

Our holiday on Crete in 2001

In 2000 we spent 2 weeks in Gouves (near Heraklion) on the north coast of Crete and this year we decided to go to the Southside of Crete and then 3 weeks long!!!

On May 25, we arrived at Heraklion airport at 9:45 PM and it was 2 degrees colder than in the Netherlands !!! A bus trip from almost 2 hours took us to our first destination in the far south: Mirtos.

Mirtos

This small village has plenty of restaurants, taverns and shops and about 500 residents live almost exclusively from tourists in the summer period. Despite the many tourists, many Dutch and Germans, it is cosy and in the narrow streets you still can taste the atmosphere of the local population. The (pebble) beach is not so comfortable, but you get used to it. And the wonderful, clear sea water makes up for everything.

We heard from our hostess Sylvie that there is a gorge running from Mirtos to the north, towards the village of Mithi. This gorge, the Sarakina gorge, would be even more beautiful than the Samaria gorge, where you almost only see tourists.

Sylvie had visited the Sarakina gorge last year, only then there was quite a lot water and she had to do some climbing, scrambling and swinging to progress. As lovers of a brisk walk, we decided to walk this gorge.



Sarakino gorge

The next day we found the start of the gorge at the estuary, at the bottom of the hill on which a Minoan settlement can be seen. We just walked into the riverbed and followed it further inland. We passed a bridge, which is used in winter to cross the river. It looked so weird, a bridge while there is no water in the distance.

After an hour and a half walking on the rocky bottom of the river, we saw more and more oleander bushes with the familiar pink and white flowers in the riverbed and along the banks. We were now walking over increasingly larger boulders and it seemed as if the ground was a bit more wet. And yes, after two hours of walking in the bright sun, we saw a small stream in the middle of the bed: the river !!!

Now we could put some water on our caps and get them a little cooled down.

Do we continue or not?

The boulders got bigger and the walking became more and more scrambling. Just when we were about to discuss: should we go ahead or go back, we saw 2 people sitting on the waterfront. It turned out to be 2 Englishmen, who had walked the gorge once before. They said that a bit further, at the narrowest part of the gorge, we had to get over a large boulder. After this we could walk through a deeper pool of water and then we would end up on the asphalt road at Mithi. It would take about 1 hour.

They said that the pool of water behind the large boulder was deep. Until there we already had to walk through ankle-deep water, so we took off our shoes and socks. The English advised us to take off our shorts too and to swim or walk in our swimwear or underpants through the deep water. The water would be roughly up to our navel, the English couple told us.

While we were talking, two other walkers arrived. To our surprise, they walked straight to the boulder, took off their shorts (their shoes and socks were already around their necks) and climbed the boulder. As far as we could see they slipped off (?) and walked with their luggage above their heads through the water. A short distance further they got dressed and continued walking. So it was possible!?!

It was a beautiful sight: a narrow passage with ankle-deep water between two high cliffs and at the end a large boulder of ± 1.20 meters high. The deep water we could not see yet. In the water and over the boulder were a number of wrist-sized black water hoses, probably for irrigation of the olive groves. We said goodbye to the English and walked through the cool water towards boulder.

swinging

Arno was the first to climb the rock and saw an iron bar on the right side along the rock wall. Oh, yes, he remembered Sylvie telling us you could swing on that rod over the deep pool of water. Arno stood with his bare feet on one of the thick water hoses in the water and swung over the water and landed on dry land.

Then it was my turn... It started when I climbed the rock: there was a dead mouse lying there and I stood next to it on my bare feet. Arno did not tell me there was a dead mouse. He didn't want to push the mouse into the water either: maybe I did not discover the mouse. Of course I see a dead mouse on a one square meter boulder !!!

Once I got up on the boulder and saw the deep pool of water where I should go through, my heart sank in my bare feet : I couldn't do this !!! The water was more than a meter deep and at the bottom laid 3 thick irrigation hoses and many (sharp) stones. I was afraid to walk there on my bare feet, and I didn't want to jump in the water at once, After I gripped the iron bar a few times I noticed it felt was properly stuck in the rocks and I decided to use it. Not to swing, like Arno did, but to hold on to while I would carefully walk over that water hose. Of course the hose in the water was pretty slippery. Moreover, he also had an iron connector at the deepest point underwater. Slowly and carefully I slid down over the hose with my hands at the bar. Arno was on the other side supporting me: you can do it, you dare ...

And I had to, I didn't have a choice, because I didn't want to go back on my own.

