

Cruising Crete

Easy-to-find great places to explore on your

own!



GAVDHOS

1. RETHYMNON-The city of Rethymno is located in the center of the northern coast of the island and is the administrative capital of the province of the same name. The city has population of 15,000. Rethymno is a peaceful quiet city, full of Venetian color and reminders of its historic past. The streets are narrow and the picturesque houses are built to about the same height. Among them there are many Venetian noble houses with beautiful staircases, coats of arms and Latin inscriptions. There are also Turkish houses with their charming relics of the Turkish period. The city has a marvelous pier, a beautiful beach (surprisingly free of sunbathers) which stretches 12 kilometers, an impressive public garden and the stunning Venetian Fortress.

2. HERAKLION-It is the fifth largest city in Greece, with a population of 115,000. The air raids of 1941 reduced the city to rubble so that it lacks the old world charm of Rethymno or Hania. Though no great beauty, Iraklion can at least claim to be prosperous, with the highest per capita income of any city in Greece, derived from a combination of shipping, banking and tourism. The city's star attraction is the Archeological Museum full of Minoan treasures, many excavated at Knossos just five kilometers to the south.

3. SPINALONGA-The tiny off-shore island of Spinalonga makes a popular excursion from Agios Nikolaos. Tours depart from the harbor at regular intervals during the day and the round trip takes about four hours. There may be an opportunity to swim during the trip and refreshments are served on larger boats. Otherwise be sure to take something to eat and drink with you. Spinalonga island (which means "Long Thorn" in Italian, a reference to its shape and pointed profile) is noted for having one of Crete's finest and best preserved Venetian fortresses, built here in 1579 to protect the approaches to Spinalonga Bay and the Gulf Of Mirabello.

4. FRANGOKASTELLO-Frangokastello is situated to the east of Chora Sfakion, near the Libyan sea (80 kilometers from Hania). Built by the Venetians in 1371 for their protection from pirates and from Cretan rebels, it is the most impressive and well-preserved castle. The beautiful sea with its beaches is a center of attraction as is the strange story of unexplained human shadows that appear at dawn on May mornings, while the mist is still in the atmosphere. The people of Sfakia say that dead of the castle appear from the sea, exciting the imagination of artists, poets and the rest. It is the most town of any significance on Crete. If you are interested in visiting this part of the island it makes a far more interesting base than Agios Nikolaos, having an easy-going but self-assured Cretan character, little affected by tourism. Tavernas are full of local people and the food is a noticeably better quality than in the major resorts. The town is worth a visit in August when the importance of the local raisin and sultana crop is celebrated with its Sultana Festival. This is one of the liveliest excuses for song, dance and over-consumption to be found in Crete.

6. MATALA-Matala is the best known of the beaches in the Iraklion province. You may still meet people who will assure you that, with its cave-dwelling hippie community, this is "the traveler's" beach on Crete. But that's history. It's about as far from modern reality as the fact that Matala was the place where Zeus swam ashore in the guise of a bull with Europa on his back, or that it was once one of the chief ports of Gortys. The entry to the village should prepare you for what to expect, as you drive in past the new hotels and "welcome To Matala" signs and pull up at the huge car park on the edge of town. It does get better and development is still relatively small scale, but the town never feels anything other than wholly touristy: coach tour arrivals in the afternoon take up every inch on the sand and prices, for rooms especially, are high.

7. AGIOS NIKOLAOS-Agios Nikolaos is 70 kilometers from Heraklion. The bus station and ticket office are behind the archaeological museum, below Megaron Fytaki. The journey to Agios Nikolaos is a beautiful one, passing through a number of attractive villages such as Selinari and the pretty village of Neapolis which lies in a plain planted with almonds and olives, and the famous Monastery of Agios Georgios. Agios Nikolaos is the administrative capital of Lassithi and has about 5,000 inhabitants. It is a beautiful little town with fine beaches for bathing and fishing. There is a small lake called Voulismenis near the harbor in which, according to Greek mythology, the goddess Athena bathed. Every Sunday evening throughout the summer, a folk festival is held here to entertain the tourists and Cretans who visit the attractive capital of Lassithi.

8. PLAKIAS-Plakias itself is growing all the time, so it's no longer the unspoiled village because all too many people arrive here. Even so, it's still some way from the really big league, and if it's not that attractive in itself, it does make a good base for the beautiful countryside and excellent beaches all around. The road comes in from the east, behind the beach, and heads straight into the heart of things along the harbor front. There's basically just a single street that runs inland, rapidly deteriorating into paths which wind up towards Sellia and Mirthios; otherwise everything is strung out in a line facing the sea or in tiny new streets built off the main road.

9. GAVDHOS-Gavdhos island is worth a trip if you want to say that you stood on the most southerly point in Europe. The island is about two hours south of Crete by ferry, and the day trip allows you four hours to explore the tiny harbor at Karabe or walk inland to the main village of Kastri. Local people have taken to meeting the ferry, and providing transport to the island's best beaches, which lie to the north, or the southernmost tip of the island, and of Europe. Tripiti point.

10. SAMARIA GORGE-An excursion to the Gorge of Samaria, via the attractive village of Laki, is particularly worthwhile. The Gorge is 42 kilometers from Hania and begins in the plateau of Omalos, which is 1,050 meters high and has an area of 5,000 acres. The gorge of the Samaria is the largest in Europe. It is 18 kilometers long and varies from two to 40 meters wide, with the sides ranging from 250 to 600 meters high. At the points called the "Iron Gates", it has a width of two to three meters for a distance of about 15 meters. The Gorge ends on the shores of the Libyan Sea at Souyia.

11. PALEOHORA-From being a small southern coast fishing village Paleohora has recently expanded to become one of the island's most enjoyable up-market resorts. A huge new marina development is under construction that will add to the existing attractions but not one hopes-destroy the authentic Creta atmosphere that prevails here at the moment. That Cretan character extends to the fact that the town center is virtually sealed off to traffic at night, when local people leave their homes to play backgammon and drink raki outside the local taverns. Paleohora has two big beaches that can both be viewed from the Castle that sits high above the town, built in 1279 by the Venetians and consisting now of little but the encircling walls.

For more information on these areas please contact Kriti Info at x1288