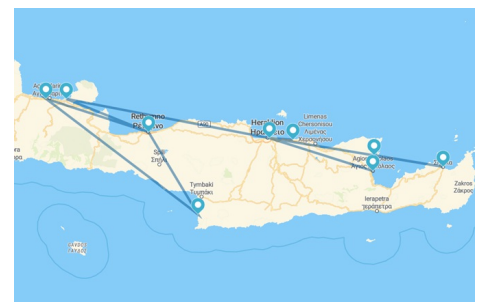




Greece (Crete), 8 Days · Tailor-made by car

## Route through the Island of the Minotaur II

Discover the very best of Crete, the famous Island of the Minotaur, on a fascinating self-drive tour. A trip peppered with fantastic experiences and stunning Mediterranean landscapes that will let you discover its myths and major historical legacy, visit its most emblematic destinations, savour the delicious local cuisine and laze on its excellent beaches. The "Island of the Minotaur II" route starts off in the capital Heraklion, where you can wander among the stalls of one of the best markets in the Mediterranean and visit the magnificent Palace of Knossos, the birthplace of kings and also one of the largest archaeological sites on the island, along with Festos. If you're into mythology, make sure you go to Gortina to hear the story that stole Zeus' heart on this island. Of course, one of the major highlights of Crete is to venture into the cave of Skotino, in Gournes, and check whether the famous minotaur could have hidden there. Its history also includes the monastery of the heroic Arkadiou, example of the Cretan resistance against the Ottoman army. But as well as being the cradle of mythological legends, this paradise island was also the birthplace of El Greco, one of the world's most revered painters. Nature lovers will also find magical places like Agios Nikolaos, where you can photograph a natural lake of volcanic origin attached to the sea. You'll see straight away why this island was the goddess Athena's favourite place in the world. Crete is also home to luxury in Elounda, handicrafts in Kritsa, walled cities such as Rethymno, fortress islands such as Spinalonga and long, inviting beaches such as Matala, perfect for exploring its rock-cut caves, or Elafonissi in Chania, ideal for sitting back and soaking up the sun. A unique and fascinating journey to the heart of the Minoan land.



NATURE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL

CULTURAL

**Departure date:** Departures from June 2026 till June 2027

**From:** Dublin, Shannon, Cork

### Travel details

## DAY 1 · CITY OF ORIGIN - HERAKLION

Flight departure from the city of origin to Heraklion and rental car pick-up. Welcome to the capital of Crete and the largest city on the island! With a quintessential Mediterranean air, the appearance of the city reflects the influences that it has absorbed throughout its history. There are Arabic touches, Byzantine remains and Venetian prosperity on an exquisite Greek base. This means that a short stroll through the city will take you past a cathedral, a former mosque and a truly unique fortress. Depending on the time your plane arrives, you can focus part of the visit on Heraklion and then get your holiday off to a bang by enjoying some of the pristine beaches nearby. Just sixteen kilometres away from the city is Agia Pelagia, home to the truly amazing Ligaria Beach. It's a family-friendly beach, sheltered from the wind and with shallow water, lined with excellent restaurants and terraces overlooking the sea. Another option is Kokkini Hani, with a much livelier atmosphere than Ligaria Beach. You can end the day with a pleasant walk through the port of Heraklion (built in the thriving Venetian period) and dinner at a restaurant serving delicious local cuisine. Overnight stay in Heraklion.

## DAY 2 · HERAKLION - PALACE OF KNOSSOS - GORTINA SITE - GOURNES - HERAKLION

Although at first glance Heraklion may seem chaotic, don't be fooled by appearances because you only need to rub a little bit to discover the genie hiding in this city. But first of all, it's best to head to the Palace of Knossos, the most outstanding archaeological site in the country. You'll be captivated by the materials used in its construction, as well as the frescoes and paintings that adorn the rooms and corridors. Guided tours are aplenty here, so it's a good idea to get there early. Check the opening hours and try not to arrive too late. You'll be thankful, for sure.

The palace is built around a central courtyard flanked by the King's and the Queen's Megarons, various chambers and the Throne Room, where King Minos most likely sat.

