



Crete

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Why Go?

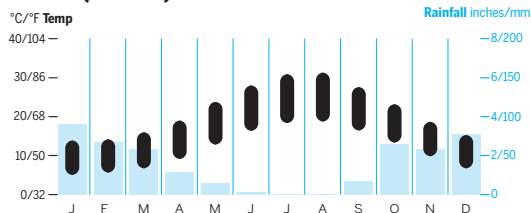
Crete (Κρήτη) is in many respects the culmination of the Greek experience. Nature here has been as prolific as Pegasus in his prime, creating a dramatic quilt of big-shouldered mountains, stunning beaches and undulating hillsides blanketed in olive groves, vineyards and wildflowers. There are deep chiselled gorges, including Europe's longest, and crystal-clear lagoons and palm-tree-lined beaches that conjure up the Caribbean.

Crete's natural beauty is equalled only by the richness of a history that spans millennia. The Palace of Knossos is but one of many vestiges of the mysterious Minoan civilisation. Venetian fortresses, Turkish mosques and Byzantine churches, meanwhile, bring history alive all over the island, but nowhere more so than in charismatic Hania and Rethymno.

Ultimately, though, it's humans – not stones – that create the most vivid memories. Crete's hospitable and spirited people uphold their unique culture and customs, and traditions remain a dynamic part of the island's soul.

When to Go

Crete (Iraklio)



Apr A painters' palette of wildflowers blankets the island as locals prepare for Easter.

Jun Hit the beaches before they get crowded and rejoice in the bounty of local produce.

Oct Warm seas, blue skies and thinning crowds as the grape harvest gets under way.

History

Although inhabited since neolithic times (7000–3000 BC), Crete is most famous for being the cradle of Europe's first advanced civilisation, the Minoans. Traces of this still enigmatic society were only uncovered in the early 20th century, when British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans discovered the palace at Knossos and named the civilisation after its legendary ruler, the mythical King Minos.

Minoans migrated to Crete in the 3rd millennium BC. Their extraordinary artistic, architectural and cultural achievements culminated in the construction of huge palace complexes at Knossos, Phaestos, Malia and Zakros, all of which were levelled by an earthquake around 1700 BC. 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, possibly by a tsunami triggered by a volcanic eruption on Santorini (Thira). Knossos, the only palace saved, 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, Crete was divided into city-states but did not benefit from the cultural glories of mainland Greece; in fact, it was bypassed by Persian invaders and the Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great.

By 67 BC Crete had become the Roman province of Cyrenaica, with Gortyna its capital. After the Roman empire's division in AD 395, Crete fell under the jurisdiction of Greek-speaking Constantinople – the emerging Byzantine Empire. Things went more or less fine until AD 824, when Arabs appropriated the island.

In AD 961, Byzantine general and ill-fated emperor Nikiforos Fokas (AD 912–69) won Crete back with 50,000 soldiers taking the island following a nine-month siege of Iraklio (then called El Khandak by the Arabs). Crete flourished under Byzantine rule, but with the infamous Fourth Crusade of 1204 – when the Christian countries of the Latin West targeted Byzantium instead of Muslim-controlled Jerusalem – the maritime power of Venice received Crete as part of its 'payment' for supplying the Crusaders' fleet.

Much of Crete's most impressive surviving architecture dates from this period, which lasted until 1669 when Iraklio (then called Candia) became the last domino to fall after a 21-year Ottoman siege. Turkish rule brought new administrative organisation, Islamic culture and Muslim settlers. Cretan resistance was strongest in the mountain strongholds, such as rugged Skafia in the southwest where the dashing Ioannis Daskalogiannis led the first notable rebellion in 1770. This and subsequent revolts were put down brutally, and it was only with the Ottoman Empire's disintegration in the late 19th century that Europe's great powers expedited Crete's sovereign aspirations.

Thus in 1898, with Russian and French consent, Crete became a British protectorate. However, the banner under which future Greek prime minister Eleftherios Venizelos and other Cretan rebels were fighting was *Enosis i Thanatos* (Unity or Death) – unity with Greece, not mere independence from Turkey. Yet it would take the Greek army's successes in the Balkan Wars (1912–13) to turn Crete's de facto inclusion in the country into reality, with the 1913 Treaty of Bucharest.

Crete suffered tremendously during WWII. Hitler wanted the strategically placed island as an air base, and on 20 May 1941 a huge flock of German parachutists soon overwhelmed the Cretan defenders. The Battle of Crete, as it would become known, raged for 10 days between German and Allied troops from Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Greece. For two whole days the battle hung in the balance until the Germans captured Maleme Airfield, near Hania. The Allied forces fought a valiant rearguard action, however, enabling the British Navy to evacuate 18,000 of the 32,000 Allied troops. The harsh German occupation lasted throughout WWII, with many mountain villages bombed or burnt down and their occupants executed en masse. Nevertheless, the Cretans (with foreign assistance) waged a significant resistance campaign that continually vexed and distracted their German military rulers.

i Getting There & Away

Air

Most travellers arrive in Crete by air, usually with a change in Athens. Iraklio's **Nikos Kazantzakis Airport** (www.heraklion-airport.info) is Crete's busiest airport, although **Hania** (www.chania-airport.com) is convenient for travellers heading to western Crete. Sitia is slated for expansion but for now only receives domestic flights.