Crete (Kríti) is a great deal more than just another Greek island. In many places, especially in the cities or along the developed north coast, it doesn’t feel like an island at all, but rather a substantial land in its own right. Which of course it is – a precipitous, wealthy and at times surprisingly cosmopolitan one with a tremendous and unique history. At the same time, it has everything you could want of a Greek island and more: great beaches, remote hinterlands and hospitable people.

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With enough land for agriculture (and some surprisingly good vineyards), it’s one of the few Greek islands that could probably support itself without visitors. Nevertheless, tourism is an important part of the economy, particularly exploited along the north coast, where many resorts cater almost exclusively to rowdy young revellers lured by thumping bars and cheap booze. The quieter, less commercialized resorts and villages lie at either end of the island – west, towards Haniá and the smaller, less well-connected places along the south and west coasts, or east around Sitía. The high mountains of the interior are still barely touched by tourism.

Of the cities, sprawling Iráklion often gives a poor first impression of the island but is well worth a visit for its excellent archeological museum. It’s also close to the fabulous Minoan sites of Knossos, Phaestos and Ayía Triádha to the south (with Roman Gortys to provide contrast). Further east, the upmarket resort of Áyios Nikólaos provides sophisticated restaurants and hotels, while quiet, lazy Sitía is a perfect base for exploring the eastern coastline. Heading west, Réthymnon boasts a pretty old town and an excellent beach, though Haniá in the extreme west arguably beats it in terms of style and atmosphere. South of here is the Samariá Gorge, one of the best hikes in the country.

In terms of climate, Crete has by far the longest summers in Greece, and you can get a decent tan here right into October and swim at least from May until early November. The one seasonal blight is the meltémi, a northerly wind, which regularly blows harder and more continuously here than anywhere else in Greece – the locals may welcome its cooling effects, but it’s another reason (along with crowds and heat) to avoid an August visit if you can.

Brief history

Crete is distinguished above all as the home of Europe’s earliest civilization, the Minoans. They had a remarkably advanced society, and formed the centre of a maritime trading empire as early as 2000 BC. The island’s strategic position between east and west has since continued to play a major role in its history. Control of the island passed from Greeks to Romans to Saracens, through the Byzantine empire to Venice, and finally to Turkey for more than two centuries. During World War II, Crete was occupied by the Germans and attained the dubious distinction of being the first place to be successfully invaded by paratroops.

Adventure sports

With its temperate climate and varied topography Crete is a great place for adventure holidays, and there are numerous companies across the island offering everything from mountain biking and canyoning to trekking and horseriding. Here’s a selection of what’s on offer.

Climbing/adrenaline sports

• Liquid Bungy

White-knuckle bungee jumping (Europe’s second highest) at the Arádhena Gorge, Haniá.

• Trekking Plan

Rock climbing, mountaineering, canyoning, rappelling, kayaking and mountain biking in Haniá province.

Horseriding

• Melanouri

Horseriding holidays (one to seven days) from a stable near Mátala.

• Odysseia

One- to six-day guided and unguided horse treks from their base at Avdhoú near the Lasíthi Plateau.

• Zoraïda’s Horseriding

Horseriding holidays and treks from their stables in Yeoryoúpoli, Haniá.

Walking and cycling

• Alpine Travel

Hiking, rock climbing, sea kayaking and biking holidays (or combinations thereof) in Haniá province.

• Cretan Adventures

Hiking, horseriding and jeep safaris throughout Crete.

• The Happy Walker

Walking tours from one day to two weeks from €30 (for the day-hike which includes minibus from your hotel to start point).

• Hellas Bike

One- to seven-day bike tours from Ayía Marína in Haniá province.

• Korifi Tours

Hiking and climbing holidays in central, southern and western Crete.

• Olympic Bike

Guided bike tours from €139 for three one-day trips, or bike rental only from €20 per day.

• Strata Walking Tours

Guided trekking holidays in the Kastélli Kissamou area of Haniá.

Wine tasting in Crete

As well as the large Péza region near Knossos and the ancient vineyard at Vathýpetro, there are also vineyards in eastern Crete, around Sitía, another major producer, and smaller vineyards in the west around Haniá. The main grape varieties grown on the island are the white Vilana and the red Mantilari, Kotsifari and Syrah grapes. Wine tasting and cellar tours can be undertaken during the summer months.

Festival island

The Cretans love a glendi (party) and festivals are celebrated with plenty of eating, drinking, live music and dancing. Here are some of those which celebrate local harvests (check locally for specific dates):

• Chestnut Festival Élos and Prásses, West Crete, end of October. The village squares are packed with tables and chairs as the villages celebrate the local chestnut harvest with eating, drinking, dancing, and roast chestnuts, of course.

