nudists – stretches north from here to a rocky cape. In this lofty spot, tamarisks fringe the snowy-white chapel Agios Giorgios that's a coveted wedding location for good reason. En route you'll pass several beach tavernas as well as the spectacular Saradari restaurant.

## The Way Things Were

### PEEKING INTO THE PAST

Counterbalancing the go-go vibe along the coast, the **Mene-laos Parlamos Museum of Rural Life** turns the clock back to more traditional times. In an upcycled olive mill and adjacent house in Piskopiano, just uphill from Hersonisos, it uses analogue exhibits and digital technology to cover various aspects of country living, from raki distilling to barrel making, olive oil production to carpentry. There's also a prized collection of weavings.



## WHERE TO STAY IN HERSONISOS

### Villa Ippocampi

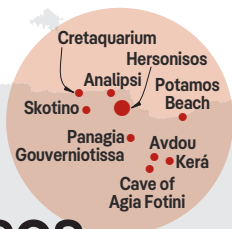
Stylish hillside adults-only refuge with a pool, gracious owners and gorgeous garden. €€

### Balsamico Traditional Suites

Suites at this charming stone complex are decked out in elegant wood and come with balconies. €

### Abaton Island

Classy Med-fronting resort with high romance factor, units sporting private pools and a happening bar. €€€



# Beyond Hersonisos

Tranquil mountain villages, thigh-burning hikes with bay views and ancient chapels provide uplifting antidotes to the buzzy coastal towns.

Hersonisos is a superb launchpad for exploring the surrounding countryside. Winding roads quickly whisk you into hills dotted with Byzantine churches, quaint villages like Krasi and clandestine caves like Agia Fotini. This is great terrain for hiking and horseback riding and also the quickest access route to the charming Lasithi Plateau (p209), whose cooler climate provides a welcome escape on scorching summer days.

The coastal communities of Stalida and Malia, meanwhile, are practically a continuation of Hersonisos with a nonstop parade of hotels, bars and tavernas. Outside of Malia, the ruins of the Minoan Palace of Malia are the area's most cerebral attraction, while Potamos Beach is a lovely and less crowded swatch of sand near the palace.

## TOP TIP

Buses link Hersonisos and Malia several times hourly in peak season. You need to rent a taxi or your own wheels to get to the inland villages.

## Palace of Malia (p169)





## A BEACH FIT FOR ROYALTY

Catch a wave on the beach where the Minoans probably took a dip some 4000 years ago. Right next to the Palace of Malia, **Potamos Beach** is one of the loveliest strands in the area. The long, sandy ribbon is popular with locals and tourists alike and comes with decent infrastructure (sunbeds, showers, portable toilets), but none of the party vibe typical for this part of Crete.

If you're feeling peckish, grab a bite on the reed-roofed terrace or under the huge tamarisk tree of Taverna Kalyva. Bird fanciers should train their binoculars on the coastal wetland behind the beach, which is also a favoured habitat of African monarch butterflies.



Cretaquarium

## Marine Life Expedition

WETSUIT NOT NEEDED

On an abandoned US air force base in Gournes, some 12km west of Hersonisos, **Cretaquarium** is a high-tech indoor sea where jelly fish dance, sea turtles glide and scorpionfish lurk. Getting close-ups of the roughly 2500 aquatic creatures from around the eastern Mediterranean should bring smiles to even the most tech-jaded visitors.

It's worth shelling out a few extra euros on the audio guide to get the backstory on many of the aquarium's denizens. Behind-the-scenes tours and a virtual reality experience are also available for an extra fee. The aquarium is part of the nearby campus of the Greek government-funded Hellenic Center for Marine Research.

## Frescoes & Herbs

SURPRISES IN A MEDIEVAL MONASTERY

A lovely stop on a tour of the Hersonisos hinterland, the monastery **Panagia Gouverniotissa** flaunts amazing Byzantine frescoes that are in surprisingly decent shape despite their



## WHERE TO STAY IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

### Country Hotel Velani

Stylish hillside hideaway above Avdou with Insta-worthy views from pool and restaurant and its own horse stables. €€

### Krassopsychia Apartments

Patterned tiles, a fireplace or a free-standing tub characterise these individually decorated apartments in Krasi. €

### Kagiampakis Concept Residences

Space galore in bilevel units in Avdou, with cosy stone and wood decor and a full kitchen. €

14th-century pedigree. It's only 11km from Hersonisos; look for signs on the highway just before Potamies.

Behind the church you can sniff out thyme, rosemary and sage growing next to pomegranate and carob trees in a small rocky **botanical garden**. The small **museum** has some cool black-and-white pictures, including one of a moustachioed man in a dress – a carnival tradition, according to the museum attendant.

## Beachfront Living, Minoan-Style

### EXPLORING AN ANCIENT PALATIAL CENTRE

One of the most enchanting pieces of Minoan jewellery displayed at the Heraklion Archaeological Museum (p132) is the golden bee pendant unearthed at the **Palace of Malia**. The compound, which occupies a precious piece of seaside-adjacent real estate some 3km east of Malia itself (12km from Hersonisos), shared the fate of its cousins at Knossos (p140) and Phaestos (p157): built around 1900 BCE, destroyed in 1700 BCE, rebuilt and levelled again around 1450 BCE.

Although smaller, it follows roughly the same floorplan as its cousins, with a central courtyard flanked by wings used for religious, residential, official and storage purposes. Unlike the others, Malia is neither reconstructed nor properly labelled, making it hard for the layperson to discern anything other than piles of stones. A free pamphlet with a map and basic explanations provide little help.

The single most mysterious piece in situ is the Kernos, a stone disc ringed by shallow indentations – it's on the left as you enter the courtyard. Was it an offering table or perhaps a game board? Archaeologists are still baffled.

What they are sure about is that Malia was surrounded by an urban area, parts of which have been excavated. Called Quartier M, it lies northwest of the palace past another site labelled 'crypt'; both are protected by a roof. An elevated footbridge provides a handy overview of the area.

## Foodie Faves in Old Town Malia

### TRADITION MEETS INNOVATION

Hersonisos' 'sister resort' of Malia, about 8km east along the coast, is just as infamous for its party vibes (vividly captured in the 2011 British comedy *The Inbetweeners*). For more charm and a quieter ambience, head to Old Town Malia, with its traditional maze of narrow lanes. Incidentally, this is also where some of Malia's best restaurants are located.



### BEST HINTERLAND RESTAURANTS

#### Velani

It's well worth the uphill hike or 3km dirt-road drive from Avdou for sublime Cretan fare with matching vistas. €€

#### Taverna

##### Krassopsychia

On the main road in Krasi, this place sets standards for flavour-packed country fare, including finger-lickin' lamb chops. €€

#### Taverna Niki

Traditional roadside outpost near Kerá with lovely views and tender, smoky meats slow-roasted in a wood-fired stone oven. €€



Malia Old Town



### WHERE TO STAY IN MALIA

#### Sunshine Hotel

This stylish abode with airy mid-century modern aesthetic punches well above its price tag. €

#### Drossia Palms Hotel

Romance is in the air at this chic in-town boutique hotel with an affiliated beach club. €€

#### Ikaros Beach

Posh, village-style resort on a rocky peninsula, complete with spa, multiple restaurants and pools. €€€





## BEST HORSE RIDING

### Odyssea Stables

Top-rated facility high above Avdou geared mostly to advanced riders with multi-day treks to the Lasithi Plateau or across the Dikti Mountains.

### Arion Stables

Sweet little horse farm between Hersonisos and Analipsi with country and beach rides plus a playground and tavern.

### Finikia Horses

In business since 1987, the line-up of this outfit south of Iraklio includes beach rides at sunrise and by moonlight.



Horsesriding, Crete

JOSEFKUBES/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

On the eastern edge, top marks go to **Milos**, a feel-good charmer with a woodsy interior and flower-filled terrace that hums with people appreciative of its *psito* dishes (roasted oven meats) cooked in the outdoor wood-fired oven. Book ahead here and also at **Avli**, which offers fine farm-to-table dining in an 18th-century mansion with jasmine-scented terrace and home-baked bread that's worth the carbs. Another culinary winner is **Kalesma**, an elegantly cosy spot smack in the centre that feeds tummy and soul with flavour-packed Greek classics.

## Subterranean Labyrinth

### EXPLORING A SACRED CAVE

Also known as Agia Paraskevi, after the chapel built above it, **Skotino** is one of the largest caves in Crete...and deliciously spooky to boot. Used as a sanctuary since Minoan times, it has a true off-grid feel, despite being only 15km west of Hersonisos. There's no admission fee, no guard and few visitors.

Only a chorus of crickets will likely break the silence as you make your way towards the massive cave opening that's as foreboding as a wide-open monster maw. Mind your footing as you step down a steep and stony path into the giant chamber dotted with formations that, with some imagination, recall shapes like a bear, a dragon, a female head. The ground can be slippery, so be sure to wear appropriate footwear and bring a flashlight (a mobile phone light will only get you so far).

A honeycomb of caves spreads out below this first chamber, which led archaeologist Paul Faure to wonder if Skotino might have inspired the myth of the Minotaur's labyrinth (he later retracted his theory). Unless you have some spelunking experience and equipment, you should not venture here.

## Clandestine Cave Chapel

### HIKING FROM EARTH TO HEAVEN

The hills above Hersonisos are primo hiking terrain with trails leading to secluded nature spots that don't see many visitors. An enthralling destination is the **Cave of Agia Fotini**, which sheltered Cretan revolutionaries during the late-19th-century uprising against the Turks and now houses a chapel. It's on Mt Louloudaki, at the end of a rough 7km-long dirt road above Avdou (17km from Hersonisos), where a blink-and-you-miss-it sign marks the turn-off.

Relentlessly uphill, the hike is quite a slog but well worth it for inhaling the panoramic views of the valley and the Aposel-emis reservoir below.



## WHERE TO PARTY IN MALIA

### Dolphin Beach Bar

Malia's oldest beach bar scores with its pirate theme, tropical cocktails and tummy-filling Cretan fare.

### Drossia Cocktail Bar

Enjoy cocktails in the garden at this been-here-forever spot that's classier than most in town.

### Apollo Club

Top DJs whip the libidinous crowd into a frenzy with urban sounds at this high-octane party pen.



At the trail's end, 200 steps hewn into the rock will deposit you at the cave entrance. Don't stop in the chapel's first section (unless you're claustrophobic)! Instead, squeeze through the narrow opening on the left of the chamber to...drum roll please...the secret chapel hewn right into the rock. Naturally, it's pitch-black here, but with your phone flashlight or, better yet, a real one you can see the icons and the stone vessel filled with 'holy water' dripping from the cave ceiling.

It's possible to drive up to the cave but it's quite a rough ride. Appearing about 3km uphill, like a mirage in these deserted parts, the classy Country Hotel Velani (p168) is a welcome pit stop for a cold drink, delicious meal or overnight stay.

## Icons, Chains & a Pillar

DROP BY A MIRACLE-WORKING CHAPEL

Tiny **Kerá**, about 25km southeast of Hersonisos, is home to one of Crete's most venerated monasteries, the **Panagia Kardiotissa**, still an active nunnery today. Its small chapel is embellished with 14th-century frescoes depicting scenes from the life of Christ and the Virgin. The monastery is linked to the legend of an icon with miraculous powers that was stolen three times by the Turks but returned each time on its own, the last time despite being chained to a marble pillar.

The original is safely ensconced at the church of San Alfonso in Rome, but locals now venerate another (equally miracle-working, of course) 18th-century icon instead. Look for it to the left of the iconostasis (wall separating nave from sanctuary) with the chains next to it and the marble pillar right outside. There's also a small museum with religious paraphernalia.

## Traditional Rural Village

CHAPELS, HIKES AND OLIVE OIL

Surrounded by fruit and olives tree, serene **Avdou**, 16km south of Hersonisos, is a lovely traditional Cretan village famous for its six Byzantine chapels, including the **church of Agios Konstantinos**, which sports some especially vibrant frescoes.

Many of Avdou's 330 inhabitants are involved in the production of olive oil, which is considered excellent and can be sampled, for instance, at the Assargiotakis shop along the main road.

Avdou is also a good base for **hikes** in the surrounding mountains, including the 7km trek to the Agia Fotini cave with a refuelling stop at the Velani restaurant (p169) about halfway.

A trip to Avdou can also be combined with a visit to Gouverniotissa (p168) or turned into a loop trip with additional stops at the Panagia Kardiotissa and the giant tree at Krasi.



### KRASI'S GIANT TREE

Just 10km south of Malia, en route to the Lasithi Plateau, cute but touristy Krasi stakes its fame on an ancient (by some accounts 2000-year-old) plane tree with a mind-boggling 16m girth. It is watered by the adjacent spring spurting from an arcaded stone basin and provides shade for the taverna tables set up beneath its massive canopy. Above one arch is a quote by Nikos Kazantzakis, who spent several summers drinking and debating under the tree with his wife and friends. The narrow lanes of the village itself are lined with traditional stone houses filled with tavernas, cafes and souvenir shops.



### GETTING AROUND

In high season, buses leaving every 15 minutes from Iraklio's port station make multiple stops on the main road cutting through Hersonisos and Malia, including one near the palace. There

is no bus service to the hills other than the tourist-gear Happy Train, which loops by Krasi and Mochos.

# LASITHI

## COSMOPOLITAN GLAMOUR, UNTAMED NATURE

Unspoiled dream beaches, splendidly isolated gorges, toy-town mountain hamlets and cities from earthy to elegant blend into an intoxicating cocktail of adventure in Crete's lesser known 'Wild East'.

Crete's easternmost region is tailor-made for escapists and travellers in search of adventure, dramatic landscapes, people-free beaches, and towns and villages that maintain a rich undertow of Cretan history and spirit. This is a wild land with the richest biodiversity and the least trampled ranges; it's so rugged in places that you half expect Pan to emerge, pipes in hand, from the mountain slopes.

Lasithi's capital, Agios Nikolaos on sparkling Mirabello Bay, exudes a relaxed vibe in the daytime before ramping up the energy in its harbourside bars at night. Just up the road, Elounda is home to Crete's most exclusive resorts, favoured by privacy-craving A-Listers like Lady Gaga, U2 and Leonardo diCaprio. The top sight-

seeing attraction here is a Venetian fortress rebooted as a leper colony in the first half of the 20th century.

Once you leave Mirabello Bay, a smorgasbord of outdoor adventures competes

for your holiday time. Cyclists head up to the bountiful Lasithi Plateau, trekkers tackle dramatic canyons such as the famous Zakros Gorge, and foodies enjoy some of Crete's finest tavernas and restaurants. You can visit the cave where Zeus was born and hike to a waterfall through a lush gorge. Then there are attractions

like the historic monastery of Toplou, Vai's beguiling palm-lined beach and Crete's windsurfing capital at Kouremenos. And let's not forget Lasithi's rich ancient history, with numerous Minoan and Dorian sites to explore.



GEORGIOS TSCHIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

### THE MAIN AREAS

#### AGIOS NIKOLAOS

Cosmopolitan resorts, mountain splendour and outstanding sights.

**p178**

#### SITIA

Friendly coastal town and gateway to the 'Wild East'.

**p188**

#### ZAKROS

Mighty canyons, Minoans and mesmerising beaches.

**p196**

#### IERAPETRA

Dreamy beaches, tropical island and gorge hiking.

**p201**

#### LASITHI PLATEAU

Cool air, fertile fields and Zeus' birthplace.

**p209**



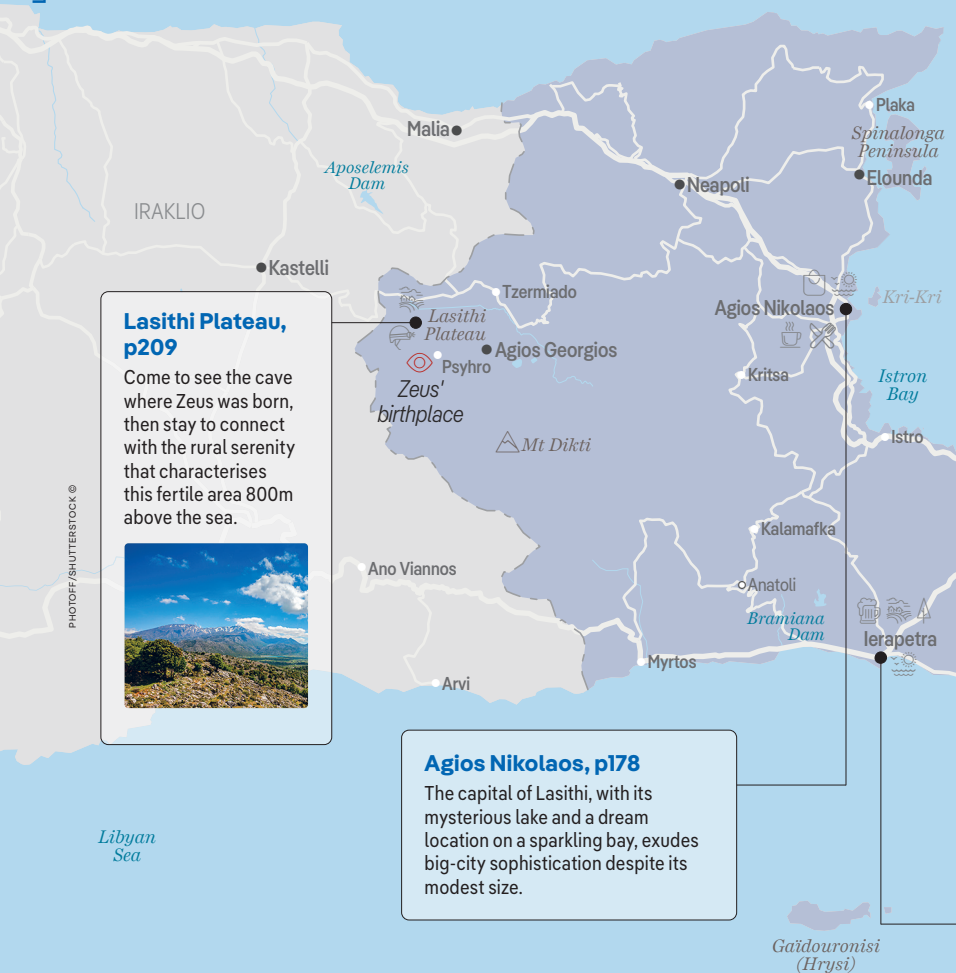
Left: Voulismeni Lake (p178); above: Spinalonga (p184)



# Find Your Way

A pastiche of stark mountains and glistening seas, Lasithi is by far the least populous of Crete's four regional units. Most people live in its three cities: Agios Nikolaos (the capital), Sitia and Ierapetra.

Sea of Crete



PHOTOFF/SHUTTERSTOCK ©





## CAR

Except in and around Agios Nikolaos, Sitia and Ierapetra, a car is essential for getting to some of eastern Crete's most magical spots. Since some beaches and trailheads can only be reached via unsurfaced roads, renting an off-road vehicle is advisable. Paved roads are generally in good condition, but the going can be slow on narrow, steep and winding mountain roads, which sometimes lack guardrails.



## BUS

Bus service between Agios Nikolaos, Sitia and Ierapetra is frequent, especially during the week. Smaller towns like Palekastro and Zakros have limited connections. There's a summer service to Vaï, but none at all up to the Lasithi Plateau. Frequency depends on the day of the week and the time of year. Schedules are posted at bus stops, or check [www.ktelherlas.gr](http://www.ktelherlas.gr).

### Sitia, p188

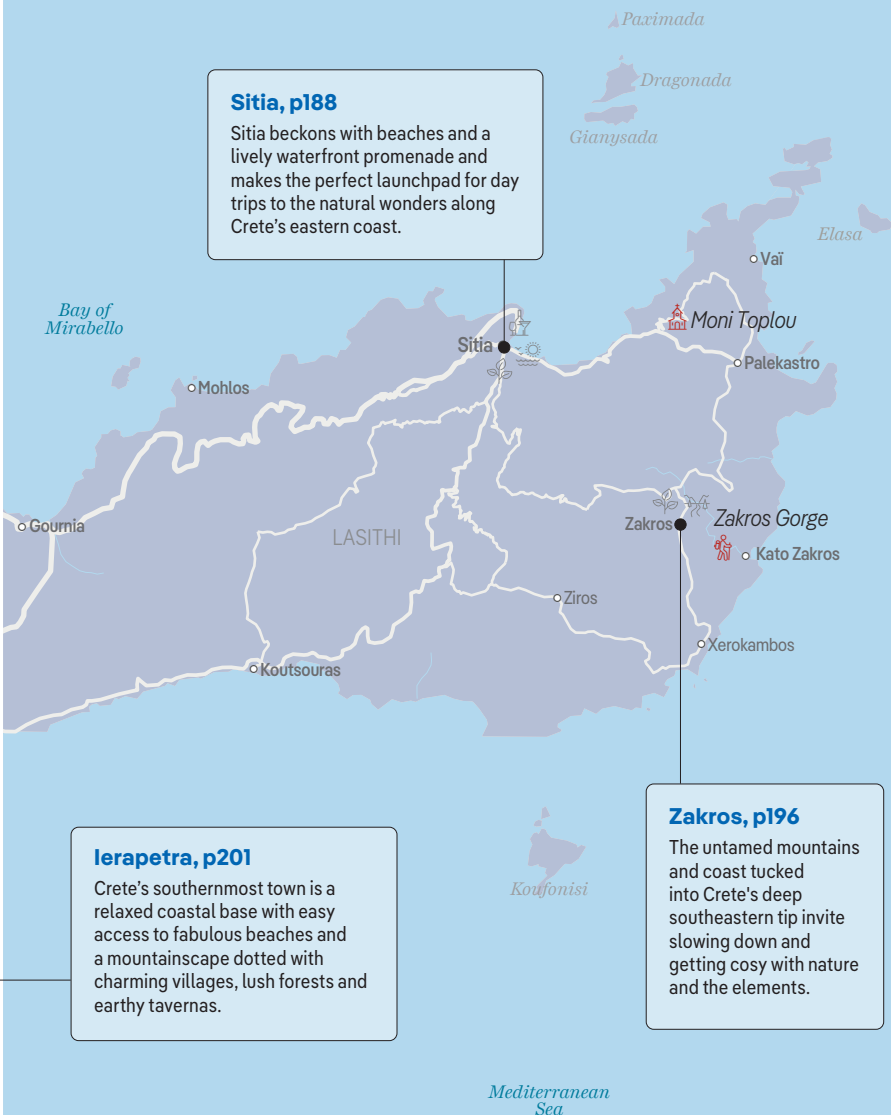
Sitia beckons with beaches and a lively waterfront promenade and makes the perfect launchpad for day trips to the natural wonders along Crete's eastern coast.

### Zakros, p196

The untamed mountains and coast tucked into Crete's deep southeastern tip invite slowing down and getting cosy with nature and the elements.

### Ierapetra, p201

Crete's southernmost town is a relaxed coastal base with easy access to fabulous beaches and a mountainscape dotted with charming villages, lush forests and earthy tavernas.





# Plan Your Time

Lasithi is tailor-made for DIY discoveries. Fill your time with lazing on the beach, tackling timeless gorges, exploring rural villages or tucking into plates of traditional Cretan cuisine.



GEORGIOS TSICHLIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Kritsa (p182)



## Seasonal Highlights

Springtime brings wildflowers and aromatic herbs. Balmy nights, starry skies and *meltemi* winds characterise summer, while winter douses the plateaus with snow.



### JANUARY

Days are short but crowds are nonexistent; enjoy views of **cobalt blue sea** against the backdrop of snow-covered mountains.



### MARCH

During pre-Lent, Sitia erupts in raucous **carnival celebrations** with street barbecues, entertainment, treasure hunts and a parade.



### APRIL

**St George**, the patron saint of shepherds, is honoured in rural communities (especially Agios Georgios) on 23 April.

## If You Only Have a Day

● Make your way early from Agios Nikolaos to **Kritsa** (p182) to marvel at the ingenious frescoes of the **Chapel of the Panagia Kera** (p185) before the crowds arrive, followed by browsing for quality souvenirs in the village.

● Spend the rest of the morning exploring **Agios Nikolaos** (p178) on foot, taking in the marina, the harbour and Lake Voulismeni, before refuelling at **Gioma** (p180).

● After lunch enjoy gorgeous coastal views en route to **Elounda** (p183), then hop on a ferry to **Spinalonga** (p184) for an unforgettable tour of this former island leper colony.

● Back on shore, ponder your impressions of the day over drinks at **Beeraki** (p184) before tucking into a sunset dinner at **The Ferryman** (p184).

