



Iraklio Ηράκλειο

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Best Places to Eat

- » Elia & Diosmos (p132)
- » Prassein Aloga (p118)
- » Brilliant/Herb's Garden (p118)
- » Kritamon (p130)
- » Roussos Taverna (p132)

Best Places to Stay

- » Lato Hotel (p191)
- » Balsamico Suites (p194)
- » Eleonas (p192)
- » Capsis Astoria (p191)
- » Villa Kerasia (p192)

Why Go?

Iraklio is Crete's most dynamic region, home to almost half the island's population and its top-rated tourist site, the Minoan Palace of Knossos. Priceless treasures unearthed here and at the many other Minoan sites around Crete have catapulted the archaeological museum in the capital city of Iraklio onto the world stage.

Even if the coastal stretch east of Iraklio is one continuous band of hotels and resorts, just a little bit inland villages sweetly lost in time provide pleasing contrast. Taste the increasingly sophisticated tippie produced in the Iraklio Wine Country, walk in the footsteps of El Greco and Nikos Kazantzakis, and revel in the rustic grandeur of such remote mountain villages as Zaros.

On the quieter southern coast, the ex-hippie hang-out of Matala is the only developed resort, while in the charming villages the laid-back life unfolds much the way it has since time immemorial.

When to Go

April and May are the perfect time for culture vultures as Knossos and other archaeological blockbusters are still mercifully crowd-free and there's minimal risk of sunstroke. Bonus: carpets of wildflowers in the countryside.

All summer long, the city of Iraklio embarks on a high-class cultural orgy of dance, music, theatre and cinema performances in enchanting outdoor venues, during the Iraklio Summer Festival.

After a long hot summer, Crete's grapes are plump and ready for harvesting. Arhanes rings in the season with a five-day wine festival in August.

DON'T MISS

The mountain village of Zaros (p133) is the gateway to some wonderful hikes, most famously the spectacular Rouvas Gorge with its ancient oak forest and chapel Moni Agios Nikolaos.

Best Ancient Sites

- » Knossos (p123) – the mother of all Minoan sites
- » Malia (p145) – Knossos without the reconstructions
- » Gortyna (p135) – relic of Roman Crete
- » Phaestos (p137) – prettiest location of all Minoan palaces

Best Rural Escapes

- » Arhanes (p129) – the heart of the wine country
- » Fodele (p127) – pretty village that claims to be El Greco's birthplace
- » Kamilari (p141) – charismatic hillside village with a Minoan tomb
- » Zaros (p133) – mountain village with famous natural spring

Resources

- » www.heraklion-city.gr
- » <http://history.heraklion.gr>
- » www.historical-museum.gr

Getting Around

Iraklio has the best transport infrastructure among the Cretan prefectures. The E75 highway runs along the north coast with individual communities accessed via the parallel Old National Rd. A major road links Iraklio with the Messara Plain and the beach resorts around Matala; another travels through Knossos and the Iraklio Wine Country as far as Arkalohori. Smaller roads, too, are mostly in good condition. In summer especially, the bus service is extensive, with all major communities served regularly.

THREE PERFECT DAYS

Day One

Kick off early and make a beeline for **Knossos** to get a head start on the tour-bus crowd. Explore the site's main features in relative peace, then move on to the less popular corners when it gets busy. Enjoy a gourmet Cretan lunch at **Elia & Diosmos** in Skalani on the edge of the **Iraklio Wine Country**, followed by sampling the vintages at the nearby **Boutari** winery and paying your respects to Crete's most revered 20th-century writer, Nikos Kazantzakis, in **Myrtia**. Spend the rest of the day touring more wineries and checking out **Arhanes'** copious Minoan sites before returning to Iraklio for a rooftop dinner at **Herb's Garden**.

Day Two

Spend the morning being mesmerised by the flitting, darting and plodding submarine denizens of the state-of-the-art **Cretaquarium** in Gournes. Afterwards, grab your torch and Indiana Jones hat and descend into the belly of **Skotino Cave**, a spooky underground world with bizarre formations and a resident population of bats and other dark-loving critters. Cope with the heat by spending the rest of the day chilling and riding the slides at **Water City**, Crete's biggest water park.

Day Three

Today you're off to a site inspection of the **Palace of Phaestos**, followed by lunch at **Taverna Agios Ioannis**. Hungry for more Minoan culture? Take a spin around **Agia Triada**. Otherwise head straight to **Agiofarango Gorge** for the short hike to a lovely, secluded beach with crystal-clear water. For dinner find your favourite among the tavernas on the main square in **Sivas**.

Accommodation

For sleeping options throughout this region, please see the Accommodation chapter (p175).