

Mountains
Spring
Winter



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Crete is an ideal place to visit all year round. Its mild climate and its unique mountainous features attract visitors before and after the established touristy summer season. Crete's stunning natural beauty awakens in visitors an imperative need to discover its mountains, its gorges, its paths.



Mountains

Crete's most distinctive feature is its large mountain ranges which are home to a number of peaks. Cretan mountains are mainly grouped into three ranges: the Dikti range in Lassithi, the Ida (Psiloritis) range in central Crete and the White Mountains (Lefka Ori) in Chania.

The highest summit is Timios Stavros on the Psiloritis range (2,456 m), however the largest area is spanned by the White

Mountains, the highest peak of which is Pahnes (2,453 m). The highest summit of the Dikti range is Spathi (2,148 m).

There are several more important mountains in Crete: the Asterousia range, the southernmost range in Greece; Mount Yiouchtas, the sacred mountain of the Minoans; Mount Kedros by Spili, the rugged mountain of the 100 springs; the Talean range, the towering mountain where the mythical robot Talos stopped to rest; Mount Orno in Sitia area and the pine-covered Thripti by Ierapetra.

The White Mountains

The White Mountains, or Lefka Ori, is the largest massif on the island and its highest summit is Pahnes (2,453 m). The heart of this imposing range includes the Mountain Desert, where more than fifty peaks named Sori (piles), reminding of cones, exceed the altitude of 2,000 m. Dolines, reminding of upturned cones are formed at the foot of Sori peaks. This creepy and haunting landscape is a unique geological formation in the entire northern hemisphere.

Hiking in the White Mountains requires fitness, experience and a good sense of orientation. There are several mountain shelters where mountaineers can spend their night.



The highest mountain areas are covered by snow till late June. There are numerous caves, precipices, sinkholes and canyons. The most famous gorge is Samaria in the White Mountains National Reserve, but there are many more: to the south, the gorges of Aradena, Tripiti, Klados, Agia Irini, Imbros and Kallikratis, and to the north, the gorge of Vrissi, Therisso, Cyclamen, Boriano, Dittany, Kidoni and more.

The White Mountains are home to the deepest caves in Greece. These include the dark sinkholes of Gourgouthakas and Leon. The most well-known plateaus include Omalos, Anopolis, Askyfou, Tavri and Niato.

The White Mountains host a great variety of flora and fauna species, which are exclusively endemic (stenoendemic), not to be found anywhere else – not even in other parts of Crete. The areas on the southern side of the mountain range are covered with cypress, oak and pine trees, whereas humid areas favour the development of chestnuts, planes and other aquatic plants.

The Psiloritis Range

The Ida range, widely known as Psiloritis, dominates at the centre of Crete. The chapel of Timios Stavros marks the island's highest summit (2,456 m). Areas with high altitude preserve snow till late June.

The rough beauty of this mountain astounds its visitors. Magnificent caves, impressive karst formations, deep gorges, small plateaus, woods, small villages hanging over precipices and bare alpine areas compose this awesome scenery.

Psiloritis was the sacred mountain of the Minoans and there are many myths related to it. The upbringing of the god of the Gods, Zeus, was associated to the Idaean Cave. In the past, Psiloritis was covered by dense forests, residues of which are still visible. The most important of those areas is the oak wood of Rouvas by Zaros.



Travellers can experience the authentic Cretan tradition in Anogia, the major town of the mountainous part of the province Milopotamos. The plateau of Nida and the primitive domed buildings, called mitata, made solely of dry stone are worth visiting. Mitata provided shelter to shepherds and they were used for milking goats and cheese-making. Around Nida you can visit the Idaean Cave, ancient Zominthos and the observatory of Skinakas. The Psiloritis range hosts many caves, two of which are open to visitors; caves Sfendoni by Zoniana and Gerontospilios by Melidoni. Apart from them, Kamares cave has is of utmost archaeological importance.