## With Three Days to Explore

● After your day in and around Agios Nikolaos, rent a car and head east to soak up the sun on the golden sands of **Voulisma Beach** (p207).

● Coast along the highway, making a quick detour to the fishing village of **Mohlos** (p193) for a sublime seafood lunch, then spend the afternoon hiking the **Richtis Gorge** (p192) to a magnificent year-round waterfall. Spend the night in **Sitia** (p188).

● On day three, backtrack west to the turn-off to **Ierapetra** (p201) on the south coast and follow our **Mountain Meander** (p206) driving route back to Agios Nikolaos, perhaps breaking for lunch at **Taverna Agia Paraskevi** (p205).

## If You Have More Time

● Instead of backtracking from Sitia on day three, turn your attention to Crete's far eastern region, where nature has put on a particularly lively show. Stop at **Moni Toplou** (p193) on your way to the exotic palm beach at **Vai** (p194) or check out the less busy strands at Itanos. Book ahead for a meal at **Hiona Taverna** (p194).

● Base yourself in **Kato Zakros** (p196) for a couple of days to hike Zakros Gorge, explore Pelekita Cave and drive down to isolated Xerokambos.

● Take your sweet time making your way back west to Ierapetra (p201) and wrap up your trip with our **Mountain Meander** (p206) driving route.



### JULY

Ierapetra's **Kyrvia Festival** runs from July to August and features dozens of cultural events for the entire family.



### AUGUST

The best new films from Greece and the world are screened at the **International Documentary Festival** in Ierapetra.



### SEPTEMBER

The **Cretan Street Food Festival**, held in mid-September in Agios Nikolaos, is a chance to sample treats from around the island.



### DECEMBER

On 6 December, Agios Nikolaos honours its patron saint with a **boat parade** and fireworks.

# AGIOS NIKOLAOS



Draped over hilly terrain, Agios Nikolaos enjoys a splendid setting overlooking the sensuously curving Mirabello Bay (also called the Gulf of Mirabello). Two uninhabited islands lie lazily right offshore, while in the distance the starkly beautiful Thripti mountain range contrasts sharply with the softly shimmering Aegean. Watching the sun slip up over the horizon is magical.

Although popular with tourists, Lasithi's capital has maintained a low-key, local character. A narrow channel separates the small harbour from the circular Voulismeni Lake, whose shore is lined with cafes and restaurants that bustle at all hours. The city beaches lend themselves to a few hours of relaxing and taking a dip in the sea. There's also some decent shopping in the pedestrianised lanes next to the lake.

Agios Nikolaos truly comes into its own at night, when a lively ambience descends on the lake, harbour and beaches, and lounge-bars fill with stylish young Greeks and holiday-makers from the nearby resorts.

## TOP TIP

Unlike most cities on Crete, Agios Nikolaos still maintains an actual municipal tourist office stocked with maps, flyers and bus schedules and staff to pepper with questions. It's right by the bridge linking the lake with the port. The website ([agiosnikolaoscrete.com](http://agiosnikolaoscrete.com)) is quite helpful as well.

## BEST BEACHES IN AGIOS NIKOLAOS

### Ammoudi Beach

Small but busy strip of sand in the northern part of town with bars, restaurants and water sports.

### Almyros Beach

Some 2.5km south of the centre, this is the largest beach, with fine sand and tranquil waters.

### Kitroplatia Beach

Compact but central and backed by cafe-bars, it's good for a quick dip rather than extended sun-worshipping.

### Gargadoros Beach

Pebbly strip popular with locals and overlooked by a congenial cafe-bar but otherwise without infrastructure.

## Where Goddesses Bathed

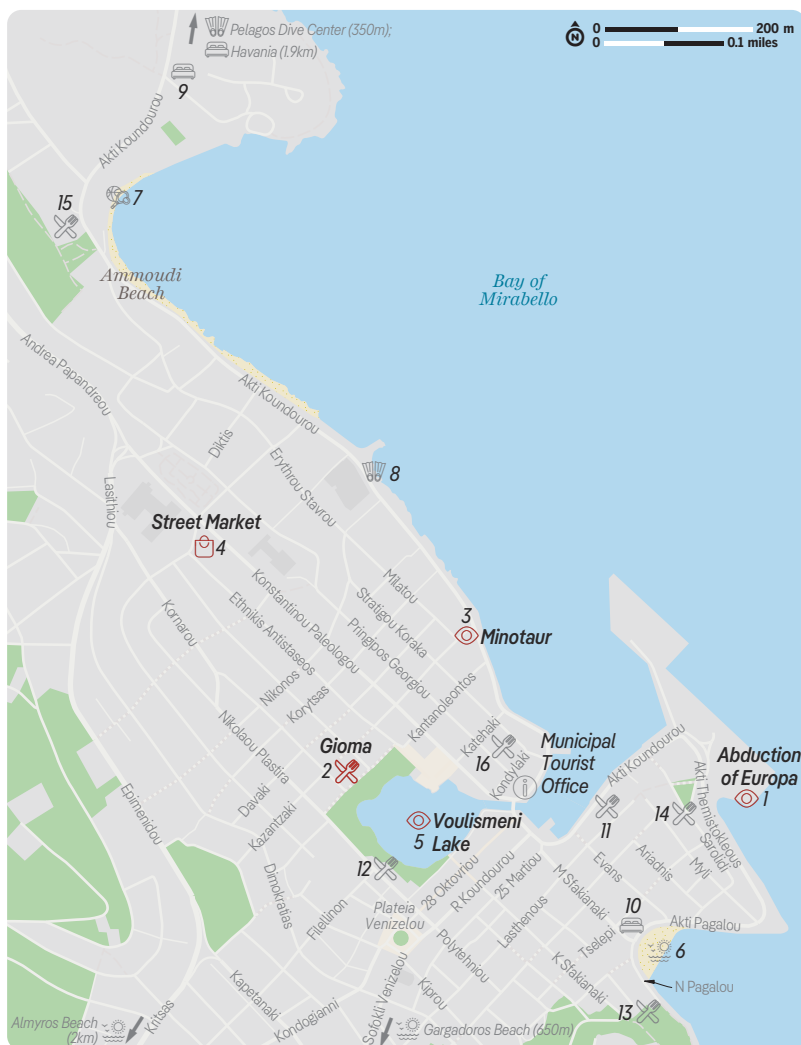
### THE MYSTERIOUS LAKE OF AGIOS NIKOLAOS

The setting on Mirabello Bay is undoubtedly breathtaking, but Agios Nikolaos' most famous water feature is the circular, cafe-lined **Voulismeni Lake** (called simply 'the lake' locally) right in the town centre. It's connected to the port by a narrow channel first dug by an Ottoman governor in the late 1860s and widened and deepened 40 years later by the French Army.

For an outstanding lake-city-sea panorama, climb the set of steep staircases leading to an **outlook** (near the Gioma tavern, p180) atop the craggy cliffs that cradle the lake's back. Looking down at the glassy pool mysteriously shimmering in shades of blue and green feels like peering into the soul of the city.

Many myths are connected with Lake Voulismeni, the story of the goddesses Artemis and Athena bathing in its waters being the most charming. Among the more ludicrous claims is that it is a bottomless crater connected by underground channels to a volcano on Santorini. The fact is that it's a 48.8m deep sinkhole – not that this makes it any less impressive.

Following the paved stone trail around the lake is a popular walk that takes you past moored fishing boats, benches for resting, a tiny rock chapel and some fat ducks. At Orthodox Easter, people gather around the lake for fireworks.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- 1 Abduction of Europa
- 2 Gioma
- 3 Minotaur
- 4 Street Market
- 5 Voulismeni Lake-

**SIGHTS**

- 6 Kitroplatia Beach

**ACTIVITIES & TOURS**

- 7 Ammoudi Beach
- 8 Creta's Happy Divers

**SLEEPING**

- 9 Minos Beach Art Hotel
- 10 Palazzo Arhontiko

**EATING**

- 11 BLE Katsarolakia
- 12 Migomis
- 13 Ofou To Lo
- 14 Paradosiako
- 15 Patriko
- 16 Pelagos

**Cafe, Voulismeni Lake**

GEORGIOS TSICHLIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



## BEST RESTAURANTS IN AGIOS NIKOLAOS

### Gioma

Superb mezedhes at tables under the pine trees high above Lake Voulismeni. €€

### Ofou To Lo

Overlooking Kitroplatia beach with cheerful white-and-blue decor and plates both comforting and innovative. €€

### Pelagos

Local favourite in an elegantly rustic villa with romantic garden specialising in fresh fish and seafood. €€

### BLE Katsarolakia

Contemporary Greek cuisine in a hip outpost with a secret garden and balcony tables overlooking the harbour. €€



GEORGIOS TSICHILIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Mirabello Bay

## Dive Mirabello Bay

### MARVEL AT AQUATIC LIFE

Mirabello Bay is exciting diving terrain with more than two dozen sites just a quick boat ride away from Agios Nikolaos. Drop down into this crystalline underwater world where wartime debris, sunken shipwrecks and ancient amphorae open a fascinating window onto Crete's past. Clear and calm water allows for visibility of 30m or more, making sightings of groupers, octopuses, moray eels, scorpion fish and other marine life extremely likely. PADI-certified **Creta's Happy Divers** and **Pelagos Dive Center** are both recommended and offer trips as well as PADI-certification courses.



## MORE ABOUT ZEUS & EUROPA

The tale of Europa and Zeus also plays a role in Matala (p152), where the pair swam ashore, and in the nearby Roman-era settlement of Gortyna (p158), where they consummated their union under a plane tree.



## WHERE TO STAY IN AGIOS NIKOLAOS

### Havania

Chic seaside complex 3km north of the centre with swimming pool and vegetables from the garden. €

### Palazzo Arhontiko

Above Kitroplatia beach, these modern apartments come with old-school accents, a balcony and alfresco breakfast included. €€

### Minos Beach Art Hotel

Waterfront resort where gardens dotted with conversation-sparking art lead to chic white-cube bungalows and villas. €€€



## Shop for Regional Bounty & Bargains

### EASTERN CRETE'S BIGGEST STREET MARKET

For a glimpse into everyday life, swing by Agios Nikolaos' boisterous **street market** that sets up on Wednesday mornings along narrow Ethniki Antistaseos high above Voulismeni Lake. Jostle with locals around dozens of stalls loaded with larder staples like fresh fruit and veg, herbs, olives, meat and cheese. A typical haul might also include household goods, and hoodies, flip-flops and other clothing. Prices are low and energy levels high. Watch the action, have a coffee or a souvlaki, buy a souvenir or two and stock up for a picnic lunch.

## Artistic Stairways

### A LOCALISED SPIN ON PUBLIC ART

There's street art and there's 'stair art', at least in hilly Agios Nikolaos whose collection of over 70 staircases is an integral part of its architectural DNA. Since 2018, a city-sponsored contemporary art initiative called **The Spirit of the Stairs** has drawn on the vision of more than a dozen Greek artists to decorate some of these thigh-burning links between residential areas and the sea.

The most impressive of these artistic outpourings is **The Minotaur** by Athens-born artist Manolis Anastasakos. Discover this superb perspective mural depicting the mythological beast in blue paint on a zigzagging staircase on Akti Koundourou (next to Manolis bike hire), the waterfront road leading to Elounda.

The tourist office has a flyer with a map of the other works, or simply keep an eye out for them while drifting around town.

### ABDUCTION OF EUROPA SCULPTURE

In a humble spot at the end of the ho-hum public parking lot near the port (off Akti Themistokleous), a buxom beauty perches proudly atop a bull while cradling an orb in one hand and the dove of peace in the other. The giant sculpture represents Europa, the Phoenician princess abducted and seduced by Zeus in bull's disguise, who gave the continent its name. Designed by the late Nikos Koundouros, a seminal Greek film director who was born in Agios Nikolaos in 1926, it was unveiled in 2012 and is meant as a metaphor for unity, peace and solidarity among the people of Europe.



### GETTING AROUND

Hilly and compact Agios Nikolaos is best explored on foot. Streets are narrow and confusing with lots of one-ways, so if you have a rental car leave it for a small fee in the big car park on Akti Themistokleous near the port. The main taxi rank is behind the tourist office just

east off Voulismeni Lake. The long-distance bus station on Epidemidou west of the General Hospital, about 750m north of the lake, has regular services to Elounda, Ierapetra, Sitia, Kritsa and Iraklio via Malia and Hersonisos.



# Beyond Agios Nikolaos



Boredom is banished around twinkling Mirabello Bay thanks to a string of bewitching beaches and mind-opening blockbuster sights.

Agios Nikolaos is an excellent hub for excursions in all directions. Take the sinuous coastal road north to Elounda, a posh seaside resort with top tavernas. It's also the launchpad to the area's biggest attraction: Spinalonga, the erstwhile leper colony set up in a Venetian fortress on an offshore island.

Heading south, Voulisma Beach near Istro beckons with golden sand and shimmering sea. Inland you quickly hit hillside Krita, a charismatic village that counts a craggy canyon, an intricately frescoed church, an ancient Dorian settlement and smart boutiques among its assets. For spellbinding views and a rural world steeped in tradition, zoom further up the mountain to the Katharo Plateau. Also nearby: Kroustas is the go-to spot for elevated local dishes.

## TOP TIP

Hop on a bus or behind your own wheels to discover a kaleidoscope of nearby cultural, historical and hedonistic diversions.

## Elounda



GEORGIOS TSICHLIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



## BEST BEACHES AROUND ELOUNDA

### Kolokytha Beach

Unorganised sandy cove on Spinalonga Peninsula (Kalydon) with great snorkelling; reached on foot or by boat.

### Skisma Beach

Long sandy strip north of the harbour, with playground, toilets and water sports and taverns across the street.

### Plaka Beach

Tan and swim with Spinalonga Island views at this pebbly strand 5km north of Elounda.



Kolokytha Beach



Voulisma Beach, near Istro

## Chic Resort Town

### JEWEL OF MIRABELLO BAY

Although home to some of Crete's most luxurious hotels and resorts, **Elounda** retains a charming down-to-earth feel. Salty fishing craft bob in its little harbour, where you can board a boat to the erstwhile leper colony of Spinalonga (p184), the area's biggest tourist attraction.

The coastal road treats you to mesmerising bay views for most of the 10km trip from Agios Nikolaos. Drivers find parking in the harbour hemmed in by attractive shops, bars and tavernas, with more parking north along the sandy municipal beach and south along the waterfront promenade Akti Olountos.

Offshore lies the rugged **Spinalonga Peninsula** (aka Kalydon), linked to the mainland by a narrow causeway and home to ancient ruins, beaches and hiking trails (p186). There's also excellent snorkelling and diving in the bay's crystalline waters.



## WHERE TO STAY IN ELOUNDA

### Elounda Heights

This hilltop adults-only hideaway comes with swoon-worthy bay views, lavish poolside breakfast and a flower-filled garden. €€€

### Kalypso Suites Hotel

On the main square with smartly renovated rooms, prosecco in the fridge and free treats nightly. €€

### Coral Studios & Portobello Apartments

Immaculately kept beachfront units with balconies, blue-painted furniture and a good-sized pool with snack bar. €



## OLOUS, THE SUNKEN CITY

Follow Akti Oloontos, Elounda's waterfront promenade, south and you'll soon arrive at a narrow isthmus connecting the mainland with Spinalonga Peninsula (officially Kalydon, not to be confused with Spinalonga Island of leper colony infamy). In the water below are vestiges of the ancient town of **Oloous**, one of the most important Dorian cities, which existed from the 8th century BCE until disappearing, possibly because of an earthquake, in around the 8th century CE.

The waters are popular with snorkellers, even if there's not much to see aside from some house foundations and the remnants of a harbour wall.

To get to the isthmus, make a sharp turn off the Elounda main road at the Ergospasio restaurant and head downhill.



GEORGIOS KRITSOTAKIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Milatos Cave

## Cold Beer & Fingerlickin' Food

### LOFTY LAIR WITH DREAM VIEWS

For eating and drinking with an epic view over Elounda, Spinalonga and the cobalt Mirabello Bay, trek or drive up the steep hillside to the hamlet of **Mavrikiano**. Destination: **Hope** and **Beeraki**. Owned by two brothers and their wives, these two casual hang-outs rub rafters in a stone house where fishermen once gathered on the terrace to suss out the next day's weather. Today, they're often mobbed by clued-in foodies keen on Hope's legendary lamb chops and Beeraki's selection of craft beers and local wines. The turn-off is about 600m north of Elounda's main square.

## The Island of Lepers

### GHOSTLY BEAUTY, TRAGIC HISTORY

Once a mighty Venetian and Turkish stronghold, tiny **Spinalonga** island became one of Europe's last leper colonies in 1903.

Also known as Hansen's disease, leprosy causes skin lesions, nerve damage and muscle weakness and has been around



## WHERE TO EAT IN ELOUNDA

### The Ferryman

Devour next-level Cretan fare at the seafront tavern of Yiannis Baxevasis, dubbed 'Greece's Jamie Oliver'. €€

### Okeanis

Elegant loft-style lair whose contemporary menu and swift service blend as perfectly as the lamb signature dish. €€

### Ergospasio

Hip outpost in an old carob factory with custom-designed *antikristo* spit grill and tables above the water. €€€



since ancient times. Hundreds of Greeks were quarantined here, initially in squalid conditions. The situation improved somewhat after 1936 thanks to Epaminondas Remoundakis, a 21-year-old law student who fought passionately for better medical care and infrastructure on the island. Treatment for leprosy became available in the 1950s and the colony finally closed in 1957.

Spinalonga catapulted into pop-cultural consciousness thanks to Victoria Hislop's 2005 best-selling novel *The Island* and the subsequent Greek TV series spin-off *To Nisi*.

Boats drop visitors at **Dante's Gate**, the 20m-long tunnel through which patients arrived: a chilling experience, to say the least. From here, a 1km trail takes you around the fortress past such sights (mostly ruined) as a church, the disinfection room, the hospital and the cemetery. As this is the region's star attraction, you're unlikely to feel lonely during your visit.

Ferries operated by local boat cooperatives depart half-hourly from Elounda and Plaka, giving you as much time on the island as you need. From Agios Nikolaos, Nostos Cruises runs daily excursions.

## Cavern with a Haunting History

CHANNEL THE SOULS OF THE DEAD

Driving from Iraklio towards Agios Nikolaos on the E75 highway, it's well worth hooking over to the intriguing **Milatos Cave**, where Turkish troops massacred hundreds of locals who had taken refuge here in 1823. One of the chambers contains a little chapel and an ossuary with bones of some of the victims. On the Sunday after Easter a moving memorial service is held in the cave. Take a minute to gawk at the grand coastal panorama before hoofing it to the cave entrance via a flat 200m path above a steep ravine.

## A Feast of Frescoes

BIBLICAL STORYTELLING, ONE PAINTING AT A TIME

A must-stop roadside attraction for art and church fans is **Panagia Kera**, a chapel some 9km south of Agios Nikolaos on the road to Kritsa. Framed by cypress trees, it may look just like any other old Cretan church. Step past its sturdy walls, though, and you'll find yourself in the presence of the island's best-preserved Byzantine frescoes covering every centimetre of wall space like a richly illustrated Bible. The oldest paintings in the central nave date back to the

## THE ROUSING TALE OF KRITSOTOPOULA

Kritsa's main strip is named Kritsotopoula (Girl of Kritsa) after the legend of a local woman who became a freedom fighter during the Ottoman occupation and who is still revered as a symbol of Cretan resistance.

Named Rhodanthe, she was the beautiful daughter of the local priest. Unfortunately she caught the eye of the Turkish ruler who had her kidnapped and forced her into marriage. On their wedding night, Rhodanthe slit her tormentor's throat, put on his clothes and made for the hills to join the Cretan rebels dressed as a young man. She battled fiercely against the Turks but succumbed to wounds sustained during an epic battle near Ancient Lato.

Rhodanthe is commemorated by a small statue on the lane that bears her name, by the endearing Kritsotopoula Museum a bit further on, and by a novel by local resident Yvonne Payne.



## WHERE TO DRINK IN ELOUNDA

### Radys Cocktail Bar

Relaxed waterfront lounge with meticulously mixed drinks and a DJ spinning mellow jazz, funk and soul.

### Alyggos Bar

Friendly, reasonably priced day-to-night stalwart with an extensive drinks menu and snacks as a counterbalance.

### Babel Bar

Cheer on your team on the big screen or catch up on your Insta over coffee.





## FOR THE LOVE OF FOOD

Just 4km south of Kritsa (14km from Agios Nikolaos), the sleepy village of **Kroustas** is a local foodie fave well known for its top-notch traditional Cretan cuisine.

Reserve ahead for a table under the mulberry trees at **Xatheri**, a top spot in town where Konstantinos and his parents serve such hearty classics as *lazania* (twisted handmade pasta) cooked in stock and topped with *anthotiro* (a dry, white cheese). Another dish worth trying is *gamopilafo*, which is rice cooked in goat broth typically served at weddings. The most atmospheric time to come is on Sundays, when tables seem to bend under the load of the dishes ordered by local families.

Alas, buses to Kroustas from Agios Nikolaos only operate on weekdays.

13th century and depict scenes from the life of Christ, including a superb Last Supper. Spend a while, then ponder it all while sipping a freshly pressed orange juice in the church's garden cafe.

## Enchanting Mountain Village

ROMANCE, RUINS AND RELIGION

Clinging to the craggy slopes of Kastellos mountain only 10km southwest of Agios Nikolaos, **Kritsa** is one of the oldest and prettiest villages in eastern Crete. The main strip, Kritsotopoula, is lined with shops slinging local products, surprisingly sophisticated boutiques and atmospheric tavernas like **Platanos**, with its 200-year-old plane tree.

But it's beyond the last store where Kritsa truly unfolds its charms. Embark on an aimless wander past coral-pink bougainvillea, doors painted in faded turquoise and midnight-blue, and stairs decorated with potted geraniums. Signs point to the trailhead of the rugged **Kritsa Gorge**, which follows a riverbed dotted with oak and olive trees and resplendent with wildflowers in spring.

Beyond the village, the fortified hilltop city state of **Ancient Lato** is one of Crete's best-preserved non-Minoan ancient sites. Founded by the Dorians in the 7th century BCE, it's worth a visit for the rural serenity and bewitching Gulf of Mirabello views alone.

Kritsa is frequently served by bus from Agios Nikolaos. If you're driving, you can park for free in the signposted big lot in the lower village.

## Spectacular, Cathartic Trails

PLATEAU CAUGHT IN A TIME WARP

If you feel like escaping the summer heat, point the compass to the **Katharo Plateau**, an otherworldly expanse 1150m above sea level. Although only 26km from Agios Nikolaos, coming up here feels like travelling back in time to a world before mass tourism, when Crete belonged to farmers and shepherds. To this day, Katharo is inhabited only from May, when shepherds move their flocks of sheep and goats up from the lowlands, until October when the animals are herded back down.

A smoothly paved road serpentine up 16km from Kritsa, delivering iconic views across to the jagged incisors of Mt Tsiwi and back east over Mirabello Bay. As olive trees give way to holm oaks, only the wind and the bells of shaggy



## WHERE TO STAY IN KRITSA

### Rooms Argyro

Near the bus station, this delightful pension has compact, modern rooms with white furniture and tiled floors. €

### Tsiboulas Cretan Cottage

Feel like a local in this traditionally decorated holiday apartment right in the upper village. €€

### Kritsa House

Romance rules in this antique-filled lower village apartment with grand mountain views from the balcony. €



Road to Katharo Plateau

goats grazing happily among the craggy boulders break the silence. In spring, a blaze of wildflowers punctuates the rugged landscape with Van Gogh-like vividness. Battered signs point out forest trails probably already in use in Minoan times.

More trails (including the one to Havgas Canyon on the Lasithi Plateau, p212) start at the top in **Aveliakos**, where the paved road ends. Most people, though, are content to refuel at one of the three tavernas. They're all good, but we give the nod to **Stereos**, where you can sit either on the pergola-covered terrace or inside by the fireplace surrounded by family heirlooms.



## GETTING AROUND

The area around Agios Nikolaos is well served by public buses with multiple trips daily to Elounda, Kritsa, Sitia, Ierapetra and the coastal communities west as far as Iraklio. Your own wheels are necessary for remote

destinations like the Katharo Plateau, Ancient Lato, Milatos Cave and Lasithi Plateau. Spinalonga is served by frequent ferries from Elounda, although departures from Plaka are cheaper and quicker.

# SITIA

Sometimes it's the absence of things that makes a place so special. In point, Sitia: no big international resorts, no fancy designer boutiques, no glittering nightclubs. Instead, the largest town in far eastern Crete exudes a charming, unpolished grit that stems from not having sold its soul to mass tourism.

