

# Crete, Greece

## Crete the land

A piece of mountain thrown smack in the center of the sea cracked and shattered in the fall, however it grew roots which wrote history. Full of gorges, ravines, jagged slender mountain peaks on the one hand, castles and villas of bygone times on the other, bound tightly together by the alluring blue of its seas. And on this earth, people who adored it and love it give another dimension to the term “patriot.” Crete: 8,036 square kilometers with 257 kms length waiting to be explored from coast to coast, with the highest mountain peak calling to be climbed (Mt Ida also known as Mt Psiloritis: 2,456 metres) or the Lefka Ori (white mountains: 2,452 metres), where you can ski with a view of the shimmering Libyan Sea. The dream of every hiker: To trek through the Samaria gorge (16 kms, a national park since 1962) and swim at the Agia Roumeli.

The dream of every naturist: to visit the fertile plateaus in May, where an endless collection of orchids and herbs dotting the landscape can be admired, and the fragrance of dittany can be smelt, and where one can walk through Europe’s only palm-tree forest on the east coast, at Vai, before diving into one of the lakes of Preveli River.

The dream of every bibliophile: To reach Zorba’s cave at Stavros, and to create your own imaginary boat, to visit Kazantzakis’ grave at the walls of Kerakleion. And if you are a simple visitor, a tourist, you will be amazed by the multiformity and contrasts of this island and its people. Drink “tsikoudia” (raki) which you will no doubt be offered, eat the “dakous” with tomato and oregano, try the “staka”. If you should find yourself wondering why it is that the people from this region become teary during their greatest joys while shooting blanks in the sky, consider the fact that being surrounded by so much beauty must hurt, and consider also their history and the ghosts of the past which they must disregard.

## Crete, the history

From the mythical, prehistoric age of Minoan and Talo’s guard, Crete has constantly been inhabited. After each destruction, old and new inhabitants have tried to give the island the significance it warrants. The destruction of the Minoan civilization (14<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.) was immediately followed by the creation of 100 new Greek city states. They lived with laws (see Gortyn epigraph) and class structures, however there was rivalry amongst them. Egyptian influence and pirate raids left their mark on the island until the first Christian years. A period of peace was noted during the Pax Romana, and when St Paul visited the island it was unified and strong.

The land of “milk and honey” was occupied by the Saracens (9<sup>th</sup> Century AD) and they established Handaka (handaki – moat). As a result, the island was known as Candia. A new chapter of the island’s history began with the arrival of Byzantines (Nikiforos Fokas 961 AD) who managed to overthrow the pirates, leading to a construction of churches and monasteries. The conflicts and wars with the crusaders were settled with great privileges and freedom being bestowed on the residents. However, this period was shortlived after the island came under Turkish Occupation (1669-1898) following a 21 year siege of the “Great Castle” of Herakleion.

The island saw heavy fighting during WWII and the German Occupation (1941-1944) continues to be a bitter memory for the much afflicted island and its inhabitants.

### **General Information**

Crete is the largest island of Greece, located at the southernmost part of Europe. Boats from the port of Piraeus leave regularly for Crete and there are also frequent flights.

The Cretan climate is mild and temperatures range from 5°C-15°C in winter and from 20°C-35°C in summer. Fauna on the island is of the richest in Europe with 1,600 plant varieties, of which 150 are indigenous.

Rich in natural beauty, the island boasts of superb isolated and popular beaches, gulfs, a great many gorges (including the well-known Samaria gorge) and high mountains somehow reflect the brave and haughty temperament of the Cretan people, who are particularly known for their patriotism, enthusiasm and love of nature.