



**Ecotourism guide to
NATURA 2000
network areas on Crete**



Nature sculpted by time

Be part of it, protect it!

- Operational Programme for Crete and the Aegean Islands
- Co-financed by Greece and the European Union





Preface



Dear friends,

The past, present and future of Crete are inextricably bound up with its exceptional natural environment. Rich biodiversity, a significant number of endemic species, a variety of ecosystems and landscapes of outstanding natural beauty are what characterize our natural heritage.

In acknowledging the value of our natural environment's multiple functions as regards healthy living and quality of life, as well as in implementing our vision of sustainable development, Crete Regional Authority has made the protection, sound management and promotion of our island's nature its top priority.

The NATURA 2000 Network protected areas have a significant role to play in realising that aim, given that they act as key reserves for nature conservation throughout Europe.

In publishing this "Ecotourism guide to NATURA 2000 network areas on Crete" we present the NATURA 2000 areas on Crete, highlighting their characteristics and stressing both their value and their prospects for growth.

Sculpted by time and six thousand years of human history, our island's nature is a common good each of us can enjoy, while also being under the obligation to protect it.

We can only hope that through this guide we will all come to better know the NATURA 2000 protected areas, and understand the need to protect them.

Regional Governor of Crete

Stavros Arnaoutakis

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Introduction



Crete has always been the crossroads for major Mediterranean cultures, and a meeting point for different experiences.

It was here that Europe first heard herself called by name, and here that Europe's first civilisation, the brilliant Minoan civilisation, was created and shone forth.

From Homeric times down to the present day, Crete has captivated visitors and spurred them to explore it, so as to discover the monuments bequeathed by millennia of culture, history and tradition, weaving a charming multicultural landscape. Yet travellers to the island have always been equally enchanted by its natural beauty and riches, which render it a unique treasure trove of life. A predominantly mountainous island, Crete is dotted with woodlands dominated by pine, cypress and oak, while the rugged mountain relief gives rise to a large number of wildly beautiful gorges.

The Cretan mountains are carpeted with medicinal and aromatic plants, and along the slopes, hills and valleys lie traditional villages bathed in the scent of orange orchards, olive groves and vineyards.

With over 300 days of sun a year, Crete has a typically mild Mediterranean climate, though in the winter months the mountains are covered in snow. Rainfall is higher in mountainous areas and along the north coast. North-westerly winds prevail for the greater part of the year, while in August the strong, cool northerlies known as the "meltemia" predominate. From time to time, strong southerly winds (the "Livas") increase average temperatures during the summer.

Within that rich natural environment is a large number of areas of particular ecological significance, which have been accorded protection status as part of the European NATURA 2000 Network, a network of protection zones extending throughout the European Union. This aims on the one hand to ensure the long-term preservation of Europe's most valuable and most threatened species and habitats to a satisfactory degree, and on the other to create the necessary conditions for sustainable management of them. To that end, management plans have been drawn up for protected areas, accompanied by special action programmes by area or group of areas. The NATURA 2000 sites on Crete include all of the island's mountain massifs, which happen to be the natural backdrop of Cretan history down the ages, as well as several coastal areas and islets featuring significant natural wealth and notable ecosystems.

The areas described in this guide are scattered all over the island, and are or have the potential to become important zones for eco-friendly tourism and educational activities, given that they are right next to - and in many cases coincide with - areas where major tourism infrastructure exists.



Alternative tourism opportunities in NATURA 2000 network areas

The basic aim of establishing NATURA 2000 Network areas is to effectively conserve biodiversity as a precious, irreplaceable natural value of paramount importance. For that reason, engaging in alternative tourism activities is only permitted under certain conditions. These safeguard the aims of sustainable management, in accordance with current legislation determining the restrictions and consequences that visitors to sensitive protected areas should bear in mind.

Apart from special restrictions applying on a case by case basis in each area, visitors to protected areas should generally avoid:

- **Driving motorised vehicles off the road network in ecologically sensitive areas, as well as along paths in such areas.**
- **Lighting fires in exposed areas and smoking, except at designated rest spots.**
- **Picking flowers and uprooting or destroying plants.**
- **Removing or destroying nests, eggs or chicks.**
- **Destroying or defacing rock formations, signs or other pointers and information structures.**
- **Destroying or damaging any cultural monuments.**
- **Possessing weapons or traps, illegal hunting and fishing.**
- **Throwing stones and making unusual or excessive noise.**
- **Disposing of litter, except at specially designated points.**
- **Disturbing wildlife without reason.**

RESTRICTIONS / PROHIBITIONS

The guiding principle in these areas is that visitors should protect the natural environment against any activity or intervention by them which could impact or alter their natural state, composition or development, as well as against acts that could lead to destruction, damage or alteration of protected natural formations, and of protected landscapes or their individual features.

In order to preserve ecosystems and endemic flora and fauna species, the following are prohibited: collecting, uprooting, possessing or transporting specimens of any species; trading in them, directly or indirectly killing them at any stage of their life cycle; damaging or destroying their habitats.

