

# CRETE



**A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD**

We are excited to introduce an in-depth land program that focuses on the island of Crete. To the Greeks, Crete is the *Megalonissi*, the Great Island, a hub of sophisticated ancient art and architecture. Its strategic location and fertile agricultural plains have made the island a prize throughout the centuries for the Romans, Turks, Venetians, Turks again, and Germans. Throughout its history the Cretans have preserved their traditions, among which is warm and heartfelt hospitality.

To experience Crete's physical landscape is worth a visit in itself—8,000-foot mountains, deep gorges, stalactite filled caves, vineyards and olive groves, aromatic herbs wafting on the breeze and picturesque coastline surrounded by azure blue waters. Add to the landscape whitewashed Byzantine churches, monasteries, Venetian villas and fortresses, and colorful fishing boats moored in centuries-old harbors and you get a true sense of the island. Augment these beautiful scenes with extensive archaeological sites of the world's most advanced ancient civilizations, contemporary with ancient Egypt, and you begin to appreciate the merits of a visit to Crete.

Experience the entire history of Crete from the Neolithic era to the 21st century as we travel throughout the island. The principal focus, however, is the Minoan culture of almost 4,000 years ago. To put it in perspective, the Minoan ruins were as old to the classical Greeks as the Greek ruins are to us. Yet there is a remarkable sophistication in the art and architecture that we experience at Knossos and Phaestos, and in the delicate exhibits in the many archaeological museums throughout the island.

The itinerary begins with a four-night stay in a well-located hotel in Heraklion. While our days offer a rich sightseeing experience, there is still time to explore the narrow winding streets of the Old Quarter, browse in the marketplace and dine in the friendly and festive local tavernas. Then, spend three nights at a lovely hotel in the town of Rethymno, our base of exploration for remote and undeveloped western Crete. The combination of archaeological sites, historic Venetian architecture, natural landscapes and local culture will provide a rich tapestry of memories. Yet the pace of the trip is relaxing with no early morning starts or long hours on a coach. There is plenty of free time, guaranteed to leave you stimulated and refreshed.



# THE ITINERARY

## Day 1 - Heraklion

Depart your home city and fly to Heraklion on the Island of Crete. Arrive in Crete where you are met by your tour manager and escorted to your hotel.

## Day 2- Knossos/Vathypetro/Archanes

Following breakfast and an orientation briefing, depart by deluxe, air-conditioned coach for our journey into the ancient world. We begin at the **Minoan Palace of Knossos**. This extensive archaeological site dates to 1900 B.C. and served as a royal residence for more than 500 years. Over the centuries, earthquakes and fires have damaged the site, but it was repeatedly rebuilt until a final devastating fire corresponding at the end of the Bronze Age left it abandoned. Several fine houses with mosaic floors have been excavated. In the early 1900s, the palace itself was “reconstructed” in places by British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans. Although his work remains controversial, without Evans’ twenty years of work it would be impossible to experience the ambience of this Minoan palace, with its long pillared halls, curiously inverse-tapered columns and lovely frescoes.

Following an extensive visit to the palace, we drive to **Vathypetro**, a nearby site where archaeologists have unearthed a Minoan villa that was most likely the residence of a local ruler. Its architecture is comparable to that of a “Little Palace,” with a central and west court, a small tripartite shrine, a three-columned portico, storerooms and workshops. Of particular interest are the installations of a wine press in the south wing and an oil press in the courtyard. Construction of the villa started in ca. 1580 B.C. and lasted for thirty years but only the west wing was completed. The interior wall of the east wing had just started to be built when the whole structure was destroyed, possibly by an earthquake, and abandoned in 1550 B.C. We continue to the town of **Archanes**, the center of this wine-growing region. Following a walk in the small streets of this charming village we will visit a local winery to sample the Cretan wines.



## Day 3 – Heraklion / Kritsa / Elounda / Spinalonga

In the morning, we visit the **Archaeological Museum** in Heraklion and its world-class collection of Bronze Age relics. Then, board a motor coach and drive east to the village of **Kritsa**, renowned for its weaving tradition. It is also the site of one of the loveliest and noteworthy Byzantine churches on the island, **Panagia Kera**, built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century during the early years of the Venetian occupation. Within its whitewashed walls are some of the best-preserved medieval frescoes on Crete. Next, drive north and stop briefly in Aghios Nikolaos before continuing up the coast of the Gulf of Mirambello to the resort town of **Elounda**. After some free time in the village, we board a local ferry for the island of Spinalonga, where we visit one of

the most important and finest fortresses in Crete. In 1630 it had 35 cannons and was thought to be impregnable. For half a century after the Turkish conquest of Crete, Spinalonga remained in the hands of the Venetians and was a refuge of many Christians who fled there to escape the Turks. Return to Heraklion in the late afternoon.

