



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Foreign Places:  
The Mediterranean: Crete**

## The Mediterranean

<u>Report</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Getting Started
2	Arriving
3	Istanbul
4	Rhodes
5	Crete
6	Malta
7	Sicily
8	Sardinia
9	Minorca
10	Corsica
11	Civitavecchia

## The Mediterranean Report Five: Crete

*Crete was the home of Neolithic humans from about 6,000 BC, and the center of the Aegean Civilization (the Minoan Culture) around 3,000 BC. Because of its strategic importance and crossroads location, it experienced centuries of warfare between, and occupations of Greeks, Romans, Byzantians, Arabs, Byzantians again, Venetians, (who broke with protocol and bought the island), Ottomans, Egyptians, Ottomans again, British/French/Russians, Greeks again, Germans, and British again. Presently, the Greeks are in charge.*

June 7, 2006



This morning, the *Minerva II* pulled into the seaport town of Aghios Nikolaos, Crete, Greece. This city was created in the early Hellenic years (around 4th century BC) and was an important port during the Roman years. It is mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Crete is a mountainous terrain, and for such a small island (160 miles x 6 to 35 miles), it has extreme elevations with peaks exceeding 7,700 feet. Some of these mountains can be seen in Figure 1, a picture taken from our cabin as we approached Aghios Nikolaos.



**Figure 1. Agios Nikoloas and the surrounding mountains.**

The island does not have much vegetation---the situation in most of the places we visited. The eastern and middle Mediterranean areas do not get much rain, which is one reason olives and olive oil are its major exports. Olive trees do not need much water.

### **Olive Tree Pride**

Speaking of olives trees, our guide for this leg of the trip provided us a history of Crete, interspersed with facts about olive trees. For example:

- Beginning around 3000 BC, Crete was the center of a Bronze Age civilization.
- During this time, olive trees were grown by the native Cretans.
- In the 13th century, the Venetians bought Crete.
- They harvested its olive trees for olives and olive oil.
- An earthquake occurred in 1303, destroying many old buildings.
- Most of the olive trees survived.
- Invading pirates in 1537 laid waste to much of the island.
- Their fires burned down many olive trees.
- Today, Crete is a thriving island, with olives and olive oil as its major source of wealth.

Fine, olive trees may be important to the Crete economy, but I saw a lot of vineyards as we drove around the island. How about some data on wine, grapes, and raisins? How about some samples of the wine?

It turned out the tour guide's emphasis on olive trees stemmed from her ownership of olive trees. She informed us she owned 500 olive trees. She boasted a person who owned 200 olive trees was an impressive person, so an owner of 500 trees was a big-time olive merchant.

### **Krista, a Village from the Past**

We stopped at a lovely, small village named Krista. The day was approaching midmorning and the shops were opening for business. As Holly and I walked the streets, we beheld scenes reminiscent of old movies and outdated issues of the *National Geographic*. Some are shown in Figure 2.





The top two photos were taken of the small meandering streets of this village...No cars allowed. The bottom-left picture shows the main street of Krista...Cars allowed, but SUVs discouraged. The bottom-right picture shows Reporterette and a local merchant engaged in positive international relations: The exchange of money and the resultant good will that follows a mutually beneficial financial transaction.

**Figure 2. Scenes from a small village in Crete.**

The woman was so happy with Holly's purchases of her tablecloths and napkins that she presented her with a hug and apricots from her tree. By the way, this reflects a bit of bias on your writer's part, but the lady on the right is a fine looking Ugly American.

### **Gournia, an Ancient Minoan Town**

Our next stop for the day was Gournia, the most extensively excavated Minoan site on Crete. The Minoan culture, flourishing in the second millennium BC, preceded the coming of the mainland Greeks. Today, the town consists of organized piles of rocks, as seen in Figure 3. But during its time, it was a thriving city, built near the Mediterranean Sea. Located on the narrowest north part of Crete, it offered easy access to Africa, across the Libyan Sea, to the south.



**Figure 3. The remains of a distant yesterday.**

What can the ignorant eye make of those rocks in Figure 3 To this writer, not much more than assorted rectangles and trapezoids. For the trained eye, they reveal much more. Here's what the experts say about this picture:<sup>1</sup>

The palace of Gournia was probably the seat of a local or district governor....It is situated just north of a large rectangular public court, on which various private houses also front, and which constituted the centre, and also perhaps the agora, of the town. [A public meeting place.] On the side facing the courtyard, the palace had a large L-shaped stairway that may have served as a 'theatrical area,' like those of the other palaces....The floor of a small room behind the stairway is covered by a huge stone, black with holes in it, and it is thought that this probably a platform for sacrificing bulls....Besides it is a small stone with hollows that recalls the 'kernos' at Malia and perhaps also served as a reception for the offering of the first fruits to the fertility goddess.

All that information is gleaned from stacks of rocks. Praise to the specialists. And this analysis is just the first example of their inferential powers. Shortly, we will see even more impressive intuitive guess-work in action.

