A Taste of Crete

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> Out in the dark blue sea there lies a land called Crete, a rich and lovely land, washed by the waves on every side, densely peopled and boasting ninety cities. Each of the several races of the isle has its own language. First there are the Achaeans, then the genuine Cretans, proud of their native stock.....
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> Homer, The Odyssey, Book XIX

In September of 1982 I visited Crete, intending to stay there for just two weeks. Six months later I was still on the island. During this time I was able to see, at first hand, the type of lifestyle led by some of the Cretans, especially in the village of Myrtos, on the south coast. Although I have been back to Crete since then, most of this article is based on my own observations made during my first stay.

Crete lies to the south of the Greek mainland. Its maximum length, from Cape Cramvousa in the west, to Cape Sidero in the east, is 260 kms. roughly the distance between Mizen Head and Carnesore Point. Its width varies between 60 kms. at its widest, to 12 kms. at its narrowest. Most of Crete is mountainous or semi - mountainous. The north and south coasts are divided by a chain of mountains which runs east/west in three sections. The islands highest peak is Mount Ida, at 8,000ft. The mountains are riddled with caves, some of which are of archaeological interest. There are also some deep gorges to be found, the most famous being the Samaria gorge in the southwest. (Mehling, 1985).

The first view one gets of Crete, arriving by ferry late in the evening, are the lights of Heraklion, the islands capital, blinking from the darkness. Very often, small groups of Cretans waiting on the quayside, vie with each other in trying to persuade travelers to stay at their respective hotels. The unsuspecting may often be alarmed by the action of locals who simply pick up luggage and walk off with it, expecting the owner to follow placidly.

By day, Heraklion is a noisy, active town. There is a relatively high volume of traffic which adds considerably to the noise level. During the height of the tourist season, which can last from May to the end of September, the pavements are often thronged with pedestrians of many nationalities. The market area, near the town centre, is sometimes so congested with people, that it is almost impossible to negotiate. Many of the shops here have canopied stalls in front, which adds to the congestion. Together with its open

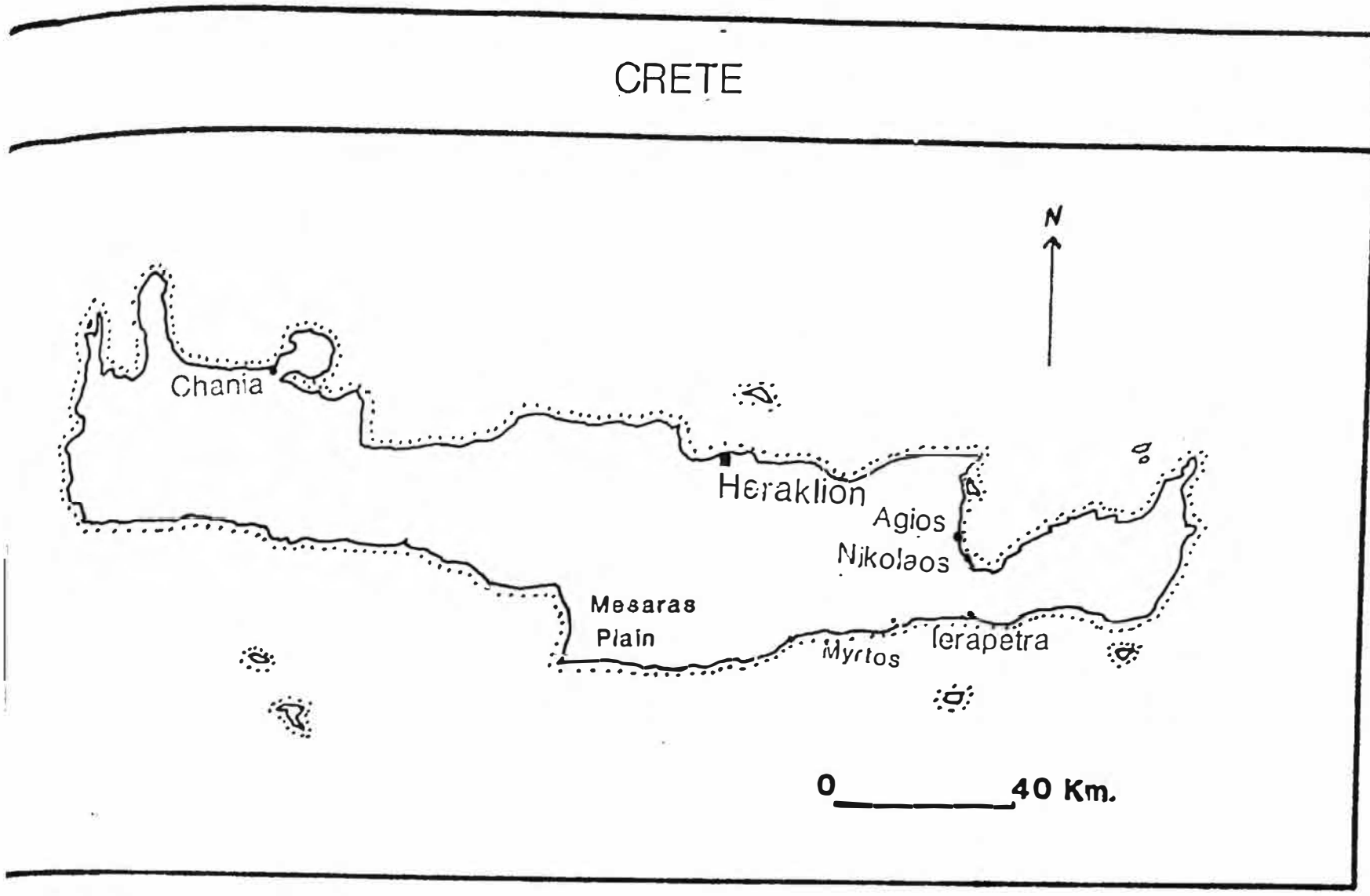
air food stalls, from which one gets the appetising smells of cooked herbs and roast meat, the smell of new leather, and the continuous shouting of the vendors, the place has a middle - eastern feel to it. This is not so surprising when one considers the influence Arabs, and later Turks, have had on the island.