The Psiloritis massif is a reservoir of huge quantities of water; supplying several springs and ponds. Those include the lake of Zaros, the dam of Faneromeni and the springs of Almiros at Ellinoperamata.

The Psiloritis range is home to numerous gorges and canyons. The most popular of them is the lush green gorge of Gafaris in Rouvas. Others include the gorges of Vorizia, Zoniana, Keri, Kroussonas, Vromonero, Asites and Platania in Amari.



The Dikti range

This range lies between Heraklion and Lassithi. Its highest summit is Spathi (2,148 m) and there are two more peaks at an altitude of more than 2000m.

Lassithi Plateau, the largest in Crete, lies at the heart of the range at an altitude of 850 m. It is surrounded by a series of smaller plateaus such as Katharo, Limnakaro, Mari, Lapathos, Omalos, Erganos and Nisimos. There is a mountain shelter at Limnakaro from where hikers ascend to Spathi.

Several gorges are found in the range of Lassithi. Apart from the two gorges named Havgas at Katharo and Kalamafka, there are more canyons such as Sarakina, Adrianos, Ambelos, Roza and Kritsa.

The Dikti range has shows a significant diversity in flora and fauna. The lower mountain sides are covered by olive, carob and pine trees. To the south-east, Selakano is the largest pine wood of Crete and close to the village Krasi lies the holm oak wood of Azilakodasos.

The fertile plateaus and valleys of the Dikti range produce a large variety of agricultural products: potatoes, vegetable, pears, apples, walnuts, cherries, etc. Livestock breeding (sheep and goats) is yet another traditional activity in this region. The famous Diktaean Cave where Zeus is said to have been born is open to the public.



The Asterousia range

Asterousia is the southernmost mountain range in Greece and it extends between the plain of Mes-sara and the Libyan Sea, bounded by the seaside settlement of Tsoutsouras to the east and Cape Lithino to the west.

This mountain range is not particularly high (its summit is Kofinas at 1,231 m). However, rough terrain, dirt roads, deep gorges and steep ravines harden its exploration.

It is characterized by high temperatures and dry landscapes with low vegetation, mainly scrublands. The few trees that struggle to grow on this arid land are almost immediately devoured by the hungry goats.

Bare mountains, creepy rocks and steep cliffs that run all the way down to the sea lend this area an air of mystery.





Hiking and mountaineering

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

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

Many travel agencies offer packages for trekking on the island and there are many hiking and mountaineering clubs. Important mountain races are also organized, such as the Psiloritis Race and the Marathon of Samaria.





Snow Sports

Apart from Cretans, most visitors ignore that the snowy peaks of the Cretan mountains in winter are suitable for snow sports.

All mountaineering clubs on the island organize courses and training sessions related to mountaineering in the snow, especially in the ranges of White Mountains and Psiloritis. Crossing mountains is usually combined with a stay in one of the many mountain shelters.

Ski mountaineering, an exciting winter sport that combines trekking on snow-covered surfaces with using skiing equipment attracts an increasing number of fans. Many Cretans climb the white-washed mountains and descend slopes on skis or snowboard.



Snowkiting is a relatively new winter sport, which has spread rapidly around the world. The sport is similar to water-based kiteboarding, but with the footwear used in snowboarding or skiing. Crete is an ideal destination and several champions of the sport were excited while kiteboarding around white peaks with the blue sea in the background.





Mountain shelters

Mountaineering clubs of Crete manage shelters on all mountain ranges of Crete. Travellers who want to stay in them should contact these clubs prior to their visit.

The most popular mountain shelter is Kallergis, east of Omalos plateau in the White Mountains, built at one of the more breathtaking spots on Crete, at an altitude of 1.680 m. Other shelters of the White Mountains include Tavri (1.210 m), Houliopoulos at Svourichti (1.980 m) and Volikas at Keramia (1.450 m). Moreover, there is another shelter at Greleska, overlooking the lush gorge of Agia Irini, which serves as wildlife observatory.

