

Crete in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Heraklion & transfer Plakias.

Day 2/4 Plakias.

Day 5/7 Chania.

Day 8 Depart Chania for London.

Departs

March / April

Focus

Plants and Birds

Grading

A/B. Day walks only

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code GRC02) or see the current Naturetrek brochure.

Highlights

- Gentle-paced two-centre holiday focusing on flowers and birds
- Dramatic coastal and mountain scenery and spectacular gorges
- Colourful spring flora, including many orchids and endemics
- Migrant birds and resident specialities
- Cretan cuisine, culture and history
- Explore Chania, the ancient capital of Crete
- Minoan archaeology at Phaestos
- Expert guidance by Naturetrek botanist & ornithologist.



Samaria Gorge & Cretan Bee Orchid
(both by David Tattersfield)



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Introduction

Crete boasts one of the most diverse floras in Europe, with over 2,000 species of flowering plant, 160 of which are endemic. The island also lies on a major bird migration route. Our spring tours to Crete begin in Plakias on the southern coast, from where we explore the dramatic Imbros Gorge and orchid-rich hills around the village of Spili. We then conclude with three nights in Western Crete based in the old capital of Chania. Bird and botany highlights are many, but may include Collared Flycatcher, Lammergeier, Cretan Sainfoin and a great variety of orchids. This holiday is timed to coincide with the best of Crete's colourful spring flora and the spring migration of birds into Europe from Africa. During our stay, we will explore a variety of habitats, from coastal cliffs and wetlands to rocky gorges and mountains. We take daily walks to discover many unique aspects of Crete's natural environment, as well as its interesting culture and long history.

Please note: Our first and third departures each spring will fly into Heraklion and depart from Chania, as detailed below. Our second departure will operate in reverse, flying into Chania and departing from Heraklion. Regardless of the order of itinerary, the wildlife content will remain the same!

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Heraklion & transfer Plakias

We depart around 0700 hours from London Gatwick on a direct flight to Heraklion on the island of Crete. We arrive in early afternoon and transfer by minibus to the small town of Plakias on the south coast of the island, which will be our base for the next 4 nights.

Day 2

Moni Preveli, Kourtaliotiko Gorge, Gious Kambos

To the east of Plakias, we explore the colourful roadside flora around the Turkish Bridge and look for wading birds along the river, before visiting the monastery at Moni Preveli, where the monks gave shelter to the Allied troops after the Battle of Crete. The surrounding hillsides and rocky headlands can be good places to see migrant birds, arriving from the Libyan Sea to the south. We may see Corn Bunting, Ortolan Bunting, Black-eared Wheatear and perhaps the rare Ruppell's Warbler. Inland, we spend time in the dramatic Kourtaliotiko Gorge, home to Griffon Vulture, Red-billed Chough, Bonelli's Eagle and Blue Rock Thrush as well as many of Crete's endemic cliff-dwelling plants.

In the afternoon, we move to the hills around Gious Kambos, above Spili, where we have lunch and discover the rich flora of the plateau. The area is well-known for its abundance of orchids and we can expect to find Naked Man Orchid (*Orchis italica*), Man Orchid (*Orchis anthropophora*), Sparse-

flowered Orchid (*Orchis pauciflora*), Four-spotted Orchid (*Orchis quadripunctata*), and Bory's Orchid (*Anacamptis boryi*), growing alongside a bewildering array of Bee Orchids and fields of the red *Tulipa doerfleri*.

Day 3

Spili and Phaestos

Today we head east to Phaestos, the second-largest of Crete's magnificent Minoan palaces, which sits on a low hill overlooking the fertile Mesara plain. On the way, we may take a coffee break in the delightful village of Spili, with its gushing fountains and interesting shops and stop to explore roadside verges for plants such as Giant Orchid (*Himantoglossum robertianum*) and Turban Buttercup (*Ranunculus asiaticus*). Around Phaestos, passage migrants may include Hoopoe, Golden Oriole and a variety of raptors and among the many showy flowers on rocky hillsides will be Cretan Sainfoin (*Ebenus cretica*), Jerusalem Sage (*Phlomis fruticosa*), Three-lobed Sage (*Salvia fruticosa*) and Giant Fennel.

Day 4

Frangocastello & Imbros Gorge

We drive west, through magnificent scenery and little white-washed villages, to the Venetian fortress of Frangocastello. The nearby rocky fields and olive groves are often good for migrant birds such as larks and wagtails, while overhead there may be hundreds of swifts and hirundines. A little further on, we spend the rest of the day exploring the eight-kilometre Imbros Gorge, which provided an important route for the evacuation of Commonwealth forces from the island. The towering cliffs and shady recesses of the ravine are a botanical paradise and, like similar habitats in the rest of Crete, have become a refuge for many of the islands rare and endemic species.