Heraklion was founded by Arabs in A.D. 824. They named the town *Rabd - el - Kandak.* Between 1669 and 1869, the island was ruled by Turks. They also have left a legacy, not only with their architecture but in other aspects of their culture. A number of Turkish words are still used in everyday language in Crete. The thick, black, sweet coffee, a favourite drink on the island, is also said to be of Turkish origin, although some Cretans are adamant that the Turks first got the idea from Greece!

Besides the use of Turkish words, the Greek spoken on Crete has other distinguishing characteristics. The most notable of these is in the pronunciation of the slender 'k' sound. For example, Raki is the Cretan equivalent of Irish 'poteen'. An Athenian, will pronounce it *ra - kee* whereas a Cretan will pronounce it *ra - chee.* Similarly, a word like *ekis*, meaning 'you have', is pronounced *eh - kiss* in Athens, whereas on Crete, it is pronounced *eh - shiss.*

Just south of Heraklion is Knossos, the site of the Minoan palace which was discovered by Sir Arthur Evans in 1900. Parts of the palace have been reconstructed, and although most, if not all, of the frescoes have been removed for safety to museums. Replicas have been put in their place. One of the scenes depicted is that of youths vaulting over a charging bull. It suggests that this was some form of public spectacle of the time. Interestingly enough, there are old photographs, which may dare back to the turn of the century, and which depict scenes of a similar nature, in the bullfighting museum in Rhonda, Andalucia, Spain. Could the Minoan form be an ancestor of the modern Spanish one?

In relation to the rest of Crete, the northern coast is the most developed part of the island. East of Heraklion, as far as Agios Nikolaos, one can see modern style holiday developments of the type found in many package - holiday brochures. Most of this coastline is serviced by a well maintained highway. The bus is the main form of public transport, there being no rail - network. Travelling by bus, especially during the tourist season, can be an event in itself. Luggage is tied down on tip and passengers pile in underneath. There always seems to be room for one more, no matter how full the vehicle is.



