



## Crete and Santorini: Better with a Guide

By Marlene Ellin

I have always been an independent, budget-minded traveler. For dozens of trips to destinations across the US and Canada, Central America, the Caribbean, and Europe, I carefully plotted a route, booked hotels and transportation, and researched interesting sites and restaurants.

But when my boyfriend and I began dreaming of Aegean islands, planning a trip seemed daunting. For one thing, we had no idea where to go. In the guidebooks, all of the Greek islands sounded enchanting; how to reliably choose among them? Signs with Cyrillic characters seemed difficult; transport between islands seemed confusing; and with George's heart condition, access to good medical facilities and a helpful interpreter might be important. Maybe it was time to try a tour.

A former colleague and veteran trekker recommended Classic Journeys. The company offers "Cultural Walking Adventures," with an emphasis on the culture, not the walking, she assured us; their trips are well-designed for people our age. The 7-day trip to Crete and Santorini seemed a bit pricey, I remarked. Her response was unequivocal. "Worth it. The hotels are luxurious, the food is top notch, the guides know their stuff -- and they really pamper you," she added.

A guide. On a visit to the Prado in Madrid years ago with my late husband and teenage daughter, we hired a guide for two hours who handpicked highlights from the museum's massive collection and revealed fascinating stories behind the paintings. It turned out to be one of the best afternoons on our trip. What would it be like to travel with such a person full time?

George and I signed up.

### Unexpected pleasures

Our rendezvous with Marinella was in Chania, Crete. If you have seen Venice, then this town would seem familiar. *La Serenissima* (The Most Serene Republic of Venice) was one of the many conquering powers to hold transient sway over Crete's hotly disputed harbors during the past three millennia, and its characteristic architecture still graces the older, seaward side of town.

As we made our way through the Venetian quarter's cobbled streets in search of the lovely Casa Delfino, first hotel on our tour, I contemplated the contrast between the district's charming shops and dwellings -- with their arched entryways and hidden courtyards -- and the bleak blur of modern structures we had passed on our taxi ride from Chania airport. Reason enough to have a guide, I mused.

But Marinella did so much more than merely steer us away from the humdrum. This gracious, well-educated, brilliant, experienced, and sensitive person was also totally wired into the local scene. A native of Crete, she brought us to family restaurants where the owners kissed her on both cheeks and then plied us with plate after plate of home-style food that we never would have discovered on the menu: eggplant with macaroni and tomato sauce; spit-roasted goat; delicately thin cheese pies drizzled with wildflower honey; pistachio milkshakes; luscious olives; fried pastries; and much more.

We were ushered through the doors of unprepossessing storefronts that held hidden treasures: delicately woven stoles and table runners dripping with hand-knotted fringe; traditional clay pots burnished smooth with stones; linens and blouses with flourishes of Cretan embroidery. Best of all was a visit in the Cretan city of Rethymnon -- which bears witness to its former Ottoman occupation with a surviving minaret -- to the shop of the last Cretan maker of phyllo dough.

Mesmerized, we watched as his still-nimble fingers stretched a wad of flour and water paste into a huge circle that he dropped, tentlike, onto a square table. As the center of the dough hovered over a

ball of air before succumbing at last to gravity, he flashed us a wide, toothless grin. Then, he proceeded to stretch the dough over the topmost of the burlap spacers he used to separate layers of dough piled high onto another table. Working rapidly, he coaxed it into an unimaginably thin layer as his wife, knife in hand, followed him around the table, trimming the excess dough to make a perfect square.

Another unexpected pleasure on this vacation: our two traveling companions. Don, a sweet-tempered, retired master carpenter, and Carol, his wisecracking wife, were on their fifth Classic Journeys trip. The company has a four-person minimum and an eighteen-person maximum, so we lucked out, especially because these 60-somethings shared our affection for leisurely breakfasts and moderately paced walks. As a small, compatible group, we were able to customize our journey in many delightful ways, including sleeping in a few mornings. We also traded an excursion to Santorini's volcano for a breathtaking hike to a Lego-like cluster of vaulted homes and churches that served as fortification against both invaders and volcanic activity.

### **Ice cream and icons**

My friend was right. Marinella pampered us. One morning, as we disembarked in Agia Roumeli after a sun-drenched coastal ferry ride, she assured us that we didn't actually have to hike into the Samaria Gorge if we grew too weary from the hot, mile-long uphill trek to the entrance. Carol and George took up that offer and opted for ice cream in a shady terrace café fronting the entrance until Don and I returned triumphant from the gorge's famed "Iron Gates." Knowing that I have balance problems, Marinella had brought collapsible hiking poles to help me get there.

The four of us were constantly stunned by her breadth of knowledge. In Santorini's myriad blue-and-white churches, she knew the provenance of every icon and saintly relic. Descending a steep, stony village path that brought us to a charming museum devoted to Cretan folkways, we asked dozens of questions about berries, birds, goats, and other local flora and fauna -- and Marinella never missed a beat.

At the ruins of Knossos, we threaded our way through the multi-chambered palace that spawned the myth of the labyrinth. It dates back to 1700 B.C. and lies atop the ruins of even older Minoan palace. We pressed our guide for details about King Minos, the remnants of frescos depicting sloe-eyed, ringleted, lily-bearing youths, the lozenge-shaped capitals atop tapered columns. She responded with stories and details about the discovery and restoration of each feature, the daily lives of the ancient Minoans, and the myth of Ariadne and the labyrinth that inspired Richard Strauss's opera.

### **Easier and more fun**

A chartered van was our convenient conveyance on land. Negotiating the waters made us even more grateful for Marinella, who bought tickets, double-checked schedules, booked taxis to get us to the docks on time, and kept us calm -- even on the stormy, gut-wrenching hydrofoil ride between Crete and Santorini.

Both islands that we visited offer an abundance of natural beauty, rich historical cross-currents, and stunning mystery. We'd have enjoyed them on our own, but finding our way would have consumed precious time that we had the luxury to spend indulging in pleasures and discoveries. Are you dreaming of Aegean islands? If you are a little older and slower than you used to be but no less curious, then it might be easier and more fun to do your island-hopping with a guide.

Marlene Ellin is a 59-year-old writer who covers topics ranging from travel to software.

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