Crete: 8-Day Self-Drive - Minoan Sites, Beaches & Venetian Towns

8 days / 7 nights | Heraklion, Crete



Explore Crete at your own pace, from Minoan palaces and Venetian harbours to south-coast villages and turquoise lagoons. This eight-day self-drive connects Heraklion, Agios Nikolaos, Matala, Chania and Rethymno, with seven nights' accommodation, breakfast and a rental car arranged for you.

YOUR JOURNEY

Begin in Heraklion, where the island's Minoan heritage meets its Venetian waterfront, before travelling east to Agios Nikolaos and Elounda. Cross to Matala on the south coast, then continue west to Chania and finish among Rethymno's old-town lanes.

Your hotels and rental car provide the framework; how you spend each day is up to you. Explore Knossos, arrange a boat trip to Spinalonga, linger over Cretan food or choose a beach day around western Crete. The itinerary offers ideas rather than a guided programme: visits, activities and excursions are optional and paid separately unless expressly included in your booking.

DAY-BY-DAY ITINERARY

DAY 1 | Arrive in Heraklion

Collect your rental car at Heraklion Airport and begin exploring Crete's largest city. Its layers of Byzantine, Venetian and Ottoman history unfold around the old centre, the Venetian port and the imposing Koules fortress. The Archaeological Museum offers an introduction to the Minoan treasures discovered at Knossos, Phaistos and other sites.

If your flight lands later in the day, head straight to your accommodation. The next morning, choose between spending time on Heraklion's sights or following the Day 2 route to Knossos, Elounda and Agios Nikolaos; trying to fit both in may feel rushed. An optional cooking or Cretan dance experience can add a local flavour to your stay; arrange activities in advance.

Approximate driving time: 20-30 minutes from the airport.

Overnight: Heraklion area.

DAY 2 | Knossos, Elounda and Agios Nikolaos

Start early at Knossos Palace, just south of Heraklion, and allow around two hours to explore the Minoan site associated with King Minos and the legend of the Minotaur. A Cretan wine tasting can be arranged as an optional stop before you continue east.

Drive on to the Elounda area (around 1 hour 15 minutes from Knossos) and stop for lunch by the water. Continue to the village of Plaka for views across to Spinalonga, the Venetian island fortress that features in Victoria Hislop's novel The Island. The boat trip to Spinalonga is optional and is best kept for Day 3 if you would rather not rush. Finish the day in Agios Nikolaos, where you stay for two nights, with time to stroll around Lake Voulismeni before dinner.

Approximate driving time: 1 hour 30 minutes, plus stops.

Overnight: Agios Nikolaos area.

DAY 3 | A day around Agios Nikolaos

Spend the day at your own pace. Options include:

Spinalonga: an optional boat trip from Elounda or Plaka, allowing around three hours in total. Boats depend on season and weather.
Lato: the ancient city set in the hills above the gulf, a short drive from Agios Nikolaos.
Vai and Toplou Monastery: a longer excursion east to the palm-fringed beach of Vai, with a stop at historic Toplou Monastery, known for its architecture, icons and manuscripts.
A slower day: time by the sea, a swim or a long lunch.
Choose one or two ideas rather than all of them. Vai is around 1 hour 30 minutes each way, so allow a comfortable return to Agios Nikolaos.

Overnight: Agios Nikolaos area.

DAY 4 | South-coast journey to Matala

Travel towards Matala on Crete’s south coast. The suggested scenic route takes you via Ierapetra, where a swim or a relaxed seaside stop can break up the drive. A detour towards the Aba waterfall area is another possibility if it suits your route and the conditions.

Continue to Matala, recognised for its beach, sandstone caves and association with the free-spirited travellers of the 1960s and 1970s. Settle in for an evening by the coast.

Approximate driving time: 3 hours without stops. Allow extra for slower coastal roads.

Overnight: Matala.

DAY 5 | From Matala to Chania

Today is the longest drive of the journey (around 3 hours without stops), so choose your stops rather than trying to fit everything in. Start early at Phaistos, a short drive from Matala, for another perspective on Minoan history. Check opening times before you go.