CONSEQUENCES

Failure to comply with the above general guidelines or with any other special provision and prohibition applying to given areas is punishable by law, particularly where it results in partial or total damage to the areas' ecosystems.



NATURA 2000 areas and alternative tourism on Crete

Crete's rich natural and cultural environment, and the perfect combination of mountains and sea, especially in NATURA 2000 areas, together with the varied terrain and rich cultural heritage, make it an exceptional place for engaging in all kinds of alternative tourism.



This guide provides information on the NATURA 2000 Network areas on Crete, both throughout the hinterland and in many coastal areas, given the impressive growth in water sports tourism seen on the island in recent years. These areas are relatively easy to access and visit, and prohibitions and ambiguities concerning permitted activities do not apply within them.

The types of alternative tourism developed on Crete, which visitors can either seek out via specialist agencies offering packages or try out on their own, are as follows:

Key to routes

-  Tarmac road
-  Unsurfaced road 4 x 4
-  Cycling route
-  Walking trail

 **Eco-tourism:** The NATURA 2000 areas on Crete are ideal for nature tourism, particularly as regards bird watching and exploring the island's botanical treasure troves.

 **Agritourism:** Traditional rural accommodation is available in many farming villages in the Natura 2000 areas, offering visitors the chance to enjoy Crete's famed hospitality and come into contact with local environmental and cultural values.

 **Geotourism:** Crete is an ideal destination for geotourism, a new form of cultural and environmental tourism combining geological heritage with cultural monuments and local traditions.

 **Cultural tourism:** Visitors can combine their enjoyment of the experience offered by Crete's wealth of archaeology, history, folklore, cuisine and religious heritage with attending high quality contemporary cultural events.

 **Wine tourism:** Crete has emerged as an important Greece-wide destination for wine tourism in recent years, with the creation of wine trails in various areas. These have contributed to visitors familiarising themselves with one of Europe's oldest wine-growing areas, with exceptional local varieties of grape.

 **Rambling & trekking:** Rambling is an ideal way to explore NATURA areas, on paths that cross sites rich in flora, fauna and monuments of different eras and cultures.

 **Caving:** With over 4,500 cave formations, Crete is considered a paradise for cavers. Those formations include some of the deepest potholes in Greece.

 **Rock climbing:** Among Crete's innumerable mountain precipices and canyons there are excellent climbing areas.

 **River trekking:** Despite being an island, Crete has a number of outstandingly beautiful rivers that flow year-round and are suitable for river trekking.

 **Gorge walking & canyoning:** Crete's imposing gorges offer an enormous wealth of natural and geological formations, as well as rich ecosystems. Several of them are easily accessible, while walking through others calls for special equipment and techniques.

 **Mountain off-roading:** This is an easy way to explore the island's mountain massifs and its nature, though very strict rules should always be observed when crossing sensitive protected areas.

 **Hang gliding & paragliding:** Many areas on Crete offer ideal conditions for paragliding flights.

 **Mountain biking:** The numerous farm and forestry roads on Crete make for an extraordinarily rich network of beautiful routes through a variety of landscapes.

 **Skiing:** Combined with the prevailing climate, the lie of the Cretan mountains favours heavy snowfalls, offering opportunities for both alpine and cross-country skiing.

 **Horse riding:** In several areas there are farms and organised riding schools offering lessons and treks over a range of routes.

 **Sailing:** The open sea around Crete is ideal for sailing, an activity linked to the island's age-old maritime tradition.

 **Sea kayaking:** Crete's coastline and coves are excellent places for sea kayaking in limpid, azure waters.

 **Diving:** The clarity of Cretan waters, their varied seabed and the rich marine life they host make them ideal for underwater exploration.



Suggested alternative activities in NATURA 2000 areas in Crete



Gramvousa

This area includes the Gramvousa Peninsula, the islands of Imeri and Agria Gramvousa off the peninsula's northern tip and the islet of Pontikonisi further west.

Sand dunes are to be found by the outstandingly beautiful bay and small lagoon at Balos, in the north-west. Overall, the area is important for narrowly endemic plants such as *Anthemis glaberrima*, a rare daisy endemic to Greece and Crete. Rare and endangered raptors can be seen during their spring and autumn migrations. There are also indications that the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) is present in the northern parts of the peninsula.

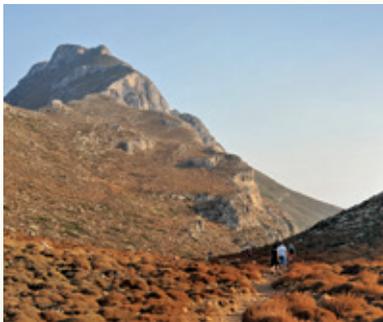
The most heavily developed tourist zone is at Falassarna, in the south-west of the area, where there are extensive sandy beaches. The ruins of Ancient Falassarna lie to the north. Low-impact tourist facilities can be found in the small inland villages in the south of the peninsula. A relatively well-preserved fortress from the Venetian era still stands on Imeri Gramvousa. Almost the entire length of the Gramvousa Peninsula consists of precipitous shores inaccessible by boat, with sea caves. Geological faults acting in various directions were largely responsible for the peculiar shape of the islets and the creation of Balos Lagoon, which effectively emerged after the major earthquake in 365 AD.



