

History

Crete's colourful history goes back 5000 years and is evident across the island, from ancient palaces and Roman cities to spectacular Byzantine churches, Venetian fortresses and Ottoman buildings. Crete's prominent place in world history is a legacy of the illustrious Minoan civilisation that was living in grand palaces when the rest of Europe was still in primitive huts. Crete has also left an indelible mark in the popular imagination because of its prominent place in ancient Greek mythology. It was where Rhea gave birth to Zeus and hid him from his child-gobbling father, and it was Zeus' son Minos who became the legendary King of Minoan Crete. Icarus and Daedalus launched their ill-fated flight in Crete, while Theseus made the voyage from Athens to Crete to slay the Minotaur in the famous labyrinth.

Crete's more recent history has been characterised by war and struggle, as the island was a strategic pawn in the battles for control of the Mediterranean. Crete has been invaded numerous times and ruled by eight different foreign powers since Minoan times – by the Mycenaeans, Dorians, Romans, Venetians, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans and Germans. That Crete only united with Greece in 1913 explains its enduring independent spirit.

THE MINOANS

The Minoans were the first advanced civilisation to emerge in Europe in the Bronze Age, predating the great Mycenaean civilisation on the Greek mainland. Minoan civilisation drew its inspiration from two great Middle Eastern civilisations: the Mesopotamian and Egyptian. Immigrants arriving from Anatolia around 3000 BC brought with them the skills necessary for making bronze, a technological quantum leap that enabled the emerging Minoans to flourish almost uninterrupted for over one-and-a-half millennia.

While many aspects of Neolithic life endured during the Early Minoan period, the advent of bronze allowed the Minoans to build better boats and thus expand their trade opportunities. Pottery and goldsmithing became more sophisticated, foreshadowing the subsequent great achievements of Minoan art, and the island prospered from trade.

Controversy still shrouds the mysterious Minoans. Evidence uncovered in the grand palaces on Crete indicates they were a peaceful, sophisticated, well-organised and prosperous civilisation with robust international trade, splendid architecture and art and seemingly equal status for women. They had highly developed agriculture, an extensive irrigation system as well as advanced hydraulic sewerage systems. They may have spoken an early Indo-Iranian

The mythical Talos, a bronze giant, is believed to be the first robot invented. Hephaestus offered him as a servant to King Minos. He had one vein from neck to ankle, where a bronze nail retained the blood.

TIMELINE

6500 BC

Crete's early inhabitants hunt and fish and engage in ancestor worship. Neolithic people live in caves or wooden houses, worship female fertility goddesses, farm, raise livestock and make primitive pottery.

3000 BC

Immigrants from the North African or Levantine mainland arrive with the skills for making bronze, heralding the Bronze Age in Crete. In this Pre-Palatial period, society changes; the inhabitants begin to trade; pottery and jewellery making develops.

2000 BC

The first palaces are built in Knossos, Phaestos, Malia and Zakros. Minoan civilisation reaches its peak. Architectural advances are accompanied by great strides in pottery production techniques. The first Cretan script emerges.

KING MINOS: MAN OR MYTH?

The legend of King Minos has captured the imagination of generations of scholars intent on finding evidence of the events described by Homer in *The Odyssey*: 'Out on the dark blue sea there lies a rich and lovely land called Crete that is densely populated and boasts 90 cities... One of the 90 cities is called Knossos and there for nine years, King Minos ruled and enjoyed the friendship of the mighty.'

The legendary ruler of Crete was the son of Zeus and Europa and attained the Cretan throne with the help of Poseidon. With Knossos as his base, Minos gained control over the whole Aegean basin, colonising many of the islands and ridding the seas of pirates. He married Pasiphae, the daughter of Helios, who bore him a number of children, including the infamous half-bull, half-human Minotaur.

How long King Minos actually reigned, however, is open to debate. The Homeric reference *enneaoros* used to describe Minos could mean 'for nine years' or 'from the age of nine years'. Was Minos able to create an empire in nine short years, or was he a long-reigning monarch who started his kingly career as a boy? He eventually came to a nasty end in Sicily when the daughters of King Kokalios poured boiling water over him as he was taking a bath.

language, and the accounts and records left behind suggest their society was organised as an efficient and bureaucratic commercial enterprise.

Although the evidence for a matriarchal society is scant, women apparently enjoyed a great degree of freedom and autonomy. Minoan art shows women participating in games, hunting and all public and religious festivals. They also served as priestesses, administrators and participated in the trades.

Not everyone buys into this rosy account of life in Minoan times; one radical archaeologist claims it was more likely a sinister society based on a death cult, with sacrificial orgies, and even argues that the distinctive giant *pithoi* were used as burial urns, not storage.

Even the chronology on the Minoan age is still debated. But most archaeologists generally split the Minoan period into three phases: Protopalatial (3400–2100 BC), Neopalatial (2100–1450 BC) and Postpalatial (1450–1200 BC). These periods roughly correspond, with some overlap, to the older divisions of Early Minoan (some parts also called Pre-Palatial), Middle Minoan and Late Minoan (the terms are used interchangeably throughout this book).

The Minoan civilisation reached its peak during the Protopalatial period, also called the Old Palace or Middle Minoan period. Around 2000 BC, the large palace complexes of Knossos, Phaestos, Malia and Zakros were built, marking a sharp break with Neolithic village life.

During this period, Crete is believed to have been governed by local rulers, with the island's power and wealth concentrated at Knossos. Society was organised on hierarchical lines, with a large population of slaves, and there were great architectural advances.

For photos and descriptions of more than 50 Minoan sites around Crete, see archaeology buff Ian Swindle's comprehensive website at www.uk.digiserve.com/mentor/minoan/index.htm.

The first Cretan script also emerged during this period. At first highly pictorial, the writing gradually changed from the representations of natural objects to more abstract figures that resembled Egyptian hieroglyphics.

In 1700 BC the palaces were suddenly destroyed by what most archaeologists believe was an earthquake. In what is considered the Minoan golden age, the Minoans then rebuilt the palaces at Knossos, Phaestos, Malia and Zakros to a more complex design centuries ahead of its time. There were multiple storeys, sumptuous royal apartments, grand reception halls, storerooms, workshops, living quarters for staff and an advanced drainage system. The design later gave rise to the myth of the Cretan labyrinth (see the boxed text, p160).

During the Neopalatial period, the Minoan state developed into a powerful thalassocracy, purportedly ruled by King Minos with the capital based at Knossos. Trade with the eastern Mediterranean, Asia Minor and Egypt continued to boom and was helped by Minoan colonies in the Aegean. Minoan pottery, textiles and agricultural produce such as olive oil and livestock subsequently found ready markets throughout the Aegean, Egypt, Syria and possibly Sicily.

Minoan civilisation came to an abrupt and mysterious halt beginning around 1450 BC after the palaces (except for Knossos) and numerous smaller settlements were smashed to bits. New scientific evidence suggests the Minoans were weakened by a massive tsunami and ash fallout from a cataclysmic volcano that erupted on nearby Santorini (see boxed text, p26). But there is much debate about both the timing and explanation for the ultimate demise of the Minoans. Some argue it was caused by a second, powerful earthquake a century later. Other archaeologists blame the invading Mycenaeans. Whether the Mycenaeans caused the catastrophe or merely profited from it, it is clear that their presence on the island closely coincided with the destruction of the palaces and Minoan civilisation.

MYCENAEAN CRETE

The Mycenaean civilisation, which reached its peak between 1500 and 1200 BC, was the first great civilisation on the Greek mainland. Named after the ancient city of Mycenae, it is also known as the Achaean civilisation after the Indo-European branch of migrants who had settled on mainland Greece.

Unlike Minoan society, where the lack of city walls seems to indicate relative peace under some form of central authority, Mycenaean civilisation was characterised by independent city-states, the most powerful of them all being Mycenae, ruled by kings who inhabited palaces enclosed within massive walls on easily defensible hilltops.

The Mycenaeans wrote in Linear B script (see the boxed text, p27). Clay tablets inscribed with the script found at the palace of Knossos is evidence of Mycenaean occupation of the island. Their colonisation of Crete lasted

Beyond the rich artistic and cultural legacy, the Minoans also invented the earliest 'flushing' toilet and advanced sewerage systems, described in detail on www.thelumber.com.

The Minoans knew how to enjoy themselves – playing board games, boxing, wrestling and performing bold acrobatic feats including the sport of bull-leaping, while Minoan dancing was famous throughout ancient Greece.

1700 BC

Minoan palaces are destroyed, most likely by an earthquake. The Minoans rebuild the palaces to a more complex and lavish design with multiple storeys, storerooms, workshops, living quarters for staff and an advanced drainage system.

1450 BC

Minoan culture comes to an abrupt and unexplained halt. The palaces (except Knossos) are destroyed in what archaeologists now believe was a massive tsunami following the earthquake in Thira (Santorini).

1400 BC

The Mycenaeans colonise Crete, building new cities such as Lappa (Argyroupolis), Kydonia (Hania) and Polyrrinia. The manufacture of weapons flourishes, the fine arts fall into decline. Greek gods replace worship of the Mother Goddess.

1100 BC

The Dorians overrun the Mycenaean cities and become Crete's new masters. They reorganise the political system, divide society into classes. A rudimentary democracy replaces monarchical government.

431–386 BC

While Greece is embroiled in the Peloponnesian War, Crete is busy with its own internal battles, Knossos against Lyttos, Phaestos against Gortyna, Kydonia against Apollonia, Itanos against Ierapitna. An earthquake wreaks havoc in 386.

67 BC

The Romans finally conquer Crete after starting their invasion two years earlier in Kydonia. Gortyna becomes the new capital and the island's most powerful city. A new era of peace follows as internal wars end.

from 1400 to 1100 BC. Knossos probably retained its position as capital of the island, but its rulers were subject to the mainland Mycenaeans. The Minoan Cretans either left the island or hid in its interior while the Mycenaeans founded new cities such as Lappa (Argyroupolis), Kydonia (Hania) and Polyrrinia.

The economy of the island stayed more or less the same, still based upon the export of local products, but the fine arts fell into decline. Only the manu-

CRETAN TSUNAMI

The sudden demise of the Minoans has been one of archaeology's biggest mysteries, but new scientific evidence confirms that they were wiped out by a cataclysmic tsunami more powerful than the 2004 Asian Tsunami.

In deposits found at key sites up to 7m above sea level, scientists discovered Minoan pottery, cups and building materials mixed up with pebbles, sea shells and tiny marine life that experts say could only have been scooped up from the seabed by something as strong as a tsunami.

Archaeologist Joseph Alexander MacGillivray, who has spent more than 25 years in Crete studying the Minoans, says tsunami science has been able to explain the scale of the disaster and answer many questions baffling archaeologists.

'When that wave hit the north coast, it was 23m high and 15km long. Three waves came ashore and the Minoan cities on the coast were wiped out,' says MacGillivray, who is in charge of the British School of Archaeology's excavations at Palekastro (see the boxed text, p198).

Radiocarbon dates for the deposits on Crete coincide with the massive volcanic eruption 70km north on Santorini around 1500 BC.

MacGillivray says 7cm of undisturbed Thira ash was found as far as Zakros, on the eastern coast. While the waves would not have reached Knossos, the damage to crops, their ports and fleets would have decimated the society.

The timing also explains what the Minoans were doing in Egypt soon after 1500 BC, requesting the breath of life from Pharaoh Hatshepsut.

'We've known for a century that the Minoans only went for that one period and now we think they went specifically to ask for help from the Pharaoh, who was the most powerful person on earth at that time.'

DNA science and the human genome have also provided some clues to the origins of the Minoans, including a new theory that the Bronze Age migration may have come from Troy, in northwest Anatolia.

French accountant Hubert la Marle's decipherment of Linear A script showed the Minoans spoke a language that came from Persia (Iran), but MacGillivray says it may not necessarily have travelled with the major population. 'There is an Iranian DNA in Crete but it does not seem as strong as the Trojan one. But this is just the beginning of the study,' he says.

As for the controversial theory that it could be Plato's lost continent of Atlantis, MacGillivray says Plato was 'no idiot...The classical Greeks had a very good idea of Minoan history because it was part of Greek history...they knew where Crete was.'

facture of weapons flourished, reflecting the new militaristic spirit that the Mycenaeans brought to Crete. The Mycenaeans also replaced worship of the Mother Goddess with new Greek gods such as Zeus, Hera and Athena.

Mycenaean influence stretched far and wide, but eventually weakened by internal strife; they were no match for the warlike Dorians.

DORIAN CRETE & THE CLASSICAL AGE

Despite fierce resistance, the Dorians conquered Crete around 1100 BC, causing many of the inhabitants to flee to Asia Minor. Those who remained, known as Eteo-Cretans or true Cretans, retreated to the hills and thus preserved their culture.

The Dorians heralded a traumatic break with the past. The next 400 years are often referred to as Greece's 'dark age', although it would be unfair to dismiss the Dorians completely: they brought iron with them and developed a new style of pottery, decorated with striking geometrical designs. They also worshipped male gods instead of fertility goddesses and adopted the Mycenaean gods of Poseidon, Zeus and Apollo, paving the way for the later Greek religious pantheon.

The Dorians reorganised the political system of Crete and divided the society into three classes: free citizens who owned property and enjoyed political liberty (which included land-holding peasants); merchants and seamen; and slaves. The monarchical system of government was replaced by a rudimentary democracy. Ruling committees were elected by free citizens and set policy. They were guided by a council of elders and answered to an assembly of free citizens. Unlike Minoan times, women were condemned to a subordinate role.

The Man Who Deciphered Linear B, by Andrew Robinson, tells the fascinating story of Michael Ventris, the young genius who cracked the code in 1952, solving one of archaeology's greatest linguistic mysteries and establishing Linear B as the oldest European writing system.

DECIPHERING THE MYSTERIES OF LINEAR B

The methodical decipherment of the Linear B script by English architect and part-time linguist Michael Ventris in 1952 gave the first tangible evidence that the Greek language had a recorded history longer than any scholar had previously believed. The language was an archaic form of Greek 500 years older than the Ionic Greek used by Homer.

Linear B was written on clay tablets that lay undisturbed for centuries until they were unearthed at Knossos in Crete. Further tablets were unearthed later on the mainland at Mycenae, Tiryns and Pylos in the Peloponnese and at Thebes in Boeotia in Central Greece.

The clay tablets, found to be mainly inventories and records of commercial transactions, consist of about 90 different signs, and date from the 14th to the 13th centuries BC. Little of the social and political life of these times can be deduced from the tablets, although there is enough to give a glimpse of a fairly complex and well-organised commercial structure.

Importantly, what is clear is that the language is undeniably Greek, thus giving the modern-day Greek language the second-longest recorded written history, after Chinese.

27 BC

AD 63

250

395

727

824

Crete united with Libya to form the Roman province of Cyrene.

Christianity emerges after St Paul visits Crete and leaves his disciple, Titus, to convert the island.

The first Christian martyrs, the so-called Agii Deka (Ten Saints) are killed in the village of the same name, as Christian persecutions begin in earnest.

The Roman Empire splits and Crete is ruled by Byzantium. Crete becomes a self-governing province with Gortyna as its administrative and religious centre. Piracy decreases, trade flourishes and many churches are built.

Crete's icon worship provokes a revolt after Emperor Leo III bans their worship as part of the iconoclastic movement. The uprising is smashed and the Byzantine emperors unleash a fierce wave of retribution.

The Arabs conquer Crete and establish a fortress called Chandax (Iraklio) to store their pirated treasure. As the island's criminal reputation grows, its economy dwindles and cultural life grinds to a halt.

By about 800 BC, local agriculture and animal husbandry had become sufficiently productive to trigger a resumption of maritime trading. As new Greek colonies were established throughout the Mediterranean basin, Crete took on a prominent trade role.

The people of the various city-states were unified by the development of a Greek alphabet, the verses of Homer and the founding of the Olympic Games. The establishment of central sanctuaries, such as Delphi, for the first time gave Cretans a sense of national identity as Greeks.

Rethymno, Polyrrinia, Falasarna, Gortyna, Phaestos and Lato were built according to the new defensive style of Dorian city-states, with a fortified acropolis at the highest point, above an agora (marketplace), a bustling commercial quarter, and beyond it residential areas.

The 6th-century-BC *Laws of Gortyna*, discovered at the end of the 19th century AD at Gortyna, open a window onto the societal structure of Dorian Crete. Inscribed on 12 large stone tablets, the laws covered civil and criminal matters, with clear distinctions drawn among the classes of free citizens and between citizens and slaves. They are still in situ at the site.

As the rest of Greece entered its golden age from the 6th to 4th centuries BC, Crete remained a backwater. Constant warfare between large commercial centres and smaller traditional communities left the island increasingly impoverished. Although Crete did not participate in the Persian wars or the Peloponnesian War, economic circumstances forced many Cretans to sign up as mercenaries in foreign armies or turn to piracy.

During this time, Crete's role as the birthplace of Greek culture drew the attention of philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who wrote extensively about Crete's political institutions.

Knossos, Gortyna, Lyttos and Kydonia (Hania) continued to vie for supremacy, causing ongoing turmoil. Egypt, Rhodes and Sparta got involved in the Cretan squabbles and piracy flourished.

ROMAN RULE

While Alexander the Great was forging his vast empire in the East, the Romans expanded theirs to the west and began making inroads into Greece. Their various interests in Crete included reducing piracy and exerting control over important sea routes. The Roman presence in Crete dates back to the 3rd century BC, but it wasn't until the second Mithridatic War (74–64 BC) that they used piracy as an excuse for intervention. Marcus Antonius, father of Mark Antony, undertook an unsuccessful naval campaign against Crete. The Cretans tried to negotiate and send envoys to Rome, but they were rebuffed. Expecting a Roman invasion, the island united and assembled an army of 26,000 men. The Roman campaign began in 69 BC under the Roman consul Metellus near Kydonia, and spread throughout the island. Although the Cretans fought valiantly, the Romans succeeded in subjugating the island two years later.

Minotaur: Sir Arthur Evans and the Archaeology of the Minoan Myth, by Joseph Alexander MacGillivray, is a fascinating portrait of the British archaeologist who revealed the palace of Knossos to the world, and a study in relative archaeology.

Although Crete lost power and influence under the Romans, a new era of peace was ushered in, ending Crete's internal wars. Crete did not mount a major challenge to Roman rule, although it became embroiled in the later rivalry between Antony and Octavian, both of whom punished the cities that supported their rival.

In the early years of Roman rule, parts of Crete were given as favours to various Roman allies. In 27 BC Crete was united with Libya to form the Roman province of Cyrene. The Romans built the first new cities since Minoan times, with Gortyna becoming the capital and most powerful city in Crete. The Romans built an amphitheatre, temples and public baths, and the population increased. Knossos appeared to fall into disuse, but Kydonia (Hania) in the west became an important centre. Roman towns were linked by a network of roads, bridges and aqueducts, parts of which can still be seen today. Under the Romans, the Cretans continued to worship Zeus in the Dikteon and Ideon Caves, and also incorporated Roman and Egyptian deities into their religious rituals.

CHRISTIANITY & BYZANTINE CRETE

Christianity arrived early in Crete with St Paul's visit in AD 63. He left it to his disciple, Titus, to convert the island. Titus became the first bishop of Crete. Little is known about the early years of Christianity in Crete, but by the 3rd century persecution of Christians began in earnest. The first Christian martyrs were the so-called Agii Deki (Ten Saints) killed in the village of the same name in AD 250.

