



EXPLORING CRETE

SMALLGROUP
TRAVEL

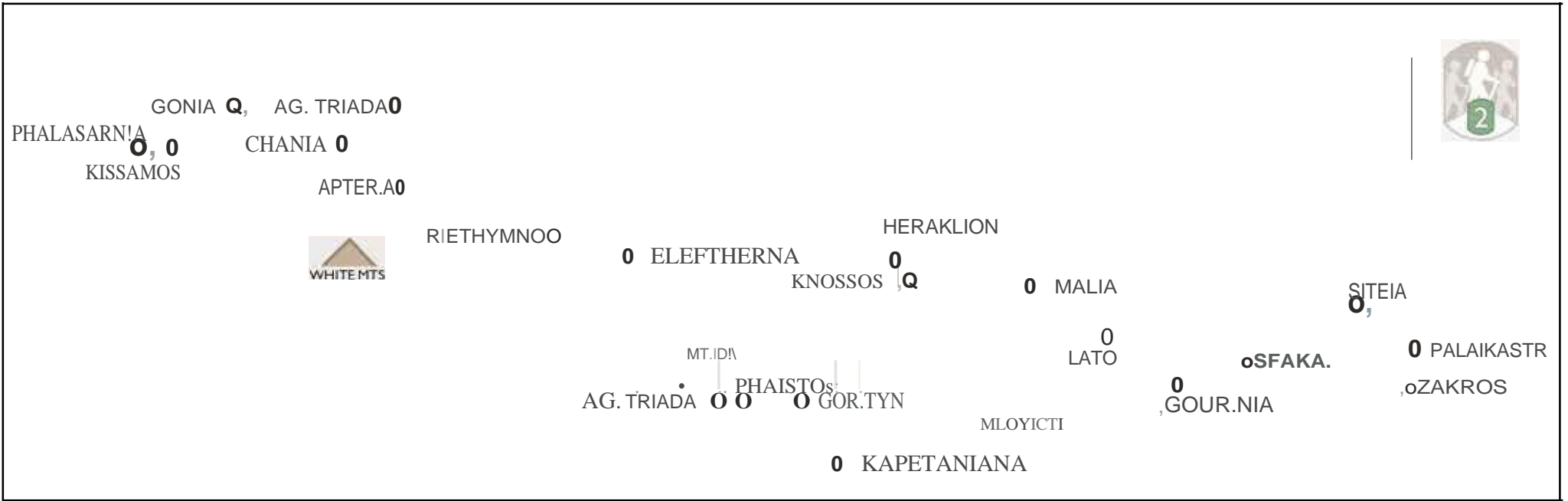


The Tour will be -LED
by Experts

ARCHAEOLOGICAL &
CULTURAL
TOUR

Exploring Crete tour is the ideal opportunity to experience this fascinating island to the full. You will visit its most important ancient sites, including the famous prehistoric Minoan palaces, but also veer off the beaten track to explore many of Crete's hidden gems. To take full advantage of the island's extraordinary beauty and its unique wealth in spring flowers, our tour of Crete includes a series of walks, bringing you into direct contact with its coasts, mountains, gorges and fertile plains, as well as its historical villages and towns.

April 11 - April 24, 2024



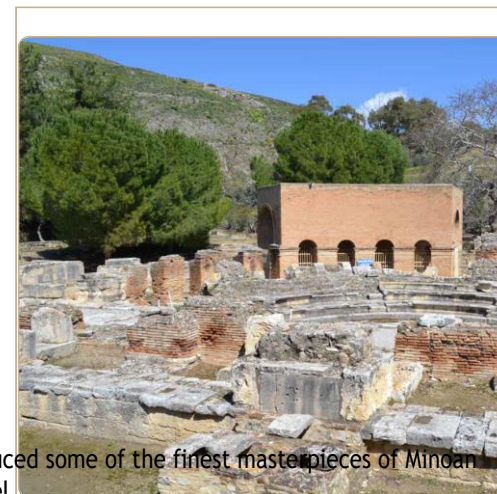
Itinerary

Day 1: Arrival in Heraklion. Transfer from the airport about 15 minutes away. Welcome drinks and dinner. Our city hotel will be our base for the first two nights.