The road journey south from Heraklion brings one over the Psiloritis mountains. In September the value of viticulture to the island's economy is evidenced by the amount of grapes one sees drying on special racks near the roadside. Crete produces a number of different wines. Retsina is an extremely dry, white wine which is exclusive to the island. Its unique taste is gained, it is said, by adding a certain type of tree resin to the fermentation process. The actual flavour may not be to everybody's liking. Outside of the commercially produced wines, there are some farmers who produce a small quantity for private consumption. If one is lucky enough to sample any of this, one could be surprised by its quality. Olive cultivation is widespread on Crete. Up to the time of harvest very little work is needed to maintain the trees, aside from insuring that they have an adequate water supply. This seems to suit many Cretans, one of their favourite sayings being, *sega, sega*, their way of saying 'take it easy'. The higher parts of the mountains are mainly used for grazing either sheep or goats. Sheep's wool is cheap, compared to Irish prices. The goats are kept for their milk, some of which is used for making *Feta* cheese, a soft white variety with a distinctive salty taste.

Aside from the Mesaras plain, most of the south coast is unsuitable for large - scale food production. In many areas, the mountains run almost directly to the shore - line. The land here tends to be of a poor quality, suffering from prolonged dry seasons. During the summer many of the rovers and streams dry up. Unless one is involved in the tourist trade

there is little work available. Most of the farmers depend on a good grape or olive crop to bring in money. Besides a goat or sheep herd, some also keep chickens. The produce from these, together with that from small vegetable plots, seems to have been a major supplement to the daily food intake.

Recent developments, with the introduction of greenhouse technology from Holland, have brought about an improvement in earnings for a substantial number of the inhabitants, especially in the poorer areas along the south coast. They have been so successful that, in some cases, emigrants have returned to the region, hoping to share in recent good fortune. The new technology has also created other opportunities in the service sector. Stimion, a hamlet on the road east of Ierapetra, has become a focal point for many of the farmers in that area. The village contains a hardware store, which is one of the main suppliers of raw - materials for greenhouse farming. The local cafes have become meeting points, where farmers gather over cups of coffee to discuss, among other things, the current market prices. Some of the farmers have built new houses as a result of their extra income. These may be used as a family home or rented out to tourists. Many Cretans are quite happy to remain in their older houses and use their money to educate their children. The sons are the ones who seem to benefit most from this. A number of these are sent abroad to countries like Britain, where they attend boarding schools.

It must be said that not all the benefits arising out of the new technology are good. This is very obvious when the time comes to replace the long lengths of plastic that are used to cover the greenhouses. Very often, the old discarded lenghts are left on the side of the road where they create a very unsightly mess. In some cases little effort is made to remove them and they end up being blown across fields or stretched along the roadside. As well as the plastic, other debris, such as empty plastic and metal containers, used to hold fertilisers or chemicals, are also left lying around. For a country that depends on tourism to such a large extent, this is surely an unwelcome sight.

About 12 kms. west of Stomion is Myrtos. This village, situated on the coast, lies just off the main road. Some of its narrow streets run directly onto the beach, which stretches off to the west. To go west from here one can take a rough dirt track, which follows the shape of the coast, or for comfort, go back onto the main road, which goes slightly more inland. Although not a major tourist centre, the village does have a number of small hotels, as well as various rooms, which the villagers are only too willing to rent - out. Life in Myrtos seems to revolve around two taverns, one facing the other. This is where the bus stops, and where one comes to collect mail. One of the taverns acts as

a delivery point. During fine weather, most of the tables and chairs are outside. Here one can sit, and while away the time playing *tavli* (backgammon) or just relaxing under the shade of a tree. Even in early October, the mid - day sun can be quite hot. In periods like this time seems to stand still. Most of the Cretans go indoors, or find some shady spot to escape the sun's heat. There is very little sound, bar that of the traditional Cretan music from the cafe's interior or the occasional passing vehicle. *Sega, sega,* seems to be a good way of describing the pace of life. From such a vantage point, one can learn much about the villagers and Crete itself. Many of the older women wear black. The black shawl, once a prominent feature in Cork, is still common here. When a husband or close relative, dies most women go into mourning. For many of the older ones this may last the rest of their lives. An interesting tradition, linked to this subject, calls for the widow to distribute some form of sweet - bread to the people of the village for a period of time after the husband's death. This, it is hoped, will help people to think kindly of him and remind them to pray for his soul.