As we were walking through Gournia, Holly and I exchanged thoughts about other old sites we had visited. We agreed this place reminded us of an ancient settlement in New Mexico, once peopled by the Anasazi tribe. The Gournia dwellings are quite similar to those we saw at the Anasazi site: two-floor houses, the lower floor for storage and domesticated animals with the upper floor for humans. And for the community: central meeting places, such as religious temples and palaces for the leaders.

The Minoans and the Anasazi lived about the same time in history. How did these societies, existing so close in time, yet so far apart geographically, display so many similarities? Certainly, cross pollination of cultures was bound to occur over thousands of years. But how...exactly? Why...exactly? We shall never know.

As we were walking back to the tour bus, I mentioned to Reporterette I would like to have a time machine to go back to fill the gaps, to verify our inferences and guess-work. On the other hand, maybe not. Perhaps it is the unknown of our past that makes it so interesting. Chances are, if we had to chronicle the details of the daily lives of the Minoans and the Anasazi, we would be looking for the nearest remote keypad to change the time channel.

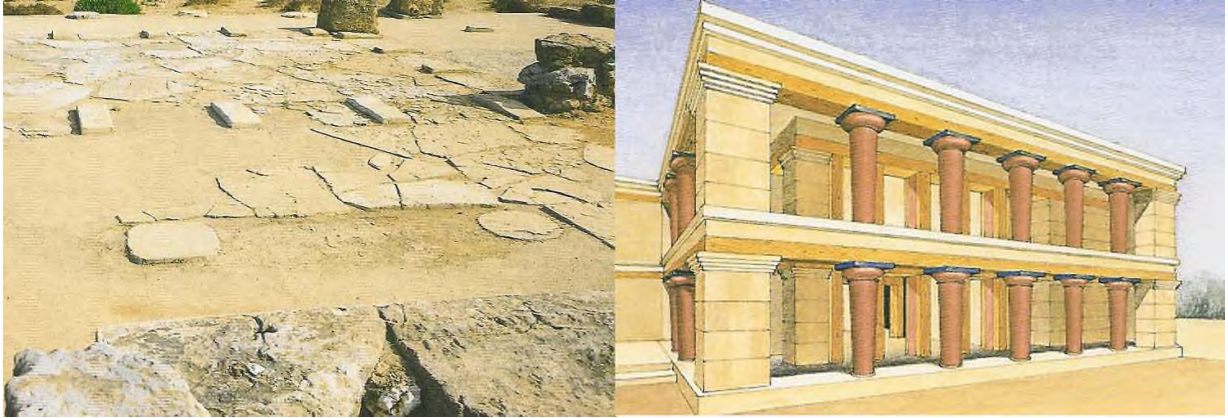
### **The Palace of Malia**

Another place of interest was the Palace of Malia, built about 1900 BC. I mention this place to continue the discussion on the extraordinary inferential powers of archeologists and anthropologists. Referring to Figure 4, the left photo shows a part of the site, as it now exists. The right photo is the historians' idea---a reconstruction, so to speak---of the palace about four centuries ago.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Costas Davaras, *Gournia*, Ministry of Culture, Panepistimiou 57, Athens, Greece, 1989, 6. Also, Figure 15 was sourced from page 9 of this pamphlet.

<sup>2</sup> Costis Davaras, *Malia*, Hannibal Publishing House, 31 Kifissodotos Street, Athens, Greece, undated, illustrations 8 and 9.



**Figure 4. Now and then.**

Someday, I hope to have a discussion with the people who start with the rock and stone piles on the left side of Figure 4 and end up with the palace on the right side. If you know how this is done, send me a brief explanation. Keep it short please. My days of specialization are behind me.

### **The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same**

The day was an arduous one: Enter the bus; listen to lectures on olive trees; exit the bus; look at piles of rocks; enter the bus; listen to lecture on olives; exit the bus; look at piles of rocks; enter the bus; listen to lectures on olive oil; return to the ship. Tough life and a joke. The day was a wonderful one---time well spent.

In closing, here is a list of notable events about Crete:

- In prehistoric times, the Cretans occupied Crete. (...for purposes of diplomacy, make sure you spell their name correctly, for example, avoid Cretins).
- 67 BC, conquered by the Romans.
- 395, Byzantines took over.
- 826, fell to the Arabs.
- 961, reconquered by Byzantines.
- 1204, sold to Venetians.
- 1669, conquered by the Ottomans.
- 1830, taken over by Egypt.
- 1840, taken over again by Ottomans.
- 1897, occupied by Greeks,
- 1898, governed by Britain, France, and Russia.
- 1906, back to the Ottomans.
- 1912, Cretans gain control.
- 1913, but not for long, ceded to Greece.

In hindsight, I am glad my ancestors (and I) lived in the backwaters of civilization. We had a peaceful heritage.

**A sidebar:** Our olive tree owner/tour guide knew what she was doing: advertising her product. After returning home, I purchased a bottle of olive oil from Crete. Its brand name is Tassos and perhaps made from her olives.