

2000

At the end of May 2000 my husband Arno and I (Barbara) were on Crete for the first time and after a few days we already knew, it sounds very cliché, here we felt at home: friendly people, what a beautiful island, what a nice climate, what a beautiful nature etc. etc. (and then I did not even mention the delicious food). The real Crete fan will probably recognize this feeling.

Gouves

The first year on Crete we stayed in the village of Gouves on the north coast of Crete, ± 20 kilometers east of Heraklion. And ± 10 kilometers before Hersonissos. We had rented an apartment next to the restaurant "Megas Alexandros". Giannis was the proud owner of this tavern and together with his mother he made the tastiest Greek meals. We also wanted to eat out at some other restaurants in the area eat, but every time we ended up with Giannis. He told us a lot about Crete and the Cretans and when he had to do some shopping in Heraklion we joined him. Giannis himself lives in the center of this city, but he doesn't like it. He thinks it is a dirty city: it stinks, it is always busy and full of noise.

He took us to a market place, where no tourists are coming. It was in a small square and there they sold everything: vegetables, bread, clothing, fish and meat, even alive. There was a man with 2 pigeons in a cage and that cage was standing in the burning sun. I felt so pity for them, so I went a bit and stood in front of the cage to make sure they were in the shade. Then I carefully, with my foot, I pushed the cage further and further under the stall, so the pigeons were in the shade.

Skotino

From Giannis and also from the owner of the apartment complex, Michalis, we heard a lot about the area around Gouves, that in this year (2000) still was a small touristic place. Michalis told us that in the nearby village of Skotino, where he was born, there is a large cave, the cave of Agia Paraskevi. Years ago he had visited this cave, but because of an earthquake the cave has partially collapsed. It is now too dangerous to visit it and they put a big fence around it.

We wanted to take a longer walk and we decided to go there, it was ± 10 kilometers. After having breakfast we walked towards Kato Gouves, the old village of Gouves which is about 4 kilometers inland and 100 meters uphill.

The road rose gradually, so this was a good warming up. We just walked on the asphalt road, so this was nice and easy. After Kato Gouves we followed the road further up, to the village of Skotino, where only 142 people live. It seemed as if time had stood still here. In the middle of the village was a small school and there were an elderly man and a woman sitting on a bench in the shade. The woman read aloud from a little book that she probably found in the bin. Some pages were half torn or so dirty that they were almost impossible to read.

We got the impression that it did not matter what the woman was reading, but that she was practicing reading.

"Full speed"

Michalis had told us that when we left Skotino we had to follow the asphalt road until we

saw a tavern and if we wanted to visit the cave we could there ask for the key of the gate. From the tavern it would be ± 1 kilometer to the cave. He hadn't told us the last part of it this road rose considerably and had many sharp curves. There were not only cars and mopeds driving on this road, but also many three-wheeled tractors with grandfather at the wheel on his way to family. It was Sunday and then many Cretans go out to visit their family. Just before a corner we heard a terribly loud engine noise coming closer.

We walked right along the side of the road and yes... there he came... a motorbike (in the Netherlands we would call it a "very old oldtimer") with a boy of about 10 years old with on the back his father holding him and giving him driving lessons. This first lesson was probably entitled "drive downhill as hard as possible"

We really needed a break and we stopped at the tavern around the corner to have a frapje (our saying for a café frappé or iced coffee) The owner and his family were just sitting at the table when we entered.

Fortunately we had our Greek booklet with us, because everyone was only speaking Greek. We had the feeling that tourists aren't coming here so often and that we were the first ones this year. We couldn't make it clear to the owner that we wanted to visit the cave, so after a delicious iced coffee we left the tavern without asking for the key. At the tavern we saw a sign with "cave" on it, so it couldn't be missed.

The asphalt road turned into a dirt road and soon we walked in between farmland with an occasional cottage or cabin in the distance. It looked like we were alone in the world.

In the distance we saw some scrub and rocks and a chapel and there nearby was the "cave"! According to the residents of Skotino, the name of the village comes from the name of the chapel near the cave: "Agios Nikolaos Skotino".

"Agios Nikolaos Skotino"

The gate around the cave was open and we could go straight to the entrance of the cave. Normally we always have a small flashlight with us in our backpack, but not today. Arno did have a lighter with him and with this he walked a few steps into the cave. I thought the entrance to the cave was great enough, I didn't have to go in too. Besides, I didn't like the idea that we would both be in the cave and someone would have the idea to lock the gate. So I (happily) stayed near the fence and enjoyed the warm sun and the beautiful butterflies.