In 324 Emperor Constantine I (also known as Constantine the Great), a Christian convert, transferred the capital of the empire from Rome to Byzantium, which was renamed Constantinople (now İstanbul). By the end of the 4th century, the Roman Empire was formally divided into western and eastern sections; Crete, along with the rest of Greece, found itself in the eastern half. While Rome went into terminal decline, the eastern capital grew, long outliving its western counterpart (the Byzantine Empire lasted until the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453).

Crete was a self-governing province in the Byzantine Empire with Gortyna as its administrative and religious centre. Piracy decreased and trade flourished, leaving the island wealthy enough to build many churches. Crete's attachment to the worship of icons provoked a revolt in 727 when Emperor Leo III banned their worship as part of the iconoclastic movement. The uprising was smashed and the Byzantine emperors unleashed a fierce wave of retribution.

Byzantine rule was interrupted around 824 when the Arabs conquered Crete. The Arabs established a fortress called Chandax in what is now Iraklio, essentially to store their pirated treasure. As the island's criminal reputation grew its economy dwindled and its cultural life ground to a halt.

The Byzantines were in no position to help Crete despite its strategic importance. They had enough problems defending territories closer to home.

You can take a virtual step-by-step video tour of Knossos on the British Archaeological School at Athens website, www.bsa.ac.uk.

960

Byzantine general Nikiforos Fokas attacks Chandax in a bitter siege, retaking Crete. The Byzantines fortify the Cretan coast. Chandax becomes the island's capital and seat of the Cretan archdiocese. A powerful land-holding class emerges.

1204

After the sacking of Constantinople by Crusaders, Boniface of Montferrat sells Crete to Venice. Venice rapidly colonises Crete and starts building towns and defences in Rethymno, Hania, Iraklio and across the island.

1363

Venetians swiftly quell an uprising by Crete's feudal leaders (Venetians and Cretans) attempting to establish an independent state under the name of St Titus.

1453

Constantinople falls to the Turks. Byzantine scholars and intellectuals flee to Crete, sparking a renaissance of Byzantine art. The Cretan School of icon painting emerges, combining Byzantine and Venetian elements.

1645

A huge Turkish force lands in Hania, provoked by a pirate attack on a Turkish ship off the Cretan coast. The Turks establish their first foothold on the island. After Rethymno is defeated, the Turks secure the western part of the island.

1669

After keeping the enemy at bay for 21 years, Iraklio (Candia) finally falls to the Turks. Crete falls under Ottoman rule, except for Spinalonga and Souda (which fall in 1715). Mosques and Turkish monuments are built.

History of Crete, by Theoharis E Detorakis, is an extraordinarily complete guide to Cretan history from the Minoan times up to (but not including) the Battle of Crete.

Not until the Byzantine general Nikiforos Fokas attacked Chandax in a bitter siege in 960 did the Arabs finally yield.

The Byzantines then lost no time in fortifying the Cretan coast and consolidating their power. Chandax emerged as the island's new capital and the seat of the Cretan archdiocese.

The Orthodox Church has played a pivotal role in Crete's history and preserving the culture and religion under successive invaders. Under Venetian rule, the Orthodox Church was dismantled and replaced with the Catholic Church and, ironically, it was the Ottomans who allowed the Cretans to resurrect the Orthodox religion. Attempts to convert the local population to Catholicism or Islam proved largely futile. Despite relentless persecution, Orthodox monasteries remained hotbeds of resistance and kept the spirit of national unity alive.

VENETIAN CRETE

The Genoese first moved in on Crete, but it was the Venetians who prevailed in 1217. Crete was pivotal to Venetian control of the Mediterranean and remained under Venetian rule until 1669, long after most of Greece had become part of the Ottoman empire. The Venetian influence is evident throughout the island, most notably in Hania, Iraklio, Rethymno, Sitia and Ierapetra, where they built mansions and massive fortresses to guard the developing port towns and harbours.

Venice colonised Crete with noble and military families, many of which settled in Iraklio (Candia). During the first century of Venetian rule about 10,000 settlers came to Crete, induced by the seizure of the island's best and most fertile land. The Cretan owners now worked as serfs for their new Venetian masters, who were not only the major land-holders but also held political control.

Cretan peasants were ruthlessly exploited under Venetian rule, and oppressive taxation added to their woes. Religious life also suffered, as the Venetians viewed the church as a symbol of national identity and supplanted the Orthodox Church with the Catholic Church.

Cretans rebelled regularly against Venetian rule and met with brutal Venetian reprisals. Eventually the rebellions forced concessions from Venice. By the 15th century the Cretan and Venetian communities reached an uneasy compromise that allowed Cretan cultural and economic life to flourish.

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Crete became the last remaining bastion of Hellenism. Byzantine scholars and intellectuals fled the dying empire and settled in Crete, establishing schools, libraries and printing presses. The cross-pollination between Byzantine traditions and the flourishing Italian Renaissance sparked a major cultural revival, often called the Cretan Renaissance. Poetry and drama flourished and a Cretan School of icon painting (see p48) developed in the 16th and 17th centuries,

combining Byzantine and Venetian elements. In the midst of this artistic ferment, the painter Dominikos Theotokopoulos emerged, studying in Italy before moving to Spain where he became known as El Greco (see the boxed text, p49).

TURKISH CRETE

By the middle of the 17th century, resource-rich and strategically located Crete became attractive to the expanding Ottoman empire and Venice was too slow in rearranging their defences in the face of the looming threat.

Turkish forces landed in Hania in 1645, and although the fortress was bravely defended it fell within two months. Rethymno was next, giving control of the west to the Turks. Candia's massive walls kept the enemy at bay for 21 years, but the city finally fell in 1669, leaving the entire island in Turkish hands (except for Spinalonga and Souda, which did not fall until 1715).

Life was not easy under the Ottomans, although they did allow the Orthodox Church to reestablish itself and survive essentially intact during more than 200 years of occupation. Nevertheless, there were tremendous political and economic advantages to embracing Islam. Mass conversions were common; sometimes entire villages changed their faith.

Economically, the Cretans were initially no better off under the Ottomans than they were under the Venetians. The Ottomans devised ingenious taxes to wring every drop of wealth out of the island, and the economy degenerated to a subsistence level. Trade picked up, however, around the start of the 18th century, and living standards improved. Crete exported grain, and its abundance of olive oil launched a soap industry.

Rebellion was brewing, though, as many Cretans fled to the mountains, harassing the Turks with sporadic attacks, particularly in the Sfakia region. In 1770 under their leader Daskalogiannis, 2000 Sfakians mounted an assault upon the Turks in western Crete. Promised Russian aid never materialised and the rebellion was viciously suppressed. Daskalogiannis was skinned alive in the central square of Iraklio.

When the Greek War of Independence spread to Crete in 1821, Sfakia was once again the nucleus of rebellion, but the revolutionaries were hampered by poor organisation and constant infighting. The Turks swiftly retaliated with a wave of massacres primarily directed at the clergy.

Bogged down with fighting rebels in the Peloponnese and mainland Greece, the Turks were forced to turn to Egypt for help in dealing with the Cretans. Chronically short of arms and undisciplined, the Cretans fought furiously but were outnumbered by the Turkish-Egyptian forces.

With the rest of Greece torn by war, Crete was left on its own and the revolutionary movement largely flickered out, with sporadic outbreaks of fighting provoking fearsome massacres of Cretan civilians. When an independent Greek state was finally established in 1830, Crete was given to Egypt.

'Rebellion was brewing, though, as many Cretans fled to the mountains, harassing the Turks with sporadic attacks, particularly in the Sfakia region.'

1770

1821

1828

1830

1831

1832

Under their leader Daskalogiannis, 2000 Sfakians mount an assault on the Turks in western Crete but the rebellion is viciously suppressed. Daskalogiannis is skinned alive in the central square of Iraklio.

Greek War of Independence is declared. The insurgency spreads to Crete but Turkish-Egyptian forces outnumber the rebellion. Continued resistance provokes fearsome massacres of Cretan civilians.

Resistance leader Michailis Dalianis and 385 rebels made an heroic last stand at Frangokastello in one of the bloodiest battles in the war for independence. About 800 Turks are killed along with the rebels.

The Great Powers give Crete to Egypt. Egyptian rule brings some improvements, with Muslims and Christians treated equally, schools organised and infrastructure rebuilt, but taxes remain high and new protests emerge.

Ioannis Kapodistrias, the first elected governor of independent Greece is assassinated by political rivals.

The Treaty of London declares an independent Kingdom of Greece and appoints Bavarian teenage Prince Otto as King of Greece.

Egyptian rule initially brought improvements. An amnesty asked Cretans to lay down their arms, Muslims and Christians were to be treated equally, schools were organised and the authorities began rebuilding the island's infrastructure, though taxes remained high and new protests emerged. After Egypt was defeated by the Turks in Syria, the Great Powers gave Crete back to the Ottomans in 1840.

Under restored Ottoman rule, Cretans won important privileges allowing more religious freedom, civil and property rights. But the Sultan's repeated violations of the new laws sparked yet another uprising and demand for *enosis*, or union, with free Greece. Although Russia was partial to the Cretan position, Great Britain and France preferred the status quo and refused any help. Rallying around the slogan 'Union or Death', fighting broke out in western Crete. Once again the Turks joined forces with the Egyptians and attacked the civilian population. In 1866 about 900 rebels and their families took refuge in Moni Arkadiou. When 2000 Turkish soldiers attacked the building, rather than surrender, the Cretans set light to a store of gunpowder. The explosion killed almost everyone, Turks included.

The event shocked the world and the heroic stand gained the Cretan cause worldwide sympathy. Despite demonstrations erupting throughout Europe, Great Britain and France maintained a pro-Turkish stance. The Great Powers forbade Greece from aiding the Cretan rebels and the revolution petered out.

The 1877 Russo-Turkish War prompted another uprising in Crete. Sensing that Turkey might be defeated, the Greek government decided to support Crete. Although the rebels seized major north-coast cities, the Berlin conference of 1878 resolving the Russo-Turkish War rejected Cretan union with Greece. Turkey made new concessions, turning Crete into a semi-autonomous province, sanctioning Greek as the official language and granting a general amnesty.

In 1889 fierce political infighting within the Cretan parliament led to a new rebellion against Turkish rule, prompting Turkey to return to the iron-fisted policies of the past. In Sfakia, Manousos Koundouros formed a secret fraternity to secure autonomy and eventual unification for Crete. They laid siege on the Turkish garrison at Vamos, leading to violent reprisals and eventual intervention by the Great Powers. The Turks were forced to agree to a new constitution.

When violence erupted again in 1896, the Greek government sent a small force to the island and declared unification between Crete and Greece. The Great Powers rejected the idea and blockaded the coast, refusing to allow either the Turks or the Greeks to reinforce their position. Greece became embroiled in a war with Turkey and recalled its forces. The Great Powers appointed Prince George, son of King George of Greece, as high commissioner of Crete.

In 1898 a detachment of British soldiers was implementing the transfer of power in Iraklio when an enraged mob of Turks stormed through the city slaughtering hundreds of Christian civilians – along with 17 British soldiers

and the British consul. The British swiftly rounded up 17 Turkish trouble-makers, hanged them and sent a squadron of ships steaming into Iraklio harbour. The Turks were ordered out, finally ending Ottoman rule over Crete.

After the disastrous Greek invasion of Smyrna, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne called for a population exchange between Greece and Turkey to prevent future disputes. Crete's remaining Muslim population of about 30,000 people was ordered off the island, abandoning their homes to the incoming Greek refugees. Ironically, many of them were Christians who had converted.

Few legacies of Turkish rule survive in Crete. The most prominent are the old mosque in Hania harbour and the minarets and mosques in Rethymno, as well as remnants of Ottoman architecture in the cities' old Turkish quarters.

UNION WITH GREECE

With the Ottomans gone, Crete was placed under international administration, but union with Greece remained an insatiable desire and would take some years to achieve. A new movement coalesced around the charismatic Hania-born Eleftherios Venizelos, one of the most important figures in Greek and Cretan politics. Venizelos was Prince George's minister of justice and a member of the Cretan Assembly. In the face of Prince George's stubborn refusal to consider unification, Venizelos convened a revolutionary assembly in Theriso, near Hania, in 1905, raising the Greek flag and declaring unity with Greece.

Venizelos then set up a rival government to administer the island. The rebellion spread, forcing the Great Powers to concede that Prince George had lost all support. King George appointed a new governor but the populace continued to agitate for unification.

In 1908 the Cretan assembly declared unity with Greece, but the Greek government refused to allow Cretan deputies to sit in the Greek parliament. Even though Venizelos had become prime minister, Greece remained fearful of antagonising Turkey and the Great Powers who were adamantly opposed to the plan. Not until Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria declared war on the Ottoman Empire over Macedonia in the first Balkan War (1912) were Cretans finally allowed into the Greek Parliament. When the war ended, the 1913 Treaty of Bucharest formally recognised Crete as part of the Greek state.

WWII & THE BATTLE OF CRETE

When German troops marched through Yugoslavia and invaded Greece on 6 April 1941, the country was rapidly overrun. Greek leader Emmanouil Tsouderos set up a government in exile in his native Crete.

With all available Greek troops fighting the Italians in Albania, Greece asked Britain to help defend Crete. Churchill obliged, as he was determined to make a stand and block Germany's advance through southeastern Europe.

Mary Renault's novels *The King Must Die* and *The Bull from the Sea* are vivid tales of Minoan times that provide an excellent feel for ancient Crete.

For all things ancient and Greek, try the great web portal www.ancientgreece.com.

1840

The Turks defeat Egypt and the Great Powers give Crete back to the Ottomans. Crete wins important new privileges but repeated violations spark another uprising and demand for union. Great Britain and France refuse to help.

1866

About 2000 Turkish soldiers attack the Arkadi monastery, where more than 900 rebels and their families shelter. Refusing to surrender, the Cretans light a store of gunpowder, setting off an explosion that kills almost everyone.

1877

The Russo-Turkish War prompts another uprising in Crete. Greece supports Crete and rebels seize major north-coast cities but the Great Powers reject Cretan union with Greece. Turkey turns Crete into a semi-autonomous province.

1889

Fierce political infighting within the Cretan parliament sparks a new rebellion and the Great Powers eventually force the Turks to agree to a new constitution.

1896

Violence erupts again. The Greek government sends a force and declares unification with Crete. The Great Powers reject the idea. Greece recalls its forces and the Great Powers appoint Prince George as high commissioner of Crete.

1898

Turks storm through Iraklio slaughtering hundreds of Christian civilians, 17 British soldiers and the British consul. The British order the Turks out and Crete is placed under international administration. Hania becomes the capital.

More than 30,000 British, Australian and New Zealand troops poured into the last remaining part of free Greece, two thirds of them evacuated from mainland Greece.

The Allies were in a poor position to defend the island, since commitments in the Middle East were already draining military resources. The island's defences had been seriously neglected. There were few fighter planes and military preparation was hampered by six changes of command in the first six months of 1941. Crete's difficult terrain also meant the only viable ports were on the exposed northern coast, while inadequate roads precluded resupplying the army from the more protected southern ports.

Hitler was determined to seize Crete and use it as an air base to attack British forces in the eastern Mediterranean. In a stunning disregard for Crete's rebellious history, Hitler actually believed that German forces would be welcomed by the native population. They were not.

After a week-long aerial bombardment, Hitler launched the world's first airborne invasion on 20 May, starting what became known as the Battle of Crete, one of the decisive battles of the war. Aiming to capture the airport at Maleme 17km west of Hania, thousands of parachutists floated down over Hania, as well as Rethymno and Iraklio.

Elderly men, women and children grabbed rifles, old shotguns, sickles and whatever else they could find to defend their homeland. German casualties were appalling, but they managed to capture the Maleme airfield on the first day and, despite the valiant defence, the Allies lost the battle within 10 days.

POSTWAR CRETE

When the external threat of war and foreign occupation finally ended, Greece and the Allies were left to deal with the fraught internal politics of the nation. The mainland resistance had been dominated by communists. Winston Churchill wanted the king back and was afraid of a communist takeover. The 1946 election, which was boycotted by the communists, was won by the royalists with British backing. A rigged plebiscite put George II back on the throne and a brutal and divisive civil war broke out, lasting until 1949.

Crete was largely spared the bloodshed and bitterness that left Greece a political and economic basket case in the 1950s. The close cooperation between the Cretans and British soldiers left the islanders with strong pro-British sentiments, leaving little room for communist infiltration.

In 1967 Greece was thrown into turmoil again when a group of army colonels staged a coup d'état, which established a military junta that imposed martial law, abolished all political parties, banned trade unions, imposed censorship, and imprisoned, tortured and exiled thousands of Greeks who opposed it. Cretan resentment towards the colonels intensified when the colonels muscled through major tourist development projects on the island that were rife with favouritism.

Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, was part of the Greek royal family – born in Corfu as Prince Philip of Greece and Denmark in 1921. Former King of Greece Constantine is Prince William's godfather and Prince Charles' third cousin.

Distinguished British archaeologist John Pendlebury, who took over Arthur Evans' work at Knossos, was executed by the Germans in 1941 while fighting with the Cretan Resistance. He is buried at the Allied war cemetery in Souda.

Crete: The Battle and the Resistance, by Antony Beevor, is a short and readable analysis of the Allied defeat.

Suspicion that the coup had been aided by the CIA remain conjectural, but the US silence on the coup and the ensuing regime did not alter the perception of US involvement, which has left a residue of anti-American feeling.

In 1974 Turkish forces invaded Cyprus following a botched junta-sponsored attempt to depose Cyprus' president, Archbishop Makarios. Discredited by the invasion, the junta was quickly dismantled.

The ban on communist parties was lifted and Kostas Karamanlis' right-wing New Democracy (ND) party won the 1974 elections. A national plebiscite voted 69% against restoration of the monarchy. Greece became a pluralist democratic republic and entered an unprecedented era of stability, peace and growth. That same year, the former Greek king and royal family fled to London where they live amongst the aristocracy, although they were stripped of most of their Greek assets in a long-running property dispute.

DEMOCRACY & MODERN GREECE

While it is positively dull in comparison to the past, contemporary Greek politics remains robust and colourful, with plenty of personal and financial scandals and regular accusations of graft, corruption and nepotism.

Since the mid-1970s, Crete's fortunes have been inextricably linked with the political, social and economic developments of mainland Greece, riding both the booms and the economic downturns.

Apart from the fatal tsunami that wiped out the Minoans, Crete was hit by a far smaller tsunami in 1956 at Palekastro. Locals recall the massive wave coming in and dumping tonnes of fish in their vineyards.

FIGHTING SPIRIT

The rebellious spirit of the Cretans has been a feature of Crete's long history of resistance to foreign occupation, particularly the heroic stances taken against the Venetians and the Turks. Nikos Kazantzakis vividly portrays the fighting Cretan spirit in his book based on a 19th-century Cretan Resistance fighter during the Turkish occupation in *Freedom and Death*.

More recently, the valiant Cretan spirit won them the endearing admiration of British, Australian and New Zealand troops who fought in Crete during WWII. After the battle of Crete, the Cretans risked German reprisals by hiding thousands of Allied soldiers and helping them get to the south to escape across the Libyan Sea. Allied undercover agents supplied from North Africa coordinated the guerrilla warfare waged by the Cretan fighters, known as *andartes*. Allied soldiers and Cretans alike were under constant threat from the Nazis while they lived in caves, sheltered in monasteries such as Preveli, trekked across peaks or unloaded cargo on the southern coast. Among them was celebrated author Patrick Leigh Fermor, who lived in the mountains for two years with the Cretan Resistance and was involved in the daring kidnapping of German commander General Kreipe in 1944.

