

Cretan Tradition Arts and Lifestyle



Region of Crete
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The multicultural and distant past of Crete is reflected in all aspects of modern Cretan people, such as language, dance, music, food, arts and crafts.





Folk tradition of Crete constitutes an inexhaustible contemporary cultural entity with customs, materials, spiritual features and ancient habits that have formed the core of the modern Cretan life over the years.

The Cretan dialect is considered the oldest in Greece and has been a subject of study and research. Dozens of words have ancient or archaic origin or come from linguistic influences from the Arabs, Venetians and Ottomans.





Hospitality of Zeus

The character of Cretans is generally hardened by the difficulties of life. However, they are always authentic, smiling and they love sharing their feelings and hospitality with their guests.

The Greek word for hospitality, *philoxenia*, derives from the words *filos* (friend) and *xenos* (stranger) and means to become friend with the stranger.

Cretans are the genuine descendants of the Cretan-born Zeus, the god of gods, humans and hospitality. Indeed, Cretans are famous for their hospitality, induced solely by respect for their fellow men.

Tip

Most locals will offer you a shot of *raki* when you ask for directions at any village.



Myths

Crete is inseparable from myths and legends, which stem from its ancient past. In Crete, Rhea gave birth to Zeus, the most important god of antiquity, father of the gods, people and hospitality. The Diktaean and Idaean Caves are connected to his birth and upbringing.

Later, Zeus in the form of a white bull, abducted the beautiful nymph from Phoenicia, Europa, and moved her to Crete. They mated below the evergreen plane tree of Gortys, which is still alive. Afterwards, Europa gave birth to Minos, the king of the first brilliant European civilization, the Minoan, and therefore, the continent was named Europe.





It was Crete where for the first time the ingenious craftsman Daedalus, designed and built the famous Labyrinth, where the monstrous Minotaur was imprisoned. Later on, Daedalus ignored the law of gravity and escaped Crete by flying away with his son Icarus. In the dark Labyrinth, Theseus killed the Minotaur and found the exit by following the thread of Ariadne.

Crete was guarded by the bronze giant Talos, the first robot in mythology. Talos wandered around the island three times a day and protected it from invaders, but it was exterminated by the Argonauts.

Tip
Even today there are legends with the most famous being Drosoulites, shadows that walk at the break of dawn between May and June outside the fortress Fragokastello. These are the souls of soldiers who lost their lives there.

Music Tradition

The island has a long and rich musical tradition with deep roots in antiquity, strongly influenced by the Byzantine music and enriched by the musical culture of the wider eastern Mediterranean. During feasts and celebrations, locals and visitors get involved with the special musical culture of Crete.



Cretan music is considered the most vibrant in Greece, because it not only continues to evolve and incorporate creative contemporary musical features, but also manages to express modern reality.

Improvisation is one of the characteristics of Cretan artists. Musicians are not limited to repeating basic melodies, but enrich their playing with improvisations that accompany dancers, who in turn spontaneously contrive new moves.

Mantinades, small poems, reflect the emotions of Cretans and express sorrow, love and any feeling that arises from the sensitive Cretan soul. One of the most impressive "scenes" during a typical Cretan feast, is when two or more improvisers exchange mantinades for hours.

Tip
Hugged men in West Crete sing the rizitika (rebel songs), some of the most primitive samples of musical and poetic tradition.

Dances

Greek dances and music first appeared in Crete, where the mother of the Gods, Rhea, taught them to Curetes who venerated her. The most famous Cretan dance was the Pyrrhic. Very famous throughout Greece, Cretan dances are echoes of the dances of the Curetes.

Traditional Cretan dances are danced by men and women, who wear their wonderful Cretan costumes in formal events. They are either fast or slow, but always vivid and imposing. When danced by groups of men, they remind of the war dances of Curetes.





With the lyre or the violin as a guide, accompanied by the lute and rarer instruments, such as the bulgari, the askomandoura or the thiamboli, dancers present the complex steps and the first of the cycle, usually a man, performs skillful dance movements called talimia.

Each area of the island has its own traditional dances, most of which retain the primitive circular pattern. Main dances are pentozalis, kastrinos, pidichtos, sousta, siganos and syrtos.

Tip
The famous melody of Zorbas is based on two Cretan songs composed by George Koutsourelis.

Traditional Occupations

Many primitive crafts remain alive on the island, while they have become obsolete in other parts of Greece. There are still several areas of the island resisting to the invasion of modern technology.

Potters at Thrapsano, Kentri and Margarites mold clay just like the Minoans did thousands years ago. Hundreds of vessels, identical to those found in the Minoan palaces, are still used for storing olive oil, grains and other agricultural products.

Carpenters transform wood into traditional musical instruments, such as the lyre and the lute. Vori, Zaros, Rethymnon, Neapolis and Kritsa are places famous for their long tradition in the manufacture and development of such instruments. Cobblers in major cities and villages such as Anogia, make the traditional stivania, the resistant Cretan leather boots.