Finally I made it to the other side, not completely dry, but this was absolutely no problem, my shorts would be dry in a second with this temperature. I sat down on the first rock in the sun and could not speak for a while. After some water and a banana I recovered and looking back at the boulder I was actually a bit proud of ourselves (read: myself). I now understood why the English told us that is only possible to walk in this direction. As long as there is a lot of water near the large boulder you could never climb the boulder from the water.

After we had put on our socks and shoes back, we walked further through the gorge and indeed Sylvie was right, here it was as beautiful as in the Samaria Gorge.



After 45 minutes we came to the asphalt road from Mithi to Marles. From here you can continue walking the gorge to Marles, but because we also had to walk more than 5 kilometres from Mithi to Mirtos, we decided to go to Mithi

Mithi

In this small hamlet we had a delicious omelette and a Greek salad on a terrace in the shade. Near the terrace was a well, where a number of residents were doing the laundry. And what kind of laundry it was: woollen blankets. Washing them by hand!!! What a job. Satisfied by the delicious lunch and refreshed by the cool water from the well we went back to Mirtos. Fortunately the way back was easy, we walked smoothly downhill on the asphalt road.



Just before Mirtos, in an olive grove, we saw a white goat tied to the tree with a rope. He had turned himself around the tree so often that he had little freedom of movement. Arno decided to help the goat. When we lead the goat around the tree in reverse again a couple of meters further away another goat appears, also tied to the tree with rope and also only a few meters of freedom. This goat had managed to get the rope completely tangled up. So Arno also released this goat. While I held the goat, Arno untied the rope. We attached the goat again and left. Both goats bleated gratefully.

Achlia and Agia Fotia

Our second address during this holiday was in Achlia, a hamlet at ± 20 kilometres East of Ierapetra. This village had a very beautiful beach, situated in a small bay, almost without pebbles and (still) very quiet. Behind the beach was a large tavern, where you could eat delicious food and all the people from the surrounding villages knew that, because it was so busy on this Sunday !!! There weren't many tourists around here yet.

In the weekend many Cretans from the area came to this beach and some had brought their complete camping equipment and had a nice family party on the beach. During the day good food, drinking, playing and the tough men had a great hobby: harpoon fishing. The sea water was so clear that you could see meters deep underwater. With a snorkel and mask you could enjoy the underwater life with most beautiful fish.

It is a pity that here on the south coast of Crete, the sun doesn't shine on the beach anymore after 7 PM.

After a few days in Achlia we moved to Aghia Fotia, ± 4 kilometres towards Ierapetra. This hamlet is located in the estuary in a bay with a beautiful beach and consists of about 15 houses, including 3 taverns (one now closed), some apartment complexes and a hotel.

Schinokapsala

We wanted to go to the mountain village of Schinokapsala to visit the shop of the Dutch woman Maria. Our hostess Marie-Jan told us we could do this on foot. We didn't have to follow the asphalt road, that route was much too long and too boring. We could go through the mountains from Aghia Fotia to Schinokapsala. We had to leave on time, according to Marie-Jan, because at noon it would be too hot to walk. It was June now and at noon the temperature was already over 35 degrees Celsius.

In our guide booklet she drew a small sketch how we could walk. Following this drawing we walked right through the mountains, on large, small and even smaller trails. We saw the traces of the big forest fire that raged on Crete more than 10 years ago: many blackened pine and spruce trees. We enjoyed this beautiful walk. We only did not see fields or roads towards Schinokapsala and we didn't meet anyone and we didn't see a house anywhere.

While we only had a little bit of drinking water left in our bottles we decided to walk back in the direction we came from. Walking towards the sea we finally saw the village of Achlia in the distance. In the tavern at the beach we had a delicious meal totally refreshed we walked the last 4 kilometres to Aghia Fotia. At our apartment we immediately packed our swimming gear and we went to the beach: the cool sea water quickly removed all the heat and fatigue.

When we saw Marie-Jan the next day, we told her that drawing a route was not her cup of tea. Every now and then we see the sketch in the booklet and then the memories come back



Butterfly Gorge

As a lover of hiking and nature, Marie-Jan knew a lot about the area and she told us that there was a beautiful gorge towards the village of Koutsouras: the butterfly gorge. Several days we were exploring the eastern part of Crete with our rental car and passing by Koutsouras we looked for the gorge. But we could not find it. We did see a gorge towards the sea in the mountain village of Pefki. This one was clearly indicated with signs.