Power kiting at Falassarna



The beach at Balos



Walking on Gramvousa

Sea daffodil
(*Pancretium maritimum*)





Elafonisos – Agios Dikaios

This area includes the beach zone from Chyroskalitissa to Cape Krios and Elafonisos in the south, and the small mountain block of Agios Dikaios and the area surrounding Vlatos Valley in the north.

Human presence in the area is mainly centred on the elongated Vlatos Valley, which has agritourism facilities. Recent years have seen an increase in tourism-oriented accommodation and activities in the wider area around Chrysoskalitissa Monastery and Elafonisos, which is famed as a scenic holiday and leisure destination. On the island itself there are the remnants of an ancient temple to Apollo. Building development has gone hand in hand with the growth of farming and greenhouses in the lowlands.

Elafonisos is considered an extremely important site due to its habitats and the rare and endemic plant species encountered there, such as *Androcymbium rechingeri*.

The relatively mountainous area of Agios Dikaios is home to chestnut groves rarely found on Crete, as well as to extensive strawberry tree maquis.

There is also a marked presence of large Cretan raptors, such as the Golden Eagle, the Griffon Vulture and the Bearded Vulture. The number of bird species rises sharply in the spring, as the area is one of the most important migration corridors crossing Crete.



Cycle racing in the village of Elos

Elafonisos islet





Gavdos



This area includes Gavdos and Gavdopoula, which lie 21 miles south of the Cretan coastline. Despite being low-lying, Gavdos has a relatively rich relief with several small valleys and seasonal streams. It is considered a highly important area for migrant birds and protected seabirds.

The vegetation on Gavdos consists of maquis (juniper), sparse forests (pine) and phrygana; Gavdopoula is mainly dominated by phrygana, with a handful of lentisk stands. The two islands are extremely important on account of their position. They are regarded as ranking among the sites of greatest botanical interest in Europe, as a proportionately high number of African plants are to be found there.



Enjoying the underwater world on Gavdos



Trypiti ("Hole in the Rock")

3 Suggested alternative activities
in NATURA 2000 areas in Crete



Human presence in the area dates as far back as Neolithic times. Significant ancient sites have been unearthed in excavations carried out over the last few years. Only Gavdos is now inhabited. Recent years have seen an increase in tourism there, particularly in the island's northern section, in the areas

around Sarakiniko, Karaves, Korfos and Ai Gianni, where most of the tourist facilities are located. There is very little farming, since the traditional terraces have been abandoned. Grazing is the only activity carried out on Gavdopoula.

3 Suggested alternative activities
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On a sailing trip



Therisso – Agia – Keritis

The rural landscape south and south-west of the city of Chania comprises the areas surrounding Therisso and Agia, as well as the Keritis River Valley and FasaS Valley, which end near Platania. All four sites are geographically and ecologically linked to the Lefka Ori.

The area's coastal section includes Platania (with its sandy beach and extensive tourist facilities) and the mouth of the Keritis River. In the hinterland, the site extends along the Keritis to include the artificial lake at Agia, which supports various wetland plant communities. The villages of Meskla and Zourva south of the valley, as well as the historic village of Therisso, have low-impact tourist facilities.

The Agia wetland is an important habitat FOR a wide variety of migrant birds, while FasaS Valley is home to the threatened *Woodwardia radicans* fern.

Despite its limited length, the Therisso Gorge hosts a wide variety of endemic chasmophytes.



Therisso



Birdwatching at Agia Lake



Sougia – Lissos

To the west of the Lefka Ori massif lies the area around Sougia, dominated by rocky landscapes and steep cliffs, which are a natural refuge for many rare and endemic flora species. One characteristic feature is the presence of sea caves in the shore zone.

Important habitats in the area include the almost sheer rock faces created by faults, rugged limestone slopes and rock crevices. Pine forests, low juniper scrub, maquis, hydrophilic riverine and chasmophyte

vegetation alternate from the hinterland to the coastline. The marine zone includes reefs and extensive *Posidonia* meadows.

The area's ecological value is added to by the presence of ancient stands of maquis vegetation featuring Phoenician juniper (*Juniperus phoenicea*). Added to these is the Hellenistic archaeological site at Lissos, one of the area's most important cultural features. The present-day village of Sougia has extensive tourist facilities.



3 Suggested alternative activities
in NATURA 2000 areas in Crete



Above: Stand up paddle boarding

Left: Walking down the
Agia Irini Gorge



The E4 path at Sougia



Lefka Ori

As Crete's largest mountain massif in terms of area, what characterises the Lefka Ori or White Mountains is their pronounced and varied relief. The gullies, caves, dolines and mountain plains have enabled a wide variety of habitats to arise.

In addition to the Samaria Gorge, the south of the massif also features the Aradena, Klados and Trypiti Gorges, which owe their existence to the intense and relatively recent uplifting of dry land.