The Psiloritis range has four shelters; Toumbotos Prinos (1.590 m), Lakkos Migerou (1.710 m) from where the trail to Timios Stavros summit starts, Prinos above Asites (1.100 m) and Zaros shelter at the position Samari (1.417 m).

Two more shelters are located in Lassithi. The first, managed by the mountaineering club of Lassithi, is located at the position Strovili on Limnakaro plateau (1533 m). The second is the small shelter of Afendis Stavromenos summit atop Thripti (1.476 m).



Canyoning and climbing

In the rugged terrain of Crete, rivers meet large faults and steep descents during their course through the canyons, forming hundreds of small and high waterfalls. Even locals are unaware of the existence of several waterfalls, as most are invisible and hidden in the impassable gorges. The vast majority has water from the first months of the year by the end of spring.

Canyoning, i.e. crossing gorges with high waterfalls, is possible only by using technical equipment. Appropriate training in canyoneering techniques can be offered by specialist companies and speleological associations of the island. This sport has gained an increasing number of fans lately.

Especially spring is the best time to get involved into it, as water still flows inside gorges.

The most popular technical canyons of Crete include the imposing gorge Ha and the canyon of Arvi, which after an 80m high fall turns into a dark underground river. Especially the area of Tsoutsouras and Keratokambos is home to many steep canyons that have been equipped with bolts and anchors for training new canyoners.

Apart from canyoning, several clubs and certified instructors deal with climbing. Every weekend numerous athletes combine an excursion in nature with practicing their favourite sport. Some well-known climbing sites are Agiofarago, Voulismeno Aloni, Therisso, Kalathas Stavros, Plakias, Malia, Kria Vrissi, Latzimas, Kofinas, Agios Nikolaos and more.



Off-road excursions

Remote and rough, the mountains of Crete are a paradise for off-road excursion fans. Driving on a dirt road to reach a snowy summit, overlooking the deep blue sea on the horizon, is a unique experience and an exciting way to really get to know the mountain.

Cycling, whether off-road or on asphalt, is another wonderful way to discover the mountains of the island. A large number of companies operate these tours and there are dozens of motorcyclist clubs.

Horse riding on the mountains is another way to discover the beauty of the Cretan mountains. Horses were traditionally in use in everyday life on the island. The particular breed of local horses, fully adapted to the rough terrain of Crete, known as Georgalidika, is still today quite common and horse races and demonstrations take place throughout the year. There is a large number of riding clubs and associations as well as other organizations that offer riding lessons and excursions on horseback.

Bird watching

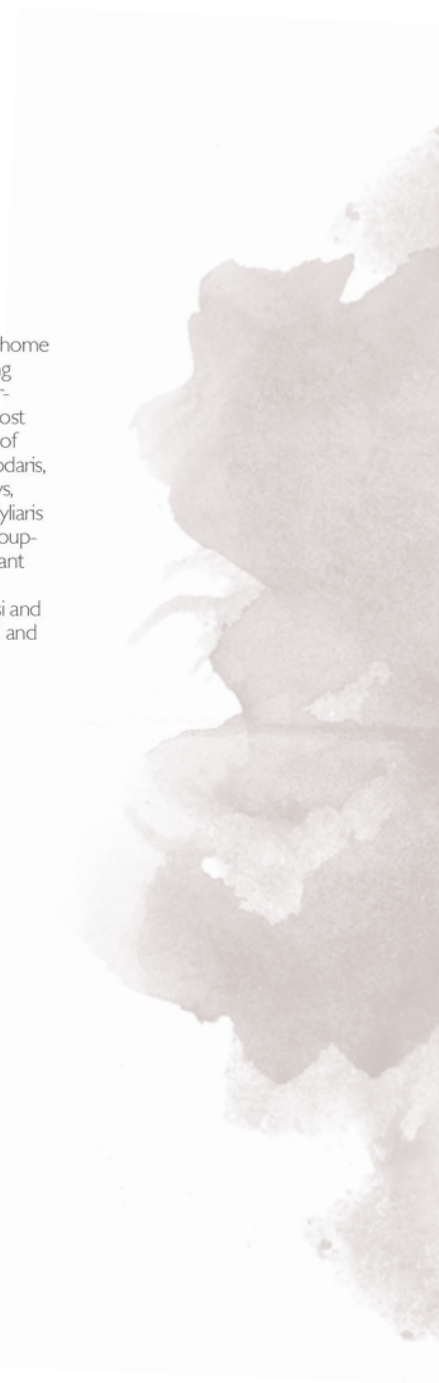
In the spring and autumn, Crete is a favourite resting place for a vast number of migratory birds.

