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48 hours in . . . Crete, an insider guide to Greece's most storied isle



Beautiful coastline, ancient treasures and tasty cuisine make Crete an alluring island destination
CREDIT: CHRISTOPHE FAUGERE



By Heidi Fuller-Love, DESTINATION EXPERT
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Mountains, museums and the Minotaur's lair

Variety is the spice of life on the largest Greek island. Crete, home of the Minotaur legend and birthplace of Europe's first evolved society, is a vivid and sensual mosaic of contrasts: from lofty mountains and pink-sand beaches, to buzzing nightlife and traditional *kafeneions* (coffeehouses). Standing at the crossroads of three continents, the atoll described by Homer in his *Odyssey* as 'a fair land ... in the midst of the wine-dark sea' has been invaded countless times over the centuries. The traces of successive invasions can be found in Turkish bathhouses, Venetian fortresses, and Byzantine architecture.

However, Cretans refuse to dwell on the past: any and every occasion is an excuse for a *glendi* (party), usually revolving round food: home-grown vegetables, locally produced olive oil, fat snails gleaned in the mountains, or *raki* brewed in the local still. And (as any Greek will proudly tell you) Crete is the country's most hospitable island, so you can expect plenty of invitations to join in the fun.

Hot right now . . .

Heidi Fuller-Love, our resident expert, offers her top tips on the hottest things to do and places to eat and stay this season.

Stay

One of a recent flurry of luxury hotel openings, beachside **Nana Princess** (Old National Road; 00 30 28970 26900) offers stone-built suites and villas clustered around a spectacular underground spa – which is possibly the most lavish in Crete.



Nana Princess, on a sea-view slope just outside Hersonissos, is a luxurious idyll

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Eat

The island's hottest dish right now is *saligaria souvlaki*, a recent creation: snails grilled on a skewer and eaten with a tangy vinaigrette. Order them in any of the *kafeneions* near the town of Moires, where the dish was first invented.

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Do

It's a winding drive to Psiloritis' northwest slopes, but worth it to visit the superbly designed **Museum of Ancient Eleutherna** (Milopotamos; 00 30 2834 092 501). Highlights include artefacts from the seventh century BC necropolis of Orthi Petra.



The exhibits inside the Museum of Ancient Eleutherna span a period of more than 3,000 years

• [The best things to do in Crete](#)

Insider tip | Island hack

For a concentrated dose of local life, look out for posters advertising Cretan music evenings – *glendis*. Held out on the village square in summer, the great-value ticket price (around €15/£13) generally includes a set menu: starter, main meat dish and dessert, along with a carafe of raki or local wine. The festivities and dancing start around 10pm – be prepared to party until dawn.



Insider tip | Neighbourhood watch

Clustered around 1821 Square, Chania's **Splantzia** district is a concentrated slice of the city's Turkish occupied past. Visit the 14th-century church of Agios Nikolaos, with its bell tower and lofty minaret; tuck into *meze* dishes; and browse the book stores and knife-making workshops along the flower-strewn Maxaradika street.



Where to stay . . .

Luxury Living

No expense has been spared in creating **Abaton Island Resort & Spa**, a sleek and classy Cycladic-style resort close to Hersonissos. Rocking chairs scattered around the property invite repose, and lighting is used to create ambiance: a forest of light bulbs dangles above comfortable sofas in reception, and the main bar glows with coloured lights.

Double rooms from €233 (£206). Themistokleous Avenue; 00 30 2897 022850



Rooms at **Abaton** Island Resort & Spa are gleaming white, with decorative touches such as huge carved headboards from India and driftwood sculptures

What to bring home . . .

Traditional *stivania* boots can be made to measure at Nikos Terezakis's Chania store, **Gilotes-Stivania** (potie 17; 00 30 28210 50300).



Stivania boots are the traditional footwear of Cretan men, and can be purchased at Gilotes-Stivania

For authentic local crafts head for **Verekinthos Arts and Crafts Village** (Verekinthou 6, Souda; 00 30 28210 89101), where you can purchase leather, glass and jewellery items, as well as old-fashioned toys made from tin or wood.

Insider tip | Attractions

Most sites and museums are usually open all day, or at least until 3pm. To avoid the coach-tour crowds, visit around noon when tourists will generally be having their lunch. For sights that are open in the evening, plan to visit around 5pm when most day trips have ended.



When to go . . .

Temperatures are balmy all year round along Crete's extensive coastline – although it will often rain from January to March, and sometimes there will be a few days of snow. Weather up in the mountains is colder: expect chilly weather from late December to early April. Conversely, in summer when temperatures along the coast climb to 30-35C, the mountain villages – which are often five degrees cooler – are ideal for escaping the heat.

Sea temperatures start to rise in late April and May, and you can often still swim in November. The island is crowded during July and August when Cretans from overseas come 'home' for the summer, but in late spring and early autumn the beaches and attractions are generally far less crowded – especially in the east of the island.

Know before you go . . .

Essential information

British Consulate: Heraklion: 00 30 28102 24012; [gov.uk](#)

Tourist police: 171

Ambulance: 166

Fire: 199

Tourism Office: 00 30 28102 28225; Xanthoudidou 1, Heraklion

The basics

Currency: Euro (€)

Telephone code: 00 30

Time difference: +2 hour

Languages: *Kritikoi* (Cretan patois), Greek

Flight time: Around four hours

Local laws and etiquette

Cretans are relaxed about sartorial style, but they appreciate modest clothing (no shorts or crop tops) when visiting churches and other religious places – and you are expected to remove headgear when entering. Nude sunbathing near Cretan families is considered extremely rude, and is only acceptable on designated beaches.

Author bio

Heidi Fuller-Love is Telegraph Travel's Crete expert. Seeking clean seas and Cretan food she moved to Greece's 'big island' ten years ago. A fan of local music, she learnt Greek by listening to Cretan *mantinades*.

