

# Crete's Autumn Flowers

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Chania
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- Day 2/7** A daily programme of botanical and natural history walks from our base in Chania.
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- Day 8** Fly London
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### Departs

October

### Focus

Plants and general natural history; plus a little ancient history.

### Grading

B. Day walks only.

### Dates and Prices

Visit [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) (tour code GRC03) or see the current Naturetrek brochure.

### Highlights:

- Enjoy botanical walks & spectacular scenery.
- Interesting range of autumn flowering bulbs including cyclamen, sternbergia & crocus.
- The attractive Venetian port of Chania is our base.
- Walk the dramatic Imbros Gorge
- Enjoy Minoan & Roman archaeological remains.
- Interesting variety of birds
- Expertly led by a Naturetrek botanist (usually David Tattersfield)



Samaria Gorge (David Tattersfield)



*Cyclamen graecum* (David Tattersfield)



*Narcissus serotinus* (David Tattersfield)



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## Introduction

The geographical position of Crete, and variety of terrain have blessed this largest of the Greek islands with a wonderful diversity of flowers and plants. Although famous for its outstanding spring flora, it is perhaps not so well known that following the hot, dry summer, autumn rains precipitate many bulbs such as Crocus, Colchicum, Narcissus and Scilla to bloom. In addition, the autumn fruits and colours together with pleasant weather make Crete a lovely place to visit at this season. During this unusual, but rewarding, botanical tour we will be based at the ancient port of Chania and will explore the relatively unspoilt western side of the island where rare plants, inspirational scenery and many well preserved reminders of Cretan history, are blended together to form the foundation for a memorable holiday.



## 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 Chania

We depart early morning (flight times to be confirmed) from London Gatwick on our direct easyJet flight to Chania on the island of Crete. On arrival we transfer to the comfortable family-run Halepa Hotel that will be our base for the next week. The old Venetian port of Chania invites exploration and is steeped in history. Even before the arrival of the Venetians, the city, formerly known as Cydonia, had long been an important centre, occupied first by the Minoans, then later by the Romans, and many of the Byzantine fortifications have been incorporated into other buildings. There are also Minoan remains carefully preserved alongside minarets and churches, and a wonderfully colourful covered market full of herbs, spices, dried fruits, olive oil and honey.

### Day 2

### Spilia and Falasarna

We begin our week by driving west along the coast. Our first stop will be to explore an area of sandy beach and dunes, where we may see late flowers of Sea Daffodil, (*Pancratium maritimum*). At Kolimbari, we turn inland to the hill-village of Marathocephala, where we will look for Sternbergia, Cyclamen and other Mediterranean flora, on rocky hillsides and olive groves during our walk to Spilia.



Autumn Squill

We will have lunch at Falasarna, on the west coast, at the foot of the Gramvousa peninsula, before walking to see the remains of the Roman settlement, along the coast, and searching for Autumn Squills and Scillas. After an absorbing introduction to the botany and landscapes of northwest Crete, we will return to our hotel in Chania, before our evening meal in one of the many local Tavernas.

## Day 3

## Imbros

Today we head south to walk in one of Crete's many gorges. The Imbros Gorge is the second largest on the island and until fairly recently was the main access route to this remote part of the south coast which explains the ancient paved footpath which facilitates entry. As we enter the gorge we hope to find patches of Crocus and we should also see Cretan Dittany, an endemic plant reputed to have been used to make the 'tea of the gods'. Our walk will take us along part of the E4 long distance footpath which here is nearing the end of its route from the distant Alps in the north. The gorge has steep dramatic walls covered with interesting plants which will no doubt mean that our progress is slowed by each fresh discovery. Sixty years ago Commonwealth troops were evacuated through the gorge following the battle of Crete and their movement would have had rather more urgency than the meanderings of a botanical tour group!