When Arno emerged from the cave (I was already starting a bit to worry) he told me he could walk quite a way into the cave, but that it was clearly visible that there has been a landslide. Whole spaces were partially closed off by fallen rocks.



the entrance of the cave

To return to Gouves, unfortunately, we had to go the same way back. We did walk downhill now and we had a beautiful view towards Gouves, with the blue sea in the background.

In Kato Gouves we enjoyed a cool drink and a snack and also here the people spoke almost exclusively Greek. With the prospect of a fresh dive into the sea, the last part of the walk went very fast.

Later when we spoke to Michalis and told that we saw 2 oldies on a bench with an old book. He said these were probably his parents. They have only recently been able to read and are really catching up and are reading everything.

When Michalis heard that we walked all the way to the cave, he thought we were crazy. Meanwhile, we found out that the Cretan is definitely not going to walk if he can also go by car. It was even worse: we were at Giannis, eating on the terrace when we saw water flowing by the side of the road.

When Giannis saw this, he jumped in his car and drove about 50 meters down the street, where there is an apartment complex with a pool. He got out of the car and asked if they couldn't stop draining the pool in this way. This was no done.

Really, there are also Cretans who are concerned about the environment. Giannis got back in the car and drove back !!! We were perplexed.

"Agia Paraskevi"

There is an interesting story with pictures about the cave "Agia Paraskevi" in Skotino on the site <http://www.interkriti.org>. Also information about Gouves and surroundings can be found here.

By car to the west

During our stay in Gouves we also rented a car for a few days to explore the westside of the island. We planned to go through Heraklion and Rethymnon towards Chania. The distance, 160 kilometers, was not too much for our Renault Clio. We had to get used to the Cretan driving style and customs, but as taxi driver, this was no problem for Arno. He adapted easily and soon honked as often and as loudly as the Cretans.

From Heraklion the highway continues towards Rethymnon, with beautiful views over the sea, flowers at the side of the road, the white and pink oleander bushes. Less fun were the many dead animals we saw on the side of the road. And not just dogs and cats, but also goats (fell off the rocks?).



meat for the butcher

In places where people had a traffic accident we saw small mini chapels as a memorial. Inside there is often a photo of the deceased, some oil, incense and a candle. The family maintains these chapels. Some still look beautiful after years, but others are rusted and almost unrecognizable.

Chania

In the busy center of Chania we drove straight to the parking garage. We could not miss it, because the large signs "PARKING" were already clear from far away. At the entrance of the parking garage, a young man conducted us from the street into the garage. Though you could hardly even get another way. In the parking garage we noticed that many people were working here. Again someone who showed us the way to an empty parking lot. At the counter, in the middle of the garage, we received a ticket from the next employee and then there was someone else working: the cashier.

After drinking a cup of coffee, we headed for the market halls. Just like in Marseille, The halls were built like a four-legged cross with different merchandise in every corridor. Mostly fresh products were for sale here. Plenty of meat (goat, rabbit) that is clearly recognizable above the display cases. In the aisle where fish was sold, they filleted and cleaned the fish on the spot and finished around noon.

You can eat fresh fish and fishsoup in several places. It was very busy in the market halls, very noisy, you could imagine being in a medina in a Eastern country. Years ago we were in Tunisia and there you had the same atmosphere as here. We found it very impressive and we were amazed.

Outside the market halls we saw many Eastern influences in Chania. We could imagine that this city was the "old" capital of Crete and frankly, we liked Chania much more than Heraklion, the current capital city. In the middle of the city you can see fruit trees in the small gardens near the houses full of lemons and oranges and you don't just see ultramodern supermarkets, but also the salesmen on their citymoped, heavily loaded with household items and beach balls.



Vrisses

On the way back to Rethymnon we passed by Vrisses and according to the tourist guide you can eat here the best yoghurt with honey. So we stopped in this small town and ate our yoghurt on a beautiful square, under large trees next to the river. It was tasty, but not really special. A few days later we discovered that we just visited the wrong tavern.

In many places along the highway we saw people selling fruit. Mostly oranges and lemons. One had a complete fruit stall on the verge, while the other had hung the plastic bags with oranges in the trees.

Rethymnon

In the afternoon we arrived in Rethymnon and this is also one particularly atmospheric city. Especially the terraces at the Venetian harbor are great and the restaurant owners know this very well and play dress their games with the tourists. While we sat there we got their "game" right.

