

TRAVEL



BYGONE BLISS: Grab a coffee, soak up the tranquility and take in the views of the old harbour in Chania. Reminiscent of 1930s Venice, it is a most welcome and beautiful sight after a hard day's shopping and located at the end of one of the bustling market streets, it's perfect to while away the evening hours

Luxury ... and seven handbags

IN RETROSPECT, it seems a terrible thing to say about a holiday, but in the face of the mountain of organisation that comes with a wedding, planning a honeymoon can seem like just one more task on a never ending to-do list.

This is ridiculous, of course, but when we started planning our honeymoon last summer, it put us in the mood for something easy, and hassle free.

We toyed with the idea of the classic honeymoon — something tropical, halfway around the world. But we weren't overly enamoured by the idea of long-haul flights — we only had two weeks, and the idea of 14 days on a tiny resort with only other honeymooners; sure to end up in some sort of competitive romance-off, wasn't tempting.

On a whim, I googled private villas in Crete. I had holidayed there twice previously; once on a family trip, and later on a post-Leaving Cert holiday. While I had no desire to repeat the drinking through funnels while dancing on bars experi-

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ence of the latter holiday, I had fond memories of constant sun, friendly locals and lovely food.

My search for private villas instantly unearthed the Pure Crete website.

The company works with locals, helping them to develop their properties — some previously run-down villas, some built from scratch on family land — and let them out. Categories available include houses with pools, houses for couples, or groups and large families, properties by the sea, and residences off the beaten track.

All are situated on the north-west coast of the island, about as far as you can get from the post Leaving Cert holiday craziness. You fly in to Chania, on the west coast of Crete. It wasn't possible to fly direct, so we flew Dublin-Gatwick-Chania.

Everyone tells you that

after you get married you'll be exhausted, and it's true, so we were more than ready to completely flake out on arrival.

The Pure Crete people thoughtfully equip each house with an arrival package which includes various foods, so after lunching on our terrace — salad with yoghurt for dessert, we fell asleep in the shade.

Many of the Pure Crete properties are used by the owners as their own holiday home off peak, so comfort levels tend to be high — lots of books, games and DVDs, towels, manicured gardens, most of which boast a barbecue area — it's as close to a home from home as you will get.

We stayed in Villa Aloni, in the village of Maza, and as we drove into the village we were greeted by the sight of a tall, beaming Greek man waving enthusiastically, while manning an outdoor grill from which emanated delicious smells of meat and thyme. This was Kostas, the village's only tavern-owner.

The large private gardens of Villa Aloni were elevated

from the road, had beautiful views of the surrounding countryside, and a private pool. The house sleeps five, and includes two bedrooms, a large livingroom-cum-kitchen-cum-dining room.

We decided to try breakfast in the nearby village of Vrisses, about 7km away. Driving on the main road was somewhat terrifying.

Cretan drivers seem to operate in a permanent state of overtaking, we saw one particularly intrepid driver overtake a car which was already overtaking a third car, all while going around a bend in the road.

So for the first while, we kept to the back roads, which provided the perfect opportunity to discover all the little villages.

Vrisses is known for its yoghurt, so I breakfasted on Greek yoghurt and honey, a meal I still fantasise about, but have so far found it impossible to find yoghurt here as thick and creamy as in Crete.

Cretan dining is very sim-

ple, deliciously fresh ingredients. One of my favourite meals was a plate of sliced courgette fried in a little flour.

We dined at Kostas's tavern several nights, sitting outside in the square under the bougainvillea. There was no menu, and it was some of the most delicious food I've ever eaten. He'd open with a Greek salad — I'd never understood the appeal of the Greek salad, have one here in Ireland and it generally just tastes of cold.

In Crete though, a beef tomato is as sweet as a cherry tomato. The main course was always some sort of melt-in-the-mouth meat, done in herbs, various vegetables sauteed or fried, cheese pies, and homemade wine. A three-course meal for two, with wine, was around €35.

After several days lounging by our private pool, we decided to venture out in search of a beach. We headed to the village of Kalives, about a 20-minute drive away.

A real village, as opposed to a purely tourist resort, it has the air of a 70s destination —

nothing is too new, there's no high-rise, nothing too overdeveloped. The beach is sandy — not always the case in Crete.

We whiled away many afternoons here; reading, getting in the water when it got too hot, and lunching in one of the beachside restaurants — pasta with a tomato and herb sauce and some sauteed vegetables was my favourite.

There are full cooking facilities in all the houses, and if you want to do a grocery shop there are supermarkets everywhere; food is a little cheaper than here.

When we were done with lounging, we drove back to Chania, where we had flown into, about an hour drive away. Chania is the second largest city in Crete, but once you get into the old town, it feels like a cosy market town.

After a few hours wandering, the husband had hit his limit for shopping, and we made our way down to the Venetian harbour.

It's a completely unexpected surprise to walk out of the narrow winding streets of a Cretan market to the pinky peach stone harbour that looks like Venice, and dates back to the 1300s.

I'd advise pausing for a coffee here rather than a meal — the restaurants were not as good value as those in the small streets behind.

Even if you're not interested in shopping, the small streets around the old market are worth a look for handmade leather bags, sandals and boots. If you are, there are amazing bargains to be had in Leather Alley and its environs — handmade riding boots for around €198. I bought seven handbags.

Travelling home on the Ryanair flight was a challenge.



LONG AND SHORT OF IT: Liadan chills out. You can lap up the sun, and going for a swim is perfect in the afternoon

GETTING THERE

Pure Crete is an independent company which for over 20 years has provided holidays from April to October in houses and farms in Cretan villages. Pure Crete specialises in all-inclusive self-catering holidays. The houses and villas are in many villages set in the foothills of the White Mountains, overlooking the sea.

Villa Aloni, Maza Western Crete, prices from £686 per adult and £586 per child, based on a family of four sharing with direct flights from London Gatwick to Chania.

Please phone Pure Crete 01 444 881402 or see www.purecrete.com



LOUNGING AROUND: Having a cool dip in the private pool at Villa Aloni is a great way to cool off