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CRETE

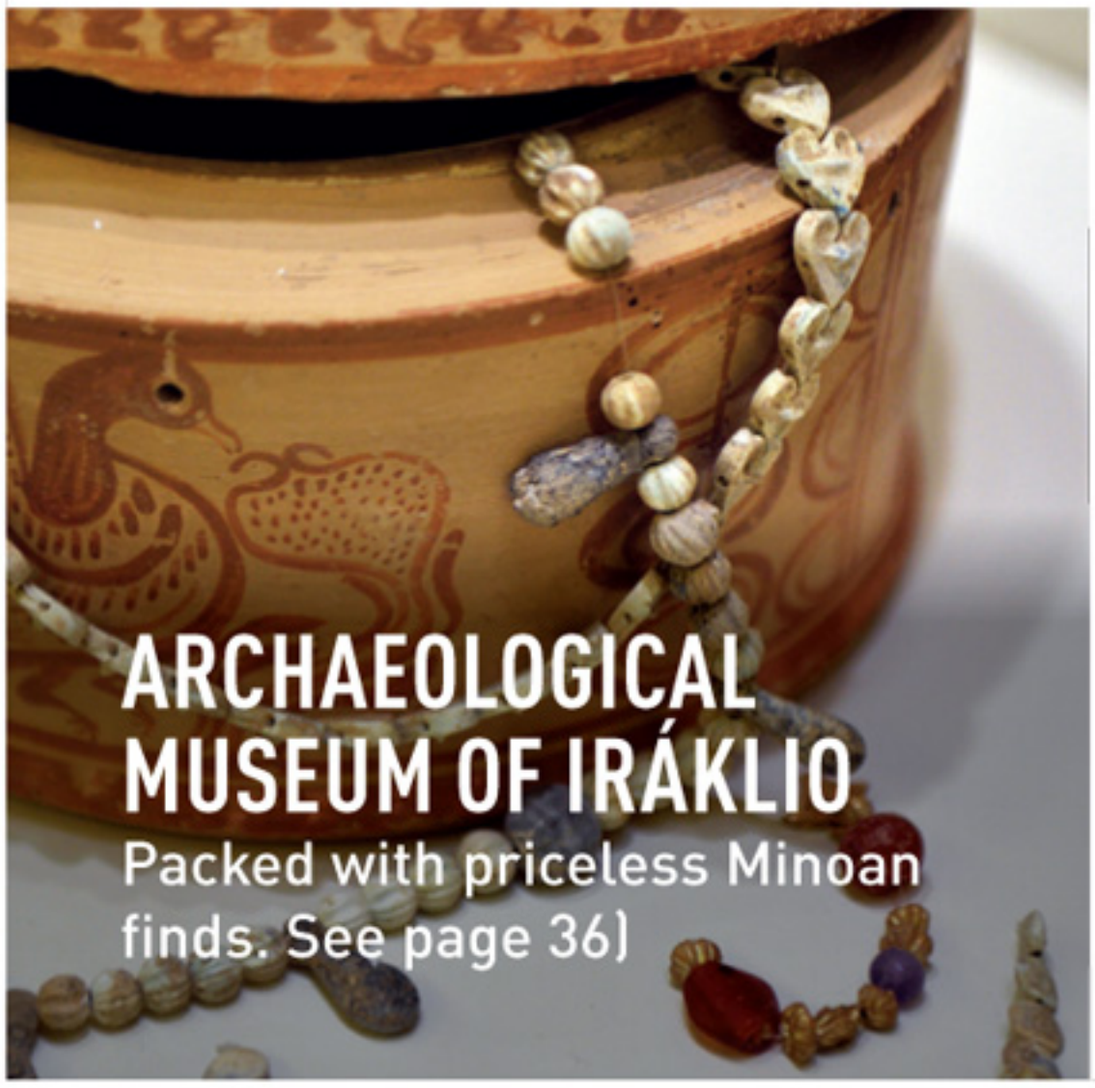
POCKET GUIDE

TOP 10 ATTRACTIONS



ÁGIOS NIKÓLAOS

The prettiest town in the east of the island is a popular resort that preserves its Cretan charm. See page 56.



ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF IRÁKLIO

Packed with priceless Minoan finds. See page 36)



MONÍ ARKADÍOU

A shrine to the Cretan struggle for independence. See page 73.



SAMARIÁ GORGE

The longest gorge in Europe is a strenuous but exhilarating trek. See page 85.



HANIÁ

The minaret-style lighthouse and scenic harbour are amongst many of Haniá's highlights. See page 79.



MONÍ TOPLOÚ

A peaceful place with a bloody history. See page 64.



GORTYS

The capital of Crete in Roman and Byzantine times. See page 46.



