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THE ISLAND INSIDE YOU

Nothing is repeated in Crete. Enormous geological contradictions and special weather conditions have formed unique landscapes, surprising the visitors and keeping senses constantly alert.

Each route in Crete is unique. Variant sensations, pictures, colors, flavors, sounds accompany visitors at every step.

One can encounter emerald beaches, scrublands, sand dunes, rocky summits, steep slopes, alpine zones, verdant mountains, deep gorges, dry lands, gurgling rivers, scenic ponds, Mediterranean woods, wetlands, fertile meadows, vineyards and olive groves, while the same contrasts are met below sea surface.

Those contradictions favor the development of different ecosystems, significantly increasing the biodiversity of the island.

Fauna
Crete is isolated from other continental regions of Europe, Asia and Africa and this is reflected on the genetic diversity of the island's fauna. From the proud Cretan ibex, the wildcat and the Cretan shrew to the endemic arthropods and bats, the fauna of Crete hides many secrets about the evolution of species in the Eastern Mediterranean.

On the island there are no animals that could harm humans. The ancestors of the Cretans attributed this either to a labor of Hercules in order to honor the birthplace of Zeus, Crete, or to the blessings of Paul the Apostle, who spent two years in Crete.

Avifauna of Crete is considered one of the richest in Europe, home to over 350 bird species. Cretan mountains host the highest insular population of vultures in the world, while along with Corsica, Crete hosts the last couples of lammergeiers in the Balkan Peninsula.

Tip
The Cretan shrew is the only endemic mammal to Greece

Flora
Crete is characterized by a great diversity of landscapes and in combination with its isolated geographic location, it hosts a large number of plant species.

Great Britain, whose area is 40 times larger than the island of Crete, encompasses almost the same number of species of plants. This is indicative of the variety of species available on the island.

Over 1700 species have been recorded up to date in Crete, many of which are endemic. Some remote areas of the island, especially the White Mountains and the surrounding islets are home to many stenoendemic species and subspecies, i.e. plants that are only distributed in this limited area.

Tip
Dittany is the most famous Cretan herb.

Canyons

For millions of years, the geological upheavals are reflected strongly in the intense relief of the island. While mountains rose, the river water continued its corrosional route through the limestone terrain, forming today's "land of gorges", Crete. With more than 400 canyons, Crete hosts the largest number of gorges in Greece.

At the foothills of the White Mountains, the province of Sfakia is home to the most famous gorge in Europe, the imposing Gorge of Samaria. The trail is crossed by thousands of visitors every summer. It starts from the plateau of Omalos, descends through a magical dense forest of cypresses and pine trees, passes between very narrow passages with vertical walls of a height of up to 500m, before reaching the seaside village of Agia Roumeli.

Other well-known hiking canyons of the region are the gorge of Imbros that starts near the plateau Askyfou, the wild canyon of Aradena, the lush green Sfakiano Gorge, the Gorge Kallikratis, the rugged canyon of Tripiti and the famous gorge of Agia Irini which ends at the beach of Sougia. Some green hiking canyons are located at the region of Zourva and Karanou, while Chania also hosts the impressive gorges of Diktamos, Lissos, Topolia, Asfendou, Kambos, Sirikari, Sassalos and more.

Rethymnon hosts several accessible beautiful canyons. The most famous is the Gorge Kourtaliotiko, in which flows the river Megalos that ends at the beautiful beach of Preveli with the dreamy palm grove. The gorge has the largest quantity of water in Crete and river trekking along its bed, from the springs to the beach, is an exciting experience. Other hiking-friendly canyons of Rethymnon include the twin Kollita gorges at the area of Argyroupolis, the gorge Kotsifos by Plakias, the gorge of Saint Anthony at Patsos, the gorge Prasano and the gorge Platania. Next to the town of Rethymnon there are the lush canyons of Myli, Vederi and Gallos.

Heraklion also hosts many canyons, most of which cross the ranges of Psiloritis and Asterousia. Asterousia has wonderful hiking canyons, the most important of which are Agiofarago, Martsalo and Trafoulas. However, the most famous gorge is the canyon Gafaris at Psiloritis, crossing the magnificent oak wood of Rouvas. Other canyons of Psiloritis are the gorge of Kroussonas, through which passes the Minoan path to the Idaean Cave, the gorge Vromonero, the gorge Vorizano and the two small canyons of Asites (Saint Charalambos and Saint Anthony). Near Heraklion city, there are the lush canyons of Karteros, Kounavi, Sylamos, Almyros and Venerato. Moreover, the western slopes of Lassithi Mountains host the canyons of Roza, Ambelos, Apotyposi and the river Aposelemis by Hersonissos.

