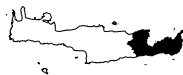


Lasithi Λασιθι



Crete's easternmost prefecture may receive far fewer visitors than the rest of the island, but the exclusive resorts around Elounda and Agios Nikolaos are the stronghold of Crete's high-end tourism. Elounda has become synonymous with luxury hotels – among them one of the world's top resorts – while the capital, Agios Nikolaos, is the region's contribution to the party scene.

The rest of the prefecture, however, is largely refreshingly undeveloped compared with the rest of Crete, mostly due to the isolated locations, winding access roads and lack of international charter flights.

At the far eastern end of the north coast is the pleasant town of Sitia, the centre of the region's olive oil industry. The famous palm-lined beach of Vai is in the far east, near one of the island's historic monasteries.

The fertile region of the Lasithi Plateau provides excellent cycling opportunities through quiet rural villages to the Dikteon Cave, where legend has it that Zeus was born and hidden from his murderous father. The hinterland has many traditional villages, and lonely plateaus and mountain ranges to explore.

The southern coast extends from the seaside village of Myrtilos in the west to the commercial centre of Ierapetra, and beyond to the rugged coast and largely untouched beaches of Xerokambos.

In the far east, Zakros combines some of the best experiences of Crete – a walk through a beautiful gorge to the evocative ruins of a Minoan Palace, just 200m from an underpopulated beach with a few good tavernas.

Lasithi has its share of sleepy fishing villages, such as Mohlos in the north and Plaka to the east, and Spinalonga Island continues to intrigue visitors.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Cycling around the **Lasithi Plateau** (p191)
- Wandering among the fascinating ruins on **Spinalonga Island** (p190)
- Exploring the Minoan palace near the beach at **Kato Zakros** (p199)
- Relaxing on **Vai** (p197), Crete's only palm-lined beach
- Visiting the **Moni Toplou** (monastery) (p196)



NORTH COAST

AGIOS NIKOLAOS ΑΓΙΟΣ ΝΙΚΟΛΑΟΣ

pop 11,286

Lasithi's capital, Agios Nikolaos (*ah-ye-eh-oh nih-ko-laos*) may lack the historic character of Crete's other major towns but its natural advantage is a striking position on a hill overlooking Mirabello Bay, with a small picturesque lake connected to the sea and a pleasant harbour.

In the early 1960s the former fishing village became a chic hideaway for the jet set and the likes of Jules Dassin and Walt Disney, but by the end of the decade package tourists were arriving in force and it became an overdeveloped tourist town.

After a slump in recent years, 'Agios' appears to have bounced back and found a different rhythm. It's become a town for locals as much as tourists. It still draws people from the resorts that stretch all the way to Elounda, especially at night, when the cafés and restaurants around the lake and port light up and the ambience turns more vibrant and cosmopolitan. While it's not the party town it once was, it has a lively nightlife. Agios Nikolaos remains the epicentre of Crete's luxury resort industry, but also attracts a mixed and relatively subdued older crowd and families.

While there is superficially little to attract the independent traveller, there is reasonable accommodation, prices are not too horrendous and there are enough activities to cater for all tastes.

It was the first town in Crete to install free wi-fi in the harbour area and the centre of town.

History

Agios Nikolaos emerged as a port for the city-state of Lato (p187) in the early Hellenic years, when it was known as Lato-by-Kamara. The harbour assumed importance in the Greco-Roman period after the Romans put an end to the piracy that had plagued the northern coast.

The town continued to flourish in the early Christian years and, in the 8th or 9th century, the small Byzantine Church of Agio Nikolaos was built.

When the Venetians bought Crete in the 13th century, the Castel Mirabello was built on a hill overlooking the sea and a settlement arose below. The castle was damaged in the earthquake of 1303 and was burned by pirates in 1537, before being rebuilt according to plans by the military architect Sammicheli. When the Venetians were forced to abandon the castle to the Turks in 1645 they blew it up, leaving it in ruins. There's no trace of the Venetian occupation now except the name they gave to the surrounding gulf – Mirabello ('beautiful view').

The town was resettled in the mid-19th century by fleeing rebels from Sfakia and was later named capital of the Lasithi region.

Orientation

The **bus station** (☎ 28410 22234) has been rather inconveniently relocated to the northwestern side of town, about 800m from central Plateia Venizelou. The de-facto town centre is around Voulismeni Lake. Most banks, travel agencies and shops are on Koundourou and parallel pedestrian street 28 Oktovriou. The main roads have a one-way traffic system, so if you are driving follow the signs to the port area or one of the car parks near the harbour.

Information

Anna Karteri Bookshop (☎ 28410 22272; Koundourou 5) Well stocked with maps, guide books and literature in English and other languages.

General Hospital (☎ 28410 66000; Knossos 3) On the west side of town.

Municipal Tourist Office (☎ 28410 22357; www.agianikolaos.gr; ☎ 8am-9.30pm Apr-Nov) Right by the bridge; has helpful information and maps, changes money and assists with accommodation.

National Bank of Greece (Nikolaou Plastira) Has a 24-hour exchange machine.

Peripou Café (☎ 28410 24876; 28 Oktovriou 13; per hr €4; ☎ 9am-2am) Has computers and wi-fi.

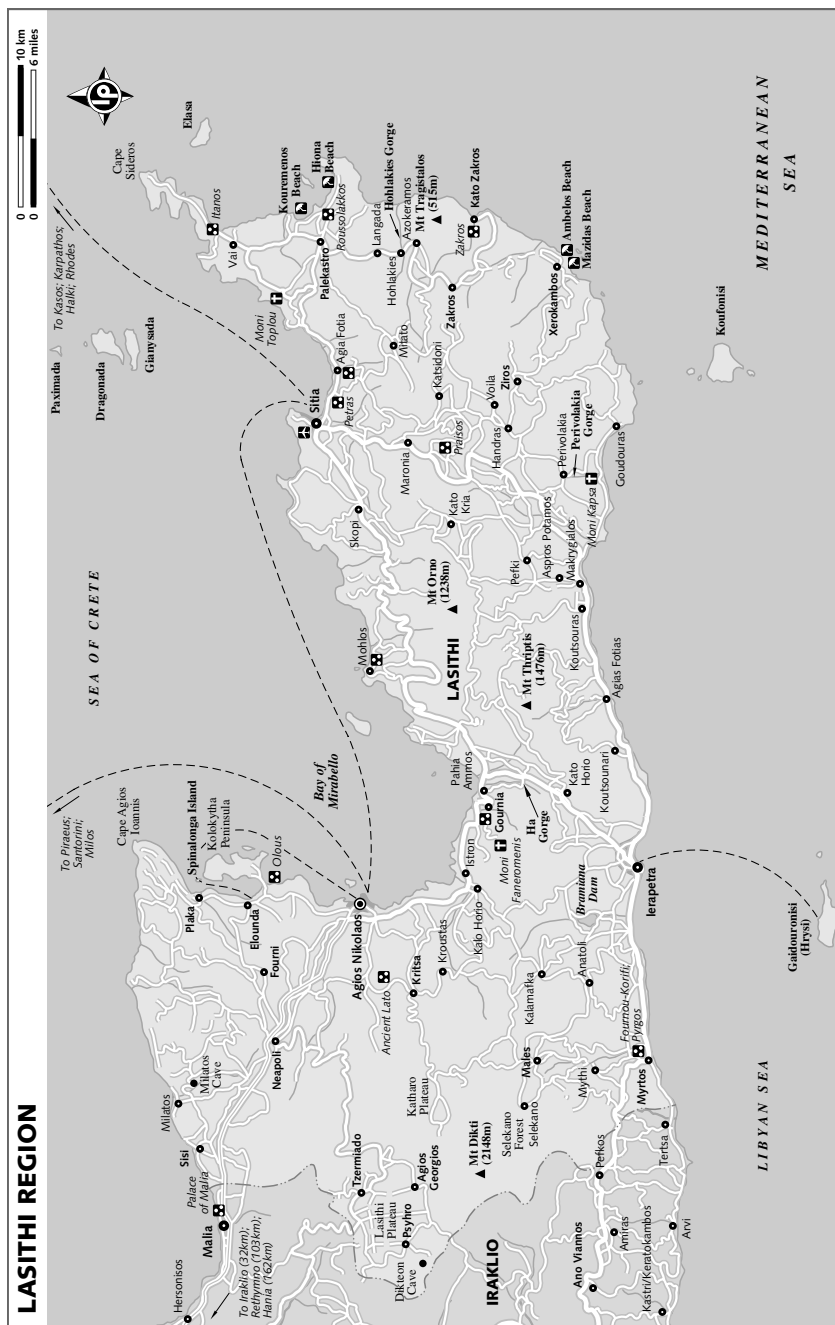
PK's Internet (☎ 28410 28004; Akti Koundourou 1; per hr €2; ☎ 9am-2am) Has a full printing, burning, Skype (phone calls via internet) and video-cams set-up.

Post Office (☎ 28410 22062; 28 Oktovriou 9; ☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri)

Tourist Police (☎ 28410 91408; Erythrou Stavrou 47; ☎ 7.30am-2.30pm Mon-Fri)

Sights

It is worth the hike up to the **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 28410 24943; Paleologou Konstantinou 74; admission €4; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun; 🕒), which has



an extensive and well-displayed collection from eastern Crete. While it has no major showpiece, it is probably the second most significant Minoan collection and includes clay coffins, ceramic musical instruments and gold from the island of Mohlos. The chronological exhibits begin with Neolithic finds from Mt Tragistalos, north of Kato Zakros, and early Minoan finds from Agia Fotia, then finds from Malia and Mohlos. The highlight is the odd-looking *Goddess of Myrtilos*, a clay jug from 2500 BC found near Myrtilos. Another stand-out Minoan item is a stone ritual vessel in the shape of a shell, found in a late Minoan shrine at Malia, which features two Minoan demons and a goddess. Noteworthy exhibits from the Hellenistic and Roman periods include an athlete's skull, with gold wreath and a coin in his mouth for safe passage to the underworld, and a winged Eros figurine.

The **folk museum** (☎ 28410 25093; Paleologou Konstantinou 4; admission €3; ☹ 10am-2pm Tue-Sun), next to the tourist office, has a small, well-displayed collection of traditional handicrafts and costumes.

The compact **Iris Museum** (☎ 28410 25899; 28 Oktovriou 21-23; admission €2; ☹ 9am-9pm Mon-Fri) has displays of dried herbs and the flora of Crete, and also sells local essential oils.

Activities

The town beaches of **Ammos** and **Kytrop-latia Beach** are smallish and can get rather crowded. The sandy beach at **Almyros**, about 1km south of town, is the best of the lot and tends to be quieter. It can be reached on foot via a coastal path starting at the end of the road just past the stadium. There's not much shade but you can hire umbrellas. **Ammou-dara Beach**, 3km from town, is a little better and supports a fairly busy restaurant and accommodation scene.

You can venture further towards Sitia to the pleasant coves with long stretches of sandy beach and turquoise waters at the signposted **Golden Beach** (Voulisma Beach) and around **Istron Bay**.

The wooden sailboat **M/S Manolis** (☎ 6974 143 150) runs fishing trips that include a barbecue and swim at Kolokytha island, as well as private charters.

Sailing trips and private charters around the Mirabello gulf are run by **Zaharias** (☎ 69373 74954; www.sailcrete.com).

There is a **children's playground, swimming pool** and **mini golf** at the municipal beach on the south side of Agios Nikolaos.

Three diving centres offer boat dives and PADI-certification courses.

Creta Underwater Centre (☎ 28410 22406; www.cretaunderwatercenter.com) In the Mirabello Hotel.

Happy Divers (☎ 28410 82546; www.cretashappydivers.gr) In front of the Coral Hotel.

Pelagos (☎ 28410 24376; www.divecrete.com) In the Minos Beach Art Hotel.

Tours

Travel agencies offer bus tours to Crete's top attractions and the boats along the harbour advertise their various excursions. Boat trips to Spinalonga (€17) include a swim at Kolokytha.

Minotours Hellas (☎ 28410 23222; www.minotours.gr; 28 Oktovriou 6) organises guided coach tours of Phaestos, Gortys and Matala (€33), the Samaria Gorge (€45), the Lasithi Plateau (€34), Knossos (€30) and other destinations.

Festivals & Events

In July and August Agios Nikolaos hosts the **Lato Cultural Festival**, with concerts by local and international musicians, folk dancing, *mandinades* (rhyming couplets) contests, theatre and art exhibitions. Ask at the tourist office for details. **Marine Week**, during the last week of June in even-numbered years, has swimming, windsurfing and boat races.

Sleeping

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Pension Mary (☎ 28410 23760; Evans 13; s/d/tr €15/25/30; ☹) This is one of those friendly places where the owner lives downstairs and bonus home-made sweets are almost guaranteed. The rooms are basic but clean and most have private bathrooms, fridges, balconies with some sea views and access to a communal kitchen. The top room is cramped but has a private terrace with barbecue. Breakfast is €5.

Pergola Hotel (☎ /fax 28410 28152; Sarolidi 20; d with view €20-40; ☹) This family-run hotel has a homely feel. Rooms are comfortable and all have fridges, TV and air-con. There is a pleasant veranda under a pergola to relax or have breakfast. Front rooms have balconies and sea views. The owners can pick you up from the bus station.

