

Destination Crete

Crete is a vast and fascinating island whose diversity and stature are unrivalled by any other Greek isle. The birthplace of Zeus evokes a wealth of myths, legends and history. Its sun-blessed and dramatic landscape is dominated by soaring mountains and stunning beaches. Its proud and hospitable people uphold their unique culture and traditions and, despite the onslaught of mass tourism, rural life remains a dynamic and enduring part of the island's soul.

Crete's rich mosaic presents visitors with an abundance of choices and experiences. The island's rugged interior is sliced by dramatic gorges and interspersed with fertile plains and hillsides blanketed in olive groves, vineyards, wildflowers and aromatic herbs. In the west thousands of people trek through the Samaria Gorge, reputedly Europe's longest, while the far east has Europe's only palm-tree-lined forest beach.

Crete's natural beauty is equalled only by the richness of a history that spans millennia. The palace of Knossos is the most famous vestige of the glorious Minoan civilisation that once ruled the Aegean, and Minoan palaces and treasures can be found across the island. At the crossroads of three continents, Crete has been coveted and occupied by consecutive invaders. A profusion of evocative ruins reveals its turbulent past, from Roman settlements, Venetian fortresses, Ottoman mosques and Byzantine monasteries, while history comes alive in the charming old towns of Hania and Rethymno.

Crete has the dubious honour of hosting nearly a quarter of Greece's tourists but it's big enough for independent travellers to venture off and find their own style of travel, from world-class luxury resorts and spas and historic boutique hotels to restored stone cottages in mountain villages. Free spirits and naturists gravitate to the remote southern beaches and island of Gavdos; intrepid hikers explore the final leg of the E4 European walking trail; cyclists whizz around the Lasithi Plateau; while nature-lovers arrive en masse in spring to walk among the stunning wildflowers. Crete's terrain provides an exciting challenge for climbing, canyoning and all manner of extreme sports.

This is an ideal road-trip destination, with picturesque (and often harrowing) drives through the spectacular mountains leading to remote beaches, traditional mountain villages and isolated agricultural settlements.

While the renowned Cretan hospitality has been somewhat lost in the tourist-ridden resort towns, you can still find glimpses of the old Crete if you head off the beaten track. The 4WDs might outnumber the mules, but you'll inevitably stop to let a flock of goats cross the road and occasionally come across men in traditional dress at the village *kafeneio* (coffee house).

Cretans fiercely protect their culture and maintain a profound attachment to the traditions, music and dances that have forged their identity. Crete's distinctive cuisine and its abundance of fresh produce provide the elements for a developing gourmet trail.

A lively destination year-round, Greece's largest and wealthiest island may feel more like a small country, with its sprawling cosmopolitan capital, big cities and towns filled with sophisticated cafés, bars, restaurants, universities and commercial activity. Above all, Crete maintains its distinctive island identity and enduring allure.

FAST FACTS:

Population 601,131

Area: 8336 sq km

GDP: €9 billion (5.3% of Greece's GDP)

Unemployment: 6.1%

Number of olive trees: 30 million

Percentage employed in tourism: 40

Annual number of visitors to Crete: 2.5 million

Number of visitors to Knossos in 2006: 705,305

Number of people who walked the Samaria Gorge in 2006: 176,747

Estimated number of guns: 1 million

Getting Started

Crete is an exciting destination but, unlike other Greek islands, it's not just a matter of hopping off the boat and taking it from there. Crete is a massive and extraordinarily diverse island open to endless exploration and experiences. Most people only ever scratch the surface of what it has to offer. You can pack a lot in with careful planning, especially if you base yourself in central Crete.

You will probably need to choose between the east and west, even between north and south, and take the time to explore one region thoroughly – it's a good excuse to come back and see the rest. In peak season, it is best to have booked accommodation, but most of the time you can find somewhere to stay.

Bear in mind that navigating the mountainous interior means zigzagging across the island, though the upside is that you see some spectacular territory and pass traditional villages on your way to that remote southern beach you're after. The distances aren't always huge, but winding through mountains can be hard going, so be realistic about how far you can drive in one day.

The best way to see Crete is by car or motorbike, but an extensive part of the island is accessible by bus.

WHEN TO GO

Crete's sunny disposition and long summers mean you can swim from mid-April to November, particularly off the southern coast. The best times to visit are in late spring/early summer and in autumn when the weather is not too hot for hiking and other outdoor activities. Conditions are perfect between Easter and late June, when the weather is pleasantly warm in most places, the sea warm enough for a swim, the wildflowers are in bloom, beaches and ancient sites are relatively uncrowded, public transport operates on close to full schedules, and accommodation is cheaper and easy to find.

