

### Greece: Exploring Crete

Tour code: JEC

Revised: Nov 05

Rich in natural splendour, and in countless reminders of its ancient and turbulent past, Crete affords an inexhaustible source of vivid impressions. Our introduction to western Crete is Chania, with its busy and colourful market and lively waterfront.

Inland, where the Levka Ori (White Mountains) rise to over 2400m/8000ft, the high ground is riven by a series of deep gorges leading down to the south coast. The Samaria gorge is now a National Forest Park, while the Imbros Gorge was at one time a main route for pack animals across the island. As you hike through this largest of all Greek islands, there are orange and olive groves, forests of cypress, pine and evergreen oak - and a profusion of wild flowers, some of them found only in Crete, for the island is host to more plant species than are found in the whole of the British Isles. This wealth of flowers and herbs sustains a large insect and butterfly population, which, in part, explains the popularity of Crete with migrant birds. Some 250 different species of migrant birds have been identified in Crete. In the high mountains griffon vultures and even lammergeiers may be observed as well as other birds of prey.

You also pass the scattered ruins of former civilizations and occupations, including Roman, Byzantine, Venetian, and Turkish. However to see remains of the earlier Minoan civilisation you will need to spend longer on Crete.

Cretan life reflects its natural surroundings. In the foothill villages, where life is simple and very close to nature, you will meet a proud people, devoted to their customs and traditions, and genuinely generous in their hospitality.

#### GENERAL INFORMATION

##### Travel Information

**First hotel:** In Chania.

**Nearest Airports:** Chania, Heraklion, Athens. From Chania (also called Hania) airport travel by taxi 15km to city centre. From Heraklion either take taxi to bus station (5 minutes), then bus to Chania (2 hours) and another bus to hotel; or take a taxi all the way (1.5 hours/ AU\$115 approx).

From Athens International airport (west terminal) there are several flights daily to Chania airport. From Piraeus (the port of Athens) there is an overnight ferry service to Chania (cabins available at a range of prices; journey time 8 hours).

From the port of Chania at Soudha take bus or taxi to city centre. Local time is 2 hours ahead of Britain. Transfers between airports and first and last hotels not included in tour price.

**End of Tour:** The tour ends on day 8 at Chora Sfakion. Return by bus to Chania (2 hours), and then taxi to airport (15km). If travelling by bus to Heraklion (3 hours) change buses at Vrisses, then taxi from Heraklion to airport (3km).

**Travel options from the UK:** Flights from Gatwick to Chania or Heraklion on Tuesdays only. Charter flights are also available from some regional airports.

**Season:** May to October. Any day (land-only)

A note re swimming – the Libyan sea is deep and only warms up slowly in the summer; don't expect to lounge in the water in May or early June; however by September and into October the sea is usually delightfully warm.

##### Level of Difficulty

**Fitness:** This trek is designed for those who enjoy good rough country walking. The tour is graded 'moderate'. We previously graded our guided tour over this route as 'B+', i.e. on the challenging side of moderate. The paths are very rough and stony; there are long descents (up to 1200m/4000 feet) and ascents (up to 750m/2500 feet) with numerous 'zigzags' ('switchbacks' in American) so that the gradients are generally moderate. Afternoon temperatures may be up to 30 degrees C/ 86 degrees F, or higher in summer. However the tour should present no difficulty to anyone in good general health who is accustomed to hill walking/day hiking in mountainous terrain. The most common problem experienced by those new to walking in Crete is blistering on feet and ankles, which develops faster in the warm conditions. On one day (day 3) there is a possibility of some easy scrambling above the Linoselli pass on the way to Gingilos summit, but as the way back on that day is the same as the way out there is no need to attempt the scrambling section and we do not describe or recommend it. Day stages range up to 18km/11 miles/about 7 hours walking. You only need to carry a daypack but on days 4 and 5 you will need to include overnight things for the two nights at Agia Roumeli. **NB** : Because of the rugged terrain this self-guided tour is not available to singles.