Mylos Pension (☎ 28410 23783; Sarolidi 24; d €40; ☹) From the fake flowers on the bed to the

family photos and icons on the walls, this quaint *pension* is an extension of the friendly elderly owner's home. The front rooms have sensational views (try for room 2) and all have a fridge and TV. The sprightly Georgia swears by the hard mattresses.

Hotel Doxa (☎ 28410 24214; www.doxahotel.gr; Idomeneos 7; s/d incl breakfast €55/65; 🏠) The plant-filled lobby sets a homy tone for this hotel, which has an attractive terrace for breakfast or drinks. Pleasant and clean rooms are equipped with fridges, hairdryers and satellite TVs and some have views. It's close to the marina and Ammos beach.

Lato Hotel (☎ 28410 24581; www.lato-hotel.gr; Amoudi s/d €46/59; 🏠) If you have your own wheels, this friendly hotel at Ammoudi beach is a good option. There's a small pool and it's a 15-minute walk into town along the waterfront. The same management runs the charming Karavostasi studios in a stone carob warehouse on an isolated cove about 8km east.

our pick Du Lac Hotel (☎ 28410 22711; www.dula.chotel.gr; 28 Oktovriou 17; s/d/studio €40/60/80; 🏠) This refurbished hotel on the lake has standard rooms and spacious fully fitted-out studios. Both have stylish contemporary furnishings and nice bathrooms. It's in a great central location, with lovely views over the lake.

TOP END

Palazzo (☎ 28410 25080; www.palazzo-apartments.gr; apt €90-110; 🏠) Opposite Kytroplatia Beach, these classy apartments sleeping up to four are the closest thing to a boutique hotel in town. The 10 charming, individually decorated apartments have mosaic-tiled floors, marble bathrooms and lovely balconies with views (in the front rooms). There's free email downstairs.

Minos Beach Art Hotel (☎ 28410 22345; www.bluegr.com; r from €180; 🏠) This classy resort in a superb location just out of town is a veritable art gallery, with sculptures from leading Greek and foreign artists adorning the grounds right down to the beach. Crete's first luxury resort continues to reinvent itself, but its low-rise design and understated style maintains its position as one of the island's best hotels. The sign on the hotel says Minos Beach Hotel.

Eating

The well-positioned lakeside restaurants tend to push inevitably bland and often overpriced

tourist 'Greek' food. Hit the back streets or head further afield for the genuine article.

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

our pick Taverna Itanos (☎ 28410 25340; Kyprou 1; mains €4-9) This friendly taverna with beamed ceilings and stucco walls is popular with locals wanting traditional home-style Cretan cooking. You can pick from the trays of excellent *mayirefta* (casseroles and oven-baked dishes) out the back, such as goat with artichokes or lamb fricassee.

Sarri's (☎ 28410 28059; Kyprou 15; mains €6-8) Tucked away in the back streets, Sarri's is a good spot for breakfast, lunch or dinner on the shady garden terrace. Check the daily specials board.

Aouas Taverna (☎ 28410 23231; Paleologou Konstantinou 44; mezedes €5.20-9.60) This family-run place on the road to the museum has a range of Cretan specialties such as herb pies and pickled bulbs, as well as tasty grills. The interior is plain but the garden courtyard is refreshing and the mezedes are good.

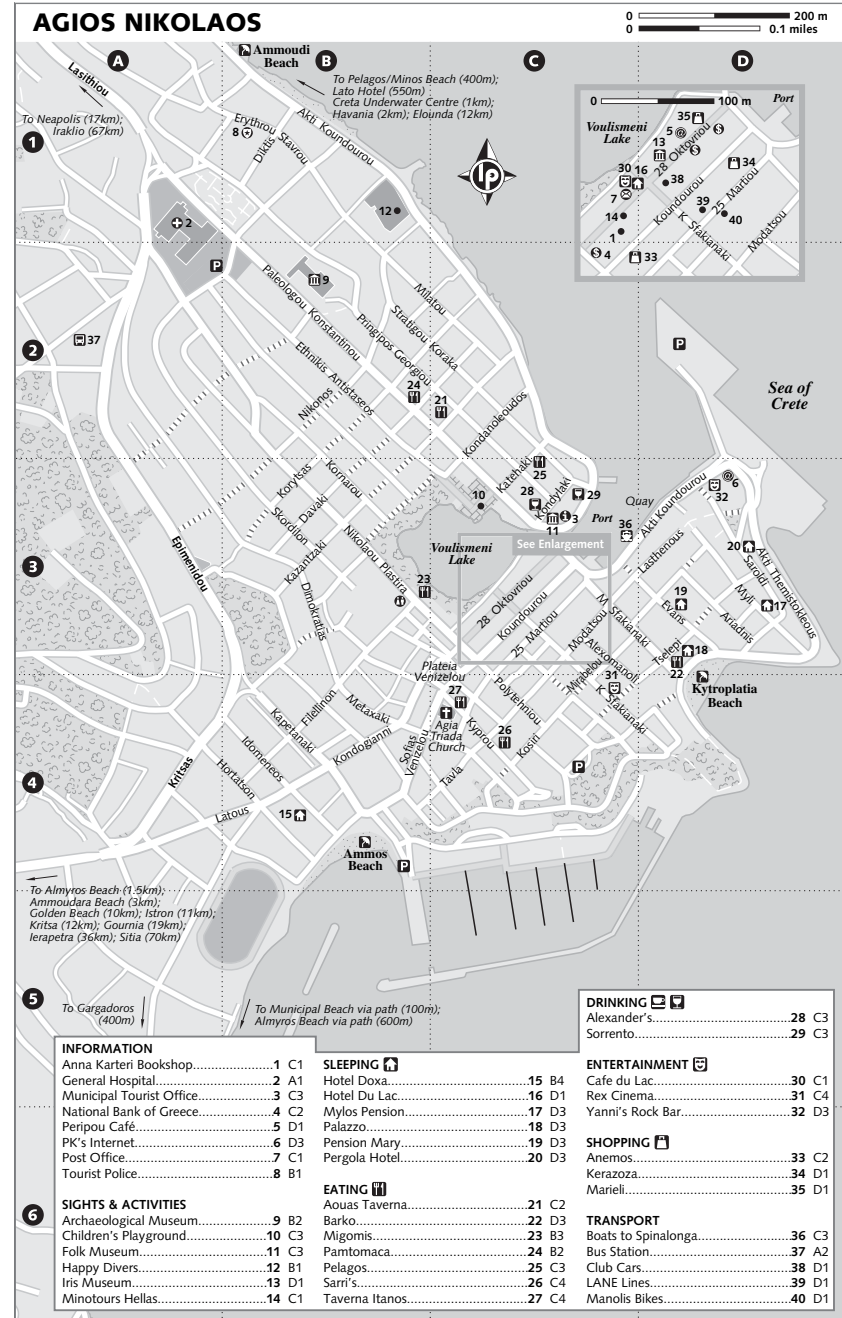
Pantomaca (☎ 28410 82394; Paleologou 52; 7pm-midnight) This colourful Catalano-Mediterranean combo is another good budget option.

our pick Gargodoros (☎ 28410 22599; Gargodoros Beach; mains €6-14) This stylish restaurant opposite a relatively quiet beach on the way to Almyros is a recent and promising addition to Agios Nikolaos' dining scene. It's light and cheery with colourful chairs and tables and a relaxed feel. The food is well executed, with modern takes on traditional dishes and emphasis on Greek and Mediterranean flavours. It's a longish walk from town along the beach front (there's a path).

Barko (☎ 28410 24610; Kytroplatia Beach; mains €8.50-13.80) This place has gone upmarket since moving to flashier premises opposite the beach. There are still excellent Cretan-style dishes but the menu includes more creative Mediterranean-style cuisine such as a light risotto with pumpkin and *anthotyro* (a soft whey cheese). There's a decent wine list, too.

TOP END

Migomis (☎ 28410 24353; Nikolaou Plastira 20; mains €14-20) Overlooking Voulismeni Lake from up high, Migomis is one of the classic and pricier lakeside eating places. The cuisine is Greek/international and the views and ambience are impressive, complete with the baby grand



piano. The fancy menu includes ostrich, and has Asian influences..

Pelagos (☎ 28410 25737; Katehaki 10; appetisers €4-8.50) For an excellent selection of fresh fish and seafood, this place is generally considered the best (and priciest) restaurant in Agios Nikolaos. The mezedes are excellent. It's in a beautifully restored house with an ambient garden.

Drinking & Entertainment

The waterfront cafés lining Akti Koundourou come alive from late afternoon and later morph into lively bars. The dance clubs are in 'little Soho' on 25 Martiou. Yanni's Rock Bar (Akti Koundourou 3) is a classic and popular haunt where not even the décor has changed in years.

Tourists tend to congregate on the opposite side of the port, particularly the popular **Sorrento** bar and around the corner at the flashing lights of **Alexanders**, which has added more recent tunes to their '60s to '80s selection.

For eclectic listening and soothing views over Voulismeni Lake try **Café du Lac** (☎ 28410 26837; 28 Oktovriou 17).

Rex Cinema (☎ 28410 83681; M Sfakianaki 35) screens the latest releases, as well as art-house movies on Thursdays.

Shopping

There are shops selling all the basics and souvenirs in town.

Anemos (☎ 28410 23528; Koundourou 12) Has unique pieces by jewellers from around Greece.

Kerazoza (☎ 28410 22562; Koundourou 42) Hand-made masks, marionettes and figurines derived from ancient Greek theatre, along with some good-quality sculptures, ceramics and jewellery by local artisans.

Marieli (☎ 28410 28813; 28 Oktovriou 33) A cute little gift store with a range of Greek handicrafts and jewellery.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

LANE Lines (☎ 28410 89150; www.lane.gr) has ferries twice per week from Agios Nikolaos to Piraeus (deck/cabin €34/€46, 14 hours), via Santorini (€20.20, five hours) and Milos (€20.60, nine hours). There is also a service from Piraeus via Milos to Agios Nikolaos, Sitia, Kasos, Karpathos, Halki and Rhodes.

BUS

Buses leave from Agios Nikolaos' **bus station** (☎ 28410 22234; www.crete-buses.gr) for Elounda (€1.30, 16 daily, 20 minutes), Ierapetra (€3.30, eight daily, 1 hour), Iraklio (€6.20, half-hourly, 1½ hours), Kritsa (€1.30, 10 daily, 15 minutes) Lasithi Plateau (€3.50, two daily, 3 hours) and Sitia (€5.90, seven daily, 1½ hours).

Getting Around

Car- and motorcycle-hire outlets can be found on 28 Oktovriou and the northern waterfront. **Club Cars** (☎ 28410 25868; www.clubcars.net; 28 Oktovriou 30) has cars for hire from €32 per day.

Manolis Bikes (☎ 28410 24940; 25 Martiou 12) has a huge range of scooters, motorcycles and quad bikes. Prices begin at €20 a day for a scooter and go up to €50 a day for a Yamaha XT 660. It also has top-of-the-range mountain bikes (from €10).

KRITSA ΚΡΙΤΣΑ

pop 1626

The pretty mountain village of Kritsa (*kritsah*), perched 600m up the mountainside 11km from Agios Nikolaos, is renowned for its strong tradition of needlework and weaving. It appears to have morphed into a tourist attraction, with weaving and embroidery draped on every available surface. Busloads of tourists swarm through the streets all summer and the villagers are eager to cater to these customers. It creates a colourful atmosphere, but not much of the stuff on sale these days is handmade or necessarily authentic. It's still possible to find the traditional geometric designs of Crete and the odd finely crocheted blanket or tablecloth, but they are becoming a rarity (and are – justifiably – not cheap, due to the labour-intensive work involved and the few women still willing and able to do it).

Apart from the needlework, **Olive Wood** (☎ 28410 51585) is one of the few shops in town that has handmade local crafts. You can order a pair of Cretan boots at **Detorakis** (☎ 28410 51349), who has been making them for 50 years.

Most years, Kritsa stages a massive **traditional wedding** (€20 including food and drink) in August, as long as one lucky couple agrees to make their nuptials a totally public affair. The event includes a feast, traditional customs and dancing, and attracts quite a crowd. It usually takes place the first Sunday after the 15 August Assumption Day holiday.

One narrow street runs through Kritsa, but there are car parks at the top and bottom of the village. The post office is near the lower car park. There is an ATM halfway up the hill.

Sleeping & Eating

Rooms Argyro (☎ 28410 51174; www.argyrorentrooms.gr; s €20, d €30-35; ☎) A friendly place with 12 immaculate and basic rooms with balconies and a little shaded restaurant downstairs for breakfast and light meals. It's on your left as you enter the village.

Olive Press (☎ 28410 51296; www.olivepresscenterall.com; d/apt €55/70) This Belgian-run B&B is in a lovingly restored stone olive press in the upper part of the village, near Agios Yiorgos church. One apartment incorporates the original olive press.

Platanos (☎ 28410 51230; mains €4.80-6.50) This taverna/*kafeneio* retains a traditional feel and has a lovely setting under a giant plane tree and vine canopy. There's a standard menu of grills and *mayirefta* and it's well regarded by locals.