Day 2: We follow the coast east to the extensive remains of the Minoan Palace at Malia and its surrounding town, founded over 4,000 years ago. Beautifully preserved just as it was excavated, Malia serves as a perfect introduction to Bronze Age archaeology, the Minoan civilisation and the nature of their 'palaces'. We'll have our first encounter with the spaces and architectural features we'll meet - rearranged and adapted - at the various Minoan sites as our journey continues. Later, we drive up into the Dikti Mountains to the celebrated Lasithi Plateau, 1,000m above sea level and famous for its white-sailed windmills. After our first village lunch, we make a short climb to one of the region's sacred caves, a key feature of ancient Crete's religious customs, and first used many generations prior to the Minoans, before returning to Heraklion.

Day 3: We begin exploring East Crete by visiting the scenic Hellenistic city of Lato, set on a saddle between twin peaks ringed by awe-inspiring heights, and boasting wonderful views over the beautiful gulf of Mirabello. For Homer, Crete was the land of "one hundred cities", the city-states of the first millennium BC. We'll use the ancient remains to discover how people lived, and how they governed themselves with surprising sophistication even in these now remote uplands. Next, we stop at the Byzantine-Venetian church of Panayia Kera, famous for the lavish frescoes covering every inch of its walls with intricate tales to inspire devotion, a prime example of the island's Byzantine heritage, here fused with some Venetian influences. After lunch, we continue to the incredibly well-preserved Minoan town of Gournia, where we can walk along the 3,500-year-old streets and alleyways hugging the flanks of a rocky hill overlooking the sea. House after bronze age house gives us the best impression we can get of ordinary daily life, and above them an impressive public building with clues to the deep religious devotion of the settlement's people.

Day 4: This day is devoted to the island's easternmost region, where we visit three archaeological treasures. At Siteia we tour our first archaeological museum, not very large but offering a superb overview across the material culture of Minoan Crete, with collections of pottery, stone vessels, clay sarcophagi, precious jewellery and much more from many sites in the east of the island, culminating in the famous gold-and-ivory Palaikastro 'Kouros', a superb piece of Bronze Age sculpture, painstakingly restored from the hundreds of fragments it was left in after its last time above ground, three and a half millennia ago. Keen to know more, we stop at the place where the 'Kouros' was found: the Minoan town of Palaikastro itself, to learn of its heyday and its violent destruction. Here, we learn about the fate of the "Kouros" and the questions arising from it, but also about the historic cult of Zeus as a boy. We lunch close to the crashing waves of the perfect beach at Kato Zakros, in an 'island' of rich farmland cut off by magnificent bleak hills and the Gorge of the Dead. With this amazingly scenic backdrop, we then tour the Minoan town and palace of Zakros itself, an artistic centre whose craftsmen produced some of the finest masterpieces of Minoan civilisation and whose trading contacts reached out to Egypt and beyond before it was brought down in flames. In the afternoon, we return to our hotel.



Day 5: We head west for a key highlight of the tour: Crete's most famous archaeological site, the great Minoan Palace of Knossos, the oldest, largest, and most elaborate of these sites. We'll hear of its long history, its place in myth and learn of its discovery by Sir Arthur Evans and the controversial but iconic reconstructions he made on the site, which leave such an indelible impression. In its wide courts, shaded colonnades and intricate arrangements of room after room, floor after floor, we can really get to grips with what these palaces looked like and think about what they were for, who lived in them and how they functioned in still-debated ways in Minoan society. Later, we enjoy lunch and a wine tasting in the lush Peza region, the heart of Cretan winemaking since the Minoan era. We continue south into the Asterousia Mountains, towering above the rugged southern coast, where we spend the first of three nights in a picturesque mountain village amid the high peaks.

