

Crete
A Notebook

Journeys Through a Mystical Landscape
(Second Edition)

By Richard Clark

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Praise for *The Greek Islands – A Notebook*

‘Clark is particularly good on the colours, flavours and scents of Greece. He has got under the skin of the place in a way few outsiders have been able to.’

Mark Hudson, winner of Somerset Maugham Award,
Thomas Cook Travel Book Award, Samuel Johnson Prize

‘This is a beautifully written book, not just a travel companion but a journey in itself through Greek history, its culture and the countryside. Reading this book is an education in itself and I found myself so much the richer in having read it.’

E.J. Russell, bestselling author of *Return to the Aegean* and
Aegean Abduction

‘What I liked most about the book was that it was personal and with that came an honesty, no wrappings, no embellishments other than descriptions of Greece itself. I would recommend this book both to people who have never been to Greece as well as to seasoned travellers. It was a joy.’

Sara Alexi – Bestselling Author of *The Greek Village Series*

‘My library contains almost all of the noteworthy books about Greece and her islands and this will be a welcomed addition. I will place it next to my collection of books by the late and great Patrick Leigh Fermor, because I think Richard Clark’s writing is as close to Fermor as we will ever come again.’

Aurelia Smeltz, author of *Labyrinthine Ways*, *A Lone Red Apple*

For Rebecca and James

Acknowledgements

This is a new edition of *Crete – A Notebook*, which was my second book about the Greek Islands, and the focus is, as the title suggests, purely on Crete. It is intended to be a memoir, so if I have in some instances misremembered any detail I am sorry and apologize in advance. I have been staggered by the reception for this series of books, and must particularly thank the authors Mark Hudson, Marjory McGinn, Sara Alexi, Jen Barclay, E. J. Russell, Mike Gerrard and Aurelia Smeltz from both sides of the Atlantic for their kind words and encouragement. Some of the articles have been previously published in my other books, and for those of you who have read them before, I ask for your forbearance.

Crete is a land the very essence of which is bound up in myth and legend and these are very much open to interpretation. My version of events is by no means definitive and I hope any discrepancies in fine detail will

not compromise the integrity of the book. Some names of people in the book have also been changed.

I would like to thank my editors Jen Barclay and Barney Harsent for their patience and editing skills, similarly the multi-talented Cheryl Perez who designed and formatted both the print and eBook versions, and David Richardson for his striking cover design and, as always, my family, Denise, Rebecca and James.

Crete – A Notebook

Journeys Through a Mystical Landscape

For those of you who have read my other books, the form this book takes will be familiar, in that it contains snapshots of experiences I have had and places I have visited on Crete since my first visit to the island in the early 1980s. It was then that I went there to work as a teacher in the island's capital city, Heraklion. The book loosely follows an imaginary journey around the island, starting at Heraklion and travelling through the other three prefectures of Lassithi, Rethymnon and Chania, sometimes hugging the coast but making frequent incursions inland. Like my last book it is not intended to be a guide, more a series of personal impressions of an island that I love. Having said this, I hope the book will give readers an insight into the places and culture and the people that live on this enchanted isle, and encourage them to take their own journeys, veering off the well-beaten tourist tracks to discover the real heart and soul of the island.

Crete – The Cradle of Civilization

Greece's largest island, Crete, is also the most southerly part of Europe. It stands at the gateway between that great continent and the diverse cultures of Africa to the south and Asia to the east. Its geographical position has made it strategically important to any number of invading armies throughout its long and turbulent history. Coupled with its exposure to some extreme forces of nature, these factors have created an endlessly contrasting and intriguing landscape and culture, which are unique even among the Greek Islands. More than any other place I have visited, Crete wears its heart on its sleeve, an unashamed product of its past and proud to be the 'cradle of civilization'.

Although embracing the culture of the rest of Greece, it has very much got its own individual identity. Isolation from the motherland for such long periods in its history has led to its own distinctive customs, dialect, food and culture, of which Cretans are justifiably proud. Only the fifth largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, it was from this remote piece of land, no more than 160 miles long and at its widest 38 miles across, that the beginnings of modern European civilization emanated.

Three different mountain ranges stride across the centre of the island running from east to west. Between their

peaks nestle fertile plains and spectacular ravines hewn out of the limestone by mountain springs. There are long, sandy beaches fringed with palm trees, and deserted shingle coves snuggling under vertical cliffs – and all is bathed in the spectacular, ever-changing blues of the sea and the sky, their peerless fusion defying description.

Like the rest of Greece, Crete derives much of its income from tourism, but is unusual among the islands as it has an agricultural base sufficient to support itself in the absence of foreign visitors. Fruit orchards, market gardening, stock rearing and fishing supplement the staple crops of olives and grapes. The indigenous population of some 600,000 is almost split half and half between those who live in the towns and those who live in rural areas, with the northern coastal cities being the most heavily populated. The climate in this part of the island is temperate, but on the south coast it can be more extreme with summer temperatures frequently reaching the mid 30s. In winter, snow covers the mountains and the high plateaux but the coastal regions usually remain mild. The variety of the landscape, climate and culture certainly appeals, but what makes so many people return time and again to this enchanted isle is surely the people.

Proud and open, they are generous and always welcoming to strangers; there is little crime and most of this

is amongst Cretans themselves, likely to be based around family disputes.

Food is important yet unpretentious, the simple fare served up at most tables being fresh and unadorned and constituting the healthiest diet in Europe. Eating is a valued social event where family and friends get together to discuss – often loudly – the issues of the day and meals can last for hours, particularly on a Sunday. It is this enthusiasm for the land and its people, essentially their love of life, which keeps drawing me back here. There is so much to discover that there is always something new to learn; always a new discovery around the corner in the alleys of a mountain village, a new view to glimpse between the peaks of a mountain pass. These are difficult times for the whole of Greece, but they have been through much worse and whatever the EU, foreign banks or their politicians subject them to they will, I suspect, always hold a welcome for those who respect their country and customs.

