

Lasithi Λασιθί



Crete's easternmost prefecture may receive far fewer visitors than the rest of the island, but the exclusive resorts around Elounda and Agios Nikolaos are the stronghold of Crete's high-end tourism. Elounda has become synonymous with luxury hotels – among them one of the world's top resorts – while the capital, Agios Nikolaos, is the region's contribution to the party scene.

The rest of the prefecture, however, is largely refreshingly undeveloped compared with the rest of Crete, mostly due to the isolated locations, winding access roads and lack of international charter flights.

At the far eastern end of the north coast is the pleasant town of Sitia, the centre of the region's olive oil industry. The famous palm-lined beach of Vai is in the far east, near one of the island's historic monasteries.

The fertile region of the Lasithi Plateau provides excellent cycling opportunities through quiet rural villages to the Dikteon Cave, where legend has it that Zeus was born and hidden from his murderous father. The hinterland has many traditional villages, and lonely plateaus and mountain ranges to explore.

The southern coast extends from the seaside village of Myrtois in the west to the commercial centre of Ierapetra, and beyond to the rugged coast and largely untouched beaches of Xerokambos.

In the far east, Zakros combines some of the best experiences of Crete – a walk through a beautiful gorge to the evocative ruins of a Minoan Palace, just 200m from an underpopulated beach with a few good tavernas.

Lasithi has its share of sleepy fishing villages, such as Mohlos in the north and Plaka to the east, and Spinalonga Island continues to intrigue visitors.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Cycling around the **Lasithi Plateau** (p191)
- Wandering among the fascinating ruins on **Spinalonga Island** (p190)
- Exploring the Minoan palace near the beach at **Kato Zakros** (p199)
- Relaxing on **Vai** (p197), Crete's only palm-lined beach
- Visiting the **Moni Toplou** (monastery) (p196)



NORTH COAST

AGIOS NIKOLAOS ΑΓΙΟΣ ΝΙΚΟΛΑΟΣ

pop 11,286

Lasithi's capital, Agios Nikolaos (*ah-yee-os nih-ko-laos*) may lack the historic character of Crete's other major towns but its natural advantage is a striking position on a hill overlooking Mirabello Bay, with a small picturesque lake connected to the sea and a pleasant harbour.

In the early 1960s the former fishing village became a chic hideaway for the jet set and the likes of Jules Dassin and Walt Disney, but by the end of the decade package tourists were arriving in force and it became an overdeveloped tourist town.

After a slump in recent years, 'Agios' appears to have bounced back and found a different rhythm. It's become a town for locals as much as tourists. It still draws people from the resorts that stretch all the way to Elounda, especially at night, when the cafés and restaurants around the lake and port light up and the ambience turns more vibrant and cosmopolitan. While it's not the party town it once was, it has a lively night-life. Agios Nikolaos remains the epicentre of Crete's luxury resort industry, but also attracts a mixed and relatively subdued older crowd and families.

While there is superficially little to attract the independent traveller, there is reasonable accommodation, prices are not too horrendous and there are enough activities to cater for all tastes.

It was the first town in Crete to install free wi-fi in the harbour area and the centre of town.

History

Agios Nikolaos emerged as a port for the city-state of Lato (p187) in the early Hellenic years, when it was known as Lato-by-Kamara. The harbour assumed importance in the Greco-Roman period after the Romans put an end to the piracy that had plagued the northern coast.

The town continued to flourish in the early Christian years and, in the 8th or 9th century, the small Byzantine Church of Agio Nikolaos was built.

When the Venetians bought Crete in the 13th century, the Castel Mirabello was built on a hill overlooking the sea and a settlement arose below. The castle was damaged in the earthquake of 1303 and was burned by pirates in 1537, before being rebuilt according to plans by the military architect Sammicheli. When the Venetians were forced to abandon the castle to the Turks in 1645 they blew it up, leaving it in ruins. There's no trace of the Venetian occupation now except the name they gave to the surrounding gulf – Mirabello ('beautiful view').

The town was resettled in the mid-19th century by fleeing rebels from Sfakia and was later named capital of the Lasithi region.

Orientation

The **bus station** (☎ 28410 22234) has been rather inconveniently relocated to the northwestern side of town, about 800m from central Plateia Venizelou. The de-facto town centre is around Voulismeni Lake. Most banks, travel agencies and shops are on Koundourou and parallel pedestrian street 28 Oktovriou. The main roads have a one-way traffic system, so if you are driving follow the signs to the port area or one of the car parks near the harbour.

Information

Anna Karteri Bookshop (☎ 28410 22272; Koundourou 5) Well stocked with maps, guide books and literature in English and other languages.

General Hospital (☎ 28410 66000; Knossou 3) On the west side of town.

Municipal Tourist Office (☎ 28410 22357; www.agiosnikolaos.gr; ☎ 8am-9.30pm Apr-Nov) Right by the bridge; has helpful information and maps, changes money and assists with accommodation.

National Bank of Greece (Nikolaou Plastira) Has a 24-hour exchange machine.

Peripou Café (☎ 28410 24876; 28 Oktovriou 13; per hr €4; ☎ 9am-2am) Has computers and wi-fi.

PK's Internet (☎ 28410 28004; Akti Koundourou 1; per hr €2; ☎ 9am-2am) Has a full printing, burning, Skype (phone calls via internet) and video-cams set-up.

Post Office (☎ 28410 22062; 28 Oktovriou 9; ☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri)

Tourist Police (☎ 28410 91408; Erythrou Stavrou 47; ☎ 7.30am-2.30pm Mon-Fri)

Sights

It is worth the hike up to the **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 28410 24943; Paleologou Konstantinou 74; admission €4; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun; 🕒), which has