The steep, heavily eroded mountain slopes bear witness to the impressive rock folds that created the mountains of Crete, and the wide variety of marble types in the Lefka Ori.

At a depth of over 400m, the majestic Samaria Gorge is the realm of the Cretan wild goat (the endemic subspecies *Capra aegagrus cretica*), large raptors such as the Bearded Vulture, and a wealth of endemic species.

The high peaks of the Lefka Ori form the richest area of narrowly endemic plants on Crete, and one of the richest in Greece.

The villages of Lakki and Vryses in the north-east serve as the main entry points to the Lefka Ori massif. Tourism is well developed in the coastal villages of Chora Sfakion, Loutro and Agia Roumeli. Low-impact facilities are also to be found on the Omalos Plain, on the eastern slopes of which is the Kallergis Refuge, an ideal starting point for crossing the Lefka Ori. The area's eastern limits are dominated by the Askyfou Plain, with the smaller plains of Niatos and Imbros. The gorge of the same name begins there, ending further south near the village of Komitades.



Skiing lessons



3 Suggested alternative activities
in NATURA 2000 areas in Crete



CHANIA Regional Unit

On the way from Pachnes to Ai Gianni





Lake Kournas – Dhrapano – Fres



The protected areas around Fres-Tzitzifos and Dhrapano-Georgioupoli-Kournas lie in the one-time province of Apokoronas. Lake Kournas is Crete's only natural freshwater lake. The entire hydrological system, including the lake itself, the marshes, the stream and the

Alymros estuary at Georgioupolis is one of the most ecologically significant areas in the islands of the Mediterranean, and is fed by the water of the Leka Ori massif. Extensive tourist facilities are to be found throughout the area.



Above:
Lake Kournas

Right:
The area
around Fres

Left:
Great Egret
Ardea alba



3 Suggested alternative activities
in NATURA 2000 areas in Crete



The wide variety of habitats supports large numbers of breeding, migrant and overwintering bird species. The mouth of the Alymros is dominated by riverine vegetation and wet meadows, while sand dune vegetation is to be found on the expansive sandy beaches of Georgioupoli; *Caretta Caretta* sea turtles have been observed to use this stretch of beach.

The semi-mountainous area including the villages of Tzitzifes and Fres forms the foothills of the Lefka Ori, with their characteristically rugged and steep-sloped expanses of limestone rock. These are covered in small cypress forests, together with stands of laurel (*Laurus nobilis*) rarely found on Crete.



Asfendhou - Kallikratis

The easternmost section of the Lefka Ori includes Kallikratis and Argouliano Gorges, Manikas Mountain Plain and all of the coastal zone south of the mountain massif.

The mountainous section is characterised by gullies, caves, chasms and mountain plains, mainly at higher altitudes, combined with low-level human activity.

This fact has contributed to the creation and preservation of highly significant natural habitats.

Frangokastello lies in the lowland section of the southern area, with the fortress from which it takes its name. Low-impact tourism occurs in the beach section; the area's villages boast a wealth of traditional architectural features.



Above: View of the Libyan Sea and Frangokastello Plain from the Kallikratis Gorge

Right: A trail biking trip



3 Suggested alternative activities
in NATURA 2000 areas in Crete



Mountain biking

The dominant vegetation consists of phrygana and maquis, with stands of prickly-oak mainly on the Kallikratis Plain. The Asfendhou area features steep gullies and caves, one of which has early Neolithic rock carvings.

The wider area, which hosts a number of endemic and narrowly endemic species, is regarded as an important site for raptors and shrubland-dwelling bird species.





Mount Kedros – Patsos and Prasses Gorges

Rising to a peak of 1,777m, Mount Kedros is the dominant massif between Psiloritis and the Lefka Ori. To the north are Patsos Gorge, ending at the Potami dam, Prasses Gorge, which ends on the north shores of Rethymno, and Myli Gorge, next to the village of the same name. The Yious Kambos Mountain Plain is of particular floristic interest.

The small gorges and rocky outcrops make ideal nesting sites for raptors.

The Prasses Gorge area combines ecological importance with archaeological, historical and aesthetic value, with monuments such as the villages of Prasses and Maroulas, rare examples of medieval architecture on Crete, and the old watermills in the now uninhabited village of Kato Myli, which is a typical example of traditional water use on the island. In the Amari Valley in the south of the area, there are tourist facilities in the villages of Amari, Asomatos, Yerakari, Meronas and Syvritos.



Patsos Gorge



Exploring sea caves

One of the most important breeding sites for *Caretta caretta* sea turtles is on the sandy beach east of Rethymnon.

An important wetland for migrant birds forms at the mouth of the Geropotamos River, while small shoreline caves are to be found on the surrounding rocky shores.

3 Suggested alternative activities
in NATURA 2000 areas in Crete





Watching raptors in the Kourtaliotis Gorge

The wider area includes the villages of Plakias, Sellia, Myrthios, Mariou, Asomatos and Lefkogia, which have extensive tourist facilities.

Other noteworthy sites are the monasteries of Preveli and Piso Preveli, both sites of especial religious interest.