To Plai (☎ 28410 51196; mains €4.40-10) On the road to Katharo just past the car park, this simple taverna has authentic Cretan cooking such as boiled goat or mutton, goat in wine, and wild greens including *stamnagathi* when in season. There are tables on the balcony with views over the valley.

Saridakis Kafeneio (☎ 28410 51577) This original old-style *kafeneio*, serving only Greek coffee (€1.50) and a few homemade sweets, is a rarity these days.

Getting There & Away

There are hourly buses from Agios Nikolaos to Kritsa (€1.30, 15 minutes).

AROUND KRITSA

The tiny triple-aisled **Church of Panagia Kera** (☎ 28410 51806; admission €3; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-2pm Sat), 1km before Kritsa, contains the most outstanding Byzantine frescoes on Crete. The oldest part of the church is the 13th-century central nave, but most of the frescoes date from the early to mid-14th century. The dome and nave are decorated with four gospel scenes: the Presentation, the Baptism, the Raising of Lazarus and the Entry into Jerusalem. On the west wall are a portrayal of the Crucifixion and grimly realistic depictions of the Punishment of the Damned. The vault

of the south aisle recounts the life of the Virgin; the north aisle is an elaborately worked-out fresco of the Second Coming. Nearby is an enticing depiction of Paradise next to the Virgin and the Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Judgement Day is portrayed on the west end, with the Archangel Michael trumpeting the Second Coming.

From Kritsa it is a 16km scenic climb up to the spectacular **Katharo Plateau**, which is cultivated by people from Kritsa and virtually inhabited only by sheep and goats – and even then only in summer. On the road to Katharo you pass by the village of **Kroustas**, where locals go for very traditional local cuisine. The popular **O Kroustas** (☎ 28410 51362) has excellent Cretan food, including a superb (albeit high-calorie) *lazania* (twisted handmade pasta also called *stroufika*) cooked in stock with *anthotyro* and excellent rusks made in the wood oven.

ANCIENT LATO ΛΑΤΩ

The ancient city of **Lato** (admission €2; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun), 4km north of Kritsa, is one of Crete's few non-Minoan ancient sites. Lato (*la-to*) was founded in the 7th century BC by the Dorians and at its height was one of the most powerful cities on Crete, until it was destroyed in 200 BC. It sprawls over the slopes of two acropolises in a lonely mountain setting, commanding stunning views down to the Bay of Mirabello.

The city's name is derived from the goddess Leto whose union with Zeus produced Artemis and Apollo, both of whom were worshipped here.

The site is barely signposted so can be a bit of a guessing game.

The **city gate** is the entrance to the site and leads to a long, stepped street. The wall on the left contains two towers, which were also residences. Follow the street to reach the **agora**, built around the 4th century BC, which contained a cistern and a small rectangular sanctuary. Excavations of the temple have revealed a number of 6th-century BC figurines. The circle of stones behind the cistern was a threshing floor. The western side of the agora contains a **stoa** with stone benches. There are remains of a pebble mosaic nearby. A terrace above the southeast corner of the agora contains the remains of a **rectangular temple**, probably built in the late 4th or early 3rd century BC. Between the

two towers on the northern end of the agora there are steps leading to the **prytaneion**, the administrative centre of the city-state. The centre of the prytaneion contained a hearth with a fire that burned day and night. On the east side of the prytaneion is a colonnaded court. Below the prytaneion is a semicircular **theatre** that could seat about 350 people next to an **exedra** (stage), which has a bench around the walls.

There are no buses to Lato. The road to the site is signposted to the right on the approach to Kritsa. It's a pleasant 30-minute walk through olive groves.

ELOUNDA EAOYNTA

pop 1561

There are magnificent mountain and sea views along the 11km road north from Agios Nikolaos to Elounda (el-oon-da). A cluster of luxury resorts occupy the lovely coves along the coast. The first elite hotel was built here in the mid-1960s, quickly establishing Elounda as the playground for Greece's glitterati and high flyers – soon after, the world's rich and famous followed suit. Elounda boasts some of the most exclusive resorts in Greece, which monopolise most of the nice beaches in the area.

Past the resorts, the once-quiet fishing village of Elounda bristles with tourists in summer, although it is calmer than its larger neighbour Agios Nikolaos. Busloads of day-trippers rock up on their way to Spinalonga Island. Elounda's attractive harbour is somewhat spoilt by the huge ugly neon signs on many restaurants and central car park. The pleasant but unremarkable sandy town beach, to the north of the port, can get very crowded. There's another beach on the other side past Alykes, the now largely submerged salt mines established by the Venetians. This sheltered lagoon-like stretch of water is formed by the Kolokytha 'island', which you can reach via a narrow stone peninsula.

Orientation & Information

The main square with a prominent clock tower and car park is next to the harbour. The bus stops nearby, where there are a couple of ATMs and the post office.

Babel Internet Café (☎ 28410 42336; Akti Vritomartidos) On the waterfront, north of the clock tower.

Eklektos (☎ 28410 42086) Sells maps and new and used English-language books.

Municipal Tourist Office (☎ 28410 42464; ☎ 8am-11pm Jun-Oct) Helps with accommodation and information, and changes money.

Olous Travel (☎ 28410 41324) Handles air and boat tickets and finds accommodation.

Tours & Activities

Boats from Elounda offer trips to Spinalonga Island, swimming and fishing trips, and four-hour cruises that include Spinalonga, swimming and a visit to the sunken city of Olous (opposite).

The area around Elounda offers excellent diving. Try the **PADI Blue Dolphin Diving Centre** (☎ 28410 41802; www.dive-bluedolphin.com; dive €39) at the Grecotel Elounda Village hotel.

Sleeping

If you're not lucky enough to be staying at one of the swanky resorts, it almost defeats the purpose of hanging out in Elounda. Many hotels are fully booked by tour operators.

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Delfinia Studios & Apartments (☎ 28410 41641; www.pediaditis.gr; studio/apt €30-40; ☎ ☎) The pleasant rooms here have balconies overlooking the sea and there is a range of options for larger groups and families. Run by the same family as the bookshop on the main road, who also run the Milos apartments nearby.

Hotel Aristeia (☎ 28410 41300; www.aristeiahotel.com; s/d/tr incl breakfast €30/45/55; ☎ ☎) In the town centre is this uninspiring but decent and clean budget option. Most rooms at least have a sea view, double-glazed windows, TV, fridge and a hairdryer.

Coral Studios (☎ /fax 28410 41712; www.coralistudios.com; studio €60-70; ☎ ☎) On the northern side, these handy self-catering studios are set in lush lawns with a shaded patio.

Portobello Apartments (2-/4-bed apt €65-75; ☎ ☎) Next door to Coral Studios and under the same management, these spacious apartments are a good option for two or more people.

Elounda Island Villas (☎ 28410 41274; www.eloundaisland.gr; d from €70; 4-person apt €105; ☎ ☎) A secluded option on Kolokytha island, reached along the narrow peninsula. The split-level apartments are set amid a pleasant garden and decorated with traditional furnishings. Kitchens are well equipped, bathrooms functional and there is an attached tavern. It's a 20-minute walk into town.

TOP END

Elounda's resorts are the stuff most people only dream about. **Elounda Beach** (☎ 28410 41412; www.eloundabeach.gr; r from €250; ☎ ☎), one of the world's great luxury resorts, is the epitome of luxury, attracting some elite clientele. You can upgrade all the way to the royal suites with a private indoor swimming pool, personal fitness trainer, butler and cook (for a mere €15,000 per night).

Eating

Nikos (☎ 28410 41439; fish per kg €35-40) While it lacks the ambience of the seafront eateries, no-frills Nikos on the main street is a good choice for fish and lobster because it generally catches its own. There are outdoor tables under a canopy across in the square. Service can be erratic but the food is very reasonably priced.

Megaro (☎ 28419 42220; fish per kg up to €45; mains €4-8) This recently refurbished place on the corner of the square is popular with locals around the district. The owner fishes from his own boat and the menu also includes Cretan specialities.

Paradosiako (☎ 28410 42444; mains €5.50-8.50) Recommended for grilled and oven-baked meat dishes. It's opposite the playground.

Ferryman (☎ 28410 41230; local fish platter for 2 €44) With a lovely setting on the waterfront, the Ferryman claims its moment of fame from being featured in the TV series *Who Pays the Ferryman*. The food and service is excellent (they even clean the fish for you), though it is on the pricey side. Its speciality is fish and lobster, but there's a broader menu of Cretan specialities

Entertainment

There are several bars and clubs at Elounda, but it's no Agios Nikolaos.

Katafygio (☎ 28410 42003) has tables along the water and is housed in a former carob-processing plant. It has Cretan and Greek nights and belly dancing.

Alyggos Bar (☎ 28410 41569), on the main street, is popular with tourists and has an impressive display of soccer jumpers and matches on TV. **Babel** (☎ 28410 42336; Akti Vritomartidos) is another good place for a drink or you can get into the Greek groove at **Venue** (☎ 28410 41355) next to Olous Travel.

Getting There & Around

Boats go across to Spinalonga every half-hour (adult/child return €10/5)

There are 13 buses daily from Agios Nikolaos to Elounda (€1.30, 20 minutes).

Cars, motorcycles and scooters can be hired at **Elounda Travel** (☎ 28410 41800; www.eloundatravel.gr) in the town centre.

KOLOKYTHA PENINSULA ΧΕΡΣΟΝΗΣΟΣ ΚΟΛΟΚΥΘΑ

Just before Elounda (coming from Agios Nikolaos), a sign points right to **ancient Olous**, which was the port of Lato. The city stood on and around the narrow isthmus (now a causeway) that joined the southern end of the Kolokytha Peninsula to the mainland. Olous was a Minoan settlement that flourished from 3000 to 900 BC. Around 200 BC it entered into a treaty with Rhodes as part of the island's desire to control eastern Crete and put an end to the piracy that was ravaging the Aegean. Excavations indicate that

GOOD FOR THE SOUL

Elounda is home to some of Europe's most luxurious spas and thalassotherapy centres, which – as the name suggests – promote the therapeutic benefits of the sea with seawater pools and hydromassage, marine algae body wraps and every imaginable sea-themed pampering and rejuvenation treatment.

The state-of-the-art **Elounda Spa & Thalassotherapy Centre** (☎ 28410 65660; www.bluepalace.gr; full-day treatments from €140), in the Blue Palace Resort just before Plaka, also incorporates Cretan nutrients into unique treatments, including exfoliation with sugar and olive oil, a traditional olive oil massage and hydromassage baths using Cretan herbs. There is even a treatment using raki – not your traditional rakotherapy!

There are packages and discounts for non-guests if you can't manage a stay at the resort for the full treatment.

Another world class spa in Elounda is the new **Six Senses Spa** (☎ 28410 68000; www.portoelounda.com; signature treatment package €220) at the Porto Elounda Hotel.

Oulous was an important trade centre with the eastern islands and minted its own currency. Little is known about the settlement during the Greek, Roman and Byzantine eras, but it appears that it was destroyed by the Saracens in the 9th century.

The isthmus sank as a result of the earthquakes that have repeatedly devastated Crete. In 1897 the occupying French army dug a canal across the isthmus connecting Spinalonga Bay to the open sea. Most of the ruins lie beneath the water, which makes it a popular place for snorkelling. The shallow water appears to be paradise for sea urchins and the area is known for the many birds that nest there. An early Christian mosaic near the causeway was part of an early Christian basilica.

There is an excellent sandy **beach** 1km along a narrow but graded dirt road on the eastern side of the peninsula. The beach is sheltered, the water pristine and few people use it, other than visitors with small *caiques* (little boats).

PLAKA ΠΛΑΚΑ

pop 38

The small fishing village of Plaka, 5km north of Elounda, used to supply the leper colony on Spinalonga. Today, Plaka has been somewhat dwarfed by the giant Blue Palace Resort at the entrance to the village, but it's still an attractive and quiet place, with a reasonable stretch of pebble **beach** overlooking Spinalonga. In a pretty waterfront setting, a handful of fish tavernas are housed in row of stone buildings.

Ask around at the boats at the port or one of the tavernas and local fishermen can take you over to Spinalonga Island (€7). You can also go across by sea kayak with Driros Beach-based **Spinalonga Windsurf** (☎ 69935 24738; www.spinalonga-windsurf.com; €15).

The popular waterfront **Taverna Giorgos** (☎ 28410 41355; Cretan specials €6.50-8) is run by a local fisherman and his family, who will dish up a decent fresh seafood meal as well as Cretan specialities.

Stella Mare Studios (☎ 28410 41814; studio €50-60; 📶) has simple studios and apartments with homy touches such as lace curtains and tapestries on the walls. They are set around a courtyard garden; some have balconies with sea views and there are goats grazing across the road.

The **Pefko** (☎ 28410 42510) *kafeneio* is a charming place for a drink.