#### Day 4 – Mt. Dicty & Lassithi Plateau

Heading south from Heraklion this morning, our motor coach climbs Mt. Dicty to the legendary birthplace of Zeus. Walk or ride a donkey up the steep rocky path to the **Dictean Cave** with its impressive stalactites and stalagmites. The Greek creation myth attests that Rhea, the mother of the gods, was only able to save one of her children, Zeus, by hiding him in this cave. Then we cross a barren wall of mountains and descend into a breathtakingly beautiful valley 2,800 feet above sea level. Windmills pump water to irrigate fields of potatoes and fruit and nut orchards in this lush and fertile region known as **Lasithi Plateau**. After spending some time in the charming village of **Krassi**, we visit the monastery of **Kera Kardiotissa**. The convent building is a complex of four separate structures, the oldest being the church. Inside the church, one can admire the remarkable frescoes and Byzantine icons, among which is the miraculous icon of Panagia Alissodemeni (Virgin Mary in chains). According to legend, the icon was stolen twice to be sent to Constantinople but although it was chained on a big column - which now stands in the convent's yard-it came back to its original place.

#### Day 5 – Heraklion / Gorty / Phaistos / Rethymnon

Following breakfast this morning we leave our hotel and travel south to the fertile Messara Plain filled with silver-gray olive groves. First, we visit the Greco-Roman city of **Gortys**. Of greatest importance here are the "Laws of Gortys," four stone tablets inscribed in a Dorian dialect that detail the laws concerning marriage, divorce, and inheritance, making this the earliest code of law in Europe. In 67 A.D. this city of 300,000 was the Roman capital of Crete. The city of Gortys thrived until 828 A.D., when the Saracens destroyed it. Among the finds of Gortys is the Basilica of St. Titus (6th century A.D.) dedicated to Titus, the island's first bishop. Other significant finds are the acropolis, the concave theater, the ancient stadium (2nd century B.C.), the temple of Pythios Apollo (7th century B.C.), the temple of Isis and Serapes, the temple of Asklepios, the Spa, the Odeum (1st century B.C.), where the "Laws of Gortys" were built, and Praetorium, the seat of the Roman governor (2nd century B.C.). Behind the Odeum stands the plane tree where, according to mythology, the sons of Zeus and Europe were born: Radamanthys, Sarpedon and Minos.



Afterwards, we visit the second most important Minoan site in Crete, the ancient city of **Phaistos**. Like Knossos, it was built around 1900 B.C., destroyed, rebuilt and finally abandoned during the late Bronze Age. The extensive site is superbly situated on a hilltop with commanding views of 8,058-foot Mt. Ida. We explore the courtyards, grand and narrow staircases and storerooms. In 1903 the Phaistos Disk, a curious clay disk dating to about 1600 B.C. and containing a sophisticated pictographic writing, was discovered. The disk, which is on display at the Archaeological Museum in Heraklion, has yet to be deciphered. We view the frescoes of **Kaliviani Monastery**. Continue to the seaside town of **Rethymno** and check in to our

hotel. Built by the Venetians on a perfect natural harbor, Rethymno thrived as a commercial port. Today this town preserves its aristocratic appearance in the Venetian old quarter and waterfront, on a rocky promontory between two long stretches of sandy beaches.

### Day 6 – Rethymnon / Atsipopoulo – Chania - Rethymnon

After breakfast, we will drive westward to the Venetian town of **Hania**. We tour fortified Kastelli Hill, which overlooks the harbor where the Venetians first settled. Then walk through the old quarter where many Venetian and Turkish buildings are preserved, and stroll along the inner harbor where fishing boats are moored with their nets piled on the stone waterfront. One of the most significant buildings is the large Venetian church of Aghios Frankiskos (St. Francis), which houses the Archaeological Museum.



After some free time in the Old Quarter, we return to Rethymno. We visit the **Fortezza**, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian fortress overlooking the harbor. It was built to defend against a Turkish invasion and the fact that the Cathedral of St. Nicolas became the Mosque of Sultan Ibrahim is testament to its lack of success.

### Day 7 – Arkadi Monastery / Vafes / Rethymnon

Today we will have a relaxing day. We visit the **Monastery of Arkadi**, the most famous on the island due to its history. It was founded in the Byzantine times and was a center of learning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with many copyist monks and a rich library and school. However, it was in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century war of independence against Turkey when several hundred men, women and children sought refuge in the fortress-like monastery during a fierce battle. When the walls were breached and a massacre began, a local hero ignited the gunpowder storeroom in what has become a symbol of freedom for the Greeks. We return to Rethymno with some free time for last minute pursuits, and in the early evening, we drive to the old village of **Vafes** where we visit a traditional Cretan house and see a 250-year old olive press. Enjoy a festive **farewell dinner** in a traditional taverna with music and dance, before returning to our hotel.



### Day 8 – Rethymnon / Heraklion

Following breakfast this morning proceed to the airport in Heraklion for flights home.