Still, Sitia does receive its share of visitors in summer, when a carnival-like atmosphere takes over the taverna-lined waterfront promenade that skirts the small fishing harbour.

In the tranquil old town above the harbour, whitewashed buildings tumble down a hillside cut by steep staircases and accented by a ruined Venetian castle. Stores and businesses in the small streets paralleling the promenade are geared mostly to the needs of the local population.

Many visitors use Sitia as a launch pad for explorations of Vai, Moni Toplou, Zakros and other remote destinations further east, although it's well worth spending a day or two in town.



## TOP TIP

There's pay parking all over town and free parking in lots behind the Archaeological Museum and off Emmanouil Rouselaki just before the ferry port. The long-distance bus station – with daily service to Agios Nikolaos, Ierapetra and Iraklio and limited connections to Palekastro and Zakros – is opposite the Archaeological Museum on the Sitia–Palekastro Rd.



## BEST RESTAURANTS IN SITIA

### Rakadiko Oinodeion

Go for the seasonal specials at this standout waterfront taverna with rustic charm and fall-over-backwards staff. €

### Mitsakakis

Sitian institution (open since 1965) famous for its sugar-rush-inducing *galaktoboureko* (custard-filled pastry) and *kataifi* (angel-hair pastry). €

### Tzivaeri

Culinary excellence, generous portions and friendly servers make this taverna a top pick on the seaside promenade. €

## Window on Eastern Crete's Distant Past

### A DATE WITH PALEKASTRO BOY

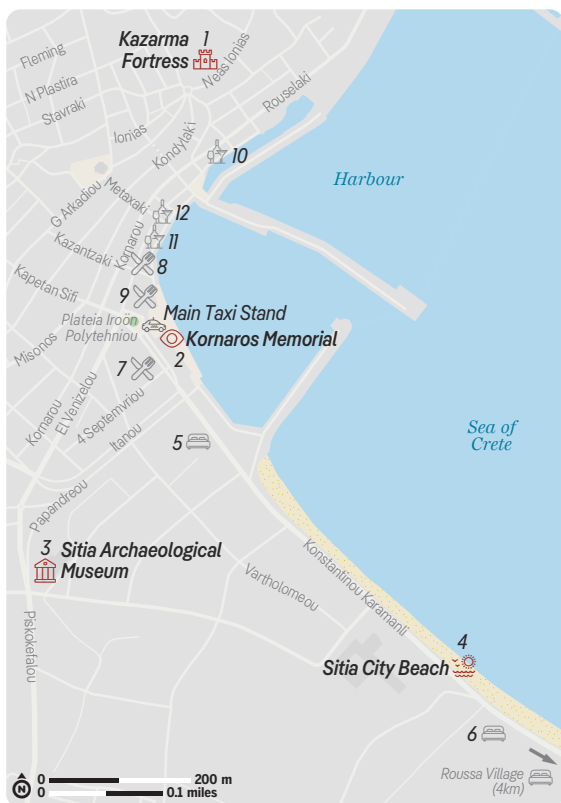
Sitia's **Archaeological Museum** is a compact and smartly curated showcase of archaeological finds from eastern Crete spanning the arc from Neolithic to Roman times, albeit with an emphasis on Minoan artefacts. It's worth coming here just to see its star exhibit, the *Palekastro Kouros* – a statue of a young man made from eight pieces of hippopotamus ivory joined together by wooden dowels. Possibly once fully covered in gold leaf, it's truly a masterpiece, despite missing its midriff.

Elsewhere you can admire standout finds from the Minoan palace at Zakros (p196), including a wine press, a bronze saw and cult objects scorched by the fire that destroyed the complex. Other notable finds are fragments of Linear A tablets found at near-by Petras and Zakros as well as Minoan *larnakes* (clay coffins).

## Fortress with a View

### A HILLTOP VENETIAN CASTLE

For the best views of Sitia, scramble up the hillside above the port to the **Kazarma Fortress**. The town's most imposing structure was built by the Venetians in the 13th century, but destroyed (by earthquakes, pirates and marauders) and rebuilt multiple times. Pretty much gutted today, it's found new purpose as an atmospheric outdoor backdrop for summer cultural events. The name, by the way, is derived from the Italian term *casa di arma*, meaning barracks.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- 1** Kazarma Fortress
- 2** Kornaros Memorial
- 3** Sitia Archaeological Museum
- 4** Sitia City Beach

**SLEEPING**

- 5** Elysee Hotel
- 6** Nereids Apartments

**EATING**

- 7** Mitsakakis
- 8** Rakadiko Oinodeion
- 9** Tzivaeri

**DRINKING**

- 10** Blackhole Cocktail Bar
- 11** Nouvelle Boutique
- 12** Wall Music Bar

## Stroll Sitia's Waterfront

### SUMMERTIME, EASY LIVING

In summer, the **paved promenade** paralleling Sitia's harbour feels like a carnival, with lively tavernas, cafes and bars pulling in an all-ages crowd of locals and visitors until the wee hours. With playgrounds and occasional live entertainment, even the little ones won't get bored. For a bit of quiet, extend your stroll north past the Roman fishtanks all the way to the ferry terminal. For an even calmer vibe, backtrack through the town's historic centre with its narrow lanes and steep staircases.



Sitia's promenade

CZECH WANDERER/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



### WHERE TO STAY IN SITIA

#### Nereids Apartments

Family-geared bungalow complex with jasmine-scented garden and a stylish lounge bar across from the beach. €€

#### Roussa Village

Self-catering stone houses in the hills 5km from town with great views of Sitia, upscale furnishings and a pool. €€

#### Elysee Hotel

Enjoy sea views from your balcony at this city hotel on the central promenade; free breakfast buffet. €



## WHERE TO PARTY IN SITIA

In the summertime, Sitia is a fun place to party with conversation-friendly bars and pulsating music joints lining up along the waterfront and drawing a mostly Greek clientele.

### Black Hole Cocktail Bar

Drinks are only so-so but the local ambience is outstanding at this all-generation bar overlooking the pier.

### Nouvelle Boutique

Comfy-chic local fave with backlit bar lures youthful revellers with funky sounds, sweet and strong drinks.

### The Wall Music Bar

Chill place for drinks and munching on burgers, pasta and other fast-food faves.



GETIAFOOT/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Sitia's city beach

## Seductive Sands

### BEACHTIME IN SITIA

There are better beaches a short drive away (p193), but Sitia's **city beach** will do in a snap if you feel like lolling around in the sun for a bit. It has mostly greyish sand and is lapped by crystalline, kid-friendly water. Extending for a couple of kilometres east of the harbour, the strand rarely gets crowded, although it lacks shade and is paralleled by a road, which temper its blissfulness.

## Remembering Vitsentzos Kornaros

### THE FATHER OF EROKOKRITOS

While waltzing down Sitia's seaside promenade, keep an eye out for the memorial honouring Crete's most famous poet, Cretan Renaissance writer Vitsentzos Kornaros, born nearby in 1553 (the statue is next to the Thalassa Café). Kornaros' best-known work, *Erotokritos*, is an epic poem deeply embedded in the Cretan psyche. Set in a fictionalised Athens, it follows the challenges, adventures and romantic interludes of two star-crossed lovers. It's written in rhyming couplets called *man-tinadhes*, each consisting of exactly 15 syllables, a lyric style popular to this day. And yes, in case you wondered: the story ends happily...after 10,012 verses!

The nonprofit cultural centre *Stegi Vitsentzos Kornaros*, founded in 2020, keeps the legacy of Sitia's most famous son alive.



## GETTING AROUND

A car is of absolutely no use in Sitia's small city centre. The main taxi stand is near the

waterfront at Plateia Iroon Polytechniou, in front of the Itanos Hotel.



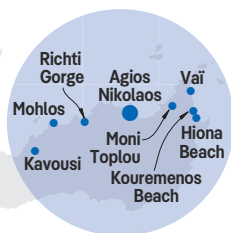


## Beyond Sitia

Crete's crowd-free far eastern mountains and coast deliver a cornucopia of explorations that, like a fine wine, must be sipped not gulped.

In Crete's sparsely populated (and little visited) 'Wild East', adventure lurks behind every bend of the roads that zigzag across hills and mountains high above the shimmering sea. It's a true wonderland for indie travellers ready to connect with untamed nature in often unexpected ways.

Hike to a Minoan palace through a canyon that doubled as a cemetery in antiquity. Crete's longest cave, burrowed deep into a coastal mountain, invites spelunking devotees. You can hug a 4000-year-old olive tree, hike to a waterfall hidden in a jungle-like gorge and spread your towel on a palm-studded beach or beneath ancient ruins. The main village is Palekastro, which boasts two great beaches: Hiona and Crete's wind-surfing paradise Kouremenos.



### TOP TIP

A car is essential in this part of Crete. Palekastro (and Zakros) are the only villages served by bus from Sitia.

### Windsurfing, Kouremenos (p195)



## WHY I LOVE SITIA



**Andrea Schulte-Peevers**, writer

No question, I do like the town of Sitia for its earthiness, palate-pleasing food and fun waterfront promenade. But to be honest, what truly tugs at my heart is the tapestry of remarkably crowd-free natural wonders just a short drive away.

I love careening along those near-hypnotising roads that slither across starkly beautiful, weathered mountains to arrive at sultry beaches, ethereal ruins, mystical gorges and other magical places. Staying in tiny coastal settlements where I can trade my go-go everyday life for slo-mo under starry skies is like balm for body and soul.

Coming to Crete's far east is a reminder that it's the simple things in life that ultimately matter in this increasingly complex world we live in.



**Richtis Gorge**

## Trekking Through a 'Cretan Jungle'

THE MAGIC ALLURE OF A YEAR-ROUND WATERFALL

Much of eastern Crete may be arid and mountainous, but hiking through **Richtis Gorge** feels like being beamed into a tropical rainforest, complete with butterflies and a waterfall.

Starting in Exo Moulana about 14km west of Sitia, the well-signposted and maintained trail follows a lively brook to a secluded pebbled beach via a cascading waterfall. It's a moderately difficult walk, with wooden bridges covering the trickiest sections, although some climbing over rocks and branches is required.

Lush vegetation like oleander and sycamore, carob and fig trees keeps much of the trail in the shade, but the humidity quickly has you dripping with sweat. Which is why the year-round waterfall is such a welcome sight! Tumbling 20m over a moss-covered cliff into a small pool, it's great for taking a refreshing dip.

You can park by the highway and walk 1.4km down to the trailhead, but it's also possible to drive and park near the pay kiosk next to a 19th-century arched stone bridge. Budget at least an hour for the 1.8km to the waterfall, another 30



### LUNCH SPOTS BETWEEN AGIOS NIKOLAOS AND SITIA

#### Kath'Odon

Sunset views and mouth-watering meals made with choice ingredients in this top-rated taverna in Mirsini. €

#### Tholos Love Beach Taverna

Laid-back meals followed by a swim on U-shaped Tholos beach, about 3km from the highway near Kavousi. €

#### Natural Taverna

Close to the turn-off to Mohlos; awesome sea views and generous portions made from homegrown produce. €

minutes to get to the beach. Most people start at the bridge and backtrack from the waterfall. Alternatively, drive 5.5km to the beach on an extremely narrow unpaved path and do the trek in reverse. Either way, bring lots of water and wear suitable shoes.

## Carefree Bijou Beach Town

THE ART OF DOING NOTHING AT ALL

At the end of a narrow road incongruously winding past massive open-cast gypsum quarries, **Mohlos** is an off-the-radar gem about 34km west of Sitia. In this pint-sized fishing village time moves as gently as the waves lapping the tiny pebble-and-grey-sand beach. There's little to do but relax, soak up the peacefulness and enjoy a leisurely meal in one of the excellent waterfront cafes and tavernas.

In ancient times Mohlos was a thriving Early Minoan community, traces of which have been excavated on the islet that lies 200m offshore. If you want to visit, ask around in the village for someone to take you there in a boat. Swimmers should be wary of strong currents.

Buses between Sitia and Agios Nikolaos can drop you at the Mohlos turn-off, from where you'll need to hitch or walk the 6km down to the village.

## Pilgrimage to a Powerful Monastery

FIERCE MONKS, FINE ICONS, FABULOUS WINES

In splendid isolation on a windswept plateau about 15km east of Sitia, the fortified 15th-century **Moni Toplou** is one of the most historically significant monasteries in Crete. Buses can drop you at the junction of the Sitia–Palekastro road, from where you'll need to hitch a ride or walk for 3.5km.

Moni Toplou's defences were tested by everyone from pirates to crusading knights and the Turks. The church brims with superb icons, including the intensely intricate *Lord Thou Art Great* icon by celebrated Cretan artist Ioannis Kornaros that depicts scenes from the Old and New Testaments, including Noah's Ark, Jonah and the Whale, and Moses parting the Red Sea.

'Toplou' is the Turkish word for cannon, which is what the monks used for keeping the pirates at bay during Venetian times. These warrior priests were also solid supporters of Cretan independence. Under the Turkish occupation a secret school operated on the premises, while during WWII resistance leaders ran an underground radio transmitter here (the period is recalled in a small exhibit).



### MONUMENTAL MINOAN TREE

Travelling along the highway between Agios Nikolaos and Sitia, build in a stop in the flower-filled village of **Kavousi** to stretch your legs on the 2km walk to an olive tree that germinated during Minoan times, some 3250 years ago. With a trunk between 5m and 7m thick and a 10m-wide canopy, it truly has made-to-impress dimensions and is considered one of the oldest olive trees in the world.



Ancient olive tree, Kavousi



### WHERE TO STAY IN MOHLOS

#### Petra Nova Villas

Bilevel stone villas with plenty of privacy, a chic interior and a patio with serene sea views. €€

#### Mochlos Mare

Spacious apartments with patio and lovely hosts in a sugar-white building accented with coral-pink bougainvillea. €€

#### Chez Cécile Home

Smallish rooms decorated with buckets of charm and hosts who literally make you 'feel at home'. €



## BEST BIRDWATCHING ON THE EAST COAST

### Vaï & Itanos

Peregrine and red-footed falcons patrol the skies of this sparsely populated area.

### Palekastro

The coastal wetlands at Hiona beach attract waterfowl, including warblers, crested lark and whimbrels, as well as migratory birds.

### Zakros Gorge

Sightings of griffon vultures, golden eagles and honey buzzards are a distinct possibility in the Valley of the Dead (p197).

### Alatsolimni Beach

The salt pans in Xerokambos are a go-to spot for migrating herons, hawks and even greater flamingos in winter (p199).

Today the monastery is not only an attraction for fans of history, religion, art and architecture, but it's also the area's largest landowner and an active producer of award-winning wines and olive oil, which you can sample for a nominal fee in the atmospheric **tasting room** in the former oil mill.

## Palm Paradise

### KICK BACK AT AN EXOTIC BEACH

Why Vaï? The **beach at Vaï** would be just another dreamy ribbon of whitish sand were it not cradled by a forest of palm trees that makes you feel like you've been teleported straight to the Caribbean. It's this exotic vibe that makes Vaï one of the island's most popular and busiest beaches despite its remote location in the far northeastern corner, some 24km from Sitia. In summer, the rows of thatched umbrellas and sunbeds often fill by 10am; jet skis roar into gear shortly thereafter and the tables of the (surprisingly good) restaurants are all taken by noon. To soak up the magic without the crowds, come early or late in the afternoon.

Vaï's palms, an endemic species called *Phoenix theophrasti*, have enjoyed their beachfront location for thousands of years. The grove was much bigger until most of it was destroyed by extensive land reclamation in 1957. In the 1970s, Matala hippies in search of a new sanctuary set up camp under the shady palms. Word got out and by the 1980s a deluge of long-term campers brought trash and trouble to paradise. Camping has since been prohibited and most of the forest is now fenced in.

There's a big pay parking lot near the beach and street parking on the access road. From May to October, two daily buses make the one-hour trip between Sitia and Vaï.

## East-Coast Beaches

### SWIMMING OFF THE GRID

Vaï's beach is gorgeous, no doubt, but if it's too busy or commercial for your taste, escape to Crete's eastern shore, which is lined by a tiara of coves and beaches to kick back in serenity (albeit without palms, shade or services).

The closest option is **Psili Ammos**, an easy scramble over the rocky headland rising up on the southern end of Vaï beach.

About 2km north of Vaï, the ruins of the ancient Greco-Roman town of **Itanos** watch over a trio of pretty wind-protected coves.



## WHERE TO STAY AND EAT IN PALEKASTRO

### Hiona Taverna

Book ahead for a clifftop table at this superb seafood-centric taverna on Hiona Beach, 3.5km from Palekastro. €€

### Esperides Stone Houses

Stone retreat decorated with traditional Cretan flair and terraces with views of Kouremenos beach. €€

### Elia Studios

Great beach views from your balconied room in a quiet garden setting with pool and barbecue facilities. €





## CHASING THE WIND

The top spot for windsurfing and wingfoiling in Crete is low-key **Kouremenos**, a long, wide and sandy beach between two reefs.

Part of Palekastro, some 20km east of Sitia, it's exposed to the *meltemi*, a dry northwesterly summer wind that can blow fiercely throughout the Aegean. This wind, coupled with a local funnelling effect, creates some ideal windsurfing conditions suitable for everyone from beginners to bump-and-jump lovers.

**Gone Surfing** and **Freak Surf Crete** are the two local operators – book at least a couple of months ahead to rent gear or take lessons. Peak season runs from mid-June to mid-September.



Palm trees, Vaï

**Kouremenos**, about 7km south of Vaï, is a long, grey sand-and-pebble beach with good shallow-water swimming and Crete's best windsurfing.

Next up is **Hiona**, a quiet sweep with excellent fish tavernas, a coastal wetland fancied by migratory birds and the nearby Minoan site of Roussolakos, all lorded over by Kastri hill.

Beaches south of Palekastro offer even more total tranquility. A case in point is **Skinias**, reached via a rough road that requires either a 4x4 or good driving skills (or both). Park on top of the hill from where it's a 10- to 15-minute downhill walk to the beach, which has sandy and pebbly patches and good snorkelling.

Better known but even more escapist is the **Karoumes** cove, your big reward after a 3km trek through the fantastic but somewhat challenging Chochlakies Gorge.



## GETTING AROUND

If you want to do any kind of exploration in Crete's far-flung east, there's no way around getting a rental car, preferably one with enough power to negotiate the steep and winding roads. Hire a 4x4 if you want to go off-road.

The only towns served by public bus from Sitia are Palekastro and Zakros. In the off-season (October to April), there's only one bus weekly to Zakros. In summer, a bus goes out to Vaï.



# ZAKROS



The timeless, slow-paced southeastern corner of Crete is the perfect destination for a mindful getaway in an enchanting oasis surrounded by starkly beautiful nature.

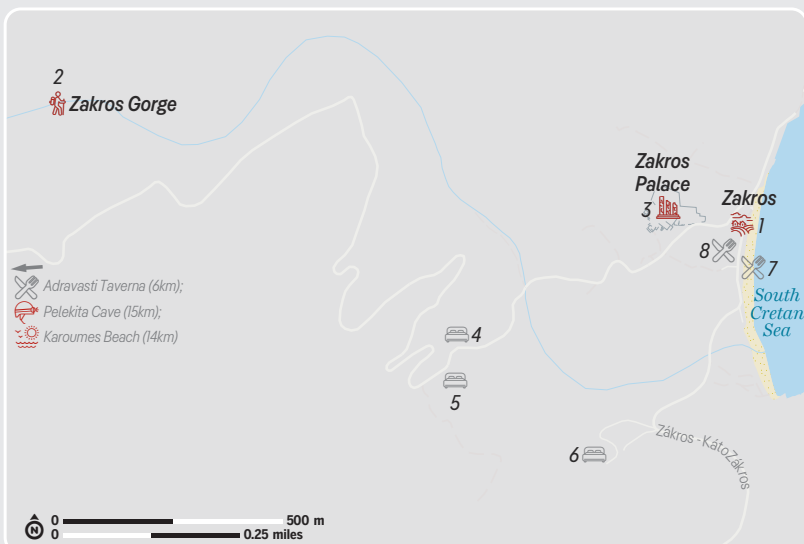
Zakros (population 800), 35km southeast of Sitia, is the administrative and commercial hub – such as it is – of southeastern Crete and is well known for its excellent olive oil. There are a few small shops, museums and tavernas around the main square, but the main sightseeing attraction in this far-flung outpost is the eerily beautiful Zakros Gorge.

One of the trailheads starts right in the village and runs straight down to the beach at idyllic Kato Zakros (Lower Zakros), where tavernas and rooms to rent hem in a horseshoe-shaped bay with a sandy-pebbly beach. This beauty spot hasn't been developed into a full-fledged resort thanks to the ruins of a Minoan-era palace mere steps from the beach. The coastal trail to the Pelektita Cave (Crete's longest) also starts in Kato Zakros.

Staying overnight in this isolated pocket of peacefulness is truly balm for the soul. More blissful beaches are just 8km away from Zakros at the end of the zigzagging road down to Xerokambos.

## TOP TIP

A car is definitely helpful for in-depth explorations of these remote parts that are poorly served by bus. It's also common to see people thumbing for a ride. Taxis are available as well.



### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Zakros
- 2 Zakros Gorge
- 3 Zakros Palace

### SLEEPING

- 4 Katerina Apartments
- 5 Stella Studios & Traditional Apartments
- 6 Terra Minoika Villas

### EATING

- 7 Agrogiali Taverna
- 8 Nikos Platanakis

## ZAKROS' PREHISTORIC ELEPHANTS

Some five million years ago, during the Miocene, a type of primitive elephant, complete with trunk and tusks, roamed around eastern Crete.

Fossilised bits and bones of this large-bodied animal dubbed *Deinotherium giganteum* were unearthed near Kato Zakros and two other hamlets within the Sitia Geopark (Agia Fotia and Petra) and are now displayed at the National History Museum in Iraklio. You can see copies at the museum's smaller cousin in Zakros (p196).

Some historians have suggested that these critters might have inspired the myth of the Neades, gigantic monsters whose powerful roar was believed to cause earthquakes.



Kato Zakros

## Ghostly Gorge Hike

### SURVIVING THE VALLEY OF THE DEAD

The beautiful hike through **Zakros Gorge**, which is also known as the Valley of the Dead because of the Minoan burial caves that honeycomb the canyon cliffs, is quite easy and does not require any special skills. The trail follows the riverbed, which is dry in the summer but may still run water as late as May. It marks the final stretch of the E4 in Crete.

Most people walk down from Zakros to Kato Zakros. You can pick up the trail right in Zakros village or pick it up further down at two trailheads off the highway linking the two. For detailed information, stop by the Natural History Museum or the cafe Xyloporta, both in Zakros.

To get to the first trailhead off the highway (**Entrance A**), turn left at the sign and follow the tarmac for about 500m to a parking area – from here you'll be in Kato Zakros in about 1½ to two hours.

It's a bit shorter from **Entrance B**, about 1km further down. Park by the side of the road. Note that the trailhead is to the



## WHERE TO STAY AROUND ZAKROS

### Katerina Apartments

Charming stone-built studios with family-style hominess in a hillside garden setting 800m from the beach. €

### Stella Studios & Traditional Apartments

Delightful owners run these studios brimming with character and surrounded by big trees with hammocks. €

### Terra Minoika Villas

Spacious and arty hillside cube houses with chic rustic furniture and balconies with widescreen nature views. €€



## SITIA GEOPARK

Eastern Crete's mosaic of muscular mountains and cove-laced coastline has enjoyed Unesco-protected status as the Sitia Geopark since 2015. Driving towards Sitia on the E75 highway, a sign in Mesa Mouliana points out the western boundary of this 517-sq-km expanse, the only place in Crete where fossilised Pleistocene mammals (hippos, elephants and deer) have been found.

The geopark is crisscrossed by 20 hiking trails (georoutes) that often follow gorges such as Zakros (p197), Richtis (p192) and Chochlakies. At least 170 caves puncture these mountains, many of them open to exploration, in case you fancy unleashing your inner Indiana Jones.

For details check [www.sitia-geopark.gr](http://www.sitia-geopark.gr) or drop by the information offices on the Sitia promenade and in the excellent Zakros Natural History Museum in Zakros.



HE RACLES KRITIKOS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

**Zakros Gorge (p197)**

left of the bus shelter and not via the dirt track misleadingly indicated by the sign!

Following the dirt track, which is the old road between Zakros and Kato Zakros before the highway was built, keeps you above the canyon (nice views) and has you on the beach in an hour.