The main religion on Crete is Greek Orthodox. Each village has at least one priest. Priests are usually quite conspicuous owing to their dark cassocks and, on occasion, tall dark hats. Many of them are married and have land or property from which they can earn a living. Some may even employ people to work for them. Whether they or their church own the land is not known. Where in Ireland Christmas is one of the main religious holidays of the year, on Crete it is not regarded as being so important. For most Cretans Easter is *the* holiday. Like Ireland , Crete has many roadsides religious shrines. Some of these contain an icon of a saint, but many were erected as memorials to victims of fatal car accidents or to mark the site where a life was miraculously saved. (Saccopoulous 1986). As in Ireland also, some saints appear to be more important than others. Traditionally, the first son is always named after the paternal grandfather. Most of the christian names are those of popular religious figures. One interesting feature in all this is the name *Emanolis.* This is very popular on Crete. It honours Jesus whose full name, according to the Greek church, was Jesus Emanuel Christ. Other popular Christian - names are , *Giorgos* (George), *Yanis* (John), *Andreas,* and *Nikolas,* to name but four. Maria, Helena, and Katerina, are some of the more popular female names.

From time to time, Myrtos contains a small contingent of foreign residents. These are not to be confused with holiday makers, whose average length of stay is two weeks. Some of these may own a business in the village. In 1983, two restaurants were separately owned by foreigners - one by a German the other by a Dutchman. Other foreigners also live in the village and work for farmers in the locality. Most of these people are attracted by the climate and the easy - going life - style. From October to March the

numbers increase with the arrival of more visitors who come to work on the various harvests. A number of these are young Athenians. With the departure of most of the tourists it is possible to get relatively cheap accommodation, as many of the rooms in the village would otherwise remain empty.

Stomion is where most go to find work. This normally involves getting the bus at 7.30 in the morning. On arrival, the usual practice is to wait at a particular cafe until the farmers begin to arrive. One or two workers are usually hired but sometimes a farmer may hire four to five, including girls. Conditions such as wages and some form of lunch are always agreed upon at this stage. The average wage for working in a greenhouse in 1983 was roughly ten or twelve pounds per day. Not much by normal Irish standards, but enough to keep one going in Myrtos for a day or two. Until one's face becomes well known, it can be difficult to get regular work. Very often a couple of days might pass with no offers, but it is possible to get by. A certain spirit of camaraderie evolves among some of the workers and they tend to help each other out with dinner invitations.

Midway through December the job situation improves. About this time of year cucumbers, the most common greenhouse crop, are harvested. After picking they are sent to depots, known among the foreigners as 'cucumber factories'. Here they are washed, seal wrapped and packed. The bulk of the crop is exported to Germany in refrigerated container trucks. Work in the depots does not pay as well as other jobs. One of the factors which contribute to this is an influx of Gypsies, who come to the area, specifically to do this type of work. Their usual mode of transport is an open pick - up truck. Nobody seems to know their exact country of origin, but they may be Romanies from Bulgaria or Yugoslavia. Whole families, including older children, can be seen working side by side in the depots. It appears as if some have an unwritten agreement with some of the depot managers, and return to the same one year after year. Many of the women among them wear boldly coloured , flamenco type, dresses. The men seem content with lavishly decorating the cabs of their pick-up trucks.

Other crops are also grown in the greenhouses. Tomatoes are popular, as are smaller quantities of courgettes, aubergines and peppers. It is noticeable that many of these fruits grow to quite a large size. The use of growth hormones and artificial fertilisers by some growers are factors which contribute to this. As soon as this harvest is finished, most farmers plant another crop having first decontaminated the soil by means of gassing. The returns from this type of enterprise are obvious. Besides edible fruits, quantities of flowers are also grown. The most popular are roses. One farmer in particular seemed to be thinking ahead and had erected a number of metal - framed

glasshouses. He felt that roses were a better long - term investment, as their price was steadier, than other crops whose prices could fluctuate more according to the state of the market.