In the warm and dry area of East Crete, most gorges dry up during the summer, however there are a few green oases, such as the canyon Richtis with the impressive waterfall. The Dikti Mountain Range is home to some very impressive canyons, with the most popular being Sarakina by Mythi, Kritsa, Adrianos, Havgas by Kalamafka and Havgas at Lassithi Plateau. Some more impressive gorges, surrounded mainly by pinewood, are located on Mount Thrypti. Among them, the canyons of Pefki, Orino, Ahlia and Mylonas are the most popular.

The area of Zakros is dominated by the eerie canyon of the Dead, which takes its name after the Minoan graves found in its cavernous walls. Other local gorges are the dry canyons Katsounaki, Lamnoni, Saint Irene and Pervolakia. North Mirabello area also hosts some less known canyons, ideal for easy hiking, such as Kouroukoulos, Havgas by Plaka and Skotini.

Tip
The province of Sfakia gets its name after the word sfax that means "gap". Actually, Sfakia literally means "Land of Canyons".

Falls
On the rugged terrain of Crete, rivers meet large faults and steep descents during their course through the canyons, forming hundreds of small and high waterfalls.

Even locals are unaware of the existence of several waterfalls, as most of them are invisible and hidden in the impassable gorges. The vast majority has water from the first months of the year by the end of spring.

The most famous waterfalls with water flowing all year round are the falls of Kourtaliotis by Plakias, Richtis near Sitia and Mylonas near Ierapetra. Impressive waterfalls are formed in winter along the large fault of the Asterousia Range, with the most famous being the fall Lichnistis at Maridaki and the impressive waterfall of Ambas by Paranymfi. A large number of winter waterfalls are also found at Mount Kedros, with the most famous being Selinara, Gre Dafni and Rechtara.

Crossing gorges of Crete with high waterfalls is possible only by using technical equipment. Appropriate training in canyoneering techniques can be offered by specialist companies on the island. The most popular technical canyons of Crete include the imposing gorge Ha, Tsoutsouras, Kalami, the gorge of Arvi (which turns into a dark underground river after an 80m high fall) and many more.

Tip
The Mastoras waterfall at the side of gorge Ha is 215m high and it is the highest fall in Greece.

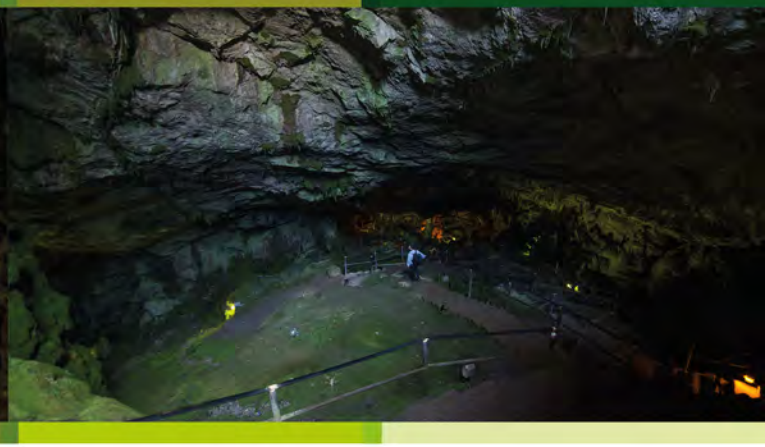
Trekking
The best way to explore Crete is to walk off the beaten track, beyond the places reached by car, follow ancient paths, explore the magnificent scents of herbs in the canyons, climb on the tops of the highest mountains and enjoy the view to the deep blue Cretan and Libyan Sea on the horizon.

The E4 European Long Distance Path encompasses a large network of trails with special cultural, natural and historical value. It is marked by the European Ramblers Association and crosses the island from Kissamos to Zakros. Hikers have the opportunity to explore a wide range of landscapes of great diversity. Apart from the E4, there are plenty of options of majestic mapped routes.

