



Bruce Elder returns to the easy charm, late nights and Minoan treasures of the bustling capital of Crete.

Twenty years ago, Heraklion (sometimes spelt Iraklion and Iraklio) was a dusty transport hub for the whole of Crete, the biggest of Greece's 227 inhabited islands. Ferries from the mainland arrived every morning; the international airport was only a few kilometres east of the city. All roads led to and from Heraklion.



Frescoes of Knossos Palace, Crete. Photo: AFP

24 hours in Heraklion

Today Dedalou Street, the city's main street once lined with frenetic restaurants, has become a chic mall, selling labels found in every other chic mall around the world. The old restaurants have given way to sleek cafes. New hotels have sprung up, exclusive resorts perch on every vantage point along the coast and the airport has been given a modern makeover. Though much has changed, the city still bustles with that distinctive hysteria that makes Greece so vibrant. And the locals weave their way through crowds of meandering tourists with tolerance and an easy good humour.

9am

Cretans enjoy a siesta in the early afternoon, after which they eat and play late. So don't think of getting up early unless you plan to go for a jog by yourself along the city's empty streets. About 9am, head for the Lion's Fountain Square (Liontaria Square), where you can start the day with a Cretan-style breakfast at Kirkor Cafe. Order a Greek coffee ("gleeko" if you want it sweet, "metrio" for slightly bitter) and a bougatsa, a simple but tasty filo pastry, with cream or fresh goat's cheese. Sit outside, admire the Lion Fountain and watch the locals head to work.

10am

It's time for some serious shopping. Head back towards the city's main square (Eleftherias Square) along Dedalou Street, the city's smart shopping street. If you're feeling extravagant, buy a replica of the famous golden bee pendant. The Minoan original, on display in the Heraklion Museum and dating from 1800BC-1700BC, was found at the palace at Malia and portrays two bees placing a drop of honey in a honeycomb held between their legs. On their heads is a wire cage with a gold globule inside. A good 14-carat replica will cost about €500 (\$784) but the shopkeepers are open to negotiation. My recommendation is to start at Mihou Helen, at 12 Dedalou Street.

11am

Heraklion Museum has been undergoing renovation for some years now and is due for completion this year. About euro20 million has been spent to modernise and update this repository of Minoan treasures, transforming the old museum into a showcase for 10,000 artefacts and making it one of the great museums of Europe. Allow a couple of hours to wander. The Minoans created works of great artistic beauty and you don't have to be an expert to admire such treasures as the superb Phaistos disc (the earliest known example of printing), a gold and steatite bull's head, an alabaster lioness's head and tiny clay tablets with Minoan ideograms.

2 Xanthoudidou Street. Entry euro6. Open Monday 12.30pm-7pm, Tuesday-Sunday 8am-7pm in summer.

1pm

Down the hill from the museum is the port and the city's 16th-century Venetian fort, Rocca al Mare, a reminder that the Venetians ruled the island from 1204 to 1669. The Turks renamed it the Koules Fort. The views of the Old Port from the battlements are impressive. The huge rooms, the thickness of the walls and solidity of the building are a legacy of the importance the Venetians placed on the island they knew as Regno di Candia (the Kingdom of Candia).

Rocca al Mare, entry euro2. Open Tuesday-Friday 8.30am-3pm.

1.30pm

As with so many destinations, Heraklion's secret places, particularly its best food options, are always where the tourists aren't. It is no accident that next door to O Vrakas, located on the roundabout close to the Rocca al Mare fort, is a rather ordinary tourist restaurant, which is nearly always crowded. Only the discriminating locals seem to realise O Vrakas offers superior and less expensive food. Here, an elderly Cretan mama cooks up a storm in a kitchen the size of a broom cupboard. Many locals insist that O Vrakas is the best fish restaurant on the island. The service is less than impressive but a meal comprising zucchini balls, perfectly cooked calamari, Greek salad and a soft drink costs about \$20 and serves as a reminder that great local food doesn't have to be expensive.

2.30pm

No trip to Heraklion is complete without a visit to the Minoan palace at Knossos, located five kilometres south of the port. The challenge is to find a time when the palace isn't a veritable traffic jam of tourists. At 8.30am in the summer months there can be up to 20 buses in the car park, while inside guides waving flags aloft are leading their groups through the labyrinthine palace's many attractions. The smart option - if there is ever a good time when the crowds have drifted away - seems to be the early afternoon. The No. 2 bus leaves the main bus station at the port, on average, about five times an hour and costs €1.15 one way. There is a case for hiring a guide or, alternatively, buying a serious and detailed guidebook and studying it before visiting the palace. While Knossos is one of the great wonders of the ancient world, it is also complex and the subject of much academic argument.

The site's most famous excavator, Sir Arthur Evans, decided in 1900 that the only way to understand the original structure, which had collapsed on itself, was to raise the upper floors and support them by concrete pillars that mimicked the original timber pillars. He also filled in the gaps in the wall murals and painted the walls and pillars. This has been, to put it mildly, a source of controversy among archaeologists. It is where human beings first built proper sewerage (see the pipes and channels), expressed

themselves in huge murals, threw pottery pithoi (storage jars) larger in size than the average man and held complex rituals involving bulls that were watched by crowds of elegantly dressed women.

Knossos Palace, entry euro6. Open Monday-Saturday 8am-6pm, Sunday 8.30am-3pm. See .

5pm

Return to the city, make your way to Milato Road, find a seat on the street and have a drink. The crowds that gather after work are remarkable. This is the Cretan interpretation of youthful sophistication - armchairs and lounges on footpaths and chic bars with implausible names such as Oxygen, My Cafe, Very Koko Cafe, Mayo Lounge (a bizarre open-air extravaganza) and New York Down Town.

7pm

It is decadent to sit and drink for a couple of hours but remember Cretan nightlife doesn't really start until 10pm. So just stay seated and, if you are in the city in summer, enjoy the passing parade of Mediterranean elegance. Cretans still believe that every civilised person should dress up and take a stroll in the cool of the evening.

9pm

It may be commercial but Ammoudara, a beach lined with hotels, bars, markets and tavernas, is patronised by Cretans and fun-loving tourists. Take a taxi; it's about five kilometres from the city centre. This is a district where visitors walk along the main street, dance in the cafes and bars, eat, stay very late and drink the island's rather forgettable wines. Later in the evening, the strains of the bouzouki and Cretan lyra will be wafting on the night air. Though traditional Cretan music will be heard only in the peace of someone's home in a rural village, tourist-oriented Cretan music has been an island obsession ever since the global success of the 1964 film Zorba the Greek, set mainly on Crete.

In Ammoudara there are dozens of restaurants and tavernas where music, Cretan food (lamb kebabs with oregano and perfect potato chips and a Greek salad rich in feta and olive oil, followed by sticky, honey-soaked baklava) and lots of Zorba-style dancing are provided for tourists. It is a bit like Crete's answer to Sydney's Kings Cross. Expect to return to your hotel very late, a little wild-eyed, tired and emotional.

Emirates has a fare for about \$2110 flying via Dubai and Athens, then to Heraklion with Aegean Airlines. (Fare is low-season return from Melbourne and Sydney, including tax.) Alternatively, buy a return fare to Athens with China Southern, Malaysia Airlines, Singapore Airlines or KLM and a separate fare to Heraklion.