About January the olives and oranges are harvested. A surprising variety of oranges are grown, and some of the growers are always grafting one species to another to create hybrids. Some of this grafting can have unusual results, with oranges on one side of the tree being sweet while those on the other side are bitter. Although it may sound attractive, the work itself can be quite strenuous. Everything must be done quickly. A box full of oranges can make a heavy load.

The olives are harvested in the same way they have been harvested for centuries. Sheets of canvas, or other suitable material are spread out under the trees. A number of the long flexible branches are then gathered together in one hand, and beaten with a stick, held by the other. At the same time, care must be taken not to do too much damage to the tree. The beating causes the olives to fall in a noisy shower on to the covering below. They are then gathered into large sacks about 120 cms. by 80 cms. ready for transport. Some olives groves are in areas where access by vehicles of any sort is impossible. The only alternative here is to rely on one of the oldest forms of transport known to man, the humble donkey. One good donkey can carry two full sacks of olives to a more accessible point without, it seems, too much trouble. Here the sacks are loaded onto a truck and then to a local olive - press where the oil is extracted. It has been noted that the effluent from these presses, of which there are many, is a serious pollutant. Most of it ends up entering the sea via the river system, which, at this time of the year, is in flood. At the moment, little if anything is being done to combat pollution.
(Papaioannou 1987)

During the long Winter evenings, the taverns and restaurants are popular meeting places. Entertainment can vary from one to the other, but all have at least two *tavli* boards. Chess too is very popular. Card games for money are nightly events among some of the village males. One of the restaurants often doubles as a cinema. This happens at irregular intervals, maybe once a week, or once a fortnight. A projectionist, complete with portable screen and projector, visits the village for an evening. These are very popular occasions with most of the inhabitants, young and old, Greek and non - Greek. The actual films may not be classics, but as a social event the evenings are a great success.

This particular restaurant also had a colour T.V. News bulletins commanded much

attention, especially political events which appear to be will covered. Greece's recent political history has been quite turbulent, compared to other west European countries. In 1967, the military seized power in a coup. The subsequent regime lasted seven years. Since its downfall in 1974, one of the most notable features of Greek politics has been the rise of PASOK (The Panhellenic Socialist Movement) . This new party, of the non - communist left, was formed in 1974, by Andreas Papandreou, son of a former prime minister. Throughout the eighties it has enjoyed great popularity, especially on Crete. In the '81 elections it received 65.1% of the vote, and in 1985, 61.3%. The party's logo, πaΣok, can be seen painted on walls, all over the island. Some doubts have been expressed about PASOK's future popularity. There are many who think that once Papandreou, a very charismatic figure, quits, the party will lose much of its appeal. (Featherstone and Katsoudas, 1987)

By March, the day temperatures begin to rise again. Rainfall still occurs, but it is not the persistent type experienced during the Winter. This is the time of the year when the land looks at its best. There is a clean, fresh, taste to the air, and the hillsides and valleys are covered in green. Some of the valley floors produce vast quantities of wild anenomes and other early flowers. With their delicate shades of pale purples and pinks, these are a glorious sight to behold. Even the spirit of the people seems to lift, as they can look forward to the longer, warmer, days ahead.

With ever increasing numbers of tourists visiting the island, it is clear that careful planning is needed to control future development. On later visits to other parts of Crete it was noticeable that valuable agricultural land was under threat from building speculators. In some villages, the sound of traditional Cretan music has been replaced by that of rock 'n' roll. The quiet, peaceful way of life, a thing that many visitors travel to Crete for, may be slowly disappearing. However, being a comparatively large island, one can still find isolated villages, even along the coast, with long, empty, stretches of beach. Accessibility to many of these areas is difficult and what appears to be a secondary road on a map may turn out to be a rock strewn, dusty trail. It will be interesting to see, how long such spots remain as they are and how many of the old traditions survive or become modified. Hopefully, we will not see the same type of development that has altered the appearance of other popular holiday destinations, such as the changes that have occurred along Spain's Mediterranean coast and the southern coast of Spain during the last couple of decades. Crete still maintains a semi - rustic charm. Perhaps therein lies its continuing attraction.

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