The beach at Preveli



Walking down the side of the Kourtaliotis Gorge



Mount Ida (Psiloritis)



The compact massif around Mount Ida (Psiloritis) lies in the centre of Crete, the highest peak being Timios Stavros at 2,456m. It is typified by landscape variety, high biodiversity and the presence of many endemic flora and fauna species, several of which are rare and/or threatened.



The Psiloritis range is the most geologically diverse on the island, with a great variety of rocks, relief forms and karst landscapes, on which account it has been declared a UNESCO Geopark.

The centre of the mountain is dominated by the impressive Nidha Plain, where the archaeologically important Idaion Cave is situated. Other significant archaeological sites are Minoan Zominthos, Kamares Cave, Axos, Agia Irini at Krousonas, Sfondoni Cave at Zoniana, etc. The area is surrounded by several villages with long-standing links to Psiloritis, such as Anogeia, Zoniana, Vistagi, Fourfouras, Kouroutes, Kamares, Zaros, Gergeri, Asites and others, which offer tourist facilities.



Heading across the snow from Kouroutes to Pardi

The southern slopes are covered in sparse prickly-oak forest, with stands of cypress and ambelitsia (Cretan zelkova).

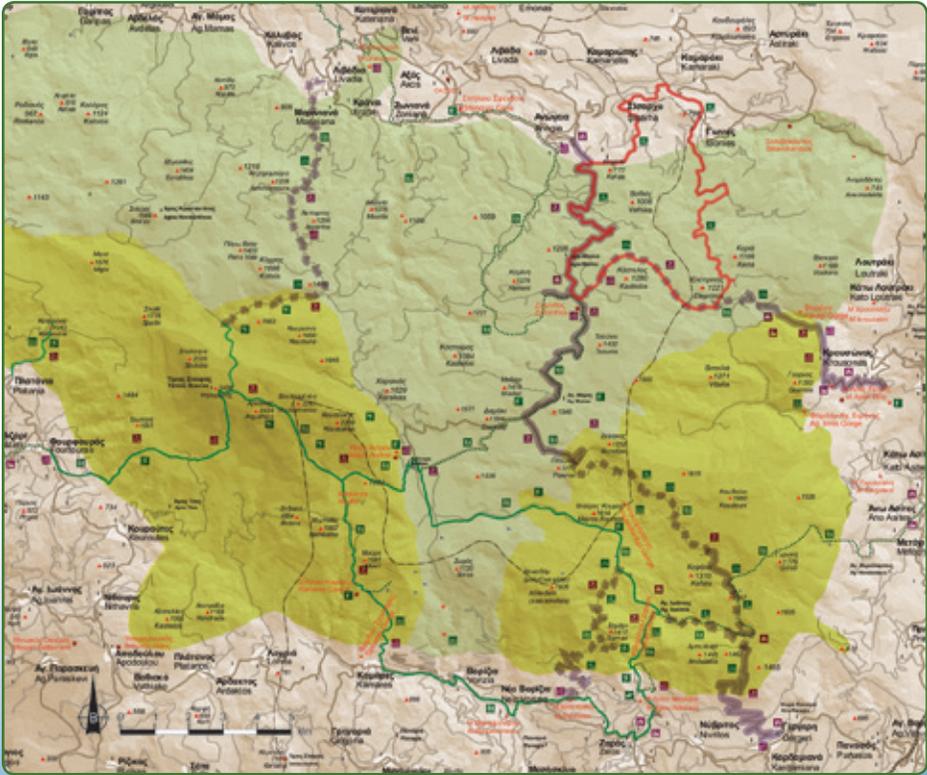
There is an impressive sparse maple forest at Zominthos. Mountain phrygana predominate above 1,600m.



Cretan wildcat
Felis silvestris cretensis



3 Suggested alternative activities
in NATURA 2000 areas in Crete



RETHYMNO and HERAKLION Regional Units

Nida Plain, Psiloritis





Yuktas – Agia Irini

Together with the Agia Irini Gorge, the small Yuktas massif dominating the hilly farming landscape south of Heraklion is characterised by high biodiversity, featuring many flora and fauna species endemic to Crete and Greece.

Human activity first appeared in the area in early Neolithic times. On the ridge of Yuktas there is both a church and a Minoan peak sanctuary. Some of the area's most important archaeological sites are the traces of a Minoan palace in the village of Archanes, the Minoan cemetery at Fourni, the temple at Anemospilia and the Minoan rural villa at Vathypetro. Archanes offers tourist facilities and an Environmental Education Centre, while also serving as the main entry point for the wider Yuktas and Agia Irini Gorge area.



