



Crete treats

With wine, spa and superb sea views, eastern Crete offers a well-balanced diet of indulgence, writes **Jo Cooke**

You can't help but love the Greek islands – and Crete is the cream of the crop. The furthest south, it has a long season, lots of sunshine and being the largest island of all, you're never short of things to do.

While many of its siblings can be summed up in a day's island tour, you'd need weeks to get to all the nooks and crannies of this baby. The trick is to pick a corner, base yourself there, and then explore.

I joined a charismatic bunch of travel agents heading to the northeastern side of the island, via an Aegean Airlines flight to capital Heraklion.

CLASSICAL CRETE

Heraklion seamlessly blends classical and contemporary. The 16th-century city walls soar above the waterfront, complemented by Castello a Mare, a fortress that extends along the harbour. Continue west and you hit the swanky promenade, with its coffee shops and cocktail bars. It's clear the residents here have flair – and always have done, if Heraklion Archaeological Museum is anything to go by. It's packed full of bejewelled and gilded artefacts.

Heraklion may be the current capital of Crete, but in antiquity it was its near-neighbour, Knossos, that ran the show. A grand Minoan palace marks the spot, reconstructed to resemble its 1900BC counterpart. This was the des-res of past millennia, a cutting-edge abode

for royals and their courtiers. Grab a tour guide at the door, and marvel at the columns, frescoes, pottery and clever mod-cons, including an 'air-conditioning' system.

The grapes on those frescoes are a clue to a Cretan tradition that dates back some 3,500 years, too: winemaking. We were whisked off into the hills by local firm Politis Transfer Services to the Douloufakis family's winery, where four generations have crafted a robust

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syrah and perky chardonnay. There are tasting rooms in the village of Dafnes, or you can sample their wares, as we did, while dining on home-cooked meze dishes at a shepherd's hut surrounded by rolling vineyards.

All of this is within easy reach of the Aldemar Royal Mare. This five-star pad, set on the long and undeveloped Anissaras beach, was our base. Together with sister properties, Aldemar Knossos Royal and Aldemar Cretan Village, guests pretty much have Anissaras all to themselves, plus it's just 25 minutes from Heraklion airport. “This is a great location, and the ➤

DESTINATIONS

GREECE & CYPRUS | CRETE



Aldemar Royal Mare

This 391-room resort is for luxury lovers, with low-rise blocks between bursts of vegetation, service that's attentive and exceptional food. "The Royal Mare has some of the best kids' facilities I have seen, plus separate pools for children and adults," says Lisa Rhodes of Travel Directors. aldemarroymare.gr

Aldemar Cretan Village

Made up of white-washed buildings with trailing bougainvillea tumbling from their balconies, this recently renovated hotel has 322 bright rooms and a village vibe. Vanessa de Vere of Travel Counsellors says: "I love its retro-chic. I wouldn't hesitate to send clients who seek tradition and comfort here." aldemarcretanvillage.gr

Aldemar Knossos Royal

This Minoan-themed hotel has a cliff-top chapel, 413 rooms and an extensive animation programme. "Family rooms have a great layout with a dividing wall that means you're not on top of each other," says Suda Gray of Travel PA. "There's even a kids' restaurant with kid-sized counters, tables and chairs," adds Blue Sea Holidays' Paul Edwards. aldemarknossosroyal.gr



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Knossos palace; the agent group; Heraklion

PICTURES: Shutterstock;

pace changes between the properties, meaning you can send a range of clients here," said Daniel Reed, independent travel consultant at Reed Travel. There's certainly a sense of seclusion, despite being just a 10-minute shuttle ride from tourist hub Hersonissos.

TEXTBOOK GREECE

From Hersonissos, you can catch a bus west into Heraklion or east to Agios Nikolaos. The latter is textbook Greece. A sizeable seaside town that feels more like a fishing village, Agios Nikolaos is touched by the ocean on all sides, with a beach and marina at one end, and picturesque ferry port at the other.

The pedestrianised 28 Oktovriou Street links the two, lined with speciality shops selling ceramics, olive oils, herbs, wood-carved kitchenalia, natural bath products and sea sponges among irresistible upscale souvenirs.

There's one further feather in Agios Nikolaos' cap. An inlet of water feeds a small lake where waterfowl hang out around a miniature church carved into the cliff face.

After a morning's sightseeing, the next stop can only be the Royal Mare's thalasso spa – a temple of wellbeing spread over three floors. There's a hammam, plunge pools, seaweed body wraps, aromatherapy

massage, aqua bikes, hydro-jet baths and weight-loss programmes, all designed to send you home feeling on cloud nine. Emma Taylor, personal travel agent at Mid-Countries Co-operative, says: "I'm impressed by the staff and their outstanding knowledge. It's perfect for girls' breaks, but more for those who want some health-conscious pampering than a hen party."

BOOK IT

Wellbeing Escapes' Wellbeing Booster package at Aldemar Royal Mare starts at £811 per person, including four nights' half-board, spa treatments and transfers. wellbeingescapes.com

Jet2holidays offers a week's all-inclusive at Aldemar Cretan Village from £599 per person, based on four sharing with flights from Manchester on May 16, 2020. jet2holidays.com

Tui has seven nights' all-inclusive at the Aldemar Knossos Royal from £777 per person, flying from Norwich on May 5, 2020. tui.co.uk

CRETAN DELIGHTS

Samaria Gorge: Take a spectacular six-hour hike through ravines and pine forest.

Elafonisi: Sail from Paleohora to this lagoon-like, white-sand beach tickled by shallow turquoise water.

Chania: Lap up this city's Italianate atmosphere and Venetian-era buildings.

Olive-oil factory: Take a tour of the Paraschakis family's olive-oil factory near Rethymnon.

GETTING THERE



Aegean Airlines offers four daily flights from Heathrow to Athens year-round, plus seasonal flights from Manchester and Edinburgh. One-way fares from Heathrow start at £75.

aegeanair.com