

GREENE

IS THE WORD



Crete

- TRAVEL -

Mark Nicholls visits the Greek island of Crete to experience the 'healthiest diet in the world', a challenging trek, ancient history and simply gorgeous scenery



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TREWN ALONG THE water's edge of the secluded Elafonisi beach, billions of crushed shell fragments give the shoreline a pinkish hue.

The outlook from beneath shady reed parasols is of clear warm water washing against the fine pieces of shell before turning a shade of turquoise as it drops to waist deep.

Elafonisi - quiet, secret and unspoilt - is one of Crete's perfect beach treasures, tucked away on a secluded corner of the island.

Travel back towards the Bay of Kissamos with its spectacular views over the Aegean and you find yourself at Falasarna, another beach of near-white sand with rocky inlets and warm refreshing waters.

This is the pleasure of Crete; idyllic beaches which contrast with the rocky backdrop of rugged mountainous terrain cascading down to a coastline pocked with fishing inlets, small harbours and postcard villages. —

CRETAN DISHES

Yiouvetsi

Goat or veal meat cooked in the oven with tomato sauce and olive oil

Artichokes

With broad beans in lemon sauce

Horta and vegetable dishes

served with olive oil and lemon juice

Fava

Yellow lentils mashed and served with onion, lemon and olive oil

Papoutsakia (small shoes)

Oven roast aubergines in olive oil and tomato sauce stuffed with vegetables

Octopus

With green olives casserole

Gemista

Stuffed tomatoes and peppers

Cuttlefish

With dill and green olives

Dakos

Cretan rusk with tomato, goats cheese, oregano and olives

Boureki

A dish unique to Chania with layers of potatoes, courgettes, goats cheese and pastry

Snails

Casserole or fried with vinegar and rosemary

Rooster

Casserole with potatoes

Kalitsounia

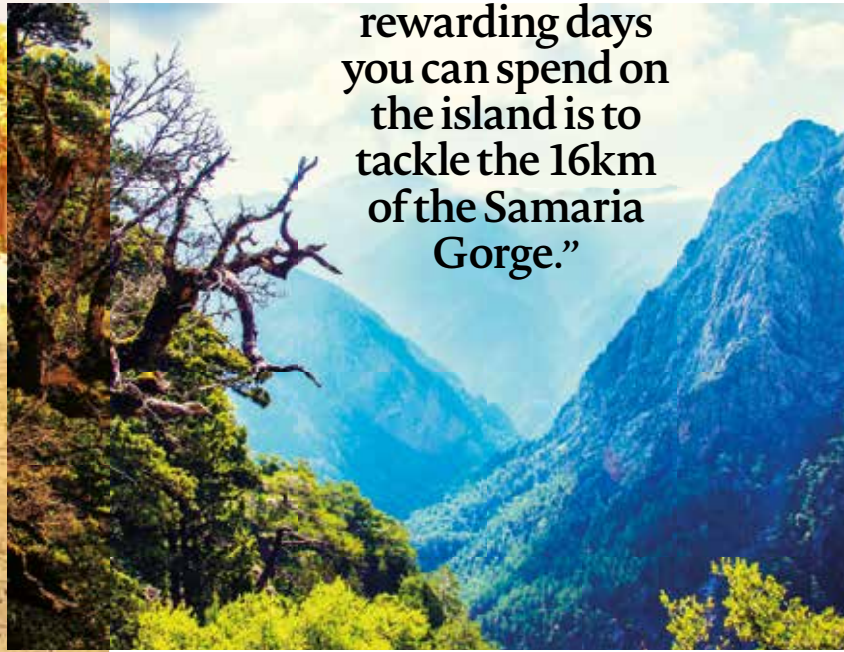
Small pies filled with cheese and seasonal greens

Marathopites

Dill pies

Vegetable briam

Mixed vegetables cooked in the oven with a rich tomato sauce



“One of the most rewarding days you can spend on the island is to tackle the 16km of the Samaria Gorge.”