Knife manufacturers in Chania and Heraklion convert steel into the famous Cretan knife, the inseparable companion of each Cretan. Engraved depictions and poems adorn the blades.

Women's cooperatives in all major villages still weave on the loom, just like women did in the Minoan times. Sariki, the Cretan head scarf with fringes resembling tears, symbolizes lamentation for the hardships Crete experienced in the past centuries. The black sariki is worn as a sign of mourning, while the white sariki is worn as a sign of joy during weddings, feasts, births and christenings.

Wood and marble sculptors give life to materials of the Cretan land by carving logs and stones and by manufacturing elaborate works, mainly of ecclesiastical art. Visitors can visit venues exhibiting woodcraft at the villages of Axos and Asteri and marble works at the International Sculpture Symposium in Venerato.



The Cretan Diet

The Cretan diet constitutes a philosophy of life. It refers to the life-style of the Cretans, in which food encompasses an entire culture.

The inhabitants of this welcoming place developed their ancient eating habits by using anything that Cretan soil generously offers to them; olive oil, wheat, wine, honey, herbs, greens and spices. Meat is consumed relatively rarely, especially due to the long periods of fasting.

People love meeting around a table, usually accompanied by music and dance. Hosts express their heartfelt hospitality to their guests and intensify their bilateral relations, proving their ancestry from the god Zeus.

Events

Cretans have always loved arts and events, through which they can come into contact with their social environment and share their emotions.

On summer nights, various cities of the island organize art exhibitions and festivals of theater, music, film and dance. Concerts are performed in stadiums, archaeological sites, on the Venetian walls of Heraklion and Chania or in small theaters in the countryside.

The religious celebrations are always framed with Cretan music and dance at village squares or near the churches, reviving customs of the Minoan ages.

There are many events that have been associated with local products and are always an occasion for a big celebration. Feasts of potato, raki, zucchini, bread, wheat, wine, cheese, snail, cherry and apple include free tasting of the traditional products of each region.

When winter arrives, celebrations do not stop. Groups of friends gather in kazania (raki distilleries), where the rite of distilling raki soon turns into a traditional feast with dance and music.



Religious Customs

Several customs revive across the countryside during Christmas and New Year's Eve. 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. One of the most remarkable modern Christmas traditions is the Divine Liturgy inside a real manger in the cave of Marathokefala.

Ancient customs for curing patients are still alive. In Sfakia patients devote dough dolls to Saint Anthony to cure their illnesses and in Psiloritis they devote human shaped breads, *lazaropsoma*, during memorial services. During the festival of Agia Pelagia, patients bury their aching legs or hands in the sand of the beach. In Achlade clothes are put on the sacred turpentine tree of Saint Fanourios.

During the feast celebration of the Holy Cross at the top of Kofinas revives a dendrolatric custom; the fruits of three trees, which locals call apples of Kofinas are gathered, blessed by the priest and shared to the pilgrims that eat them.



Carnival is another great celebration with roots deep into the past and 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 centuryplant and other typical figures such as the Camel and the Cadi (Turkish judge). Larger cities on the island organize parades and treasure hunts.

Apart from the common Easter customs in Greece, Crete has its own local traditions to show. These include the auction of the Cross, sheep blessing under the epitaph, the burning of Judas, the transferring of the Holy Light at home while remaining speechless and leaving red eggs on graves. Also during the celebration of Saint John the Theologian at Mammaketo, on Lassithi plateau, the dried orchids of the epitaph bloom again. In Agios Thomas and on the Asterousia range ancient habits revive; temples and houses are surrounded with waxed ropes, to keep evil spirits away.





There are more customs, such as Klidonas, celebrated on the day of Saint John the Baptist in late June. During the feast of the Transfiguration of Christ, pilgrims devote the first grapes of the season to bless their vineyards, while on the same day at the top of the peak Afendis of the range Dikti, participants try to find coins in the soil around the church. On November 3rd, on the feast day of Saint George Methystis ("methystis" is the one that makes you drunk) barrels with wine are first opened. The villages Asi Gonia and Karoti in Rethymnon host the celebration of Saint George. Sheep are milked before the priest and milk is shared to the congregation.

Folklore Collections

Visitors of Crete may come to contact with the traditions and customs of Crete, through a large number of museums and collections that intend to highlight the folklore and ethnological tradition of the island.

Important collections of bygone eras include utensils related to traditional agriculture, livestock breeding, wedding, christening, birth, architecture, clothing and equipment of traditional Cretan houses.