## Ancient Seaside Power Nexus

### EXPLORE MINOAN CRETE'S MARITIME TRADING HUB

Ancient **Zakros Palace** – the fourth-largest Minoan palace complex after Knossos, Phaestos and Malia – is the most important archaeological site in eastern Crete. It sat next to a harbour and was likely engaged in sea trade with Egypt and the Middle East, as suggested by excavated elephant tusks and oxide ingots. While the ruins are sparse, the enchanting mountain-and-sea setting makes it an attractive site to nose around, even though there's little information.

Enter the compound from the south and stroll past vestiges of workshops to the central court. Pause to build a mental image of Minoans strolling around, perhaps heading to a religious ceremony or a big dinner held in the two banquet



## WHERE TO EAT AROUND ZAKROS

### Nikos Platanakis

Now run by Nikos' sons, this beachfront taverna only uses vegetables from its garden near the Minoan palace. €

### Agrogiali Taverna

Kato Zakros' oldest taverna with cheerful blue-and-white furniture does a brisk trade in fresh-off-the-boat fish and Cretan classics. €

### Adravasti Taverna

Worth the drive 3km north of Zakros for made-with-love Cretan plates and homemade products for sale. €€€

halls in the west wing. The food for the event would have been prepared in the kitchen north of the courtyard. There's also a smaller dining hall upstairs, perhaps for the kitchen staff. You can still spot the column bases that supported this two-storey building.

The residential area in the east wing also incorporates a lustral basin (sheltered by a cover), which was once decorated with frescoes and abutted the queen's bedroom. These types of rooms probably served as a ritual cleaning space for those entering a shrine.

The nearby Cistern Hall, a stepped round basin once connected with a natural spring, is an unusual feature; it may have been a pool, a bath or even an aquarium.

## Spelunking Adventure

### JOURNEY INTO A SCULPTURED UNDERWORLD

Crete's deepest grotto, the 310m-long **Pelekita Cave**, can only be reached by foot or boat. From Kato Zakros, a completely shadeless 3km trail parallels the rocky coast, rewarding your efforts with magnificent views of the sea below and signs of Neolithic habitation within the cave's rich interior. Enter through its 15m-wide jaw, hardly visible among the crags of Mt Traostalos, then rejoice, marvel or scare yourself silly while descending an often slippery path down into a series of soaring chambers filled with pillars, cascading formations and stalagmites sprouting from fallen rocks. Bring a torch or two and wear suitable shoes.

Pelekita translates as 'hewn' in reference to the quarry that was mined for building material for the Minoan palace at Kato Zakros.

To extend your hike, keep going for 2km to pristine **Karoumes Beach**. If you don't want to backtrack along the coast, pick up the 3.5km trail through the Chochlakies Gorge, which takes you back to the main road. Either call or taxi or thumb your way back to Kato Zakros.

## Supreme Serenity in Xerokambos

### NATURAL SOCIAL DISTANCING AT LAND'S END

Tucked into the far southeastern corner of Crete, some 40km southeast of Sitia, **Xerokambos** is an indie traveller's dream. There's little to do in this magical spot but relax in the dunes or on the beach, feast in the tavernas, explore nearby caves and gorges, and scan the skies for the falcons that breed on the offshore Kavalli Islands.



### WATER: NATURE'S ELIXIR

The landscape of Crete's southeastern tip is as arid as the dark side of the moon until you reach Zakros, a veritable oasis thanks to a steady water supply gurgling forth from natural underground springs.

The largest of these, **Mesa Mylos**, is just north of the village. The water irrigates the extensive groves of olive trees – many centuries old – whose fruit produces fragrant, top-quality olive oil.

To visit the spring, first pop by the endearing exhibits in the Zakros Water Museum set up in three adjoining historic water mills, then follow a path uphill, perhaps bringing a picnic to enjoy at a tree-shaded table.



### WHERE TO SLEEP IN XEROKAMBOS

#### Lithos Traditional Guest Houses

Gorgeously appointed stone houses with a helpful owner and fridges stocked with cold drinks, including organic wine. €€€

#### Akti Rooms

Compact self-catering apartment complex with balconies overlooking the main beach and small shops within walking distance. €

#### Thea Apartments

Modern units surrounded by olive trees come with sea-view balconies and two tavernas and a small shop close by. €



## BEST RESTAURANTS IN XEROKAMBOS

### Cretan Sun Tavern

Authentic taverna beloved by locals and visitors alike for its fresh and excellently prepared Cretan fare. €

### Taverna Kostas

Michalis and his team churn out delectable vegetables dishes plus charcoal-grilled fish and meat best enjoyed on the terrace. €

### Akrogiali Taverna

Friendly spot handy for hearty traditional lunch fare between tanning sessions on the main beach across the road. €



GEORGIOS KRITSOTAKIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

### Argilos beach

Xerokambos has no real centre: homes, holiday villas, apartments and a smattering of mini-markets and restaurants lie scattered over a sprawling area. The big attraction is the pristine beaches, 14 in all, strung like pearls across a 4.5km stretch of coastline. Outside July and August, many of them are often footprint free.

Gossip lovers might like to know that Demi Moore attended the baptism of her godchild at Xerokambos' cute **Agios Nikolaos chapel** in July 2021. Sadly, the chapel suffered significantly in the October 2021 earthquake.

Below the chapel, **Argilos beach** is backed by cliffs rich in mineral-laced clay said to have healing qualities. Locals like to break off chunks of clay, soften them in the sea and rub the mud into their skin.

Getting to Xerokambos is half the fun. Coming from Zakros, the corkscrew road twists for about 9km through a gorge-scarred mountainscape before opening up to a showstopping panorama of the deep-blue Libyan Sea. Another road zigzags down from Ziros for about 18km, delivering brake-worthy views after every hairpin turn. There is no bus service.



## GETTING AROUND

Zakros, the largest town in southeastern Crete, is 45km southeast of Sitia and served by buses from there. To travel between here and Kato

Zakros or Xerokambos, you need your own wheels or take a taxi.



# IERAPETRA



The largest town on the south coast, Ierapetra is a cheerful, down-to-earth community that offers a laid-back, traditional Cretan experience. The opening of a slew of contemporary upscale resorts along the beaches east of the centre, however, has begun to sharpen the town's tourism profile.

For now, though, life in the daytime moves at an unhurried pace. There's little to do other than lounging in the waterfront cafes and restaurants, browsing the few souvenir shops or basking in the sun on the long grey-sand city beach. Once the sun dips below the horizon, though, taverna tables fill quickly with locals and visitors and the carousing often lasts until the wee hours.

The jumping-off point for boats to the semitropical Chrissi Island (also called Gaïdouronisi or Hrysi), Ierapetra is also the commercial hub of southeastern Crete's substantial greenhouse-based agribusiness. First introduced by a Dutchman in the 1960s, it's the backbone of the region's considerable wealth.

## TOP TIP

If Ierapetra's town beach isn't cutting it for you, you'll find plenty of lovely coves and strands east of town, including one of Crete's longest beaches at Koutsounari (aka Long Beach). Appealing sandy strands beyond here include local favourite Agia Fotia, noted for its calm water, and Makrygialos with its cheerful beachside promenade.

## Statues, Coffins & an Octopus

### A TREASURE CHEST OF ANTIQUITIES

Located in a 19th-century school built by the Ottomans, the **Archaeological Collection of Ierapetra** may initially seem like just another dusty repository for carved rocks and clay shards. That is until you see the grandeur of an **intact statue** (no missing parts, take that Venus de Milo!) of the goddess Persephone that dates back to the 2nd century CE. And that's just the start of the surprises at this compact gem. Don't miss the big **larnakes** (clay coffin) from 1300 BCE, which is decorated with hunting scenes, a chariot race and, yes, an octopus.

## Top Spots to Feed Body & Soul

### A SURVEY OF IERAPETRA'S DINING SCENE

Ierapetra has a steadily improving dining scene with lots of dependable cafes and traditional tavernas lining up along the seaside promenade. Consistently getting top marks is **Napoleon**, where the quality of the home cooking and the service are a cut above. Sit on the covered terrace flanked by palm trees while picking from the tasty line-up of fresh fish and Cretan specialties.

A standout with next-gen flair is **Vira Potzi** right next to the Kales fortress. Views of the entire waterfront on the breezy terrace are merely the overture to plates of time-tested Cretan classics cooked up with a culinary twist. The wine list is as impeccable as the service.



## BEST CAFE-BARS IN IERAPETRA

### Caravan Cocktail Bar

Indoor-outdoor bar on nightlife drag Kyvra where drinks are mixed in a green VW bus.

### Ntoukiani

Tiny indoor bar with boho flair, a local crowd and good cocktails. Best on cold nights.

### Saxo Bar

Classic party den since 1990, now with swish backlit bar and rooftop lounge.

### Chocolicious

Locally adored cafe is carb heaven for the sweet toothed any time of day.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

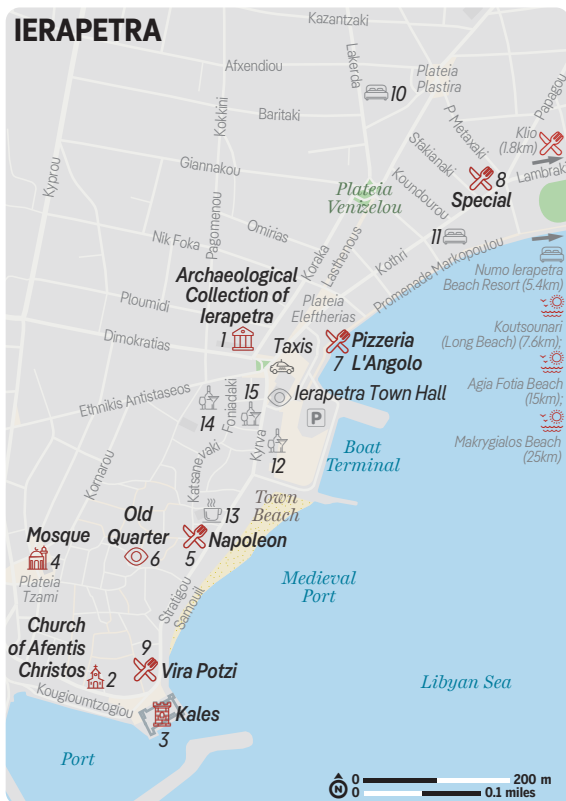
- 1 Archaeological Collection of Ierapetra
- 2 Church of Afentis Christos
- 3 Kales
- 4 Mosque
- 5 Napoleon
- 6 Old Quarter
- 7 Pizzeria L'Angolo
- 8 Special
- 9 Vira Potzi

**SLEEPING**

- 10 Cretan Villa Hotel
- 11 El Greco Hotel

**DRINKING**

- 12 Caravan Cocktail Bar
- 13 Choccolicious
- 14 Ntoukiani
- 15 Saxo Bar

**IERAPETRA****House of Napoleon**

PASYS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

At the eastern end of the waterfront, **Klio** has cooked its way into patrons' hearts and tummies with its Cretan flavour bombs served in a feel-good ambience at tree-shaded tables overlooking the sea. The kitchen is especially known for doing deliciously wicked things with fish and seafood.

Jazzing up Ierapetra's fast-food scene, upbeat **Special** is a reminder of the simple goodness of charcoal-grilled souvlakia or well-prepared rotisserie gyros (chicken or pork), although the burgers, salads and sausages hold their own. Portions are big enough to share, and there's a kids' menu to boot.

Also enjoying a bit following with local families is **Pizzeria L'Angolo**, which gets pie punters salivating for its generously topped crispy crusts.

**GETTING AROUND**

Getting around Ierapetra's cluttered town centre by car can be a nuisance, so park in the street or in a parking lot and travel on foot. There's a big lot right next to the Chrissi Island

ferry terminal. The central taxi stand with fixed fares posted on a board is outside the town hall, steps from the jetty.

## IERAPETRA'S OLD QUARTER WALKING TOUR

Few visible signs remain, but Ierapetra actually has an impressive history with interludes as a Dorian settlement, a Roman port, a Venetian stronghold and an Ottoman outpost. This short but sweet walking tour (taking no more than half an hour) takes you from the harbour through the atmospheric old quarter, stopping at the few remaining sites that recall Ierapetra's pedigree.

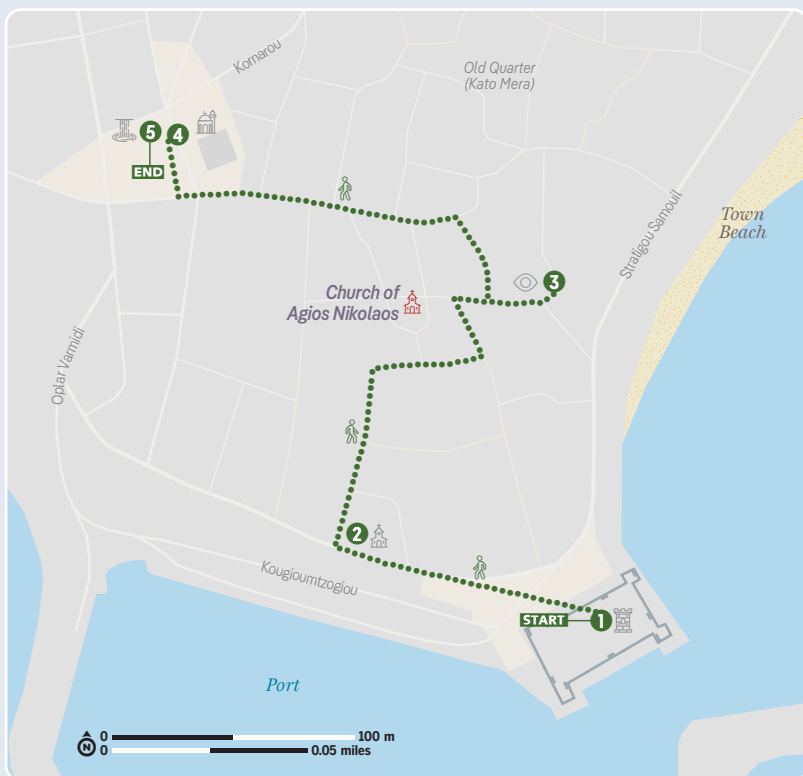
To kick things off, head to the 17th-century Venetian fortress called **1 Kales**, whose crenellated walls overlook the fishing harbour. It was built atop an older defensive structure reputedly erected by Genoese pirates in the 13th century and destroyed by an earthquake and the Turks. There's not much to see inside, but it's fun to climb up to the ramparts and the single tower for grand views of the bay and the mountains.

A few steps west, on Samouli, the red-tile domes of the **2 Church of Afentis Christos** come into view. Built in the 14th

century, it's Ierapetra's oldest house of worship and has some fine icons and a free-standing bell tower.

Continue into the thicket of narrow alleyways of the pint-sized Old Quarter (Kato Mera). The 'big attraction' is what is grandly called **3 House of Napoleon** but which actually turns out to be a tiny, two-storey abode. French statesman Napoleon Bonaparte is said to have stayed incognito with a local family in 1798 en route to his campaign in Egypt. The next morning, he allegedly left a note revealing his identity.

Weave your way past the Church of Agios Nikolaos to the triangular Plateia Tzami at the northern edge of the old quarter. The late-19th-century **4 mosque** here is now being used as a music school but still sports a finely wrought minaret. Both the mosque and octagonal domed **5 fountain** in the square are tangible reminders of Ierapetra's Ottoman era.





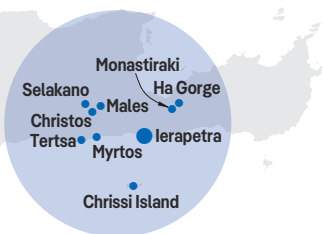
# Beyond Ierapetra

Surrender to slothdom on your favourite beach or get into the mountains for culinary feasts and under-the-radar natural splendours.

Crete's southeast has a subtropical climate which makes the myriad beaches and coves east and west of Ierapetra such a big draw. Sometimes too much of a draw: access to the paradisaical strands of uninhabited offshore Chrissi Island was restricted in 2022 because of overtourism. (The climate also accounts for the sprawl of greenhouses blanketing the coast and hinterland.)

The friendliest of the coastal villages is charmingly undeveloped and flower-filled **Myrtos** which, despite its popularity with visitors, has maintained a strong local identity. For a totally secluded beach experience, venture a bit further west to Tertsa and beyond.

Myrtos is also the gateway to sleepy mountain villages, hiking in gorges and pine forests and earthy meals in characterful tavernas.



## TOP TIP

Public buses serve Myrtos and the coastal communities east as far as Makrygialos, but you need your own wheels to venture into the mountains.

## Myrtos



ALEXLENA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

## BEST MOUNTAIN TAVERNAS



**Yiannis Zervakis**, a local chef who also organises cooking workshops and food and wine tours, tells us where to get great food in the mountain villages. *facebook.com/yiannis.zervakis*

### Taverna Agia Paraskevi

Near Christos, chef Yiannis cooks delicious pork, lamb and other traditional foods in a wood oven. Sit on the plane-tree-shaded terrace next to a tiny chapel and a gurgling stream.

### Stella's Café

Enjoy the tranquillity, the fresh air and great homemade food at this cafe in Selakano, especially Stella's famous omelette with potatoes. You can take nice walks in the surrounding forest.

### Villa Mala

In a renovated old building in Males, Villa Mala has a wonderful view down to the sea. Enjoy local wine, excellent traditional and modern dishes and don't miss the homemade apple pie!



Ha Gorge

## Beachside Boho Village

### GARDEN BY THE SEA

Some 20km west of Ierapetra via an unpaved coastal road, tiny **Tertsa** is almost literally a pocket of paradise where bananas, grapes, cucumbers and other crops grow in abundance. On Sundays, villagers come down from the mountains to stock up at the farmers market that sets up at the village entrance. This is usually followed by a dip in the sea and lunch at one of the two tavernas.

During the week, Tertsa's wide grey-sand beach is practically deserted. For even more privacy, walk west past the big rock to a string of secluded beaches where nudity is practised.

Buses from Ierapetra go to Myrtos (weekdays only), from where it's a 6km walk to Tertsa.

## Crete's Fiercest Canyon

### HELLO TO THE HA

The savage cleft of the mighty 1.5km-long **Ha Gorge**, which splits apart the great curtain wall of the Thripti Mountains, is the most impressive feature along the isthmus that links



## WHERE TO STAY IN MYRTOS

### Big Blue Apartments

Modern amenities meet traditional Greek design in these breezy sea-facing and self-catering studios with private decks. €€

### Villa Mertiza

Boho-chic and good-sized studios come with comfy box-spring beds and a flower-filled garden for meeting fellow guests. €

### Sarikampos Beach

Units at this value-pick beachfront hotel, some 2km east of Myrtos, are roomy and immaculate. €



## ROAD TRIP

# Mountain meander

Although only 75km long, it's best to budget at least half a day (or a full day with walks) for this tour linking Lasithi's south and north coast via a panorama-intense network of twisting roads clinging to the southeastern flank of the Dikteon Mountains. It cuts through a landscape of rocky pinnacles, pine tree forests and escarpments clothed in scrub and woodland and makes stops at a deep gorge, a revitalised mountain village and a clifftop cave chapel before culminating at a fabulous sandy beach close to Agios Nikolaos. Also check out the taverna recommendations from our local expert (p205).

## 1 Ierapetra

Start your trip in Ierapetra, the only sizeable town on Lasithi's south coast. Take a stroll along the cafe-lined waterfront to the historic fortress, circle back through the old town before pointing the compass west.

**The Drive:** Leave Ierapetra's sprawl behind during the 15km drive paralleling the coast west to Myrtos.

## 2 Myrtos

Tiny Myrtos is a positively delightful holiday village with a boho pulse and a strong community spirit. It's fringed by an apron of grey pebble-and-sand beach and bright-blue water, makes an excellent base for mountain and canyon hikes and even has a couple of minor Minoan sites. All these assets attract a devoted visitor clientele that also cherishes its flower-festooned guest-houses and cluster of tavernas in the village and along its languid seafront.

**The Drive:** Follow signs north into the mountains towards the teensy village of Mithi before parking at the trailhead to the Sarakinas Gorge a few kilometres further on.

## 3 Sarakinas Gorge

From the parking lot it's a five-minute walk past a small dam to the mighty mouth of the canyon, which packs stunning beauty into a mere 1.5km. Feel like an ant as you walk between sculpted walls soaring up to 150m high. Some scrambling and water crossing is required. Check ahead for water levels and bring a towel in case you want to take a dip.

**The Drive:** Continue north for 7km, turn left at the Christos-Males junction and drive another 7km to Selekanos. The road gets very narrow in parts, so drive ultra-carefully.

## 4 Selekanos Forest

Continue to the settlement of Selekanos to stretch your legs in the wildly beautiful Selekanos woods. Pine trees dominate but there are also kermes oaks, planes and Cretan maples. The forest is also the hub of Crete's honey production, so be ready for bee encounters, especially in the summer.

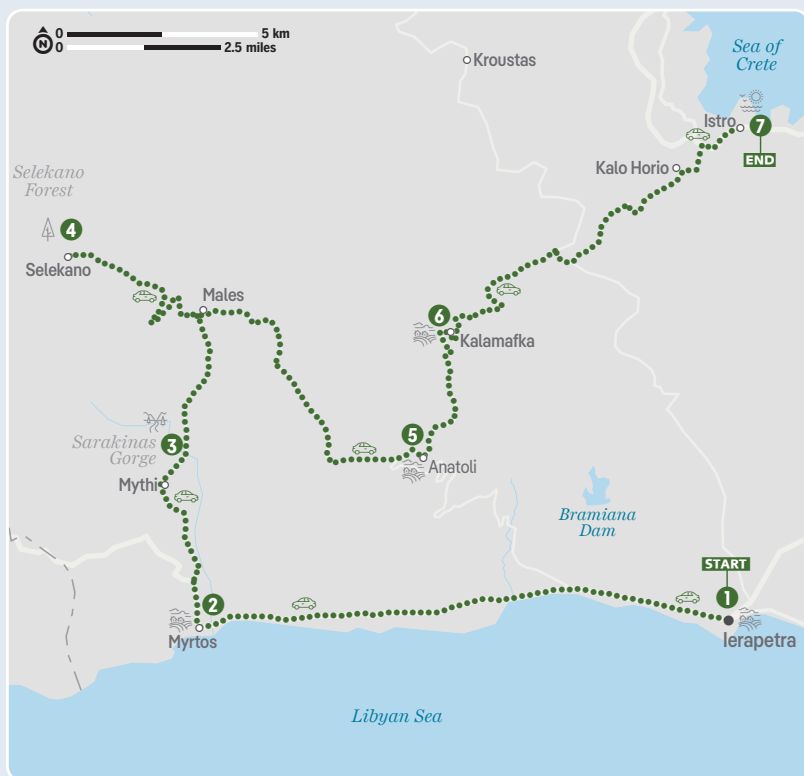
**The Drive:** Backtrack to the junction and continue east for 10km via Males along an especially scenic stretch with views back to the moodily majestic Dikteon Mountains.

## 5 Anatoli

The descent into oblivion of this picturesque Venetian-era village of 'the rising sun' (as its name translates) has been arrested by cashed-up and conservation-minded folks from Ierapetra and beyond (helped along by EU subsidies). Although still sleepy, many ruins have been restored and turned into fancy vacation homes. Great views of the coast below.



Anatoli



**The Drive:** Keep going for 6km on this twisty mountain road to Kalamafka, embedded between limestone pinnacles.

## 6 Kalamafka

One of those pinnacles is crowned by the amazing cave chapel of Timios Stavros. The 220 steps will get your thighs burning, but it's well worth the effort for a look inside the tiny, whitewashed and icon-filled hole-in-the-mountain church and the sweeping views across the village and surrounding peaks.

**The Drive:** About halfway on the 15km drive down to coastal Istro, you'll pass a windy viewpoint from which you can see both the Aegean and Libyan Seas.

## 7 Voulisma Beach

Wrap up your tour with a much-deserved dip in the sea at one of eastern Crete's most popular beaches. Wedged into a U-shaped bay, Voulisma's fine golden sand is lapped by shallow and usually calm water shimmering with Caribbean intensity. There's a small restaurant by the stairs leading down from the parking area and water sports in high season. Depending on the current, plastic pollution can be a problem.



## GREEN GOLD

Agriculture has long been the backbone of Crete's economy and Ierapetra is no exception. However, the region remained rather poor until 1966 when a Dutch agriculturist named Paul Kuijpers settled here and began building **greenhouses**.

Locals – used to their traditional ways – were sceptical about these modern cultivation techniques in the beginning. But after seeing the huge profits to be made from multiple harvests of tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and other fruit and vegetables per year, they soon started embracing the new techniques as well. These days, Ierapetra is home to the largest number of greenhouses in Crete, which form the region's main source of income next to tourism.

A statue of Kuijpers, who died in a car accident in 1971, stands in the village of **Gra Ligia**.