Take any route along the coast and you can pause for wonderful seafood at tavernas huddled in craggy coves, such as at Sfinari, to enjoy freshly-caught fish, a range of shellfish, wine, and the irresistible Kakavia (one of Crete’s traditional fish soup dishes).

Crete’s enduring attraction is its diversity and while the beaches may be tempting, one of the most rewarding days you can spend on the island is to tackle the 16km of the Samaria Gorge.

The longest natural fissure in Europe, the descent is along pathways carved out of a river bed through the rugged beauty of the White Mountains of Crete.

Breakfast on strong, sweet Greek coffee – the sort that feels gritty between your teeth - and the ‘spanakopita’ cheese and spinach pies near the village of Omalos at the top of the gorge before descending into the chasm.

The path meanders downward through pine and cypress trees before levelling out onto the river bed with the water flowing close by and supplying regular fountains to fill bottles with some of the sweetest water you will ever taste.

Now a national park, the gorge was a wartime hideaway for Crete’s resistance fighters and also hosts endangered species such as Crete’s wild goat, the kri-kri.

Past the abandoned village and the 14th century church of Ossia Maria, which gave the gorge its name, the track continues to the narrowest point a mere three metres across before finally spilling out onto the black sandy beach at Agia Roumeli.

Accommodation
Mark Nicholls stayed at the 33-room Mistral Hotel at Maleme near Chania, which opens from April to October. Specialising in hosting solo travellers, guests book the hotel independently and arrange their own flights, though the Mistral arranges transfers. Themed holidays are available, from Greek Easter, Spring & Flowers week, Walking, and Photography. For bookings and further information, visit www.singlesincrete.com

Your reward – apart from the satisfaction of reaching the end – is a cooling dip in the Libyan Sea and lunch in one of the village’s small tavernas; perhaps a traditional Greek dish of stifado or a simple Greek salad. Juicy figs are hard to resist, as are any of the local cheeses. And a Cretan herbal mountain tea (Malotira) with thyme or heather honey is more than welcome.

In recent years, western Crete has become one of my favourite holiday destinations, helped along by the knowledge that, since the 1950s, the Cretan diet has been widely recognised as one of the healthiest on earth.

I like to stay at the 33-room Mistral Hotel at Maleme, near Chania. Run by brothers Vassilis and Antonis Gialamarakis and their families, it has two beautiful pools, quiet landscaped gardens and a welcoming bar area. It prides itself on showing Crete as it is through its food, wine, hospitality and some off-the-beaten-track excursions. The food is a highlight – four courses every night, with an emphasis on seasonal dishes sourced locally and cooked traditionally. Vegetables, fruits and herbs are grown in the gardens, bread is baked every morning nearby and they hand press their own olive oil. And it shows!



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SAMARIA GORGE



Stuffed cuttlefish, artichokes in lemon and dill sauce and Cretan speciality kalitsounia (sweet cheese pastries) are all excellent. Snail dishes are popular (with plenty of garlic) and occasionally a whole lamb is spit-roasted in the garden. And look out for the bergamot jam, served at breakfast. Sublime.

In the evocative Venetian harbour city of Chania you can absorb the ambience of one of Crete's magical gems, with harbour-side restaurants, narrow backstreets with enticing shops and a relaxed atmosphere that is Cretan to the core.

In a different direction towards the island's capital Heraklion is Knossos, the ancient seat of the highly-advanced Minoan civilisation which was at its peak some 1500 years before Christianity. The palace, discovered in the early 1900s, has been restored to offer a fascinating insight into the way the early inhabitants of Crete lived. For those enthralled with Minoan history, Crete has many other sites from the era to visit at Malia and Phaestos.

This is a special island to visit, with a pace of life that entices you to relax, explore and simply wander the beaches, amble through quiet villages or pause at harbour fronts lined with tavernas, where colourful fishing boats bob on the tide. Just don't forget to try the Metaxa! 🍷

ELAFONISI BEACH



Flights

Mark Nicholls flew Ryanair fly direct from Stansted to Chania, visit www.ryanair.com