Excellent collections are met at the museums of Lychnostatis in Hersonissos, Chania, Arolithos by Tylissos, Rethymnon, Agios Nikolaos, Sitia, Vainia, Therisso, Gavalohori, Piskopiano, Somatas, Ini, Asites, Chandras, Kandanos, Palekastro, Vrahassi, Gavdos, Pefki, Hamezi, Mohos, Spili and more. Traditional watermills at Zakros and Chironastiri are open to visitors. Similarly, venues related to the olive tree include the Museum of Olive in Vouves, the old oil mill (fabrica) of Arhanes and Vatolakos.

Special ethnological collections are listed at the Museum of Acritans of Europe at Paleochora and Vori. Maritime and fishing tradition is highlighted at the Naval Museum of Crete and at the Fisheries Museum at Kolimbari. Other notable museums are the Museum of School Life at Nerokouros, the Museum of Musical Instruments at Houdetsi and the Wax Museum of Potamianos in Zoniana.



Architecture

Major cities of Crete are home to impressive architectural structures, mainly from the Venetian and the Ottoman Era. Forts, scenic harbors, palaces, fountains and temples are the main attractions of the cities. On the other hand, the interesting attractions in the hinterland include arched bridges, water and wind mills, aqueducts, cisterns and chapels.

Venetian and Ottoman architectural patterns, combined with features of folklore architecture, are evident in contemporary houses. Arched gates since the Venetian era, and sahnisi (protruding covered balcony) since the Ottoman era, are some of the features used even today.



The traditional rural house is an evolution of the prehistoric dwelling; it is constructed with stone, branches and soil, while wooden beams support the roof. To the interior, there is space for animals, while the main features include a stone-built wine press covered with a wooden platform, a fireplace for cooking and heating, and some niches in the walls for storing household utensils.

Some of the most interesting traditional buildings, perfectly adapted to the needs and particularities of the mountainous areas of Crete, are mitata. They are round domed buildings, made solely of dry stone, being an evolution of the domed Minoan tombs. Mitata provided shelter to shepherds and were used for milking goats and cheese-making. They are met in all ranges of Crete, but Nida plateau by Anogia is the most famous place to come across such constructions.



Art

Travelers of Crete can visit very interesting art collections and exhibitions throughout the year. Temporary exhibitions of painting, photography and other forms of art are frequently hosted in galleries in Heraklion, Chania, Agios Nikolaos, Panormos and other towns. It is worth mentioning the southernmost gallery of Europe which is housed at Keratokambos and the museum of engravings, named Xotarís, in Arhanes.

Museums and art galleries with permanent collections of utmost importance include the Museum of Visual Arts in Heraklion, the Art Factory Eleourgion in Dromonero, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rethymnon and more. Important collections of wood and stone sculpture operate in Axos, Asteri, Venerato and Marathos. There is also a Wax museum in Zoniana.

Museums and collections that highlight the life and work of great Cretan authors, artists and politicians are met all over the island. Venues associated with the life and work of the national leader Eleftherios Venizelos are open to visitors. These include the house where he was born in Moumies, his house at Halepa, the Historical Museum in Therisso and the Museum of Venizelos at the village Agios Georgios. A very interesting museum dedicated to the great author Nikos Kazantzakis operates at his birthplace, Myrtia. Moreover, visitors can visit the house, where the great Cretan painter El Greco

is believed to have been born in Fodele, and the Gate Bethlehem at the Walls of Heraklion, where objects used for the film *El Greco* are exposed. Lastly, Viannos houses a museum dedicated to the author Ioannis Kondylakis.





Tradition of air and water

Limited water resources in Crete, due to its geographical position, forced its inhabitants to construct colossal projects for water supply in cities. Even today, the surviving parts of the long aqueduct of Lyktos, that brought water to ancient Hersonissos, and the giant Venetian aqueduct, which brought water to the center of Candia (the contemporary city of Heraklion) from springs in Arhanes and Skalani, are awe-inspiring.





In major cities, water was provided through elaborate fountains, with the most famous being the surviving Morosini Fountain in the center of Heraklion. In many areas of Crete where water is scarce, such as the north mountainous part of the province Mirabello, large cisterns and wells are still used.

Although rivers in Crete are mainly seasonal, visitors will be impressed by some of the most beautiful stone bridges in Greece. The most famous is the arched bridge of Preveli. The ancient bridges of Eleftheria, built in the ekforic system, and Elliniki Kamara (Greek Bridge) at Vrysses are of great archaeological importance.



In western Crete, where rainfalls are quite frequent, water mills were used for grinding grain. However, in drier Eastern Crete residents used the wind for their needs. Indeed, many clusters of windmills, called milotopi, are met in most places, especially at northern Mirabelo.



The windmills of Ambelos at Lassithi Plateau form the largest milotopi in Greece. Apart from grinding grain, the need for pumping water to irrigate crops at the plateaus of Lassithi and Ziros inspired the construction of lightweight metal windmills that pumped water from wells.

Tip
About 12,000 metal windmills operated in the middle of the previous century at Lassithi Plateau, forming the first wind farm in the world with estimated installed power of 5MW.