One day, on our way back to Aghia Fotia we passed by Koutsouras for the third time and we decided to stop at a parking place at a kind of park and we would have a look there. This seemed to be the National Park of Koutsouras. At the right side, next to the entrance we saw a dilapidated kiosk and half-demolished toilets. It looked quite neglected. We also saw a pool, which contained everything, but no fish or frogs. A true Cretan pool (with a lot of waste). Next to this pool we saw a river bed. We had the idea that we had found the Butterfly Gorge. We walked parallel the river bed and saw many different trees and shrubs were planted here. It was really a real park.

We got closer and closer to the mountains and just when we thought we couldn't go any further the path made a turn and here we saw yellow dots and "stone men". Now we were sure we found the gorge. It was too late to continue so we decided to go back and come back the next day to continue the walk.

The next morning we parked the car at the National Park again, put on our walking shoes and walked through the park towards the mountains. We heard from Marie-Jan that the gorge was not difficult, only in the beginning you had to climb up about 3 meters along a rope, but she could manage, so we could also do this. Soon we came to a kind of cove, surrounded by mountains and rocks.

Just when we thought we couldn't go any further we saw along one of the rocks a rope with several knots. This was the rope Marie-Jan was talking about. And it was definitely a 3 meter climb !!! Of course I had to pull the rope: it was tight. But rope climbing was never my favourite thing to do, so I wasn't standing really eager to climb up the quite steep rocks. When we looked around to see if there wasn't another way to continue, we saw a big branch on the other side of the cove, standing against the rocks. It looks like it was placed here to climb the rocks, (so there had been more people who did not want to use the rope or dared to climb).

At this spot the rocks were also quite steep and the branch was almost standing upright against the rocks. Fortunately, the branch had many small side branches on which you could step on. I was so glad I didn't have to climb the rope that I was full of courage and wanted to be the first to climb into the branch. Arno would then hand me the backpack and he would follow.

The first half was not too bad: the branch was firm (of course I had checked this), but I have quite short legs and when I was almost on top I had my put my foot on a side branch, but I couldn't reach it. Arno encouraged me: you can do it... you dare..., but it didn't work out. In addition, I was worried about my balance too. Finally, I grabbed my foot with my hands and put it on a side branch and after a short prayer I managed to get my other leg a little higher. I was almost there! Finally standing on top of the rocks Arno threw me the backpack and as if he did it every day, he climbed easily up the branch. He has much longer legs than I do.

I remembered Marie-Jan telling us you could walk this gorge only in this direction: you couldn't go down on these rocks again. Maybe it would be possible with the rope, but we didn't mind walking back along a different route.

The gorge was stunning and really worth his name, as on several spots there was water in the river and there were many different kinds of butterflies. The gorge was also very varied: bushes that you had to walk through, rocks that you had to climb over and goat paths higher up in the mountains. The route was marked clearly with yellow dots on trees and rocks and with large and small 'stone men". The narrow roads along the coast were almost invisible. We climbed higher and higher and at places where the route was not clearly indicated we put some "stone men".

Marie-Jan told us that the gorge would end up at a small chapel and from there, through the mountains, you could walk back towards the coast.

And yes, just when we were enjoying the beautiful view we saw something white in the distance, a chapel. There we had a drink and a meal in the shade under the olive trees. It was noon and very hot.

After looking at the map in which direction we had to go, we walked further. From the position of the sun, we knew where to go, but the paths did not go in that direction. And we didn't meet anyone either to ask where to go or giving us a ride to the inhabited world. A car was parked at an olive grove, but no one was there. We waited a while, hoping the owner of the car came back, but nobody came.

All-over the olive groves there we saw black water hoses to water the land and a short distance away one of those hoses leaked: a lot of water squirted out. We didn't have to think so long. Immediately we soaked our caps completely and refreshed ourselves. We almost finished our drinking water, but we didn't dare to drink this rural water. Refreshed we continued walking and finally we saw the sea, far below us: we were almost there (we thought).

According to the map, the mountains we walked on were over 500 meters high and this we believed without doubts. The gravel road was quite steep and had a lot of hairpin turns. A few times we cut the road and walked (slipped) straight down the mountainside. Some spots were quite steep and at one point we saw a dead goat. And normally goats are masters in the mountains running and jumping. We have seen them walk on as real balance artists, but if they fall off the mountain here ... We have to be careful.

Meanwhile, we ran out of water. Seen from the mountains we thought we took a short cut to the parking at the park, but arriving at the foot of the mountains we could only walk along the coast via the asphalt road. The parking was still at least three kilometres away !!! Walking 3 kilometres is not a problem for us, but after a gorge hike and a mountain hike at three o'clock in the afternoon, walking along the hot asphalt in the burning sun, without water, that no fun... it were heavy kilometres.