**Waymarks:** There are prominent 'E4' waymarks at occasional intervals along the E4 long distance trail which our route follows on days 4 and 5 and parts of some of the other days. On Days 6 and 7 the routes are not waymarked but are well used and easy to follow with the help of our specially written route notes.

### Baggage Transfers

Where there are roads we arrange local vehicle support to move your baggage but for the stay at Agia Roumeli (nights 4 and 5) it will be necessary to carry overnight requirements.

### Accommodation & Meals

Evening meal, bed and breakfast on the 3 nights spent away from the coast (i.e. at Omalos and at Anopolis); bed and breakfast only on the remaining 4 nights. Other meals can readily be obtained locally.

The standard of accommodation on Crete, as in other parts of Greece, has improved radically in recent years, and we can now normally guarantee modern accommodation with fully en-suite facilities throughout this tour. All the coastal towns and villages have a wide choice of places to eat and shops where picnic materials can be obtained.

**Night 1:** Chania. In Chania your modern hotel is within a short walk of the Venetian harbour, 50m. from the bus station and famous covered market. The bright rooms are equipped with a private bathroom, balcony, telephone and T.V. For your first evening meal there are plenty of places to choose from by the old harbour with its Venetian lighthouse. Continental breakfast is included.

**Nights 2 & 3:** Omalos. Here your accommodation is normally in a friendly and well-designed lodge-style hotel with spacious balconies and stone flag hallways. Dinner is included: the cuisine is local and traditional. Vegetarian dishes are available, including an excellent bean soup as a starter. Breakfast includes yoghurt with honey – both are local produce.

**Nights 4 & 5:** Agia Roumeli. Here your small modern hotel is just behind the long beach of pebbly sand and only 2 minutes walk from the Tara restaurant, which we recommend for your evening meal – a wide choice with freshly cooked traditional dishes and fresh fish available. Rooms have balconies and private facilities. Breakfast – with freshly squeezed orange juice - on a terrace overlooking the Libyan Sea.

**Night 6:** Anopolis. At the mountain village of Anopolis, where you are likely to see local men in traditional dress of baggy trousers and crocheted headgear, you get a feel of the old Crete of 40 years ago. We are using a new English-speaking guesthouse well located overlooking the village square of Anopolis. All rooms have en-suite facilities. The village church is just across the square, but after your long walk today you should

sleep soundly despite the church bells. Dinner is included - menu of limited range, although vegetarian dishes are available.

**Night 7:** Chora Sfakion (also known as Sfakia). On night 7 you return to the coast where your room is close enough to the sea front to hear the waves on the harbour wall. It is also about as close as you can get to the bus station for your departure. Your hotel has its own taverna/restaurant alongside the harbour with a wide choice. Basic continental breakfast.

### Outline Itinerary

**Day 1.** Morning flight from London Gatwick to Heraklion or Chania. Transfer by bus or taxi (not included) to the centrally situated hotel. Rest of afternoon and evening available to explore the town, its old quarter, two harbours, museum, market, and waterfront. It is possible to swim off the town beach to the west of the promenade. There is wide choice of places to dine on the waterfront and elsewhere in the old town.

**Day 2.** Morning in Chania before late morning taxi transfer (included in the tour price) with your baggage to the beautiful Omalos Plateau (1050m) in the heart of the White Mountains. After lunch at tonight's hotel you can either explore the plateau (formerly intensively cultivated) or, with the help of a lift from the hotel to Xiloscalo (1200m/4000 feet) at the head of the Samaria Gorge you can walk up to the Austrian-run Kallergi Mountain Hut (1689m/5540 feet) to enjoy a cold beer and admire the magnificent view before walking back down the track to Omalos in the cool of the early evening.

**Day 3.** After early breakfast a short transfer to Xiloscalo at the head of the Gorge of Samaria. From here your way climbs among scattered trees (cypress and thorny maple) to the refreshing Linoselli spring. The last part of the ascent to the summit of Mt. Gingilos, a rugged peak of 1975m/6480ft involves some scrambling and is above the grade of this tour, but the Linoselli saddle at about 1750m, half-way between the spring and the summit provides an enjoyable, if more leisurely walk with spectacular views in all directions.

