

CRETE IS SPECIAL! CRETANS ARE DIFFERENT!

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I should know! I have been married to a Cretan for more than 43 years. I first read about Crete in my college days in the early 1950s. One of my university professors had gone to Crete on a mission for the United Nations, and he gave me a copy of a bleak report about the poverty on the island. The first time I saw Crete was when I went there for my wedding to Maro Liapakis in December 1961. My family from Makedonia and I flew on a DC-3, the WW II propeller plane that rested inclined on 3 wheels, and the 6 of us were the only passengers on it. The second trip was in 1966, when we bought a microbus in Germany and drove it to Greece with our 3 children.

In 1966, we camped one weekend at Elounda beach by Agios Nikolaos in Crete. There was nothing at that magical spot. A shepherd cooked eggs and potatoes for us in a decrepit hut while attending his flock of sheep and goats that were devouring the vegetation of the beach. Then the Germans, who were still being taught classical Greek and Greek history in their schools, having recovered from WW II, started flocking to archaeological sites in Crete. The tourist boom of the 1970s

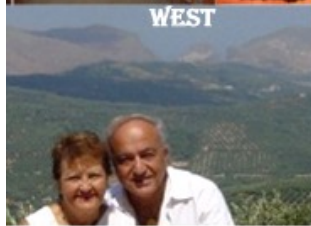


followed and **Elounda Beach** became the site of 5-star resorts of world renown [having *Patakos*, a Cretan army colonel, in the Junta of dictators that took over the Government in 1967, helped ease the acquisition of the shorelines and the issuance of building permits]. The rich and the powerful vacation now in Elounda arriving on private helicopters and

luxurious yachts. The entire north shores of Crete are filled with hotels and tourist shops to the dismay of environmentalists and the delight of bankers. Crete has become one of the richest regions of Greece. For holidays, there is no better place in the whole world to tour than Crete. I should know, I have been traveling around the globe for half a century now.

Crete has some of the most magnificent mountain peaks. They are everywhere throughout the entire 260-km length of the island. There are more than 10 mountain ranges above 3000 feet elevation. Elegant Mount Psiloritis in the center and the aristocratic White Mountains in the west are above 8000 feet. Historical Diktis of the Lasithi range in the east above our village of Avdou is over 7000 feet. The island being only 56 km in width at its broadest, the luminous blue sea is in view everywhere from the pristine **pink beach** at Falásarna in the West to the imperial grove of **palm trees** at Vai beach in the

East. One can go from the populated North with the opulent resorts to the isolated cliff beaches in the South facing the warm waters of the Libyan Sea in a matter of minutes. The **Farangi of Samaria**, the longest gorge in whole of Europe, is a "must" for every visitor to walk its 16 km base from Omalos in the North to Agia Roumeli in the South where tavernas with cold beer and fresh fish await the exhausted trekkers. [A British submarine was awaiting King George and the rest of the Greek government who escaped to Egypt by walking through the Samaria Gorge when the Nazis parachuted onto Crete in 1941, but more on those poignant events later in this article!]



Dining at sunset time by the quaint harbor of **Hania** in the west is an experience that cannot be matched anywhere in the world. Cretan diet has been discovered as the best. In the center of Crete, I suggest the tavernas in the serpentine narrow streets of **Rethymnon** where the most massive Venetian fortresses in the Mediterranean surround its small harbor. The epicenter of business and entertainment is medieval, labyrinthine **Heraklion**, named after the "All Greek" hero Hercules. There, I suggest making several visits to the best endowed archaeological museum in the whole world and a pilgrimage to the nearby ruins of the Minoan palace in Knossos.

There are hundreds of historically interesting monasteries to visit in Crete but my favorites are three. In the West, The **church of Prophet Eliseo** on a hill with breath-taking vistas in all directions, in Dromonero, 16 km south of Hania, on the spot where the last battle for independence from the Turks was fought in 1896 and was concluded with a truce on 14 June, the name day of Prophet Eliseo. In the center, the historical **Arkadi Monastery**, 16 km south of Rethymnon where the monks dynamited the convent rather than surrender to the Turks. In the East, the wonderful and unique Byzantine icons at the convent of **Panagia Kirá in Kritsá**, 16 km south of Agios Nikolaos.

But we are jumping ahead of the story. Let us go back to the beginning of time.