• Sardine Festival Néa Hóra, Haniá. The first Monday in September is the date for this annual festival at the small harbour by the town beach, with plentiful free fish and wine with local musicians and dancers.

• Sultana Festival Sitía, in August. The region is well known for its sultana production, and the harvest is celebrated with traditional Cretan music and dance in the main square, accompanied by food and wine.

• Tsikoudiá (Raki) Festival Haniá, Iráklion and Voukoliés, mid-October and early November. At the end of the grape harvest the must-residue from the wine press is boiled and distilled to make tsikoudiá, the local fire water. Hot tsikoudiá, with an alcohol content as high as 60 percent, is scooped from the vats and proffered in shot glasses, and so the merriment begins.

Ecotourism in Crete

Crete has an incredibly diverse landscape, flora and fauna, and a number of environmentally aware locals have set about preserving its natural and cultural heritage. A range of retreats and lodges has sprung up across the island, offering the chance to experience sustainable, eco-friendly living and participate in everything from hiking to making the local firewater tsikoudhiá.

Central Crete

The hub of central Crete is the capital city, Iráklion, a busy but convenient base for visits to the nearby Minoan palace of Knossos. The area immediately around the city is less touristy than you might expect, mainly because there are few decent beaches of any size on the adjacent coast. To the west, mountains drop straight into the sea virtually all the way to Réthymnon, with just two significant coastal settlements: Ayia Pelayia, and the more attractive Bali. Eastwards, the main resorts are at least 30km away, at Hersónissos and beyond, although there is a string of rather unattractive developments all the way there. Inland, there’s agricultural country, some of the richest on the island, a cluster of Crete’s better vineyards and a series of wealthy villages. To the south lie the sites of Gortys, Phaestos and Ayía Triádha which can all be visited in a day, with a lunchtime swim on the south coast at Mátala or Léndas thrown in.

Iráklion

Crete’s biggest city, IRÁKLION (Heraklion) is a hectic place, a maelstrom of bustle, noise and traffic-congested thoroughfares. On the positive side, though, the city does have superb fortifications, a fine market, atmospheric old alleys and some interesting lesser museums. Virtually everything you’re likely to want to see lies within the northeastern corner of the walled city. The most vital thoroughfare, 25-Avgoústou, links the harbour with the commercial city centre. Further up 25-Avgoústou, Kalokerinoú leads down to Haniá Gate and westwards out of the city; straight ahead, Odhós-1821 is a major shopping street, and adjacent Odhós-1866 is given over to the animated street market, perhaps the best on the island. To the left, Dhikeosínis heads for the city’s main square, Platía Eleftherías, paralleled by the pedestrian alley, Dedhálou, lined with many of the city’s swankier fashion stores and the direct link between the two squares.

Inland from Iráklion

Heading south from Knossos, the zone around Arhánes and Péza is one of Crete’s major wine-producing areas. Nearby are some more Minoan sites at Anemospiliá and Vathýpetro, plus a few diverting villages. The main inland route southwest from Iráklion climbs through the mountains before winding down to Áyii Dhéka and the Messará plain. Here on the Messará, all within a 40km range of each other, lie the three major archeological sites of Phaestos, Ayía Triádha and Gortys. Once you get this far south you’re within a short drive of the coastal resorts of Mátala and (accessed via a mountain road) Léndas.

East of Iráklion: the package-tour coast

East of Iráklion, the main package-tour resorts are at least 30km away, at Hersónissos and Mália, although there is a string of rather unattractive developments all the way there; the merest hint of a beach is an excuse to build hotel and apartment complexes. That said, there are one or two highlights amid the dross, which are well worth a visit: the impressive Cretaquarium at Goúrnes, the old villages in the hills behind Hersónissos, and, beyond the clubbing resort of Mália, a fine Minoan palace that will transport you back three and a half millennia.

Mount Psilorítis

Mount Ida, also now known as Mount Psiloritis, is the highest mountain in Crete, with the highest summit being Timios Stavros. Mount Ida may be the highest mountain on the mystical island of Crete, but only by a mere 3 m, beating Pachnes, the highest summit of Lefka Ori. Mount Ida holds legends that date back to prehistory and makes an ideal landscape for hiking and exploring higher altitudes.

Hiking routes on Mount Ida

The easiest route to the summit is part of the E4 trail starting at the Ideon Andron cave. Beginning in the Nida Plateau at around 1500 metres high, the way to the summit from here is only about 3 hours. The Nida Plateau is on the east side of the mountain and around 15 km from the village of Anogeia, where there is a road in good condition leading from Heraklion.