You return by the same route back down to the plateau, crossing it on farmers' tracks to return to the hotel. 5.5 hours walking from Xiloscalo to Linoselli saddle and back to Omalos.

**Day 4.** You pack minimum requirements (including your own towel for the beach) for two nights (three days) and leave your main luggage at Omalos to be sent round to Anopolis where you will regain it on day 6. After catching the bus to Xiloscalo you start your walk down the full length of the Gorge of Samaria. This is a popular walk and you are unlikely to be the only ones on the trail, but by starting a little later or a little earlier you can miss the crowds.

The gorge, one of the finest in Europe, is designated a National Forest Park. The forest trees are mostly evergreens: pine, cypress and holly oak,

with massive plane trees close to watercourses. 17 kilometres long, the gorge walls rise in places to 600 metres. The flora of the gorge is particularly abundant in the spring.

On the way down you pass the chapel of Ay. Nikolaos, surrounded by some of the largest and most ancient cypress trees in Crete, and later, the old deserted village of Samaria, a nice spot for a picnic with tables, shade and water. Next, the gorge narrows towards the famous Iron Gates which are at one point a mere two metres wide.

You emerge finally at the village of Ayia Roumeli where you can swim in the Libyan sea and enjoy well-earned drinks and dinner at "Tara", our recommended taverna at the water's edge. 21km/12.5 miles/6 hours walking.

**Day 5.** Today is a favourite for many people: a magnificent coastal walk, at first along the pebbly beach, then above low cliffs through fragrant woodland of Calabrian pine, dropping down at one point to the beach to visit the little church of Aghios Pavlos, where St Paul is said to have landed on his voyage to Rome; then across a bare and rocky hillside before descending to the oasis-like Marble Beach; after a break you continue along the cliffs to Loutro, from where you catch the afternoon boat back to Agia Roumeli.

You should carry swimming things, but there is no need to carry a picnic, as you can buy lunch at Marble Beach or Loutro. 16km/10 miles/5 hours walking.

**Day 6.** After an early start to catch the cool of the morning, you walk along the shore eastwards for an hour or so before turning inland to climb the 600m/2000 ft coastal escarpment, via the dramatic Sellouda mule track, which winds up through the cliffs.

Hopefully you will reach the top just before the shade leaves the path to rest and refresh yourselves while admiring the panorama from this eerie-like spot high above the coast.

After a break you continue on across a barren stony plateau and through pine forest to the almost deserted village of Aradaina perched on the edge of the awesomely deep Aradaina gorge. The village church is a scheduled ancient monument.

You have the choice of crossing the bridge for memorable views down the gorge, or following the village mule track down to the bottom and up the other side, and you reach Anopolis by mid afternoon. 18km/11 miles/7 hours.

If you have enough energy we recommend (either in the early evening or before breakfast) a walk up to the Agia Ekaterini (St Catherine) chapel on a hilltop with an incredible all-round view. This takes about 1 hour.

Close to the chapel are the as yet unexcavated remains of the sizable Roman town of Anopolis.

**Day 7.** There are two alternative walks for today.

(A) Our recommended walk is the traverse of the Imbros Gorge; perhaps the next-best known gorge in Crete after Samaria. You travel with the baggage (included in the tour price) down the long winding road to Chora Sfakion, then after dropping the baggage off continue by bus (11am) or taxi (fares not included) to the village of Komitadhes at the lower end of the gorge. The traverse of the gorge up to Imbros village (moderate grade) takes about 3 hours. At Imbros there is a fairly basic taverna where you can get lunch before catching the afternoon bus back to Chora Sfakion which passes at around 3.30pm. 3 to 3.5 hours walking.

(B) For those who would like another visit to the coast at Loutro you can return to the coast by walking down the remarkable zigzagging muletrack from Ay. Katerini chapel, with extremely fine views along the way, to arrive at Loutro. Here you can linger to enjoy the small pebbly beach and pleasant restaurants of this former fishing village now protected as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. You can then take the afternoon boat, or walk (2.5 hours, challenging grade, head for heights needed) along the coast to Chora Sfakion (the principal port of this rugged area of Crete, also known as Sfakia).