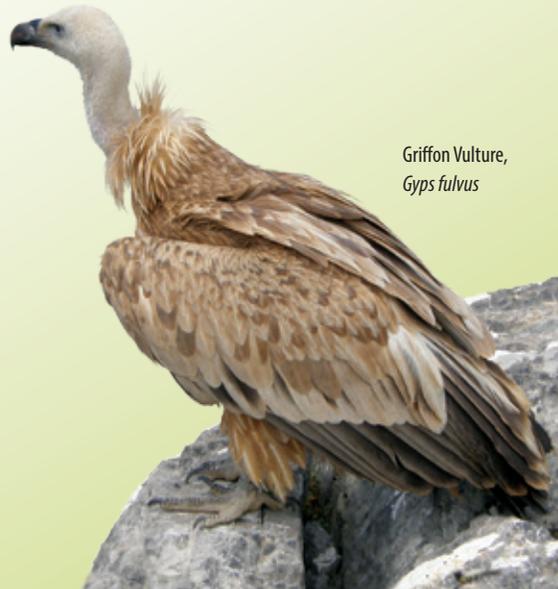
Observation point at Chosto Nero, Mt. Yuktas



Enjoying the Agia Irini Gorge

The massif is delimited by the action of faults, which have formed the steep cliffs on its east and west boundaries. The sheer, rocky limestone cliffs make an ideal site for the Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) to breed, and for endemic crevice plants to spread.

In the north-north-eastern section, the small Myristis River forms the Agia Irini Gorge, with its lush riverine vegetation.



Griffon Vulture,
Gyps fulvus



Asterousia Mountains and Mesara coast

The Asterousia mountain range runs along the southern coastline of Heraklion Regional Unit. The characteristic alternations of limestone and flysch create particular conditions as regards the distribution and availability of surface water, thus contributing to the formation of the area's distinct ecosystems. It is a relatively low range, with Kofinas (1.231 m) as its highest peak. The torrents and streams on the southern slopes flow through impressive gorges of considerable aesthetic and ecological value to end in the Libyan Sea. Despite serious overgrazing, the flora remains reasonably interesting.



An opening on a climbing route at Trafoulas



3 Suggested alternative activities
in NATURA 2000 areas in Crete



Horse trekking in the Asterousia Mountains

Important archaeological sites in the wider area include Phaestos, Agia Triadha, Kommos, Matala, Lentas, Trypiti etc., which bear traces of habitation from Minoan to Roman times. The area is dotted with religious monuments, the most characteristic being the monasteries of Apezana, Odhigitria, Koudhoumas and Agios Nikitas. Kapetaniana in the east, Lentas in the south and the Matala-Kokkinos Pyrgos area in the west have extensive tourist facilities.

The Asterousia Mountains provide various nesting sites for raptors, while the beach from Kommos to Kokkinos Pyrgos is one of Greece's most important breeding sites for Caretta Caretta sea turtles.

Salt marshes, wet meadows and temporary ponds form at the mouth of the Geropotamos River, providing stopover points for a wide range of birds. The area's sand dunes are the most expansive ones in Crete.