As soon as a group of tourists arrives, one of the employees try to lure people to his seats and he tries to find out from which country the tourists come. Once the tourists are sitting in the chairs with the thick, soft cushions, the next step follows: the employee goes inside the tavern and indicates from which country the tourists come and a waiter, who very coincidentally (!?!) knows the language of the tourists, walks to the group and welcomes them in their native language. And whether this is English, German, Swedish or Dutch, he knows the most important words and welcomes the people in a funny, hospitable way.

After visiting the Venetian Fort and the old town we left the city and drove back in the direction of Heraklion and Gouves.

driving style

When we were near Heraklion it had become completely dark and at the car rental company Michalis had urged us not to drive in the dark, because you couldn't know with those Cretans.

Well, now we know: just before Heraklion the highway crosses the "main" road from Heraklion to the south, a kind of cloverleaf. We just had to follow the road. Suddenly we saw (red) rear lights getting closer instead of going further away. Arno slowed down and suddenly we saw what was going on. A Cretan had discovered that he missed the exit to the south. But this was no problem for him, he just reversed and took the right turn!!! Fright, swallow, sigh !!!

Spinalonga

After we had seen a part of West Crete, we also wanted to go for a day to the Eastside to the Lassithi plateau. First we drove to Agios Nikolaos and then to the north to visit the leper island of Spinalonga. We bought a ticket for the boat to the island and visited the island on our own. We found it very impressive, but also very sad. In some places you could almost feel the pain and sorrow from the people who lived here. It wasn't really something that makes you happy.

Kritsa

From here we left for Kritsa, a mountain village with a large byzantine church with murals. This village has very narrow streets where many souvenirs are sold in tiny shops. At a church I enjoyed the beautiful view, when suddenly an old, small woman, dressed in black appealed to me. At first I didn't understand what she was telling me. When Arno joined us, she almost clung to Arno, telling him the same story she had already told me. When I heard it for the second and the third time I understood what she was saying: this old woman had (according to her) leprosy in her eyes and she wanted money. I couldn't help the feeling that the story wasn't completely correct and that this was a way to earn a little extra money. We left Kritsa and drove to the Lassithi plateau.

Lassithi plateau

To get here we had to go first to Agios Nikolaos again and from there we could drive to the plateau. The route was beautiful and the plateau itself is very special. At such a height (800 meters) a large plain with plenty of grasslands and a few windmills. According to the tourist guides, the plain is full of windmills, but these are almost all rusty and without blades. Some mills are still intact and with a little imagination you can imagine it must have been a pretty sight: a plain full of windmills. When we arrived at the birth cave of Zeus, to visit it, they were just closing (it was now 5:00 pm).

Lake Zaros

We also wanted to see the south of Crete and that meant another time getting up early in the morning and back on the road with our Renault Clio. We went to Heraklion and then we took the road south. This is called a main road, but in our opinion it is a normal secondary road.

In the village Zaros we stopped to have a look at the lake and the Rouvas gorge. We parked the car in the center of the village and walked to the lake. It was much further than we thought and a lot warmer too, but fortunately there was a tavern, and what kind of a tavern, with a trout farm !!! After a cool café frappé and a Greek omelette we walked towards the lake. This was beautiful, clear blue water, it almost looked fake.



Rouvas gorge

At the lake the hike to the Rouvas gorge started. We weren't really wearing the right shoes for a walk in the mountains (sandals), but we would do just a short walk. It was completely deserted there, we didn't meet anyone and smelled only the delicious aroma of thyme, rosemary and sage. It was a beautiful environment. We saw many birds of prey in the sky. The route was indicated with yellow dots on the rocks and led further and further along narrow paths uphill. At one point we were very high in the mountains and because we also wanted to drive to Matala, we decided to walk back.

Then a man came up to us and asked us in German if we have seen his wife. She wore a floral skirt, green sweater and a hat. We hadn't seen anyone. The man looked disappointed. He and his wife had gone hiking together in the mountains, but a little way back his wife would wait for him while he would walk a little further. He would meet her again at the agreed meeting point. However, when he came back here, his wife was not there. He had searched in the immediate surroundings and called her everywhere, but he did not find her. We told the man that we were on our way back to Zaros and if we saw his wife we would tell her he was waiting for her. We couldn't do more for him. We walked back downhill to the lake where it was very busy with tourists. After a walk around the lake we walked back to the village, to our car. Every now and then we wondered if the German had found his wife yet.