Day 6: In the morning, we descend to the green Mesara Plain, to investigate the island's Roman and Early Byzantine capital, Gortyn. We visit the heart of this extensive site, still under excavation. Our visit begins with the famous Gortyn Law Code, one of the longest ancient Greek inscriptions ever found and hugely informative for our understanding of city-state laws and the workings of daily life for those who tend to get left out of history. Then, we set out on an easy stroll through old olive groves concealing parts of the ancient city, some excavated and some still unexplored. We return to our mountain village for a free afternoon in its picturesque winding lanes and bathing in the sheer visual opulence of its views. After lunch, there is time to enjoy our mountainous abode.

Day 7: The day is devoted to the Minoan presence in the Mesara, Crete's largest plain and agricultural heartland. Our first visit is to the Minoan Palace of Phaistos, arguably the most beautiful of its kind, perched on a jutting spur that seems to leap into space high over the lush valley in a striking setting overlooked by snow-capped Mount Ida, the island's towering central peak. Very close by, we disentangle the complex ruins of Agia Triada, a finely equipped, though not huge, Minoan town that may have been a summer residence for the Bronze Age rulers of southern Crete. We'll hear about the incredibly rich finds made here, ready to admire them up close when we visit the Archaeological Museum in Heraklion at the end of the tour. We'll have much to remember in the evening as the shadows cast by the enfolding peaks lengthen and we look out across the Libyan Sea in an idyllic evening soundtracked only by the sound of goat bells amid the solitude

Day 8: We start the day with a short tour of the excellent and award-winning folklore museum at Voroi, to see impressive handiwork wrought by the hands of virtuoso craftspeople in weaving, basketry, beekeeping and the other skills of traditional rural life. We then continue into western Crete, stopping by the Late Minoan-Mycenaean cemetery of Armenoi, its scores of rock-cut graves scattered in an oak forest. Surrounded by the serenity of the site, we learn about the changes the island underwent during and after the 15th century BC and we learn about the young people that were laid to rest here, before entering the largest and most elaborate of the tombs. After lunch and a tasting at a famous winery in the most fertile part of West Crete, we end the day at a historic seafront hotel in the beautiful Venetian city of Chania, our base for the next three nights.

Day 9: We make our way to the westernmost shore of the island, where we begin the day in a fertile plain beneath a sheer-climbing acropolis and in sight of wave-battered rocks. We are at the site of ancient Phalasarna, where the geological story competes with the historical in impressiveness. We'll see the beautifully-preserved harbours of this ancient city - part flourishing port, part pirate's nest - the mooring rings for the ships still in place at the empty quayside. Complex artificial channels protected the ships, brilliantly-preserved fortifications the city - but neither proved adequate against two insuperable forces: nature and Rome. The whole port was heaved above sea level by a mighty geological paroxysm in the fourth century, but by that time the city was already dead, laid waste by Roman arms centuries earlier. We'll see traces of both at the excellent museum in Kissamos next - the catapult stones of the Roman legionaries at Phalasarna, and the remains of flourishing local communities hit by the catastrophes of earthquake and tsunami. We lunch by more peaceful shores, in the wide turquoise bay of the seafront at Kissamos, embraced by the painterly arms of distant hills. In the afternoon we visit the historic monastery of Gonia. Its serene, ordered modern state hides its central role in much of Crete's turbulent revolutionary and wartime past. The beauty of the monastery is matched by the fine icon collection in the superb museum within.

Day 10: Free day, yours to relax by the clear waters of the harbour, explore the pretty streets of old Chania or dive in and go shopping in the more bustling parts! You may wish to take the chance to visit the spectacular new archaeological museum, opened in 2022. You are free to choose your own options for lunch and dinner.

