

April, 2016

Travels with Anzie – Crete

Crete can be the culmination of the Greek experience. The mountains still show fingers of snow in late April. It seems like every square meter of the foothills are cultivated with olive groves and vineyards. Any spaces not farmed are covered with wildflowers. Deep, chiseled gorges empty out to the Aegean where you find palm-lined beaches reminiscent of the Caribbean. The island is so big – about 160 miles long and 40 some miles wide – that it's sometimes easy to forget you're on an island. It's also the southernmost part of Europe.



Crete is so ancient that it makes us feel really young. Here we'll talk a little bit about its history, historic sites, fascinating cities, towns and villages, its people and its legends.

Despite a violent history, Crete does not bear many scars of its tragic history. It has been fought over and ruled by several countries: Minoans (the original civilization), the Mycenaeans, Dorians, Romans, Byzantines, Venetians, Turks and British. The author of *Zorba the Greek*, Nikos Kazantzakis, in his historical novel *Freedom and Death* depicts the revolution against the Turks. When 2000 Turkish soldiers arrived, hundreds of Cretan men, women and children fled their villages to find shelter at the Monastery of Arkadi. Under siege, they elected to blow up stored gunpowder, killing everyone, including Turks. Crete finally joined with Greece in 1913, and has remained a part of Greece since then, except for harsh German occupation during WWII.

Getting There: We took the Hi-Speed Ferry from Paros. It takes about three hours. There is also air service. We landed at **Iraklio**, aka **Heraklion**, located on the north coast close to the center of the island.

We stayed at the **Village Heights Golf Resort**, situated on the side of a mountain overlooking the town of Hersonissos and the sea. We stayed here in order to use up a timeshare that we were about to lose. It turned out to be an excellent choice.

Meet Giorgio. He's our waiter at Village Heights. Born and raised Cretan, forty-ish with a slight paunch and a receding hairline, he's an avid stamp collector and a font of information about Crete. Along with our bill he always brought us a dessert and a glass of raki, the Greek version of grappa. He often brought along a story or legend.

The island is replete with legends. Our resort was located only 15 miles north of the cave, Psychro, where Zeus was allegedly born. Legend has it that Zeus' father, Kronos, had the nasty habit of eating his children. Reason?: to prevent them from supplanting him as ruler of heaven. To trick him Mother Rhea presented him with a stone wrapped in a blanket. Thinking it was a new baby, Kronos swallowed it. Rhea then hid while she gave birth to Zeus. Eventually Zeus, along with his regurgitated siblings, Posiedon and Hades, overthrew Kronos.

Giorgio gave us another story that occurred right below us, in Hersonissos. A few years ago a fire broke out. To fight the fire a helicopter fitted with a large scoop flew just above the ocean, and filled the scoop with seawater. Unbeknownst to anyone, they had also scooped up a swimmer. They dropped the water – and the swimmer – onto the fire.

Palace of Knossos

Just south of Heraklion lies this center of the ancient **Minoan** civilization. Constructed by King Minos around 1650 BC, the architecture and decoration reveals an amazing level of sophistication. Even the water system, which used clay pipes to carry water from a distant mountain with pressure developed solely by gravity, gives us perhaps the first example of indoor plumbing. The palace lay in the center of the capital city of the same name with a population of about 100,000.



Discs were found that revealed symbols imprinted by carved stamps in soft clay. To date no one has been able to translate the discs, although some claim that they represent the first example of “moveable type”.

Legends surround Knossos. The King hired Daedalus as his architect. Daedalus did such good work that the King kept him and his son, Icarus, imprisoned in the palace.

To escape, Daedalus fashioned wings that were secured by wax. We all know what happened next. Icarus flew too close to the sun. Boys will be boys!

Then Queen Minos coupled with a bull, and gave birth to a half-man, half-bull monster called the Minotaur. The monster developed a taste for human flesh. The king had Daedalus design a “Labrynth” to contain the Minotaur. He then fed him human sacrifices. Then along came Theseus, a prince from Athens. The king’s daughter, Ariadne, fell in love with him. Enraged, the king forced Theseus to battle the Minotaur. Before he entered the Labrynth, Ariadne gave him a ball of string that he could unwind so he could find his way out of the Labrynth. He killed the Minotaur, and escaped Crete together with Ariadne.