German reprisals against the civilian population were fierce. Cities were bombed, villages burnt down and men, women and children lined up and shot. When the Germans finally surrendered in 1945 they insisted on surrendering to the British, fearing that the Cretans would inflict upon them some of the same punishment they had suffered for four years.

1900

1905

1908

1913

1921

1941

Arthur Evans begins excavations at Knossos, quickly unearthing the palace and stunning the archaeological world with the discovery of the advanced Minoan civilisation.

A revolutionary assembly in Theriso declares unity with Greece. Venizelos sets up a rival government to administer the island. The Great Powers concede Prince George's loss of support and appoint a new governor of Crete.

The Cretan assembly declares unity with Greece, but Cretan deputies are not allowed to sit in the Greek parliament until 1912.

Greece and Crete are officially united under the Treaty of Bucharest.

Greek troops in Smyrna attack the Turks, but are routed and many Greek inhabitants are massacred. In the ensuing population exchange, Crete's 30,000 Turks are ordered off the island, while Greeks from Smyrna arrive in Crete.

Germany invades Greece and Allied troops arrive to defend Crete. Germany launches an airborne invasion to capture the airport at Maleme, west of Hania, in the famous Battle of Crete. Allied soldiers are evacuated from Hora Sfakion.

WAR MEMORIALS

The Battle of Crete had a monumental impact on the outcome of the WWII, and the massive casualties on all sides make it a significant war memorial pilgrimage. Every May, war veterans from Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Greece attend commemoration celebrations held throughout Crete.

Major anniversaries include a reenactment of the airborne invasion at Maleme, west of Hania. Participation of those who served on Crete has dwindled with time, but the anniversaries remain important memorials for Greeks and Allied ex-servicemen and there are regular battlefield tours of Crete. More than 1500 Allied soldiers are buried at the immaculate Souda Bay War Cemetery near Hania. Ironically, one of the long-term caretakers of the German war cemetery at Maleme, where 4500 soldiers are buried, was the late George Psychoundakis, the former shepherd boy whose story about being a runner during the German occupation is told in *The Cretan Runner*. There are also war memorials across the island, including a striking monument overlooking the cliffs at Moni Preveli and at Stravromenos on the north coast of Rethymno.

Andreas Papandreu's PASOK party – which formed Greece's first socialist government – dominated Greek politics for two decades after it was elected in 1981. Papandreu's populist pledge to remove US bases and withdraw from NATO was especially popular in Crete, given the islanders' strong antipathy to the presence of foreign troops. US presence on the island was reduced, though there are still American and NATO bases operating in Crete and the US naval base at Souda Bay is a regular target for protests.

After Greece joined the EU in 1981 (then the EEC), Crete's farmers benefited from EU subsidies, and the island's cultural and tourism infrastructure development was also bolstered. Tourism boomed with direct charter flights to Crete, almost tripling tourist arrivals between 1981 and 1991.

The charismatic Papandreu's significant reforms were marred by numerous scandals, including his public affair with a younger air hostess (whom he later married) and a financial scandal in the late '80s involving the Bank of Crete, in which Papandreu and four ministers were charged with embezzlement (all were later acquitted).

The ND party enjoyed a brief stint in government from 1990 when Konstantinos Mitsotakis, a Cretan, was elected prime minister, but corruption allegations and internal divisions returned PASOK to power three years later.

In 1996 Papandreu's ailing health finally forced him to step down as PASOK leader, ending a colourful era in Greek politics. His successor Costas Simitis, a straight-laced technocrat and economic reformer, led PASOK in a dramatic change of direction that included privatisation and reform of Greece's notorious public sector. Securing the 2004 Olympic Games brought a flood of money into Greece for infrastructure improvements, but Simitis'

austerity packages – designed to whip Greece into fiscal shape in preparation for full membership of the European Monetary Union in 2002 – caused much discontent, as did major post-euro rises in the cost of living after the introduction of the euro. Simitis handed the reins to Foreign Minister George Papandreu, son of Andreas, in January 2004 but despite Papandreu's political pedigree and personal popularity – particularly in Crete – he was unable to save PASOK from a thumping defeat in two months later.

Kostas Karamanlis' ND party got the glory of presiding over the successful 2004 Olympic Games, which became less about the sport and more about Greece proving it was a modern, developed nation, rather than the European backwater it had been seen. In the post-Olympics chapter of Greek history, ND did not make much headway in its efforts to get the Greek economy into shape in the face of the Olympics cost blow-outs, Greece's premature (and rigged) entry into the euro zone, rising unemployment and inflation as well as attempts to reform labour laws, social security, education and push through privatisation.

In the summer of 2007, Greece plunged into an environmental and political crisis brought on by the massive fires that destroyed vast tracts of the country and killed 65 people. Yet, the ND government scraped back into power in the September national elections, with voters abandoning the major parties. The communist (KKE) party numbers were boosted and the nationalist LAOS party gained 10 seats, the first far-right party to enter the Greek Parliament since the end of military rule more than 30 years ago. PASOK leader George Papandreu's was left fighting a leadership challenge by party veteran Evangelos Venizelos (remarkably not apparently related to the famous Greek statesman).

CRETE TODAY

In this unprecedented era of peace and stability, Crete has become one of Greece's most dynamic and prosperous islands and a major economic powerhouse. The annual tourist invasion – more than two million visitors, the majority from Germany and the UK – has overtaken agriculture as the dominant industry.

Crete has been a major beneficiary of EU infrastructure programmes and agricultural subsidies and more recently, grants to promote green tourism and preserve cultural heritage through restoration of historic buildings and traditional settlements. With increased urbanisation, its towns have prospered, while the island has also evolved into a major research centre, with several university campuses and research institutes, and a large student population.

Island development has been haphazard however, partly because Crete has no centralised government and the island's four prefectures operate virtually independently, and often competitively. It remains resentful of

Crete has produced two of independent Greece's prime ministers, Eleftherios Venizelos (several times between 1910 and 1933) and Konstantinos Mitsotakis (1990–93).

1944

1946–49

1951

1967

1971

1974

The Cretan guerrilla resistance kidnap German commander General Kreipe and, aided by the Allies, sends him to Egypt, sparking fierce German reprisals. Cities are bombed, villages annihilated and civilians, including children, lined up and shot.

Greek civil war breaks out between communists and right-wing royalists. The communists fail to infiltrate Crete, which is largely spared the bloodshed and bitterness that engulfs Greece.

Greece joins NATO. Military bases are established on Crete.

Army colonels stage a coup and impose martial law across Greece. Cretan resentment towards the junta intensifies when the colonels muscle through major tourist development projects on the island that are rife with favouritism.

Iraklio resumes its position as the island's capital.

Turkish forces invade Cyprus following a botched junta-sponsored attempt to depose Archbishop Makarios, the president of Cyprus. The junta falls and democracy is restored to Crete. The monarchy is abolished and the royal family exiled.

outside control from Athens, while complex regional politics is based on family and patronage as much as party affiliation, as well as who looks after local interests best. Crete remains a key PASOK stronghold, significantly outpolling ND at national elections.

Crete's often conflicting interests and divisions are now between the north coast tourist zone and the less developed south, between fertile and wealthy agricultural regions such as central Iraklio region and the southeast Lasithi greenhouse zone, and between poorer remote rural communities and increasingly sophisticated towns.

Crete's tourism doubled again between 1990 and 2000, largely due to the cheap package tourism boom, but the trend is causing much dismay among the rest of the industry who see few benefits and the impact on the island's environment and resources. The need for sustainable tourism is becoming increasingly critical.

The lack of planning and regulation is most evident in the overdeveloped north coast tourist zones, which have reached saturation point, while on the schizophrenic southeast coast you'll see hotels built next to ugly greenhouses right on the coast. (Crete has 50% of Greece's greenhouses but along with prosperity, anecdotal evidence suggests health problems and cancer rates in the Lasithi region have risen due to pesticide use.)

The extension of the national highway to Sitia is considered pivotal to regional development of the east, but controversial tourism projects planned around Vai have locals divided, while major growth in the expanding beach resorts around Platanias in Hania suggest lessons have not been learnt.

An alternative push for more sustainable green tourism – the potential of which has not been tapped – as well as agrotourism and more upmarket holidays has led to an increase in special-interest activities such as extreme sports, spas, golf, cultural tourism and culinary and winery tours. Overall the industry has had to shape up and become more professional than the sideline build-it-and-they-will-come approach of the past.

In recent years there has been an increased focus on preserving Crete's cultural identity and traditions in the face of globalisation. While environmental issues are gaining more prominence, consciousness is still very low.

Agriculture remains a major force and way of life. While Crete has one of Greece's highest levels of organic farming, it represents only a tiny percentage of the industry.

Easier access to the mainland, better work and education opportunities and lifestyles have made Crete a more attractive place to live. The tide of young people moving away from the island has started to stem, while small but steady stream of people are abandoning Athens for life on Crete. A boom in holiday and retirement homes for Europeans has seen real estate prices skyrocket.

'Crete's tourism doubled again between 1990 and 2000...'

FAMILY AFFAIRS

The Greek political landscape has been characterised as a hereditary democracy, with two families dominating the modern leadership of the country. (Earlier political dynasties included Venizelos and the Rallis clan).

Current New Democracy (ND) leader and prime minister Kostas Karamanlis is the nephew and namesake of former prime minister and president, who dominated Greek politics in the later 20th century.

Enigmatic PASOK founder Andreas Papandreu, whose colourful reign as prime minister spanned more than 12 years, was the son of George Papandreu, prime minister in 1944 and 1963–65. Andreas's son George, a former foreign minister, is the current PASOK leader.

Cretean-born former ND prime minister Konstantinos Mitsotakis' son Kyriakos is an ND MP; his charismatic daughter Dora is foreign minister (and former mayor of Athens) and widely tipped as a future leader. She entered politics after her husband Pavlos Bakoyiannis, also an ND MP, was assassinated by the 17 November (N17) terrorist organisation.

The biggest population shift, however, has been the economic migrants who now do much of the agricultural and building work, while seasonal workers in the tourism sector means your waiter is just as likely to be from Poland than Sfakia.

Preserving Crete's unique character and environment in the face of rapid social and economic changes sweeping the island will be the island's greatest challenge as it enters the next era of its colourful history.

1981

Greece becomes the 10th member of the EEC. Greeks elect the first PASOK socialist government, led by Andreas Papandreu.

1990

Cretean Konstantinos Mitsotakis is elected prime minister when New Democracy (ND) narrowly wins government. His economic reforms are unpopular in Crete. A breakaway party is formed after corruption allegations, ending ND's capacity to govern.

1993

PASOK returns to power. Andreas Papandreu resigns in 1996 due to ill health, ending an era in Greek politics. Costas Simitis takes over and introduces austerity measures and reforms continuing PASOK's long reign.

2002

Greece becomes a full member of the European Monetary Union and the drachma is replaced by the euro.

2004

ND, under Kostas Karamanlis, wins power. Greece wins the European Soccer championship. Athens hosts a successful Olympic Games.

2007

Weeks after fires ravage Greece, Kostas Karamanlis' ND is reelected. PASOK is routed and the minor parties gain more seats, including the communist party (KKE) and the right-wing nationalist LAOS party.

The Culture

REGIONAL IDENTITY

The Cretans are a very distinctive clan of Greeks, with their own spirited music and dances, distinct cuisine and traditions. Proud, patriotic yet famously hospitable, Cretans uphold an undeniable connection to their culture. They will always identify as Cretans before they say they are Greek, and even within different parts of Crete people maintain strong regional identities. This becomes particularly apparent when you leave the commercialised major tourist centres. In rural areas, many Cretans still speak a local dialect or have a distinct accent.

Centuries of battling foreign occupiers have left the island with a stubbornly independent streak that sometimes leads to clashes with Athens. National laws that conflict with local customs are often disregarded. Guns, for example, are strictly regulated in Greece, yet the evidence suggests Cretans are stashing an astounding arsenal (see the boxed text, p43).

Nevertheless, the Cretan people have a well-justified reputation for hospitality and for treating strangers as honoured guests, a gesture of pride (and a hangover of historical territorialism) rather than subservience.

Obviously Cretans are no longer offering free food and lodging to millions of tourists a year, but if you wander off the beaten track into mountain villages you may well be invited into someone's home for a coffee or even a meal. In a café or taverna it is customary for people to treat another group of friends or strangers to a round of drinks (however, be mindful that it is not the done thing to treat them straight back – in theory you do the honours another time).

Cretan society is deeply influenced by the Greek Orthodox Church and its rituals and celebrations (see p213 for a list of festivals and events). It maintains strong family ties and a sense of family honour. Crete's infamous vendettas, while increasingly rare, have not entirely ended (see the boxed text, p97).

Cretan weddings and baptisms are still huge affairs, and while shooting pistols in the air is becoming more politically incorrect (and dangerous – people have been accidentally hit and killed), it is still common in some areas, where bullet-riddled road signs are a characteristic part of the landscape.

Rivalries between the prefectures are strong. As the island's capital until 1971, Hania considers itself the historical heart of the island, while Rethymno claims to be its cultural centre.

The dominant political ideology is left-of-centre with the socialist PASOK party repeatedly outdrawing the conservative New Democracy (ND) party in local and national elections.

Cretans remain very ethnocentric, while anti-Americanism is another interesting undercurrent. Apart from general resistance to American hegemony, it originates from what many regard as undue US interference in Greek affairs during the civil war, suspected CIA involvement in the colonels' coup of 1967, US indifference over Cyprus, and its interventions in the Middle East and the Balkans. In Crete this sentiment often culminates in protests over the US military base at Souda or is demonstrated in more subtle ways such as refusing to serve Coke. While there is often heated and forthright objection to American foreign policy, the ire is ideological and not extended to American tourists.

Cretans who migrated to Athens or overseas (far fewer than in other regions of Greece) maintain strong cultural and family links, returning

CULTURAL TIES: IOANNA KARYSTIANI

Hania-born author Ioanna Karystiani has lived in Athens since she was 18, but her heart has never left Crete. She regularly returns to Hania to spend time with her family, who moved to Crete from Turkey in the 1920s population exchange. 'I sit in a room with my parents who are in their 90s now and hold them in my arms, my mother on the right, my father on the left, talking and telling *mandinades* (traditional rhyming couplets),' she says.

Karystiani, one of the Polytechnic generation who revolted against the colonels in 1973, is a former political cartoonist who turned to writing later in life. She is author of the 2004 movie *Brides*; her novel *Koustoumi sto Homa* is based on a family vendetta in Sfakia, the harsh mountain stronghold of the Cretan Resistance.

Karystiani, 55, believes a land and its history and language feeds the next generation and shapes its character.

'Cretans are fiery characters. The diversity and ruggedness of the land and the history of all the revolutions and wars has played a role in that. The Minoan civilisation was peaceful. In later years the hardship of life and the constant invaders have made the Cretans harsh and unique. They have a great pride in their land, which is often demonstrated positively; sometimes it can be expressed in a narrow, parochial way, with a sense of superiority, but most people are not like that.'

While in many other parts of Greece, traditional songs and music have been lost in the quest to become contemporary Europeans or not to be seen as retrograde, the Cretans, she says, have by and large maintained their culture.

'In Crete there are thousands of children who learn how to play lyra and learn Cretan dances and are not embarrassed at all. They may also love rock, but they still tell and compose *mandinades*, and sing and dance and celebrate in the old way. They have brought that part of their culture into the present because it warms their hearts; it still speaks to them.'

regularly. Even the island's most remote villages are bustling during holidays, elections and other excuses for family reunions and homecomings.

LIFESTYLE

The Cretan lifestyle has changed dramatically in the past 30 years, the most obvious change being that life has got a lot easier. Cretan society has become increasingly urbanised, living standards have improved significantly, Cretans are conspicuously wealthier and the towns are full of sophisticated restaurants, bars and clubs.

Cretans pride themselves on their capacity to enjoy life. You will see them dressed up and going out en masse for their evening *volta* (stroll), and filling cafés and restaurants.

Like most households in Greece, the Cretans have felt the brunt of higher living costs since the introduction of the euro. Eating out has become much more expensive, although there are still many reasonably priced tavernas in Crete, particularly in the villages.

Cretans often deal with the seasonal invasion of foreign tourists by largely operating in a different time-space continuum from their guests. They will often tell you a particular place is 'only for tourists', and that's normally your cue to avoid it.

From April to around October, many live in the hurly-burly of the coastal resorts – running shops, *pensions* or tavernas – and then return to their traditional life in the hills for the autumn olive and grape harvests.

While tourists eat early in the evening in restaurants along a harbour or beach, Cretans drive out to a village taverna for a dinner that begins around 11pm. Often these tavernas produce their own meat and vegetables, saving on business costs and at the same time providing better food.

Harvard anthropologist Michael Herzfeld makes interesting anthropological observations of Cretans in *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Manhood in a Cretan Village*, while *A Place in History* looks at life in and around Rethymno, including issues such as the Cretan vendetta.

Greece has the highest number of smokers in the EU and they smoke anywhere at any time. While smoking restrictions have been introduced with some success in public areas, nonsmoking areas in restaurants are still a rarity.

DOS & DON'TS

Crete is a pretty laid-back destination but there are some cultural sensitivities to respect, particularly outside the main tourist resorts.

Always dress appropriately when visiting a church or monastery. Women should wear skirts that reach below the knees, men should wear long trousers and arms, shoulders and cleavage should be covered (it is always handy to carry a sarong).

Topless sunbathing is allowed in most places in Crete and nudism is tolerated at some remote beaches, though you should take the cue from people around you or check for signs asking you to keep your gear on (p103), especially if you are near a church or monastery or in a family area. Just because it's hot, doesn't mean men should walk around towns and villages without their shirts, just like you wouldn't at home.

If you are wondering why some villages and towns seem like ghost towns in the middle of the day, it's because things shut down for *mesimeri*, the post-lunch siesta time (3pm to 5pm). Try to be quiet during these times and never call on anyone at home.

While Cretans can probably drink you under the table, public drunkenness is frowned upon. Cretans take their hospitality seriously so if you are treated to a drink or meal, accept it graciously as rejecting it can cause offence.

Do try to learn a few words of Greek, it's always appreciated.

Generational and rural-city divides are another feature of modern Crete. In rural areas you will see shepherds with their flock in the mountains and men congregating in the *kafeneia* (coffee house) after their siesta. Mountain villages are repositories of traditional culture and you'll find that many older women and many men are still clad in black garb (a symbol of mourning).

But even pastoral life has changed. While people still live off the land – and provide for their families in the cities – subsistence farming has mostly given way to commercial production. Though you will still see the odd donkey, it has been replaced by the monstrous 4WD pick-up trucks and foreign workers do most of the grunt work.

The younger generation of Cretans is highly educated and most speak English and often German as well.

In the shift from living a largely poor, agrarian existence to becoming increasingly sophisticated urban dwellers, Cretans are also delicately balancing cultural and religious mores.

Crete society is still relatively conservative and it is uncommon for Greeks to move out of home until they are married, apart from leaving temporarily to study or work. The reasons for this are practical as well as cultural – most will get a house when they get married and who wants to do their own washing and cooking anyway?

ECONOMY

Crete has ridden the wave of Greece's economic growth in the past five years, and the increased availability of credit, has sparked a frenzied, if ultimately unsustainable, consumer spending boom. On the other hand, most households have felt the brunt of higher living costs since Greece joined the Euro Zone in 2001.