According to mythology, this palace was home to the famous labyrinth holding the Minotaur, a beast that fed only on human flesh. When you're finished, head back to discover Heraklion. It boasts an exquisite cultural life, a permanent market and a beautiful harbour for a leisurely stroll. The city centre has life all year round and is the perfect place to taste Greek cuisine. What's more, its list of museums is truly enviable.

The Archaeological Museum is a prime example. Don't forget to visit the Phaistos Disc! Meanwhile, the Historical Museum of Crete gives an insight into seventeen centuries of the island's history through multimedia content and includes two original paintings by El Greco, who was born in Crete.

Don't forget the Museum of Natural History. A good idea to go there with the family and enjoy features such as an amazing earthquake simulator. But art here isn't only found in museums. A stroll through the city centre will confirm this. A great place to start your sightseeing tour is Koules Fortress. It's the undisputed symbol of the city and is now used to host outdoor concerts, rather than to protect citizens from pirates. You can walk along its walls, of Venetian origin, and visit the tomb of Nikos Kazantzakis. Remember that name, because today you'll be able to visit his museum, but before then there's still lots to see in Heraklion. The old quarter is a good starting point. This is a very pleasant area to stroll around, so park your car and admire majestic temples such as the Church of Agios Titos and Agios Minas Cathedral, palaces such as the Venetian Loggia, and gardens such as El Greco Park. The city centre itself is very lively. You can check out this vibrant atmosphere in Eleftherios Venizelos Square and Kallergon Square.

The next stop will be the 6,000-year-old Gortina site, located one hour's drive from the capital. Its ruins will definitely not disappoint, and you can visit them without the pressure of dozens of tourists milling around and wanting to take the same photo as you. Enjoy them at your own pace and remember that the Basilica of Agios Titos, the Amphitheatre and the Roman Odeon are the most outstanding remains. Just behind the Odeon is a path; take it and ask someone to tell you the love story of Zeus here. Then you can head to the area of Gournes and visit one of its villages, either Kato Gouves, Amnisos or Pano Gouves. It's a tourist resort, so here you'll find all the amenities and services you need, as well as excellent beaches. There are also several dive centres, perfect whether you're a seasoned diver or a total beginner. If you come to Crete looking for something more than just beach time, in Gournes there are several alternatives. Our recommendation is to visit the Cretaquarium and venture into Skotino Cave to check whether - as legend has it - the Labyrinth of the Minotaur might have been located here.

Overnight stay in Heraklion.

### DAY 3 · HERAKLION - AGIOS NIKOLAOS - ELOUNDA - SPINALONGA - SITIA - KRITSA - HERAKLION

Today you'll head east to Agios Nikolaos. This is a town overlooking the sea, with an inviting harbour and waterfront promenade. It's ideal for strolling along and soaking up the great atmosphere that always prevails in the area. One of its greatest attractions is Lake Voulismeni, a natural lagoon that is connected to the sea by a canal. Life in the town revolves around this lake of volcanic origin. There are plenty of shops and restaurants, while Greek mythology says that the goddess Athena reigned supreme here. Several boats set sail from here to take you to nearby beaches accessible only from the sea. This is one good option, as is continuing with the day's route. In Agios Nikolaos you should make a decision: to head north, to the towns of Elounda and Spinalonga, or to keep on the road to Sitía. It's quite tricky to manage to fit everything into one day. It is possible, but you'll need to spend around five hours in the car to make it all happen. Let's say you choose to continue on to Elounda. Take note because you're about to enter one of the most luxurious and stunning areas of the whole island. Welcome to the epitome of luxury! Here you'll find the most exclusive hotels on the island and an array of exquisite beaches and coves lapped by crystal-clear waters. This is why it has become one of the most tourist-friendly areas in Crete. You should definitely take a stroll around the quaint harbour and some of the resorts to get an idea of what paradise looks like. Take advantage of your rental car to tour the Spinalonga peninsula. Another option is to park up and take a 20-minute boat trip to the island of Spinalonga from the port of Elounda. (Note: The suggested boat trips are not included). You'll be surprised to learn that Spinalonga wasn't originally an island. During the occupation of the island by Venice, it was separated from the shore to improve its defence. This pocket-sized island is today 800 metres from the Cretan coast. (Note: In the winter months, there are no scheduled tours, but you can reach the island with the help of some fisherman from the villages of Elounda and Plaka). Its greatest asset is its strength, which fought off invasions and sieges for decades while the rest of the island had already surrendered. Until 1973, it was a leper colony and now it has become a tourist attraction and the setting for a recent Greek film. It's a very entertaining visit. You'll need about an hour and a half to complete it. And if you prefer to explore some rural life and the verdant mountainous landscape of Crete, your next destination should be Kritsá. // If, on the other hand, you choose to explore the picturesque seaside town of Sitia, you'll discover a beautiful laid-back place that hasn't fallen to the excesses of tourism. Here you'll find the best wines on the island thanks to a good raw material and the meticulous work of the local wineries. Stroll through its port and visit the fortress of Kazarma. If you fancy a bite to eat, you can head to one of the waterfront cafes. If you're travelling in summer, enjoy some time on its beach before heading back to Heraklion via Kritsa. It's a picture-postcard type of place. In winter, snow-capped peaks provide a backdrop to the roofs of the town's beautifully whitewashed houses. In summer, its bustling streets are a coming and going of handicraft traders selling to the influx of tourists. This is the sort of place you could easily fall in love with, so be careful of wanting to stay here forever. Overnight stay in Heraklion.