The high season kicks in around late June and lasts until the end of August. Accommodation can be booked solid in August and is significantly more expensive. July and August are the hottest months and the most crowded, and while this is a great time for hanging out at the beach and enjoying balmy nights, it's tough-going traipsing around archaeological sites or walking in the heat. In July and August, the *meltemi* (strong northeasterly winds) can play havoc with ferry schedules and make sandy beaches unpleasant. There's usually no rain at all during summer. In winter, most beach resorts close down and tourist services and attractions are scaled right back, especially outside major cities.

COSTS & MONEY

Crete is cheap by northern European standards, but not as cheap as it used to be, especially in the high season (July and August) when prices rise dramatically. The following budgets are for individuals; couples sharing a room and meals can get by on less. Add €25 to €30 per day for car hire.

A rock-bottom daily budget would require €30 to €40. This would mean taking buses, staying in hostels or camping, and only occasionally eating in tavernas and visiting sites and museums.

Allow at least €60 per day in the summertime for a simple room, meals in local tavernas, drinks at night and some sightseeing.

If you want more-comfortable hotels, good wine, and visits to restaurants, bars, museums and sites, you will need more than €100 per day.

An average taverna meal works out to about €10 to €15 per person including house wine; you can virtually double that for a fancier restaurant.

See Climate Chart (p211) for more information on rainfall and temperature ranges throughout the year.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Sturdy walking shoes for clambering around ancient sites and hiking gorges.
- Sunglasses, hat, sunscreen and mosquito repellent.
- Swimming gear, shorts and light cotton clothing (a light sweater or jacket for evenings and when in the mountains).
- A healthy appetite, adventurous palate and a stomach for raki.
- Room enough in your bag to bring home some fabulous olive oil and bags of herbs.
- Valid travel insurance, ID card or passport and driving licence.
- A camera...Pic opportunities abound.
- A compass, whistle and good maps if you are going to hike in remote areas.
- A torch (flashlight) for occasional blackouts and for exploring caves.
- Binoculars for checking out the birds.
- A mobile phone so you don't feel left out (even the shepherds have one).
- A Swiss Army knife for all eventualities (no Cretan would be without a knife).

BOOKS ABOUT CRETE

Crete is the subject of numerous travelogues and novels.

Essential reading includes Nikos Kazantzakis' classic *Zorba the Greek* (1946) and *Freedom and Death* (1950), both of which give a thoroughly engaging account of Cretan life, struggles and characters.

Falling for Icarus is a humorous and well-written memoir of English writer Rory MacLean's bizarre attempt to build a plane in Crete, helped by a colourful cast of Cretans.

The Island, by Victoria Hislop, is a compelling novel uncovering dark family secrets and delving into life on the Spinalonga leper colony.

Christopher Somerville writes a delightful and witty account of his midlife crisis walk across Crete's E4 trail in *The Golden Step: A Walk Through the Heart of Crete*, weaving in history and characters.

George Psychoundakis' *The Cretan Runner* is an exciting and personal account of the Cretan resistance. The author was a runner delivering messages to the Allies. It was translated into English by author and fellow Resistance fighter Patrick Leigh Fermor, who also wrote the introduction.

Across Crete, edited by Johan de Bakker, is the first of a three-part series that takes the reader from Hania to Iraklio as seen through the eyes of 18th- and 19th-century British travellers such as Richard Pokocke, Robert Pashley, Captain Spratt and Edward Lear.

Memory of Tides, by Angelo Loukakis is a moving novel about the parallel lives of a Greek-Australian soldier and a Cretan woman who meet during WWII, set in both Crete and Australia.

Winds of Crete, by David MacNeill Doren, is an amusing account of island life as experienced by an American and his Swedish wife.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Explore Crete (www.explorecrete.com) Good general travel site for Crete.

InfoCrete (www.infocrete.com) A site with about 100 Crete tourist-site web links.

Interkriti (www.interkriti.gr) Links to hotels, apartments, shops and restaurants, as well as an active bulletin board.

Greek National Tourism Organisation (www.visitgreece.gr) Has some information about Crete and links to the useful culture ministry site.

HOW MUCH?

Packet of 20 cigarettes
€2.80

An iced cappuccino €3.50

A Greek salad €3.50

Double room at a 3-star
hotel €70

Mixed drink at a bar €6

TOP PICKS



FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The Cretans take their festive occasions very seriously and use any excuse to get together for a big meal, good company, music and free-flowing raki. There are festivals dedicated to snails, chestnuts and potatoes, as well as religious and cultural events. For a comprehensive list of festivals, see p213.