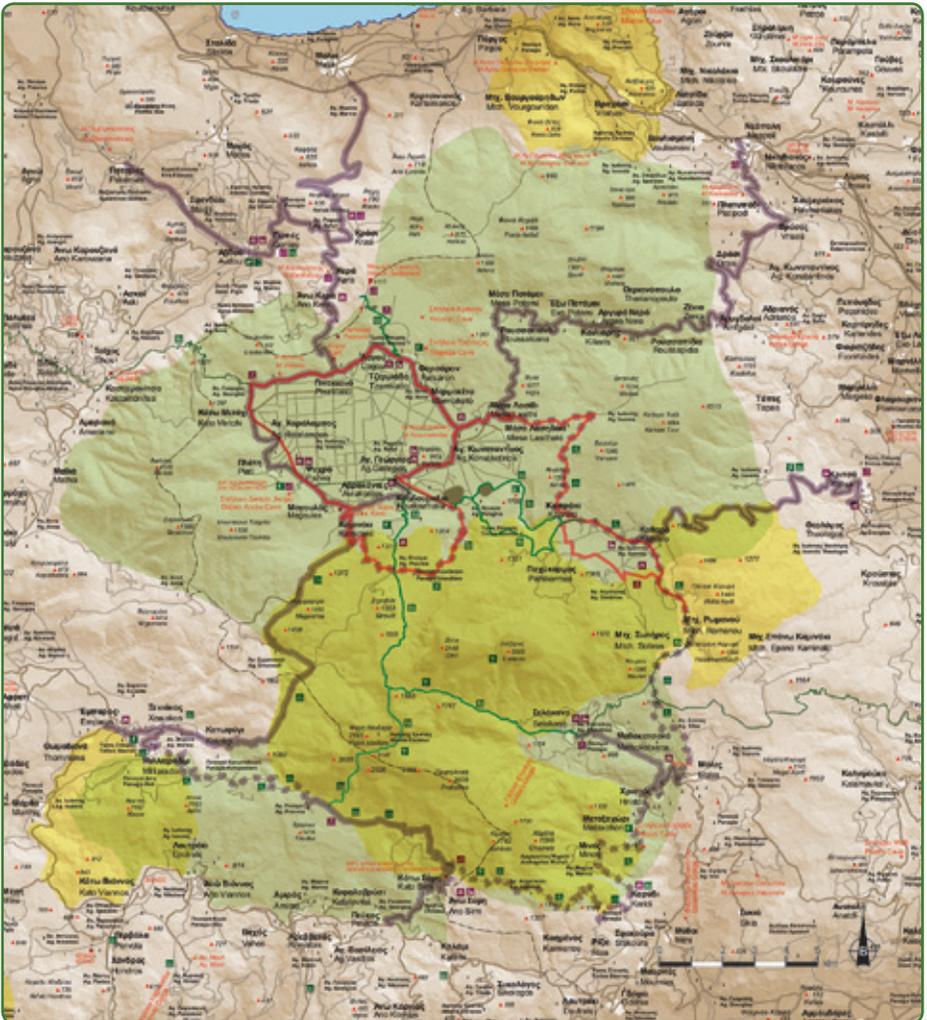




Mount Dhikti and wider area

The Dhikti mountain block covers a large part of eastern Crete. The wider area includes the Selinari Gorge and Vrachasi to the north, with Omalos Plain at Viannos and Mount Koupa to the south-west.

The Dhikti massif is rich in narrowly endemic plant and animal species. The southern slopes are one of the most important areas in Crete for large raptors.



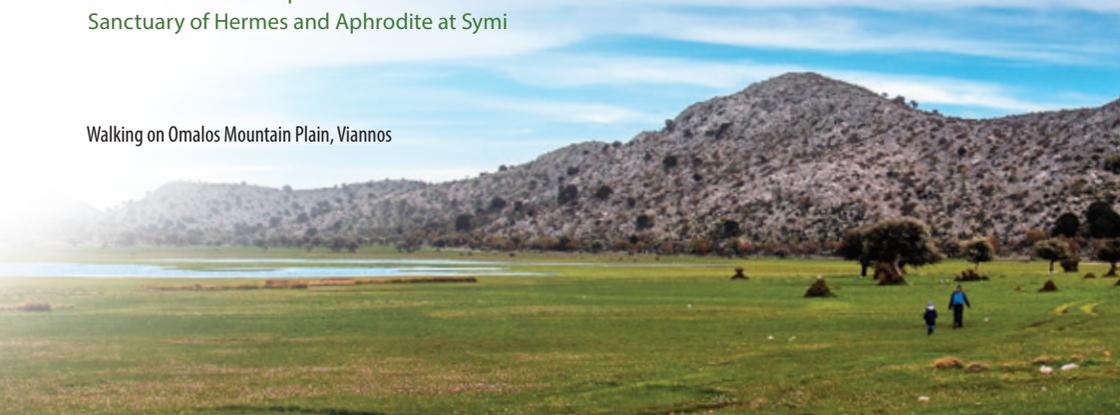


On a study trip to the palaeontological excavations, Katharo Mountain Plain

Apart from the Lassithi Plain, which has been inhabited uninterruptedly since prehistoric times, characteristic landscapes bearing traces of a lasting human presence are the extensive Katharo Plain, where there are sites with significant Pleistocene fossils, and the smaller plains of Nisimos, Limnakaros, Omalos at Viannos and Selakano. Scattered archaeological sites on the Dhikti massif confirm human activity in the area. Some of the most important are the Sanctuary of Hermes and Aphrodite at Symi

Viannos, the Dikteon Cave, the Trapeza or Kronos Cave, the Late Minoan settlement at Karfi, and Ancient Lato in the Kritsa area. The villages of Viannos to the south, Kritsa to the north-east, the valley below Mount Christos to the south-east, Neapoli to the north and the Avdhou area to the north-west are the entry points to the Dhikti mountain range.

Walking on Omalos Mountain Plain, Viannos



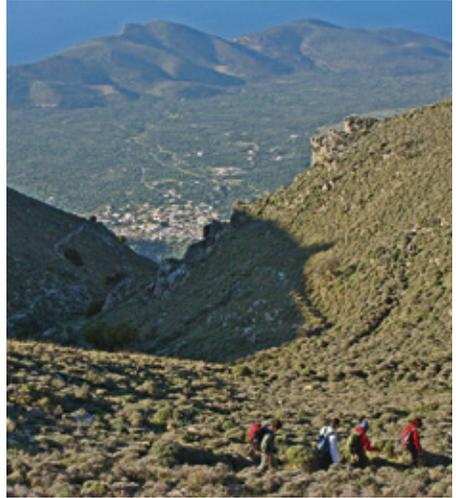


Mount Thryпти – Chrysi Island

Dominated by the imposing Ha Gorge, Thryпти is the highest mountain in the eastern part of Crete, and is of major ecological interest. Chrysi Island (or Gaidouronisi, “Donkey Island”) lies 10 miles south of Ierapetra

The Thryпти range is of interest to ornithologists, being a breeding site for rare and endangered species.

Chrysi is a relatively flat, uninhabited island, combining volcanic rock in the eastern and western sections, sand dunes densely covered in sea juniper in the central zone, and sandy beaches in the north and south.