### DAY 4 · HERAKLION - CHANIA

You're in luck today because you have a few hours at your leisure in Heraklion and, although you'll have visited many of its attractions in previous days, we've kept behind a real treasure for you: its market. It's located on Street 1866 and is the ideal place to buy local fruits, handicrafts and anything you can think of. In fact, it's one of the best markets in the Mediterranean and reminds the traveller of the commercial virtues of the various civilisations that have made Crete the island it is today. Bid farewell to the capital now en route to your next stop. After a two-hour drive, you'll arrive in Chania. Chania is pretty much Crete in a nutshell, even though it doesn't have an archaeological site. The city is exceptional and the beaches are the longest and most stunning on the island. Its splendour is mainly due to the Turkish and Venetian influence, which is an important cultural legacy reflected by the presence of fortifications, palaces and minarets soaring up from ancient churches. As any good coastal city, it boasts an inviting waterfront promenade and a very interesting naval museum, located just at the entrance to the Firkas Fortress. Temples are also prevalent in the city, so it's always a good idea to visit some of them. There are many to choose from. From the Cathedral in Mitropoleos Square to Etz Hayim Synagogue and the Minaret on Daliani Street. All a melting pot of cultures that live in harmony within the same city. Besides walking around and exploring the city, Chania offers appealing family-friendly plans such as the water park or go-karting. At night, there's a buzzing atmosphere on the waterfront. Overnight stay in Chania.

## ● DAY 5 · CHANIA - ELAFONISSI BEACH - CHRYSOSKALITISSA MONASTERY - CHANIA

After enjoying the charms of Chania, you can set off for Elafonissi. This is our favourite beach in Crete and one of the must-visit natural sights on the island. Approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes from Chania, it's the westernmost point that you'll reach on this trip. (Note: You can walk out far from the shore, as the water is very shallow, especially in the summer season). If you have time, make a final trip to Chrysoskalitissa Monastery, some 72 kilometres from Chania. It takes the shape of an old fortress, built on a 35-metre-high promontory with stunning sea views. Enjoy another night in Crete and head back to Chania for an al fresco dinner on the waterfront. Overnight stay in Chania.

## ● DAY 6 · CHANIA - ARKADI MONASTERY - RETHYMNO

Say goodbye to Chania today and set off for one of the places most loved by the Cretans: the Renaissance and Baroque monastery of Arkadiou. You may be wondering: why do the islanders love a specific monastery so much? Because this is where locals held out against the Ottoman army for the island's freedom. They fended off the Turks for two days and, when they finally entered the monastery, the Cretans blew up the ammunition store... and everyone in the building. They became heroes and today their courage and the freedom that this place symbolises are remembered. You'll be captivated by its imposing façade dominated by three bells, while imaging the bravery of the men who defended the monastery. It's awe-inspiring. After this memorable experience, it's time to return to the car and drive about 30 kilometres to the town of Rethymno. Sheltered by lofty mountains (snow-capped in winter), it is a perfect example of a town that has undergone invasions by very different civilisations throughout its history. Very prevalent here are Ottoman and Venetian influences on a deeply Greek foundation lying beside a very pretty beach. Must-sees are its fortress, with its spectacular outer walls, and the Rimondi Fountain, found inside the mosque of Sultan Ibrahim Han, as are its handful of museums. From almost all the city you'll see a minaret. It belongs to the former Neratze Mosque, which was once also a church and is now a conservatory of music. Finally, you can take a stroll around the harbour and have some dinner before heading back to the hotel. Overnight stay in Rethymno.

