

Discovering the natural and religious heritage of Crete #EduTourism



Participants of the EduTourism field survey conducted in Crete unanimously believe that the island is characterized by its natural beauty and long-standing religious heritage. The following route starts in the prefecture of Rethymnon, passes through the prefecture of Heraklion and ends in the north-east of Crete, in the area of Sitia.

The Agios Antonios Gorge or the Patsos Gorge, takes its name from the village of Patsos, which is located about 3 km away, and from the chapel of Agios Antonios which is located in a cave at the beginning of the gorge. It is one of the most famous gorges in Crete, 5 kilometres long and hosts 80 species of

flora, 4 of which are protected. 24 species of fauna have also been counted, 11 of which are protected.

The dense forest of plane trees and carob trees combined with the small river that runs through it create a landscape of incredible natural beauty. The cavernous church of Agios Antonios is located just above the entrance to the gorge. Right next to the huge cave that houses the temple there used to be an altar of a pagan shrine. There are many narrow passages, descents and ascents in the gorge, which are easily done by anyone in good physical condition. The assistance with the use of ropes, stairs and bridges, which the forestry department has installed, facilitates the crossing. It is a good option for every nature lover to enjoy the natural landscape of the area as well as for families to spend a beautiful day in nature.

Continuing the route, the visitor can cross the gorge of Rouvas or Gafari or Agios Nikolaos is the most important gorge of Psiloritis, with rich flora and fauna, gorges, interesting geological formations and crags of rare beauty. It has a total length of about 4 km with a 2.7 km shaped route, in a truly unique environment.

It is the largest primeval forest in Crete (about 30,000 hectares), with the usually bushy primeval forests having grown to an impressive size. The arboreal holm oaks have managed to thrive as the area is isolated, with no anthropogenic interference (mainly grazing). In addition to the towering primroses, there are many other species of trees, witnesses to the power of nature, with impressive trunk diameters.

Walking through the forest, the visitor will come across the chapel of Agios Ioannis and the monastery of Agios Nikolaos, as well as the picturesque lake of Zaros.

Next stop we recommend the gorge of Tsoutsouros that ends at Tsoutsouras and is one of the many difficult gorges of the area. It starts in the area of Sfakia and its exit is near the sea, at the location of Larinaki, and at first sight it is awe-inspiring. The gorge, although relatively short in length (1.5km), is an ideal place for beginners to train in canyoning as it is adequately secured by the caving groups active on the island.

Continuing on, we reach the Sylamiano or Knosano Gorge also known as Agia Irini Gorge from the village of the same name where there is also the Church of Agia Irini (Spilia) which is a welcoming place for families to go on an excursion, as it combines its proximity to Heraklion with the feeling of being in the countryside. However, it is not possible to walk along the entire length of the stream due to dense vegetation and lack of paths, but visitors can visit parts of



it. The diversity of flora species in the area is relatively low, due to the presence of shade from the dominant species which are sycamore and bush.

In the canyon bed and a few meters south of the bridge, a unique waterfall of about 4m high with water flowing almost all year round is formed. From here onwards, walking through the canyon bed is almost impossible due to dense vegetation.

Then, the visitor reaches the village of Avdou and although it is a small village, there are plenty of Byzantine churches. The majority of these are scattered around the village or around the perimeter of the Aposelemi dam, such as Agios Konstantinos and Agios Nikolaos. Characteristic for the Holy Church of Agios Nikolaos depending on the water level it sinks or reappears.

An easy excursion from Avdou is the dam of "Aposelemi" and its artificial lake "Lagada". The Aposelemi dam collects the water from the Lassithi Mountains. Birds of various species have found shelter there, turning the area into a wetland. It is a point for hiking and recreational excursions. Visitors can observe or photograph birds with spectacular colours, many of which are migratory.

The Toplou Monastery is located 10 km east of Sitia and is the last destination of the route. The wider area has a special morphology that gives the destination a competitive advantage and a mild form of tourism development. Many people arrive in the area to visit the historic monastery of Toplou Monastery on the eastern side of Crete. The Museum of Carpentry and Greek Folk Prints, made by the monks in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the museum of the monastery, apart from the admirable icons, there are also exhibits of ecclesiastical art objects such as Gospels, silver and gold crosses, Patriarchal Sigils, Sultan's Firmania, seals, revolutionary banners, archpriestly vestments. In the monastery is kept the Archpriest's sack and tablecloths of St. Chrysostom of Smyrna.

This route, which lasts about 8 hours, gives the visitor the opportunity to tour a variety of destinations of natural and religious interest.

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