Indeed, Crete's per capita GDP and investment levels have been higher than the national average. Crete also has the highest rate of self-employed people in Greece (and amongst the highest in the EU). Crete's farmers have reaped the benefits of EU membership, but tourism has replaced agriculture as the island's dominant economic activity. Crete is nonetheless one of Greece's biggest producers of olives and olive oil, vegetables (potatoes and

TRIGGER-HAPPY

Sitting in a café in Askyfou one afternoon, a man at the next table pulls out a semi-automatic pistol and fires a few rounds, just for fun. Late one night after a festival near Lissos, gunshots ring out every time the group of merry Cretans on the beach finishes a song. At Cretan weddings and celebrations, volleys of gunshots – and accidents from stray bullets – have become so common that many musicians refuse to play in certain areas unless they get an assurance that there won't be any guns.

In 2004 acclaimed composer Mikis Theodorakis led a campaign trying to change the island's gun culture, but Cretans have not laid down their arms. Conservative estimates indicate one in two Cretans owns a gun, while others suggest there could be over one million weapons on Crete – more than the island's population.

Road signs riddled with bullet holes are the first inkling that you are entering the somewhat lawless mountain country that was historically a stronghold for Crete's Resistance fighters, particularly around Sfakia and Mylopotamos province in Rethymno. A history of turmoil and invaders has made Cretans determined not to give up their guns, even though in theory the same restrictions apply in Crete as the rest of Greece.

The endemic, machismo gun-ownership – and the act of shooting off a few rounds – is traditionally seen as an act of independence and pride (these days it's also a reckless show of excess and an expensive habit).

But gun mania is not just a cultural or historic hangover. Feuding and raiding is rife in the 'devil's triangle' of Anogia, Zoniana and Livadia, a notorious centre for illegal arms and drugs, the deep ravines being a haven for concealing cannabis crops.

tomatoes), oranges and wine, largely produced in fertile areas such as Iraklio's Mesara plain. The massive spread of greenhouses in southern Lassithi have made the region prosperous. Stock breeding of sheep and goats is the other major sector.

Crete has reaped the benefits of EU membership, while tourism has more than doubled since 1990, accounting for 40 per cent of jobs in the region and overtaking agriculture in some areas as the dominant industry.

POPULATION

Crete is Greece's most populous island with more than 600,000 residents. About 42% of the population live in Crete's main cities and urban centres, with about 45% living in rural regions. Close to 49% of the population live in the Iraklio prefecture, which is double the size of the next biggest town, Hania.

MULTICULTURALISM

After the exodus of Crete's Turkish community in the population exchange of 1923, Crete became essentially homogenous, and its population virtually all Greek Orthodox. More recently Crete has become home to a significant population of migrants from the Balkans and Eastern Europe, who have become an economic necessity in the agriculture, construction and tourism sectors. The majority are from Albania.

Economic migrants are a relatively new phenomenon for Crete which, like most of Greece, is struggling to come to terms with the new reality and concepts of multiculturalism. While there are tensions and mistrust, migrants appear to have fared better in Crete than in many other parts of Greece.

A small group of English, Germans and northern European refugees have also settled and bought property on Crete, though they live on the more affluent fringes. Foreign women married to Cretan men, a particularly

With an estimated 34 million olive trees in Crete, it works out to 62 olive trees for every man, woman and child.

common occurrence in the 1980s, are another characteristic minority group in Cretan society.

SPORT

Football (soccer) is the most popular sport in Crete, followed by basketball. Cretan men are avid sports fans and Crete fields two teams in the Greek national league. If you happen to be eating in a taverna on a night when a big match is being televised, expect indifferent service. Crete hosted the 2004 Olympic soccer preliminaries at Iraklio's massive Pankritio stadium.

RELIGION

The Orthodox faith is the official and prevailing religion of Crete and a key element of Greek identity, ethnicity and culture. There is a prevailing view that to be Greek is to be Orthodox. While the younger generation isn't necessarily devout, nor attends church regularly, most observe the rituals and consider the faith integral to their identity. Between 94% and 97% of the Greek population belongs at least nominally to the Greek Orthodox Church.

After Constantine the Great officially recognised Christianity in AD 313 (converted by a vision of the Cross), he transferred the capital of the Roman Empire to Byzantium (today's Istanbul) in AD 330. By the 8th century, differences of opinion and increasing rivalry emerged between the pope in Rome and the patriarch of the Hellenised Eastern Roman Empire. One dispute was over the wording of the Creed, which stated that the Holy Spirit proceeds 'from the Father', but Rome added 'and the Son'. Other points of difference included Rome decreeing priests had to be celibate, while Orthodox priests could marry before becoming ordained, and the Orthodox Church forbidding wine and oil during Lent.

Their differences became irreconcilable, and in the great schism of 1054 the pope and the patriarch went their separate ways as the Orthodox Church (orthodoxy means 'right belief') and Roman Catholic Church.

The Greek Orthodox Church is closely related to the Russian Orthodox Church; together they form the third-largest branch of Christianity.

During Ottoman times membership of the Orthodox Church was one of the most important criteria in defining a Greek. The Orthodox religion held Cretan culture together during the many dark centuries of repression, despite numerous, largely futile efforts by the Venetians and Turks to turn the Cretans towards Catholicism and Islam.

The year is centred on the saint's days and festivals of the church calendar. Name days (celebrating your namesake saint) are celebrated more than birthdays, and baptisms are an important rite. Most people are named after a saint, as are boats, suburbs and train stations.

There are hundreds of tiny churches dotted around the countryside, predominantly built by individual families, dedicated to particular saints. The tiny roadside iconostases or chapels you see everywhere are either shrines to people who died in road accidents or similar dedications to saints.

The Orthodox Church of Crete is independent from the Greek Orthodox Church and answers directly to the Patriarch of Constantinople.

Regrettably, many small churches and chapels are kept locked nowadays, but it's usually easy enough to locate the caretakers, who will be happy to open them for you.

GENDER ROLES

The role of women in Cretan society is complex and shifting, and throws up some interesting paradoxes. While traditional gender roles are prevalent in rural areas and among the older generation, things have become much more

Personal questions are not considered rude in Crete, so don't be surprised if you are grilled about your age, salary, marital status etc, and given sympathy if you are over 25 and not married.

For a useful but by no means exhaustive listing of books about Crete with reviews, visit www.helenicbookservice.co.uk.

EASTER IN CRETE

Easter is the year's most important religious event and a good time to be in Crete. Many age-old ceremonies and rituals take place throughout Holy Week, culminating in the Resurrection of Christ on the eve of Easter Sunday.

This is a week of strict fasting and many tavernas will only serve special Lenten fare, particularly on Good Friday (though in Crete there is a tradition of seafood suppers after Friday's church service). Eggs are dyed red (symbolising the blood of Christ) in preparation for the post-Resurrection celebrations.

On Good Friday an *epitafio* (bier) representing the body of Christ is decorated with flowers and carried through the streets in a sombre but moving candle-lit procession. In larger towns such as Iraklio, several churches will time their procession so that the biers meet at a central point.

The climax of the week is the Saturday evening resurrection service, when crowds spill out of church into streets and squares. Just before midnight the lights are extinguished until the priest appears with the holy light, which is spread through the candles of the congregation. At midnight the priest announces *Hristos Anesti* (Christ has risen) and fireworks and gunshots herald the start of feasting that lasts through Easter Sunday. The poignant and beautiful ceremony is the most significant moment in the Orthodox year, for it symbolises the Resurrection. Worshippers make their way home, trying to keep their candle lit so they can bless their house with the holy light.

The Lenten fast ends immediately after church, with a traditional supper of *mayirtsa* (tripe soup), served in tavernas and homes. On Easter Sunday you will see spit-roast lambs cooking everywhere – even on the side of the road in villages – which is a key part of the festivities.

liberal for younger women in cities and large towns. Old attitudes towards the 'proper role' for women are changing fast as more women are educated and entering the workforce.

Despite the machismo, Cretan society is essentially matriarchal. Men love to give the impression that they rule the roost and take a front seat in public life, but it's often the women who run the show, both at home and in family businesses.

In villages, men and women still tend to occupy different spheres. When not tending livestock or olive trees, Cretan men can usually be found in a *kafeneio* playing cards and drinking coffee or raki. Although exceptions are made for foreign women, *kafeneia* are off-limits to Cretan women. The older generation of Cretan women are house-proud and spend much time cultivating their culinary skills. Most men rarely participate in domestic duties (or certainly don't own up to it). While it's becoming rarer these days, women busy themselves in their free hours with sewing, crocheting or embroidery, often in a circle of other women. But young Cretan women are more likely to be found in a café than behind a loom.

Rural areas remain relatively conservative and girls who do not pursue an education tend to marry young.

ARTS Minoan Art & Culture

The rich legacy of Minoan civilisation uncovered in the palaces, settlements and tombs around Crete reflect the glory and brilliance of perhaps the most peaceful and prosperous era in the island's history. The Minoans surrounded themselves in art and heavily decorated their palaces. The surviving painting, small-scale sculptures, carved seals, mosaics, pottery and jewellery on display at archaeological sites and museums around Crete provide a priceless insight into the Minoan world as well as demonstrate their extraordinary artistry. Minoan painting is virtually the only form of Greek painting to have survived, because large-scale sculptures did not make it through the disasters

(natural or otherwise) that befell the island. Minoan art inspired the invading Mycenaeans and its influence spread to Santorini and beyond.

POTTERY

Pottery techniques advanced in the early Minoan years. Spirals and curvilinear motifs in white were painted on dark vases and several distinct styles emerged. Pyrgos pottery was characterised by black, grey or brown colours, while the later Vasiliki pottery (made near Ierapetra) was polychrome. In the Middle to Late Minoan period, the style shifted to a dark-on-light colour technique.

Highly advanced levels of artisanship developed in the workshops of the first palaces at Knossos and Phaestos. Kamareos pottery, named after the cave where the pottery was first found, was colourful, elegant and beautifully crafted and decorated with geometric, floral, plant and animal motifs. Human forms were rarely depicted. During the entire Middle Minoan period, Kamareos vases were used for barter and were exported to Cyprus, Egypt and the Levant.

With the invention of the potter's wheel, cups, spouted jars and *pithoi* (large Minoan storage jars) could be produced quickly and there was a new crispness to the designs. The most striking were the 'eggshell' vases with their extremely thin walls.

In the late Neopalatial era, marine and floral themes in darker colours reigned. After 1500 BC, vases sprouted three handles and were frequently shaped as animal heads, such as the bull's-head stone rhyton (libation vessel) in the Iraklio Archaeological Museum. The decline of Minoan culture saw the lively pottery of previous centuries degenerate into dull rigidity.

JEWELLERY & SCULPTURE

Jewellery making and sculpture in various media reached an exceptional degree of artisanship in the Protopalatial period. The exquisite bee pendant found at Malia displays extraordinary delicacy and imagination. Another Minoan masterpiece is a 15th-century-BC gold signet ring found in a tomb at Isopata, near Knossos, which shows women in an ecstatic ritual dance in a meadow with lilies, while a goddess descends from the sky.

Minoan sculptors created fine miniatures, including idols in faïence (quartz-glazed earthenware), gold, ivory, bronze and stone. One of the most outstanding examples is the bare-breasted serpent goddess with raised arms wielding writhing snakes above an elaborately carved skirt. Another incredible piece is the small rock-crystal rhyton from the Palace of Zakros. All of the above can be seen in the Archaeological Museum of Iraklio.

The art of seal-stone carving also advanced in the palace workshops. Using semiprecious stones and clay, artisans made miniature masterpieces that sometimes contained hieroglyphic letters. Goats, lions and griffins and dance scenes were rendered in minute detail. Arthur Evans spent much of his first trip to Crete collecting these seals.

In the Postpalatial period, the production of jewellery and seal-stones was replaced by the production of weaponry, reflecting the influence of the warlike Mycenaeans.

THE FAMOUS FRESCOS

Minoan frescoes are renowned for their vibrant colours and the vivid naturalism in which they portray landscapes rich with animals and birds; marine scenes teeming with fish and octopuses; and banquets, games and rituals. Although fresco painting probably existed before 1700 BC, all remnants vanished in the cataclysm that destroyed Minoan palaces around that time.

Knossos yielded the richest trove of frescoes from the Neopalatial period, most of which are on display in the Archaeological Museum of Iraklio.

Only fragments of the frescoes survive but they have been very carefully (and controversially) restored and the technique of using plant and mineral dyes has kept the colours relatively fresh. Minoan fresco painters borrowed heavily from certain Egyptian conventions but the figures are far less rigid than most Egyptian wall paintings.

The Knossos frescoes suggest Minoan women were white-skinned with elaborately coiffured glossy black locks. Proud, graceful and uninhibited, these women had hourglass figures and were dressed in stylish gowns that exposed perfectly shaped breasts. The bronze-skinned men were tall, with tiny waists, narrow hips, broad shoulders and muscular thighs and biceps; the children were slim and lithe.

Many of the frescoes show action scenes, from boxing and wrestling to solemn processions, saffron gathering to bull-leaping (see box on p48).

RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

The Minoans were not given to building colossal temples or religious statuary. Caves and peak sanctuaries appear to have been used for cult or religious activity. Minoan spiritual life was organised around the worship of a Mother Goddess. Often represented with snakes or lions, the Mother Goddess was the deity-in-chief and the male gods were clearly subordinate.

The double-axe symbol that appears in frescoes and on the palace walls of Knossos was a sacred symbol for the Minoans. Other religious symbols that frequently appear in Minoan art include the mythical griffin bird and figures with a human body and an animal head. The Minoans appear to have worshipped the dead and believed in some form of afterlife, while evidence uncovered in Anemospilia, suggests human sacrifice may also have taken place (see p165).

MINOAN WRITING

The Cretan hieroglyphic was the system of writing used in the Protopalatial period that later evolved into Linear A and B script. The most significant example of this writing is on the inscrutable 3600-year-old terracotta tablet known as the Phaestos disk, which has been the object of much speculation since it was discovered at Phaestos in 1908. The disk, about 16cm in diameter, consists of an early Minoan pictographic script made up of 242 'words' written in a continuous spiral from the outside of the disk to the inside (or the other way round). The repetition of sequences of words or sentences has led to speculation it may be a prayer. It has never been deciphered.

Fine Arts

The artistry of the Minoans has still not been surpassed. During a brief artistic renaissance on the island that lasted from the 8th to the 7th centuries BC, a group of sculptors called the Daedalids perfected a new technique of making sculptures in hammered bronze, working in a style that combined Eastern and Greek aesthetics. Their influence spread to mainland Greece. Cretan culture went into decline at the end of the 7th century BC, though there was a brief revival under the Romans, a period notable for richly decorated mosaic floors and marble sculptures.

BYZANTINE ART

Although Byzantine icons and frescoes were created from the earliest years of Byzantine rule, most were destroyed in popular rebellions during the 13th and 14th centuries. In the 11th century, émigrés from Constantinople

'Minoan frescoes are renowned for their vibrant colours and the vivid naturalism...'

'The artistry of the Minoans has still not been surpassed.'

NO BULL

The bull was a potent symbol in Minoan times, featuring prominently in Minoan art. The peculiar Minoan sport of bull-leaping, where acrobatic thrill-seekers seize the charging bull's horns and leap over its back is depicted in several frescoes, pottery and sculptures. Scantly clad men and women are shown participating in the sport, which may have had religious significance. One of the most stunning examples is the Middle Minoan bull-leaping fresco found at the palace of Knossos, which shows a man leaping over the back of a bull with a female figure on each side. Another prized bull is the carved stone rhyton (libation vessel) in the shape of a bull's head, with rock crystal eyes and gilded wooden horns.

brought portable icons to Crete, but the only surviving example from this period is the icon of the Virgin at Mesopotitissa, now in Venice. From the 13th to the early 16th centuries, churches around Crete were decorated with frescoes – many of which can still be seen today. Byzantine art flowered under the Paleologan emperors who ruled from 1258 to 1453, and its influence spread to Crete. The great icon painter of the 14th century was Ioannis Pagonomenos, who worked in western Crete.

THE CRETAN SCHOOL

With the fall of Constantinople in 1453, many Byzantine artists fled to Crete. At the same time, the Italian Renaissance was in full bloom and many Cretan artists studied in Italy. The result was the 'Cretan School' of icon painting that combined technical brilliance and dramatic richness. In Iraklio alone there were more than 200 painters working from the mid-16th to mid-17th centuries who were equally at ease in Venetian and Byzantine styles. The Cretan Theophanes Sterlitzas painted monasteries throughout Greece, and spread the techniques of the Cretan School.

Too few examples of the Cretan School are on display in Crete. In Iraklio you can see some fine examples at the Museum of Religious Art (p153) – the centrepiece of the collection being six portable icons from the great Michael Damaskinos, the finest exponent of the Cretan school. Damaskinos' long sojourn in Venice introduced him to new techniques of rendering perspective, which he brought to the Byzantine style of icon painting.

CONTEMPORARY ARTS

The fine arts have a relatively low profile in Crete today, though there are many contemporary artists and artisans working and exhibiting on the island. Many Cretan-born artists live and work in Athens and abroad. Rethymno's Contemporary Arts Centre Rethymno (p126) is one of the island's leading galleries for local and international artists and has a permanent collection of the work of local painter Lefteris Kanakakis. The Centre for Byzantine Art in Rethymno (p125) continues the tradition of the Cretan School of icon painting and exhibits the work of Manolis Koudourakis. Apart from exhibitions of local artists held by municipal art galleries around Crete, new private galleries are starting to appear in Hania and Iraklio. Hania also hosts an annual International Art Festival (check out Omma Centre of Contemporary Art's website, www.omma.us, and click on the links for information).

Dance

Fresco scenes of dancing Minoans suggest that dancing in Crete began in the ancient Greek temples. Dancing is depicted on ancient Greek vases and

EL GRECO THE CRETAN

One of the geniuses of the Renaissance, El Greco ('The Greek' in Spanish), was in fact a Cretan named Dominikos Theotokopoulos. He was born in the Cretan capital of Candia (present-day Iraklio) in 1541, during a time of great artistic activity, following the arrival of painters fleeing Ottoman-held Constantinople. These painters had a formative influence upon the young El Greco, giving him early grounding in the traditions of late-Byzantine fresco painting that was to give such a powerful spiritual element to his later paintings.

El Greco went to Venice in his early 20s, joining the studio of Titian, but he came into his own as a painter after he moved to Spain in 1577, where his highly emotional style struck a chord with the Spanish. He lived in Toledo until his death in 1614. The most famous of his works, such as his masterpiece *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (1586), are in Toledo but his paintings are in museums around the world. *View of Mt Sinai and the Monastery of St Catherine* (1570), painted during his time in Venice, hangs in Iraklio's Historical Museum of Crete (p152), next to the tiny *Baptism of Christ* acquired by the City of Iraklio in 2004. You can see *Concert of Angels* (1608) at the National Gallery in Athens.

A white marble bust of the painter stands in Iraklio's Plateia El Greco, and there are streets, taverns and hotels named after him throughout the island. A small museum dedicated to El Greco has been established in the village of Fodele, in the house he allegedly spent time in as a child (see p161).

And it was only a matter of time before we had the movie: *El Greco* (2007), an epic €7 million production was shot in Iraklio, Venice, Spain and Athens. It was directed by Yannis Smaragdis and stars British unknown Nick Ashdon.

there are references to dances in Homer's works, who commented on the ability of Cretan dancers in particular.

Cretan dances are dynamic, fast and warlike, and many of them are danced by groups of men. Dances for women are traditionally related to wedding or courtship, and more delicate and graceful. Like most Greek dances they are normally performed in a circle – in ancient times, dancers formed a circle to seal themselves off from evil influences. In later times of occupation, dancing was a way for men to keep fit under the noses of the enemy.