When we finally got to our car, we immediately changed our walking shoes for sandals and drove straight to the village of Koutsouras for a lunch and a lot of water. We sat on a terrace on the waterfront and after drinking a lot of water, we ordered an omelette. And we ate the most nastiest omelette ever, but at that time food was more important than taste. When we arrived at our apartment in Aghia Fotia at about five o'clock a dive into the cool sea did us forget all our misery.

"Animal Day"

The next day we drove to the northeast coast of the island and in the coastal village of Pachia Amos we experienced the true Cretan service. We sat on a terrace and ordered a café frappé (iced coffee) and we would like some "Sweet" (sweet pastry). However, the owner of the tavern did not have this, but it was no problem. He would arrange something.

He ran into a narrow street and came back with 2 saucers with large pieces of "Sweet". With a beaming face he put it on our table. We were very surprised and asked him where he got it so quickly. He explained that the bakery further down the main street had a lot of "Sweet" !!! That was service.

When we got back in Aghia Fotia we went the restaurant "To Potami", one of the taverns in the riverbed. We had eaten here before and now we would like to eat Stifado. Unfortunately they didn't have this on the menu every day. We then agreed that we would have Stifado on Thursday. Then the mother could do some shopping. Last year we often ate Stifado in Gouves and we think this is one of the best Cretan dishes. We also make it regularly at home in the Netherlands, but just as good as on Crete you will never get it.

On Thursday we sat down at a table in the tavern and one of the sons came straight to us to ask what we wanted to drink. He did not ask what we wanted to eat: he already knew that. I got the impression that the tourists here never order Stifado and that he was happy to serve it. Soon he came back with a can filled with spring water and a carafe with red wine. The family of the tavern is from the mountain village Schinokapsala and that is where the delicious spring water comes from.

They probably waited for us, because the boy came back almost immediately with two plates, filled with Stifado and a basket of bread and a salad. This Stifado looked quite different from what we were used to: it looked more like soup. The taste was very good, and after a few bites I discovered a small bone in it and then I realised we were eating real stifado: rabbit meat !!! The original recipe consists of rabbit meat, but usually goat or beef is used.

When the son came to ask if it tasted, I asked him if it was rabbit meat. He looked completely delighted: that we tasted it! He proudly said it was indeed "Koenelli" (the Greek word for rabbit).

The grandfather of the family was always in the tavern and he with a smile he watched us eating the Stifado. I couldn't help thinking that Mother didn't need to buy meat at all. Grandpa himself went into the mountains to personally shoot Koenelli!

It was a night of the beasts this evening, because when we just finished our meal I saw a cockroach on the floor and as we were in our previous apartment we have seen a lot of cockroaches, so I recognise them. I quickly sat with my feet on an empty chair. The son saw the beast too and it was "no good". He killed him instantly. Other Dutch tourists saw the cockroach too and thought it was a sweet bug. The rest of the evening I sat with my legs on the chair and often looked around me, but they didn't show up.

If you thought this was all, then you are wrong, because at night I woke up at 3:30 am from a sound on the sofa bed next to our bed. There were our bags, luggage and some plastic bags. As a true hero, I called Arno and I crawled under the sheet. Arno shook out the bags and plastic bags and just at the moment that I dared to look above the sheet again I saw an animal running along the wall escaping onto the balcony. What had happened: because it was so hot, we let the windows plus the shutters open for the first time this night, (stupid, stupid, stupid,) and this beast had benefited from that. We had heard more rustling and rumbling in the bush in front of our balcony in the evening, but in the dark you saw nothing and during the day you heard nothing. After we closed the shutters properly we could sleep again, well... at the slightest noise I was already sitting upright in bed.

The next morning we told Marie-Jan what happened, and she reassured us: these were not rats or something like that, because they did not occur on Crete, these were Cretan mice !!! She would take care of it. With some "Glue boards" near our balcony the problem would be solved.

The next evening I didn't sit so quiet on the balcony, but fortunately the nearby cats had also discovered the "mice" in the bush and every now and then there was a lot of noise and rustling: I believe the cats had a good meal this night.

On the day of departure we would go to tavern "To potami" again to

eat Stifado. We enjoyed a very good “Koenellie”, clearly bigger and fatter than the previous one. Grandfather had done a good job!
The bus to Heraklion left at 6 pm and although it was hard to say goodbye, we enjoyed the beautiful drive over the narrowest part of Crete.