## Day 4

## Chania & Megala Chorifa

After three nights in Chania, a more detailed tour of this interesting town is perhaps overdue and we will rectify this by spending the morning in a leisurely exploration. With so many architectural references to the past it will be a journey through time as we allow history to take priority over botany for a few hours. Later we will drive to Megala Chorifa and the hilltop site of Aptera, littered with the remains of Hellenic, Roman and Turkish civilisations. We will spend a relaxing afternoon amongst the archaeology, with plenty of time for photography or just to admire charms of Goldfinch feeding among the abundant seed-heads of thistles, Jerusalem Sage and Mulleins. On our return journey we will make a brief visit to the Allied War Cemetery at Souda.

## Day 5

## Topolia and Elaphonisi

Beyond Kolimbari, we turn south and make our first stop at Topolia, to search for Cyclamen and other autumn bulbs. We stop for coffee in the gorge and visit the cave of Agia Sophia, where we are afforded close views of some of Crete's endemic cliff-dwelling plants. We continue through well-watered valleys, filled with Chestnut and Plane trees to the coast, where we spend time visiting Elaphonisi Island, connected to the shore by a narrow sand spit. Sea Daffodils are still in bloom, here, along with other coastal plants and, as the sea is warm, we may take the opportunity for a swim.



## Day 6

## Omalos

A day excursion to the White Mountains and Omalos Plateau promises more superb scenery and some fine flora. We will search the arid limestone hillsides for the endemic Cyclamen (*Cyclamen graecum* subsp. *candicum*), before spending some time botanising on the plateau. Crocuses and the endemic *Colchicum cretense* are abundant here, among fruiting shrubs of Cretan Maple, *Berberis* and *Zelkova*. After lunch overlooking the dramatic Samaria Gorge we break the journey back to Chania with a visit to Agia Lake, one of the finest wetland sites in Crete, where we can expect a good range of birds and dragonflies.

## Day 7

## Polvrenia

We make our way westward, again, to Topolia and take the hill road towards Sirikari. A good path leads us down through Olive groves, with abundant Cyclamen, to a wild gorge, which we follow to Polyrynina. After lunch in the Taverna we will explore the chaotic blend of ancient and modern in this delightful village which includes Roman cisterns, cave dwellings and a raki distillery.



## Day 8

## London

Our flight is usually scheduled to depart from Chania in the afternoon so we should have time today to take a quick final look around the town or visit a nearby wildlife site. We are due back into London Gatwick late afternoon.



## Grading

Grade B - Although we will be doing no more than 4 hours walking each day, often less and always at a leisurely pace, we will sometimes encounter rough mule tracks and steep slopes; for example, the 8 kilometre walk along the Imbros Gorge is rough and stony in places. Therefore, you should be used to - and enjoy! - walking, and a measure of fitness is required to get the most out of this tour. We have therefore graded the holiday B, and hope that its content will be enjoyed by those of all ages who appreciate natural history, and the outdoor life.

## Focus

Plants; plus a little history/ancient history and general natural history.

## Food & accommodation included in the price

Breakfast and lunch are included in the holiday cost, but evening meals are not. For evening meals there are many excellent restaurants in Chania, within 15-30 minutes' walk from the hotel (the old town, near the Venetian Port, being around 25-30 minutes' walk), and we will plan to eat together and enjoy a selection of them during the course of the week. If anyone prefers not to walk, your tour leader will be happy to arrange a taxi for just a couple euros to run you into town. We would recommend allowing approximately £120-£150 for the extra meals depending on your appetite.

## A Typical Day

We will aim to start each day's programme at around 9.00 a.m. (having had our breakfast), and to return to our hotel by 5.30 - 6.00 p.m. each evening. We will be travelling by coach and picnics and an occasional taverna lunch will be usual.

## Weather

The climate in Crete is temperate. October and early November often provide warm and very enjoyable days, however, it gets less predictable at these edge of season months. We recommend a warm outdoor jacket and fleece for the odd chilly day and for evenings. Daytime peak temperatures typically range from 17°C to 25°C.

## 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](http://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.

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