The most popular Cretan dances are the graceful and slow *syrtó* and the *pendozali*. The latter was originally danced by armed warriors and has a slow version and faster one that builds into a frenzy, with the leader doing kicks, variations and fancy moves while the others follow with more mild steps. Another popular dance is the *sousta*, a bouncy courtship dance with small precise steps that is performed by couples. The *maleviziotiko* (also known as *kastrino* or *pidikto*) is a fast triumphant dance.

Dancing well is a matter of great personal pride, and most dancers will take their turn at the front to demonstrate their prowess. Be aware that cutting in on somebody's dance is absolutely bad form, as families have usually paid for the dance (this is how Cretan musicians often make their living).

The best place to see Cretan dancing is at festivals, weddings and baptisms. Folkloric shows are also put on for tourists in many areas. Although these are more contrived, they still put on a decent show.

In addition to Crete's own traditional music and dances, you will also come across mainstream Greek music and dance.

Music

Cretan music is the most dynamic and enduring form of traditional music in Greece today. It remains the most popular music in Crete, staving off mainstream Greek and western pop, and accompanies weddings, births, holidays, harvesting and any other celebration.

Anthony Quinn (Mexican, not Greek) injured his foot while filming *Zorba the Greek*, so the scripted energetic dance became a slow shuffle he falsely claimed was traditional.

Crete's thriving local music scene continues to spawn a new generation of folk performers, who play regularly and produce new recordings of traditional songs as well as a contemporary style of music based on Cretan tradition. Cretan music also has a presence in the world-music scene as a genre in its own right.

The most prominent Cretan musician today is the legendary Psarantonis; he's known for his unique style of playing and is instantly recognisable from his wild beard and straggly mane of hair. Psarantonis performs regularly – everywhere from the smallest Cretan village to the clubs of Athens and the international festival circuit.

The icon of Cretan music, however, is the late Nikos Xylouris, whose career was cut short when he died in 1980 at the age of 43. With his superb voice and talent on the lyra, he remains the biggest selling and most revered Cretan musician.

Cretan music has been influenced by many musical traditions over the centuries and resembles eastern modal music. The lead instruments are the lyra, a three-stringed instrument similar to a violin that is played resting on the knee; the eight-stringed *laouto* (lute); and the *mandolino* (mandolin). Other traditional instruments include the *askomandoura* (bagpipe), *habili* (whistle) and *daoulaki* (drum). The *bouzouki*, so associated with Greek music, is not part of Cretan music, though popular Greek music is also heard and performed in Crete.

One of Crete's favourite forms of musical expression are *mandinades*, rhyming couplets of 15 syllables that express the age-old concerns of love, death and the vagaries of fate. Probably originating as love songs in 15th-century Venice, thousands of *mandinades* helped forge a sense of national identity during the long centuries of occupation. The best 'rhymers' at Cretan festivals will tailor their songs to the people present and try to outdo each other in skill and composition. These days young Cretans continue the tradition, and *mandinades* are still part of the modern courtship ritual, albeit often via mobile phone text messages.

Another popular form of music is *rizitika*, which are centuries-old songs from the Lefka Ori thought to have derived from the songs of the border guards of the Byzantine Empire, though it is believed they may date back further. Many of the *rizitika* songs deal with historical or heroic themes. One of the most popular is the song of Daskalogiannis, the Sfakian hero who led the rebellion against the Turks in 1770 – the song has 1034 verses.

With more than 10,000 lines, the 17th-century romance *Erotokritos*, written by Vitsentzos Kornaros, has provided ample material for performers, and continues to inspire Crete's musicians. It has been put to music countless times, with each artist presenting their own interpretation of the great work.

Traditional folk music was shunned by the Greek bourgeoisie during the period after independence; however, a new wave of *entehno* (artistic) music that emerged in Athens in the 1960s drew on urban folk instruments such as the *bouzouki* and created popular hits from the works of Greek poets.

Acclaimed composer Yiannis Markopoulos (from Ierapetra) upped the ante by introducing rural folk music into the mainstream and was responsible for bringing Nikos Xylouris to the fore. During the junta years, Xylouris' music became a leading voice of the resistance. Markopoulos himself is best known internationally for his composition for *Who Pays the Ferryman?*

Xylouris was one of a swathe of artists who have emerged from the village of Anogia and part of an extraordinary musical family (see the boxed text, opposite).

For an insight into Cretan music, go to www.cretan-music.com (in English and Greek).

The oldest surviving folk songs in Greece, dating from the 17th century, were found at Mt Athos and were revealed to be *rizitika* (patriotic songs) from western Crete.

MUSICAL FAMILIES

The village of Anogia (p136), in the foothills of Mt Psiloritis in Rethymno, has produced a disproportionate number of musically talented sons. The much-loved and now long-lamented singer and lyricist Nikos Xylouris was from Anogia, and his ancestral house is maintained as a kind of musical shrine in the lower village. His idiosyncratic brother Psarantonis has since taken up the reins and is wildly popular nationwide. Brother Giannis Xylouris (Psaroyiannis) is Greece's most accomplished lute player. His heir apparent is Psarantonis' charismatic son, Giorgos Xylouris (Psaroyiorgis), whose musical career has blossomed since returning to Crete after a stint living in Australia. Yiorgi's sister, Niki, is one of the few female Cretan singers, and the finest, while their brother Lambis is not surprisingly also in the music game.

Other notable musicians from Anogia include the lyra player Manolis Manouras, Nikiforos Aerakis, Vasilis Skoulas and Giorgos Kalomiris.

The talented but capricious Georgos Tramoundanis, alias Loudovikos ton Anogion (Ludwig from Anogia), sells his brand of folksy, ballad-style Cretan compositions to audiences all over Greece.

Xylouris, Thanasis Skordalos and Kostas Mountakis are considered the great masters of Cretan music, and most musicians today follow one of their styles.

One of the most respected and intriguing figures of Crete's music scene is Ross Daly (of Irish descent), a master of the lyra who has established a musical workshop in Houdetsi (see p164).

The excellent sextet Hainides is one of the more popular bands to emerge from Crete in recent years, playing their own brand of music and giving memorable live performances around Greece. Other leading figures include Mitsos and Vasilis Stavrakakis and contemporary musicians such as the band Palaïna, Stelios Petrakis from Sitia, Papa Stefanis Nikas and Yiannis Haroulis. Australian-born Sifis Tsourdalakis is another rising young talent.

Popular artists of Cretan origin playing mainstream Greek music include the talented Manos Pirovolakis with his rock-lyra sound.

Literature

Crete has a rich literary tradition that sprang from the Cretan love of songs, verses and word play. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, Crete had a tremendous literary flowering under Venetian rule.

The era's greatest masterpiece was undoubtedly the epic *Erotokritos* written by Vitsentzos Kornaros of Sitia. More than 10,000 lines long, this poem of courtly love is full of nostalgia for the dying Venetian regime that was threatened by the rise in Turkish power. The poem was recited for centuries by illiterate peasants and professional singers alike, embodying the dreams of freedom that enabled Cretans to endure their many privations. Many of the verses were incorporated into Crete's beloved *mandinades*. It is considered the most important work of early modern Greek literature.

Greece's best-known and most widely read author since Homer is Nikos Kazantzakis, born in Crete in 1883 amid the last spasms of the island's struggle for independence from the Turks. His novels are full of drama and larger-than-life characters. His most famous works are *The Last Temptation*, *Zorba the Greek*, *Christ Recrucified* and *Freedom or Death*. The first two have been made into films. *Zorba the Greek* takes place on Crete and provides a fascinating glimpse of the harsher side of Cretan culture.

Kazantzakis had a chequered and at times troubled literary career, clashing frequently with the Orthodox Church for his professed atheism (see the boxed text, p53).

The first complete English prose translation of Crete's 10,000-line epic *Erotokritos*, was published by Byzantina Australiensia in 2004, with a scholarly introduction and notes, translated by Gavan Betts, Stathis Gauntlett and Thanasis Spilias.

Literature and Society in Renaissance Crete, by David Holton, is a comprehensive study of the literature of the Cretan Renaissance in its historical, social and cultural context, with chapters on the poetic and dramatic genres contributed by leading experts in the field.

Iraklio may have Kazantzakis, but Rethymno can lay claim to Pandelis Prevelakis. Born in Rethymno in 1900, Prevelakis also studied in Athens and at the Sorbonne. Primarily known as a poet, Prevelakis also wrote plays and novels, and his best-known work is *The Tale of a Town*, which is about his home town.

Contemporary Cretan writers include Rhea Galanaki, whose prize-winning *The Life of Ismail Ferik Pasha* (1989) has been translated into six languages; it's a story about the clash of Christianity and Ottoman Islam in Crete. It is listed in Unesco's Collection of Representative Works.

Ioanna Karystiani (see the boxed text, p41), who wrote the screenplay for *Brides*, has been published in several languages, but only her novel *Little England* has been translated into English.

Film

Crete has no local film industry but has been the location for several films, including 1960s classic *Zorba the Greek*, which was shot in Stavros on the Akrotiri Peninsula as well as on other locations around the island. In 1956 the American director Jules Dassin (*Never On Sunday*) chose the village of Kritsa as the backdrop for *He Who Must Die*, the film version of Kazantzakis' novel *Christ Recrucified* starring Dassin's wife, Melina Mercouri. The film lovingly captured the worn faces of the villagers, many of whom acted in the film.

CRETAN MUSIC TOP 10

The following broad selection of recordings provides an introduction to Cretan music past and present.

- *Tis Kritis Ta Politima* – this 2006 double CD compilation is a good overall introduction to Cretan music, featuring a broad selection of traditional songs by leading Cretan musicians and Greek artists.
- *Dimotiki Anthologia-Nikos Xylouris* – an early 1976 album that shot Crete's legendary musical son, Nikos Xylouris, to stardom. It's also available in a good-value twin-CD set (*I Kriti Tou Nikos Xylouris*) with another classic album, *Ta Pou Thimoume Tragoudo* (1975).
- *Ta Oraiotera Tragoudia Tou* – a fine anthology paying tribute to the postwar master of Cretan music, Kostas Mountakis, known as 'the teacher'.
- *Thanasis Skordalos* – part of the *To Elliniko Tragoudi* series documenting the greats of Greek music, this is a taste one of Crete's lyra legends.
- *Anastorimata* – a landmark album from 1982 heralding the idiosyncratic Psarantonis' unique musical style. It also features *mandinades* by Vasilis Stavrakakis, and Ross Daly makes his first appearance.
- *Beyond the Horizon* – Ross Daly's 2002 album presents his exceptional orchestration of traditional Cretan music, continuing the Irishman's influence on Cretan music.
- *Embolo* – a 2004 double-disc set featuring Yiannis and Giorgos Xylouris, two of the greats of Cretan music, with the best Cretan lute you can hear.
- *Xatheri* – a stellar collaboration from 2003 featuring Crete's top vocalist Vasilis Stavrakakis, Giorgos Xylouris on lute, Niki Xylouris and other leading musicians playing Cretan classics with a fresh sound.
- *Palaiina Seferia* – the excellent 1997 self-titled first album of this contemporary Cretan ensemble led by Zacharias Spyridakis, a student of the lyra master Mountakis.
- *Hainides* – the self-titled first album of this popular Cretan band gives you a good feel for its unique style based on Cretan music.

NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS – CRETE'S PRODIGAL SON

Crete's most famous contemporary literary son is Nikos Kazantzakis. Born in 1883 in Iraklio, the then Turkish-dominated capital, Kazantzakis spent his early childhood in the ferment of revolution and change that was creeping upon his homeland. In 1897 the revolution that finally broke out against Turkish rule forced him to leave Crete for studies in Naxos, Athens and later Paris. It wasn't until he was 31 that he finally turned his hand to writing by translating philosophical books into Greek. For a number of years he travelled throughout Europe – Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Russia and Britain – thus laying the groundwork for a series of travelogues in his later literary career.

Nikos Kazantzakis was a complex writer and his early work was heavily influenced by the prevailing philosophical ideas of the time, including the nihilistic philosophies of Nietzsche. In his writings, Kazantzakis is tormented by a tangible metaphysical and existentialist anguish. His relationship with religion was always troubling – his official stance being that of a nonbeliever, yet he always seemed to toy with the idea that perhaps God did exist. His self-professed greatest work is his *Odyssey*, a modern-day epic loosely based on the trials and travels of the ancient hero Odysseus (Ulysses). A weighty and complex opus of 33,333 iambic verses, *Odyssey* never fully realised Kazantzakis' aspirations to be held in the same league as Homer, Virgil or the Renaissance Italian, Tasso.

Ironically it was only much later in his career, after Kazantzakis belatedly turned to novel writing, that his star finally shone. It was through works such as *Christ Recrucified* (1948), *Kapetan Mihalis* (1950; now known as *Freedom and Death*) and *The Life and Manners of Alexis Zorbas* (1946) that he became internationally known. This last work gave rise to the image of the ultimate, free-spirited Greek male, 'Zorba the Greek', which was immortalised by Anthony Quinn in the movie of the same name.

Kazantzakis died while travelling in Freiburg, Germany, on 26 October 1957. Despite resistance from the Orthodox Church, he was given a religious funeral and buried in the southern Martinenga Bastion of the old walls of Iraklio.

More recently, Crete was the setting for the rather lacklustre 2000 romantic comedy, *Beware of Greeks Bearing Guns*, an old-fashioned tale of mistaken identity and a Cretan vendetta starring Greek satirist Lakis Lazopoulos and Greek-Australian actress Zoe Carides. The Greek-Australian co-production was shot in Crete and Melbourne.

The 2007 epic *El Greco*, a film about the life of Crete's famous painter (see the boxed text, p49), directed by Yiannis Smaragdis, was shot in Crete. Meanwhile, please stay tuned for two movies shot in Crete in 2007. Olga Malea's *First-Time Godfather* was shot in the village of Fres, while Greek-Australian actor Alex Dimitriades plays the lead role in the romantic comedy *Reception Will Follow*, produced by Greek-American Christine Crokos.

While Crete has no local TV production, one of the most popular recent TV series was *Tis Agapis Mahairia* (The Knives of Love), a drama based on a Cretan vendetta.

Greece's film industry overall is going through a period of flux. For many years it was in the doldrums, due largely to inadequate government funding and a tendency to produce slow-moving esoteric films loaded with symbolism and too avant-garde to have mass appeal, despite being well made with some outstanding cinematography.

The leader of this style is Greece's most acclaimed film director, Theodoros Angelopoulos, who won the 1988 Golden Palm award at the Cannes Film Festival for *Eternity and a Day*. His other well-known films include *Ulysses Gaze*, starring Harvey Keitel, *The Beekeeper*, *Alexander the Great* and *Landscapes in the Mist*.

More recently Greek filmmakers have begun producing commercially successful films, a trend started by the 2000 box-office hit *Safe Sex*, a light-hearted look at Greek sexuality by Thanasis Reppas and Mihalis Papathanasiou.

But Greece has not had a major international hit since *Zorba*, and beyond the festival circuit, few have made an impact outside Greece. Two major mainstream films that gained international cinematic releases – the first in many years – were Tassos Boulmetis' *A Touch of Spice* (2003) and Pantelis Voulgaris' 2004 hit *Brides*, which was executive-produced by Martin Scorsese.

The latest wave of filmmakers is attracting international attention with films that present a grittier, up-close and candid look at contemporary Greek life, a shift from idealised and romanticised views from the past. Directors to watch include Konstantinos Giannaris, whose provocative documentary-style films such as *From the Edge of the City* and his most recent release *Hostage* seem to split audiences and critics alike. Yannis Economidis, whose punishing second film *Soul Kicking* (2006) was screened at Cannes, has been likened to a younger Mike Leigh on speed.

Food & Drink

Cretan cuisine has its own distinct identity within Greek cooking. Regional specialities found across Crete and the quality and range of produce grown on the island by various small-scale producers present a diverse gourmet trail. One of the delights of travelling through Crete is coming across a family-run taverna where authentic Cretan dishes are made with fresh, home-grown produce, where the wild aromatic greens were picked in the mountains, the oil and cheese is homemade, tender lamb is from a local shepherd or the fish was caught by the owner.

Unfortunately, since the advent of mass tourism, the food dished up to visitors at many of the island's bland tourist tavernas has hardly done the cuisine justice. This is changing, however, as pride in promoting Cretan cuisine increases and more traditional home-style dishes are appearing on restaurant menus. Even in popular areas, many tavernas have stopped pandering to foreign predilections, trading schnitzel for *stifado* (braised meat with onions), while a new generation of professional chefs is experimenting with variations on traditional dishes and flavours to create nouveau-Cretan cuisine.

Crete may be a potential gourmet travel destination, but the essence of its rustic cuisine remains its simple seasonal and balanced approach, which reflects the bounty of a sun-blessed fertile land and a history of resourcefulness that comes from subsistence living during hard times.

Cretan cuisine gained legendary status for its health benefits following scientific studies of the Mediterranean diet in the 1960s that showed Cretans had the lowest levels of heart disease and other chronic illnesses (see the boxed text, p57). This was largely attributed to a greater reliance on pulses, fresh vegetables and fruit than on meats and processed foodstuffs, and copious use of virgin olive oil.

Food and the ritual of dining together play an integral role in Cretan life, whether at home or eating out with family and friends. Cretans will travel far to get to a great restaurant or eat specific food, heading to the mountains for local meat and the sea for fresh fish. Some of the best tavernas are tucked away in unexpected places.

THE CRETAN KITCHEN

Greek and Cretan dishes often overlap, but there are Cretan specialities, as well as regional variations across the island. Cretan cuisine has its roots in antiquity and has been influenced by various cultures over time but it essentially relies on fresh, unadulterated seasonal produce, aromatic herbs and ingredients that speak for themselves. The olive oil, produced in vast quantities across the island, is among the world's best and is an integral part of meals. Apart from its beneficial qualities, olive oil also makes vegetables and salads taste better.

The island's diet evolved from subsistence and what could be grown or made locally. For centuries Cretans have been gathering *horta* (wild greens) from the hills and boiling them for warm salads or cooking them in pies and stews. *Hohlai* (snails) are collected after rainfall and prepared in dozens of interesting ways: try *hohlai boubouristi*, simmered in vinegar and rosemary, or snails stewed with *hondros* (cracked wheat). Cretan *paximadia* (rusks), a hangover from times of famine, are made from barley flour or whole wheat and double-baked to produce a hard loaf that can keep, literally, for years. They are moistened with water and topped with

'...Cretans had the lowest levels of heart disease and other chronic illnesses...'

THE GOOD OIL

The Minoans were among the first to grow wealthy on the olive, and Crete remains an important olive-growing area, producing the largest quantity of extra virgin olive oil in Greece. More and more organic oil is being produced and at least nine olive regions have gained the EU's Protected Appellation of Origin status.

The best Cretan olive oil is from Kolymbari, west of Hania, and Sitia in the east. Biolea, near Hania, makes superb organic olive oil, as do monasteries – particularly the award-winning olive oil produced at Moni Agia Triada near Hania and Moni Toplou in the East.

The oil that is prized above all others is *agoureleo* (meaning unripe), a thick green oil pressed from unripe olives.

Greeks are the world's biggest per-capita consumers of olive oil; in Crete annual per-person consumption averages 31L.

Cretans probably eat more snails than the French – Cretan snails are even exported to France.

tomato, olive oil and feta or *myzithra* (sheep's-milk cheese) in the popular dish called *dakos* (or *koukouvagia*).

Meat features more regularly than it did in the past. Cretans eat a lot of locally reared lamb and goat and are also fond of rabbit, which is stewed with rosemary and *rizmarato* (vinegar). While grills dominate taverna menus, Cretans have their own way of barbecuing called *ofto*, in which big chunks of meat are grilled upright around hot coals. In parts of Crete meat is cooked *tsigariasto* (sautéed), while in traditional mountain village tavernas you will find surprisingly tasty boiled mutton or goat. Meat is also cooked with vegetables, often lamb stewed with *stamnagathi* (wild greens) or artichokes, or chicken with okra.

