

Heraklion-Crete

Crete is located at the uttermost point of Greece and of all Europe and having equal distance from Asia, Africa and Europe makes this island something like the bridge of the three continents.

Crete (or **Kretee**, in Greek), is the biggest island in Greece and the fifth biggest in Europe (after Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica and Cyprus). It is a long island in shape, extending about 258 km from east to west; while its breadth ranges between 10km - 55km. Crete is mountains and very fertile, the one side which is facing Greece and Mediterranean climate and the opposite, facing Africa has wonderful sandy beaches with palm trees and almost tropical climate.

This island where, according to the ancient mythology, Zeus was born on and has been the cradle of civilization, has a truly amazing past both distant and more recent; and the Cretans who carry this wealth, have a very unique character, one which is authentic and unforced and which is marked with passion for life and liberty... "I fear nothing, I hope for nothing, I'm free" this sentence which belongs to the author of the famous novel 'Zorba the Greek', Nikos Kazantzakis has given a successful definition of the Cretans throughout the centuries and up until today.

The island was inhabited as early as 6000 BC, reaching its peak during the Minoan Period (2600- 1100 BC), period during which most of the palaces were built, many of which still exist.

Crete is divided into four prefectures (states), Heraklion, Lasithi, Chania, and Rethymnon. Heraklion, which is the capital and the biggest city, gaining its name from the mythical hero Hercules that came to Crete in order to accomplish his seventh of his twelve labors (to kill the Minotaur); covers an area of 2641sq. km and has about 270.000 inhabitants. The city and its suburbs are embraced by a 3km wall with four gates and seven ramparts. These walls form a triangle which has the sea as its base and Martinengo Bastion as its apex and they are a unique monument of the Venetian way of fortification.

The city consists of two parts; the new town with its modern shops and busy squares and the old town with its Venetian fountains (built by Morosini), the Venetian Loggia, the fruit and vegetable market and many narrow traditional

alleys. Heraklion express Crete's uncanny ability to blend the old with new with harmony.

Highlights of Heraklion

The first thing one can see upon arrival to Heraklion is the Venetian Harbor with its characteristic Venetian Arsenals and the Kastro known as Koules Fortress, having on its three sides reliefs of the lions of St. Marks (symbol of Venice).

The town's center is Liberty Square. This has always been the center of the city, from Venetian times and up until today this is the meeting place and the heart of modern Heraklion. Very close one can find the famous fountains with the lions (symbol of Venice), the Fountains of Morosini (1628), surrounded by many coffee and pastry shops with the famous Cretan 'bougatsa' (sweet cream pie). Very near is the Basilica of Agios Markos (1239) and the Venetian Loggia, a building in the Italian Renaissance architecture style, initially erected in 1623-1628 and was used at that time as a club for the Venetian nobility; today it house the Town Hall of Heraklion. Exactly behind the Loggia is the Byzantine church of St. Titus which is the patron Saint of Crete and in which the holy relics of St. Titus are kept. Another sight which is unique in Heraklion is the Cathedral of St. Minas (1862-1895), which is the largest church on Crete and in which six icons of the great Cretan icon-painter Michael Damaskinos (teacher of El-Greco) are displayed. The Archeological museum of Heraklion is not to be missed, (look for the frescoes from Knossos and the disk of Phaestos as well as the jewelry from Minoan period).

Products of Crete

The Cretans have the biggest living rate in Europe and one of the reasons for that is the Cretan way of eating. Cretan soil is so rich that in a way it "feeds" the rest of Greece. Olive trees giving the highest quality olive oil and olive products, vineyards and excellent wine and raisins (the worldwide known sultanina raisins), honey, cheese and unique yoghurt, spices and herbs and of course fresh fruit and vegetables of all sorts.