Matala

In Matala we parked the car near the beach and headed for the well-known caves to visit these, but just like the cave of Zeus, we were too late: it was Sunday and then the caves closed an hour earlier than normal. Besides the caves, where many hippies used to stay in the 1960s, there was little to see in Matala. It is a very touristic place. We enjoyed a nice cool drink at one of the many busy terraces in the village.

On our way back we drove on small roads towards the north coast and drove through very small villages, where they probably don't see many tourists: the people looked so surprised when we passed by. The roads were good to ride, just very narrow and sometimes very steep.

We entered a village and from a distance we saw something hanging in the tree. We thought it would be plastic bags with oranges, like at the road near Rethymnon.

We actually would like to buy some tasty oranges, so Arno slowed down. Driving closer to the tree it soon became clear that we were mistaken. There was a dead goat hanging in the tree !!! A man was cleaning the goat, the head was lying on the street and the fur was already partially taken off (hence the gray color). This shocked me quite a bit and probably the man noticed this and he started laughing.

When we were back in Gouves that night, I had a delicious vegetarian meal at Giannis. We told Giannis where we had been and also the story about the German who had lost his wife at the Rouvas gorge. I was wondering whether he had already found her again. But according to Giannis, this man was now the happiest man in the world! At first I didn't understand what he meant, but when everyone started laughing I got it, but I couldn't laugh about it. Sometimes when we talk about Crete and the gorges, I have to think about that German again.

Samaria Gorge

Like many other tourists, we also wanted to walk the famous Samaria gorge. This is not an easy way if you are staying beyond Heraklion. The journey with the bus took us more than 3 hours !!! We left early in the morning and after a breakfast stop at half past seven, we arrived at the entrance of the gorge about 9 o'clock. I found it impressive. First a beautiful plateau and then between the mountain tops the "natural" staircase along which you descend into the gorge.



Our guide had told us to walk a bit fast, otherwise we would run out of time and maybe miss the boat. He would leave after us so we would all walk in front of him.

Unfortunately we walked through the gorge at a brisk pace and did not really enjoy all the beauty along the way. Especially the village Samaria, where not so long ago people still lived and the steep rockwalls on the narrowest part of the gorge were impressive. We also loved the boat trip from Agia Roumeli to Chora Sfakion.

In Chora Sfakion the bus was waiting for us to take us back to Gouves. We were the last to be dropped off. How long the return journey took !!! And when we could finally get out of the bus, the muscles in my legs were so stiff that I couldn't even walk down the stairs normally. I had to go backwards. I was glad we were the last ones, so nobody saw what I was doing.

It was a beautiful experience, but almost 3 days I could not walk normally. Even the stairs to our apartment I had to walk backwards.

Beach holiday

On one of our last days in Crete, it started blowing and it also rained three whole drops. And the Cretans complained... It was still 18 degrees Celsius, but they were freezing. With such a strong wind and so many clouds, we certainly did not think it was beach weather. Some tourists thought otherwise: wrapped in towels behind a wall of beach chairs they sat sheltered on the beach. They booked a beach holiday, so they wanted to have a beach holiday!

Monastery of "Kyra Eleoussa"

We thought it was a nice temperature to go for a walk. We had heard from Henk, one of our Dutch neighbours, that near the cave Agia Paraskevi there are also remains of an old monastery. He was there last year and then the restoration had just started. We wanted to take a look there and Henk offered to take us there by car and then we would walk the way back. It was wise that he brought us, because we certainly could not have found it ourselves. The monastery was almost invisible from the road.

The former monastery had quite a large area and it was clear to see that the ruin was being restored. We walked around the outside walls and in a hole of the wall we found a key that matched the door of the church that stood in the middle of the grounds. We are curious and carefully we opened the door of the church, but it soon became clear to us that they just painted it, the smell of paint was so strong.



The monastery was in a beautiful strategic place, quite high on a mountain, with plenty of views all around. Also the different rooms were clear to see and the function of the rooms was sometimes clearly visible. You could see the sleeping quarters (very small) and the kitchen, with a large chimney. The view from this place was beautiful.

Henk told us that we could walk back through the mountains towards the asphalt road to Gouves. This was no longer possible, because on top of the first mountain, a farmer had made a fence around his land with sheep. So there was no other option than to walk back via the asphalt road to Gouves.

The site <http://www.interkriti.org> also contains information about this monastery.