Heraklion

Arrivals – By Sea or Air

For most people, the first experience of the tantalizing island of Crete will be Heraklion's Nikos Kazantzakis International Airport. Let me assure you that things can only get better. The only thing worse than arriving at this airport is departing from it. That Crete's greatest writer lends this airport his name is an undeserved aggrandizement.

The airport is a victim of the island's own success as a tourist destination. It has been extended several times but has failed to keep up with the demand of the more than two million holidaymakers who land here every year. A new airport has been in the pipeline for some time, but with the current financial climate, finding a commercial partner has proved difficult. However, recently the new airport was given the go-ahead and is to be built to the southeast of Heraklion near Kastelli, due to be finished in 2018.

Getting off the plane, however, does lend hints of the pleasures in store, as the two things that always hit me are

the heat and the smell. Frequently windy, the air tumbling seawards off the mountains as the door to your aircraft is thrown open hits you with its warm infusion of wild herbs and arid dust.

On my first visit to Crete I was fortunate to arrive by sea and, if time and circumstances allow, I still believe that is the best way to approach any island, taking the time to savour its character as it unfolds; the view changing from the panoramic, slowly gaining focus as you get closer and can pinpoint your destination.

Back in 1982, as I approached the coast of Crete for the first time, I sensed its smell drifting in on the early-morning breeze long before landfall. I caught sight of the island slowly emerging from that misty dawn, and a wild bouquet garni of sage, thyme, rosemary and parched earth made its first tentative introduction to my senses.

It had not been my intention to catch a ferry from Piraeus to Heraklion in that late spring of 1982. I had flown into Athens hoping to transfer to a flight to Crete. But Greece was experiencing some not unusual industrial action at the time and, if I wanted to get to Crete that weekend, I would have to go by sea.

Landing in Athens the day before, I had met up with friends who worked on yachts sailing out of Glyfada Marina, in a suburb to the south of the city. As well as the strikes, Greece was in the grip of a heatwave and Athens

Get by in Greek

The following words and phrases are intended to give you a start at getting by in Greek. Use these, and your attempts at speaking the language will always be appreciated. The spellings used below are as close an approximation of words written in the Greek alphabet as I can get, as frequently no exact transliteration is possible. Dive in and have a go, a little Greek can go a long way...

Greetings and Courtesies

Hello *Yasas*

Goodbye *Adio*

Good morning *Kalimera*

Good evening *Kalispera*

Good night *Kalinichta*

Please/You're welcome *Parakalo*

Thank you *Efharisto*

OK *Endaxi*

Sorry *Signomi*

I don't understand *Then katalaveno*
 Cheers *Issyia/Yamas*

Questions and Answers

Yes *Ne*

No *Ochi*

Where is? *Poo eene?*

How much is? *Poso kani?*

What is this? *Ti ine afto?*

Do you speak English? *Milate Anglika?*

What's your name? *Pos sas lene?*

What's the time? *Ti ora eene?*

How are you? *Ti kanete?*

Very well *Poli kala*

Not too bad *Etsi ketsi*

Not very well *Ochi ke toso kala*

I'm English/American *Eeme Anglos (m) Anglida (f)/
 Amerikanos (m) Amerikana (f)*

My name is Richard *Me lene Richard*

Weather

It's hot *Kanei zesti*

It's cold *Kanei krio*

Greek Food At-a-Glance

The following list is by no means exhaustive, but I hope it gives a flavour of the foods on offer in Crete.

Appetizers, Starters and Mezzes

Dolmades Stuffed vine leaves

Sardeles pastes Salted sardines

Gavros marinates Anchovies in oil, lemon and herbs

Saganaki Deep fried cheese

Saganaki garides Shrimp with cheese and tomato sauce

Revithia keftedes Deep fried chickpea balls

Tsatsiki Yoghurt, cucumber and garlic sauce

Taramasalata Blended fish roe, oil and lemon salad

Kolokythokeftedes Fried courgette balls

Tyrokeftedes Fried cheese balls

Boksades Lamb cubes with feta cheese in pastry

Spanakopita Spinach pie

Tyropita Feta cheese pie

Skordalia Garlic, potato and lemon sauce

Fava Split pea, garlic and lemon sauce

Salads

Horiatiki salata (Greek country salad) Tomatoes, onion, cucumber, feta cheese and olives

Ampelofasoula salata String bean, tomato and olive salad

Patatasalata Potato, onion, parsley and olive salad

Lahanosalata Cabbage, carrot, garlic and lemon juice salad

Garidosalata Shrimp salad

Meat Dishes

Mousaka Aubergines, mince, potatoes and béchamel sauce

Kotopolo me patatas sto forno Roast chicken and potatoes

Arni me patatas sto forno Roast lamb and potatoes

Souvlaki Grilled meat, usually lamb or chicken on skewers with peppers, onions and tomatoes

Gyros pitta Sliced grilled pork, chicken or lamb in pita bread with salad, chips and tsatsiki

Sofrito Veal with wine, garlic and parsley sauce

About the Author

Richard Clark is a writer, editor and journalist who has worked on an array of national newspapers and magazines in the UK. In 1982, on a whim, he decided to up sticks and go and live on the Greek island of Crete. So began a love affair that has continued to this day, when he still visits the Greek islands on a regular basis. He is married with two grown up children and lives in Kent.

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