The cataclysm of 7500 years ago caused by the melting of the ice that covered most of Europe filled up the Pontos Lake [Ευξεινός Πόντος] and made it into what is now called the “Black Sea”. [A pejorative name given by the Ottoman Turks, who having come from the inland steppes of Asia did not have the skills of Jason and his Argonauts, and so the Turks could not navigate the tempestuous waters of Pontos]. The Pontian farmers and fishermen who managed to escape the flood through the Caucasus Mountains settled into Anatolia and from there to the Aegean islands. By the 3rd millennium before Christ, there were settlements in Crete. This was the time that cultivation of olives began producing oil for cooking, for light and for therapeutic purposes. Community development with **palaces in Knossos, Malia, and Faestos** followed from wealth gained with extensive olive oil trade with the surrounding islands, Asia and Africa. With no enemies, the Minoan empire millennia were times of peaceful colonization of Karpathos and Santorini [Θερα], control of Athens and the Aegean Sea, and of major cultural breakthroughs of global significance!

Plumbing for cities, painting frescoes that could last thousands of years, urban drainage, systems for storage of grains and other food commodities, shipping, pottery, jewelry of exquisite quality and many other crafts were developed during the Minoan Kingdom. But the biggest



contribution was the development of rudimentary alphabet that eventually produced the Greek letters and the passing of knowledge through the printing of words. To appreciate this, I suggest you visit the **ruins at Górdyna** in southern Crete, and stare at the marble tablets that have all the laws of that time inscribed on them in full detail including the punishment for sexual harassment! The best time to visit, by the way, would be on the night of the August full moon when the Gordyna basilica park hosts a night of classical music, under the stars, as is being done in many other archeological sites in Greece. Linear B that was finally deciphered in the 1950s by young M Ventris [who soon thereafter was killed in a car accident] was proven the foundation of an alphabet that led to writing and communicating in 750 BC when Homer published **the ILIAD** and **the ODYSSEY**, thousands of years before Gutenberg produced the printing press in Germany.

A German engineer who was visiting me in Columbus a few years ago became distraught when he saw in the car plates that Ohio was being advertised as the birthplace of aviation. He was taught that aviation was invented in Germany. Well I have news for both Ohioans and Germans. Ohio may be the birthplace of modern aviation, but **the original first ever human flight took place in Crete, 3500 years ago**. In fact, I even know the spot from which Daedalus and his son Ikarus took off on their maiden human flight. It is a cave on the side of a foreboding mountain of the Lasithi range that overshadows “our” village of Avdou. The cave is almost impossible to access. Even goats have difficulty clambering over the boulders to reach the cave. I know. We baptized 2 of our 9 grandchildren in the chapel inside that cave that houses the miraculous chapel of Agia Foteini. By the way, there are over 2000 caves in Crete and each one of them has a story to tell because they were used from thousands of years as shelters, as cult centers, as refuge from pirates, and later as grottos of Christian saints. The caves at Eleftherna south of Rethymnon are ingenious and thus worth your visit along with the latest excavations adjacent to the hideouts of escaped slaves in ancient times.

The mountain facing Avdou is now used as the site for the national paragliding championships. The steep incline of the slope creates amicable thermal currents to help the parachutists take off and stay aloft for hours at a time at the pleasure of Aeolus, the god of wind, who helped Daedalus realize the first ever human flight. My legend has it that “our mountain” was the place from which **Daedalus and his son Ikarus** took off in their wax-winged aircraft back 3500 years ago. They were escaping the wrath of King Minos who did not want the architect of his palaces to reveal the secrets of the labyrinthine city to his adversaries. The Minoan palace in nearby Knossos, unearthed by Sir Evans of England in the early 1900s, had so many corridors and hidden rooms, that Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, tied a rope from a ball of twine to the waist of Prince Theseus, son of king Aegeus of Athens for whom the Aegean Sea was named, so that Theseus could find his way back after wrestling and killing the Minotaur, the half bull-half man, whom King Minos kept imprisoned in the labyrinth. Theseus and Ariadne sailed away from Crete. But Theseus abandoned Ariadne on the island of Naxos, halfway to Athens, where Ariadne was rescued by *Dionysus*, the god of wine and festivals, a wonderful story that has become the theme for operas, mural paintings, and literary works by some of the greatest artists in the world.