GEORGIOS TSICHLOS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

**Chrissi Island**

Ierapetra with the north coast in just 12km. Unless you're an experienced canyoneer, don't even think about attempting a crossing. But to at least see its mouth up close, turn off at Monastiraki, park next to the Ha Canyon sign and follow the easy 1km-long trail. **Monastiraki** itself is a lovely village with three churches and atmospheric tavernas, including the recommended Kapilion.

## An Island on the Edge

### OVERTOURISM IN PARADISE

Ierapetra is the launch pad for boat trips to one of Crete's most beautiful islands: uninhabited **Chrissi Island** (also known as Gaïdouronisi or Hrysi Island) about 16km offshore. It is famous for its silvery beaches; clear water shimmering in myriad shades of blue; traces of Minoan ruins; Belegirina, a beach covered with a mountain of shells; and, above all, the only forest of Lebanese cedar trees in Europe.

Alas, this nature preserve has been under severe pressure from the deluge of roughly 200,000 tourists ferried in every year. Some of them set up camp, trampling saplings, using up the groundwater needed by local plants, leaving garbage behind and even setting up makeshift tavernas.

In 2022, the Greek government put on the brakes and closed Chrissi off to tourism during the summer months. Until nature has recovered, boats are only allowed to circle the island, stopping briefly to drop passengers at designated spots so they can wade to the beach for swimming. Camping or exploring the island interior is strictly off limits.



## GETTING AROUND

Ktel operates regular buses from Ierapetra's bus station on Lasthenous 28 to the main coastal communities west and east of Ierapetra,

as well as long-distance buses to Sitia and Agios Nikolaos. To get to the mountain villages, you need your own transport.

# LASITHI PLATEAU



A line-up of defunct windmills salutes you as you cross the Seli Ambelos pass, the main gateway to the Lasithi Plateau. This slow-paced, ethereal world feels like the antithesis to Crete's cities and coasts. The fertile oval-shaped plain is covered by a checkerboard of fields and orchards that yield a cornucopia of crops – mostly potatoes, tomatoes and lettuce – sold at farmers markets and supermarkets around Crete.

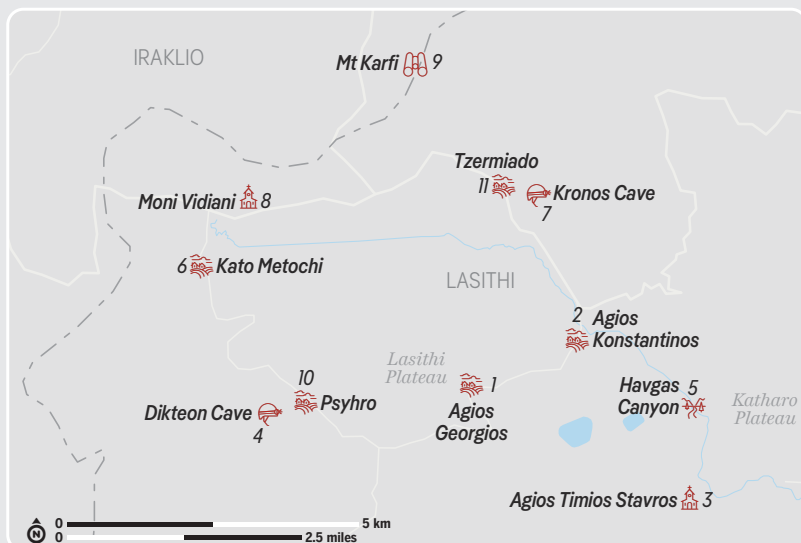
A 23km-long circular road links the 18 tiny villages (of which Tzermiado is the hub) of the plateau, which is the island's only area above 800m permanently settled year-round.

Mountains the colour of elephant hide loom in the distance, including the Dikteon range, home of Dikteon Cave where – so the myth goes – Zeus was born and hidden as an infant. It's the plateau's prime attraction and draws day-trippers by the coachload. But only those who spend the night will truly connect with the people and spirit of this unique corner of Crete.

## TOP TIP

The Lasithi Plateau is not served by public buses. A taxi to Tzermiado or Psyhro costs about €60 from Iraklio and €50 from Agios Nikolaos. To cut costs, take a bus to Malia and a taxi from there (about €25).

If you're driving, access is quickest coming from Malia on the north coast. There's a direct, very windy road through the mountains from Agios Nikolaos; going via Malia is slightly longer but a much easier drive.



### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Agios Georgios
- 2 Agios Konstantinos

- 3 Agios Timios Stavros
- 4 Dikteon Cave
- 5 Havgas Canyon

- 6 Kato Metochi
- 7 Kronos Cave
- 8 Moni Vidiani

- 9 Mt Karfi
- 10 Psyhro
- 11 Tzermiado



## BEST RESTAURANTS ON THE LASITHI PLATEAU

### Café Kronio

Sample gorgeous country cooking in Tzermiado's oldest taverna (since 1966) run by a delightful Cretan-French couple. €€

### Oropediou Geusis

Nicknamed Mafia's, this hospitable *kafeineo*-style Tzermiado classic spoils guests with a cornucopia of hearty homemade dishes. €

### Metochion

Roadside taverna in Kato Metochi serving rib-stickers like homemade pasta, lamb chops and fantastic stuffed zucchini flowers. €

### Dikti Tavern

In Agios Konstantinos, this traditional stone-and-wood taverna gets a big thumbs up for its succulent lamb. €€



Dikteon Cave

## The Cave Where Zeus Was Born

### MYTH, MYSTERY AND MINOANS

High above the village of Psychro, **Dikteon Cave** is Crete's most famous hole in the ground. It was here, in Greek mythology, that Rhea gave birth to Zeus, far from the clutches of his offspring-gobbling father, Cronos.

Hot sun gives way to damp darkness as you negotiate the vertiginous concrete staircase that corkscrews deep into the earth's bowels, passing towering stalactites and ethereal formations. If you're in the right state of mind, you might be able to make out Zeus' cradle, mantle or even the spot where he was nursed. It gets cool and slippery down here, so wear sneakers and bring a sweater.



## WHERE TO STAY ON THE LASITHI PLATEAU

### Maison Kronio

Impeccable apartments near Tzermiado boasting a pool with mountain views and a fridge stocked with breakfast. €

### Vasilikata

Ten sensitively restored stone houses furnished with warmth and comfort in Agios Konstantinos. €

### Argoulas

Above Tzermiado, these apartments sport traditional decor and sweeping views across the plateau. €



Lots of offerings found in the cave – including daggers, arrowheads, figures and double axes – indicate that it was a place of cult worship from Minoan to Roman times. Some items are now on display at the **Heaklion Archaeological Museum in Iraklio** (p132).

Visit in the afternoon to avoid the usual tourist avalanche. From the car park it's a steep 800m walk to the cave entrance via a sunny paved path. There are also donkeys standing by to do the walking for you, but note that animal rights groups suggest that donkeys offering tourist rides are often maltreated and urge people to consider whether this is the case before deciding to take a ride.

## Minoan Refugee Camp

### CLIMB MT KARFI

One of the most popular hikes on the Lasithi Plateau takes you from Tzermiado up **Mt Karfi**, a limestone pinnacle with remnants of a late-Minoan settlement and sweeping views over the coast.

When marauding Dorians invaded Crete around 1100 BCE, it quite literally sent the remaining Minoans running for the hills, setting up camp on Karfi's southeastern flank. The harsh winters could not have been fun, but the site was easy to defend, and descendants of the refugees managed to survive for hundreds of years, probably by farming and herding animals.

The route starts near the health centre on the main road west of Tzermiado. Start by following a paved road for about 2km to the petite Nisimos Plateau, then turn left onto a dirt path and steer towards the shoebox-size Ariadni chapel, right next to the trailhead.

The steep climb along a rocky, thistle-lined path to the top and the scattered ruins of the archaeological site takes about 30 minutes. Budget about two hours for the entire return trip, half that if you drive to the chapel.

Agios Timios Stavros is easily spotted across the Nisimos Plateau.

## Lasithi from Above

### DREAMY VIEWS FROM A MOUNTAIN CHAPEL

For a stunning vulture's view of the Lasithi Plateau's checkerboard of fields, as well as Mt Karfi, head up to **Agios Timios Stavros**, a whitewashed chapel clinging to the edge of a mountaintop above Tzermiado. It's easy to get to on foot or by car. Just follow the narrow but paved road (the same



### WINDMILL LORE

If you spend any time on the Lasithi Plateau you'll likely come across a famous photograph showing the landscape blanketed by a forest of windmills with white-canvas sails.

They were first put up by the Venetians to irrigate Lasithi's fields. These days more efficient mechanical pumps take care of the job and only a few windmills are left, mostly serving as photogenic props for tourists.

Driving to the Lasithi Plateau, a row of them lines up like soldiers for inspection at the **Seli Ambelou pass**. A brief stop here is worthwhile to take a closer look and to be swept away by the panoramic view of the Aposelemis Reservoir and the Aegean Sea. Privately owned, some windmills have been restored and there's a board explaining their history and mechanics.



### WHAT ELSE TO SEE ON THE LASITHI PLATEAU

#### Cretan Folk Museum

Exhibits in this endearing 19th-century farmhouse in Agios Georgios include farming tools, photographs and an ingenious wine press-turned-bed.

#### Moni Vidiani

Cute chapel and natural history exhibit focused on bearded vultures in an abandoned monastery surrounded by roses and cypress trees.

#### Kronos Cave

A trail near Tzermiado leads to this ho-hum cave used as a burial site by the Minoans.



Havgas Canyon

you'd take for Karfi) as it climbs some 3.5km to the crest. Open the gate to get onto the grounds of the church, take in the views and listen to the silence broken only by the wind.

## Venture Into a Secret Canyon

CLIFFS, NYMPHS AND A BELL-SHAPED BOULDER

Not too many people trek along the **Havgas Canyon**, which follows a riverbed between the Katharios Lakkos and Kefala mountains for about 4km. Granted, it's no walk in the park but ever so rewarding thanks to dramatic cliffs with trees growing out of them, wildflowers, birds and the big payoff at the end: a perfectly round boulder presiding over an **emerald pond**, poetically named Nereidokolimpos (fairy pond).

To get to the trailhead, make your way to Agios Konstantinos, then walk or drive for 2km along dirt roads flanked by wild fennel, grapes, peaches and other crops to a concrete water basin. The trail starts right past it and is usually accessible from late May to November – ask locally before setting out. In spring the canyon collects runoff from the Katharo Plateau (p186), which travels across the Lasithi Plateau to a sinkhole and ends up in the Apolselemis Reservoir to provide water to Iraklio and the coastal towns.



### TZERMIADO'S POTATO FESTIVAL

The humble potato is the queen of the crops of the Lasithi Plateau, which is reason enough to dedicate an entire three-day festival to the prolific tuber.

Every year in late August you can join the party, scarf up delicious dishes featuring not only potatoes but other local agricultural bounty along with traditional music, dancing, drinking and merriment likely to keep young and old happy.



### GETTING AROUND

With no regular bus service, exploring the plateau means hiring a car or booking a private

driver or guided tour.





# TOOLKIT

The chapters in this section cover the most important topics you'll need to know about in Crete. They're full of nuts-and-bolts information and valuable insights to help you understand and navigate Crete and get the most out of your trip.



**Arriving**  
p216



**Getting Around**  
p217



**Money**  
p218



**Accommodation**  
p219



**Family Travel**  
p220



**Health & Safe  
Travel**  
p221



**Food, Drink  
& Nightlife**  
p222



**Responsible  
Travel**  
p224



**LGBTiQ+ Travel**  
p226



**Accessible  
Travel**  
p227



**Nuts & Bolts**  
p229



**Language**  
p230





# Arriving



Nikos Kazantzakis Heraklion International Airport (HER), 5km east of Iraklio, is the primary point of entry to Crete. Chania Airport Ioannis Daskalogianni (CHQ), 14 km east of town, is another popular gateway. Small Sitia airport handles most domestic and charter flights.

Crete's main ferry ports with boats to the Dodecanese islands and Piraeus are Iraklio, Sitia, Souda (near Hania) and Rethymno.



## Visas

EU nationals don't need a visa. Visitors from the UK, Canada, New Zealand, US and Australia are among others that can stay for up to 90 days in any six-month period without a visa.



## ATMs

ATMs can be found at airports, ferry ports and throughout cities, towns and larger villages. Visa and MasterCard are accepted in cities and tourist centres, rarely in villages.



## Duty-free

Over 17s from non-EU countries: 200 cigarettes or 50 cigars or 250g of tobacco; 1L spirits over 22% volume or 2L under 22% volume; 4L wine; 16L beer; goods up to the value of €430.



## Wi-fi

The airports in Iraklio and Hania both have free wi-fi but it can be slow during peak times. Elsewhere on Crete, wi-fi access is widespread.

## Public Transport from Airports to City Centre



Bus tickets from Iraklio airport cost €1.50 from the vending machine or €2 on the bus.

## ANTIQUITIES

Under Greek law, it is strictly forbidden to collect, acquire and export antiquities without special permits issued by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture/General Directorate of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage ([gda@culture.gr](mailto:gda@culture.gr)). Severe smuggling penalties might be incurred. Don't even think about picking up as much as a shard when traipsing around Crete's archaeological sites. Apart from the legalities, you might risk raising Zeus' ire!

Scan this QR code for enquiries





# Getting Around

Although Crete has quite an extensive bus network serving major towns, you will need a car to explore most regions, villages and beauty spots, especially in the mountains. A regional ferry links communities on the south coast of Hania.

## TRAVEL COSTS



Rental  
**From €30/day**



Petrol  
**Approx €2/  
litre**



Hania to Samaria  
Gorge  
**€90**



Iraklio to Agios  
Nikolaos  
**€7.10**

## Hiring a Car

Most rentals are manual; automatics are rare; book ahead. The big rental companies have branches at the airports and in bigger towns, but local operators may have better rates. Check if your insurance includes unsurfaced roads.

## Road Conditions

Roads are generally in good condition. In most areas they are mostly paved but often narrow, winding and may lack guardrails. In remote and rural areas, however, quite a few roads are still unpaved and only suitable for high-clearance or 4WD vehicles.

### TIP

When driving in the mountains, expect to stop for herds of sheep or goats clogging the road.

## ROAD HAZARDS

The main dangers in Crete lie in the local driving culture. Road rules are routinely ignored and there is barely any police presence. Expect to be tailgated, honked at and aggressively and illegally overtaken if you move too slowly. Overtaking on bends and ignoring double lines and stop signs are also prevalent. Also keep in mind that road surfaces can change unexpectedly when a section of road has succumbed to subsidence or weathering. And always keep a keen eye out for loose rocks on the road. Driving on mountain roads, your passage might be temporarily halted by a herd of sheep or goats.



## DRIVING ESSENTIALS



Drive on the right.

**50**

Speed limit is 50km/h in built-up areas, 90km/h on secondary roads and 120km/h on highways.

**.05**

Blood alcohol limit is 0.5g/L



## Bus

Buses are the only form of public transport in Crete and link the major towns. Service is widespread in summer and between major towns, but nonexistent to many villages and beaches, and much reduced October to March. For timetables, check <http://e-ktel.com> for western Crete and [ktelherlas.gr](http://ktelherlas.gr) for central and eastern.



## Taxi

Taxis are widely available except in remote villages. Larger towns have taxi stands that post a list of fixed prices to outlying destinations, which removes anxiety about overcharging. Rural taxis may not have meters, so you should always settle on a price before getting in.



## Road Rules

Driving is on the right side of the road and passing only on the left. On highways, slower drivers are expected to straddle the narrow service lane and let faster traffic pass. At roundabouts you must give way to drivers coming onto the roundabout to your right.



# Money

CURRENCY: EURO (€)



## Credit Cards

Big resorts and hotels accept credit cards, but family-owned properties often don't or don't like to. Likewise, upmarket shops and restaurants accept plastic, but village tavernas and small shops almost never do. American Express and Diners Club in tourist areas only.

## Cash

Cash is king, especially outside the cities, so always carry some with you. ATMs are widely available in cities, towns and larger villages.

## Tipping

**Hotels** Tip porters €1 per bag and housekeepers €1 per night.

**Restaurants** Even if a service charge is included, a small tip is customary for good service. Round up the bill or tip 10% in cash.

**Taxis** Not expected but rounding up to the nearest euro is a welcome gesture.



## Taxes & Refunds

Visitors with a permanent residence outside the EU are eligible to claim back the VAT (24%) on goods. The minimum purchase amount is €50. For each qualifying purchase, you will receive a Tax Free Form in the shop, which must be stamped by a customs official in the airport when leaving the country.

## HOW MUCH FOR A...



Beach lounge & umbrella  
€12/day



Bus Iraklio to Hania  
€13.80



Single dive with equipment rental  
€60



Combo ticket  
Knossos/Heraklion  
Archaeological  
Museum  
€20

## HOW TO...

**save some euros**

Use **public transport** wherever you can, shop at farmers markets, bring your own **towel and umbrella** to the beach instead of renting a sunlounger, and fill up on gyros or mezedhes in the **local taverna**. **Students** get discounted admission at nearly all museums and sights; the ISIC card (International Student Identity Card) is widely recognised.



## PAYING THE BILL

In a restaurant, you must ask for the bill which – in traditional places – arrives with complimentary fruit or sweets or a shot of liquor. In some tavernas, especially in remote

areas, the bill might simply be a piece of paper with nothing but a scribbled total. For your own protection, as well as discouraging tax avoidance, ask for an itemised

bill. Unfortunately, bill-padding and overcharging does happen in touristy areas, so always pay attention while dining out.

## LOCAL TIP

Gentle bargaining is acceptable in flea markets and other markets, but elsewhere you are expected to pay the stated price.



# Accommodation

## Hotels

Crete has some of the best resort hotels in Greece, including elite spa hotels, but standards vary dramatically. In fact, private room rentals with a local family sometimes offer more comforts and amenities than a midrange hotel. There's a smattering of boutique-style hotels, especially in Hania and Rethymno, in superbly restored Venetian mansions or historic buildings.

## Apartment & Villa Rentals

Renting a studio, apartment or villa is great for space-cravers, families, small groups and privacy seekers. Naturally, furnishings and decor vary widely, from traditional to modern-minimalist, but all are invariably clean and often in lovely locales. Cooking facilities range from kitchenettes with a microwave, kettle and a fridge to fully furnished kitchens with stove top and oven.

## Go Rural

Rural tourism is booming in Crete. Traditional guesthouses, villas and apartments in tranquil villages away from the coastal hubbub are sometimes attached to organic farms, allowing you to participate in seasonal activities, such as sheep shearing, raki distilling, olive harvesting, grape crushing or cheesemaking. Some owners also give cooking courses. Budget between €70 and €100 for a traditional cottage. The website of the Hellenic Agrotourism Federation (<http://agro Xenia.org>) lists many options throughout Crete.

### HOW MUCH FOR A NIGHT IN...



A five-star resort  
**from €200**



A hostel dorm  
**from €13**



A private apartment  
**€40**



### Budget Sleeps

Hostels on Crete are invariably indie places with budget-hotel amenities, including private air-conditioned rooms with balconies, en suite baths, shared kitchens, beach shuttles, parking and even swimming pools. All are well-run and sociable places.

## Stay with Locals

In the countryside where hotels are scarce, locals often rent rooms or small apartments. These used to be located right in the family home, but these days are more likely purpose-built appendages right next to it. Most are only open April to October. Standards of cleanliness are generally high and prices low. Many are listed on Airbnb or on sites like booking.com. Also look for signs saying 'Rent Rooms' or similar.

## CAMP OUT

Crete's campgrounds are privately run and range from sun-baked dirt patches to tree-shaded, resort-style grounds with pools, shops, tavernas and wi-fi. Some also rent caravans, tents and bungalows. The core season runs from May to October, although a few remain open year-round. The Panhellenic Camping Association ([greececamping.gr](http://greececamping.gr)) publishes information about its member sites, their facilities and opening months. It's a good idea to have a foam pad to lie on, a waterproof cover for your sleeping bag and plenty of insect repellent. Camping outside a proper campsite (eg on the beach) is not allowed.





# Family Travel

While Crete doesn't cater to kids the way that some destinations do, children will be welcomed and included wherever you go. Greeks generally make a fuss over children, who may find themselves receiving many gifts and treats. Teach them some Greek words and they'll feel even more appreciated.

## Dining Out

Kids are welcome just about everywhere and most restaurants are happy to serve smaller portions for children. Ordering lots of mezedhes (appetisers) lets little ones sample the local food and find their culinary favourites. High chairs are rare, though, so consider bringing a deflatable booster seat or a cloth one that attaches to the back of a chair.

## Keep in Mind

- Nappy-changing facilities are extremely rare. Bring a portable mat and hand sanitiser.
- Cretans are quite relaxed about breastfeeding in public. Formula is widely available in supermarkets in large towns and tourist areas.
- Cobble streets and steep hills that are not particularly stroller-friendly are ubiquitous.



## Getting Around

Seatbelts must be worn in front and back seats. Children under 11 or less than 1.35m tall must sit in a child restraint in the back. If hiring a car, check for agencies that have child seats available and fit the seats yourself.



## Discounts

Most fun places in nature such as beaches, caves and hiking trails are totally free. Admission to Knossos and other ancient sites and museums is free for anyone under 18 (bring ID if your age is not obvious).

## KID-GEARED PICKS

**Acqua Plus** Keep tempers cool at Crete's biggest and most popular water park with exhilarating water slides, pools and games for all ages.

**Cretaquarium** (p168) A compact and fun introduction to the Mediterranean underwater world.

**Dikteon Cave** (p210) Connect with ancient mythology while descending into the spooky cave where Zeus was born.

**Agia Marina Donkey Sanctuary** (p159) Make friends with rescued donkeys.

**Kirkor** (p135) Devour *bougatsa*, a custard-filled pastry dusted with powdered sugar.

## MAGIC OF MYTHOLOGY

The very concept of learning about history may sound the death knell of interest for young ones – never mind teens. But Crete's past is steeped in mythology with tales of goddesses, monsters, heroes and crazy creatures like the Minotaur providing ample fodder for the imagination. Start before your trip by reading *A Child's Introduction to Greek Mythology* (written by Heather Alexander, with illustrations by Meredith Hamilton). In Iraklio, take the kids to the **Heraklion Archaeological Museum** (p132), which has free themed educational brochures packed with creative activities that get under the skin of its most famous exhibits. With the imagination now on fire, a trip to **Knossos** (p140) will feel like a 3D detective story (child-g geared private tours available).







# Health & Safe Travel

## INSURANCE

Comprehensive travel insurance is not compulsory but highly recommended. Some policies specifically exclude dangerous activities such as diving, motorcycling and even trekking; read the fine print. EU travellers with a European Health Insurance Card are entitled to free emergency medical treatment.



### Dangers

Probably the biggest danger travelling in Crete is heat stroke – remember Crete is blessed with a regular breeze so it's easy to become overexposed to the sun without realising it. Be careful, too, at isolated beaches and coves that may have powerful offshore currents. If travelling with kids, be mindful at ancient sites without safety fences.



### Cretan Winds

Fierce wind is a force you might have to reckon with on Crete, especially from May to September when the *meltemi*, a dry northerly wind, can blow for days on end. Churning waves can be a problem on the north coast, while on the southern beaches you might be pummelled by airborne sand.



### SOLO TRAVEL

Crete is remarkably safe for women to explore, even for solo travellers. Going alone to cafes and restaurants is perfectly acceptable.

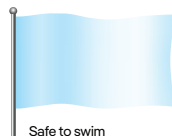
## SWIM SAFELY



No swimming allowed



Swim with caution



Safe to swim



### Cannabis

Greek drug laws are among the strictest in Europe. Recreational cannabis use is illegal, although the Greek government has legalised medical marijuana (including growing it for medical purposes). Getting caught possessing or consuming weed is likely to lead to fines and/or imprisonment.

### TOURIST POLICE

The tourist police work in cooperation with the regular police and are found in cities and popular tourist destinations. Each tourist police office has at least one member of staff who speaks English. If you have report a complaint about any service providers, report it to the tourist police and they will investigate.



# Food, Drink & Nightlife

## When to Eat

Most tavernas open all day, but some upmarket restaurants open for dinner only. Cafes do a roaring trade, particularly after the mid-afternoon siesta.

**Breakfast:** Crete doesn't have a big breakfast tradition unless you count coffee and a cigarette, and maybe a pie or pastry eaten on the run.

**Lunch:** While changes in working hours affect traditional meal patterns, lunch is still usually the biggest meal of the day, starting after 2pm.