The resourceful Cretans use almost every part of the animal – including delicacies such as *ameletita* ('unspeakables' – fried sheep's testicles), and *gardhoumia* (stomach and offal wrapped in intestines).

Psari (fish) has long been a staple (except in mountain areas) cooked with minimum fuss – usually grilled whole and drizzled with *ladholemono* (a lemon-and-oil dressing). Smaller fish like red mullet and tiny whitebait are usually lightly fried.

Kalitsounia, lightly fried pastries filled with *myzithra* cheese or *horta*. Cheese versions are also served with honey.

Where Cretan cuisine shines is in vegetable dishes such as artichokes and broad beans or tasty zucchini flowers (*anthoi*) stuffed with rice and herbs.

Crete produces wonderful cheeses from goat and sheep's milk, or a combination. *Graviera*, a nutty, mild gruyere-like sheep's-milk cheese, is often aged in special mountain caves and stone huts called *mitata*. It is delicious eaten with thyme honey. Other local cheeses include *myzithra* (a soft, mild ricotta-like cheese that can be eaten soft or hardened for grating), the hardened sour *Xynomyzithra*, *anthotyro* (a similar soft whey cheese) and *galomyzithra* (a creamy speciality of Hania). *Staka* is a rich, soft buttery cheese, often added to rice *pilafi* (pilaf) to make it creamier.

Thick, tangy sheep's-milk yogurt is something to savour, best eaten with honey, walnuts or fruit, especially in areas like Vryses (see p120).

DRINKS Beverages

A legacy of Ottoman rule, Greek coffee is traditionally brewed on hot sand in a special copper *briki* (pot) and served in a small cup, where the grounds sink to the bottom (don't drink them). It is drunk *glyko* (sweet), *metrio* (medium) and *sketo* (without sugar). Greek coffee is, however, struggling to maintain its place as the national drink against the ubiquitous frappé,

the iced instant-coffee concoction that you see everyone drinking. Alternatives are espresso and cappuccino chilled – *freddo*. Herbal teas are popular, especially camomile or aromatic Cretan *tsai tou vounou* (mountain tea), which is both nutritious and delicious. The endemic Diktamo (dittany) tea is known for its medicinal qualities, while Crete's reputedly medicinal warm tippie is *rakomelo* – raki, honey and cloves.

Beer & Spirits

Greek beers are making their mark in a market dominated by big European breweries such as Amstel and Heineken. The major Greek brands are Mythos and Alfa, while boutique beers include the Vergina and Hillas lagers from Northern Greece, organic Piraiki made in Piraeus and Craft, which is widely available in draught form. Crete also has its own beer produced at the Rethymniaki brewery (p132). Greeks are not big beer drinkers, however: they only consume about half the EU per capita average.

Supermarkets are the cheapest place to buy beer, which is also available in kiosks.

Ouzo, the famous Greek spirit, has a more limited following in Crete, where it is drunk mostly by mainlanders or foreigners. It is served neat, with ice and a separate glass of water for dilution (which makes it turn milky white).

Wine

Wine has been produced in Crete since Minoan times and Crete's farmers have long grown small vineyards and made wine for their own consumption. It wasn't until industrialisation (and the resulting rapid urban growth and onset of tourism) that bottled wine was mass produced commercially – and retsina was introduced to the world.

In the past 20 years, a renaissance in the Greek wine industry has seen a new generation of progressive internationally-trained winemakers reinventing Greek wine using local and international varieties. About 20% of Greek wine is produced in Crete and while, on the whole, Cretan wine may not make connoisseurs tremble with delight, the island produces many

THE CRETAN DIET

The health benefits of the Cretan diet first gained attention after an influential international study, begun in the 1960s, found that Cretan men had the lowest rate of heart disease and cancer. Thirty years later, half the Cretan participants were still alive, compared to no survivors in Finland. The mystery is attributed to a balanced diet high in fruits, vegetables, pulses, whole grains, olive oil and wine. Another important factor may be the *horta* (wild greens) that Cretans gathered in the hills and survived on during war, which may have protective properties that are not yet fully understood. Regular fasting may also play a role, along with the use of sheep and goat's milk instead of cow's, and many will swear by the medicinal properties of raki and wine and their role in ensuring longevity. Unfortunately the Cretan diet and lifestyle is changing as the island has prospered and become urbanised. Meat and cheese feature more in the diet, few Cretans still work in the fields and obesity, heart disease and cancer rates are rising.

Apart from the health benefits, Cretan cuisine is also finally being recognised as a key part of the cultural heritage. A resurgence of interest and pride in Cretan cuisine has started to change the island's gastronomic map. In recent years more emphasis is being placed on promoting Cretan cuisine through programmes such as **Concred** (www.concred.gr), a restaurant certification programme established in 2004, which has about 30 restaurants on board. Many are in large hotels, which once served only international food, but the list includes a range of classy restaurants and simple tavernas, in the cities, in mountain villages and by the sea, who serve Cretan food. But there are plenty of authentic places to discover in your travels.

CRETAN FIRE WATER

Raki – *tsikoudia* – is an integral part of Cretan culture. A shot of the fiery brew is offered as a welcome, at the end of a meal and pretty much at any time and on all occasions. Distilled from grape stems and pips left over from the grapes pressed for wine, it is similar to the Middle Eastern *arak*, Italian grappa, Irish poteen or Turkish raki. Each October, the raki distilling season starts, with distilleries around the island (including many private stills) producing massive quantities of raki. The season is usually accompanied by a lots of drinking and feasting. If you pass a village distilling raki, you may well get an invitation. Good raki has a smooth mellow taste with no noticeable after-burn. As long as you eat food with it, don't mix it with other alcohol and drink plenty of water, you can drink considerable amounts without serious after-effects or hangovers.

distinguished wines. Wine tourism is slowly picking up as wineries are becoming more visitor-friendly (see p166).

About 70% of Cretan wine comes from the Peza area, Crete's main Appellation of Origin region. Much of it is blended and produced in bulk by cooperatives and the quality can be uneven. Other key wine regions are Dafnes, Arhanes and Sitia, which has a significant industry (p194) producing some crisp whites, while there are also fine wineries in Hania (see p95). The most popular Cretan white grape varieties are *vilana* and *thrapstathi*. The oldest variety, *liatiko*, has been used to make red wine for the last 4000 years, while reds include *kotsifali* and *mandilari*.

House wines served in restaurants are usually very presentable and much cheaper than bottled wine. Some Cretan house reds have a light port taste. Ask for *kokkino* (red), *roze* (rose) or *lefko* (white).

Nowadays retsina, white wine flavoured with the resin of pine trees, has taken on an almost folkloric significance with foreigners, some of whom confuse it with barrel wine (which is non-resinated). It goes well with strongly flavoured food, especially seafood, but it is an acquired taste.

FEASTS & CELEBRATIONS

Food plays an integral part in Cretan religious and cultural celebrations, which are inevitably accompanied by a feast. Festivities invariably involve spit-roasting (and/or boiling) lamb or kid goat, accompanied by a delicious rice *pilafi* made from the stock.

Easter is preceded by the Lenten fast, which involves special dishes without meat or dairy products – or even oil if you go strictly by the book. Come the resurrection, though, the celebrations begin with a bowl of *mayiritsa* (an offal soup), and an Easter Sunday lunch of lamb and *kreatotourta* (meat pies).

Red-dyed boiled eggs are part of the Easter festivities and also used to decorate the *tsourecki*, a brioche-style bread flavoured with *mahlepi* (mahaleb cherry kernels).

Easter sweets include *koulourakia* (biscuits), *melomakarona* (honey biscuits) and *kourambiedhes* (almond biscuits).

A *kouloura* – an intricately decorated loaf of bread that takes hours to make – is a traditional wedding gift. Honey and walnuts, considered an aphrodisiac or fertility-booster, are given to the bridal couple.

The *Vasilopita*, a New Year's cake, has a coin inserted into the mix, giving the recipient good luck for the year.

Throughout the year, there are many celebrations centred on various harvest festivals – from chestnuts to sultanas (see p213 for a full list).

For comprehensive information on the country's wine regions and producers, visit www.greekwine.gr or www.greekwinemakers.com.

DINING OUT

In most places there is usually a distinction between 'tourist' tavernas and places aimed at more discerning locals, and the key is to find the latter. Friendly touts and big illuminated signs in English with unappealing photos of dishes is a big giveaway, though admittedly there are rare exceptions. Given the later dining times, you may find that a restaurant that was empty at 7pm is heaving with locals when you leave the taverna you chose, so try to adapt to local eating times (see Habits & Customs, p62).

By law, every eating establishment must display a written menu including prices. Restaurant staff will automatically put bread on your table and this comes at a nominal extra charge. Tipping is not mandatory but the bill is usually rounded up or around 10% is added for good service.

As a general rule of thumb, the further you move from the north-coast tourist resorts the better the food becomes, especially in the villages where they are likely to use fresh local produce. Beware of small tavernas with over-extensive menus, as they could not realistically produce all the dishes fresh to order.

Where To Eat & Drink

Other types of eateries include the following:

Estiatorio A restaurant where you once paid more for essentially the same dishes you got in a taverna, but with a nicer setting and formal service. These days *estiatorio* often refers to an upmarket restaurant serving more international cuisine.

Kafeneio One of the oldest institutions, *kafeneio* normally only serve Greek coffee and spirits but in many Cretan villages they will always have meals. They are still largely the domain of men.

Mayireio A restaurant specialising in big trays of the day's cooked dishes, including both traditional baked dishes and one-pot favourites.

Mezedopoleio The key here is lots of different mezedes, small dishes that are shared.

Psarotaverna A taverna specialising in fish and seafood dishes.

Psistaria A taverna specialising in char-grilled or spit-roasted meat.

Rakadiko The Cretan equivalent of an *ouzerie* serves increasingly sophisticated mezes with each round of raki. Particularly popular in Sitia, Ierapetra and Rethymno.

Taverna The classic Greek eateries are casual, family-run (and child-friendly) places where the waiter arrives with bread and cutlery in a basket, and water. They have barrel wine and paper tablecloths and fairly standard menus. Trendy modern tavernas offer creative takes on Greek classics in fancier surrounds, with higher prices and good wine lists but not necessarily better food.

Zaharoplasteio A cross between a patisserie and a café (though some only do take-away).

Mezedes & Starters

Mezedes (appetisers) are normally shared before the main meal, though it is quite acceptable to make a full meal of them. You can also order a *pikilia* (mixed mezedes plate).

Common mezedes are dips such as *taramasalata* (fish roe), *tzatziki* (yogurt, cucumber and garlic), *melidzanosalata* (aubergine or eggplant) and

GOURMET DELIGHTS

You can pick up a range of delicious souvenirs on your travels, such as excellent Cretan honey, aromatic herbs and teas, spoon sweets (traditional syrupy fruit preserves) pickles, raki and, of course, olive oil. Some of the best places for local produce are women's cooperatives such as

Krousonas (p163) where you can see women at work and buy some excellent traditional products, including rusks, spoon sweets, pastries, biscuits and pastas. In Hania, **Miden Agan** (p88)

has a delectable range of deli foods, olive oils and an extensive wine selection, as does **Avli Raw Materials** (p129) in Rethymno.

DOS & DON'TS

- Do ask to look in the pots in the kitchen or select your own fish.
- Do ask for specific local specialities in every region.
- Don't insist on paying if you are invited out – it insults your host.
- Don't refuse a coffee or glass of raki – it's offered as a gesture of hospitality and good will.

fava (split-pea puree). Hot mezedes include *keftedes* (meatballs), *loukanika* (village sausages), *bourekaki* (tiny meat pies), *saganaki* (fried cheese) and *apaki* (vinegar-cured pork). Vegetarian mezedes include rice-filled *dolmades*, deep-fried zucchini or aubergine slices, *gigantes* (lima beans in tomato and herb sauce), and vegetable fritters, most commonly *kolokythokeftedes* (with zucchini) or *domatokeftedes* (with tomato).

Typical seafood mezedes are pickled or grilled *Ohtapodi* (octopus), cured *lakerda* (fish), mussel or prawn *saganaki* (cooked with tomato sauce and cheese), crispy fried calamari, fried *maridha* (whitebait) and *gavros* (mild anchovy) either marinated or grilled.

Soup is not normally eaten as a starter, but can be an economical and hearty meal in itself with bread and a salad. *Psarosoupa* is a fish soup with vegetables; *kakavia* (Greek bouillabaisse) is made to order and laden with seafood. If you're into offal, don't miss *mayiritsa*, the traditional Easter tripe soup.

The ubiquitous Greek or village salad, *horiatiki salata*, accompanies most meals and is made with tomatoes, cucumber, onions, olives and feta cheese, sprinkled with oregano and dressed with olive oil, occasionally garnished with fresh *glistrida* (purslane or capers). Hand-cut potatoes fried in olive oil are also a favourite.

Mains

In tavernas, main dishes normally include a combination of one-pot and oven-baked dishes (*mayirefta*) and food cooked to order (*tis oras*) such as grills. Fancier and more international-style restaurants have more conventional menus. The most common *mayirefta* are *boureki* (a cheese, zucchini and potato bake), *mousakas* (layers of aubergine, minced meat and potatoes topped with cheese sauce and baked), *pastitsio* (baked cheese-topped pasta with minced meat), *yemista* (stuffed tomatoes or green peppers), *yuvetsi* (casserole of lamb or veal and pasta), *stifado* (braised meat with onions), *soutzoukakia* (spicy meatballs in tomato sauce) and *hohlii* (snails). *Ladhera* are largely vegetable dishes stewed or baked with plenty of olive oil.

Mayirefta are usually prepared early in the day and left to cool, which enhances the flavour (they are better served lukewarm than microwaved).

Meat is commonly baked with potatoes, with lemon and oregano, or cooked in tomato-based stews or casseroles (*kokkinisto*).

Most places will make tasty charcoal-grilled meats such as *brizoles* (pork chops) or *paidakia* (lamb cutlets).

Seafood mains may include octopus with macaroni, and squid stuffed with cheese and herbs or rice. Cuttlefish (*soupies*) is excellent grilled or stewed with wild fennel. Fried salted cod served with *skordalia* (a lethal garlic and potato dip) is another tasty dish.

Fish is usually sold by weight in restaurants and it is customary to pick your victim from the selection on display or in the kitchen. Make sure it's weighed (raw) so you don't get a shock when the bill arrives, as fresh fish is not cheap.

While Crete's fishing industry ensures a lot of fresh fish, there is certainly not enough local fish to cater for the millions of tourists who descend each

summer. Most places will state if the fish and seafood is frozen, though sometimes only on the Greek menu (indicated by the abbreviated 'kat' or an asterisk). Smaller fish are often a safer bet – the odder the sizes, the more chance that they are local.

The choice fish for grilling are *tsipoura* (gilthead sea bream), *lavraki* (sea bass) and *fangri* (bream), while smaller fish such as *barbunya* (red mullet) are delicious fried. See the Food Glossary (p64) for other common fish names.

Sweet Treats

Fruit, rather than sweets, is traditionally served after a meal – but that's not to say that you won't find some delectable local sweets and cakes. Women pride themselves on their baking and confectionary skills.

As well as traditional Greek sweets such as *baklava*, *loukoumades* (fritters with honey or syrup), *kataifi* (chopped nuts inside shredded pastry soaked in honey), *rizogalo* (rice pudding), and *galaktoboureko* (custard-filled pastry with syrup), Cretans have their own sweet specialities.

Sfakianes pite, from the Sfakia region of Hania, are fine pancake-like sweets with a light *myzithra* filling, served with honey. *Xerotigana* are deep-fried pastry twirls with honey and nuts.

Traditional syrupy fruit preserves (known as spoon sweets) are served on tiny plates but are also delicious as a topping on yogurt or ice cream. Some tavernas serve halva (made from semolina) after a meal.

Quick Eats

Souvlaki is the favourite fast food of Crete. *Gyros*, skewered or kebab versions are wrapped in pitta bread, with tomato, onion and lashings of tzatziki. There are plenty of western-style *fastfoudadika*, as fast-food joints are known, in major cities and towns. A range of *pittes* including *kalitsounia* and the classic *tyropita* (cheese pie) and *spanakopita* (spinach pie) – can be found in bakeries. If you are in a hurry but want a real meal, tavernas with *mayirefta* are the best bet.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Crete has very few vegetarian restaurants per se, but a combination of lean times and the Orthodox faith's fasting traditions has made Cretans accidental vegans, so there are normally plenty of vegetarian options. *Ladhera* are the mainstay of religious fasts. Beans and pulses were the foundation of the winter diet, so you will find dishes such as delicious *gigantes* (lima beans in tomato and herb sauce).

Look for dishes such *fasolakia yiahi* (green bean stew), *gemista* (stuffed tomatoes) and *bamies* (okra). Aubergines are also widely used, particularly in dishes such as *briam* (mixed vegetables).

Horta (wild greens) are extremely nutritious. The *vlita* variety are the sweetest, while *stamnaqathi*, found in the mountains, is considered a delicacy and served boiled as a salad or stewed with meat. Other common *horta* include wild radish, dandelion, stinging nettles and sorrel.

Fruit

Crete grows many varieties of beautiful fruit, which are tastier than supermarket offerings back home. A delicious fruit that grows wild on the opuntia cactus is the *frangosyko* (prickly pear, also known as the Barbary fig), though they need to be approached with extreme caution because of the thousands of tiny prickles (invisible to the naked eye) that cover their skin. Never pick one up with your bare hands. Peel them by trimming the ends off with a knife and slit the skin from end to end.

For updates, information and articles on Greek and Mediterranean food, check out www.gourmed.gr.

Feasting and Fasting in Crete, by Diana Farr Louis, is a hard-back portrait of the island and its culinary history traditions. It includes 140 recipes gathered during her travels and chapters on the island's wine, cheeses and herbs as well as special recipes for weddings and religious festivities.

There are more than 100 edible *horta* (wild greens) on Crete, although even the most knowledgeable would not recognise more than a dozen.

Another unusual fruit you may see are *mousmoula* (loquats), small orange fruit with juicy flesh that are pleasantly acidic.

EATING WITH KIDS

Crete is very child-friendly and families will feel comfortable at informal tavernas and *psistarias*, where children are welcome and treated well and no-one is too fussed if they play between the tables. You will often see families dining out late at night and packs of children playing outside tavernas while their parents indulge in a long dinner. Kids' menus are not common, but most places will make up special plates or accommodate requests.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Hospitality is a key element of Cretan culture, from the glass of water on arrival to the customary complimentary fruit and raki at the end of a meal. People prefer to share lots of dishes, which makes for more social and relaxed dining and allows you to taste everything. Cretans rarely eat alone.

Cretans aren't big on breakfast. Budget hotels usually provide continental-style breakfasts (rolls or bread with jam, and tea or coffee) and more up-market hotels serve full buffets including Cretan-style pastries.

Although changes in working hours are affecting traditional meal patterns, lunch is still usually the big meal of the day and does not start until after 2pm. Most Greeks wouldn't think of eating dinner before dark, which coincides with shop closing hours, so restaurants don't fill up until after 10pm. In between, cafés do a roaring trade, particularly after the mid-afternoon siesta (when many places become ghost towns).

Dining is a drawn-out ritual so, if you are eating with locals, pace yourself and don't gorge on mezedes, because there will be plenty more to come. The service can be slow by western standards, but staff are not in a rush to get you out of there either. Once you have your meals they are likely to leave you alone and will often not clear the table until you ask for the bill. Cretans order plenty of dishes and have food left over at the end of the meal. Many places will oblige if you want to take leftovers with you, though when locals do so, it really is a doggie bag.