SPINALONGA ISLAND ΝΗΣΟΣ ΣΠΙΝΑΛΟΓΚΑ

Spinalonga Island lies just north of the Kolokytha Peninsula and was strategically important from antiquity to the Venetian era. The island's massive **fortress** (☎ 28410 41773; admission €2; 🕒 10am-6pm) was built by the Venetians in 1579 to protect the bays of Elounda and Mirabello. It was considered impregnable and withstood Turkish sieges for longer than any other Cretan stronghold, but finally surrendered in 1715 some 40 years after the rest of Crete. The Turks used the island as a base for smuggling. Following the reunion of Crete with Greece, Spinalonga became a leper colony, which closed in 1953, and the island has been uninhabited ever since.

Regular excursion boats visit Spinalonga from Agios Nikolaos (€15) (see p183). Ferries can take you across from Elounda (€10) or you could also take a cheaper boat from Plaka. Boats from Agios Nikolaos pass the uninhabited Bird Island and Kri-Kri Island, one of the last habitats of the kri-kri, Crete's wild goat. Both are designated wildlife sanctuaries.

MILATOS ΜΥΛΑΤΟΣ

Milatos, the north coast's easternmost beach settlement, is refreshingly mellow after the overdeveloped coastal strip east of Iraklio. Milatos beach is little more than a main square, with the Church of Anaplis in the middle, and a string of tavernas, dwellings and accommodation lining the beach. The actual village of Milatos is 2km up the hill.

There is little to see of Ancient Milatos, to the east of the beach, but you can explore the series of caverns in the **Milatos Cave**, about 3km east of the village (best to have a torch). More than 2000 Cretans were holed up in the cave for 15 days in 1823 but were massacred when they surrendered. There is memorial chapel inside the cave.

Panorama (☎ 28410 81213; top fish per kg €45) on the western end is run by a fishing family and uses mostly local organic vegetables. It also has spacious studios in a complex behind the taverna (€40).

At the other end of the beach **To Meltemi** (☎ 28410 81286; mains €5.50-8.50) is a friendly, family-run place with excellent local cuisine – try the *hortopitakia* (pies with greens).

Another worthwhile taverna in this area is **Volosyros** (☎ 28410 71601; mains €6.50-8.50) which has a wood oven and a lovely garden terrace

out the back. It's on the road to Milatos, in the upper village of Sisi.

LASITHI PLATEAU ΟΡΟΠΕΔΙΟ ΛΑΣΙΘΙΟΥ

The Lasithi Plateau, 900m above sea level, is a vast expanse of pear and apple orchards, almond trees and fields of crops. It would have been a stunning sight when it was dotted by some 20,000 metal windmills with white canvas sails built by the Venetians in the 17th century. There are less than 5000 still standing today and few are in service, most having been replaced by less-attractive mechanical pumps.

The plateau's rich soil has been cultivated since Minoan times. The inaccessibility of the region made it a hotbed of insurrection during Venetian and Turkish rule. Following an uprising in the 13th century, the Venetians drove out the inhabitants of Lasithi and destroyed their orchards. The plateau lay abandoned for 200 years, preserving a rich forest and biotope, as a lack of drainage meant the plain flooded each spring with melted snow. Food shortages led the Venetians to cultivate the area and build the irrigation trenches and wells that still service the region.

There are 20 villages dotted around the periphery of the plateau. Tour buses regularly pass through the region, which relies heavily on tourism but is essentially an agricultural area with traditional rural villages that return to pastoral serenity when the tourists leave. It is worth an overnight stay to get a sense of rural Crete.

You can approach the plateau from several points, the main routes being from Iraklio via the Kastelli road or Malia, or the commercial town of Neapoli, with other turn-offs near Agios Nikolaos.

The plateau is a popular **bike route**, and on any given day you will be assailed by squadrons of helmet-clad cyclists. Enterprising cycle tour operators in Iraklio and Agios Nikolaos ferry bikes and cyclists to the plateau but you can also get bikes locally.

From Iraklio there are daily buses to Tzermiado (€3.50, two hours), Agios Georgios (€4.70, two hours) and Psyhro (€4.70, 2½ hours). There are also buses to the villages from Agios Nikolaos (p186).

TZERMIAO ΤΖΕΡΜΙΑΔΟ

pop 762

Tzermiado (*dzer-mee-ah-do*) is a sleepy town with dusty little streets lined with houses overgrown with vines and hanging plants. It's the largest and most important town on the Lasithi Plateau and has a fair amount of visitors from the tour buses going to the Dikteon Cave. A number of shops sell rugs and embroideries, although they're not of a particularly high quality. Of better quality are Lasithi's superior potatoes, which are celebrated in a three-day festival at the end of August in Tzermiado.

There is only one main road running through town that takes you past the town square, with a couple of ATMs and a post office.

South just outside Tzermiado is the **Kronios Cave** (Trapeza), for which you need a torch (and preferably a guide – they tend to hang out waiting) to explore. From the signposted turnoff, you can drive to the end of the dirt path, from where you go up about 150 steps to the cave.

North of Tzermiado, perched on a dramatic rocky hill, is the Minoan settlement of **Karfi**, a crude refuge for Minoans fleeing the Dorians. You can drive the bulk of the way and walk for about 40 minutes up to the site. Otherwise it takes about two hours to do the 6km climb. Take plenty of water. Follow the signs to the Timios Stavros church (where you need to leave the car) to the well-marked path up to the ruins.

Argoulis (☎ 28440 22754; www.argoulis.gr; d incl breakfast €60-80) is a delightful small complex of 11 stone spacious apartments built into the hillside in the abandoned part of the village, with panoramic views of the plateau. The rooms are well-equipped and traditionally decorated, and breakfast is made from fresh local produce.

Some of the best Cretan cuisine around is served at **Kourites** (☎ 28440 22054; mains €7-8; www.kourites.eu), including vegetarian delights such as artichokes. Try some of the dishes cooked in the wood oven – the suckling pig with baked potatoes is delicious. There are simple rooms above the taverna with small balconies (single/double including breakfast €25/35) and you can have free use of the bicycles.

AGIOS GEORGIOS ΑΓΙΟΣ ΓΕΩΡΓΙΟΣ

pop 541

Agios Georgios (*agh-ios ye-or-gios*) is a tiny village on the southern side of the Lasithi

Plateau and the most pleasant to stay in. If you have your own bicycle, you can base yourself here and explore the plateau at your leisure.

The village also boasts an excellent **folklore museum** (☎ 28440 31462; admission €3; 🕒 10am-4pm Apr-Oct) housed in the original home belonging to the Katsapakis family. Exhibits are spread over five rooms and include some intriguing personal photos of writer Nikos Kazantzakis.

You cannot miss the signs in the region directing you to the massive **Lasinthos Eco Park** (☎ 28440 89100; www.lasinthos.gr; admission €2.50; 🕒 9am-6pm), just past Agios Georgios. This new complex, including the barn of a taverna, craft displays and a massive souvenir store, caters to tour buses. The workshops of traditional crafts are contrived and the 'farm' is rather light on.

On the northern side of the village, **Hotel Maria** (☎ 28440 31774; s/d €20-35) has spacious rooms, nicely decorated with weaving and traditional furnishings (although larger people should note that the beds are very narrow). Maria does the cooking at **Taverna Rea** (☎ 28440 31209; mains €4.50-6.50) on the main street, which rustles up excellent grilled local meats (her husband is the butcher) and good-value Cretan staples. They also rent out studios above the taverna (€30).

PSYHRO ΨΥΧΡΟ

pop 208

Psyhro (psi-*hro*) is the closest village to the Dikteon Cave. It has one main street with a few tavernas, and plenty of souvenir shops selling 'authentic' rugs and mats of largely non-Cretan origin. It is prettier than Tzermiado and makes for a better rest stop. Buses to Psyhro drop you at the end of the town where it's about a kilometre's walk uphill to the cave (the bus may take you all the way if lots of passengers are going there).

If you do need to stay the night, the rather featureless **Zeus Hotel** (☎ 28440 31284; s/d €25/30) is near the start of the Dikteon Cave road. You can find the owners at the Halavro taverna near the cave entrance.

With its neat folksy interior and street-side tables, **Stavros** (☎ 28440 31453; grills €5-8) serves a good range of traditional home-style Cretan dishes. Most of the meat and produce is from the family farm.

Former cave guardian Petros Zarvakis has opened **Petros Taverna** (☎ 28440 31600; grills

€6) opposite the entrance to Dikteon Cave, serving Cretan food and grills. He also organises regular hikes up to Mt Dikti, camping out under the stars.

DIKTEON CAVE ΔΙΚΤΑΙΟΝ ΑΝΤΡΟΝ

Lasithi's major sight is the **Dikteon Cave** (adult/child €4/2; 🕒 8am-6pm Jun-Oct, 8am-2.30pm Nov-May), just outside the village of Psyhro. Here, according to legend, Rhea hid the newborn Zeus from Cronos, his offspring-gobbling father.

The cave, also known as the Psyhro Cave, covers 2200 sq metres and features both stalactites and stalagmites. It was excavated in 1900 by the British archaeologist David Hogarth, who found numerous votives indicating it was a place of cult worship. These finds are housed in the Archaeological Museum (p149) in Iraklio.

The cave began to be used for cult worship in the Middle Minoan period and continued, though less intensely, up to the 1st century AD. An altar for offerings and sacrifices was in the upper section. Stone tablets inscribed with Linear A script were found here, along with religious bronze and clay figurines.

The upper cave is large and generally devoid of stalactites or stalagmites. A steep downward path brings you to the more interesting lower cave. In the back on the left is a smaller chamber where legend has it that Zeus was born. There is a larger hall on the right, which has small stone basins filled with water that Zeus allegedly drank from in one section and a spectacular stalagmite that came to be known as the Mantle of Zeus in the other. The entire cave is illuminated, although not particularly well, so watch your step.

It is a steep 15-minute (800m) walk up to the cave entrance. You can take the fairly rough but shaded track on the right with great views over the plateau or the unshaded paved trail on the left of the car park next to the Halavro taverna. You can also let a donkey do the hard work (€10 or €15 return).

NORTHEAST COAST

GOURNIA ΓΟΥΡΝΙΑ

The important Late Minoan site of **Gournia** (☎ 28410 24943; admission €2; 🕒 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun) pronounced *goor-nyah*, lies just off the coast road, 19km southeast of Agios Nikolaos.

The ruins, which date from 1550 to 1450 BC, are made up of a town overlooked by a small palace. Gournia's palace was far less ostentatious than the ones at Knossos and Phaestos as it was the residence of an overlord rather than a king. The town is a network of streets and stairways flanked by houses with walls up to 2m high. Domestic, agricultural and trade implements found on the site indicate that Gournia was a thriving little community.

South of the palace is a large rectangular **court**, which was connected to a network of paved stone streets. South of the palace is a large **stone slab** used for sacrificing bulls. The room to the west has a stone **kernos** (large earthen dish) ringed with 32 depressions and probably used for cult activity. North of the palace was a **Shrine of the Minoan Snake Goddess**, which proved to be a rich trove of objects from the Postpalatial Period. Notice the storage rooms, workrooms and dwellings to the north and east of the site. The buildings were two-storey structures with the storage and workrooms in the basement and the living quarters on the 1st floors.

Near the site is **Gournia Moon Camping** (☎/fax 28420 93243; www.gourniamoon.com; sites per person/tent €5.70/5.70; 🕒), the closest camp site to Agios Nikolaos. The shaded and well-organised site has a taverna, swimming pool, snack bar and mini-market.

Sitia and Terapetra buses from Agios Nikolaos can drop you at the site.

MOHLOS ΜΟΧΛΟΣ

pop 87

Mohlos (*moh-los*) is a pretty fishing village reached by a 5km winding road from the Sitia-Agios Nikolaos highway. In antiquity, it was joined to the homonymous island that now sits 200m offshore and was once a thriving Early Minoan community dating from the period 3000-2000 BC. Excavations still continue sporadically on both Mohlos Island and at Mohlos village. An information board overlooking the harbour explains the archaeology of the area.

Mohlos is a chill-out place with a small pebble-and-grey-sand beach, simple accommodation, plenty of good walks and interesting villages to explore nearby. Beware of strong currents further out in the small strait between the island and the village.

Mohlos attracts mainly French and German independent travellers, while the tavernas enjoy a good reputation for fresh local fish and seafood and are packed with locals on weekends.

When we last visited, an ominous construction frenzy nearby did not bode well for peaceful Mohlos.

There's a mini-market and a couple of gift shops. **Barbarossa Tours** (☎ 28430 94723; barbarasso@otenet.gr) can arrange rooms, excursions, boat and air tickets and car hire. Yiannis Petrakis and his Belgian botanist wife Ann Lebrun run nature walks and guided jeep and bike **tours** (☎/fax 28430 94725; annelebrun@caramail.com; walks €12-20, mountain bike/motorcycle tours €35/75).

Sleeping & Eating

Kyma (☎ 28430 94177; soik@in.gr; studio €30) Fairly well signposted on the village's western side near a supermarket, the self-contained studios are spotless and good value.

Hotel Sofia (☎/fax 28430 94554; r €35-45; 🕒) The rooms above the Sofia taverna have been spruced up with new furniture and bedding, and all have TV and fridge, but some are rather cramped. The front rooms have balconies with sea views. The family also has spacious apartments 200m east of the harbour, for families and longer stays. Try the home cooking at the taverna.