**Dinner:** Cretans eat dinner late, after sunset in summer. This coincides with shop closing hours, so restaurants often don't fill until after 10pm. Arrive by 9pm to avoid crowds.



## MENU DECODER

**Cover:** Small compulsory charge (usually €1 or €2) for bread and butter.

**Mezes or mezedhes:** Hot or cold small plates such as tzatziki (yoghurt with grated cucumber and garlic), *saganaki* (fried cheese), dolmadhes (stuffed vine leaves) and *dakos* (tomato-topped rusks), eaten as an appetiser and meant to be shared.

**Salads:** May include grilled vegetables or boiled mountain herbs in addition to crisp classics such as Greek salad (*horiatiki*).

### From the grill:

Grilled meats including souvlaki (pork skewer) or lamb chops, usually served without sides.

### Traditional Greek dishes:

Typically *mayirefta* (ready-cooked meals) such as *mousakas*, *stifadho* (stew) and *pastitsio* (baked pasta).

**Fish:** Ideally the catch of the day, sold by weight, grilled and served whole.

**Pasta:** May feature classics such as spaghetti bolognese as well as local variations like *lazania*.

## Where to Dine

**Estiatorio:** Restaurant with upmarket international cuisine or Greek classics in a more formal setting.

**Kafeneio:** Coffee house and cultural institution.

**Mayirio:** Restaurant specialising in *mayirefta*, ready-cooked homestyle one-pot stews, casseroles and baked dishes.

**Mezedhopoleio & ouzerie:** Serves lots of different mezedhes (shared small dishes).

**Rakadhiko:** Offers increasingly sophisticated mezedhes with each round of raki.

**Taverna:** Common, casual, family-run place. They usually have barrel wine, paper tablecloths and traditional menus.

**Zaharoplasteio:** Cross between a patisserie and a cafe.

## HOW MUCH FOR A...



Greek salad  
€5–7



Bougatsa  
€3.50



Souvlaki, per stick  
€1.50



Frappe  
€2.50



Lunch at taverna  
€8–14



Three-course  
dinner with wine at  
upscale restaurant  
from €50



Glass of beer  
(0.5L)  
€4–5



Glass of house  
wine  
€2–2.50

## HOW TO...

### Eat Like a Local

- Try to adapt to local eating times – a restaurant that was empty at 7pm might be heaving with locals at 10pm.
- Book for upmarket restaurants; reservations are unnecessary in most tavernas.
- In tavernas, it's fine to browse the *mayirefta* behind the counter or in the kitchen (if invited) before ordering.
- Taverna dress code is casual, but in high-end restaurants dress nicely.
- There is a small charge for bread and nibbles served on arrival.
- Often you will be served complimentary fruit or dessert and/or raki at the end of a meal, usually after asking for the bill.
- Dining is a drawn-out ritual; if you eat with locals, pace yourself, as there will be plenty more to come.
- To split the bill, it's best to work it out among your group rather than asking staff to do it.
- Cretans are generous hosts. Don't refuse a coffee or drink – it's a gesture of hospitality and goodwill.
- If you're invited out, the host normally pays.
- If you are invited to someone's home, take a small gift (flowers or sweets). Remember to pace yourself, as you'll be expected to eat everything on your plate.
- Smoking is banned in enclosed public spaces, including restaurants and cafes, but you'll see plenty of Cretans flouting the law. Smoking on terraces is permitted.



### Tipping

Tipping is not mandatory, but Greeks usually round up the bill or add around 10% for good service.

## CRETAN WINE & RAKI

**Wine** Crete has three wine-producing areas. Iraklio Wine Country (pl47) makes about 70% of its wine. It produces mostly Kotsifali, Mandilari and Vilana grapes in two centres: around Peza/Arhanes south of Iraklio and around Dafnes, further west. The smallest region is east of here in Lasithi, where vineyards cluster primarily around Sitia and specialise in Liatiko grapes. In western Crete, the main grape-growing region is west of Hania, and the main varietal Romeiko.

**Raki** Also known as *tsikoudia*, raki is the Cretan pomace brandy and an integral part of local culture. A shot of the fiery brew is offered as a welcome, at the end of a meal and pretty much at any time and on all occasions. It is distilled from grape stems and pips left over from the grapes pressed for wine. Each October, the raki distilling season starts, with distilleries and private stills around the island producing massive quantities. Expect lots of drinking and feasting, and if you pass a village distilling raki you may well get an invitation.

Good raki has a smooth mellow taste with no noticeable after-burn and shouldn't cause a hangover. It does not incorporate herbs and is drunk neat. Family-owned distilleries bottle the potent brew in plastic water bottles, sold in groceries, tavernas or by the roadside. In winter, look for warm *rakomelo* – heated raki with honey and cloves.

**Ouzo** The famous Greek aniseed spirit has a more limited following in Crete.



# Responsible Travel

## Climate Change & Travel

It's impossible to ignore the impact we have when travelling, and the importance of making changes where we can. Lonely Planet urges all travellers to engage with their travel carbon footprint. There are many carbon calculators online that allow travellers to estimate the carbon emissions generated by their journey; try [resurgence.org/resources/carbon-calculator.html](http://resurgence.org/resources/carbon-calculator.html). Many airlines and booking sites offer travellers the option of off setting the impact of greenhouse gas emissions by contributing to climate-friendly initiatives around the world. We continue to offset the carbon footprint of all Lonely Planet staff travel, while recognising this is a mitigation more than a solution.

## Crowd-free Alternatives

Trade the busy blockbuster sights and beaches for lesser-known but no less appealing alternatives. Skip Vai for other pristine east coast **beaches** (p194). Trek down the **Imbros Gorge** (p70) instead of Samaria. Explore remote **Pelekita Cave** (p199) instead of Dikteen Cave.

## Marketteering

Buy Crete's superfresh, seasonal fruit and veg along with honey, herbs and other artisanal products directly from the farmers. The bounty is especially rich in the **markets** of Agios Nikolaos (p181), Mires (p160) and Hania (p61).



## Protect the Turtles

Volunteer with the **Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece** ([archelon.gr](http://archelon.gr); p159) to help them monitor the endangered loggerhead turtles that nest on beaches in Hania, Rethymno and Kommos.



Visit little-known **Selekano Forest** (p206), which has one of Crete's most diverse ecosystems and the hub of Crete's apiculture (beekeeping).



Visit **Kapetaniana** (p162) or **Anatoli** (p206) to see how **dying villages** have been brought back to life.

Meet, feed and pet the rescued donkeys who get to spend the rest of their lives in peace and comfort at the **Agia Marina Donkey Sanctuary** (p159) near Matala.

For a better understanding of Cretan rural traditions and customs, visit the engaging **Lychnostatis Open Air Museum** (p164) near Hersonisos. Run by a local family, it offers hands-on weaving workshops, ceramics and plant-dying demonstrations, tours of orchards and herb gardens, and other charmingly old-school activities.

## Ecostays

Slow down by staying at such eco-cred stars as solar-powered **Aspros Potamos** near Ierapetra, **Kamihis Farm** in Zaros, where candles and oil lamps light up rooms, and the upscale pioneering **Milia Mountain Retreat** near Vlatos.

## Farmer for the Day

Go local on working farms that also welcome visitors. Scattered throughout Crete, they offer an immersion in pre-industrial life through a slew of traditional agricultural activities. Check out **Agreco Farm** (p107), **Enagron, Stone Village, Dalabelos Estate** (p112) and **Kamihis Farm** (p149).



## Classic Pottery

Gain respect for the Cretan tradition of pottery-making that goes back to Minoan times. In **Thrapsano** (p150) near Iraklio, you can visit workshops that still make giant clay pots by hand. Near Rethymno, tiny **Margarites** (p108) is another pottery hub with more than 20 stores and studios.



Ditch the car and hop on Crete's comfortable, air-conditioned **buses** whenever possible.



Learn how to make *kalitsouni* pastries, gyros and Cretan brunch, in **cooking workshops** in Chania ([soulcookingworkshops.com](http://soulcookingworkshops.com)).

## Wind

Crete's first wind farm was installed near Sitia in 1993. Today, about a quarter of the total energy collected on the island comes from renewable sources, with 200 megawatts produced by wind farms and 100 megawatts from solar parks.

## RESOURCES

**eurosustainability.org** Arranges Natural Treasures of Crete and stargazing program.

**greentour.gr** Local tour operator specialises in ecotourism.



Seek out '**heroes of the handmade**' like Yiorgos Hatziparaskos (p104), one of Greece's last filo masters in Rethymno; Zamaros (p109), a famous cheesemaker in Maroulas; and herbalist Botano (p160) in Listaras.



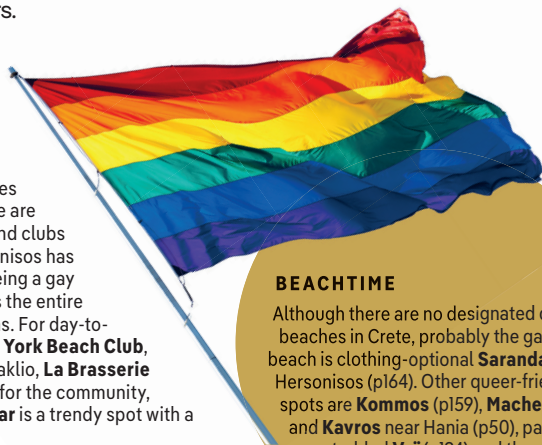


# LGBTIQ+ Travellers

Compared to Athens, Mykonos and other Greek destinations, Crete does not have much of an open LGBTIQ+ scene. Which is not to say that you can't have a great time, especially in bigger cities such as Iraklio and Hania. According to advocacy group ILGA-Europe, Greece has made significant strides in improving LGBTIQ+ rights in recent years.

## Party Time

Iraklio, Hersonisos and, to some extent, Hania have the biggest gay-friendly party scenes on Crete, although there are no exclusive gay bars and clubs as such. **YOLO** in Hersonisos has a solid reputation for being a gay hang-out but welcomes the entire spectrum of persuasions. For day-to-night mingling, try **New York Beach Club**, also in Hersonisos. In Iraklio, **La Brasserie** is the top meeting spot for the community, while in Hania **Ababa Bar** is a trendy spot with a steamy Latin vibe.



## BEACHTIME

Although there are no designated queer beaches in Crete, probably the gayest beach is clothing-optional **Sarandaris** in Hersonisos (p164). Other queer-friendly spots are **Kommos** (p159), **Macherida** and **Kavros** near Hania (p50), palm-studded **Vai** (p194) and the beaches west of **Tertsia** (p205).

## TRADITIONAL MINDSET

The church still plays a prominent role in shaping Cretans' views and homosexuality is frowned upon by many locals, especially in rural areas and among older generations. Overall, though, acceptance has increased in recent years. Still, the local LGBTIQ+ community is discreet.

## Greek Mythology

Greek mythology is rife with stories of same-sex relationships. In fact, the concept of fixed sexual orientation seems not to have existed, and sexual freedoms flourished. Hercules dressed as a woman, Patroclus was Achilles' young lover, the goddess Artemis was linked to Athena, Apollo had many male lovers, most tragically the mortal Hyacinthus, and Hermaphroditus was the two-sexed child of Aphrodite and Hermes.

## RESOURCES

**Nomadic Boys** ([nomadicboys.com/crete-gay-guide](http://nomadicboys.com/crete-gay-guide)) Gay travel guide to Crete by a French/Greek couple from London.

**Travel Gay** ([travelgay.com/destination/gay-greece/gay-crete](http://travelgay.com/destination/gay-greece/gay-crete)) Commercial site but with useful and updated localised information.

**Spartacus International Gay Guide** (<https://spartacus.gayguide.travel>) Widely regarded as the leading authority on gay travel.



## A Good Night's Sleep

For leads on gay-friendly hotels, check **travelbyinterest.com**. For private stays with gay hosts, **MisterB&B** lists quite a few options. With useful and updated localised information.



# Accessible Travel

If mobility is a problem, visiting Crete will present serious challenges. Most hotels and sights are not wheelchair accessible, and narrow streets, steep curbs and parked cars make getting around difficult. People who have visual or hearing impairments are rarely catered to. Assume nothing.

## Beachtime

Cretan beaches with shallow entry to the sea and accessible facilities include Plaka (p183); city beaches in Sitia (p190) and Ierapetra (p201); and Platanias and Agioi Apostoli near Hania (p58).



## RESOURCES

**Limitless Travel** ([limitlesstravel.org/disabled-holidays/crete](http://limitlesstravel.org/disabled-holidays/crete)) UK-based travel operators offering assisted holiday packages on Crete.

**Disabled Accessible Travel** ([disabledaccessibletravel.com](http://disabledaccessibletravel.com)) Offers assisted tours of Knossos, Hania, Rethymno and other popular destinations.

**Best Crete Transfer** ([bestcretetransfer.com](http://bestcretetransfer.com)) and **B&S Luxurious Tours & Transfers** ([crete-taxi-service.com](http://crete-taxi-service.com)) Provide wheelchair accessible taxi transfers and private tours.



### Airports

Both airports in Iraklio and Hania have fairly adequate accessible infrastructure, including lifts, ramps, accessible toilets, disabled parking and a special waiting area. For assistance getting to and from the plane, contact the airline directly.



### Accommodation

New hotels and apartments are required by EU law to be accessible by installing lifts and rooms with extra-wide doors and spacious bathrooms. Large resorts are usually your best bet. Guide dogs are accepted everywhere.

## ACCESSIBLE RESORT

**Eria Travel** ([eria-travel.gr](http://eria-travel.gr)) provides services including wheelchair and equipment rentals as well as Eria Resort, which was specifically designed for disabled travellers.

## Getting Around

Getting around Crete by public transport is tough going for the mobility impaired as buses have high steps and are not equipped with lifts.

## Sights & Tours

Top sights like the **Heraklion Archaeological Museum** (p132) and the **Historical Museum of Crete** (p136) have ramps, lifts, accessible toilets and free wheelchair rentals.

## STREET OBSTACLES

With its cobbled historic centres and hilltop rural villages, much of Crete can be a challenge to navigate for wheelchair users and the mobility-impaired. Of the larger cities, Rethymno and Hania are easier to get around than others like Agios Nikolaos with its myriad stairs.

## DISCOUNTS

People with disabilities qualify for free or discounted admission at most museums and sights as well as discounted tickets on public buses (if you manage to get on, that is).





# Nuts & Bolts

## OPENING HOURS

Opening hours vary throughout the year and between cities and rural areas. The following are high-season opening hours (July/August).

**Banks** 8am–2.30pm Monday to Thursday, 8am–2pm Friday

**Bars** 8pm–late

**Cafes** 10am–midnight

**Clubs** 10pm–late

**Post offices** 7.30am–3pm Monday to Friday (rural); to 8pm plus to 2pm Saturday (urban)

**Restaurants** 11am–4pm and 7–11pm, some tavernas all day

**Shops** 9am–3pm, plus 5.30–8.30pm Tuesday, Thursday and Friday; all day in summer in centres and resorts

## Smoking

Antismoking legislation prohibits lighting up in all enclosed public spaces, including cafes, restaurants, nightclubs, offices, businesses and transport stations.

## Weights & measures

Greece uses the metric system. Decimals are indicated by commas, thousands by points.



## Water

Tap water is chlorinated and safe to drink in most of Crete.

## GOOD TO KNOW



**Time zone**  
GMT/UTC,  
+1 hour in summer



**Country code**  
30



**Emergency number**  
166/199



**Population**  
617,360

## PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

All banks, post offices, public services, museums and ancient sites close on public holidays. Small shops, especially in tourist towns, may be open.

**New Year's Day**  
1 January

**Epiphany** 6 January

**First Sunday in Lent**  
February

**Greek Independence Day** 25 March

**Good Friday** March/  
April

**(Orthodox) Easter Sunday** April/May

**May Day (Protomagia)** 1 May

**Whit Monday (Agiou Pnevmatos)** 50 days after Easter Sunday

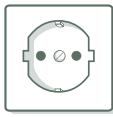
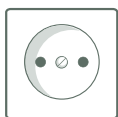
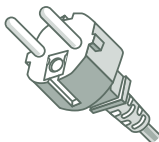
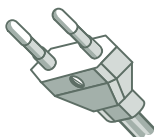
**Feast of the Assumption** 15 August

**Ohi Day** 28 October

**Christmas Day** 25 December

**St Stephen's Day** 26 December

## Electricity 230V/50Hz







# Language

With just a little Modern Greek under your belt, you'll have a richer understanding of this language's impact on contemporary Western culture; and even if you learn only the very basics, your travel experience will be the better for it.



## Basics

**Hello.** Γειά σας. *ya-sas* (polite)

Γειά σου. *ya-su* (informal)

**Good morning.** Καλημέρα.

*ka-li-me-ra*

**Good evening.** Καλησπέρα.

*ka-li-spe-ra*

**Goodbye.** Αντίο. *an-di-o*

**Yes./No.** Ναι./Όχι. *ne/o-hi*

**Please.** Παρακαλώ. *pa-ra-ka-lo*

**Thank you.** Ευχαριστώ.

*ef-ha-ri-sto*

**Sorry.** Συγγνώμη. *si-gh-no-mi*

**My name is ...** Με λένε ...

*me le-ne ...*

**Do you speak English?**

Μιλάτε αγγλικά? *mi-la-te an-gli-ka*

**I (don't) understand.**

(Δεν) καταλαβαίνω.

(dhen) *ka-ta-la-ve-no*



## Directions

**Where is ...?** Πού είναι ...?

*pu i-ne ...*

**What's the address?**

Ποια είναι η διεύθυνση

*pia i-ne i dhi-ef-thin-si*

**Can you show me (on the map)?**

Μπορείς να μου δείξεις? (στο

χάρτη)

*bo-ris na mu dhik-sis (sto-kar-ti)*



## Signs

ΕΙΣΟΔΟΣ **Entry**

ΕΞΟΔΟΣ **Exit**

ΠΛΗΡΟΦΟΡΙΕΣ **Information**

ΑΝΟΙΧΤΟ **Open**

ΚΛΕΙΣΤΟ **Closed**

ΓΥΝΑΙΚΩΝ **Toilets (Women)**

ΑΝΔΡΩΝ **Toilets (Men)**



## Time

**What time is it?** Τι ώρα είναι?

*ti o-ra i-ne*

**It's (2 o'clock).**

Είναι (δύο η ώρα).

*i-ne (dhi-o i o-ra)*

**It's half past (10).**

(Δέκα) και μισή. *(dhe-ka) ke mi-si*

**today** σήμερα *si-me-ra*

**tomorrow** αύριο *av-i-o*

**yesterday** χθες *hthes*

**morning** πρωί *pro-i*

**(this) afternoon** (αυτό το)

απόγευμα *(af-to to) a-po-yev-ma*

**evening** βράδυ *vra-dhi*



## Emergencies

**Help!** Βοήθεια! *vo-i-thya*

**Go away!** Φύγε! *fi-ye*

**I'm lost.** Έχω χαθεί. *e-kho kha-thi*

**There's been an accident.**

Εγινε ατύχημα. *e-yi-ne a-ti-hi-ma*

**I'm ill.**

Είμαι άρρωστος. *i-me a-ro-stos (m)*

Είμαι άρρωστη. *i-me a-ro-st (f)*

**I'm allergic to (antibiotics).**

Είμαι αλλεργικός/αλλεργική

(στα αντιβιοτικά).

*i-me a-ler-yi-kos/a-ler-yi-ki*

**(sta an-di-vi-o-ti-ka) (m/f)**



## Eating & Drinking

**What would you**

**recommend?**

Τι θα συνιστούσες?

*ti tha si-ni-stu-ses*

**That was delicious!**

Ηταν νοστιμότατο!

*i-tan no-sti-mo-ta-to*

**Cheers!** Είς υγείαν! *is i-yi-an*

## NUMBERS

1

ένα *e-na*

2

δύο *dhi-o*

3

τρία *tri-a*

4

τέσσερα  
*te-se-ra*

5

πέντε *pen-de*

6

έξι *e-xi*

7

επτά *ep-ta*

8

οχτώ *o-hto*

9

εννέα *e-ne-a*

10

δέκα *dhe-ka*



### DONATIONS TO ENGLISH

anarchy, astronomy,  
cosmos, democracy,  
drama, logic, politics ...

## SOUNDS

The pronunciation of Greek is easy to master, as most of the sounds correspond to those found in English.

### Reading & Writing

The Greek writing system was simplified in 1982, when the old stress symbols and aspiration marks (ie an accent indicating that a sound is pronounced with a puff of air before it) were abolished.

### Genders

Adjectives in Greek normally come before the noun, just like in English. They take different endings to agree with the noun they qualify – masculine, feminine or neutral.

## Going to the Beach

**Where's the ...** Πού είναι η ... *pu i-ne i ...*  
**beach?** παραλία? *pa-ra-li-a*

**best** καλύτερη *ka-li-te-ri*  
**nearest** κοντινότερη *ko-di-no-te-ri*  
**public** δημόσια *thi-mo-si-a*

### Where's the nudist beach?

Πού είναι η πλαζ γυμνιστών?

*pu i-ne i plaz gim-ni-ston*

### Do we have to pay?

Πρέπει να πληρώσουμε?

*pre-pi na pli-ro-su-me*

### What time is high/low tide?

Τι ώρα είναι η παλίρροια υψηλή/  
άμπωτις?

*ti o-ra i-ne i pa-li-ri-a i-psi-li/a-bo-tis*

### Is it safe to dive/swim here?

Είναι ασφαλές να κάνω βουτιές/  
κολυμπήσω εδώ;

*i-ne as-fa-les na ka-no vu-ti-es/*

*ko-li-bi-so e-tho*

## WHO SPEAKS GREEK?

Greek is the official language of Greece and a co-official language of Cyprus, in addition to being spoken by emigrant communities in Turkey, Australia, Canada, Germany and the United States. In total, there are over 13 million Greek speakers worldwide.

Close relatives  
Ancient Greek

Language family  
Indo-European  
(Hellenic branch)

Greece Cyprus



# THE CRETE STORYBOOK

Our writers delve deep into different aspects of Cretan life

## **A History of Crete in 15 Places**

Crete's natural beauty is equalled only by the richness of its history.

*Andrea Schulte-Peevers*

**p234**

## **Natural Crete**

The island's natural splendour shapes its soul.

*Ryan Ver Berkmoes*

**p238**

## **Crete's Minoans**

4000 years ago Crete had a culture with lessons for today.

*Ryan Ver Berkmoes*

**p241**

## **Crete's Proud Culture**

Crete is a powerhouse of dance, literature and the visual arts, going back millennia.

*Ryan Ver Berkmoes*

**p244**

## **Crete's Soulful Music**

Cretan music is the most enduring form of traditional music across Greece today.

*Ryan Ver Berkmoes*

**p247**

**Cretan traditional music played on a *lyra* (p247)**

VENIAMAKIS STEFANOS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

# A HISTORY OF CRETE IN 15 PLACES

Crete's natural beauty is equalled only by the richness of its history. Catapulted into the history books by the Minoans, it has been coveted and occupied by consecutive invaders ever since. Rebelliousness is therefore a distinct part of the Cretan DNA. Today's Crete is a tantalising amalgam of tradition and modernity.

By Andrea Schulte-Peevers

**CRETE'S OFTEN TURBULENT** recorded history can be traced in the island's ancient palaces and Roman cities, frescoed Byzantine churches, Venetian fortresses and Ottoman mosques. It was the Minoans, Europe's first advanced civilisation, who first carved out Crete's prominent place in the history books some 4000 years ago at a time when other Europeans were still huddled in primitive huts. Recent excavations, though, have provided proof that humans have actually inhabited the island for at least the past 130,000 years.

Thanks to its location at the crossroads of three continents, Crete became catnip for waves of invaders, from the Mycenaeans, Dorians and Romans to the Saracens, Venetians, Ottomans and finally Nazi Germans. Centuries of battling occupiers have left Cretans with a fiercely independent streak, residual mistrust of authority and little respect for the state. Respect for the Orthodox church, meanwhile, remained strong throughout the series of occupations to this day.

Crete also has a prominent place in ancient Greek mythology. It was here where Rhea gave birth to Zeus, and where Zeus' own son, Minos, had his legendary reign.

Icarus and Daedalus launched their ill-fated flight in Crete, while Theseus made the voyage from Athens to Crete to slay the Minotaur in the famous labyrinth.

## 1. Plakias

### CRETE'S FIRST SEAFARERS

During excavations carried out in 2008 and 2009 near Plakias (p121; and nearby Preveli), archaeologists were astonished to discover chiselled stone tools dating back at least 130,000 years. The tools were the first evidence that humankind had engaged in sea travel so long ago. This has revolutionary implications for the entire anthropological conventional wisdom, which had it that the first humans migrated to Europe from Africa by land alone.