Ordering a Greek salad or tzatziki as a meal – a common practice among young and budget tourists – is often quietly sneered at by the restaurant staff.

PRESERVING TRADITION

Since making Crete her second home, Greek American chef Nikki Rose has become a quiet ambassador for preserving Cretan culture with sustainable agrotourism through her programme, Crete's Culinary Sanctuaries.

As well as cooking demonstrations in local homes, Rose takes small groups to visit people who still take the time to still make cheese, honey or bake bread in an old wood oven the traditional way. 'It's a lifestyle that's fast disappearing,' she explains.

By slowly establishing an informal islandwide network of organic farms and small producers using traditional methods, she hopes to help preserve Crete's culinary heritage.

'Sustainable tourism and agriculture work together to create better quality tourism and protect the environment and at the same time protect the communities.'

Rose is concerned about the increasing number of 'agro-Disney' ventures, which she fears are alienating and squeezing out the real thing.

'It's very dangerous for real cultural heritage preservation. The tourists don't venture to a real village but they go to these re-creations of traditional Cretan life. If these traditional villages still exist, people should at least go to those places and leave their tourist dollars there.'

Greeks don't traditionally drink coffee after a meal and many tavernas don't offer it.

COOKING COURSES

Culinary tours and cooking courses are becoming more popular on Crete. General courses start from €50.

Rodialos (☎ 28340 51310, www.rodialos.gr) regularly hosts one- to seven-day cooking seminars in a lovely villa in Panormo near Rethymno. Mary Frangaki takes participants through the principles of Cretan cooking and cooks several courses. Rodialos also hosts holistic programmes incorporating yoga and t'ai chi. Workshops cost €50 per day and include eating what you cook. Participants can stay at the villa. Check the website for more details.

Enagron (☎ 28340 61611; www.enagron.gr) outside the village of Axos runs cooking workshops and also organises seasonal events around the production of cheese, wine and raki. The farm setting is lovely and there is accommodation on site (see p136).

Crete's Culinary Sanctuaries (www.cookingincrete.com) focuses on organic agriculture and traditional approaches to Cretan cuisine with hands-on classes and demonstrations in people's homes, visits to local farmers and producers. Headed by Greek-American chef and writer Nikki Rose, the custom-made courses are conducted around Crete (see boxed text, opposite).

Tastes of Crete (☎ 28210 41458; www.diktymna-travel.gr) is an informal hands-on one-day cooking seminar held in an impressive 18th-century farmhouse about 10 minutes from Hania. Classes are limited to eight people and are held twice weekly from May to October. Classes cost €95, which includes transfers, visits to markets, lessons and lunch.

Logari (☎ 2810 752 808; www.logari.gr) was founded by Katerina Hamilaki who runs regular cooking seminars and food-related holidays at her farm and taverna in Katalagari, near Iraklio, which also has a raki still.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Get behind the cuisine scene by getting to know the language. For pronunciation guidelines see p234.

Useful Phrases

I want to make a reservation for this evening.

Θέλω να κλείσω ένα τραπέζι για απόψε.

the-lo na kli-so e-na tra-pe-zi ya a-po-ψε

A table for ... please.

Ένα τραπέζι για ... παρακαλώ.

e-na tra-pe-zi ya ... pa-ra-ka-lo

I'd like the menu, please.

Το μενού, παρακαλώ.

to me-nu, pa-ra-ka-lo

Do you have a menu in English?

Έχετε το μενού στα αγγλικά;

e-hye-te to me-nu sta ang-li-ka?

I'd like ...

Θα ήθελα ...

tha i-the-la ...

Please bring the bill.

Το λογαριασμό, παρακαλώ.

to lo-ghar-ya-zmo, pa-ra-ka-lo

I'm a vegetarian.

Είμαι χορτοφάγος.

i-me hor-to-fa-ghos

I don't eat meat or dairy products.

Δε τρώω κρέας ή γαλακτοκομικά προϊόντα.

dhen tra-o kre-as i gha-la-kto-ko-mi-ka pro-i-on-da

Cretan Cooking, by Maria and Nikos Psilakis, is a well-translated version of their popular guide to Cretan cooking. It contains 265 mouth-watering recipes, some fascinating asides on the history of the dishes and background to the Cretan dietary phenomenon.

The Glorious Foods of Greece, by award-winning Greek-American food writer Diane Kochilas, is a 'must have' for any serious cook, with a regional exploration of Greek food and a 60-page chapter on Crete.

Food Glossary**STAPLES**

<i>pso-mi</i>	ψωμί
<i>vu-ti-ro</i>	βούτυρο
<i>ti-ri</i>	τυρί
<i>a-vgha</i>	αυγά
<i>me-li</i>	μέλι
<i>gha-la</i>	γάλα
<i>e-le-o-la-dho</i>	ελαιόλαδο
<i>e-lyes</i>	ελιές
<i>pi-pe-ri</i>	πιπέρι
<i>a-la-ti</i>	αλάτι
<i>za-ha-ri</i>	ζάχαρη
<i>ksi-dhi</i>	ξύδι

MEAT, FISH & SEAFOOD

<i>vo dhi no</i>	βοδινό
<i>ro-fos</i>	ροφός
<i>ko-to-pu-lo</i>	κοτόπουλο
<i>sou-pia</i>	σουπιά
<i>ke-fa-los</i>	κέφαλος
<i>sfi-ri-da</i>	σφυρίδα
<i>zam-bon</i>	ζαμπόν
<i>la-ghos</i>	λαγός
<i>ka-tsi-ka-ki</i>	κατσικάκι
<i>ar-ni</i>	αρνί
<i>a-sta-kos</i>	αστακός
<i>ko-li-os</i>	κολός
<i>mi-di-a</i>	μούδια
<i>ohta-po-dhi</i>	χαπαόδι
<i>hyi-ri-no</i>	χοιρινό
<i>gha-ri-dhes</i>	γαρίδες
<i>kou-ne-li</i>	κουνέλι
<i>bar-bou-nia</i>	μπαρμπούνια
<i>sar-dhe-les</i>	σαρδέλες
<i>la-vra-ki</i>	λαβράκι
<i>fa-ghri/li-thri-ni/me-la-nou-ri</i>	φαγρι/λιθρίνι/μελανούρι
<i>ka-la-ma-ri</i>	καλαμάρι
<i>ksi-fi-as</i>	ξιφίας
<i>ma-ri-dha</i>	μαρίδα
<i>mos-ha-ri ga-lak-tos</i>	μοσχάρι γαλάκτος

FRUIT & VEGETABLES

<i>mi-lo</i>	μήλο
<i>ang-gi-na-ra</i>	αγγινάρα
<i>spa-rang-gi</i>	σπαράγγι
<i>me-li-dza-na</i>	μελιτζάνα
<i>la-ha-no</i>	λάχανο
<i>ka-ro-to</i>	καρότο
<i>ke-ra-si</i>	κεράσι
<i>sy-ka</i>	σύκα
<i>skor-dho</i>	σκόρδο
<i>sta-fi-li-a</i>	σταφύλια
<i>(a-ghri-a) hor-ta</i>	(άγρια) χόρτα
<i>le-mo-ni</i>	λεμόνι

bread
butter
cheese
eggs
honey
milk
olive oil
olives
pepper
salt
sugar
vinegar

beef
blackfish
chicken
cuttlefish
grey mullet
grouper, white
ham
hare
kid (goat)
lamb
lobster
mackerel
mussels
octopus
pork
prawns
rabbit
red mullet
sardines
sea bass
sea bream
squid
swordfish
whitebait
veal

kre-mi-dhi-a
por-to-ka-li
ro-dha-ki-no
a-ra-kas
pi-per-yes
pa-ta-tes
spa-na-ki
fra-u-la
do-ma-ta
kar-pou-zi
gli-stri-da

κρεμμύδια
πορτοκάλι
ροδάκινο
αρακάς
πιπεριές
πατάτες
σπανάκι
φράουλα
ντομάτα
καρπούζι
γλυστριδα

onions
orange
peach
peas
peppers
potatoes
spinach
strawberry
tomato
watermelon
purslane

DRINKS

bi-ra
ka-fes
καφές
tsa-i
ne-ro
kra-si (ko-ki-no/a-spro)

μπύρα
καφές
ρακί
τσάι
νερό
κρασί (κόκκινο/άσπρο)

beer
coffee
raki
tea
water
wine (red/white)

Environment

THE LAND

Crete is the largest island in the Greek archipelago with an area of 8335 sq km. It's 250km long, about 60km at its widest point and 12km at its narrowest. The island has an extraordinary geographical and ecological diversity, with mountainous ranges, dramatic gorges, a vast coastline and a plethora of caves. Crete's biodiversity also provides a broad range of habitats for wildlife in a relatively small geographic area, including a few interior wetlands. The island is renowned for its flora and in spring there is an abundance of wildflowers, including many endemic and rare species.

Three major mountain groups – the Lefka Ori (White Mountains) in the west, Mt Psiloritis (also known as Mt Idi) in the centre and the Lasithi Mountains in the east – define the island's rugged interior. The Lefka Ori are known for their spectacular gorges, such as Samaria, plus the snow that lingers on the mountains well into spring. The Omalos Plateau is in the Lefka Ori at an altitude of 1000m. The highest mountain peak is Psiloritis (p137), at 2456m. It has hundreds of caves, including the Ideon Andron Cave where Zeus allegedly grew up, and the Rouvas Forest on its southern slopes.

The Lasithi Mountains harbour the famous Lasithi Plateau (p191) and Mt Dikti (2148m) whose southern slopes preserve an example of the magnificent forests that once blanketed the island. Far-eastern Crete is the driest part of the island and its highest mountain is the wild Mt Thripti at 1476m.

Western Crete is the most mountainous and greenest part of the island, while eastern Crete tends to be barren and rocky. Most of the interior is mountainous and marked by olive trees, scrub and wild herbs. High upland plateaus are either cultivated or used for pasturing goats (like the Omalos Plateau). The largest cultivable area in the south is the fertile Mesara Plain. Lake Kournas (p117), near Hania, is the only natural freshwater lake on the island. Gavdos island (p106), the most southerly point in Europe, just 300km from Africa, is also part of Crete.

WILDLIFE

Animals

While Crete is known for its massive population of sheep and goats, the island is also home to some endemic fauna, including the indigenous large and big-eared Cretan spiny mouse, and a large population of bats, insects, snails and invertebrates.

One of the more intriguing rare animals on Crete is the *fourkattos* (wild cat), about which shepherds have been telling tales for centuries. Scientists assumed it only existed in legend, until a British scientist bought two strange pelts at a market in Hania in 1905. The only other proof ever found was in 1996 when Italian scientists studying Cretan fauna discovered a 5.5kg cat in a trap. It remains unclear whether the cat was indigenous to the island or whether it was a domesticated animal that ran wild.

Other local species include the tiny Cretan tree frog and the Cretan marsh frog. The southern coastline and its steep underwater cliffs are home to the Mediterranean Sea's most significant population of sperm whales, who gather, feed, breed and possibly mate in the area year-round. The southern coast is also inhabited by large groups of striped dolphins, Risso's dolphins and Cuvier's beaked whales. Bottlenose dolphins are often spotted in the shallow waters between Gavdos and Gavdopoula, as well as off the southern coast.

The Cretan Sperm Whale Project, run by the Pelagos Cetacean Research Institute, monitors the whale population and has an eco-volunteer programme. Private dolphin-spotting trips are run from Paleohora (p103).

BIRD LIFE

Crete is a superb destination for bird-watchers as the island is on the main flying routes from East Africa. The island's large and diverse variety of bird life includes many resident and migratory species, as well as some rare predatory birds. Along the coast you'll find birds of passage such as egrets and herons during spring and autumn migrations. Various species of gull nest on coastal cliffs and offshore islets. Rare hawks migrate up from Africa during the summer to nest on the offshore islets. Wood pigeons still nest in cliffs along the coast, but have been hunted to near extinction.

The mountains host a wealth of interesting birds. Look for blue rock thrushes, buzzards and the huge griffon vulture. Other birds in the mountains include Alpine swifts, stonechats, blackbirds and Sardinian warblers. The fields around Malia host tawny and red-throated pipits, stone-curlews, fan-tailed warblers and short-toed larks. On the hillsides below the Moni Preveli (p140) you may find ruppells and subalpine warblers. The Akrotiri Peninsula (p89) is good for bird-watching – around the monasteries of Agias Triadas and Gouvernetou you'll find collared and pied flycatchers, wrynecks, tawny pipits, black-eared wheatears, blue rock thrushes, stonechats, chukars and northern wheatears. Migrating species such as waders, egrets and gulls are found on Souda Bay.

There are small natural wetlands around Crete, while a number of new dams and reservoirs created in the last decade have also become significant wetland habitats for migratory birds. Lookouts and observation decks have been built in key bird-watching areas.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Crete's most famous animal is the *agrimi* or kri-kri, a distinctive wild goat with large horns often depicted in Minoan art. Only a few survive in the wild in and around the Samaria Gorge (p93) and on the islands of Agioi Theodoroi off Hania and Dia off Iraklio.

You may spot a *lammergeier* (bearded vulture) – one of the rarest raptors in Europe, with a wing span of nearly three metres – in the Samaria Gorge or hovering above the Lasithi Plateau. The species is now threatened with extinction. Crete has the only four birds known to be in Greece.

Crete is battling to protect its population of loggerhead turtles, which have been nesting on Crete since the days of the dinosaurs (see boxed text, p69). The island also has a small population of the rare and endangered Mediterranean monk seals breeding in caves on the south coast.

Plants

Crete has one of the world's most amazing variety of plants and wild flowers and is a mecca for botanical enthusiasts. One Japanese fanatic on a specialist tour came just to see one particular rare tulip. It has been estimated that there are about 2000 plant species on the island and about 160 of those are endemic to Crete. The island's gorges are mini-botanical gardens and their isolation helped preserve many endemic species.

As a rule, a visit in March or April is the surest way to see the island in full flower, but mountain plants and flowers often bloom later in the year and late rains can also extend the growing season.

Along the coast, sea daffodils flower in August and September. In April and May knapweeds are in flower on the west coast and the purple or violet petals of stocks provide pretty splashes of colour on sandy beaches. At the

Hard-core bird-watchers should come equipped with *A Birdwatching Guide to Crete* by Stephanie Coghlan or, for a comprehensive reference on Greece's birdlife, try *The Birds of Greece* by Christopher Helm.

Crete is one of the most significant refuel stopovers for birds migrating between Africa and Europe in spring and autumn, while many migratory birds choose to spend the winter in Crete.

Walks with Crete's Spring Flowers, by Jeff Coleman, is based on walks around the southwestern corner of Crete, particularly Loutra, Paleohora and the Samaria Gorge.

Fossils discovered in an underwater cave in Hania in 2000 were revealed to be a new species of dwarf elephant that existed only in Crete 50,000 to 60,000 years ago – the creature now known as the Cretan Elephant (or *Elephas Chaniensis*).

same time of year in eastern Crete, especially around Sitia, watch for crimson poppies on the borders of the beach. At the edge of sandy beaches that are not yet lined with a strip of hotels you'll find delicate pink bindweeds and jujube trees that flower from May to June and bear fruit in September and October. In the same habitat is the tamarisk tree, which flowers in the spring.

Further away from the beach in the lowlands are junipers and holm oak trees, as well as spring-flowering poppies and purple lupins. If you come in the summer, you won't be deprived of colour since milky white and magenta oleanders bloom from June through to August.

On the hillsides look for cistus and brooms in early summer, and yellow chrysanthemums in the fields from March to May. The rare endemic blue carpet blooms called *Blavees* are only found in the high peaks of the Lefka Ori.

Many varieties of orchid (including 14 endemic species) and ophrys bloom in the spring on the lower slopes of the mountains, turning the hills and meadows pink, purple and violet. The area around the mountain village of Spili is renowned for its abundance of wild orchid species and tulips. Dense-flowering orchids, pink-flowered butterfly orchids and Cretan cyclamens grow on the Lasithi Plateau. Purple and crimson anemones are seen in the same habitat in early spring, followed by yellow buttercups and crowfoots in late spring.

Crete has one of the richest varieties of indigenous herbs in the world, collected for both medicinal and cooking uses. The native dittany (*diktamo*) tea, is renowned for its healing effects and pungent Cretan wild oregano is among the best in Greece. Aromatic sage, rosemary, thyme and oregano grow wild in the mountains and countryside, while you can find all sorts of Cretan herbal remedies at Marianna's Workshop in Maroulas (p132).

NATIONAL PARKS

The only national park in Crete is the Samaria Gorge (p93), the largest and most impressive gorge in Europe (and also on the tentative list for Unesco's World Heritage sites). It is 16km long and has a visitor centre. No-one lives in the gorge; it is an important sanctuary for birds and animals, particular the kri kri. Vast sections of Crete are also part of the special conservation area network of the European NATURA 2000 programme.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

The level of environmental awareness in Crete is very slowly increasing, although environmental regulation is still lacking. While the concept of eco-tourism is being paid lip-service, too few legitimately eco-friendly developments have emerged. Indeed, a number of alarming development proposals have caused major protests in recent times. The most controversial is a plan to by a British consortium to build a massive €1.6 billion 'eco-friendly' luxury development on virgin coastline in far eastern Crete on land belonging to the Toplou monastery. Objections to the plans – for three golf courses and several hotels and six villages in an area with no water or infrastructure, requiring desalination and wastewater treatment plans – were taken to Greece's highest court. Environmental groups have also been mobilised over contentious plans for a major shipping container port in Tymbaki, which would spoil a huge section of the south coast.

There are no recycling programmes on Crete even though the huge influx of summer visitors produces tonnes of rubbish. Most tourist areas are kept relatively rubbish-free, but in the interior you will often be treated to the pungent odour of garbage decomposing in an illegal dump. There have been moves for the country to clean up its act, however, after the EU fined Greece more than €5 million for not acting on its toxic waste dump at Kourouptos in western Crete, the problem has not gone away.

The Flowers of Greece & the Aegean, by William Taylor and Anthony Huxley, is the most comprehensive field guide to flowers in Greece and Crete.

There are more than 200 species of wild orchid on Crete, including 14 endemic varieties and Crete's famous Ophrys Cretica, which uses its insect-like appearance as a disguise to attract male insects.

Plants of Crete (Mystic Publication) is a comprehensive glossy botanical guide by Antonis Alibertis outlining the healing, aromatic and edible plants and herbs of Crete.

LOGGERHEAD TURTLES

Since 1990 **Archelon** (Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece; www.archelon.gr) has worked with state agencies, local authorities, hotel groups, tour operators, fishing operators and local residents to reverse the decline of Crete's population of loggerhead turtles (*Caretta caretta*).

The north-coast beaches around Rethymno and Hania as well as the south coast along the Mesara Gulf host more than 550 nests each summer – the turtles lay their eggs in the middle of the sandy beaches. Sadly, the ribbons of hotels and tavernas on the northern beaches have seriously disturbed their nesting habits. Because they are so vulnerable on land, the females are frightened by objects on the beach at night and can refuse to lay eggs, while hatchlings emerging at night are disoriented by tavern and hotel lights.

Archelon patrols about 33km of beach through the nesting and hatching season, mostly around Rethymno, Matala and Hania. Signposted metal cages are put around nests to protect them from sun-beds and tourists, many hatcheries are fenced off and the problem of lights on the beach is gradually being addressed by hotels, with the Grecotel group leading the way in implementing Archelon's directives on lighting.