Mohlos Mare (☎/fax 28430 94005; d €45; 🕒) Just outside the village along the coast road, these well-maintained spacious, well-appointed apartments are bright and airy and the top rooms have great views from the big balconies. There's a vineyard and garden out the front with hundreds of roses, and a communal outdoor kitchen and barbeque.

To Bogazi (☎ 28430 94200; mezedes €2.50-6.50) Serves more than 30 mezedes, including many vegetarian-friendly dishes and a range of seafood and Cretan specials.

Ta Kochilia (☎ 28430 94432; mains €4.50-6.50) This excellent place enjoys a lovely setting and is known for its fresh fish and simple, good food. Seafood lovers should try the sea-urchin salad – dip your bread in it – or the braised cuttlefish in black ink.

Getting There & Away

There is no public transport to Mohlos. Buses between Sitia and Agios Nikolaos will drop you off at the Mohlos turn-off.

You'll need to hitch or walk the 6km to the village.

SITIA ΣΗΤΕΙΑ

pop 8754

Sitia (*si-tee-a*) is an attractive mid-sized coastal town with a pretty harbour-side promenade lined with tavernas and cafés that makes for a pleasant evening stroll. It has fortunately managed to escape the tourist frenzy that grips most of the north coast in summer. While the town is traveller-friendly, it exists for the locals, who rely on agriculture and commerce rather than tourism.

In the bustling streets of the old town that wind their way uphill from the harbour, you'll find the occasional example of old Venetian architecture mixed in with the new. A sandy beach skirts a wide bay to the east of town. Sitia attracts lots of French and Greek tourists, but even at the height of the season the town has a relatively laid-back feel that is refreshing compared with the commercialism further west.

It also makes a good jumping-off point for the Dodecanese islands.

History

Archaeological excavations indicate that there were Neolithic settlements around Sitia and an important Minoan settlement at nearby Petras. The original settlement was destroyed and eventually abandoned after an earthquake in 1700 BC.

In the Greco-Roman era there was a town called Iteia in or around modern Sitia although its exact site has not yet been located. In Byzantine times Sitia became a bishopric, which was then eliminated by the Saracens in the 9th century. Under the Venetians, Sitia became the most important port in eastern Crete. The town was hit by a disastrous earthquake in 1508 – a blow from which it never really recovered – and the Turkish blockade of Sitia in 1648 marked its death knell. The remaining inhabitants fled and the town was destroyed. It was not until the late-19th century when the Turks decided to make Sitia an administrative centre that the town gradually came back to life. Crete's most famous poet, Vitsentzos Kornaros, was born in Sitia in 1614.

Orientation & Information

The town's main square is Plateia Iroon Polytehniou – recognisable by its palm trees and statue of a dying soldier. There are lots of

ATMs and places to change money. The bus station is inland near the museum. Ferries dock about 500m north of Plateia Agnostou.

Akasti Travel (☎ 28430 29444; www.akasti.gr; Kornarou & Metaxaki 4) Good source of information.

Java Internet Café (☎ 28430 22263; Kornarou 113; ☎ 9am-late; internet per hr €2)

National Bank of Greece (Papanastasiou & Katapoti) Has a 24-hour exchange machine.

Post office (Dimokritou; ☎ 7.30am-3pm)

Tourist office (☎ 28430 28300; Karamanli; ☎ 9.30am-2.30pm & 5-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-2.30pm Sat) On the promenade.

Tourist police (☎ 28430 24200; Therisou 31) At the main police station.

Sights & Activities

The excellent **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 28430 23917; Piskokefalou; admission €2; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun) houses a well-displayed and important collection of local finds spanning Neolithic to Roman times, with emphasis on the Minoan civilization. One of the most significant exhibits is the *Palekastro Kouros* – a figure pieced together from fragments made of hippopotamus tusks and adorned with gold (see the boxed text, p198). Finds from the palace at Zakros include a wine press, a bronze saw, jars, cult objects and pots that are clearly scorched from the great fire that destroyed the palace. Among the most valuable objects are the Linear A tablets, which reflect the palace's administrative function.

Towering over the town is the **kazarma** (fort; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-3pm) (from 'casa di arma'), which was a garrison under the Venetians. The only remains of the wall that once protected the town, the site is now used as an open-air venue.

The **folklore museum** (☎ 28430 28300; Kapetan Sifinos 28; admission €2; ☎ 10am-1pm Mon-Fri) displays a fine collection of local weaving and other exhibits of folk life.

The **Union of Agricultural Cooperatives of Sitia** (☎ 28430 29354; admission & tour €2; ☎ 8am-3pm), about 1km before town, showcases the area's wines, oil and raki. Tours include a video and wine tasting. The charge is often waived if you make a purchase.

About 2km southeast of town is the interesting Minoan archaeological site of **Petras** on a low hill overlooking the sea. You can see the remains of the settlement, including two houses from the New Palace period. The site is open to the public.

Universal Diver (☎/fax 28430 23489; pavlossimos@yahoo.gr; Kornarou 140) is a PADI dive centre offering all levels of scuba diving.

Festivals & Events

Sitia produces superior sultanas and the town holds a **Sultana Festival** in honour of the grape in the last week of August.

The **Kornaria Festival** runs from mid-July to the end of August, with concerts, folk dancing and theatre productions staged in the *kazarma* and other venues. Posters around town announce the events, some of which are free.

Sleeping

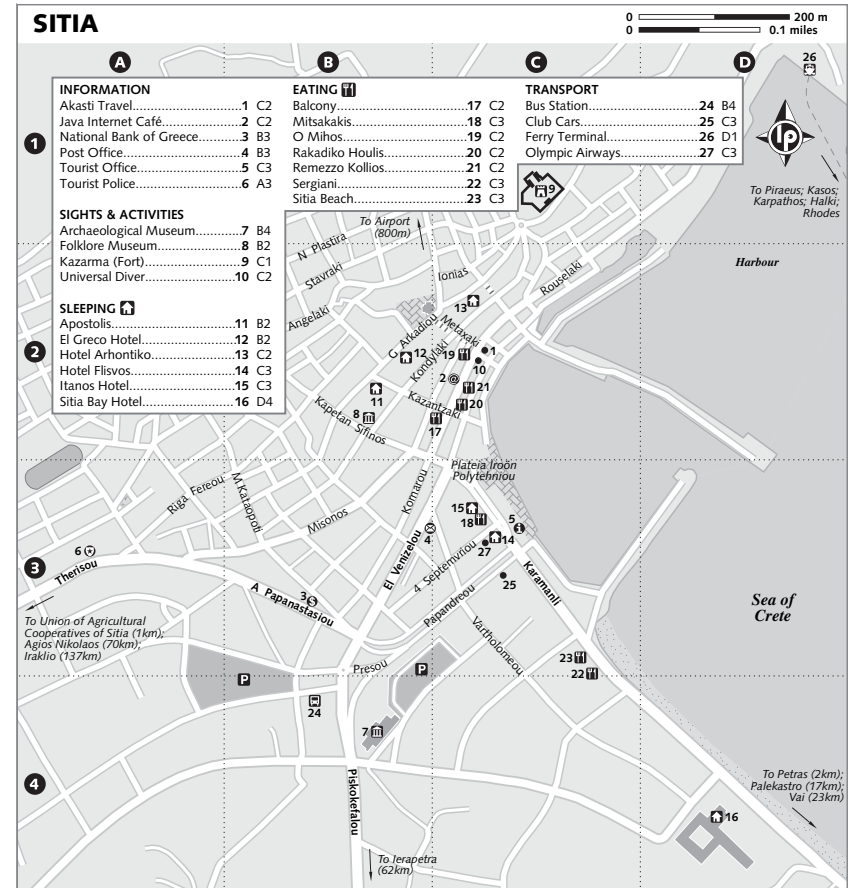
Hotel Arhontiko (☎ 28430 28172; Kondylaki 16; d/studio €30/33) This guesthouse, in a beautifully main-

tained neoclassical building uphill from the port, has a real old-world feel. It's spotless, with shared bathrooms and a lovely shady garden in the front and the top rooms have sea views.

Apostolis (☎ 28430 28172; Kazantzaki 27; d/tr €37/47) These domatia have ceiling fans, and relatively modern bathrooms with handy touches such as shower curtains. There's a communal balcony and fridge.

El Greco Hotel (☎ 28430 23133; elgreco@sit.forth-net.gr; G Arkadiou 13; s/d incl breakfast €35/50; ☎) The quaint and friendly old-style El Greco has very clean and presentable rooms, and all have a fridge, phone and extras such as hairdryers. Some sleep up to four.

Hotel Flisvos (☎ 28430 27135; www.flisvos-sitia.com; Karamanli 4; s/d/tr from €40/50/60; ☎) Along the



southern waterfront, Flisvos is a decent modern hotel. Rooms are neat and have air-con, TV, fridge, phone and balconies and there is a recently renovated back wing with more spacious rooms and a lift.

Itanos Hotel (☎ 28430 22900; www.itanoshotel.com; Karamanli 4; sea view s/d incl breakfast €42/56; 🏠 📺) You could also try this place on the waterfront. There's a rooftop terrace restaurant and internet access downstairs.

Sitia Bay Hotel (☎ 28430 24800 www.sitiabay.com; Paraliaki Leoforos 8; apt/ste from €110/160; 🏠 📺) It looks like another modern hotel but the service is as personal and friendly as it gets, with homemade bread, marmalade and cakes brought to your room daily. Most of the comfortable and tasteful one- and two-room apartments have sea views, and there's a pool, hydrospace, mini-gym and sauna.

Eating

Sitia Beach (☎ 28430 22104; Karamanli 28; mains €5.50-8) This unassuming place on the beach makes a decent pizza but it is more highly recommended for home-style cooking that appears daily on the specials board. Try the pork with lemon and rice.

O Mihos (☎ 28430 22416; Kornarou 117; mixed grill for 2 €20) This *psistaria* in a traditional stone house one block back from the waterfront has excellent charcoal-grilled meats as well as Cretan cooking. There are also tables on a terrace nearby on the beach.

Houlis Rakadiko (☎ 28430 28298; Venizelou 57) For a more classic local experience try this old place, which has a wide range of fine mezedes accompanied by good raki. It has no signage, but it's the second place from the corner; by day it's packed with men playing backgammon.

our pick Balcony (☎ 28430 25084; Foundalidou 19; mains €10.60-18.80) The finest dining in Sitia is on the 1st floor of this charmingly decorated neoclassical building. It has an eclectic menu of fusion cuisine, from Cretan to Mexican and Asian-inspired dishes from the charmingly feisty owner-chef (and ex-singer) Tonya's travels. Service can be patchy.

Also recommended:

Mitsakakis (☎ 28430 22377; Karamanli 5) For a sweet treat, the *galaktoboureko* (custard-filled pastry with syrup) is highly recommended.

Remezzo Kollios (☎ 28430 28607; Venizelou 167 12; seafood dishes €5-18) On the waterfront. Popular but pricey.

Sergiani (☎ 28430 24092; Karamanli 38) On the waterfront.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Sitia's **airport** (☎ 28430 24666) has an expanded international-size runway but international flights had yet to operate in 2007.

Olympic Airlines (☎ 28430 22270; www.olympicairlines.com; 4 Septemvriou 3) has four weekly flights to Athens (€71, one hour), Alexandroupolis (€8, two hours) and three flights per week to Preveza (€80, two hours and 20 minutes). There are also daily flights (€47) with three stops to Kassos (20 minutes), Karpathos (1 hour) and Rhodes (2 hours).

BOAT

LANE Lines (☎ 28430 25555; www.lane.gr) has weekly ferries from Sitia to Rhodes via Kasos (€19.50, six hours), Karpathos (€19.50, eight hours), Diafani (€17.90, nine hours), Halki (€18.20, 11 hours) and Rhodes (€27, 14 hours). Departure times change annually, so check with a travel agent or ring LANE Lines for latest information.

BUS

From Sitia's **Bus Station** (☎ 28430 22272) there are six buses per day to Ierapetra (€5.40, 1½ hours), seven buses to Iraklio (€13.10, three hours) via Agios Nikolaos (€6.90, 1½ hours), four to Vai (€3, 30 minutes), and two to Kato Zakros via Palekastro and Zakros (€4.50, one hour). The buses to Vai and Kato Zakros only run between May and October.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport (signposted) is 1.5km out of town. There is no airport bus; a taxi costs about €5.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Car- and motorcycle-hire outlets are mostly found on Papandreou and Itanou. Try **Club Cars** (☎ 28430 25104; Papandreou 4).

MONI TOPLOU ΜΟΝΗ ΤΟΠΛΟΥ

East of Sitia, the imposing **Moni Toplou** (☎ 28430 61226; admission €2.50; 🕒 9am-6pm Apr-Oct) looks more like a fortress than a monastery – a necessity imposed by the dangers it faced at the time of its construction. It is one of the most historically significant and progressive monasteries on Crete. The middle of the 15th century was marked by piracy, banditry and constant rebellions. The monks defended themselves with all the means at their disposal, including

a heavy gate, cannons (the name Toplou is Turkish for 'with a cannon') and small holes for pouring boiling oil onto the heads of their attackers. Nevertheless, it was sacked by pirates in 1498, looted by the Knights of Malta in 1530, pillaged by the Turks in 1646 and captured by the Turks in 1821.