Day 5

Armeni, Georgiopoulos & Chania

Before leaving Plakias, we will explore the sand dunes and rocky headland across the bay, looking for plants such the endemic *Muscari spreitzenhoferi* and the curious Cretan Birthwort (*Aristolochia cretica*). In the nearby Kotsifou Gorge, we should see the yellow Cretan Arum (*Arum creticum*), Shrubby Flax (*Linum arboreum*) and a variety of other interesting flora on the cliffs and screes. We then travel north to the Late Minoan Cemetery at Armeni, where we will find a wealth of orchids and other plants among the fascinating archaeology. Along the north coast there are extensive sand dunes and an interesting wetland at Georgiopoulos, where a variety of water birds may include Little Bittern, Little Crake, Little Egret, herons and waders, among the usual Coot, Moorhen and Little Grebe.

Finally, we will visit the Allied War Cemetery at the head of Souda Bay, before completing our journey to our hotel in Chania, where we will spend our remaining three nights. During our stay we will be eating out each evening in some of the many restaurants, near to the picturesque Venetian harbour.

Day 6

Agia Lake & Omalos Plateau

Our first stop today will be at Agia Lake, one of the most important wetlands on the island. Squacco and Purple Heron, Great and Little Egret, Little Crake and Little Bittern can be found in the reed margins and we often see Kingfisher, European Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler and Western Marsh Harrier.

We then drive to the Omalos Plateau, high in the White Mountains, famous for its spring floral displays. The stony pasture is a blaze of colour from Crown Anemones (*Anemone coronaria*) and *Tulipa bakeri* and, depending on the season we may see the strange Widow Iris (*Iris tuberosa*) and Mountain Arum (*Arum idaeum*). Ancient gnarled Cypress trees frame the stunning view into the depths of the Samaria Gorge and overhead we may see Crag Martin, Red-billed and Alpine Chough and perhaps Golden Eagle or the rare Lammergeier. On the plateau, birds such as Woodlark, Linnets, Northern and Black-eared Wheatear and Cirl Bunting are frequently seen and a small ephemeral lake often has a number of waders. Sparse woodland of Cretan Maple (*Acer sempervirens*) clothes the slopes, along with *Berberis cretica*, *Daphne sericea* and the delicate *Cyclamen creticum*.

Day 7

Akrotiri Peninsula

We will spend some time this morning exploring the markets, museums and interesting streets of Chania, before heading off onto the Akrotiri Peninsula. We will visit the beautiful Monastery of Agia Triada and spend time looking for migrant birds in the vineyards and ancient olive groves. Woodchat Shrike, Cuckoo, and a range of Pipits and Flycatchers are regularly seen, while overhead we may see Eleonora's and Red-footed Falcon. The rocky phrygana of the peninsula has an interesting range of plants and we cannot fail to notice the dramatic, malodorous spathes of the Dragon Arum (*Dracunculus vulgaris*). Towards the coast, the Gouverneto Monastery is the start of a steep path down to the ruined Katholikou Monastery, where the walls and cliffs are covered in fine specimens of many endemic plants, including Shrubby Mullein (*Verbascum arcturus*), Cretan Wall Lettuce (*Petromarula pinnata*) and Cretan Comfrey (*Symphytum creticum*).

Day 8

Fly London

After breakfast we have a final morning to enjoy a little time in Chania, or explore another one or two local sites before transferring the 20 minutes or so from our hotel to Chania Airport. Our flight usually departs at around 1400 hours and we are due to arrive back at London's Gatwick Airport in the late afternoon.

Focus

The colourful spring flora, including many orchids and endemics, and the migrant and resident birds of Crete.

Tour grading

Grade A/B - We will be walking no more than 4 hours in the day, usually much less, and always at a slow pace. However, we are generally on rocky terrain and a measure of experience and fitness would be beneficial. For those that wish to walk further on one day, the full trail down the Imbros Gorge is 8 kilometres in total and takes around 4 hours. As all walks are optional, this holiday will suit those of all ages who appreciate natural history.

Food & accommodation included in the price

We stay in comfortable hotels where all rooms are en-suite. Breakfasts and lunches are included in the price of the holiday, together with evening meals in Plakias. Evening meals on the last three nights in Chania are not included. Since the Halepa Hotel does not have a restaurant, we will be eating out in one of the excellent tavernas in the old part of the town, near to the Venetian harbour. This involves a 25-30 minute walk but if you prefer, a taxi can be arranged at a small extra cost.

A typical day

We will aim to start each day's programme at around 9.00am (having had our breakfast), and return to our hotel by around 6.00pm each evening. We break the day with a delicious picnic lunch prepared by your tour leaders and enjoyed at a scenic spot. Each evening we will meet to discuss the day's observations, make a plan for the following day, and enjoy our evening meal together.

Extensions

As well as its natural history, Crete is rightly famed for its Minoan palaces and anyone with an interest in Greek history and archaeology might consider spending a couple of extra nights in Heraklion in order to visit the excellent Heraklion Archaeological Museum and the Minoan palace of Knossos. Please just contact the Naturetrek office for further details.

Weather

The weather at this time of year can be changeable, and whilst we hope for warm, sunny conditions, it can be cold, wet and overcast at times. You should come prepared for all possibilities!

Your Safety & Security

You have chosen to travel to Greece. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice> regularly prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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