

Understand Crete

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Greece has been hard hit by the recession and excessive debt. How has Crete fared through it all?

HISTORY 224

We show you how Minoans, Romans, Venetians, Ottomans and modern Cretans have shaped this cradle of European civilisation.

THE CRETAN WAY OF LIFE 237

Fierce, proud, independent, with a love of age-old traditions and customs, Cretans will charm, impress and surprise you.

MINOAN ART & CULTURE 242

Excavated paintings, jewellery, sculptures and pottery provide a priceless insight into the Minoan world and demonstrate the society's extraordinary artistry.

THE ARTS 246

From rhyming couplets to rebel songs and Nobel Prize laureates, we introduce you to Cretan art, literature, music and dance.

NATURE & WILDLIFE 251

Crete brims with furry, feathered and flippered creatures, many of them endemic, as are the wildflowers.

Crete Today

Being a large, often self-contained island with an independent history, Crete can sometimes seem a world away from mainland Greece. But as the nation struggles with its economy and its relationship with the EU, Crete also has to face the governmental shortfalls and the recession that are impacting people all over Greece. Other challenges are Crete's natural environment and its position abutting the Middle East and Africa, from where many migrants flee north.

Best on Film

Zorba the Greek (1964) Boasting three Academy Awards, this is still the quintessential Crete-filmed movie, based on the excellent novel of the same name.

Night Ambush (1957) Gripping retelling of the kidnapping of Nazi General Heinrich Kreipe by British forces in 1944.

El Greco (2007) Greek-made biopic tells the life story of the Cretan-born Renaissance painter.

Two Faces of January (2014) Intrigue ensues at the ruins of Knossos and on Cretan back roads.

Best in Print

Freedom or Death (Nikos Kazantzakis, 1950) Powerful account of the 1889 Cretan rebellion against the Turks.

The Cretan Runner (George Psychoundakis, 1955) Cretan resistance in WWII, as told by a local shepherd turned messenger.

Dark Labyrinth (Lawrence Durrell, 1958) Philosophical tale of a group of English travellers determined to find and explore a dangerous labyrinth.

The Island (Victoria Hislop, 2005) Bestselling beach read weaving romance and tragedy, set on Spinalonga Island.

Crete & the Fiscal Crisis

As with anywhere in Greece, Crete has not been immune to the country's severe debt crisis. Between 2010 and 2012, the 'troika' (European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund) approved two bailout loan packages totalling €240 billion (not all of which was disbursed) to prevent Greece from defaulting on its debt (equal to 150% of its GDP). The deals required the government to impose strict austerity measures (public spending and pension cuts, reduction of red tape, crack-downs on tax evasion and across-the-board tax increases) as well as to raise billions through the privatisation of state-controlled assets.

The country has fallen into a depression: GDP shrunk by about 20% during five years. By 2014 unemployment climbed to 28%, with youth unemployment at a staggering 60%. In early 2015 the ECB cut off emergency aid (already totalling €130 billion), the banks closed briefly and capital controls were imposed, and remain in effect as of the time of writing (July 2015).

Throughout these machinations, tumultuous social and political repercussions have rocked Greece. These include mass protests and widespread strikes. Disillusionment with the long-ruling PASOK and New Democracy parties ultimately yielded parliamentary elections in January 2015, which saw Alexis Tsipras of the leftist anti-austerity party Syriza become prime minister. As Greece teeters on the brink of default, talks with the troika remain embattled as a third loan package and debt restructuring are being negotiated. The possibility remains that Greece could exit the eurozone.

The reality of lost jobs, capital controls, cut wages and pensions, unpayable taxes, and disappearing social services has been exacerbated by the disillusioning uncertainty that accompanies each of these political and economic manoeuvres. Yet it is possible that for its part,