Our mountain and our cave are a foreboding sight, which confirmed in my mind that Daedalus and Ikarus had used this cave to hide the enormous amounts of beeswax [which would explain why the sinuous cave footpath to the chapel is waxy and slippery] needed to build their wings. This region must have been a wax producing area. Until fifty years ago, my wife’s grandfather had cauldrons [καζάνια] of beeswax in which he made wax [κερί] in the basement of his house in Hersonissos by the Aegean Sea, only a few miles north from Avdoú; also, a village a few miles south of Avdoú, across from the cave, is named Kerá, which could come from “wax,” as the Greek word for wax is “keri”. According to historians, Crete is the first place in the world where people cultivated bees, the first honey makers. Cretans were the first to herd sheep and the first to use bows and arrows for hunting; the first to cultivate and process olives on a continuous basis. Pezá and Arhánēs are famous for their wines from time immemorial. [By the way, every villager and every taverna owner will avow that his wine and

tsikoudia [ρακή] made from his own grapes or olive oil pressed from his own grove is the best in the world, even though for most of their world does not extend beyond the borders of their village]!

Daedalus and his son Ikarus took off from our cave during a foggy day when the clouds covered the entrance but not the valley. The cool clouds protected their wings of wax from melting. When young brash Ikarus ventured above the clouds, when they were 125 kilometers into the Aegean Sea, his wings melted from exposure to the sun, and he fell into the sea. On the spot where he fell, near Naxos, rose the island of Ikaria. We have several people from Ikaria in our community. The academy where Greek Air Force pilots are trained to fly fighter jets is called "*Ikarus Academy*" [Σχολή Ικαρών]. In the 1980s, a champion cyclist, Nikos Papadopoulos, pedaled the 125 km distance in the air from Crete to Ikaria on a contraption designed by MIT engineering students, demonstrating that **legends do indeed have a factual base**.

The tranquility of the Minoan civilization ended with the invention of iron in the North and the invasion of the militant Doric tribes from mainland Greece. Crete became a subject of the Kingdom of Mykines of Peloponnesos, and Crete's history thereafter became intertwined with that of the rest of the regions of Greece. **Odysseus** spent a few months in Crete on his wanderings home to Ithaca from the Trojan War. The chief naval officer of the expedition of Alexander into Asia and some 7000 soldiers were from Crete. Cretans became famous and notorious as mercenary soldiers. Crete became part of the Roman Empire 71 BC and part of the Byzantine Empire when Emperor Constantine moved the imperial capital from Rome to **Byzantium in 330 AD**.



Crete was Christianized by a pupil of **Apostle Paul**, Titus, who is the patron saint of Crete. His head is enthroned in the church of Saint Titus in Heraklion. In his letters to Titus, Apostle Paul urges him to be tough with Cretans because they are different and fiercely independent, for which I can vouch, also! Crete, during the dark middle ages, produced world legendary iconographers like El Greco [Domenico Theotokopoulos] who moved to imperial Spain and M Damaskinos. A visit to the home of El Greco by the **village of Fodele** 20 km west of Heraklion is a "must" pilgrimage. After the visit, go for a coffee under the gnarled platanos tree by the stream that crosses the village, a tree that was there when El Greco was growing up. Another bright star was V Kornaros who wrote that astonishing poem story "*Erotokritos*".

When the Byzantine Empire began to decline, Crete became the arena of pirates like the notorious Barbarossa who burned down Rethymnon. Arab Saracens made Crete the center of their slave trade from 824 to 961. In 1204, the 4th Crusade was financed and lead by the 80-year old blind ruler of Venice. Instead of leading his Christian army to free Jerusalem from the Muslims, he headed straight to Constantinople, raided the town after destroying the naval forces of the weakened Byzantine Empire, ransacked, plundered, and pillaged the city robbing it of its precious icons and wealth, and occupied Crete and other islands. Venice became the ruler of the seas. The Venetian castles and forts that dominate the entrances to all the three major harbors and strategic peninsulas on Crete and most of the capes of mainland Greece are testimonies to the Venetian rule that controlled trade in the Mediterranean for 4 centuries. The Ottoman Turks, after laying a siege of Heraklion [*Candia under the Venetian name*] that lasted 22 years during which 118,000 Turks and 22,000 Cretans were killed, subjugated the whole of Crete in 1648 and ruled until 1896 when Crete became autonomous. But Crete did not join Greece [Ενωσης] until 1913 thanks to the political brilliance of **E. Venizelos**, the man for whom the new Athens international airport is named.

Crete withstood successive waves of invaders over its long history but its resistance to the German parachute invasion in May 20, 1941, was indeed heroic and is now the subject of a documentary that a Greek-American filmmaker Christos Emerson made, whose web site is worth visiting for those interested in the details, www.crete1941.com. Nowadays Crete is being invaded again annually by millions of Germans but they are peaceful tourists who are spending enough money to make Crete a place where some locals can work hard 6 months and party the rest of the year.