KNOSSOS

Its Minoan palace, with superb frescoes, is Crete's most visited attraction. See page 41.



LASÍTHI PLATEAU

Home to rural life and ancient windmills. See page 60.



RÉTHYMNO

Réthymno's attractive Venetian harbour is lined with dozens of fish restaurants. See page 70.

A PERFECT TOUR





Days 1–2

Iráklio

Pick up your hire car at Iráklio airport, check into a city hotel and look round the Archaeological Museum. Stroll through the old quarter, taking in the Historical and Religious Art museums in particular. Devote the following morning to Knossos Palace.

Days 2–3

Ágios Nikólaos and Spinalónga Island

After lunch in Iráklio, drive east to Ágios Nikólaos, choosing accommodation nearby. Take in 'Ag Nik's' lakeside nightlife, then next morning embark at Pláka for Spinalónga Island to visit its abandoned leper colony.

Days 3–4

Head east

Lunch in Ágios Nikólaos, then head east via Sitía to Moní Toploú and Vaï beach. Stay over near Koureménos beach for two nights. On day 4, hike the Hohlahiés gorge, and sample windsurfing at Koureménos.

Day 5

Swim and overnight in Mýrtos

Proceed via Zíros and Makrý Gialós, stopping to swim at a tempting beach, before a lunch (and museum) stop in Ierápetra. Continue west to overnight at peaceful Mýrtos.

Days 6–7

Rouvás Gorge

Drive inland from Mýrtos towards the Mesará valley, pausing at Áno Viánnos for its brilliantly frescoed church, before proceeding to Zarós for two overnights. On day 7, walk the Rouvás Gorge or visit the monastic churches of Vrondísi and Ágios Fanoúrios. With any time remaining, make the short detour to ancient Gortys.

OF CRETE





Days 10–11

Sightseeing in Réthymno

Drive to Réthymno, stopping at Arkádi monastery en route, and arrange lodging in the atmospheric old town for two nights. Spend the entire next day taking in the old quarter, especially the massive Fortezza and the Historical and Folklore Museum.

Day 8–9

Church visit

Continue west, via the Minoan highlights of Phaistos and Agía Triáda, pausing for lunch at either Vóri or Mátala (swim at the latter). End the day at Plakiás or Spíli, checking in for two nights. The next day involves an early start to tour the Amári Valley to visit its churches, with possibly time late in the afternoon for a swim at Ágios Pávlos beach.

Days 12–13

West towards Haniá

Proceed west towards Haniá, stopping for a swim and lunch at idyllic Lake Kourná. Arrive in Haniá for a two-night stay at a boutique hotel in the old quarter. The afternoon and the whole of day 13 are spent savouring the old town's museums, shops and plentiful restaurants.

Days 14–15

Hike

Park your hire car safely before taking a dawn bus up to Xylóskala for the unmissable descent of the Samariá Gorge. At the bottom, overnight at Agía Rouméli; next day, take a boat west to Soúgia or Paleóhora where you will have an opportunity for another well-deserved swim. Finally, take a bus back to Haniá, retrieve your car, and drive to your departure airport.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 10

A BRIEF HISTORY 16

WHERE TO GO 31

Iráklio 31
The city centre 33, The harbour area 34, South of the city centre 35, The Archaeological Museum 36,

Central Crete 41
Knossos 41, Towards Gortys (Górtyna) 45, Phaistos 47, Agía Triáda and Vóri 49, Mátala to Agía Galíni 50, The central mountains 51

Eastern Crete 53
Rowdy resorts 53, Mália to Neápoli 54, Ágios Nikólaos 56, Eloúnda to Spinalónga island 57, Inland to Kritsá 59, The Lasíthi Plateau 60, East to Sitía 62, Toploú to Zákros 64, The southeastern coast 67

Western Crete 69
South of Réthymno 73, The south coast 76, Réthymno to Haniá 78, Haniá 79, West of Haniá 83, The White Mountains and the Samariá Gorge 84

Excursion to Santoríni 86
Firá 87, Ía 88, Pýrgos, Profítis Ilías and Akrotíri 88

WHAT TO DO 91

Sport 91
Entertainment 93
Shopping 96
Children's Crete 102

EATING OUT 104

A–Z TRAVEL TIPS 118

RECOMMENDED HOTELS 137

DICTIONARY 143

INDEX 175

FEATURES

Conflict of interests 15
The Cretan Renaissance 23
Historical Landmarks 29
Minoan Building Methods 42
Rites and sacrifices 44
Kamáres pottery 46
Overnight sensation 59
Mists or mysteries? 77
Zorba's Dance 94
Calendar of festivals 103
Snail delicacies 107

INTRODUCTION

Crete: the name invokes a range of different images. Ancient sites to explore; commercial towns bustling with noise and traffic; millions of olive trees blanketing the countryside; raucous resorts with neon-lit bars and loud music; a romantic meal for two overlooking a small fishing port; mountains and gorges to trek through; a sun-bed on a beach among hundreds of others similarly soaking up the rays; 15 hours of sunshine a day in summer; three feet of snow in the mountains in winter. This island has something for everyone, and its sheer variety satisfies even the most jaded and cynical traveller.