Walking time 2.5 to 5 hours according to whether you walk from Loutro or catch the boat.

**Day 8.** Depart from Sfakia. Direct buses to Chania; or via Vrisses for Heraklion, depart daily at approx. 7am and 11am. Journey time is 2/3 hours. For those spending longer in Crete there is also a bus service along the south coast of Crete from Sfakia to the resort of Plakias and (with one change en route at Spili) to Agia Galini.

### **What's Included**

The price is based on two people sharing twin or double bedrooms (we do not accept single travellers on this tour). 7 breakfasts and 3 evening meals are included. Transfers are included when you move on during the tour as follows: Day 2 (Chania to Omalos, customers plus baggage), Day 4/6 (Omalos to Anopolis, baggage only) and Day 7 (Anopolis to Chora Sfakion, baggage, also customers if required).

There is no baggage transfer to or from Agia Roumeli where you spend nights 4 and 5, as there is no road access. You will therefore need to carry overnight things and a change of clothing (and swimming things if required) in your daypack/rucksack on days 4 and 6.

Also included is a set of detailed day-by-day route notes and directions specially researched by and exclusive to Sherpa Expeditions and a map at 1:100,000 scale (published by Harms Verlag) showing the walking route.

Not included are the evening meals on days 1, 4, 5 and 7, lunches, bus and/or taxi transfers from and

back to airports or elsewhere within Crete (other than those specified above as included), boat ticket from Loutro to Agia Roumeli on day 5 (approx. AU\$10).

### **Extra nights**

Because charter flights between UK and Crete are only at one-week intervals it is not feasible for those travelling by air charter to vary the duration of the stay in Crete except by a whole week. Customers on land only tours or flying via Athens can however book extra nights if required at any of the stops on the walking tour if arranged at the time of booking.

### **On this Self Guided Tour we provide you with:**

Route notes (specially researched by and exclusive to Sherpa Expeditions); maps at 1:80,000 scale. The available maps are not as good as those in west European countries; in particular paths and trails are not accurately shown.

### **Books & Maps**

To whet your appetite we append a list of books and maps, which can in most cases be bought in Chania and Chora Sfakion as well as in London. Several walking guides are available, such as: - Caughey, J. *Off the Beaten Track in Crete*: Cicerone Press;

*Rother Walking Guide to Crete*, distributed in Britain by Cordee and there are inexpensive booklets on birds, flora and fauna. A comprehensive study of flowers and geology is: Polunin, O.

*Flowers of Greece and the Balkans* (OUP. 1987) and for historical ecology: Rackham, O/Moody, J

*The Making of the Cretan Landscape* 1996 Mancs Univ Press. (For information on absolutely everything you see on trek!).

Fascinating on the history of archaeological discovery in Crete, and WWII exploits on Mount Ida, is: Powell, D. *The Villa Ariadne* (Efsthiades). Of the many Battle for Crete memoirs that are available: Eliot, M:

*The Lion of Crete* (Century Hutchinson, 1987) the story of the New Zealand SOE agent who ran a guerilla band in what is now our trekking area, and; Beevor, A.

*Crete, the Battle and the Resistance* (1991) A classic wartime resistance memoir of interest to those who walk the mountains is; Psychoundakis, G. *The Cretan Runner* (translated by P. L. Fermor, who was himself involved in the Cretan resistance).

The 1866 struggle for Independence from the Turks is vividly portrayed in the classic novel; Kazantzakis, N. *Freedom and Death*. and his delightful masterpiece *Zorba the Greek*, set in Crete, is well known. *Zorba* was filmed on location near Chania with Anthony Quinn type-cast in the title role.

There are many general Guidebooks to Crete: *The Blue Guide* is the definitive guide to cultural aspects, and the *Rough Guide to Crete* is good for everyday information.

Nelles Verlag does a useful map of the whole of Crete at scale 1:200,000 and can be obtained from Stanford Ltd, 12 Long Acre, London WC2, Tel: 0207 836 1321. Other maps may be available in Chania.

### **Further Information**

National Tourist Office of Greece in London: tel. 0207495 9300

