

Travel

Crete expectations You won't be disappointed

By BEV SPENCER
Crete, jewel of the Mediterranean, guardian of the Aegean, prize of conquest after conquest, birthplace of El Greco and Nikos Kazantzakis, can be easily reached from Athens.

Subway cars lead from the centre of Athens to the port of Piraeus. The journey to Heraklion, Crete, takes about 12 hours in a large ferry. Every hour is worth it. For the antiquity and climate of Crete surpass even those of mainland Greece.

About 4,000 years ago the island was home to a kingdom of affluence and far-reaching authority. The Minoans, far advanced beyond contemporary Greeks, held the Greek cities as tributary states. The Minoan culture is rich in art, literature and technology. The seat of that ancient kingdom was Knossos, not far from Heraklion.

The remains of the incredibly complex palace of Knossos still baffle and fascinate. They were partially restored by Sir Arthur Evans. British archeologist. Over six

acres of land the sprawling palace extends, sometimes four stories in height, a fantasy of columns and corridors. There frescoes of consummate skill depict the stylized dolphin and the sacred bull.

Convolute water courses once supplied bathing rooms and fountains. Ingeniously devised courtyards and windows provided light for the deepest levels. A theatre, the potter's rooms, a throne room, the bakeries, prayers or meditations centres—each of the 1200 rooms hints at the opulent life enjoyed by that early civilization. Sculptures and relics have been transferred to the Museum of Heraklion. They show bare-breasted women and athletes performing dangerous and strenuous dances, sometimes leaping over the bull. From the mysteries and complexities of Knossos rose the Greek legend of the Labyrinth and the Minotaur.

But the ruins are empty now, the fountains are choked with dust. About 1400 B.C. the power of Knossos was suddenly

shattered by unknown causes. Neither of the two ancient scripts discovered there reveal the end of the civilization. One is a precursor to Greek, the other, consisting of exceedingly ancient hieroglyphics has never been translated.

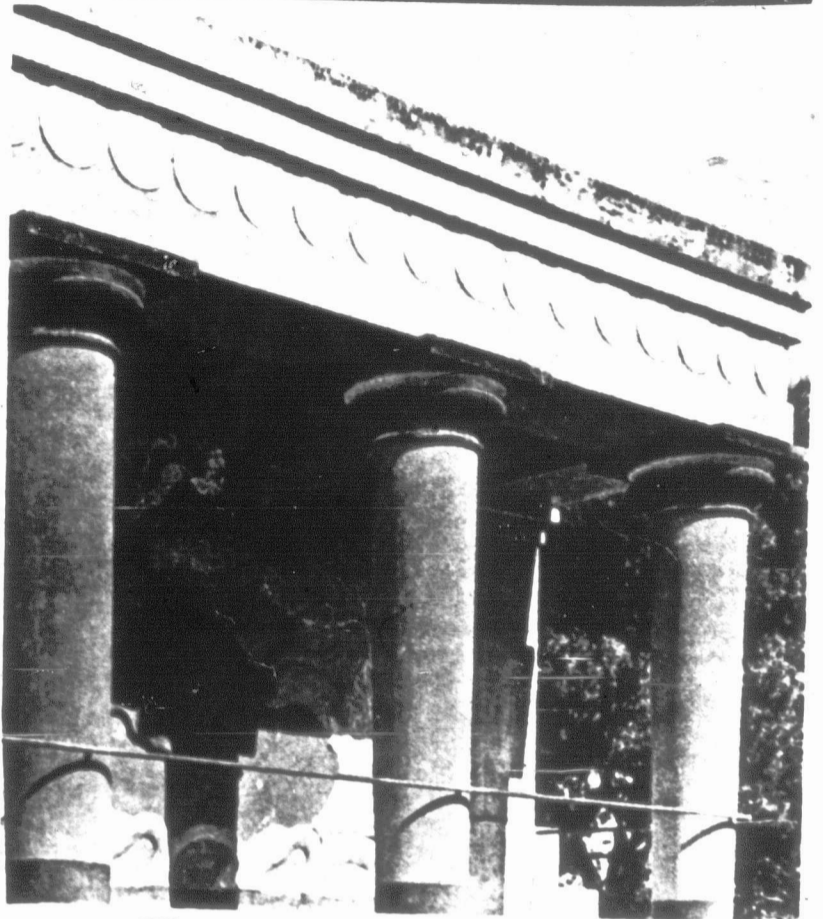
As fascinating as Knossos may be, it is only part of the story of Crete. Other fragments of the tale can be pieced together from Latin and Islamic funerary inscriptions. The Romans seized Crete in 67 B.C. Later Crusaders and Venetians took their turns, building ramparts and stout-walled fortresses in Heraklion. The Turks besieged the main city for 20 years before conquering in 1669. As late as 1866 the people of Crete resisted in isolated patches. At the monastery in Arkadi 500 people blew themselves up rather than surrender to the Islamic invaders.

Byzantine churches, nameless ruins crumbling in the hills, antique walls mouldering in alleyways—Crete has it all.

A fine road runs the length of the island, usually hugging the north coast.

Other less dependable roads branch off to explore the south. Agios Nikolaos is a good stop on the Gulf of Mirabella with its bright boutiques and white hotels. Silver jewelry is one of the best buys. Canea is a crowded old Venetian town. Rethymon retains a Turkish flavor, with its minarets. Mallia crouches on an arid plain between scores of white-sailed windmills.

The ruins of Phaistos, overlooking the Mesara Plain, are accessible by bus. The drivers of Crete care nothing for the cliff-edged hairpin turns. With a little courage a rental car can be manoeuvred along the same roads, over the highlands. The inevitable olive groves cling to hillsides. Donkeys and motorcycles stand by the roadside or labor up the slopes. White chapels perch on impossible summits. The charmed fire of the alpen glow burns on the goat-ravaged cliffs. Then suddenly, the sun-bleached southern coast is revealed—blue sky above blue water and a desert land.



The Bull Fresco at Knossos

Matala is a justifiably famous southern resort. All year people sunbathe and swim on the beach. The hotels are inexpensive, the food is good, though not as varied as in the cities and the hills are open to exploration. Some old cliffside caves still serve as dwellings for the inhabitants.

On the hills, shards of pottery and fossils are as common as pebbles.

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