THE 'GREAT ISLAND'

Its strategic position at the crossroads of trade north from Egypt, west from Rome and east from the Middle East, made it valuable territory from the earliest days of trade and power politics.With an area of 8,300 sq km (3,200 sq miles), Crete is sometimes called Megalónissos, or 'Great Island'. Visually it is stunning, with three dramatic mountain ranges over 2,000m (6,500ft) high that seem to anchor the island in the Mediterranean. Water has cut vertiginous gorges through the mountains and opened huge cave systems. These caves were places of great religious significance to the ancient Cretans; in some cases they were

Crete's provinces

Crete is divided into four administrative districts (*periféries* in Greek), mostly named after their governing cities: Iráklio, the most populous, with the island's capital; Haniá; Lasíthi (based in Ágios Nikólaos); and Réthymno.


Natural landscape

thought to be the birthplaces of Greek gods. Over the centuries these caverns provided protection for pirates, vagabonds and freedom fighters. The mountains were never fully conquered, even during World War II. Today, their peaks are the domain of numerous birds of prey, including eagles, hawks and vultures.

Fertile plateaus and lowlands have been settled and farmed since Neolithic times; abundant fresh spring water from the surrounding peaks helped ensure a rich harvest. Around the coastline – especially in the north – long sandy stretches have attracted visitors since the 1960s advent of package tours, but variety exists here too, with several different coastal environments – rocky coves, rugged headlands and marshy wetlands.

THE FRUITFUL YEAR

Despite its southerly latitude, seasons remain distinct on Crete. Springtime sees the hills awash with flowers and wheat

crops ripening in the warming sun, goat kids are born and the flocks make the most of fresh pastures. As summer starts, the cereals are harvested and the land takes on an ochre hue. Birdsong gives way to the sound of cicada, and the smell of honeysuckle rises in the evening air. Midsummer sees Cretans seeking shade to escape the heat, while visitors head out in droves to work on their tans. The clanging of livestock bells can be heard across the countryside as flocks desperately search for sustenance in the parched hills.

Autumn brings a cooling of the temperature yet a warming of the landscape, as colours mellow in the lower arc of the late season sun. Stucco on buildings takes on a rosy hue, the grapes swell to tempting perfection, and citrus fruit begin their transition from green to orange. Soon, winter brings a blanket of snow to the mountains; ordinarily dry ravines and pastures swell with rain run off and wood smoke fills the air.



The inviting waters of the Gulf of Mirabéllo

CRADLE OF EUROPE

The footsteps of history can be seen on every dusty path and urban street. Crete was the cradle of European civilisation, and the Minoans – a people believed to be mythological until evidence of their existence was confirmed early in the 20th century – travelled far and wide across the eastern Mediterranean for trade.

A prodigious collection of artefacts now displayed in museums across the island shows them to be the first indigenous European culture, whose lives were graced by art, sports and the pursuit of pleasure. The Minoan civilisation suffered a sudden and terminal collapse around 1450BC for reasons that have not been fully established.

A devastating natural disaster was initially thought to be the cause, but archaeological theories now consider either invasion by a warring people or internal revolt to be the most likely scenarios. Whatever the case, the catastrophe heralded the start of thousands of years of invasion and subjection for the Cretans. Mycenaeans, Dorians, Athenians, Macedonians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Venetians and Ottomans all came to take control. Evidence of their presence abounds in the commanding fortresses, protective harbours, fine mansions, narrow winding alleys, elegant minarets and ornate fountains of the towns. In 1913 Crete finally achieved a long awaited *énosis* (union) with Orthodox Christian Greece.

FREEDOM OR DEATH

Cretans did not take kindly to their native land being usurped and, particularly in the years of Turkish rule, they gained a reputation as formidable and tenacious fighters who would strike with speed and then retreat to mountain strongholds to outwit their enemies.

They reverted back to the same lifestyle during World War II when Crete was captured by German forces, mounting a successful guerrilla resistance and living up to the old rallying cry – 'freedom or death'.

Invaders would occupy the cities but they could never manage to tame the people of the countryside. For centuries, unbowed Cretans lived simple lives in harmony with the land, tending their flocks, growing fruit and vegetables, and harvesting the sea.