## 2. Dikteon Cave

### BIRTH OF A MYTH

Dikteon Cave (p210) is said to be where Zeus – chief god in the Greek pantheon – was born to Rhea and Cronos. He was then reared in Ideon Cave (p115) on Mt Psiloritis. As an adult, Zeus fell in love with Europa, kidnapped her and swam ashore in Matala (p152), only to consummate their (problematic)







relationship under a plane tree in nearby Gortyna (p158). Oddly, the supposedly immortal god has also been assigned a burial place under Mt Yioulitas (p145).

### 3. Archaeological Museum of Arhanes

#### MINOAN ART

The Minoans did not just build impressive palaces, sewer systems and religious shrines, they also created extraordinary artworks. Vibrant frescoes portraying animals, flowers, scenes of banquets, games, rituals and many other motifs decorated their complexes. Extraordinarily vivid, they were painted in a technique called wet fresco, where the paint is absorbed by wet plaster, thus preventing fading. In the tiny archaeological collection in Arhanes (p144) are vessels with dried remnants of the actual paint used some 3500 years ago. For the best original frescoes head to the Heraklion Archaeological Museum (p132), or for replicas head to Knossos (p140).

### 4. Gortyna

#### CAPITAL OF ROMAN CRETE

As the most strategic island in the central Mediterranean, Crete had been on Rome's to-do list since the 3rd century BCE. But it wasn't until Roman consul Metellus launched the decisive invasion in 67 BCE near Kydonia (Hania) that Crete fell under Roman rule. The Romans spent decades building up their new possession, with Gortyna becoming the capital and most powerful city under Roman rule in the 1st century BCE. The city blossomed under the Roman administrators, who endowed it with lavish public buildings, amphitheatres, temples and public baths. At its peak, as many as 100,000 people are believed to have lived here.

### 5. Church of Agios Titos

#### ARRIVAL OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity was first brought to Crete in 63 CE by St Paul himself, accompanied by his disciple Titus, now the patron saint of Crete. Paul appointed Titus bishop and left him to preach on the island. Titus' remains were buried in the 6th century in the basilica in Gortyna (p158), but only the skull could be salvaged during its destruction by the Saracens (Arabs from Spain) in 824 CE. It ended up in a church in Iraklio but

was moved to Venice for safekeeping when Crete fell to the Ottomans. After lengthy negotiations, the skull was finally returned to the Church of Agios Titos (p135) in 1966.

### 6. Koules Fortress

#### SARACEN TRONCHOLD

Koules fortress (p135), which guards Iraklio's harbour, was built by the Venetians (in the 16th century) on a site first fortified by the Saracens who gradually conquered Crete after 824 CE. The Saracens established a stronghold in Iraklio (then called Chandax) and used it as a base for their raids around the Aegean. There are few records for this period, considered Crete's 'dark age'. Byzantine armies sought to reclaim Crete several times but were not successful until Nikiforos Fokas laid siege to Chandax and liberated Crete in 961.

### 7. Church of Panagia Kera

#### BYZANTINE MASTERPIECES

Greek painting came into its own during the Byzantine period, which lasted roughly from the 4th century BCE until the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Much Byzantine art was destroyed in popular rebellions during the 13th and 14th centuries, but not the stunning frescoes decorating the three-aisled Church of Panagia Kera (p185) in Kritsa. The works feature a roll call of saints along with scenes around the life of Christ, including an especially vivid Last Supper.

### 8. Hania Old Town

#### CRETE'S HISTORY ENCAPSULATED

Hania's old quarter (p50) is like a 3D textbook chronicling the many phases of Crete's turbulent history. Conceived by the Venetians, this web of car-free lanes is Hania's heart and soul. Looming above are the Venetian fortifications that kept the Turks at bay until 1645. There are a few Ottoman vestiges, the oldest being the domed Mosque of Kioutsouk Hasan in the picturesque harbour. There's also a museum with a splendid Byzantine icon, the Etz Hayyim Synagogue and the Municipal Art Gallery with the latest in Greek art.

### 9. Frangokastello

#### RETURN OF THE REBEL SOULS

Frangokastello (p71) is a 14th-century Venetian fortress where, in 1828, some 400

Cretan rebels made a last stand in one of the bloodiest battles of the Greek War of Independence. Legend has it that at dawn on each anniversary the rebels' ghosts, the *drosoulites*, can be seen marching along the beach. There's also a theory that the 'ghosts' are actually an optical illusion created by peculiar atmospheric conditions.

## 10. Moni Arkadiou

### MONASTERY MASSACRE

Combining beauty and tragedy, Moni Arkadiou (p107) is a moving symbol of the struggle for independence. The 16th-century stone church and cloister appear pastoral and lovely. But it was here in 1866 that some 2000 Turkish soldiers attacked the monastery where hundreds of Cretan women, children and rebels had sought shelter. Rather than surrender, the entrapped locals blew up their gunpowder magazine, killing all but one small girl.

## 11. Hania Airport

### HONOURING A CRETAN HERO

Crete's second-biggest airport is named for Ioannis Daskalogiannis, a Cretan rebel who led an ill-fated revolt against Ottoman rule in 1770. Although the rebels seemed to have the upper hand at first, the tide soon turned, sending Daskalogiannis and his men into hiding. He eventually surrendered to the Turks at the fortress of Frangokastello (p71) and was taken to Iraklio where he suffered a particularly nasty demise by being tortured, skinned and beaten to death in broad daylight. Statues of the man grace many a town square, including his birth town of Anopoli. One of the most popular *rizitika* (centuries-old patriotic songs from western Crete) is also dedicated to him.

## 12. Hora Sfakion

### SPIRIT OF REBELLION

Under Venetian and Turkish rule, Hora Sfakion (p66) was an important maritime centre and (with the upland regional capital of Anopoli) the nucleus of the Cretan struggle for independence. The Turks inflicted severe reprisals on the inhabitants for their rebelliousness in the 19th century, after which the town fell into an economic slump that lasted until the arrival of tourism several decades ago. Hora Sfakion

played a prominent role during WWII when thousands of Allied troops were evacuated by sea from the town after the Battle of Crete.

## 13. Theriso

### UNION WITH GREECE

Theriso (p79) went down in history as the village where charismatic Eleftherios Venizelos – considered one of the country's greatest heroes – convened a revolutionary assembly in 1905, raised the Greek flag and declared unity with Greece, laying the groundwork for modern Crete. In 1908 the Cretan assembly officially declared unity with Greece, but the Greek government did not allow Cretan deputies into the Athens parliament until after the First Balkan War (1912). The 1913 Treaty of Bucharest finally recognised Crete as part of the Greek state.

## 14. Andartis Monument

### PARTISAN OF PEACE

On the Nida Plateau, high on Mt Psiloritis, you can make out this sprawling landscape sculpture created by German artist Karina Raeck in 1991 to commemorate the Cretan WWII resistance fighters – known as *andartes*. Cretans hid thousands of Allied soldiers in caves or monasteries such as Preveli before helping them escape across the Libyan Sea. Meanwhile, Allied undercover agents arrived to assist with coordinating and arming the resistance. Reprisals by German troops against the civilian population were brutal. The monument itself is a pile of local rocks arranged in such a way that it looks like an angel when seen from above.

## 15. Hersonisos

### BIRTH OF MODERN TOURISM

When writer Henry Miller travelled to Crete in 1939, tourists were a rare phenomenon. That all changed dramatically in the 1970s, partly ushered in by the completion of the national road E75 that saw resorts like Hersonisos (p164) sprout on terrain previously occupied by fishing villages and agricultural land. Numbers reflect the growing demand for blue-sky holidays by sun-starved northern Europeans. Today tourism is the backbone of Crete's economy – next to agriculture – and accounts for about a quarter of tourism spending in Greece overall.

# NATURAL CRETE

The island's natural splendour shapes its soul.

By Ryan Ver Berkmoes

**CRETE IS AN ISLAND** of geographical contrasts, to say the least – you can swim in the morning and hike in the snow in the afternoon. Caves, gorges and plateaus are just some of the features, and the island has a dizzying biodiversity of plants and animals, from orchids to eagles.

With an area of 8335 sq km, it is the largest island in the Greek archipelago. It's 250km long, about 60km at its widest point and 12km at its narrowest.

## Dramatic Geology

Just as tourists from across the world meet on Crete, so do several tectonic plates: the African, Aegean Sea and Eurasian. The result is a region of unsettled geology and geography, which ranges from sudden events (such as Santorini's many volcanic eruptions) to gradual change.

Crete has had its share of drama through many earthquakes, including one aeons ago that lifted the entire south coast; you can still see evidence of this in the 'bathtub ring' visible on the sheer rocky cliffs that plunge into the sea. Longer-term geologic effects are evidenced by the soaring mountains that dominate the landscape. Peaks top 2400m and are cleaved by equally dramatic gorges carved by water. These deep clefts in the landscape – such as the Samaria Gorge – are major attractions, popular today for hiking. Across the island look for wild swirls in rockfaces caused by the immense forces of the conflicting plates.

Crete's geology is also deeply ingrained in its people. It takes a hardy soul to eke out a living in the rocky and uncompromising terrain. There has always been something of a disdain for mainland Greeks because of their supposed easy life courtesy of the agriculturally friendly fertile plains. Crete's independent spirit has also been aided by the ability of the populace to vanish up into the mountains when threatened, whether by pirates, Ottomans or Nazis.

## Plucky Animals

While Crete is known for its large population of sheep and goats, the island is also home to endemic fauna including hares, rabbits, weasels and its own subspecies of badger. The island also has a large population of bats, insects and snails, the latter being a major part of the Cretan diet.

Although you might not spot them, Crete is also home to numerous reptiles, among them the European rattlesnake (non-venomous), as well as dice, cat and whip snakes.

Between May and September, female loggerhead sea turtles arrive to lay their eggs on sandy beaches near Hania, Rethymno and Messara Bay. There's also a small population of rare and endangered Mediterranean monk seals breeding in caves on the south coast.

Off the southern coastline, with its steep underwater cliffs, is found the Mediterranean Sea's most significant population of





sperm whales, who gather, feed and possibly mate in the area year-round. The area is also abundant with squid, on which the giants (and people in local tavernas) feed. You can also watch for various dolphin species and Cuvier's beaked whales. Bottlenose dolphins are often spotted in the shallow waters off Paleohora near Gavdos.

Crete flies high in the bird world. It lies on the main Africa-Europe migratory routes and well over 400 species have been recorded on the island, including both resident and migratory species. Along the coast, you'll find birds of passage such as egrets and herons during spring and autumn migrations.

The mountains host a wealth of interesting birds. Look for blue rock thrushes, buzzards and the huge griffon vulture. Other birds include alpine swifts, stonechats and blackbirds.

Crete's most famous animal is the *kri-kri* or *agrimi*, a distinctive wild goat with large horns, often depicted in Minoan art. Only a few survive in the wild, in and around Samaria Gorge and on the islands of Agioi Theodoroi off Hania and Dia off Iraklio.

You may spot a lammergeier (bearded vulture) – one of the rarest raptors in Europe, with a wingspan of nearly 3m – in Samaria Gorge or hovering above the Lassithi Plateau. Golden eagles and Bonelli's eagles can also be spotted in these areas and elsewhere, including the Kato Zakros region.

### Hardy Plants

Crete blooms in every sense of the word, with an estimated total of about 1750 plant species, of which around 170 are endemic. The island's gorges with their seasonal water flows are mini botanical gardens and their isolation has helped preserve many species.

Along the coast, sea daffodils flower in August and September. In April and May, knapweeds are in flower on the western coast and their purple or violet petals provide vibrant splashes of colour on beaches. At the same time of year in eastern Crete, especially around Sitia, watch for crimson poppies on the borders of the beach.

Ubiquitous tamarisk trees, which flower in spring, provide welcome shade for many beaches island-wide.

On the hillsides look for cistus and brooms in early summer and yellow chrysanthemums in the fields from March to May. There are more than 200 species of wild orchid in Crete, including 14 endemic varieties and the island's famous *Ophrys cretica*, which uses its insectlike appearance as a disguise to attract male insects.

### Protecting Crete

Crete's natural and physical beauty are under constant threat from tourism development and resource exploitation. There are many groups working to protect the island's environment.

**International NGOs** Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund are both active in Crete. Together they scored a major victory in 2022 when the French petroleum giant TotalEnergies cancelled plans to drill for oil and gas off Crete's coast following years of international opposition.

**Hellenic Society for the Protection of Nature** Greece's oldest non-governmental environmental group ([www.eepf.gr](http://www.eepf.gr)) maintains an array of programs on Crete, including one devoted to protecting the *kri-kri*.

**Cretan Sperm Whale Project** The Pelagos Cetacean Research Institute (PCRI; [www.pelagosinstitute.gr](http://www.pelagosinstitute.gr)) monitors the whale population; it also worked with Greenpeace and WWF to fight TotalEnergies' offshore drilling proposals.

**Archelon** Greece's turtle protection society ([www.archelon.gr](http://www.archelon.gr)) works to protect nesting turtles on Crete's beaches. Look for summertime info booths on the Hania and Rethymno harbours.

**Blue Flag Beaches** Crete does very well in the annual international awards for Blue Flag Beaches. Over 110 Cretan beaches usually win the coveted designation each year, which is based on water quality, cleanliness, environmental management and more.



# CRETE'S MINOANS

4000 years ago Crete had a culture with lessons for today.

By Ryan Ver Berkmoes

**THE MINOANS' PALACES** were lavishly decorated with art, and the surviving paintings, sculptures, mosaics, pottery and jewellery at archaeological sites and museums across Crete demonstrate the Minoans' extraordinary artistry. And that's just one of the legacies of this rich culture that believed in gender equality, peaceful relations and scientific achievement.

Mystery shrouds the Minoans: we don't even know what they called themselves, 'Minoan' being the term given by archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans, in honour of the possibly mythical King Minos.

Evidence uncovered in Crete's grand palaces indicates they were a peaceful, sophisticated, well-organised and prosperous civilisation with robust international trade, splendid architecture and art, and seemingly equal status for men and women. Women are depicted in Minoan art participating in games, hunting and public and religious festivals.

The Minoans also had highly developed agriculture, extensive irrigation systems and advanced hydraulic sewerage systems. Their exquisite artistry in pottery and jewellery survives to this day, and richly coloured frescoes – such as those at Knossos (p140) – portray landscapes rich with animals and birds, marine scenes teeming with fish and octopuses, and banquets, games and rituals. Idealised figures of men, women and children would do Instagram proud today.

## Symbols

The double-axe symbol that appears in frescoes and on the palace walls at Knossos was sacred for the Minoans. Other religious symbols that frequently appear in Minoan art include the mythical gryphon and figures with a human body and head of an animal. The Minoans appear to have worshipped the dead and believed in some form of afterlife.

The bull was another potent Minoan symbol. The peculiar Minoan sport of bull-leaping – where acrobatic thrill-seekers seize a charging bull's horns and leap over its back – is depicted in several frescoes, pottery and sculptures.

Bulls were also prominent in the life of Queen Pasiphae, wife of King Minos. She gave birth to the infamous half-bull, half-human Minotaur as a punishment from the gods for her literal love of bulls. It fell to the inveterate inventor Daedalus to create a prison strong enough to contain the monster, which possessed the strength of an army. His answer was to construct the labyrinth, an endless maze of tunnels.

## Fun & Games

The Minoans knew how to enjoy themselves – playing board games, boxing, wrestling and performing bold acrobatic feats, including the sport of bull-leaping, while Minoan dancing was famous throughout Ancient Greece.



## Art & Letters

In Crete, Minoan painting is virtually the only form of ancient Greek art to have survived; large-scale sculptures disappeared in natural disasters like the great tsunami that swept over from Thira (Santorini) in 1450 BCE. Minoan art inspired the invading Mycenaeans and its influence spread to Santorini and beyond.

Their inscrutable written hieroglyph system, Linear A, provides another indication of a culture that was very advanced. The most significant example of this writing is on the 3600-year-old terracotta tablet known as the Phaistos Disk, which has been the object of much speculation since it was discovered in 1908. The disk, about 16cm in diameter, consists of an Early Minoan pictographic script made up of 242 'words' written in a continuous spiral. It has never been deciphered.

We know more about Linear B, a script written on clay tablets unearthed at Knossos. The methodical decipherment of this script by English architect Michael Ventris in 1952 provided the first tangible evidence that the Greek language had a recorded history longer than any scholar had previously believed. The language was an archaic form of Greek 500 years older than the Ionic Greek used by Homer. The Knossos clay tablets are mainly inventories and records of commercial transactions dating from the 14th to the 13th centuries BCE. They give a glimpse of a fairly complex and well-organised civilisation.

### Crete's Odd Couple: Minos & Daedalus

Minos, the legendary ruler of Crete, was the son of Zeus and Europa and attained the Cretan throne aided by Poseidon. Or maybe not. Homer describes him and his land in *The Odyssey*: 'Out on the dark blue sea there lies a rich and lovely land called Crete

that is densely populated and boasts 90 cities... One of the 90 cities is called Knossos and there for nine years, King Minos ruled and enjoyed the friendship of the mighty.' His mythical heritage aside, whether or not Minos existed is open to much debate. Whatever his character might have been, the legends around him would fuel a grand streaming series.

The fate of Minos was ultimately interwoven with an Athenian master craftsman named Daedalus who, having fled from Athens after murdering his nephew (for being more inventive), sought sanctuary in Crete. Minos was quick to utilise his skills, commissioning the inventor to design the legendary Palace of Knossos. It is said that Daedalus' statues were so lifelike that they had to be chained down to stop them from moving. The name Daedalus derives from the Greek verb *daedalo*, which means 'work with skill', and some credit him with inventing the saw, axe, drill and many more tools that would have made him the DIY hero of his day.

With Knossos as his base, Minos gained control over the whole Aegean basin, colonising many of the islands and ridding the seas of pirates. His naval success was also often attributed to the ingeniousness of Daedalus, whose achievements included designing the prow of the modern boat.

When Daedalus and his son Icarus left Crete without permission, Minos was enraged. While they fled, Icarus famously flew too near the sun, his waxed feathers melting. Minos pursued Daedalus to the city of Kamikos in Sicily. Thereupon nothing much good happened, especially to Minos, who died in a notorious bathing incident. After his death, the Cretan king descended to Hades' realm, the Underworld. Some legends say that Daedalus had a final act as an engineer in Egypt.



# CRETE'S PROUD CULTURE

Dance in the streets – this is Crete!

By Ryan Ver Berkmoes

**CRETE IS A POWERHOUSE** of dance, literature and the visual arts, going back millennia. From priceless Minoan sculptures to 10,000-line poems celebrating courtly love, the island has developed its own ways of living, loving, lamenting and showing it to the world through the arts.

## Art

The artistry of the Minoans (c 3500–1100 BCE) ranks among the best in human history (p243). Later, during a brief artistic renaissance on the island that lasted from the 8th to 7th centuries BCE, a group of sculptors called the Daedalids perfected a new technique of making sculptures in hammered bronze.

From the 13th to the early 16th centuries, churches around Crete were decorated with frescoes on a dark-blue background featuring a bust of Christ in the dome, the four Gospel writers in the corners, and the Virgin and Child in the apse. The best-preserved Byzantine frescoes in Crete are in the Church of Panagia Kera (p185) at Kritsa.

With the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Crete became the centre of Greek art as many Byzantine artists fled to the island. At the same time, the Italian Renaissance was in full bloom and many Cretan artists studied in Italy. The result was the Cretan School of icon painting that combined technical brilliance and dramatic richness. Artists drew inspiration from both Western

and Byzantine styles. You'll see examples today in old churches across the island.

## El Greco, the Cretan

One of the geniuses of the Renaissance, El Greco (meaning 'The Greek' in Spanish; his real name was Domenikos Theotokopoulos) was born and educated on Crete, although he had to travel to Spain to earn recognition. El Greco was born in Iraklio in 1541 during a time of great artistic activity in the city following the arrival of large numbers of painters fleeing Ottoman-held Constantinople. These painters had a formative influence upon the young El Greco.

Because Iraklio was a Venetian city it made sense for El Greco to head to Venice to further his studies, and he set off when he was in his early 20s to join the studio of Titian. It was not, however, until he moved to Spain in 1577 that he really came into his own as a painter. His highly emotional style struck a chord with the Spanish, and the city of Toledo was to become his home until his death in 1614. To view the most famous of his works, like his masterpiece *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (1586), you will have to travel to Toledo. However, two lesser El Greco works from his time in Venice are displayed in Iraklio at the Historical Museum of Crete (p136): *The Baptism of Christ* (1569) and *View of Mt Sinai and the Monastery of St Catherine* (1570).





Each displays the deeply moody perspectives that became his hallmark.

Although he left Crete before he gained fame, El Greco is honoured across the island. Streets, tavernas and hotels are named after him. A white marble bust of the painter stands in Iraklio's Plateia El Greco, and there are streets named after him throughout the island. There's a small El Greco museum in the village of Fodele, 30km west of Iraklio, in a house he allegedly spent time in as a child.

## Literature

Crete has a rich literary tradition that sprang from the Cretan love of songs, verses and wordplay. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the island experienced tremendous literary flowering under Venetian rule. The era's greatest masterpiece was the epic *Erotokritos*, written in Cretan dialect by Vitsentzos Kornaros. More than 10,000 lines long, this poem of courtly love is considered the most important work of early modern Greek literature and many of its phrases can be heard in Cretan folk music today.

Greece's best-known and most widely read author since Homer is Crete's Nikos Kazantzakis. Odysseus Elytis (1911–96) won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1979. One of his main works is 'Axion Esti – It is Worthy' (1959), a complicated poem that deals with existentialist questions. It's one of the best-known poems and songs in Greece.

Contemporary Cretan writers include Rhea Galanaki (b 1947), whose prize-winning *The Life of Ismail Ferik Pasha* (1989) is about the clash of Christianity and Ottoman Islam in Crete.

## Zorba's Father: Nikos Kazantzakis

Crete's most famous contemporary writer is Nikos Kazantzakis. Born in 1883 in Iraklio, Kazantzakis spent his early childhood in the ferment of political upheaval. In 1897 the revolution against Turkish rule forced him to leave Crete for studies elsewhere.

Kazantzakis' self-professed greatest work is *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* (1938), an opus of 33,333 iambic verses, and a modern-day epic loosely based on the ancient hero Odysseus (Ulysses). Only much later did Kazantzakis turn to novel writing. He gained international acclaim with works such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1955; later turned into the 1988 Martin Scorsese film) and *Freedom or Death* (1953), a novel about Crete's revolt against the Ottomans.

*The Life and Adventures of Alexis Zorbas* (1946; subsequently renamed *Zorba the Greek*) is his most famous book. It gave rise to the clichéd image of the ultimate free-spirited Greek male, immortalised in the 1964 movie by the Mexican-born Anthony Quinn.

## Dance

Dancing has been part of social life in Crete since the dawn of Hellenism. Dancers are depicted on Ancient Greek vases, and Homer lauded the ability of Cretan dancers.

The most popular Cretan dances are the graceful and slow *syrtos* and the *pentoza-li*. The latter has a fast version that builds into a frenzy, with the leader doing kicks and fancy moves. Another popular dance is the *sousta*, a bouncy courtship dance with small precise steps that are performed by couples.

For Cretans, dancing well is a matter of great personal pride and most dancers will take their turn at the front to demonstrate their prowess. The best place to see Cretan dancing is at festivals and celebrations.

# CRETE'S SOULFUL MUSIC

Cretan music is the most enduring form of traditional music across Greece today, and on the island it remains the most popular music.

By Ryan Ver Berkmoes

**CRETE'S THRIVING LOCAL** music scene features generations of folk musicians who perform traditional songs, as well as contemporary styles based on local traditions. The scene also continues to spawn new generations of folk performers who play regularly and produce new recordings. You'll hear Cretan tunes accompanying any celebration; and that folk music blaring in your Hania taxi? It's likely local. Cretan music also has a presence in the world-music scene as a genre in its own right.

## Instruments & Musical Styles

Cretan music has been influenced by many musical traditions over the centuries. The lead instrument is the aeons-old *lyra*, a three-stringed instrument similar to a violin that is played resting on the knee. It is often accompanied by the eight-stringed *laouto* (lute), which keeps the rhythm for the *lyra*. Other traditional instruments include the *mandolino* (mandolin), the *askomandoura* (bagpipe), the *habiolli* (wooden flute) and the *daoulaki* (drum). Crete's musicians are quick to tell you that the *bouzouki*, so associated with Greek music, is not part of Cretan music.