- Carnival, Rethymno (three weeks before Lent)
- Feast of Agios Yiorgos (St George), Asi Gonia (23 April)
- Easter Festivities, mountain villages (March–April)
- Renaissance Festival, Rethymno (July–September)
- Iraklio Festival (July–August)
- Yakinthia Festival, Anogia (July)
- Sultana Festival, Sitia (August)
- Traditional Cretan Wedding (Kritsa; August)
- Raki distilling season, everywhere (October)

BEACHES

Crete has stunning beaches. The best are normally the hardest to get to, but the following are all accessible, some with a bit of a walk. Crowds can detract from many of the more popular beaches, but they are gorgeous nonetheless.

- Balos, Gramvousa Peninsula, Hania (p111)
- Agios Pavlos & Triopetra, Rethymno (141)
- Vai, Lasithi (p197)
- Elafonisi, Hania (p115)
- Falasarna, Hania (p112)
- Preveli Beach, Rethymno (p140)
- Agiofarango, Iraklio (p174)
- Kommos, Iraklio (p174)
- Hrysi Island, Lasithi(p204)

CRETAN VILLAGES

Crete's mountains are dotted with authentic little villages that are a world away from the coastal tourist resorts. While some have become tourist attractions in themselves, you can still gain an insight into rural village life, especially after the last tour buses leave. Venturing off the beaten track leads to remote and unspoilt villages. These are some of the ones worth seeing:

- Argyroupolis (p130)
- Anogia (p135)
- Spili (p133)
- Margarites (p134)
- Kritsa (p186)
- Askyfou (p94)
- Maroulas (p132)
- Arhanes (p163)

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Has information on Crete, as well as travel news, updates to our guidebooks and links to other travel resources.

Stigmes (www.forthnet.gr/stigmes/destcret.htm) Insightful Crete magazine.

West Crete (www.west-crete.com) Comprehensive guide to western Crete.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

If you only have a week, this route takes in the island's major archaeological sites, a couple of stunning beaches and mountain villages, the Samaria Gorge and Crete's most picturesque towns. It's a jam-packed schedule covering about 320km.

CRETE HIGHLIGHTS

Starting in **Iraklio** (p146), check out the superb archaeological museum and make the obligatory pilgrimage to the palace of **Knossos** (p158). On day two head south to explore the Roman **Gortyna** (p168) and the Minoan Palace of **Phaestos** (p169), stopping for a swim by the hippie caves at **Matala** (p172) or at nearby **Kommos** (p174). A visit to the excellent folk museum at **Vori** (p172) is a worthwhile detour. Spend the night by the beach or head inland to the village of **Zaros** (p166). Travelling west, stop in the village of **Spili** (p133) on the way to **Moni Preveli** (p140) and **Preveli Beach** (p141) and spend the night in **Plakias** (p138). Go north to **Rethymno** (p122) and spend a day exploring the old town. Heading west, stop at **Vryses** (p120) for lunch before driving to **Hania** (p78) for the evening. Take the early bus to the start of the **Samaria Gorge** (p93) and trek to **Agia Roumeli**, where you can take the boat west to **Loutro** (p98). The next morning take the boat to **Hora Sfakion** (p96) and bus it back to Hania.

Seven days / 320km

SEA OF CRETE



LIBYAN SEA

CENTRAL-WEST CRETE**12 to 14 Days / 500km**

This itinerary covers some of Crete's most stunning natural attractions, the unspoilt southern coast, unique villages and its two most attractive towns. Starting in **Iraklio** (p146), head inland to **Anogia** (p136) and the villages and caves at the foothills of **Mt Psiloritis** (p137). Stop by the pottery village of **Margarites** (p134) and the historic **Moni Arkadiou** (p134) before spending some time in the Venetian port of **Rethymno** (p122) with its 16th-century fortress. Heading south, the fountains at **Spili** (p133) make a good coffee stop before a visit to **Moni Preveli** (p140) and **Preveli Beach** (p141). From here you could continue east to the stunning southern beaches of **Agios Pavlos & Triopetra** (p141) or head west to the traveller hang-out of **Plakias** (p138) and the beachfront fortress of **Frangokastello** (p98).

Heading west through the Kourtoulioti Gorge you come to the coastal port of **Hora Sfakion** (p96). You can either take a boat trip along the southern coast to **Loutro** (p98) or **Sougia** (p100) and double back, or take the steep road north to the Lefka Ori along the **Imbros Gorge** (p95) to the mountain village of **Askyfou** (p94). Spend at least a day in alluring **Hania** (p78).

To the north, the **Akrotiri Peninsula** (p89) has some lovely monasteries and the famous beach at **Stavros** (p89) where *Zorba the Greek* was filmed. Take the circular route southwest via **Kolymbari** (p108) and the villages of **Innahorion** (p113), to the westernmost tip of the island at **Elafonisi** (p115).