Volunteers are always welcome to assist in their patrol and monitoring work and help to staff information booths, with a minimum stay of one month (contact the Archelon main office in Athens via the website).

The society has the following advice for visitors:

- Leave the beaches clear at night during the May to October nesting season.
- Remove umbrellas and sun-loungers at night.
- Don't touch baby turtles on the way to the sea; they must orient themselves and the walk strengthens them.
- Urge hotel and taverna owners to cooperate with the society and shade their lights when necessary.
- Dispose of rubbish properly; plastic bags, which the turtles mistake for jellyfish, are lethal.

Outside the major cities Crete's air and water is clean, but the flora and fauna are under pressure from deforestation. Centuries of olive cultivation, firewood gathering, shipbuilding, uncontrolled livestock breeding, overgrazing and arson have laid waste to the forests that had carpeted the island at one time. There is no tree-replanting programme, possibly because the 90,000 goats living on the island would chew through the saplings. The use of pesticides and herbicides in farming has eliminated many bird and plant species, and hunting has decimated the animal population.

It is along Crete's shoreline that environmental damage is most acute. Marine life has suffered from overfishing and the local habit of fishing with dynamite and overdevelopment of the northern coast is chasing away migratory birds. Worldwide concern has been roused for the plight of the loggerhead turtles, which nest on the same sandy beaches that tourists prize (see below).

As tourism on Crete has ballooned over the last two decades, the island has had to cope with increasing demands for electricity and renewable energy sources. Solar power is widely used domestically and by hotels and there were plans to build a large solar plant. More than a dozen wind farms around the island also inject much-needed power into the island's electricity grid.

On the plus side, organic farming is taking off, along with a move towards sustainable tourism. Several big hotel groups have introduced eco-friendly practices in their resorts. Green organisations, such as WWF Greece and Greenpeace, have become increasingly active in Greece over the past 10 years, and many local environmental groups have been formed in Crete, most of whom are part of the island-wide Écocrete network.

Almost a quarter of Greece's cleanest beaches are on Crete. In 2007, 96 beaches in Crete were awarded the European Blue Flag Beach rating. Of those, 39 beaches were in Lasithi prefecture (for the full list see www.blueflag.org).

For the latest information on environmental issues and organisations in Crete, as well as petitions against eco-unfriendly projects, go to www.ecocrete.gr.

Crete Outdoors

Crete's rugged terrain, soaring mountains, dramatic gorges and cobalt-blue seas are a nature-lover's dream. While the heat in summer can make you just want to hit the beach, Crete is a year-round destination for travellers interested in more active experiences and adventure travel. You can climb its high peaks in spring or cycle around the Lassithi Plateau in summer. Spring and autumn are the best time for great walks and serious hikes through beautiful gorges or along scenic coastal paths and alpine trails.

In recent years opportunities for active and challenging holidays have increased, with several specialist operators running activities on the island. There are excellent horse-riding trails and more extreme pursuits such as paragliding, bungee jumping, caving, canyoning or sea kayaking along the south coast. Crete's warm, clear waters offer excellent opportunities for diving and snorkelling. Windsurfers head to Kouremenos on the east coast, and all around the island you will find every imaginable water sport.

HIKING & TREKKING

Crete offers an enormous variety of options for keen hikers and trekkers that take you through remote villages, across plains and into gorges. Unfortunately, excellent hiking opportunities are poorly documented – there are few detailed English-language guides in publication – and the trails themselves are generally inadequately marked.

The exception to this is the E4 trail, which runs the length of Crete (see boxed text, opposite), though some parts of that are also tricky to find. Add to this the generally rugged and arid nature of Crete's terrain and you'll soon see why hiking and trekking here can be both a blessing and a bane. Nonetheless, the island's generally untrodden interior is probably its attraction and, while the majority of visitors may opt for a guided hike, experienced walkers will find plenty to challenge and stimulate them.

Some of the most popular hikes, including the Samaria Gorge (p93), are detailed throughout this book, and there are newly marked trails at Zakros (p200).

While Crete is a veritable paradise for hikers, walking is not much fun between July and August, when the temperatures can reach 40°C. Spring is when walkers descend en masse.

Crete's numerous gorges attract hikers from all over the world. The walks can be a breathtaking (and hard-going) experience. Along the way you can enjoy the aroma of wild herbs and flowers, stop at shaded picnic spots and wade through streams (in spring and autumn).

Gorge walking will involve a bit of planning if you have your own transport. You will either have to walk back the same way to pick up your vehicle, or arrange for someone to collect you at the other end. Buses can normally get you to within striking distance of a gorge entrance. Most gorge walks are doable by anyone with a reasonable level of fitness. Here is a select list of some of the more accessible gorges:

Agia Irini Gorge (p101) A full-day walk best tackled from the village of Agia Irini north of Sougia. This is a challenging hike with dramatic landscape varying from alpine to coastal. It ends at Sougia.

Agiofarango (p174) A popular hike in south-central Crete running from Moni Odigitrias, 24km southwest of Mires, it ends at a lovely beach.

Hohlakies Gorge Not as well known as its near neighbour at Zakros, this short (3km) walk runs from Hohlakies village to the coast. Hikers can walk a further 7km northwards to Palekastro.

The three-volume GPS-compatible 1:100,000 scale touring maps by Anavasi (☎ 210 321 8104; www.anavasi.gr) show the E4 across Crete but its walking maps cover sections in greater detail (at a scale of 1:25,000) for the Lefka Ori (Sfakia and Pahnès), Samaria/Sougia, Mt Psiloritis and Zakros-Vai.

For maps, photos and detailed information and advice on sections of the E4 trail, check out the website www.crete.tournet.gr.

More than 160,000 people hike the Samaria gorge each year, making it Crete's second most popular tourist attraction after Knossos.

Imbros Gorge (p95) Perhaps the second most-popular gorge walk after Samaria, it runs from the village of Imbros for 8km to Komitades, near Hora Sfakion.

Rouvás Gorge (p167) This short link hike runs from the village of Zaros on the southern slopes of Psiloritis to meet up with the alpine route of the E4 trail. It's a convenient way to get to and from the trans-Crete hike.

THE E4 ROUTE

The trans-European E4 walking trail starts in Portugal and ends in Crete. In Crete the trail picks up at the port of Kissamos-Kastelli in the west and ends – after 320km – on the pebbly shore of Kato Zakros in eastern Crete. Enthusiasts planning to tackle the Cretan leg can do it in a minimum of three weeks, allowing for 15km per day, or more comfortably in four weeks allowing for stops and/or shorter hiking trips. You can, of course, tackle only sections of it if your time is limited or if you just want to walk the most interesting parts. However, you will need to make important decisions early on as the trail splits into two distinct sections through western Crete: the coastal route and the alpine route.

The E4 trail is marked throughout its length with black and yellow posts and signs, but is not always well maintained: paths are overgrown and in many sections signs are hard to find. The E4 can be a lonely trail and there is no food (and little water) along most of the route, so it is always wise to get local advice before setting off.

From Kissamos-Kastelli the route first takes a long dip south, following the western coast via Elafonisi to Paleohora. From Paleohora there is a pleasant hike to Sougia (see the boxed text, p106). The first big decision must be made at Sougia. A little east of here, the E4 alpine route shoots north and upwards and heads across the high alpine tracts of the barren Lefka Ori, while the E4 coastal route hugs the rugged coastline as far as Kato Rodakino, between Frangokastello and Plakias. The alpine route is for serious hikers and will involve overnighing in one of three refuges along the way (see p74 for information on Crete's refuges). The E4 coastal route, while not a picnic stroll, is easier but can be quite rough in parts, and the section between Sougia and Agia Roumeli is quite difficult to find and potentially dangerous to follow.

Neither trail actually incorporates the Samaria Gorge as part of its route, but you can easily include it. At Sougia take the first leg of the E4 alpine route towards Omalos and hike south down the Samaria Gorge to the coast (and the E4 coastal route) at Agia Roumeli. Alpine hikers can, of course, head north up the gorge from Agia Roumeli and pick up the E4 alpine route near Omalos. The alpine route from Omalos is perhaps the toughest section of the trail and should not be attempted in the heat and aridity of summer. It is high and exposed and there is no water other than the odd snow bank that may have lingered from winter.

From Argyroupolis, near where the two trails cross each other, the E4 alpine route now runs south of the E4 coastal route, which itself loops northwards along the escarpment of the Psiloritis massif. The E4 alpine route runs through the Amari Valley for some way, via Spili and Fourfouras, before veering west and up to the summit of Mt Psiloritis (2456m). Both trails meet once more at the Nida Plateau on the eastern side of Crete's highest mountain (see the boxed text, p138, for hikes in this area).

Heading eastward the now-unified trail meanders through the more populated Iraklio prefecture via the villages of Profitis Ilias, Arhanes and Kastelli before climbing once more to the Lassithi Plateau.

From Lassithi the route becomes alpine with a crossing of the Mt Dikti (2148m) range to the south, then turning eastwards for the remote passage down to the narrow 'neck' of Crete between Ierapetra and the Bay of Mirabello. Mountains take over as the trail threads its way between Mt Thripti (1476m) to the south and Mt Orno (1238m) to the north. Settlements are fewer at this end of the island, so each day's hiking leg should be planned carefully.

The final leg from Papagiannades and through the villages of Handras and Ziros is less taxing and the last village, Zakros, marks the start of the hike through the 'Valley of the Dead' to the sea at Kato Zakros (see the boxed text, p200). This is the final leg on the long walk from Portugal (if you have come all the way!).

CANYONING, CLIMBING & BUNGEE JUMPING

While Crete doesn't offer the kind of stunning alpine terrain that's found in Austria or Switzerland, the island does have a large number of mountains and established mountaineering clubs. Each prefecture has its own club, which maintain the E4 trail and mountain refuges. They are all members of the association of Greek Mountaineering Clubs (EOS) and organise regular climbing, walking, speleology and skiing excursions around Crete, which visitors are welcome to join.

Mountaineering Club of Hania (EOS; ☎ 28210 74560; www.interkriti.org/orivatikos/hania1.htm; Tzanakaki 90, Hania)

Mountaineering Club of Iraklio (EOS; ☎ 2810 227 609; www.interkriti.org/orivatikos/orivat.html; Dikeosynis 53, Iraklio; ☎ 8.30pm-10.30pm)

Mountaineering Club of Lasithi (EOS; ☎ 28970 23230)

Mountaineering Club of Rethymno (EOS; ☎ 28310 57766; www.eos.rethymnon.com; Dimokratias 12, Rethymno) Lists excursions on its website.

Huts maintained by the clubs are listed in the boxed text, below.

MOUNTAINEERING CLUB REFUGES

Name	Location	Altitude (m)	Capacity (beds)	EOS
Kallergi	Near the Samaria Gorge	1680	50	Hania
Katsiveli-Svourihitis	Svourihitis foothills	1970	25	Hania
Limnarkarou	Lasithi Plateau	1350	15	Lasithi
Prinos	Asites, East Psiloritis	1100	45	Iraklio
Tavris	Plateau of Askyfou	1200	42	Hania
Toubotos Prinos	Mt Psiloritis	1500	28	Rethymno
Volikas	Volikas Keramion	1400	40	Hania

Hikers tackling the E4 trail need to do some planning. While there is nearly always accommodation within the range of a six- to seven-hour daily hike, some of it will need to be arranged beforehand – particularly the mountain refuges, where you might need to pick up keys.

Canyoning

Canyoning is becoming increasingly popular in Crete, where there is no shortage of wild and beautiful canyons. The newly formed **Crete Canyoning Association** (☎ 6997 090307; www.canyon.gr) has secured more than 50 gorges in southern Crete since 2005. Among them is the challenging Ha gorge (p205), near Mt Thripti in eastern Crete, which until recently had been traversed by less than a dozen people (and still numbered less than 100 in 2007). The Association's website has useful information and a published guide to Crete's canyons. It organises regular excursions and also runs beginners courses. A four-day, four-canyon course inclusive of equipment costs €155. Guided canyoning trips range from €45 to €70 depending on location.

Climbing

Apart from peak climbing up Crete's numerous summits, scaling up the cliff face of mountains and gorges is another increasingly popular sport. Southern Iraklio is one of the most popular areas for climbing, particularly the stunning cliffs around Kapetaniana and Mt Kofinas on the southern flanks of the Asteroussia mountains (p175). The Agiofarango gorge (p174) is another popular climbing spot, while new sites are being opened up around Crete, including sites at Matala and in Theriso, near Hania.

Unless you are experienced, you are advised to contact local organisations before attempting climbs. French climbing enthusiast Philippe Bugada has published a multilingual comprehensive guide *Crete* (Kapetaniana/

There are more than 3000 caves recorded in Crete, of which about only 850 have been explored. The 1208m-deep Gourgouthakas cave, in the Lefka Ori, is one the 30 deepest caves in the world (and the deepest in Greece). Its entrance is about a metre wide.

The multilingual *Canyoning in Crete*, by Yiannis Bromirakis (Road Editions 2007), covers many of Crete's newly accessible gorges in fine detail with maps and drawings.

Climb in Crete (www.climbincrete.com) has some excellent information on climbing and mountaineering on the island, including articles, photos and hiking guides.

Kofinas, €18) to about 150 climbs around Kapetaniana and Agiofarango. It is available on Crete (or through www.lacordi.telle.com).

Bungee Jumping

High above the Aradhena Gorge, on the south coast, is a spectacular bungee jumping location, the highest bungee jumping bridge in Greece and the second highest in Europe. Thrill seekers can jump 138m into the narrow gorge from the bridge that crosses over the canyon. Jumps are held every weekend from June to September by **Liquid Bungy** (☎ 6937 615191; www.bungy.gr; €100 per jump).

WATER SPORTS

Crete is a paradise for water sports. Parasailing, water-skiing, jet-skiing, pedal boating and canoeing are available on most of the major beaches. On the northern coast, you'll find a water-sport centre attached to most luxury hotels and you don't need to stay there to use the facilities. Elsewhere, specialist operators run snorkelling and diving courses as well as windsurfing and sea kayaking. There are few waves to catch in Crete so leave the board at home.

Sea Kayaking

Crete's south coast has become increasingly popular for sea kayaking trips. The dramatic cliffs and remote beaches make it a spectacular experience. Sea kayaking can be experienced as a day trip (from €60) or week-long trips including accommodation and pick up. Some can also be combined with hiking.

Alpine Travel (☎ 28210 50939; 6932 252 890; www.alpine.gr; Boniali 11-19) Based in Hania.

Nature Maniacs (☎ 28250 91017; www.naturemaniacs.com) Runs sea kayaking along the south coast from its base in Loutro.

Diving & Snorkelling

Crete's warm, clear and inviting waters make snorkelling and diving a pleasure. With the liberalisation of laws relating to diving, the Greek seas have been opened, except for areas declared archaeological sites. Like much of the Mediterranean, marine life, especially big fish, has been fished out, but Crete has stunning caverns, dramatic cliffs and interesting locations for divers. Some of the more interesting snorkelling is around the sunken city of Olous near Elounda (p188), while Bali (p144), Plakias (p138) and Paleohora (p102) are popular diving sites.

Several diving centres offers courses from beginners to PADI-certification and advanced dive courses. Under Greek law, you must dive as part of a licensed diving operation and you are forbidden to disturb any antiquities you may come across. It's wise to call at least a day in advance to book a dive.

Snorkelling trips are also widely available.

Check out these companies in the following towns:

Agios Nikolaos Cretas Happy Divers (☎ 28410 82546; www.cretashappydivers.com) On the beach of the Coral Hotel and at Plaka and Elounda.

Bali Hippocampus (☎ 28340 94193 www.hippocampus.com) Near the port.

Hania Blue Adventures Diving (☎ 28210 40608; www.blueadventuresdiving.gr; Arholeon 11)

Iraklio Diver's Club (☎ 2810 811 755; www.diversclub-crete.gr; Agia Pelagia); Stay Wet

(☎ 28970 42683; www.staywet.gr; Mononaftis)

Plakias Kalypso Rock's Palace Dive Centre (☎ 28310 20990; www.kalypsodivingcenter.com; Eleftheriou Venizelou 42); Phoenix Diving Club (☎ 28320 31206; www.scu.bacrete.com)

Rethymno Paradise Dive Centre (☎ 28310 26317; www.diving-center.gr; Eleftheriou Venizelou 57)

Paleohora Aqua Creta Diving & Adventures (☎ 28230 41393; www.aquacreta.gr)

Windsurfing

The best windsurfing in Crete is at Kouremenos Beach (p198), north of Palekastro in Sitia. Windsurfing is also good in Almyrida (p118), near Hania.

For detailed descriptions of a range of walks around Crete, check out an intrepid walker's site at www.peter-thomson.co.uk/crete/contents.html

The **Hellenic Windsurfing Association** (☎ 210 323 0330) in Athens can provide general information.

Key water-sport centres:

Driros Beach (☎ 6944 932 760; www.spinalonga-windsurf.com) At Plaka, near Elounda.

Freak Windsurf (☎ 28430 61116, 6979 254967; www.freak-surf.com) At Kouremenos.

UCPA Sports (☎ 28250 31443; www.ucpa.com; board hire €8 per hr) In Almyrida.

Yachting

Yachting is a great way to experience Crete, but the winds make it unreliable and its distance from other islands means it is not on the Greek island yachting loop. Some companies, however, do offer daily sailing excursions. Sailing along the southern coast allows you to see some of Crete's finest and most isolated beaches.

Nautilus Yacht Rentals (☎ 28420 89986; www.ierapetra.net/nautilus) in Ierapetra take private yacht tours around the south coast islands of Hrysi and Koufonisi, and can take you around the coast as far as Sitia.

Yachties can get the lowdown on sailing around Crete and Greece at www.sailing.gr or www.yachting.gr.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Golf

Crete has a few nine-hole golf courses, but the island's only 18-hole pro course is the **Crete Golf Club** (☎ 28920 26000; www.crete-golf.com) in Hersonisos. This desert-style, par 72 course has been designed to blend in with the environment. The course is quite tough and also has a double-ended driving range, a golf academy and club house. It's not for hackers, though. An 18-hole round in summer will set you back €67 (excluding clubs or buggies).

Horse Riding

Several places on Crete offer horse riding and guided trail rides through the countryside.

The most impressive operation is **Odyssea Stables** (☎ 28970 51080; www.horseriding.gr) above Avdou, at the foot of Mt Dikti (p166). These new stables have excellent facilities (including accommodation) and run anything from two-hour beginners rides to three-days rides through the Lasithi Plateau and week-long trails through the Dikti mountains to the south coast. Typical prices range from €18 for a one hour beach ride, €35 for a two-hour hack, €55 for a day trip and from €474 for 8-day courses including accommodation and meals.

Zoraida's Horseriding (☎ 28250 61745; www.zoraidas-horseriding.com), in Georgoupolis, offers beach and nature trails, including day safaris and a six-day course for advanced riders.

Melanouri Horse Farm (☎ 28920 45040; www.melanouri.com) in Pitsidia near Matala runs rides through the surrounding region.

Paragliding

Crete's climate and terrain make it an ideal location for paragliding (known as *parapente*) and it is a sensational way to see the island if you are game to fly with the birds. There are about 45 excellent paragliding take-off sites around Crete, mostly surrounding the three highest mountains, as well as coastal sites such as Falasarna and Paleohora.

Certified instructor and paragliding enthusiast Grigoris Thomakakis and his team at the **International Centre of Natural Activities** (☎ 6977 466900; www.icna.gr) run flights across the island and near their base in Avdou, south of Malia. Day flights for experienced pilots accompanied by an instructor cost €30. Tandem flights cost €70.

'Yachting is a great way to experience Crete...'

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