Moni Toplou had always been active in the cause for Cretan independence and paid a price for it. Under the Turkish occupation, a secret school operated in the monastery, while its reputation for hiding rebels led to severe reprisals. During WWII, Abbot Silingakis was executed after sheltering resistance leaders operating an underground radio transmitter.

The monastery's star attraction is undoubtedly the icon *Lord Thou Art Great* by celebrated Cretan artist Ioannis Kornaros. Each of the 61 small scenes painted on the icon is beautifully worked out and inspired by a phrase from the Orthodox prayer that begins 'Lord, Thou Art Great'. The icon is in the northern aisle of the church, along with 14th-century frescoes and an icon stand from 1770.

An excellent **museum** tells the monastery's history and has a fine collection of icons, engravings and books, as well as weapons and military souvenirs from the resistance.

The abbot, Filotheos Spanoudakis, is one of the most dynamic on Crete, promoting organic farming through the local agricultural cooperative and cultivating the monastery's large landholdings. He built an olive oil and wine bottling plant on the monastery grounds for the local community. Controversial plans for a massive tourism development on monastery land on the remote northern tip of the island have sparked major protests from environmentalists.

The well-stocked shop sells the monastery's award-winning organic olive oil and wine.

The monastery is a 3km walk from the Sitia-Palekastro road. Buses can drop you off at the junction.

EAST COAST

VAI BAI

The beach at Vai, on Crete's east coast 24km from Sitia, is famous for its unique palm forest. There are many stories about the origin of these palms, including the theory

that they sprouted from date pits spread by Roman legionaries relaxing on their way back from conquering Egypt. While these palms are closely related to the date, they are a separate species found only on Crete.

In July and August, you'll need to arrive early to appreciate the setting, because the place is packed and the beach is covered in sun-beds and umbrellas (€6).

It's possible to escape the worst of the balmy – jet skis and all – by clambering over a rocky outcrop behind the taverna to a stunning secluded beach. Alternatively, you can go over the hill in the other direction to a series of quiet coves frequented by nudists.

The **Restaurant-Cafeteria Vai** (☎ 28430 61129; mains €4-6) is dependable and welcome after a hard day on the beach.

There are buses to Vai from Sitia (€2.50, one hour, five daily). The car park charges €3.

ITANOS ITANOS

If you're after more secluded beaches, head north for another 3km to the ancient Minoan site of Itanos. Although inhabited from about 1500 BC, Itanos was clearly prosperous by the 7th century BC since it was an important trading post for exports to the Near East and Middle East. Its archrival was Praisos, near Ierapetra, and in 260 BC Itanos hosted a garrison of Egyptians to fortify its position against Praisos.

When Ierapetra destroyed Praisos in 155 BC, Itanos fought with Ierapetra as well and again received foreign help from Magnesia, a Roman city. The town was destroyed somewhere towards the end of the Byzantine era and may have been re-inhabited by the Venetians. It's difficult to discern any recognisable building in Itanos, but there are remains of two early Christian basilicas and a Hellenistic wall. The site is well marked and next to swimming coves shaded by pine trees.

PALEKASTRO ΠΑΛΑΙΚΑΣΤΡΟ

pop 1084

Palekastro (pah-*leh*-kas-tro) is a modern farming town that is more of a stopover or useful base for exploring eastern Crete than as a destination in itself. It's situated in the midst of a rocky, barren landscape, but is within easy striking distance of the lovely Kouremenos Beach, Vai Beach and Moni Toplou.

About 1km from town, towards Hiona beach, is the archaeological site of Rousolakkos, where archaeologists believe a major

Minoan Palace is buried (see boxed text, below). This is where the *Palekastro kouros* – now residing in the Archaeological Museum in Sitia (p194) – was found.

Tucked in a back street and badly sign-posted is the well-presented **Folk Museum of Palekastro** (☎ 28430 61123; admission €2; 🕒 10am–1pm & 5–8pm Mon–Sat), housed in a traditional old manor house with displays also in the old stables and bakery.

Palekastro's economy is built on fishing and agriculture, with tourism limited to July and August. It's best to have your own transport.

Orientation & Information

The main street runs through the town and forks in the town centre. The **tourist office** (☎ 28430 61546; www.palaikastro.com 🕒 9am–10pm May–Oct) changes money and has information on rooms and transport. There's an ATM next door and a postal agent near Itanos rooms. Check email at **Hellas Internet Café** (🕒 10am–11.30pm). The bus stop is in the centre of town.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Hellas (☎ 28430 61240; hellas_h@otenet.gr; s/d €30–45; 🕒) This place offers simple rooms with air-con, TV, telephone and fridge, updated bathrooms and double-glazed windows. Downstairs at the taverna, Marika cooks up reputedly the best lunch in town, with hearty home-style cooking (dishes €4–6.90). The *stifado* (stew) and aubergine *imam* (Turkish vegetable stew) are recommended.

Hiona Holiday Hotel (☎ 28430 29623; s/d €50/60) If you want modern, this new hotel has a glitzy exterior and more of a city hotel feel, but the rooms are tastefully decorated and have decent facilities.

To Finistrini (☎ 28430 61117; mezedes €2–6) About 200m along the Vai road, this neat little *ouzerie-cum-mezedopoleio* (mezes restaurant) dishes up tasty mezedes that go down well with a shot or 10 of raki.

Mythos (☎ 28430 61243; mains €4.80–5.90) Opposite Hellas, this pleasant and popular taverna has a big vegetarian mezes selection and traditional *mayirefta*, fish and grills.

Getting There & Away

There are five buses per day from Sitia that stop at Palekastro on the way to Vai. There are also two buses daily from Sitia to Palekastro (€2.20, 45 minutes) that continue to Kato Zakros (€4.50, 1 hour).

AROUND PALEKASTRO

Kouremenos, north of Palekastro, is a nearly deserted pebble beach with good shallow-water swimming and excellent windsurfing. You can hire boards from **Freak Surf Station** (☎ 28430 61116; www.freak-surf.com, board hire per week €190, courses from €45) on the beach.

Hiona Beach is another quiet choice to the east, with some great fish tavernas on the beach. **Hiona** (☎ 28430 61228) is considered the best of the three, with super-fresh fish, but Kakavia, which is renowned for its fish soup, is also recommended.

BURIED PALACE

About a kilometre from Palekastro town, there's a significant Minoan archaeological site believed to be part of a yet-to-be unearthed Minoan palace complex that is the second-largest Minoan city after Knossos. The **Roussolakos** site, next to Hiona beach, is being excavated by the British School of Archaeology.

Excavations have so far produced important finds such as the **Palekastro Kouros**, on display in the Sitia Archaeological Museum (p194), along with mostly Bronze Age Kamares pottery, amphorae, soapstone serpentine lamps and *pithoi* (large storage jars). The Kouros, made of gold and ivory, is believed to be the first image of a Minoan god. Archaeologists believe this site is one of two major temples on Crete referred to by Greek philosophers.

Although the site was excavated in the early 1900s, the 1960s and several times since 1988, those digs did not get to the heart of the site. With new technology used in oil exploration, archaeologists have confirmed that there is a huge structure under the olive groves nearby but it will be years before there is funding for such a massive dig and a museum would have to be built on site for the finds.

The site is open to visitors and makes for a pleasant walk. You can see the layout of the streets and there are signs indicating what was underneath the sections that were covered.

Casa di Mare (☎ 28430 25304; www.casadimare.com; studio €40–60; 🕒 🚿), opposite Kouremenos Beach, has six spacious, comfortable studios with stone floors and rustic-style décor that sleep up to four. There's a small pool among the olive groves.

Apartments Grandes (☎ 28430 61496; www.grandes.gr; q studio €65; 🕒) is a pretty place on Kouremenos Beach surrounded by a flower garden and trees. It's well-equipped, decorated with style and has a beachfront taverna.

ZAKROS & KATO ZAKROS ΖΑΚΡΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΚΑΤΩ ΖΑΚΡΟΣ

pop 753 & 15

The village of Zakros (*zah-kros*), 45km south-east of Sitia, an important agricultural centre, is the nearest permanent settlement to the east-coast Minoan site of Zakros, 7km away. While there is little incentive to linger in the village (there is only one hotel), it's a lively place where the *kafeneia* and *ouzeries* are always animated and there is rarely a tourist in sight. Zakros is the starting point for the trail through the Zakros Gorge, known as the **Valley of the Dead**. It takes its moniker from the fact that ancient burial sites are located in the numerous caves dotting the canyon walls, rather than from hapless hikers who failed to make it (see the boxed text, p200).

Kato Zakros (*kah-to zah-kros*) is just about the most tranquil place to stay on Crete's southeastern coast. It's little more than a long stretch of pebbly beach shaded by pine trees and bordered by a string of tavernas. The settlement is unlikely ever to expand, thanks to restrictions imposed by the archaeological service. Once you've done the gorge and poked around the palace site, there is little to do but relax on the beach, snorkel, fish, sleep and deliberate on what to have for dinner.

Sleeping

The domatia in Kato Zakros fill up fast in the high season, so it is best to book. If there are no rooms available you can camp at the southern end of the beach.

Stella's Apartments (☎/fax 28430 23739; www.stelapts.com; studio €40–75) These charming studios are in a lovely verdant, pine-tinged setting 800m along the old road to Zakros. Decorated with wooden furniture made by Elias, the handyman (and hiker), they have barbecues, external kitchen with an honour-system for supplies, and hammocks under the trees. They are perfect for longer stays.

Kato Zakros Palace (☎/fax 28430 29550; www.palaikastro.com/katozakropalace; r/studio/apt €45–75) Up on the hill as you approach, this is a bit of an eyesore but does have superb views and spacious new accommodation.

Four good accommodation places in Zakros are under the same **management** (☎ 28430 26893; www.katozakros.cretfamilyhotels.com).

Athena & Coral Rooms (d €30–50; 🕒) Behind the Akrogiali taverna. Athena has pleasant rooms with heavy stone walls, while Coral has excellent, small but spotless rooms equipped with a fridge and great veranda with sea views.

Katerina Apartments (apt €40–60) Four excellent stone-built studios and maisonettes opposite Stellas, which can sleep up to four and enjoy a superb setting.

Poseidon Rooms (d €20–40) Budget rooms in a great spot right on the beach, (some with shared bathrooms) and there's a communal fridge.

Eating

The rivalry can be fierce among the tavernas on the beach.

Akrogiali Taverna (☎ 28430 26893; mains €5–9) Relaxed seaside dining and excellent service from the inimitable owner Nikos Perakis. The speciality is grilled swordfish steak (€9) and the raki is excellent.

Restaurant Nikos Platanakis (☎ 28430 26887; mains €5–7.50) This well-regarded restaurant has a wide range of Greek staples such as rabbit stew, excellent *hortopitakia* (pittas with spinach and greens) and grilled meat and fish. Most of the produce is from the massive vegetable garden out the back.

Getting There & Away

There are buses to Zakros from Sitia via Palekastro (€4.50, one hour, two daily). From June to August, the buses continue to Kato Zakros.

ZAKROS PALACE

Although **Zakros Palace** (☎ 28430 26897; Kato Zakros; admission €3; 🕒 8am–7.30pm Jul–Oct, 8.30am–3pm Nov–Jun) was the last Minoan palace to have been discovered (1962), the excavations proved remarkably fruitful.

The exquisite rock-crystal vase and stone bull's head now in Iraklio's Archaeological Museum (see p149) were found at Zakros, along with a treasure trove of Minoan antiquities. Ancient Zakros, the smallest of Crete's four palatial complexes, was a major port in Minoan times, trading with Egypt, Syria,

WALKS AROUND ZAKROS

A walk through the spectacular Valley of the Dead to Kato Zakros is a must, but there are many other interesting and well-marked but little-traversed trails in the area. Not as lush and dramatic as Crete's west, the barren landscape around Zakros is nonetheless spectacular, with the aroma of wild oregano and thyme wafting from underfoot. Apart from the gorge, all the walks are unshaded but they are relatively level and much easier than the west for less-fit or older walkers. Always take food and water and wear sturdy footwear.

Most of the walking trails around Zakros have been cleared and signposted with handmade wooden signs by hiking fanatic Elias Pagianidis (find him at Stella's Apartments, p199). He is happy to pass on his knowledge of the area and update Anavasi's Zakros hiking map (which he has posted on a board at the start of the gorge). Elias' suggested walks are listed here. If you have wheels you can also drive to the start of the Hohlakies Gorge and do the one-hour walk to the lovely isolated Karoumes beach.

Zakros Gorge

The walk starts from just below Zakros village and winds its way through a narrow and (at times) soaring canyon with a riot of vegetation and wild herbs. About 3km from Zakros is an alternative starting point, but this way you miss a significant section of the gorge. The trail emerges close to the Zakros Palace, 200m from the beach (two hours).

Kato Zakros to Traostalos

About 10m from the southern mouth of the gorge is a well-marked path up to Mt Traostalos (turn right after 25 minutes at the fork in the path), which offers superb views from the rise at Skopeli (1½ hours). You can walk back the same way or continue to the Pelekita cave, taking the coastal walk back (four hours round trip).