Return to Hania via the coastal road, detouring to **Falasarna** (p112) and north to the **Gramvousa Peninsula** (p111) to the spectacular beach at **Balos** (p111). Returning east it's worth stopping at the springs of **Argyroupolis** (p130), southwest of Rethymno, and the lovely resort town of **Panormo** (p143), on the eastern coast heading to Iraklio.

This covers a pretty thorough wish list of Crete's high-lights and involves lots of winding mountain drives. You should allow for plenty of stops and distractions. Total distance covered would be more than 500km.

SEA OF CRETE



LIBYAN SEA

TAILORED TRIPS

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE MINOANS

Six to Seven Days / 400km

The Minoans knew how to choose their real estate so this is not a bad way to see some of the best spots on the island. Allow at least half a day at the museum in **Iraklio** (p146) to appreciate the richness of Minoan civilisation through the treasures found at the major sites. After exploring the palace at **Knossos** (p158), take a short detour to the sanctuary of **Anemospilia** (p164). At **Arhanes** (p163), you can stop at the excellent small museum and the **Vathy-petro Villa** (p164) nearby, which was probably the house of a Minoan noble.

Head east inland or along the coast to the palace of **Malia** (p178), and then to the important site of **Gournia** (p192), about 19km southeast of Agios Nikolaos. Continuing east veer off the highway to the seaside village of **Mohlos** (p193), where there are tombs near the cliffs and an islet opposite with the ruins of Minoan houses. Continue east past Sitia to **Palekastro** (p197), where ongoing excavations are expected to uncover a major palace. The palace of **Zakros** (p199) is ideally located next to the lovely beach of **Kato Zakros** (see p200) and the Zakros Gorge. It is a long drive west cutting inland to the major palace at **Phaestos** (p169) and the summer villa at **Agia Triada** (p171). The minor sites at **Kamilari** (p174) and **Kommos** (p103) are next to good beaches.



GORGES & SOUTH COAST TOWNS

Three to Five Days / 120km

This itinerary combines a trek through two stunning gorges, including the famous Samaria Gorge, and a boat trip to a couple of great beaches. It is best done by bus and you need to be travelling very light or organise to have your luggage delivered ahead in a few places. From **Hania** (p78) take the early bus to **Omalos** (p92) and walk through the **Samaria Gorge** (p93), leaving early to ensure you get to **Agia Roumeli** (p95) in time to cool off with a swim and catch the afternoon boat to **Sougia** (p100). Rest your weary body at this laid-back beach community in preparation for a 7km walk down the smaller **Agia Irini Gorge** (p101) the next day. A bus or taxi from Sougia takes you to the start of the gorge and it is a reasonable walk back. The next day you can take the boat to **Paleohora** (p102). You can also take the stunning **coastal walk** (p106) from Sougia to Paleohora, which is one of the most popular parts of the E4 trail, stopping at the ruins of ancient **Lissos** (p102). Relax in Paleohora before taking the bus back to Hania.



On the Road



VICTORIA KYRIAKOPOULOS

My last days on the road, I drove south through the mountains to Sougia. Something about this laid-back place draws you back. It's refreshingly undeveloped, the sea is clear, the long pebble beach isn't overrun by umbrellas and loungers, and there are a couple of friendly tavernas and relaxed open-air clubs if you ever tire of staring at the stars.

MY FAVOURITE TRIP

The best trips are those where one great experience follows another. From the historic Moni Odigitrias (p174) in southern Iraklio, I walked the stunning Agiofarango gorge (p174), passing climbers and goats and little cave chapels, to emerge at a spectacular beach for a swim. On the way back, I



stopped for great traditional food at a village *kafeneio* run by friendly environmentalists.

AUTHOR

Victoria Kyriakopoulos is a freelance writer based in Melbourne. She has travelled widely throughout Greece since first visiting her parents' homeland in 1988. She may not have descended from Crete, but it feels like a second home after she spent several months exploring the hospitable island for the last two editions of Lonely Planet's *Crete*. Victoria is also the author of Lonely Planet's *Best of Athens*.

She lived in Athens between 2000 and 2004 where she covered the city's Olympics preparations and other events, edited the Greek diaspora magazine *Odyssey* and worked as a researcher for several TV programs about Greece. She has written about Greek cuisine for *Greek Gourmet Traveller* and other publications and is a restaurant reviewer for the *Age Good Food Guide*. She is regular contributor to the *Age* and other Australian and international publications, a former staff writer with the *Bulletin* and a media-relations consultant.

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