"Everyone who has visited Crete cannot help but admire the uniqueness of the island, its size, the variety and intensity of vistas, the immense views of mountain and sea that are incongruous in many respects but demand your attention, the uniqueness of their lyra-based music, the energy of their dances, the delight in their heritage, the arrogance of their independence, etc." Elissaios

But one cannot really appreciate Crete and Cretans without reading the most famous writer of all of Greece, the brightest son of Crete, **Nikos Kazantzakis**, for whom the modernized international airport is named in Heraklion. Kazantzakis is by far the writer who best captured the spirit of Greeks and the ethos of Cretans. His books have become classics: "Freedom or Death" [*the struggle (παλικαρια) of Cretans against the Turks in the 19th century*], "Zorba the Greek" [*the adventures of a free-spirit from Makedonia in Crete at the beginning of the 20th century*]; "Greek Passion" [*the tragedy of refugees from*

Anatolia trying to relocate after WW I]; "*Fratricides*" [*the tragedy of the civil war after WW II*]; "Report to Greco" [*childhood in austere Crete and the influence of history and religion on a future writer, philosopher; an essential read*]. They are all published in several languages including English, but if you can read them in their original Greek, you will be delighted! His mastery of the Greek language is unparalleled. A few years ago, we had lunch with Michael Chaplin the son of the famous actor Charlie Chaplin who flew to Heraklion from Switzerland with his wife Patricia specially to attend a symposium on the writings of Kazantzakis. The granddaughter of Zorba, who now lives in Serbia, also attended the symposium.

In modern times, many Cretans have become world renown. Is there any one who does not know and not enjoy the music of **Mikis Theodorakis** or **Manos Hadjidakis**? Nobel Laureate **Odysseas Elytis**, whose poems were in the classical

Greek tradition starting with Homer 2700 years ago, was born in Crete where his family that was from Lesvos owned soap factories in Crete. Crete has produced sons and daughters who have reached the pinnacle of their respective professions in America, and in our mists, I have picked 2 to represent Cretan pride. Dr. Manolis Tzagournis and Haralambos Michelakis-Meshel. A synopsis of their life and achievements is featured in this issue. Let me stop here, because naming people is risky as one always misses a person who is someone's favorite.

But the most famous of all Cretans is **Zeus** [*Jupiter in Latin; ΔΙΑΣ in Greek*]. When Kronos, the supreme ruler of the universe, was told that one of his sons would dethrone him, he began to devour his sons as they were born. His wife Rhea went to Crete to deliver Zeus and hid him in a cave in the Lasithi Mountains overlooking Avdou. To foul Kronos, she threw a boulder for him to gulp down instead of the newborn. Then she got some teenagers, the Kourites, to be the babysitters. The Kourites would crash their bronze weapons against their shields and sing loudly to prevent Kronos from hearing the cries of baby Zeus. The songs and dances of the Kourites was the beginning of the Cretan music. Zeus, with the aid of other Titans [like Ocean, Hyperion, Atlas, Prometheus, etc], dethroned Kronos who fled to Italy where he helped bring about the golden age of Rome that followed that of Greece. The Greeks and the Romans chose Zeus as the leader of their **12 OLYMPIAN gods** [*in current times, the 11 national soccer players plus Zeus, their German coach, who won the European Football Championship beating the TITANS of world soccer France, Germany, et al, on July 4, 2004!*]. One of Zeus many intriguing deeds was his metamorphosis into a bull to entice the captivatingly beautiful daughter of the king of Phoenicia in Lebanon by the name of Europa to ride the bull. Zeus flew her to Crete, had children with her, king Minos being one of them, the bull became the revered animal of Crete, and Zeus honored his bride by naming the whole continent **Europe**.

So you too, dear reader, [*if indeed you had the patience to read this far*], must be convinced by now why historians consider **Crete the place where everything began!** Like my esteemed friend Sr. Eduardo Robledo, former Ambassador of Mexico to Argentina, who along with his wife Alexandra visited us in Avdou, Crete, in 2004 for the baptism of our granddaughter, told me:

“To get to know the world and the origin of our culture, it is necessary to begin with Crete! That is why, if I have my way with my own grandchildren, their first trip outside of Mexico will not be in New York, Paris, or Madrid; it will be CRETE!”

There is no better compliment than that! *ΠΑΝΤΑ ΓΕΙΑ, ΚΡΗΤΗ!*