A large part of the trails runs through areas which have been declared protected. The most famous of these is the National Reserve of the White Mountains (Lefka Ori), one of the seven reserves of Greece, which is home to Samaria Gorge. Other protected areas of outstanding natural beauty, such as areas labeled as Natura 2000, are the entire ranges of Dikti, Ida (Psiloritis), Kedros, Asterousia, Youchtas and Thripti, the peninsulas Gramvousa, Rodopos and Sidero, all the islands that surround the island and special sites like Lafonissi, Georgioupolis, Cape Lithino, the rocky coastline west of Rethymnon, etc.

Moreover, the lovers of geo-tourism can discover new places, especially after the declaration of Psiloritis Range and Sitia mountains as Protected Geoparks. Such projects aim at promoting such places and providing information about them.

Tip
Nine mountaineering and trekking clubs operate in Crete, indicating the love of locals for Cretan nature.



Underground world
The existence of numerous caves is inextricably linked to the rugged topography of Crete.

People lived in caves thousands of years ago, as evidenced by the prehistoric carvings in the cave Skordilakia by Asfendou. Moreover, today's religious tradition in the caves, which hosts cavernous chapels, is an evolution of the worship of ancient gods inside caves. Originally, the Minoans worshipped their major deities, such as Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth, in caves. Later, they placed the birth and upbringing of the king of the gods, Zeus, in the Diktaean and Idaean caves, turning them into important religious centers. During the Byzantine era, caves which according to tradition hosted Saints, such as Saint Paul, Gerasimos and John Xenos, were converted to important ascetic communities. Many pages of Cretan history were also written in the caves of Crete, such as the massacres in the caves of Melidoni, Milatos, Krionerida and Tigani at Gramvousa.

Many caves are of very high speleological and ecological significance. Caves with rich decoration which are open to visitors are the Diktaean Cave by Psychro, Gerontospilios by Melidoni and Sfendoni by Zoniana. Besides the caves of religious or historical value, Crete has more than 4.500 mapped caves and sinkholes, available to each experienced speleologist who wants to enjoy their rich decoration and fauna. Areas that host a large number of caves, ideal for cavers, is mount Stroumboulas by Heraklion, the Geopark of Sitia, the Geopark of Psiloritis and Melidoni area in the White Mountains.

Tip

The three deepest explored sinkholes in Greece are all located in Crete. Deepest is Gourgouthakas at White Mountains whose depth has been explored up to 1208m.

Forested Areas

Crete was once covered with dense forests, thus its mountains were called "Idea", i.e. wooded. Unfortunately these forests have almost disappeared due to logging, overgrazing and fires. Even so, the few remaining forests are some of the most beautiful landscapes in Crete and a typical sample of the Mediterranean vegetation that once covered the entire island.

Each area of Crete has its own characteristic trees. The provinces Apokoronas and Sfakia are covered with cypresses, Thrypti has mainly pines, the lowlands of central Crete host arbutus, the humid areas of Kissamos are covered with chestnuts, while the Diktaean and the White Mountains are home to oaks.

The most important cypress woods are met at the National Reserve of the White Mountains, Kroustas, the lowlands of Apokoronas and the mountainous province of Kydonia. The greatest oak wood is located at Rouvas at Psiloritis and it is home to rare animals and plants, including the endemic Cretan wildcat and the orchid Cephalanthera cuculata. Extensive pine woods are formed at the mountain of Thripti, at eastern Dikti, Sfakia, Asterousia Range and southern Psiloritis. More specifically, the pine woods of Selakano, Vorizia and Kato Symi are the largest beekeeping areas in Crete.

Woods of special tree species are also formed in various parts of the island, such as the famous groves of the Cretan Date Palm at Vai and Preveli beach. Also, Azilakodasos near Malia is the largest forest of holm oaks in Crete, while the area of Tris Ekklisies hosts the largest native forest of carob trees in Europe.

Tip
In ancient times, Crete was known as the land of cypress.

Living Monuments
Either due to their enormous size or following legends, some trees in Crete have been declared natural monuments. Among the most famous of them are the evergreen plane-tree of Ancient Gortys, under which Zeus and Europe mated and, thus, Minos was born.

