

Magical island which kept us spellbound

Packed with sandy beaches, rugged mountains, vibrant cities and sleepy villages

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Whatever you look for in a summer holiday, chances are you'll find it in Crete.

With sandy beaches, rugged mountains, vibrant cities and peaceful villages, the largest of the Greek islands has a unique and magical landscape.

The history of Crete is as rich as its scenery. Dating back to the seventh millennium BC, the island is a tapestry of different civilisations, cultures, architecture and mythology. Visitors can see remnants of Roman and Turkish architecture, as well as ancient Minoan ruins.

The island's north coast is most popular with tourists and bustling capital Heraklion is the main entry point. Rethymnon and Chania to the west are far more traditional. To the east is the major resort of Agios Nikolaos.

At the island's centre are the White Mountains, which soar to over 2,000m in places. The far-less visited south coast is a land of gorges, hamlets, coves and beaches.

For our stay, we chose a sleepy village five miles west of Rethymnon; a city of charm and history set along a stretching sandy beach. Despite being the third largest city in Crete, the pace of life is slow and Rethymnon retains much of its Venetian and Turkish appearance.

The Rethymnon Province is a tantalisingly untamed beauty. Endless mountain roads wind through its timeless wildflower fields, sleepy villages and olive groves.

To explore such beauties, Mel and I opted for the traditional mode of transport – moped.

While not everybody's cup of tea, two wheels immerses you into the surroundings like no other mode of transport can.

With warm silky wind on your skin, the fragrance of wild herbs in your nose and sun beaming down, the exhilaration and beauty of a ride around Crete cannot be underestimated. And for around 30 Euros a day, it's not too expensive.

One highlight was a ride up winding hills and gorges to the sacred Arkadi Monastery.

Dating back to the 16th century, the monastery played an active role in the Cretan resistance of Ottoman rule during the Cretan revolt of 1866.

Nearly 1,000 Greeks sought refuge in the monastery. After three days of battle, the Cretans blew up barrels of gunpowder, sacrificing themselves rather than surrendering.

Today, the monastery has a serenity about it and is a pretty place of quiet reflection.

An absolute must-see is the Samaria Gorge. The 13 kilometre walk takes you down from the White Mountains through the cinematic scenery of the gorge, which is the second longest in Europe.

With olive, fig and orange trees, a plethora of herbs,



The White Mountains in Crete, as seen from the top of the Samaria Gorge. All photographs by Melissa Blake



Oleander is a native plant of Crete

vibrant wild flowers, goats - which love eating fig leaves - and amazing views, it really is nature at its best.

The crystal clear water which runs through the gorge is infused with herbs, pollens and minerals which are said to revitalise hikers on the trek.

After passing through the gorge, hikers emerge onto white sands and clear turquoise waters of the Libyan Ocean.

With so much beautiful food and wine – and at such a cheap price – available in Crete one can live like a king on a shoestring budget.

The people are friendly, the weather is always good and the activities cater for all tastes.

No matter what your tastes, there's something for you.

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Beach on the north coast of Crete

Late deals

Bulgaria

On the Beach (www.onthebeach.co.uk; 0871 474 3000) offers seven nights at the three-star Park Hotel Continental (B&B) in Sunny Beach from £414pp (two sharing), including flights from Gatwick on August 25.

Dubai

Teletext Holidays (www.teletextholidays.co.uk; 020 3001 0628) offers five nights at the Jannah Marina Bay Suites (all-inclusive) from £382pp (two sharing). Includes flights from Heathrow on September 6.

Greece

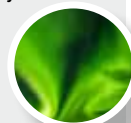
Sunvil (020 8758 4758; www.sunvil.co.uk) offer seven nights at Villa Penny (self-catering) in North Samos from £529pp (two sharing) - saving £233pp (31%). Includes transfers and flights from Gatwick on September 1.

Trip of the week...

NORTHERN LIGHTS

The Aurora Borealis, or as more commonly known, the Northern Lights, is a natural light show resulting from an interaction between the magnetic fields of the Earth and the Sun. The aurora's appearance can vary from a weak glow to a breathtaking, sky-filling spectacle, and even though the best views may be had from ground level, visibility can be hampered by surrounding light pollution, bad weather or an inconveniently cloudy night. Evening excursions by air only £219.95pp, flying from from Birmingham, East Midlands, Gatwick, Norwich, Luton, Liverpool, Leeds Bradford, and Manchester airports.

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