



Crete Κρήτη

Crete is in many respects the culmination of the Greek experience. Its hospitable, spirited people maintain a proud sense of separateness, evident in everything from their haunting, violin-driven traditional music to their hearty, homegrown food and drink.

Everything about Crete is larger than life. Millions upon millions of olive trees produce some of the finest olive oil in Greece – and arguably, in the world – while the island is the mythical birthplace of Zeus himself, and site of the legendary Minoan civilisation; the much-visited Palace of Knossos is its most striking reminder. And, with their pretty pastel houses set on narrow stone lanes, the ancient Venetian ports of Hania and Rethymno are among Greece's most evocative towns. All in all, Crete bursts with the relics of millennia of culture, stretching from the prehistoric through Minoan, Byzantine, Venetian and Ottoman eras. Most visitors hang around the north-coast resorts, so it's easy to escape the crowds by heading for the south coast's numerous deserted beaches and inland rugged terrain trodden only by goats. Spectacular mountain ranges are dotted with thousands of caves and sliced by dramatic gorges that spill into the sea.

The northern coast features Crete's urban areas, and most of its package-tour resorts. Head south for off-the-beaten-track outdoors activities and pristine, peaceful beaches. The rugged interior, intermittently made up of mountains, agricultural plains and plateaus, hosts some of Crete's most authentic and down-to-earth villages, where you'll get a warm welcome from black-clad elders; such humble places often have the best (and cheapest) locally produced olive oil, honey, *raki* (Cretan firewater) and other superlative Cretan products.

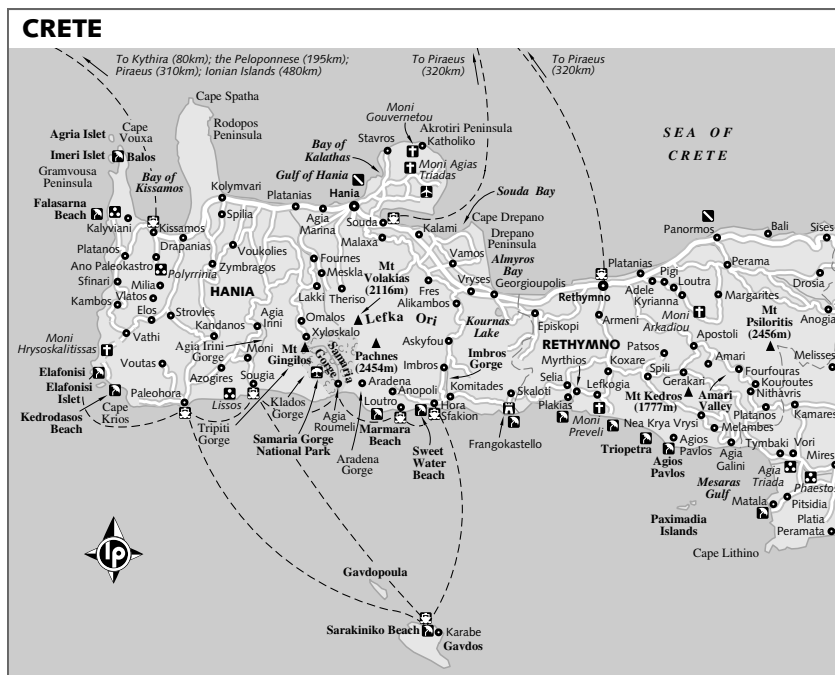
HIGHLIGHTS

- **Time Out** Wandering the beautiful back lanes of Hania's Venetian Old Town (p483)
- **Minoan Magnificence** Visiting the grand, reconstructed Minoan palace at Knossos (p469)
- **Sylvan Idylls** Experiencing the haunted woodlands waterfalls and hermits' caves of offbeat Azogires village (p498)
- **Soldiering On** Taking the six-hour hike through Europe's longest gorge, Samaria (p491)
- **Back in Time** Exploring the ruined Venetian fortress of Spinalonga (p506), occupying its own islet in Crete's northeast
- **Beach Bliss** Swimming under a full moon at the south coast's remote Agios Pavlos and Triopetra beaches (p481)
- **Livin' Large** Kicking back amid the olive groves, beaches and big winds of lively Plakias (p479)



■ POPULATION: 540,045

■ AREA: 8335 SQ KM



History

Although it's been inhabited since Neolithic times (7000–3000 BC), Crete is most famous for its advanced Minoan civilisation. Traces of this still enigmatic society were only uncovered in the early 20th century, when British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans discovered and then restored the palace at Knossos. Since no one knew what to call this lost race, Sir Arthur made an adjective of the mythical King Minos, the legendary former ruler of Knossos – and so emerged the name 'Minoans'.

Their actual name notwithstanding, we do know that the Minoans migrated to Crete in the 3rd millennium BC. These mysterious people were expert in metallurgy, making unprecedented artistic, engineering and cultural achievements during the Protopalatial period (3400–2100 BC); their most famous palaces (at Knossos, Phaestos, Malia and Zakros) were built then. Artistically, the frescoes discovered at Knossos have a naturalism lacking in contemporary Cycladic figurines, ancient Egyptian artwork and later Archaic sculpture. The Minoans also began producing their exquisite Kamarea pottery and silverware, and

became a maritime power, trading with Egypt and Asia Minor.

Around 1700 BC, however, an earthquake destroyed the great palace complexes. Undeterred, the Minoans built bigger and better ones over the ruins, while settling more widely across Crete. Around 1450 BC, when the Minoan civilisation was in the ascendant, the palaces were mysteriously destroyed again, probably by a giant tsunami triggered by the massive volcanic eruption on Santorini (Thira). Knossos, the only palace saved, was finally burned down around 1400 BC.

Archaeological evidence shows that the Minoans lingered on for a few centuries in small, isolated settlements before disappearing as mysteriously as they had come. They were followed by the Mycenaeans, and the Dorians (around 1100 BC). By the 5th century BC, at the acme of classical Greek civilisation, Crete was divided into city-states. However, the island did not benefit particularly from the cultural glories of mainland Greece, and was bypassed by Persian invaders and the Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great.