By the way, frescoes reveal that the Minoan women wore dresses that revealed their breasts. Let us only hope that this topless style regains popularity soon!



A British archeologist, Sir Arthur Evans, was responsible for discovering Knossos in the early 20th century. He directed the re-creation of several portions of the palace, right down to the frescoes. We visited another “dig” of a Minoan palace in Malia. Compared to Knossos, this was a pile of rocks. Knossos is well worth the visit.

Wine and Olive Country

Leaving Knossos we headed south, up into the mountains. We were struck by the fact that every available meter of land was cultivated. This, as opposed to the Greek island of Paros where much land seemed to lie fallow. Perhaps Cretan soil is more fertile. At any rate, vineyards became more plentiful as we drove, as many road signs pointed out vineyards. We tasted both white and red. Both were pretty good, but the white was more consistent. Unfortunately they’re not yet producing enough to export out of Greece.



Olive oil is a different story. Crete produces plenty of “Extra Virgin”. In order to qualify as Extra Virgin the oil must be less than 0.8% on the acidity scale. Crete’s output qualifies. Hence much of its production is exported to other countries where it is mixed with their more acidic oil in order to qualify as “Extra Virgin”, and demand a higher price. Who knew? The moniker “Extra Virgin” always perplexed me. After all, either you are or you ain’t a virgin, right?

Hania

Also known as Chania, this city lies on the northwest coast. The Venetian influence on architecture is beneficial. The pastel buildings that string alongside the port lend the town such a romantic flair, not to mention the ancient fortifications that guard the port. Several horse-drawn carriages were lined up along the pier. We meandered through the town, passing two “digs” with signage that described what was found.

If we had more time, we would have stayed overnight here. Lots of theater, music and restaurants. Next time.



Agios Nikolaos and Environs

To the east of Heraklion lies the eastern-most province of Lasithi. It is sprinkled with charming resort towns.

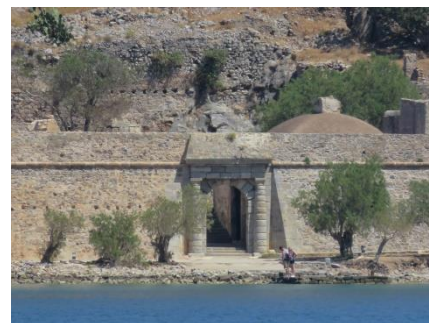
In the center of Agios Nikolaos lies the Lake Voulismeni, virtually surrounded by cafes and restaurants. The lake sits at the bottom of a cliff and is separated from the curving Mirabello Bay by a narrow channel. Carved into the cliff is a fisherman's chapel, which was converted into a pirate's den several years ago for a movie. We hear that the town offers some good nightlife.

Up until the 1960's the lake was considered bottomless. Then famous diver Jacques Cousteau showed up to test this theory. He ascertained that the lake was 60 ft. deep. Since then, every time they experience a dip in revenues, the restaurateurs blame Jacques.



Further along the coast lies the resort town of **Elounda**, which is allegedly the venue for the most expensive resort hotels in Crete. Gossip has it that this is where the elite go to chill out. If you're into famous people spotting, this is the place to go.

We stopped for lunch at a seaside restaurant in the village of **Plaka**. Besides providing good food, the restaurant, **Delphini**, overlooks the fabled island of **Spinalonga**. Beginning in 1903, the island was used as a leper colony. A cure for leprosy, aka Hansen's disease, was found in the 1950's. The island was finally abandoned in 1957. From our perspective a mile distant, it looks like a sandcastle. An ancient Venetian fortress, built out of the island rock and sand, blends into the surroundings. You can take a ten minute boat ride to the island for 5 Euros round-trip.



There's an upside and a downside to our trip to Crete. The upside is that we got to explore another cradle of civilization and to get a real sense of history that we were never able to get out of a book or a classroom. The downside is that we only had four days to do it in, only enough time to barely scratch the surface of possibilities. We did a lot; it was not a relaxing vacation. But relaxation is what Paros is for.

Next, Athens and Istanbul.

Onward,

Chuck & Anzie