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Journeys | Crete

Days of Wild Oregano and Goatherds

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A SPIRALING, slightly treacherous dirt road leads to Aspros Potamos, an enclave of 300-year-old cottages in eastern Crete once used by olive farmers and goatherds. Peaceful and primitive, with stone floors, oil lamps for light and a starry night sky, the cottages, now a rustic retreat for tourists, offer visitors a glimpse into the life of old Crete, without the boutique airbrushing.

It's not the usual vision of Greece's largest island, but for many, it's far more rewarding than the seaside nightclubs, umbrella-pinned beaches and Riviera-lite resorts that attract many people. The eastern Lassithi prefecture, which stretches from a lush plateau of farms to dry crags overlooking transcendently blue bays, offers plenty of portholes into a disappearing Crete and its robust geography.

But the last-paradise vibe may not last much longer. Several developers are scoping out the land for resort development, and residents fear that the resorts will guzzle the island's increasingly scarce water resources.

I explored this old side of Crete during a trip last summer to the eastern side of the island. My family left Greece for the United States when I was a child, and though I have visited my mother's island many times, Crete remains a tableau of longing: the puffing chimneys on the tiny stone houses in my mother's village, the farmers riding donkeys to orange groves. Somewhere between our rented stone cottage and the expanse of Lassithi, I figured, were pieces of this reverie.

The first night didn't go well. I had forgotten matches for the oil lamp and a flashlight to maneuver up the rocky steps to our room, and we had to mummify ourselves in the bed sheets to defend ourselves from mosquitoes.

To crank ourselves up the next morning, we drank strong, unsweetened Greek coffee on the terrace before driving north to Sitia, then east toward the island's tip. We passed ancient peak sanctuaries, a stunning coastline and Moni Toplou, the powerful monastery that owns much of the land in this area. The white turbines from Toplou's wind park starred the balding hills like kinetic crosses.

We stopped at Palaikastro, a pretty town of about 800 people in the rural municipality of Itanos. Nearby is a Minoan-era settlement that, according to some archaeologists, may have approached the size of Knossos, the palace complex about 60 miles to the west and the fabled lair of the mythical man-bull, the Minotaur. A badly marked dirt road leads from Palaikastro to the Minoan archaeological site of Roussolakos, which is cordoned off by a rusting metal fence and overlooks Kouremenos Bay. On the grounds are bouquets of wild oregano and wild bay plants.

A little farther northeast is another archaeological wonder, the ancient town of Itanos, now also known as Erimoupolis (the Deserted City). Itanos is near the popular Vai beach, which is surrounded by a thatch of palm trees and is often crowded to discomfort in summer. You will find far better beaches if you scope out the rest of the coastline here. We discovered a deserted cove just beyond the Itanos archaeological site and climbed down a jagged path to get to the shore. The smooth-pebbled beach embraced a circling sea, which merged into an illuminated sky. Here we ran into a middle-aged Scandinavian couple wading into the water, wearing nothing but diving masks.

“Do you think Crete is losing its sense of nostalgia?” I later asked Nikos Troulinos, a retired naval officer who farms bananas and olives in the area. We had stopped by his thatched road stand near Vai, where he sells his bananas and outstanding cold-extract olive oil.

Mr. Troulinos handed us small, fragrant Cretan bananas to sample. “You want nostalgia?” he said. “Here’s nostalgia: I still milk my goats every morning, and my 2-year-old grandson likes to help me, and we drink the milk afterwards. I think that’s about as close to grace as you can get. I mean, to be Cretans, should we be riding around on donkeys to fit your idea of nostalgia?”

The next day we went west to the verdant stretch of Lassithi, passing the miles of greenhouse-lined shore near the drab southeastern city of Ierapetra. We stopped in the seaside village of Myrtos for honey-drenched kataifi (walnuts, sugar and spices wrapped in shredded phyllo) and a walk through the tiny streets, which were full of Dutch tourists and looked, unnervingly, like a movie set. Then we went on to the forest of Selakano, where there are startling views of the Libyan Sea.

Situated in the Dikti mountain range (where Zeus was said to have frolicked as a boy-god) Selakano is a slow drive through narrow switchbacks and breathtaking gorges. The way to Selakano isn’t well marked, so we stopped at a roadside cafe in the village of Males for directions. An old man in a weathered three-piece suit and a sweeping mustache pointed to my tiny rented Hyundai. “You’d do better with a donkey,” he said.

Indeed the puny car struggled uphill, but we made it to the forest, which was thick with pine, plane, oak and cypress. The air was cool and rain-scented, the prelude to a shower that sent us to Stella's Cafe in the hamlet of Selakano. A blossoming canopy of almond and pear trees embraced the village. Nearby, a bearded young goatherd managed his flock.

Over mugs of herb tea and plates of baby-walnut spoon sweet, the cafe owner, Stella Fanouraki, and her brother Manolis Kritsotakis, a retired 3M executive, described life in the village: mornings of tending flocks or gardens of tomatoes and peppers, and evenings sharing dinners of stewed goat and white beans. Mr. Kritsotakis, who grew up in the area but now lives in the tony Athenian suburb of Ekali, said he spent summers here, growing grapes, making wine and hiking with his daughters.

There's no place to stay in Selakano, but Ms. Fanouraki said a couple of her fellow villagers were planning to open guesthouses soon.

Though Aspros Potamos isn't nearly as cozy (or populated) as Selakano, the rustic cottages there have the same bygone magnetism. An Athenian transplant, Aleka Halkia, bought the abandoned buildings in 1985 and moved in with her daughter Myrto Botsari. Over the years they added rustic wooden furniture as well as bathrooms and terraces. A photovoltaic solar energy system powers a small refrigerator and warms water for bathing.

The mother and daughter both still live there, though Ms. Botsari's husband, Manolis Kounelakis, now runs the show. Their guests — Americans, Britons, Irish, Germans and citified young Greeks — revel in the surroundings. They hike along gorges to the nearby mountain village of Pefki to hear local musicians recite mandinadhes — improvised couplets — at a tavern called Piperia (Pepper) and play the lyra, a pear-shaped, three-stringed lyre voiced with a bow. They eat snails fried in olive oil, rosemary and vinegar and drink raki (a potent Cretan spirit made from grape must). They chat with old men in cafes about the old days. "It's like you get to live another life," said Dita Hussain, a nurse from Portland who stayed at Aspros Potamos earlier last year.

Older Greeks stay away or leave bemused, like my mother, who laughed at my fascination with the oil lamps. Greeks who lived an impoverished childhood in their villages during the 1940s and '50s would rather not relive it. "But their children, who have grown up in cities and crave nature and a connection to a diminished past, stay for days sometimes, playing their guitars under the stars," Ms. Halkia said.