For more experienced hikers, there is a trail to the summit from the village of Fourfouras or Kouroutes, with an ascent for more than 2000 metres. The trip typically takes around 8 - 10 hours. All trails and routes are marked with dots of coloured paints and the occasional sign, but be sure to take a map with you for safe measure!

Getting to Mount Ida

Heading for the mountains from Anóyia, a smooth road ascends 21km to an altitude of 1400m on the Nídha Plateau at the base of Mount Psilorítis. Here, at the end of the road and opposite the Taverna Nida, is the path up to the celebrated Idean cave (about a 15min walk) and the start of the way to the top of Mount Psilorítis (2456m).

History of Mount Ida

In Greek mythology, Mount Ida is sacred to the Goddess Rhea and holds the legendary Idaean cave in which the Greek God Zeus was supposedly born.

Climbing Mount Psilorítis

Climbing to the summit of Mount Psilorítis, for experienced and properly equipped hikers, is not at all arduous. The route, which diverts from the path to the Idean Cave just beyond a small chapel, forms a stretch of the E4 Pan-European footpath and is marked with the red arrows and the E4 waymarkers. It should be a 6–8hr return journey to the summit, although in spring, thick snow may slow you down. Don’t attempt the walk alone as you could face a very long wait should you run into trouble, and mobile phones may not have a signal in places.

If you’re prepared to camp on the Nídha plateau (it can be very cold), or rent a room at the Taverna Nida, you could continue on foot the next day down to the southern slopes of the range. It’s a beautiful hike and also relatively easy, four hours or so down a fairly clear path to Vorízia where there is no food or accommodation, although Kamáres, 4km west, has both.

Eastern Crete

Eastern Crete is dominated by Áyios Nikólaos, a small cosmopolitan town and resort, and its close neighbour Eloúnda, the home of luxury hotel and villa complexes, and the gateway to the mysterious islet of Spinalónga. Inland from Áyios Nikólaos, Kritsá with its famous frescoed church and textile sellers and the imposing ruins of ancient Lato make for good excursions. Further inland, the extraordinary Lasíthi Plateau is worth a night’s stay if only to observe its abidingly rural life. Far fewer people venture beyond the road south to Ierápetra and east to Sitía, where only the famous beach at Váï ever sees anything approaching a crowd.

Áyios Nikólaos

ÁYIOS NIKÓLAOS, known simply as “Áyios” to the locals, is set around a supposedly bottomless salt lake, now connected to the sea to form an inner harbour. It is supremely picturesque and has some style and charm, which it exploits to the full. The excellent archeological museum (Tues–Sun 8.30am–3pm; €3) on Paleológou north of the lake, and an interesting Folk Museum (Tues–Sun April–Oct 10am–2pm and 5–7pm; €3) near the tourist office are both worth seeking out. Both the lake and the harbour area are surrounded by charming restaurants and bars.

The small and busy Kitroplatía beach lies just around the southwest corner of the port and is lined with tavernas and cafés, while 1km beyond here, past the marina, lies the much larger, and well-kept, municipal beach. There are further swimming opportunities to the north around Eloúnda, and some great backcountry inland – perfect to explore on a scooter.

Lasíthi Plateau

Scores of daily tour buses visit the LASÍTHI PLATEAU to view the “thousands of white-cloth-sailed windmills” which irrigate the high plain. In fact there are very few working windmills left, although most roadside tavernas seem to have adopted many of those made redundant as marketing features. The drive alone is worthwhile, however, and the plain is a fine example of rural Crete at work, every inch devoted to the cultivation of potatoes, apples, figs, olives and a host of other crops; stay in one of the villages for a night or two and you’ll see real life return as the tourists leave.

Sitía

SITÍA is the port and main town of the relatively unexploited eastern edge of Crete. It’s a pleasantly scenic, offering a plethora of waterside restaurants, a long sandy beach and a lazy lifestyle little affected even by the thousands of visitors in peak season. The town attracts a number of French, Italian and Greek tourists, and it grows on you, perhaps inviting a longer stay than intended. For entertainment there’s the town beach, providing good swimming, windsurfing and diving. In town there’s a small folklore museum (Mon–Fri 10am–1pm; €2), an excellent archeological museum (Tues–Sun 8.30am–3pm; €2) and a Venetian fort to explore. A colourful weekly market takes place on Tuesdays between 7am and 2pm along Odhós Itanou near the archeological museum.