One of Crete's favourite forms of musical expression is the *mantinadha* (a style of traditional Cretan rhyming couplets), which expresses the timeless concerns of love, death and the vagaries of fate. Thousands of

*mantinadhes* helped forge a sense of national identity during the long centuries of occupation. The best 'rhymers' at Cretan festivals would tailor their songs to the people present and try to outdo each other in skill and composition. The best-known piece of Cretan Renaissance literature, the 17th-century *Erotokritos* by Vitsentzos Kornaros, consists of language and rhyme consistent with *mantinadhes*. It has provided ample material for performers and continues to inspire Crete's musicians today.

Another popular form of music is *rizitika* (patriotic songs), which are centuries-old songs from western Crete, especially the Lefka Ori (White Mountains) region in Hania. Many of the *rizitika* deal with historical or heroic themes. The period of German occupation in WWII produced a fertile crop of *rizitika*.

## Postwar Revolution

Traditional folk music was shunned by the Greek bourgeoisie during the period after independence, when they looked to Europe – and classical music and opera – rather than their eastern or 'peasant' roots. However, a new wave of *entehni mousiki* (artistic music) that emerged in Athens in the 1960s drew on urban folk instruments such as the *bouzouki* and created popular hits from the works of Greek poets.





Acclaimed composer Yiannis Markopoulos (from Ierapetra) upped the ante by introducing rural folk music into the mainstream. He's best known internationally for his composition for the TV series *Who Pays the Ferryman?* Markopoulos was also responsible for bringing the icon of Cretan music, the late Nikos Xylouris of Anogia, to the fore.

### Anogia's Beloved Musicians

Arguably, the mountain town of Anogia (p115) is the heart of Cretan music. It's known for its stirring music and is the birthplace of a large number of Crete's best-known musicians. The main instrument here is the *lyra*, often accompanied by lutes and guitars. Local boy Nikos Xylouris (1936–80) took the world by storm with this instrument and his handlebar moustache and is still considered Crete's best singer and *lyra* player. During the reign of the Greek junta government (1967–74), Nikos wrote songs that became the anthems of the political opposition.

Nikos' brother Antonis, aka Psarantonis (b 1937), also has an international following for his haunting voice. A third brother, Giannis, aka Psarogiannis, is Greece's most accomplished lute player.

Psarantonis' charismatic son, Giorgos Xylouris (Psaragiorgis; b 1965), followed in his father's footsteps and is known for playing the lute as a solo instrument rather than in its traditional accompaniment role. Giorgos' sister, Niki, is one of the few female Cretan singers. Released in 2015, the Greek film *A Family Affair* is an intimate portrait of the Xylouris family and their strong connection with traditional Cretan music.

Giorgos Dramountanis, also known as Loudovikos ton Anogion (Ludwig from Anogia; b 1951), also brings his brand of folksy, ballad-style Cretan compositions to audiences all over Greece. He's the

director of the annual Yakinthia Festival (p95) of Cretan music.

### Other Notable Crete Musical Artists

Michail 'Mikis' Theodorakis, one of the biggest – and most controversial – musicians in postwar Greece had deep ties to Crete. He was a leftist political activist and a composer and lyricist credited with over 1000 works. He scored the renowned films *Zorba the Greek* (1964), the landmark Greek documentary *Z* (1969), and *Serpico* (1973). During the Greek junta government (1967–74), Theodorakis was imprisoned and his songs were banned. He was considered Greece's greatest living composer until his death in 2021. He's buried with his parents and brother near Hania.

Also imprisoned by the junta, well-regarded composer Mitsos Stavrakakis was but one of an entire clan of Cretan musicians.

Stelios Petrakis has an international following for his creative takes on Crete's music. His namesake Stelios Petrakis Cretan Quartet has performed the island's folk music globally, including at New York's Carnegie Hall. He's also known for handcrafting his own *lyra* and other traditional Cretan instruments.

The excellent sextet Haïnides is one of the most popular acts to emerge from Crete in recent years, playing songs inspired by the island's musical culture, with lyrics drawn from the Cretan dialect of Greek. They perform across Greece and Europe.

Techno sensation Kooba Tercu is a band with many connections to Crete. Their driving and dystopian music could be said to draw inspiration from the darker themes of folk music passed down through the generations in Crete's mountain villages where the only absolute is that not too long after one invasion, there's bound to be another.

# INDEX

## A

- accessible travel 227  
accommodation 219, 225  
    accessible 227  
activities 16, 38-41, *see also individual activities*  
Agia Galini 125  
Agia Marina Donkey  
    Sanctuary 159  
Agia Roumeli 22, 28, 78-9  
Agios Nikolaos 178-81  
    beyond Agios Nikolaos 182-7  
Agios Pavlos 9, 125  
Agreco Farm 107  
agriculture 208  
agrimi, *see kri-kri*  
air travel 151  
airports 151, 216  
Amari 13, 120  
Amari Valley 23, 119-20  
Anatoli 206-7  
ancient sites 10-11  
    Agia Triada 161-2  
    Anemospilia 145  
    Aptera 11, 63  
    Argyroupoli 109  
    Diktynna 65  
    Eleutherna 107-8  
    Falasarna 87  
    Fourni 145  
    Gortyna 158-9  
    Itanos 194  
    Knossos 139-42  
    Late Minoan Cemetery 110  
    Lato 11, 186  
    Lissos 74, 75  
    Minoan peak sanctuary 145  
    Monastiraki 120  
    Necropolis of Orthi Petra 107

- Palace of Knossos 24, 127, 140-2, **140-1**  
Palace of Malia 169  
Phaestos 11, 24, 157-8  
Polyrrinia 89  
St Lucas Bastion 96  
Vathypetro 145  
Zakros Gorge 11  
Zakros Palace 198-9  
*andartes* 237  
animals, *see individual animals*  
Anogia 115, 249  
Anopoli 67  
antiquities 216  
Anydri 80-1  
Aptera 11  
aquariums  
    Cretaquarium 168  
Aradena 67  
Aradena Gorge 12  
archaeological sites,  
    *see also ancient sites,*  
    historical sites  
    Basilica of Aghia Sophia 111  
    Fourni 145  
    Lissos 75  
    Rethymno region 102  
    Vathypetro 145  
architecture 105  
area code 229  
Argyroupoli 13, 109  
Arhanes 143-5, **143**  
    beyond Arhanes 146-51  
art 181, 185-6, 243, *see also museums & galleries*  
arts 244-6  
ATMs 216  
Avdou 171  
Azogires 85

## B

- Bakaliko 144  
bakeries 104-5  
beaches 8-9, 221  
    accessible 227  
Agioi Apostoli 59  
Agios Ioannis Beach 71  
Agios Pavlos 9  
Almyros Beach 178  
Ammoudara 137  
Ammoudi Beach 122, 178

- Ammisios 137  
Balos 89  
Damnoni Beach 122  
Elafonisi 9, 22, 27, 84  
Falasarna 9, 87  
Gargodoros Beach 178  
Gialiskari Beach 81  
Halikia 80  
Hiona 195  
Hrysi Akti 59  
Kalamaki 59  
Karoumes 195, 199  
Karteros 137  
Kedrodasos 84  
Kitroplatia Beach 178  
Kolokytha Beach 183  
Kommos Beach 159  
Koukistres Beach 112  
Koum Kapi Beach 58  
Kouremenos 195  
Lavrakas Beach 71  
Likos Bay 69  
Lygaria 137  
Marathi Beach 64  
Matala 155  
Mononafitis 137  
Nea Hora Beach 58  
Orthi Ammos Beach 71  
Pahia Ammos 80  
Paralia Beach 112  
Plaka Beach 183  
Plakias Beach 122  
Potamos Beach 168  
Preveli Beach 9, 124-5  
Psili Ammos 194  
Red Beach 155  
Rethymno 103  
Sarakiniko 71  
Seitan Limania 64  
Sitia 190  
Skinias 195  
Skisma Beach 183  
Sougia 73  
Stavros Cove 64  
Sweetwater 69  
Tertsia 205  
Triopetra 125  
Vai Beach 9, 25, 194  
Voulisma 207  
birds 240  
birdwatching 39, 194  
boat tours  
    south coast 70

- books 33, 148, 220, 246  
*bougatsa* 135  
bungee-jumping 67  
bus travel 217  
business hours 229

## C

- camping 219  
canyoning 39  
car travel 217  
caves  
    Cave of Agia Fotini 170-1  
    Dikteon Cave 210-11  
    Ideon Cave 115  
    Kronos Cave 211  
    Matala 153-4  
    Melidoni Cave 115  
    Milatos Cave 185  
    Pelekita Cave 199  
    Polyphemos Cave 75  
    Skotino 170  
Chania, *see Hania*  
cheese 36  
children, travel with 60, 220  
Chrissi Island 208  
churches & cathedrals  
    Aefentis Christos Chapel 145  
    Agios Antonios 75  
    Agios Markos Basilica 135  
    Agios Spyridon Church 102  
    Agios Timios Stavros 211-12  
    Chapel of Agios Ioannis 150  
    Chapel of Agios Nikolaos 77  
    Church of Agia Sophia 100, 102  
    Church of Agios Georgios 81  
    Church of Agios Nikolaos 57  
    Church of Agios Titos 135, 236  
    Church of Panagia Kera 236  
    Church of Sotiros Christou 69  
    Church of St Paraskevi 109



Church of Virgin Mary 154  
 Greek Orthodox  
 Cathedral 57  
 Holy Church of Agios  
 Georgios Grotta 103  
 Panagia Kera 185-6, 236  
 Venetian church  
 (Arkadiou) 107  
 Venetian Church of San  
 Salvatore 57-8

climate 30-1  
 climate change 224  
 clothing 32  
 coffee 51, 77, 138  
   Rethymno 104  
 cooking courses 225  
 costs 217, 218, 219, 223  
 courses 225  
 crafts 224  
 credit cards 218  
 culture 244-6  
 cycling 16, 38

## D

Daedalus 243  
 dance 246  
 Dikteon Cave 12, 234  
 disabilities, travellers  
   with 227  
 diving 39, 41  
   Hania 56  
   Mirabello Bay 180  
   Oloos 184  
   Panormo 112  
 dolphins 240  
 donkeys 159, 224  
 Dramountanis, Giorgos 249  
 drinks 18-19, 222-3  
 driving 217  
 driving tours  
   Lasithi region 206-7, **207**  
 duty free 216, 218

## E

economy 237  
 El Greco 244-5  
 Elafonisi 9, 84  
 electricity 229  
 Elos 85  
 Elounda 183, 184, 185  
 Elytis, Odysseus 246  
 emergencies 229  
   language 230  
 environmental issues  
   224-5, 240  
 Episkopi 109  
 etiquette 32  
 Etz Hayyim 58  
 events, *see* festivals &  
   event

## F

Falasarna 27, 86-7, **86**  
   beyond Falasarna 88-9  
 Falasarna Beach 9  
 family travel 60, 220  
 ferry travel 70  
 festivals & events 31  
   Assumption of the  
   Virgin 131  
   Carnival 94  
   Cretan Street Food  
   Festival 177  
   Dafnes Wine Festival 130  
   International  
   Documentary Festival  
   177  
   Kyrvia Festival 177  
   Mt Psiloritis Race 95  
   Street Art Festival 155  
   Thrapsano Pottery  
   Festival 130  
   Tzermiadi Potato  
   Festival 212  
 films 33  
 flora 240  
 food 18-19, 34-7, 222-3  
 football 59  
 fortresses  
   Castel Milopotamo 111  
   Fortezza (Rethymno)  
   96-7, 100  
   Frangokastello 71  
   Imeri Gramvousa 89  
   Kazarma Fortress 188  
   Koules Fortress 135, 236  
   Venetian Fort (Paleohora)  
   82  
 fountains  
   Morosini Fountain 134  
   Rimondi Fountain 100, 104  
 Frangokastello 236  
 freshwater trout 149

## G

Gaidouronisi 208  
 Galanaki, Rhea 246  
 Gavalohori 63  
 Gavdos Island 29, 71  
 gay travellers 226  
 geology 238  
 Gerakari 120  
 gorges 12, 41  
   Agia Irini Gorge 73, 75  
   Agiofarango Gorge 160-1  
   Anydri Gorge 81  
   Aradena Gorge 12, 67  
   Figou Gorge 57  
   Ha Gorge 205, 208  
   Imbros Gorge 70-1  
   Kourtaliotiko Gorge 117  
   Kritsa Gorge 186

Mili Gorge 107  
 Richtis Gorge 192-3  
 Rouvas Gorge 150  
 Samaria Gorge 12, 77-8  
 Sarakinas Gorge 206  
 Zakros Gorge 197-8  
 Gortyna 158-9, 236  
 Gramvousa Peninsula 89  
 Greek language 230-1  
 Greek mythology,  
   *see* mythology, Greek  
 greenhouses 208  
 gyros 136

## H

Hainides 249  
 Hania 22, 27, 50-61, 236,  
   **52-3**  
   accommodation 58-9  
   activities 56, 57  
   beaches 58-9  
   beyond Hania 62-5  
   drinking 60  
   food 56-7, 58, 61  
   history 54  
   itineraries 51  
   shopping 61  
   tours 56  
   travel within 61  
   walking tours 55, **55**  
 Hania region 44-89  
   accommodation 63  
   festivals & events 48-9  
   food 63  
   itineraries 48-9  
   navigation 46-7  
   shopping 64  
   travel seasons 48-9  
   travel within 46-7, 65, 67,  
   71, 79, 82  
 Havgas Canyon 212  
 health 221  
 Heraklion, *see* Iraklio  
 Hersonisos 164-6, 237, **165**  
   beyond Hersonisos 167-71  
 highlights 8-19  
 hiking 12, 16, 38-9, 41  
   Agia Irini Gorge 73, 75  
   Aradena Gorge 67  
   Hania 57  
   Havgas Canyon 212  
   Imbros Gorge 70-1  
   Kourtaliotiko Gorge 117  
   Mili Gorge 107  
   Mt Karfi 211  
   Myrthios 122  
   Paleohora 80-2  
   Rouvas Gorge 150  
   Samaria Gorge 77-8  
   Sfakia 69  
   Sitia Geopark 198  
   south coast 69  
   Zakros Gorge 197-8

historical sites 14-15,  
   *see also* ancient sites,  
   archaeological sites  
 Agios Markos Basilica 135  
 Cave of Agia Fotini 170-1  
 Falasarna 87  
 Hania harbour 15  
 Imeri Gramvousa 89  
 Kazarma Fortress 188  
 Loggia 100, 103-4, 135  
 Milatos Cave 185  
 Moni Arkadiou 15, 107  
 Moni Toplou 15  
 Rethymno's old quarter  
   15, 100  
 Spinalonga 15, 184-5  
 Theriso 79  
 Venetian Fort (Paleohora)  
   82  
 Venetian harbour  
   (Rethymno) 97, 100  
 history 234-7  
   Cretan revolution 161  
   Falasarna 87  
   Gortyna 158  
   Hania 54  
   Hora Sfakion 67  
   Ottoman occupation 185  
   Rethymno 101  
   Souda Bay 64  
   Theriso 79  
   World War II 110  
 Hora Sfakion 66-7, 237, **66**  
   beyond Hora Sfakion  
   68-71  
 horse-riding 39, 170  
 Hrysi Island 208

## I

Icarus 243  
 Ierapetra 201-3, 206, **202**  
   beyond Ierapetra 204-8  
 Imbros 70  
 Imeri Gramvousa 89  
 Innahorion villages 85  
 insurance 221  
 Iraklio 24, 26, 132-8, **133**  
   accommodation 134  
   beaches 137  
   beyond Iraklio 139-42  
   drinking 137  
   food 134, 135, 136  
   travel within 138  
 Iraklio region 126-71, **128-9**  
   festivals & events 130-1  
   itineraries 130-1  
   navigation 128-9  
   travel seasons 130-1  
   travel within 129  
 Iraklio wine country 144,  
   146-8, 150  
 itineraries 22-9, *see*  
   *also* individual locations

## J

Jewish heritage 58

## K

Kalamafka 207  
Kalamaki 157, 159, 162  
Kambos 85  
Kamihis farm 149  
Kamilari 158, 160, 163  
Kapetaniana 162  
Kastri 71  
Katharo Plateau 186-7  
Katsivelos 107  
Kavousi 193  
kayaking 38  
    south coast 70  
Kazantzakis, Nikos 148,  
    149, 246  
Kefali 85  
Kerá 171  
kitesurfing 39  
Knossos II, 139-42, **140-1**  
Kooba Tercu 249  
Kornaros, Vitsentzos 190  
Koules 236  
Krasí 171  
kri-kri 78, 107, 240  
Kritsa 13, 25, 185, 186

## L

Lake Kournas 65  
Lake Votomos 150  
Lakki 79  
Lakkos 138  
lammergeier 240  
language 33, 230-1  
Lasithi 172-213, **174-5**  
    driving tours 206-7, **207**  
    festivals & events 176-7  
    itineraries 176-7  
    navigation 174-5  
    travel seasons 176-7  
    travel within 175  
Lasithi Plateau 12, 209-13,  
    **209**  
Lato II, 186  
laws 221  
Lefkogia 122  
lesbian travellers 226  
LGBTIQ+ travellers 226

Map Pages **000**

lighthouses  
    Hania 60  
Limanakia 166  
Lissos 74, 75  
literature 246, *see also*  
    books  
loggerhead sea turtles 159  
Loudovikos ton Anogion  
    249  
Loutro 69  
lyra 247

## M

Malia 169-70  
*mantinadha* 247  
maps 59  
Margarites 108-9  
marijuana 221  
markets 35  
    Agios Nikolaos 181  
    Iraklio Market 137  
    Saturday Market (Hania)  
        61  
Maroulas 109  
Matala 26, 29, 152-5, **152**  
    beyond Matala 156-63  
Mavrikiano 184  
measures 229  
*meltemi* 31, 221  
Meronas 120  
Mesa Mylos 199  
Meskla 79  
Miller, Henry 237  
Minoan palaces,  
    *see* ancient sites  
Minoan people 241-3  
Minos, King 243  
Mirabello Bay 180  
Mires 160  
Mohlos 13, 193  
monasteries & convents  
    Moni Agias Triadas 65  
    Moni Agios Nikolaos 150  
    Moni Arkadiou 23, 107, 237  
    Moni Gouvernetou 65  
    Moni Hrysokalitissas  
        Monastery 85  
    Moni Odigitrias 161  
    Moni Preveli 125  
    Moni Toplou 193-4  
    Moni Vidiani 211  
Panagia Gouverniotissa  
    168-9  
    Panagia Kardiotissa 171  
Monastiraki 120  
money 216, 218  
Moni Arkadiou 15, 23  
Moni Toplou 15  
mosques  
    Kara Musa Pasha Mosque  
        103  
    Mosque of Kioutosouk  
        Hasan 50, 57

Neratzes Mosque 100,  
    103  
Sultan Bin Ibrahim  
    Mosque 96  
mountaineering 115  
mountains 12  
    Mt Gigilos 57  
    Mt Psiloritis 115  
    Mt Yiouhtas 145  
Mt Psiloritis 12  
museums & galleries  
    Archaeological  
        Collection of Ierapetra  
        201  
    Archaeological Museum  
        (Arhanes) 144, 236  
    Archaeological Museum  
        (Sitia) 188  
    Archaeological Museum  
        of Chania 17, 51, 54  
    Archaeological Museum  
        of Rethymno 100, 101  
Byzantine &  
    Post-Byzantine  
        Collection 57-8  
Centre of Mediterranean  
    Architecture 50  
Cretan Folk Museum 211  
Greek National Football  
    Museum 59  
Heraklion Archaeological  
    Museum 17, 132, 134  
Historical & Folk Art  
    Museum 104  
Historical Museum of  
    Crete 136-7  
Kotsanas Museum 136  
Lychnostatis Open Air  
    Museum 164, 225  
Maritime Museum of  
    Crete 17, 54, 56  
Menelaos Parlamos  
    Museum of Rural  
    Life 166  
Military Museum of  
    Chromonastiri 110  
Museum of Ancient  
    Eleutherna 108  
Museum of  
    Contemporary Art 104  
Museum of Cretan  
    Ethnology 17, 160  
Museum of National  
    Resistance 79  
Museum of the Acritans  
    of Europe 82  
Nikos Kazantzakis  
    Museum 17, 149  
Paleontological Museum  
    104  
music 33, 247-9  
    Yakynthia Festival 95  
Myrthios 13  
Myrtos 206

mythology 125, 178, 180,  
    210, 220, 234, 243  
Agia Galini 125  
Ideon 115

## N

national parks 40  
Nida Plateau 115

## O

olive oil 18, 36-7  
Olous 184  
Omalos 79  
opening hours 229  
ouzo 223

## P

Palace of Knossos 24, 127,  
    140-2, **140-1**  
palaces, Minoan,  
    *see* ancient sites  
Paleohora 22, 27, 28, 75,  
    80-2, **81**  
    beyond Paleohora 83-5  
Panormo III-13, **111**  
    beyond Panormo 114-15  
Pappadina 85  
parks & gardens  
    Botanical Park & Gardens  
        of Crete 79  
    Maravel Garden 118  
passports 216  
Petrakis, Stelios 249  
petrol 217  
Phaestos II, 24, 157-8  
Pitsidia 159, 161, 163  
Plakias 29, 121-2, 234, **121**  
    beyond Plakias 123-5  
planning 30-3  
plants 240  
police 221  
Polyrrinia 89  
population 229  
Porta Guora 100, 104  
pottery 108-9, 150-1, 225  
Preveli Beach 9  
public holidays 229

## R

raki 18, 37, 223  
*rebetiko* 138  
responsible travel 224  
Rethymno 23, 26, 96-105,  
    **98-9**  
    accommodation 101  
    activities 103  
    beyond Rethymno 106-10  
    drinking 104

food 97  
 history 101  
 shopping 102-3  
 tours 103  
 travel within 105  
 walking tours 100, **100**  
 Rethymno region 90-125,  
**92-3**  
 festivals & events 94-5  
 food 109  
 itineraries 94-5  
 navigation 92-3  
 travel seasons 94-5  
 travel within 93  
 weather 94-5  
*rizitika* 247  
 rock-climbing 16, 38  
 Rodopou Peninsula 65

## S

safe travel 221  
 sales tax 218  
 Samaria Gorge 12  
 Sarakinas Gorge 206  
 sea turtles 159  
 seafood 135  
 seasons 30-1, 36  
 Selekano Forest 206, 224  
 Seli Ambelou 211  
 Sfakia 68-71  
 Sfinari 85

shopping  
 markets 35  
 Sitia 188-90, **189**  
 beyond Sitia 191-5  
 Sitia Geopark 198  
 Sivas 159, 163  
 snorkelling 39  
 solo travellers 221  
 Souda Bay 64  
 Sougia 28, 72-5, **72**  
 beyond Sougia 76-9  
 Spili 116-18, **116**  
 beyond Spili 119-20  
 Spinalonga Island 15, 25,  
 184-5  
 stand-up paddleboarding  
 39, 41, 122  
 Stavrakakis, Mitsos 249  
 sustainable travel 224  
 swimming 221

## T

tavernas 205  
 taxis 217  
 Tertsa 205  
 Theodorakis, Michail  
 'Mikis' 249  
 Theriso 79, 237  
 Thrapsano 150-1  
 Thronos 120  
 time 229

tipping 218  
 travel seasons 30-1  
 travel to/from Crete 216  
 travel within Crete 217  
 Turkish wooden balconies  
 105  
 turtles 224, 238

## V

Vai Beach 9, 25, 194  
 Vamos 63  
 VAT 218  
 Venetian fortifications  
 (Hania) 50-1  
 Venetian harbour (Hania)  
 50  
 Venetian harbour  
 (Rethymno) 97  
 villages 13, 237  
 visas 216  
 Voulismeni Lake 178  
 Vryses 63-4

## W

walking tours  
 Hania 55, **55**  
 Ierapetra 203, **203**  
 Iraklio 134-5, 136  
 Lissos 74, **74**  
 Rethymno 100, **100**

water 229  
 waterfalls 117, 192-3  
 waterparks 164  
 weather 30-1  
 weights 229  
 whales 240  
 wi-fi 216  
 wildlife-watching 238  
 Samaria Gorge 77  
 windmills 211  
 windsurfing 16, 39, 41,  
 122, 195  
 wine 37, 223  
 Dafnes Wine Festival 130  
 wineries  
 Iraklio wine country 24,  
 144, 146-8, 150  
 Rethymno region 113

## X

Xerokambos 199-200  
 Xylouris family 249  
 Xylouris, Nikos 249

## Z

Zakros 196-200, **196**  
 Zakros Gorge 11, 197-8  
 Zakros Palace 198-9  
 Zaros 150









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