Then pick one of the following, depending on your pace:

Preveli: a palm-lined gorge and beach on the south coast (a walk down to the beach is required).
Frangokastello: a Venetian fortress by the sea and a more relaxed coastal stop.
Continue through the Cretan countryside towards Chania, aiming to arrive by late afternoon.
Spend the evening around the Venetian harbour and the old town. Samaria Gorge needs a full day of its own and is not suited to this driving day.

Approximate driving time: 3 hours direct, longer with a south-coast detour.

Overnight: Chania area.

DAY 6 | Chania and the beaches of western Crete

Use your second day in the Chania area to explore at your own pace. Options include:

Balos and Gramvousa: a seasonal boat excursion from Kissamos (around 40 minutes from Chania). Visit Gramvousa’s Venetian fort or enjoy the sea before continuing to the lagoon.
Elafonisi: celebrated for its shallow turquoise water and pale sand with pink shell fragments (around 1 hour 45 minutes each way).
A slower day in Chania: the Archaeological and Folklore museums, Stivanadika’s leather shops and the harbourfront.
Boat trips depend on season and weather. We recommend reaching Balos by boat rather than by car, as the access road is unpaved and may not be covered by your rental terms.

Overnight: Chania area.

DAY 7 | Chania to Rethymno

Continue east to Rethymno for your final overnight, a drive of around one hour. An optional visit to the Botanical Park and Gardens of Crete can be worked into the day if it suits your route and opening times. Lake Kournas and the seaside village of Georgioupoli also make an easy stop along the way.

In Rethymno, explore the Fortezza, Venetian harbour and lighthouse, then wander through old-town lanes lined with historic houses, mosques, shops, tavernas and cafes. Take time to enjoy the town's Cretan food and unhurried evening atmosphere.

Approximate driving time: 1 hour, plus stops.

Overnight: Rethymno.

DAY 8 | Return to Heraklion Airport

After breakfast and check-out, drive to Heraklion Airport (around 1 hour 30 minutes from Rethymno). Allow time for the journey, any required refuelling and the return of your rental car before your departure flight.

ACCOMMODATION

Seven nights' accommodation with breakfast are included, planned across the itinerary as follows:

Heraklion area . 1 night

Agios Nikolaos area . 2 nights

Matala . 1 night

Chania area . 2 nights

Rethymno . 1 night

Accommodation is arranged in hotels or similar properties in these areas and is subject to availability. If a property is unavailable, we will propose a comparable alternative and advise you of any supplement before you confirm. Some accommodation may be outside town centres, so the rental car is useful throughout the journey.

TRANSPORT

Enjoy eight days with a category B rental car, Fiat Panda or similar. Collection and return are at Heraklion Airport, with standard service between 08:00 and 21:00. Out-of-hours

collection or delivery carries an additional charge.

You drive independently throughout the trip. Before confirming, ask us about the rental conditions relevant to your booking, including driver requirements, deposits, fuel policy, additional drivers and any cover or excess.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

This is a private, self-guided journey; a tour guide or driver is not included.

Archaeological sites, museums, tastings, cooking and dance experiences, boat trips and other suggested activities are optional and paid separately.

Arrange optional cooking or dance experiences in advance. Boat trips, including Spinalonga, Balos and Gramvousa, depend on season, availability and weather.

Driving times are approximate and do not include stops. Allow extra time for Crete’s slower mountain and coastal roads, especially on Days 4 and 5.

Samaria Gorge requires a dedicated full day and is not included in this itinerary.

We recommend reaching Balos by boat rather than by car. Its access road is unpaved and may not be covered by your rental terms.

The applicable climate-resilience levy is paid directly to each accommodation provider.

Extra nights can be requested at any stage, at an additional cost.

INCLUDED

- 7 nights in comfortable hotels or similar properties in the areas listed

- Breakfast each morning

- 8-day category B rental car, Fiat Panda or similar

- Standard car collection and return at Heraklion Airport, 08:00-21:00

NOT INCLUDED

- Flights

- Tour guide or driver

- Meals and drinks other than the included breakfasts

- Entrance fees, boat trips, tastings and suggested activities

- Locally payable climate-resilience levy

- Out-of-hours car collection or delivery and any optional extras

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Hotel availability and travel arrangements are confirmed at booking.