

Creating the Perfect Crete Plan

Here are some heroic strategies
for getting away with a legendary
Greek vacation.

by Lola Méndez



Greece is celebrated as a destination for diverse vacations that blend together culture, ancient history, and leisurely beach days. Yet one island holds more historic importance (and mystery) than the others, while still offering quintessential Greek bucket-list activities, from dining on local cuisine to visiting historic port cities and idyllic Mediterranean beaches. That island is Crete, the birthplace of Europe's earliest advanced civilization and home of the legendary Minotaur.

ENTER HERE AND BE DELIGHTED

Many travelers stay in Heraklion, the lively Cretan capital on the island's northern coast. But as Greece's fourth-largest city, it can feel hectic and clash with laid-back vacation vibes. Instead, stay in Chania, a slower-paced picturesque port town on the island's northwestern coast with plenty to see, eat, and experience.

Chania is charming, with its 14th-century Venetian Harbor and ancient Old Town, where traces of Crete's Roman, Venetian, and Ottoman heritages are still evident today. It's the perfect place for a late-afternoon stroll, taking in ancient archaeological sites like the Church of Saint Nicholas, a 700-year-old Greek Orthodox church with both a bell tower and a minaret, Venetian mansions, Byzantine Walls, and picturesque medieval alleys, before climbing out to the Chania Lighthouse for epic sunset views over the Old Venetian Harbor.

DIVINE DELICACIES

Monogram is a great place to grab a coffee before exploring the port city. For lunch, try vegetarian renditions of local Cretan specialties at "To Stachi" Bio Slow Food such as giant lima beans cooked with aromatic herbs. Cool off from the afternoon heat with



STARGAZING

Cretan Dream Resort & Spa is a luxurious beachfront property that offers guests culturally-relevant experiences such as Cretan dancing lessons, live Greek music, and stargazing through a telescope with a Greek astronomer who shares Greek mythology related to the stars.



tahini gelato at Domenico. For dinner, go to a tavern loved by locals, The Well of The Turk. Grab a table on the terrace surrounded by bougainvilleas and order family-style. You can't go wrong with ordering *lahmajun*, mushroom *saganaki*, and beetroot dip, followed by a round of ouzo for the table.

Book a suite with a private dipping pool at the nearby Cretan Dream Resort & Spa, a luxurious beachfront property that's locally-owned and offers guests culturally-relevant experiences such as Cretan dancing lessons, live Greek music, stargazing

through a telescope with a Greek astronomer who shares Greek mythology related to the stars, and more. The resort's massive infinity pool overlooks Kato Stalos Beach. The Tavern Restaurant offers a gigantic breakfast buffet featuring Cretan delicacies such as locally made cheese, a selection of pastries, freshly squeezed juices, fresh honey from the resort's apiary, and unlimited Cretan olive oil from the resort's own grove. Visit the olive grove for a sommelier-guided tasting of local wines and cheeses and see the ancient 3,000-year-old olive tree.



Palace of Knossos



Botanical Garden of Crete

Left: GNTU/V. Soulas (palace exterior), iakiss Mias - stock.adobe.com (fresco). Botanical Garden of Crete (calla lily).
 Letters Papadakis - stock.adobe.com (pithoi) Right: gatsi - stock.adobe.com (2 - Preval Beach and river gorge).
 GNTU/V. Soulas (street market), Cretan Dream Resort & Spa (pool), Lola Mender (sommelier)



Palace frescos

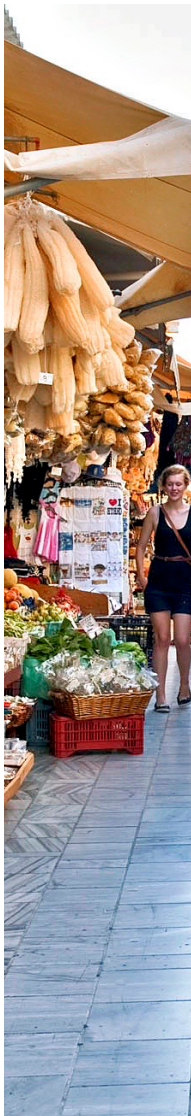
MYTHS AND MOUNTAINS

There's no better way to experience Crete's rich cultural heritage than a day trip to the Palace of Knossos, where Greek mythology comes to life at the Minoan site. The local lore is that children were fed to the Minotaur every eight years, and the labyrinth where the Minotaur once walked can still be seen today. The palace has fully intact *pithoi*, large clay storage jars that are at least 3,700 years old, and a functioning potable water and irrigation drainage system made of clay pipes, including flushable toilets. Nearby is the Heraklion Archaeological Museum with an extensive collection of Minoan artifacts.

Learn about Crete's biodiversity at The Botanical Garden of Crete's trail filled with Cretan herbs, medicinal plants, and Mediterranean fruit trees at the base of the White Mountains. After hiking through the lush gardens, enjoy a fresh lemonade at the open-air restaurant overlooking the gardens and pick up souvenirs like local wines and hot chilis in the gift shop.



Pithoi

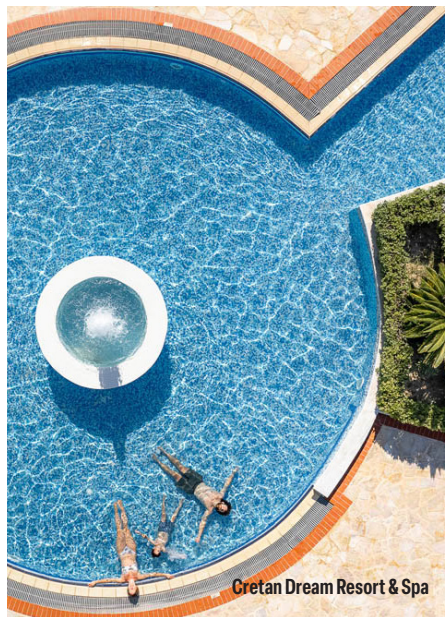


SUN WORSHIP

No trip to a Greek island is complete without beach days, and Crete has over 600 miles of coastline along the Mediterranean Sea and Aegean Sea. But Crete's best beaches aren't easy to reach with access only by boat or by trekking down long staircases. Pack your water shoes and take a picturesque ride on the public ferry to Balos Lagoon in the Sea of Crete and enjoy the secluded island's soft sands and turquoise waters.



Preveli Beach



Cretan Dream Resort & Spa



Palm-lined river gorge

HIKE DOWN

from the parking lot to the left of the beach to a rare oasis where a river gorge meets the sea among a palm grove with wild ducks and turtles.

The ferry also stops at Gramvousa Island, home to a stunning beach and a hilltop Venetian fortress. Or, charter a boat from Notos Mare to Crete's black sand beaches and coastal villages, with a stop in Sfakia for fresh seafood lunch in a darling Libyan Sea port.

If you only visit one beach on the island of Crete, it should be the unique Preveli Beach. Hike down from the parking lot to the left of the beach to a rare oasis where a river gorge meets the sea among a palm grove with wild ducks and turtles. Locals say the palm trees grew after pirates left seeds here during the Ottoman period. Wear your water shoes and walk through the river into the gorge, then back out to the rocky beach for a last, leisurely dip in the serene Libyan Sea. ●