Kato Zakros–Azokeramos–Zakros Gorge

Taking the same path towards Traostalos, this time you take the left fork towards Azokeramos. Rather than go all the way to Azokeramos, at the marked junction near Skafi, veer left towards Vahlias and follow the dry Xeropotamos riverbed south, which meets the Zakros gorge at Lenika, taking you back to the beach (three hours round trip).

Northern coastal walk: Zakros–Pelekita–Karoumes Beach

This is a spectacular route above the sea past an ancient quarry and cave at Pelekita (2½ hours).

Southern coastal walk: Zakros–Xerokambos–Katsounaki Beach

A walk along the east coast (1¾ hours).

Anatolia and Cyprus. The ruins are not well preserved and water levels have risen over the years so that some parts of the palace complex are submerged (and home to many turtles).

If you enter the palace complex on the southern side you will first come to the **workshops** for the palace. The **King's apartment** and **Queen's apartment** are to the right of the entrance. Next to the King's apartment is the **Cistern Hall**, which once had a cistern in the centre surrounded by a colonnaded balustrade. Seven steps descended to the floor of the cistern, which may have been a swimming pool, an aquarium or a pool for a sacred boat. Nearby, the **Central Court**

was the focal point of the whole palace. Notice the altar base in the northwestern corner of the court; there was also a **well** in the southeast corner of the court at the bottom of eight steps. When the site was excavated the well contained the preserved remains of olives that may have been offered to the deities.

Adjacent to the central court is the **Hall of Ceremonies** in which two rhytons were found. To the south is the **Banquet Hall**, so named for the quantity of wine vases found there. To the north of the central court is the **kitchen**. The column bases probably supported the dining room above. To the west of the central court is

another **light well** and to the left of the banquet hall is the **Lustral Basin**, which once contained a magnificent marble amphora. The Lustral Basin served as a washroom for those entering the nearby **Central Shrine**. You can still see a ledge and a niche in the south wall for the ceremonial idols.

Below the Lustral Basin is the **Treasury**, which yielded nearly a hundred jars and rhytons. Next to the treasury is the **Archive Room** that once contained Linear A record tablets. Northeast of the archives room is the **bathroom** with a cesspit.

XEROKAMBOS ΞΕΡΟΚΑΜΠΟΣ

pop 28

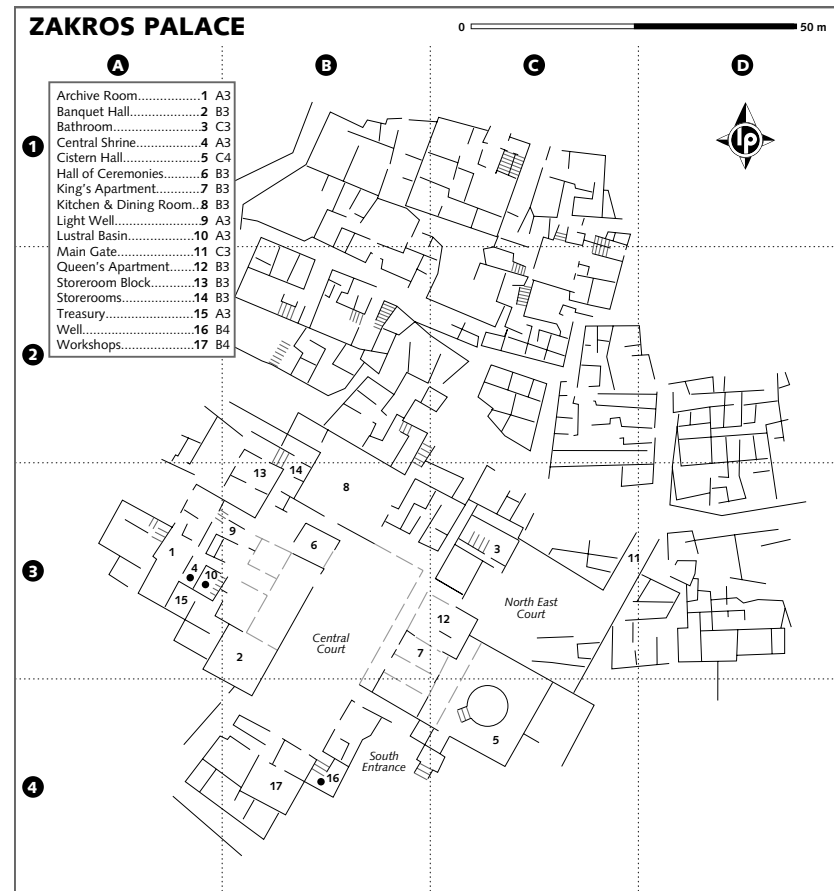
Xerokambos (kse-ro-kam-bos) is a quiet and spread-out agricultural settlement on the

far southeastern flank of Crete. Its isolation means that tourism is pretty much low key and most certainly of the unpackaged kind. Its appeal lies in that very isolation. There are a couple of splendid beaches, a few scattered tavernas and studio accommodation.

Ambelos Beach, north of the rocky headland that splits Xerokambos in two, is a small, intimate beach and enjoys some shade. **Mazidas Beach**, on the south, is larger but has no shade. Most accommodation and tavernas are near Ambelos. There is a well-stocked mini-market on the north side of Mazidas Beach.

Sleeping & Eating

Ambelos Beach Studios (☎/fax 28430 26759; studio €30-40) These cosy studios have basic



kitchenettes, fridges and flyscreens. There is a barbecue and outdoor wood oven for guests, and a tree-shaded garden courtyard that makes it well-suited to families. It's just across from the beach.

Akti Apartments (☎ 28430 26780; studio €35-45; 🏠) With balconies overlooking the beach, these comfortable studios are perfect for couples. They are light and nicely decorated and have kitchenettes. There are also family apartments (€65-80).

Villa Petrino (☎ 28430 26702; www.xerokampos.eu; d €40; 🏠) These attractive, large, fully equipped apartments are suitable for families. Overlooking the garden, they have built-in beds, marble floors and the top rooms have beach views.

Kostas Taverna (☎ 28430 26702; mains €3-6) Next to Villa Petrino, this friendly and well-regarded taverna has a shady veranda with views out to sea. The multilingual owner, Nikos, is happy to show you the day's offering in the trays and pots in the kitchen. Try the rabbit *rismarato* with rosemary and vinegar served with hand-cut fried potatoes.

Akrogiali Taverna (☎ 28430 26777; mains €4.50-8) Near Ambelos Beach Studios, this is the only real beachside taverna in Xerokambos. Under new management, it does a range of mezedes, grills and home-style specials such as rabbit (in busy periods).

Getting There & Away

There are no buses to Xerokambos. From Zakros there's a signposted turnoff to Xerokambos, via an 8km winding dirt road that is rough but drivable in a conventional vehicle (it was slowly being asphalted when we were there). Otherwise there is a good paved road from Ziros.

SOUTH COAST

IERAPETRA ΙΕΡΑΠΕΤΡΑ

pop 11,877

Ierapetra (yeh-rah-pet-rah) is Europe's most southerly major town that services the surrounding farming region. Ierapetra's main business continues to be agriculture rather than tourism, as the greenhouses that line the landscape along the coast will attest. Despite being one of the wealthiest cities in Greece, it is a largely unremarkable place

and it attracts relatively few tourists. There are tavernas and cafés along the waterfront, a small Venetian fort on the harbour and the odd remnant of a Turkish quarter. The town beach and surrounding beaches are good, the nightlife busy enough and the scene is still Cretan enough to give you a less touristic experience of the island.

Ierapetra was an important city for the Dorians and the last city to fall to the Romans, who made it a major port of call in their conquest of Egypt. The city languished under the Venetians, but they did build the small fortress at the western end of the harbour.

From Ierapetra you can visit the offshore, low-lying, sandy island of Gaidouronisi (also known as Hrysi).

Every Saturday there is a street market on Psilinaki St from 7am to 2pm.

Orientation & Information

The bus station is on the eastern side of town and there are ATMs around the main square. Find town information at www.ierapetra.net.

City Netcafé (☎ 28420 23164; Kothri 6; per hr €2.50; 🕒 9am-late) Check email here.

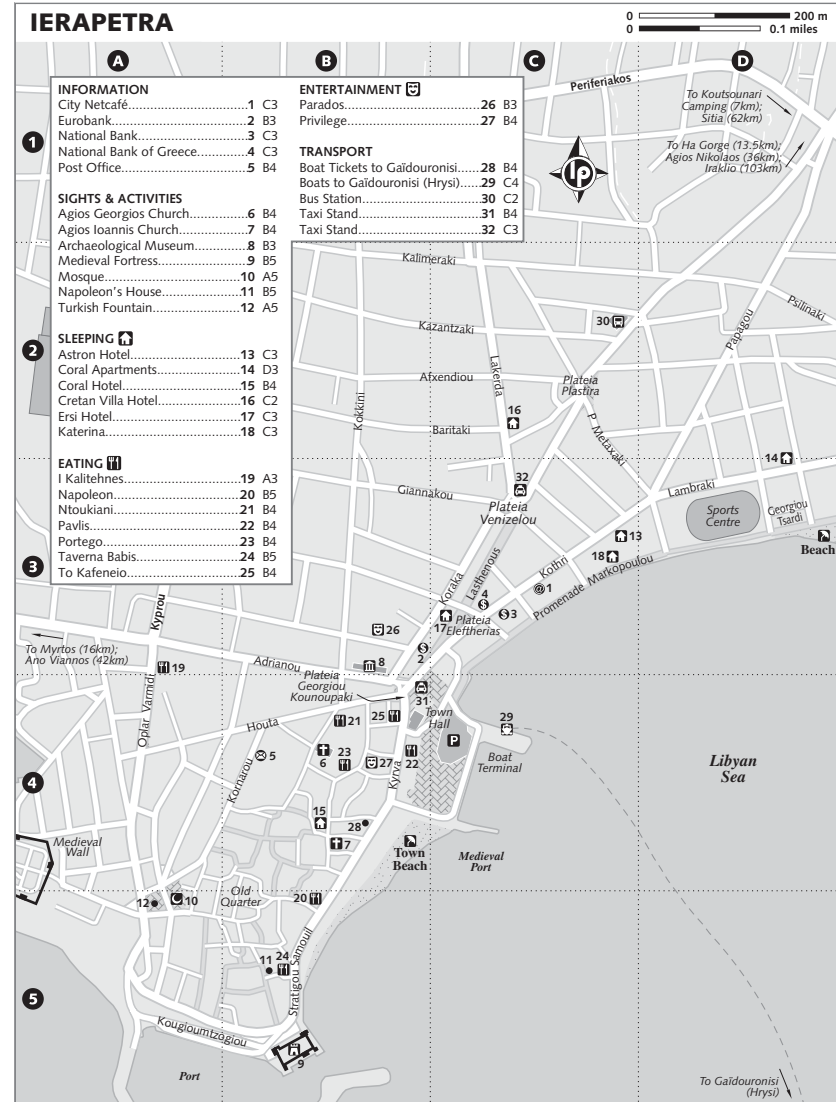
Post office (☎ 28420 22271; Kornarou 7; 🕒 7.30am-2pm)

Sights

Ierapetra's one-room **archaeological museum** (☎ 28420 28721; Adrianou (Dimokratias) 2; admission €2; 🕒 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun) is perfect for those with a short concentration span. It does have a good collection of headless classical statuary and a superb statue of the goddess Persephone that dates from the 2nd century AD. Also notable is a *larnax* (clay coffin), dated around 1300 BC, decorated with 12 painted panels showing hunting scenes, an octopus and a chariot procession. The 1899 building was a school during Ottoman times.

South along the waterfront is the **medieval fortress** (admission free; 🕒 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun), built in the early years of Venetian rule and strengthened by Francesco Morosini in 1626. It was in a pretty fragile state and closed for restoration at the time of research.

Inland from here is the labyrinthine **old quarter**, where you will see a **Turkish fountain**, the restored **mosque** with its minaret, and the old churches of **Agios Ioannis** and **Agios Georgios**. **Napoleon's house** is where the man



himself is said to have stayed incognito with a local family when his ship anchored in Crete for one night in 1798 on the way to Egypt. He apparently left a note revealing his identity.

The main **town beach** is near the harbour, while a second **beach** stretches east from the bottom of Patriarhou Metaxaki. Both have

coarse, grey sand, but the main beach offers better shade.

Festivals & Events

Ierapetra's annual **Kyrvia Festival** runs from July to August and features a wide range of concerts, plays and art exhibitions. Brochures are available in hotels and at the

town hall. Cultural events are also held in spring.

Sleeping

Koutsounari Camping (☎ 28420 61213; www.camping-koutsounari.epimlas.gr; per tent/adult €4/6) About 7km east at Koutsounari, it has a restaurant, snack bar and mini-market. Ierapetra-Sitia buses pass the site.

Ersi Hotel (☎ 28420 23208; Plateia Eleftherias 19; d €30; ♿) This refurbished central hotel has neat rooms with a fridge, TV and sea views, though some are rather compact. The same family runs the Coral and larger fully-equipped apartments (€45-60) on the other side of town

Coral Hotel (☎ 28420 22846; Katzonovatsi 12; d €30) This is another reasonable budget option in a quiet pocket of the old town.