Many observation huts and towers have been installed in wetlands where bird watchers can watch a great variety of birds. Apart from wetlands, watch towers have been placed in several gorges and mountains that are home to a large number of birds of prey.

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



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





Cretan flora in the spring

Crete has a rich biodiversity and the best moment to witness this is in the spring when the flora is at its best.

Over 1.700 species have been recorded up to date in Crete, many of which are endemic. Some remote areas of the island, especially the White Mountains and the surrounding islets are home to many stenoendemic species and subspecies, i.e. plants that are only distributed in this limited area.

Every year these rare species attract botanists from all over the world. They come to study wild flowers, including impressive native Cretan orchids. Moreover, endemic tulips grow on the White Mountains, on the Dikti range, on the Gramvousa peninsula and in the small botanical paradise of Gious Kampos in Rethymnon.

Crete is also famous for its aromatic plants and herbs that grow everywhere on the island. Many of them have been used since ancient times for their therapeutic properties and they are currently cultivated in many places of the island.



Forested mountains

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

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

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

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



Agritourism

A 'return to nature' through alternative tourism is a unique experience. Visitors have the opportunity to come to contact with traditional life by staying in one of the many agritourism cottages in the hinterland.

Agritourism lodges and several specialized companies provide seminars for traditional cooking, making pastry, kneading bread and collecting of wild greens, herbs, mushrooms, snails and truffle.

Moreover, one can participate in the harvest of olives, the process of the olive oil production, distillation of raki, vintage, honey production, vegetable cultivation, collection of milk and dairy products processing, raising of domestic animals, sheep - shearing, etc.





Life in the villages

Traditional life is still preserved vivid in the villages of Crete, differentiated according to their geographic location, either up in the mountains or in the valley.

Smells from kneading and vintage, agricultural works in olive groves and vineyards, wandering in the whitewashed streets and the village squares, voices of children playing around, bleating animals... Pictures that are still met in the Cretan countryside.

The short winter in the mountain villages is an opportunity for Cretans to gather, dance, sing, eat and drink. Raki distilleries, known as rakokazana, is offer another occasion for having a great time with friends, accompanied by traditional music and dances.





Τα έθιμα του χειμώνα

Winter and spring customs

Many old customs are still preserved in the villages during the Christmas and Easter celebrations. In the past, white animals (sheep and cows) should enter houses in order to keep evil spirits away. Similarly, sea squills are hanged on the doors as a symbol of immortality.

A unique event not to be missed is the celebration of the Christmas mass in a real manger in the cave Marathokefala. Moreover, in the Christmas village at plateau Omalos, the snow confers a magic aura of Christmas to the setting.



Carnival is another great celebration with roots deep into the past and it is enthusiastically celebrated in places like Gergeri in Heraklion, with Arkoudiarides (wild bears) wearing furs and bells, the soiled faces of the Lerades, Siviani which is a special mask made of the roots of the American aloe plant (known in Greek as the immortal plant) and other typical figures such as the Camel and the Cadi (Turkish judge). The larger cities on the island organize parades and treasure hunts.



The main Easter customs include the auction of the Holy Cross, passing the sheep under the Epitaph procession, burning the effigy of Judas in a big bonfire, carrying the Holy Light from the church to the homes and placing red eggs on the graves.

Distillation of the Cretan white spirit, raki, is a special ritual. Groups of friends around the cauldron of raki feast and dance till early hours.