## ● DAY 7 · RETHYMNO - PLATANIAS - PHAISTOS SITE - TOWN AND BEACH OF MATALA - RETHYMNO

There'll be quite a lot of driving today, as you'll be heading to the centre of the island. To reach Phaistos, you'll pass by Heraklion and then head southwards on the 97. After Knossos, it's the most important archaeological find on the island. It is a spectacle! It's incredible to think how such a complex could have been built in 1600 BC, and which has resisted everything except natural phenomena such as earthquakes. You'll probably start building up a mental picture of the town as you stroll past its wineries or the Royal Archive. There's usually a special price for anyone visiting the Palace of Phaistos and Agia Triada, your next visit. It's just 20 minutes from here. It cherishes the same magic as its predecessor, but with less crowds. You'll be able to head around the palace and also admire the Chapel of Agios Georgios. The theory that the king lived here with his entourage is based largely on the quality of the materials used for its construction: from slate and alabaster floors to the perfectly-preserved sarcophagi. A few kilometres away is the beach of Matala, a natural paradise difficult to forget where you could take a refreshing dip in the sea or explore some of the small caves along the rocks. It's a beach with a really great atmosphere, especially in the month of June when it plays hosts to the hippy Matala Beach Festival. Each year, it attracts thousands of young people keen to listen to the live acts. (Note: Matala is also the name of the charming seaside town next to the beach. The place rose to fame in the late sixties and early seventies following the massive influx of hippies who set up home in the caves. Matala still has hints of the famous hippy spirit that turned this beach into a true flower-power icon). After an intense day, it's time to head back to Rethymno and make the most of the last few hours of your holiday. Overnight stay in Rethymno.

## ● DAY 8 · RETHYMNO - HERAKLION - CITY OF ORIGIN

Organize today's day depending on the departure time of your flight, in Heraklion, located approximately an hour and a quarter away by car.

Arrival at the airport with enough time to drop off your rental car and flight back to the city of origin.

Arrival. End of the trip and our services.

Your trip includes \_\_\_\_\_

## Your trip includes

- ✓ Return flight.
- ✓ Stay in selected hotel in Heraklion.
- ✓ Selected meal plan in Heraklion.
- ✓ Stay in selected hotel in Chania.
- ✓ Selected meal plan in Chania.
- ✓ Stay in selected hotel in Rethymnon.
- ✓ Selected meal plan in Rethymnon.
- ✓ Rent-a-car.
- ✓ Amount of the supplement for collection and return of the vehicle in a different office.

## Your trip doesn't include

- ✗ Accommodation taxes in Greece direct payment in facility.
- ✗ Possible toll charges.
- ✗ Insolvency protection.

## Destinations Visited

Heraklion



Gournes



Agios Nikolaos



Elounda



Sitia



Chania



Rethymnon



Platanias



Matala



## Important remarks

- Triple rooms in Europe are generally rooms with twin beds or a double, in which a folding bed is installed to accommodate the third person. Due to the inconvenience this causes, we advise against using this option as far as possible.
- Check-in time at the hotel on the day of arrival depends on each establishment, but in no case will it be before

3:00 p.m., unless otherwise indicated.

- The proposed excursions and tours for each day are purely suggestions, as you can tailor the trip to suit your times, tastes and needs.
- A credit card is considered a guarantee, so sometimes you will need one for check-in at hotels.
- Hotels usually have cots available. Otherwise, babies will have to share a bed with an adult.
- To pick up your rental car, you'll need a credit (not debit) card in the name of the person who made the booking, who must also be the named driver of the vehicle.
- Consult the necessary documentation to enter the destinations visited and for transit in the countries where air stopovers are made.