Coming down from Mt. Thryпти, with the village of Kavoussi in the background



Mt. Thryпти

The area’s main feature is its pronounced relief, which is due to the action of faults (most of which are active), such as those at Ha and Lastros, and the ensuing creation of gorges. Small valleys with stone terracing for vineyards are surrounded by small, traditional houses used seasonally by residents of the nearby settlements. The villages of Mochlos, Kavoussi and Pachia Ammos in the north, together with Koutsounari, Ferma, Mavros Kolymbos and Orino in the south, can serve as bases for visiting the area.

There is a variety of well preserved ecosystems in a relatively small and inaccessible area. What typifies the region is its rich biological diversity, and the marked endemism of both flora and fauna species.



Cape Sidhero – Zakros – Kapsa Monastery Gorge

One of the most distinctive areas on Crete is the island's eastern extremity, where there are three NATURA 2000 areas. These encompass Cape Sidhero, Cape Plaka and the hinterland, the Dionysades Islands, Elasa and Grantes, and the low mountains rising south and west of Zakros.

The area is sparsely populated, most small upland settlements having been abandoned. Low-impact tourism is to be found in the coastal zone, involving various archaeological sites of importance from as early as Minoan times, such as ancient Itanos, Palekastro

and the Minoan palace at Zakros. The picture is rounded off by scattered sites of palaeontological interest, mainly in the coastal zone. The peculiar multicoloured rocks, the stunning shorelines with the impressive palaeoshores at Kato Zakros and the variety of karst formations (caves, potholes, gorges etc.) led to the establishment of the Sitia Natural Park, with the aim of operating as a European Geological Park. The villages of Zakros, Xerokambos and Palekastro and the town of Sitia can be used as bases for exploring the area.



Above: Kouremenos Beach, famed as a wind surfing destination

Left: Eleonora's Falcon (*Falco eleonorae*)



The famed forest of Cretan palms (*Phoenix theophrasti*) grows at Vai, in what is regarded as one of the driest climates in Europe.

Significant populations of raptors and seabirds breed in the Dionysades island group.

3 Suggested alternative activities
in NATURA 2000 areas in Crete





General information on alternative activities

In general, the NATURA 2000 Network areas on Crete can be visited and explored year round, thanks to the mild climate and favourable weather conditions typical of the island. Spring and autumn are ideal seasons, since both winter snowfalls (which can last until April) and the excessive heat of summer can be avoided then.

- **Water:** Avoid drinking water from rivers, wells or springs that are not marked as drinking water.

- **Difficulties:** Do not underestimate the rugged character of the Cretan mountains. On routes crossing grazing areas you may well come across fences.

Make sure you close gates and crossing points behind you. Also, keep your distance from sheepdogs, and avoid making any movements they could see as aggressive.

- **Tourist services:** All the villages in NATURA areas on Crete have kafeneia (coffee houses), and several offer tavernas and accommodation. Information on anything you may need can be obtained from the Citizens' Advice Centres (Greek: K.E.P.) and town halls in each area.

- **Weather forecasting:** Detailed area by area weather forecasts are available online at www.meteo.gr/citySelection-En.asp.

- **Recommended equipment:** True mountain routes on Crete call for full mountaineering gear, whereas light gear will suffice on lowland and semi-mountainous routes. On winter routes, and on some summer ones through gorges with water, it is worthwhile considering specialist equipment.



- **Walking time:** Where given, walking times are approximate, corresponding to the pace and abilities of the average walker (roughly 4 kilometres per hour on normal, undemanding routes). This may vary depending on individual pace and physical fitness, weather conditions, backpack weight etc.

- **Changes to routes:** The information given in this guide is accurate at the time of press, and not binding on the publisher as regards possible future changes. Possible changes to the course of routes or condition of paths may be due to human intervention (farming, shepherding, public works) or to climatic conditions (local torrential rain can significantly alter paths).

- **Safety:** In general terms, walking routes on Crete are doable, without creating particular difficulties or requiring specialist techniques. N.B.: Walkers bear responsibility for following all routes described, not only as regards potential accidents they may have, but also as regards any damage they may cause, such as forest fires, environmental degradation etc. Safety in the outdoors depends solely on personal judgement, walkers' training and experience, and on the correct estimation of their abilities. Use of the information contained in this guide should be combined with an understanding on the part of visitors of the risk involved in being in unfamiliar areas, as well as recognition of the responsibility they bear with regard to personal choices concerning their own safety.

Responsible travellers...

The routes and points of interest presented in this guide are located in protected areas, which are habitats for sensitive flora and fauna species. The existence of these species is an indicator of a healthy natural environment; the very least we can do is respect them, minimising any signs of our presence both during our visit and after we leave.

In protected areas, camping and overnight stays are prohibited outside specially designated campsites. Short stays and rest stops are permitted, but never forget to take all litter or other objects that don't belong in the landscape with you when leaving; enjoy the scents and sights of aromatic and other plants; photograph them, but do not pick them under any circumstances. On departing, leave your footsteps behind and take only your memories with you...

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The Special Environmental Studies for areas on Crete are not listed below, since hard copies or electronic versions can be obtained from the organisations responsible for their implementation.

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PROTECTED AREAS OF CRETE



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