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Craggy Ruggedness of Crete Preserves Beauty of Ancient World

I was not prepared. I had read all the guidebooks and talked with people who'd gone there. But I was not prepared for tonic beauty of Crete, for the craggy ruggedness of its mountains, the quick fertility of its plains, the deep blue and jade green Mediterranean woven to its shores.

Above all, I was not prepared to find myself sifting, like an archeologist, through layers of accumulated civilization until my original self rested in my hands. But as Kazantzakis' Zorba told us - and as the myths told us even earlier - Crete has the power to unveil the marrow of bones.

My friends Don and Ida and I had planned for nearly a year to go to Crete to visit the ruins of the Minoans, a culture that had inhabited Crete from at least 6000 BC to 1400 BC. We'd become fascinated by the Minoan culture because their worship of the ancient Goddess seemed to allow them to live in a world full of light and life and sacred power. Chaperoned by one carry-on piece of luggage, the Blue Guide, and enough film to keep Fotomat solvent for a year, we left to explore.

It's usual to first fly into Athens and then from Athens into Heraklion, Crete's capital. At the airport we picked up the Suzuki jeep we'd rented (the only kind of transportation, we found later, that made sense to use on the mountainous island) and set out to find a good hotel.

The city's narrow streets are fringed with the greasy sweet smell of diesel fumes from Yugos, Fiat, Mirabellas and the ubiquitous motorbikes, whose gun-shot mufflers and mosquito buzz slice the air even at three a.m. Most of the buildings are ugly (except for the old Venetian administration buildings and Orthodox churches, which are merely decrepit), panels of concrete glued together in flat-top arrangements that crawl up the side of the low hill the city surrounds. Heraklion makes no effort, beyond the necessarily exploitative ones, to be a city easy on the foreign eye.

But Heraklion does have the Archeological Museum, which offers a unique display of Minoan artifacts. Within an hour of depositing our luggage and sloughing off the dirt and fatigue of our long journey, we made our way there. Like most things in Heraklion, and indeed in much of Crete, the museum has few pretensions. It looks like a warehouse, and its displays are minimalist in design: squat glass cases graced by a card with a line or two of description in three languages, the pieces unpretentiously scattered on glass shelves.

But as we began to see in reality what we'd only glimpsed in pictures, we knew that we were not prepared for how much life these pieces still had.

After Heraklion we jumped into our jeep and set off to see the four major palaces built by the Minoans around 1600 BC. The palaces all share similar ground plans, with wide outside

courts for religious performances, broad approach roads, wide steps leading to spacious porches, extensive magazines for storing food and materials and pillared hallways.

But two of the palaces in particular, Knossos just outside Heraklion, and Festos, 60 kilometers south, give the best sense of how the Minoans blended their lives with the life of the world around them.

The word “labyrinth” comes from Crete, and it refers to the kinds of palaces the Minoans built. Standing as high as five stories, they were honeycombed with hallways and rooms and staircases and must have housed hundreds, if not thousands of people.

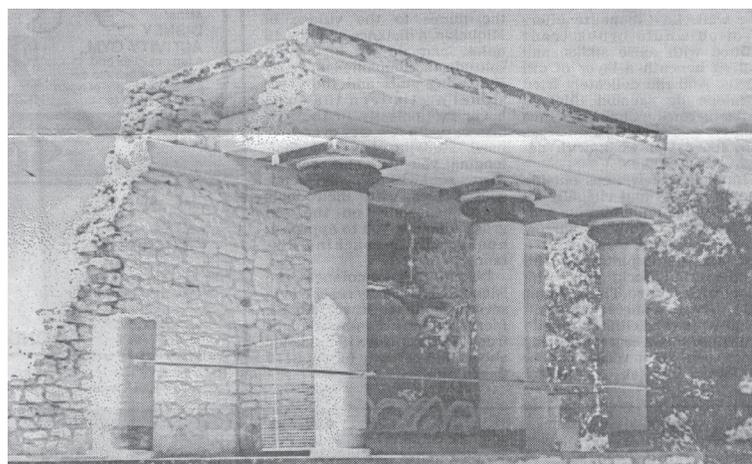
Minoan work, while no less concerned with matters of ultimate meaning, is sprightly and colorful and local in feel, with artful and naturalistic images of quail in high grasses, dolphins sporting in the sea, a monkey picking through yellow crocuses.

Pictures of the Minoans themselves show slender, elegant men and women adorned with jewelry, their hair long and curled. And men and women appear equal in most aspects of life, even in the deadly bulljumping rituals, where they both took turns making their acrobatic leaps over the horns of a charging bull.

Crete has been eroded, fissured, cleaved and accordianed by earthquake, volcano, salt, wind and water, but it has also been carved by humans with their olive groves and grape vines and windmills. The ancient mesh of natural and human interventions is so compounded that there are no lines between the two, only various shadings from one to the other and back again. Standing on the sharp curve of an upgrade looking out over fields and crags, with so much of this area’s history incorporated into the history of our bones and minds, it’s possible to feel both awed and familiar, both a stranger and the traveler returning home.

And so many other things about Crete: showers without curtains (and with a handheld showerhead); the kindness of everyone we met, especially if we tried our fractured Greek on them; the silty raw taste of Turkish coffee; old men with faces like grape vines arranged in village cafes; restaurant owners taking you into the kitchen to select your food. (Menus were never used.) It was hard to leave, to come back to the normalized and expected.

But part of my heart is harbored in Crete; its energy seeps into everyday life and lifts the ordinary just a notch higher, turns it a bit brighter. And also part of my heart is at the palace daubing fresh pigment on wet plaster, lifting the sides of a vase to exquisite thinness, feeling the power of life percolating as the seasons and my spirit change and grow. For a time, it was possible to get outside the sometimes deadening and frightening age in which we live and rediscover the original maps of human life.



Entrance to Knossos palace. (Photo by Michael Bettencourt)