Day 11: A morning drive takes us to the Akrotiri peninsula, where we visit the serenely beautiful Venetian-era monastery of Agia Triada, whose sienna-hued walls and welter of picture postcard viewpoints beg for a painter or photographer to immortalise them. If your tastes run to, well, tastes, there's the traditional olive press and the monastery's organic oils and wines that need attending to. We drive by the magnificent Bay of Souda, where we stop to pay our respects at the island's British and Commonwealth war cemetery, set in a location central to the tragic events of the 1941 Battle of Crete. Our next visit is to the vast Classical and Roman city of Aptera, sprawling prodigiously over a mighty eminence with impressive views over the blue bay and receding panoramas of mountain and shore. We'll take in the grand Graeco-Roman theatre and the huge cisterns that fed its Roman baths, all now watched over by a formidable Ottoman stronghold. Following a delightful village lunch, we end the day in the grand Venetian city of Rethymno, where we stay in a 16th century palazzo for two nights. In the evening, advised by your tour experts, you can choose your own dinner among the many options available in the picturesque Old Town.

Day 12: In the morning, we tour the Fortezza, the well-preserved Venetian fortress whose frowning, mighty walls dominate Rethymno, commanding wide views across the Cretan Sea and the mountains to the west and east. Then, we set out inland to Eleutherna, one of Crete's oldest and most important ancient cities, set in the beautiful Amari valley and the site of ongoing and superbly productive excavations. Its recently opened archaeological museum is eye-opening, revealing the broad trading contacts and considerable wealth that existed here in the Early Iron Age, just as the city-states began to develop. The rich burials of its warriors and priestesses are an outstanding highlight of this great display. After a village lunch, we return to Rethymno. We explore some of the Venetian city's finest features on a pre-dinner stroll.



Day 13: We return to Heraklion to visit the superlative Archaeological Museum, housing one of the world's most important exhibits of prehistoric art and artefacts, a magnificent showcase of Minoan culture and the Greek and Roman ages in Crete. Our extensive tour takes in many wonders: the stunning achievements of Minoan potters, delicate works in ivory, painstakingly carved stone vases with rituals and myth played out on them, elaborate jewellery of gold and precious stones, masterpiece offerings to the deities whose images they bear. We'll see the world-class collection of famous and evocative fresco paintings from Knossos - lithe bull-leapers and the sinuous, privileged elite of Knossos. And we'll finally be able to satisfy our curiosity by getting up close to some of the amazing artworks we've talked about at their original find-spots earlier in our tour. After a relaxing afternoon, we stroll through the Venetian heart of the city, once known as Candia, passing its main monuments and concluding with a final magnificent dinner.

Day 14: Transfer to Heraklion airport.

Cost of the Tour April 11- 24 April 2024

The Tour is part of the Peter Sommers Collection. They are led by expert guides.

The tour dates are exclusive to SmallGroup Travel with a maximum of 16 travelers. As part of the celebratory year - 20 years since the First SmallGroup travel tour took place, first option will be given to Frequent SmallGroup Travel clients. Although exclusive to SmallGroup Travel, the cost is that of the published dates.

I hope you will join me exploring Crete and all its history.

Cost based on a minimum of 16 travelers - **Please note cost is in GBP**

Twin share £4615 per person

Single supplement of £695.

The hotels that we will be using for this tour are as follows:

- Heraklion: Hotel Galaxy, executive rooms (at beginning and end of tour)
- Ierapetra: Hotel El Greco, sea view rooms
- Kapetaniana: Hotel Thalori, traditional rooms
- Chania: Hotel Doma, executive rooms
- Rethymno: Hotel Palazzino di Corina, standard rooms

Inclusions:

- All breakfasts, 11 lunches and 11 dinners;
- 13 overnights in hotels of different categories (3 in Heraklion, 2 in Ierapetra, 3 in Kapetaniana, 3 in Chania, 2 in Rethymnon);
- the services of two specialist guides who will accompany you throughout the trip;
- Private A/C coach for all tours and visits as per itinerary
- entrance fees; site transfers;
- airport transfers based on a group arrival;
- all local taxes and VAT;
- gratuities in restaurants and hotels;
- all mineral waters, teas and coffees and wine with dinner.

This price does not include: flights, airport taxes, visas, travel insurance, Guide Gratuities.

I am able to provide you with an Insurance quote and will offer a 10% discount as part of the group.

Please contact me if you are interested in the tour or have any questions.

Best wishes

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Sue Kuti
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