Many of the monumental trees have been officially designated as monuments of nature by the Greek state. One of them is the oversized hawthorn of Ancient Zominthos. Some other trees have been associated with the struggles of the Cretans for liberation, such as the huge tree of Mandalenis at Korfes, the plane tree of the Pente Parthenes at Ancient Lappa and the oak tree of Ismael at Mathia. Monumental ancient plane trees are met in Krassi, Vlatos and within the monasteries of Saint George Gorgolainis, Saint John at Gionas and Holy Fathers at Azogyres.

In Crete there are many ancient olive trees that have been declared monumental by the Association of Cretan Olive Municipalities. The oldest olive trees in the world are located at the location Azorias by Kavoussi and Ano Vouves by Chania. The crowns for the winners of the Women's and Men's marathon at the Olympic Games held in Athens in 2004 were cut from these trees. At Anissaraki by Kandanos we meet an entire park of monumental olive trees, but also in Palea Roumata, Asomati, Ancient Elefthema, Genna, Lastros, Panassos, etc.

Tip

The ancient myrtle at the monastery of Paliani is considered sacred and celebrates on the feast day of the Virgin Mirtidiotissa. This is considered a residue from the worship of trees in the Minoan religion.

Wetlands

Crete has limited water resources, due to its geographical location and weather conditions. Dams and artificial reservoirs have been built at several sites of the island in order to meet the increasing needs for water supply. After their construction, all of them soon were transformed into very important wetlands, enriching the biodiversity of the island.

The largest natural lake in Crete is located at Koumas by Georgioupolis, where visitors can watch birds from the local watch tower. Small but important natural ponds with water all year round are also located at Tersanas by Chania, at Mohos and Thrapsano while seasonal ponds are met at Orne, Parakalouri, Ziros, Omalos by Viannos, Achendrias, Stroumboulas, various plateaus of the northern province of Mirabello, Gergeri and several more places. Artificial lakes where one can observe birds are located at Ayia by Chania, at Votomos by Zaros, at the large dams of Bramiana, Aposelemis, Faneromeni, Potami and the numerous small dams in the hinterland of Heraklion.

Rivers and wetlands that are home to large populations of wading birds are also found in numerous sites of the island. The most famous include the estuaries of the rivers Aposelemis, Anapodaris, Almiros by Gazi, Preveli, Platys, Almiros by Agios Nikolaos, Kyliaris and the four rivers of Georgioupolis. Other extremely important locations are the saltpans of Xerokambos, Gavdos, Chrissi and the marshes of Malia, Katalyki and Falassarna.

Tip

Bird watching at the wetlands of Crete is a great activity, especially during the seasons of bird migration: autumn and spring.

Collecting Experiences
Smells from kneading and vintage, agricultural works in olive groves and vineyards, wandering in the whitewashed streets and through the village squares, voices of children playing around, bleating animals...

Pictures that today are like distant memories. Yet the visitor of Crete can still come in contact with this traditional way of life, while staying in one of the rural villages or one of the many agritourism cottages scattered all over the island, which can offer similar experiences.

Agritourism lodges and some specialized companies provide seminars for traditional cooking, pastry, kneading bread and collecting wild greens, herbs, mushrooms, snails and truffle. Moreover, one can participate in the harvest of olives, the process of olive oil production, distillation of raki, vintage, honey production, vegetable cultivation, milking and processing of dairy products, raising domestic animals, shearing sheep, etc.

Organizations for nature
The ecological and environmental significance of Crete is the main subject for many organizations of the island. Every year, many clubs and associations organize actions related to environmental protection and public awareness. Protection of sea turtles, cleaning wetlands, bird watching, releasing birds of prey, exhibitions and seminars are some of the most common activities on the island, which intend to sensitize and inform people.

The Natural History Museum of University of Crete usually implements major actions and studies on the natural history and biodiversity of the island, while offering guests a unique experience through its rich exhibition.

The aquarium "Thalassocosmos" of the Hellenic Centre for Marine Research is an excellent means of acquaintance with marine life. 1.7 million liters of sea water host about 200 species of the Mediterranean, from the large shark to the small seahorses. Through constant training activities, children and adults learn about the magical underwater world. It is the largest aquarium in Greece and one of the most important in the Mediterranean.

Important efforts are also made for informing visitors about local communities. Omalos plateau hosts the Information Centre for the White Mountains National Reserve and in the Gorge of Samaria there are two exhibitions highlighting the human interaction with the local nature.

Tip
Since 2004, Kolimvari is home to a museum dedicated to the Cretan wild plants