Cretan Villa Hotel (☎ /fax 28420 28522; www.cretan-villa.com; Lakerda 16; s/d with aircon €40/50, without aircon €35/44; ♿) This well-maintained 18th-century house is the most atmospheric place in town. The traditionally furnished rooms have a fridge and TV, and there is a peaceful courtyard. It's a five-minute walk from the bus station. The rooms without air-con are cheaper.

Katerina (☎ 28420 28345; fax 28420 28591; Markopoulou 95; r €45; ♿) The sea views are the saving grace of these dreary rooms with basic bathrooms.

Astron Hotel (☎ 28420 25114; htastron@otenet.gr; Kothri 56; s/d incl breakfast €50/75; ♿) The town's top hotel, it's a block from the beach. The comfortable rooms here come with satellite TV and telephone; some have sea views.

Eating

Ierapetra has an excellent tradition of *rakadika*, relaxed evening hang-outs where a carafe of raki or wine comes with half a dozen or more tasty tid-bits, making it a good value slow dining experience. You could try **To Kafeneio** opposite the town hall, the popular **Ntoukiani** (Ethnikis Antistaseos 19) or the modern reincarnation **Pavlis**, near the port, where for €3 per carafe you get six or seven plates of excellent mezes.

our pick **Portego** (☎ 28420 27733; Foniadaki 8; mezedes €3-5, wood-oven specials €5-9) This delightful restaurant serves excellent Cretan and Greek cuisine and has dishes cooked in the wood-fired oven (as is their bread). Try the lamb in a clay pot with yogurt. It is housed in the

historic 1900s house of local character Anna Bey, whose portrait is in the back room. It has a good wine list, a lovely courtyard for summer and a cool bar.

Napoleon (☎ 28420 22410; Stratigou Samouil 26; mains €4.50-9) This is one of the oldest and most respected establishments. It's on the waterfront on the south side of town. There is fresh fish and Greek and Cretan specialties, but whatever you order is of a high quality.

Kalithenes (☎ 28420 28547; Kyrou 26; mains €4-7) This colourful little place tucked in a backstreet among hardware stores and tyre shops has great-value organic food, such as okra and potatoes and spicier falafel and kebabs introduced by the Egyptian owner, as well as its own tasty bread. The Turkish squat toilet, however, takes the exotic a little too far.

Also recommended on the waterfront are Taverna Babis, with an enormous range of mezedes, or Gorgona for fresh fish.

Entertainment

Kyrya is Ierapetra's main nightlife strip, with clubs such as Privilege and others catering to locals with non-stop Greek club music. You'll find more nightclubs around the corner on Foniadaki. Portego is a classy place for a drink, while Parados, behind the museum, is known for jazz.

Getting There & Away

There are nine buses per day from Ierapetra's **bus station** (☎ 28420 28237; Lasthanous) to Iraklio (€8.60, 2½ hours), via Agios Nikolaos (€3.30, one hour) and Gournia; seven to Sitia (€5, 1½ hours) via Koutsounari (for camp sites); and seven to Myrtos (€1.60, 30 minutes).

Taxis (☎ 28420 26600) can take you anywhere for a fixed fare. Fares are posted outside the town hall rank for destinations including Iraklio (€74), Agios Nikolaos (€33), Sitia (€50) and Myrtos (€14). There is another rank at Plateia Venizelou.

Boats for Gaidouronisi leave from the quay every morning. Most travel agents around the quay sell tickets (€15).

GAIDOURONISI (HRYSI ISLAND) ΓΑΙΔΑΡΟΥΝΗΣΙ/ΧΡΥΣΙ

Just off the coast of Ierapetra, you will find greater tranquillity at Gaidouronisi (Donkey Island) – universally marketed in Ierapetra as Hrysi or Hrisi (Golden Island) – where there are good sandy beaches, a taverna (alarmingly

rumoured to be taken over by a chain snack store), and a stand of Lebanon cedars, the only one in Europe. It can get very crowded when the tour boats are in, but you can always find a quiet spot.

In summer, **excursion boats** (€15) leave from the Ierapetra quay every morning and return in the afternoon.

HA GORGE ΦΑΡΑΓΓΙ ΧΑ

Some 13.5km north of Ierapetra is the wild and beautiful **Ha Gorge**, perhaps the most challenging gorge to traverse in all of Europe. More of an extreme climbing experience than a hike – most of the time you need ropes or must swim – the Ha Gorge is a narrow rent in the imposing mountains with water running its entire length – including 27 waterfalls. The first intrepid climbers to successfully cross it (1987) took seven days to tackle the 1800m gorge. It was secured in recent times and an experienced team of climbers can do the gut-wrenching and occasionally dangerous hike in three to six hours (see p74).

EAST OF IERAPETRA

The good beaches to the east of Ierapetra tend to be crowded in peak season and you really need a car to explore the area. About 13km east is the lovely beach of **Agias Fotias**, although it's no longer the isolated beach that was popular with campers.

Much of this coastline has been dotted by plastic-covered greenhouses and haphazard unattractive tourism development. There's little on the drive through to make you want to stop but there are some appealing tucked-away places. You would be excused for driving straight through **Koutsouras**, but just off the main road **Rovinsona's** (☎ 28430 51026; mezes €4-7; ☎ 3pm till late) is a delightful surprise, overlooking the beach under giant tamarisk trees,

with superb food and excellent music. It has a refreshing yogurt dip with purslane, but the highlight is the wood-oven pies – share the goat-and-cheese pie with fennel (€8).

Kalliotzina (☎ 28430 51207) next door is a highly regarded taverna, with tables overlooking the beach and standard taverna fare. Signposted off the beach road, **Big Blue** (☎ 28430 52100; d €40; ♿) has a range of bright studios and apartments right on the pebble beach with a pleasant beach bar.

The fine white sandy beach at the eastern end of **Makrigialos**, 24km from Ierapetra, is one of the best on the southeastern coast, but the town has been swamped by the giant Sunwing resort and other development that obscures the beachfront promenade and the pleasant port.

On the road to Sitia, you can take a detour to the abandoned medieval village of **Voila**, on a hill 1km above the village of Handras (well signposted). A relatively well-preserved tower and arches on the dwellings reveal a mix of architectural styles. There is also a flowing Venetian fountain nearby.

About 7km east of Makrigialos, on the scenic drive along the rocky coastline, is **Moni Kapsa** (☎ 28430 51638; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-8pm), built into the craggy cliffs. It has a colourful history, flourishing under small-time crook and self-proclaimed miracle worker Geronogiannis (after a timely vision from god) who used his ill-gotten fame and fortune to extend the monastery. There are some fine icons and ornate wooden temples in the chapels. The monastery is built at the mouth of the **Perivolakia Gorge** (Kapsa), a 3.5km walk from the village Perivolakia, which emerges at a decent small beach.

At the half-way point to Kapsa from Makrigialos, it is worth a detour up the hill to the signposted **Spilia Tou Drakou** (Cave of the Dragon;

MUSICAL SURPRISES

What's Pavarotti's old Bosendorfer grand piano doing in the southern resort of Makrigialos? It was one way Norwegian-born businessman Gunnar Stromsholm showed he was serious about hosting a world-class music festival in Crete. Since the first concert was held in the courtyard of his villa, Case dei Mezzo, in 2004, the **Casa dei Mezzo music festival** (☎ 28430 29183; www.casadeimezzo-festival.com; tickets €10) has become an annual event, held in June, with leading pianist and conductor Bryan Stanborough as patron and artistic director. Among the eclectic 2007 lineup was Japan's foremost soprano Ranko Kurano performing *Madame Butterfly*. Performances are held at several venues, including the original de Mezzo tower and **Epavli** – the nearby ruins of a stunning Venetian mansion in the abandoned medieval village of Etia.

ROUGHING IT

The primitive 300-year-old stone cottages at **Aspros Potamos** (☎ 28430 51694; www.asprospotamos.com; r €32-60) were traditionally used by farmers from the hillside village of Pefki during the winter. Aspros Potamos is just above Makrighalos on the road to Pefki. Twenty years ago, Aleka Halkia bought the abandoned ruins of the settlement and has slowly restored them in original style as guesthouses for people wanting to go back to nature and simple living. An award-winning eco-friendly photovoltaic system is used to heat water and power the bathroom light and fridge. The 11 cottages are lit with oil lamps and candles, and have stone floors, traditional furnishings and most have fireplaces for the winter. One has a bedroom built right into the rock face. Aleka lives there year-round and runs them with her daughter Myrto, who has now moved to town for some mod cons. It's a few kilometres along the turn-off north to Pefki. It can be a little tricky to find, so call ahead and they'll meet you.

Just above Aspros Potamos you will come across the **Stausa Workshop** (☎ 28430 51410) of artisans Maria Palumbo and Makis Ladas, who live in their isolated stone cottage year-round creating unique pieces from driftwood and other recycled natural materials. It is a pleasant walk from Makrighalos or the road is signposted on the western side of the bridge.

☎ 28430 51494). The cave is actually named after the guy who runs the taverna below, which has stunning sea views from the terrace and excellent food. Try the grilled lamb cutlets (€8.50) or the local speciality *nerati*, a *myzithra*-and-fennel pie.

MYRTOS ΜΥΡΤΟΣ

pop 425

One of the few places on this stretch of coast that retains an element of authenticity and vil-

lage ambience is Myrtos (*myr-tos*), 14km west of Ierapetra. It is popular with more mature travellers, many of whom have been coming back for years. Myrtos has no big hotels, there's a reasonable patch of beach, some decently priced places to stay and eat and some interesting excursions in the area.

There is no post office or bank. Internet access is available at **Prima Travel** (☎ 28420 51035; www.sunbudget.net; per hr €3.50), which serves as the town's quasi-tourist office and leads guided walks around the area.

DETOUR: THE HINTERLAND

There is some great off-road exploring to be done in the mountains above Ierapetra and the lesser-known misty Omalos Plateau if you have the right vehicle. But even in a conventional vehicle (or on foot) you can see some relatively untrodden parts of Crete. There are several routes to explore. Taking the scenic road northeast from Ierapetra, you pass the **Bramiana Dam**, a manmade dam that has become a significant wetland for migratory birds. From above, you can see the scale of the plastic greenhouses but then you enter a dramatic ever-changing mountain landscapes, from barren rocky precipices to verdant forests. From the peak of the picturesque village of **Kalamafka**, one of the narrowest and highest points on the island, you can see both the north coast and the Libyan sea to the south.

South of Kalamafka is the heritage-protected, virtually abandoned village of **Anatoli**, which is being restored thanks to EU funds. It has a remarkably preserved main street with original shopfronts, and at the time of research a couple of guesthouses were opening in anticipation of the village's revival.

Just outside Males is the tiny **Agia Paraskevi chapel** built into the rock face near a running waterfall and café. The old-style taverna on the road below the chapel is run by an elderly couple who just cook a bit extra for occasional passing guests, so there are only a few options (we had the local speciality *gardoumia* – stomach wrapped in intestines).

At the foot of the superb **Selekano forest**, part of the E4 trail, is the tiny village of Selekano, which was one of the last places in Crete to get power – in 2006. Until then the quaint **Stella's kafeneio** used to run on a wood oven and gas. Her shady vine canopy is a good place for a break. There is a scenic drive back to Myrtos via Mythi.

Myrtos' small **museum** (☎ 28420 51065; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri) houses the private collection of a former teacher who sparked the archaeological digs in the area after finding Minoan artefacts on field trips with students. The collection includes Vasiliki pottery from the nearby Minoan sites of **Fournou-Korifi** and **Pyrgos** as well as an impressive model of the Fournou-Korifi site exactly as it was found, with all the pots and items in situ.

The consensus on the waterfront tavernas seems to be Taverna Akti for the daily specials, Manos at the eastern end for grilled meats and Beach on the west side for fresh fish and mezés.

Big Blue (☎ 28420 51094; www.big-blue.gr; d/studio/ apt €35/60/75; ☎) On the western edge of town, this is one of the best places to stay and is handy for the beach. You have a choice of more expensive, large airy studios with sea views, or cheaper, cosy ground-floor rooms. All have cooking facilities.

Cretan Rooms (☎ 28420 51427; d €35) These cosy, excellent traditional-styled rooms with balconies, fridges and shared kitchens are popular with independent travellers. Owner Maria Daskalaki keeps them neat and clean. They are prominently signposted from the main street.

Hotel Myrtos (☎ 28420 51227; www.myrtoshotel.com; s/d/triple incl breakfast €30/35/40; ☎) This superior C-class place in the middle of the main street has large, well-kept rooms with TV, phone, mini-bar and balconies. Its taverna (mains €4 to €7) is popular with both locals and tourists for its wide range of mezés and *mayirefta*, which include many vegetarian dishes.

Platanos (☎ 28420 51363; mains €4.50-8) This seems to be the heartbeat of the town for foreigners. It's a cosy place for a drink or dinner under a giant plane tree.

There are seven buses daily from Ierapetra to Myrtos (€1.60, 30 minutes).

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