Island escape: Gaidhouronísi

One way to escape the urban hubbub for a few hours is to take a boat to the island of Gaidhouronísi (aka Donkey Island or Chrissi Island ) some 10km out to sea from Ierápetra. No one seems to know how the 5km-long island got its name as there are no donkeys; instead you’ll find a cedar forest, the fabulous “Shell Beach” covered with millions of multicoloured mollusc shells, some good sandy beaches and a couple of tavernas. Excursion boats (May–Sept daily 10.30am & 12.30pm out, 4pm & 7pm return; €24, under-12s €12) leave from Ierápetra seafront harbour, and you can buy tickets on the boat or at any of the town travel agents in advance. The voyage to the island takes fifty minutes and the boats have an on-board bar.

Réthymnon and around

The province of Réthymnon reaches to Mount Psilorítis in the east and towards the White Mountains in the west. The fertile Amari Valley, with its pretty villages, lies in the central plain, while on the south coast, in particular around Plakiás, there are beaches as fine as any Crete can offer.

Réthymnon itself is an attractive and lively city, with some excellent beaches nearby, although the coastline to the east has seen a great influx of tourists, with the development of a whole series of large hotels extending almost 10km along the beach.

Réthymnon

RÉTHYMNON remains one of the most beautiful of Crete’s major cities (only Haniá is a serious rival), with an enduringly provincial air. A wide sandy beach and palm-lined promenade border the old town, a labyrinthine tangle of Venetian and Turkish houses where ancient minarets lend an exotic air to the skyline. Dominating everything from the west is the superbly preserved outline of the fortress built by the Venetians after a series of pirate raids had devastated the town.

Hiking the Amári valley

A good base for touring the Amári valley is Thrónos, a sizeable village at the valley’s northern end with an inviting place to stay, Rooms Aravanes. The proprietor here – Lambros Papoutsakis – is a keen walker and conducts guided treks to the peak of Mount Psilorítis, which at 2456m is Crete’s highest. Although he does guide groups up in the daytime, his preferred approach is during the full moons of June, July and August, which avoids the extreme summer temperatures. Phone in advance for details; it’s not a difficult climb, but you’ll need sturdy footwear and a sleeping bag. The summit is reached at around dawn, and the sunrise is always spectacular: on clear days the mountain offers a breathtaking view of the whole island and its four seas spreading in all directions.

Other hikes from Thrónos include a relatively easy path leading north through the foothills in a couple of hours to themonastery of Arkádhi, while south from Thrónos is an easy stroll on a paved road running back into the main valley via Kalóyerosa. A map detailing these walks is available from Rooms Aravanes.

Western Crete

Crete’s westernmost quarter is one of its least visited, partly because there are no big sandy beaches to accommodate resort hotels, and partly because it’s so far from the great archeological sites. But for mountains, scattered coves and unexploited villages, it’s unrivalled.

The city of Haniá (Chania) is an excellent reason to come here, but the immediately adjacent coast, especially to the west of the city, is overdeveloped and not particularly exciting; if you want beaches head for the south coast or the far west. Here, Paleóhora is the only place which could really be described as a resort, and even this is on a thoroughly human scale; others are emptier still. Elsewhere on the south coast, Ayía Rouméli and Loutró can be reached only on foot or by boat; Hóra Sfakíon sees hordes passing through but few who stay; Frangokástello, nearby, has a beautiful castle and the first stirrings of development. Behind these lie the White Mountains (Lefká Óri) and the famed walk through the Samariá Gorge. In the far west, great beaches at Falásarna and Elafoníssi are mostly visited only as day-trips.

Haniá

HANIÁ, as any of its residents will tell you, is spiritually the capital of Crete, even if the political title was passed back to Iráklion. It is also the island’s most attractive city, especially if you can catch it in spring, when the White Mountains’ snowcapped peaks seem to hover above the roofs. Although it is for the most part a modern city, you might never know it as a tourist. Surrounding the harbour is a wonderful jumble of Venetian streets that survived the wartime bombardments, while simply wandering the old town you will discover old city walls, Ottoman, Byzantine and Minoan ruins. Restoration and gentrification, consequences of the tourist boom, have made inroads of late, but it remains an atmospheric place.

The southwest coast

The ancient capital of the Sfakiá region, Hóra Sfakíon, lies 70km south of Haniá, reached via a spectacular twisting asphalted road over the mountains. It’s the main terminus for gorge walkers, with a regular boat service west along the coast to Ayía Rouméli and Loutro, which are accessible only by foot or boat. Frangokastello, with its castle fortress and sandy beaches, lies a few kilometres east of Hóra Sfakíon, along the coastal road. Other main routes south over the mountains from Haniá are those to the small town of Paleóhora (from the north-coast highway at Tavronítis) and to the laidback seaside village of Soúyia (via Alikianós on the Omalós road).