Chania

Old town vs New town

Wendy Jones
2nd July – 8th July
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Introduction
My travel scholarship granted by the University of Leicester allowed me to fund a rewarding journey to explore the west of Crete for a week. My main aim of this trip was to divulge further into my love of geography and discover more about the 2 contrasting settlements that split Chania into a modern city and an old town. I have a special interest in architecturally preserved ruins and civilizations that have been protected from the Neolithic times. The trip has provided me with invaluable historical and cultural experiences that have helped me to develop greater independence and insight into what the world has to offer.

2nd July
My trip to Crete started out with me flying for 3 hours on the afternoon of the 2nd of July. Once I landed, I caught a taxi, driven by a lovely old gentleman called Demetrios who gave me a quick rundown of the best places to visit whilst I was in Chania – He was also very prompt to tell me it was pronounced Hania as opposed to the English pronunciation of Chania! I decided to take this day to rest and recuperate so that I was ready for the long days ahead. I had already pre-prepared a map and route of everything I wanted to see each day which I double checked with the receptionist. Luckily my hotel was a 5-minute walk from the nearest bus stop and cost about 4 euros to go around the island. By using public transport, I got a real feel for what it was like being a true member of the Greek community and it allowed me to maximize the time I spent discovering Chania treasures.
3rd July

On the 3rd of July, I started off with a 2-hour bus tour from Gerani, all the way through to Chania passing by 2 major towns – Platanias city and Agia Marina. The nonstop tour gave me a brief outline of what was to expect from the next few days. It was very clear from the top of the bus the clear progression from the new town to the old town. Small towns such as Gerani and Platanias were full of nightclubs, restaurants, hotels and many resorts which slowly progressed to ancient buildings and architecture that dated back hundreds of years. One common misconception that I did have before visiting was that the old town would be a lot smaller in comparison to the new town. The tour guide educated me on how plenty of the old town was preserved to maintain its historical importance whereas all the newer and smaller settlements were created by the community themselves building hotels, resorts, and shopping malls.
The modern towns became more prevalent after 1900 especially after Prince George was overthrown. Alexandros Zaimis is the man who then became prime minister and enabled Crete to become once again a flourishing country. Once the tour ended, I spent the rest of the day exploring Gerani and talking to the local people. Even though the new town is assumed to be a lot more modern, a lot of the businesses are predominantly family owned and passed down from generation to generation. Gerani especially became the bubbling hub due to the surplus of nightlife activities available for the young people in the area. After World War II a lot of the workforce were concentrated on making small-scale towns that would attract tourists with Gerani being an excellent example. As I walked in the city, I began talking to one of the girls who worked in a store that sold wooden art. She went out of her way showed me some of the “Secrets of Gerani” during her lunch break which I was grateful for! These included the local bakery and Gerani beach. Gerani beach has been certified a ‘Blue Flag Beach’ as recognition for its high environmental and quality standards.
4th July

On the second day, I decided to plan my route via the public transport system to Platanias City and then to Agia Marina. Both towns were recognized as modern towns with Agia Marina being right by the coast, offering a contrast to the inner town settlement of Platanias. The difference of the public service system compare to England was vast – There was not a card system or in fact, any logical system put in place to monitor who got on and who paid for their trip. Passengers would get on the bus and a ticket collector would make his/her way down the bus selling tickets which provided impossible once the bus got full. The insufficient availability of buses didn’t help the situation either!

Platanias is a smaller village compared to Gerani as it is was only established 7 years ago from a merger of 4 smaller villages. It was clear to me that Platanias was the bubbling hub due to the surplus of nightlife activities available for the young people in the area. Just walking through the narrow streets, staff from restaurants would walk up and encourage me to take a look at the menu – my first experience of this was very strange as I’ve never seen this type of passive aggressive advertising before. By the time I had walked down the street I was quickly used to being stopped by every restaurant!

The lack of activity during the day (with exceptions of some bars showing the World cup) made me question whether a majority of tourists in the area preferred to go to the old town during the day and visit the new town by night. Walking further through Platanias, you get to a range of residential areas that were built in 1965 known as Greece’s urbanization period. With a large influx of tourists, the demand for workers became abundantly higher hence having a knock-on effect on housing. There was a mix of simple housing that seemed to be built on top of each other going up the hills, as well as some beautifully preserved houses that greatly channel the neoclassical architecture style. The neoclassical style is often emphasizing greatly in Greek culture which is seen widely in large cities such as Athens with the National Library of Athens being a great example of this.
5th July
On the third day, I started my exploration of the old town of Chania. Going into the second part of my travel project I had already had a rough idea of the differences I was expecting to see – I had a keen interest in seeing whether the transport and the impact of the population volume would differ greatly. In order to ensure that I didn’t get lost, or waste any valuable time, I printed off a map and marked key points of interest that I would love to see. Taking the bus from Gerani to Chania, a clear difference could be seen already in the infrastructure. In Gerani, a bus stop was simply a small stand outside a small coffee house called a Kafeneio whereas in Chania architectural stands with seating was present resembling a traditional bus stop seen in the UK. Not only that, but even the structure of the roads emphasized the great disparity between the busy town and the smaller village; Gerani didn’t have any road markings to separate out the roads or to indicate any bus lanes whereas Chania seemed to have a stricter policing of road traffic and higher caution for tourists. This would be due to the amount of
revenue made from the high volume of tourists which allows the government to further develop and manage the popular areas of Crete to decrease the footfall impact.

I started my discovery of Chania at the Old Venetian Harbour which is a staple historical site. The harbor has been preserved from the Venetian ruling period which covers the years 1252-1645. The harbour had a wide use of ranges during the colonization of Crete where it was used as a lookout from opposing enemies as well as serving the military ships. It was then rejuvenated to become one of the most affluent commercial ports. Walking along Kountourioti coast, the Turkish influence is prominent. During the 16th century, they posed an immense threat to the Venetian empire which leads to the further fortification of Chania which included constructing substantial forts at the harbor and building bastions. The fortification came in 2 stages – Byzantine fortification and Venetian fortification. The Byzantine fortification during the 6th – 7th century was mainly huge inner city walls built to protect from Arab raids and invasions. The Venetian fortification was mainly for protection from the Ottoman empire.
A clear view of the Chania lighthouse can be seen from all angles of the island – the lighthouse was in fact rebuilt several times. This is due to the conflicting influences in architecture during the different rulers of Chania. It was initially built under Venetian influences to protect the harbor but the carving of the Lion of St. Marc was removed and the top half was then rebuilt under Turkish rule to resemble a minaret. The modern lighthouse that stands there today was extensively renovated in 2005 because the old infrastructure was leaning after the impact of earthquakes and World War 2. Walking west around the coast, sits the maritime museum which was previously a garrison found inside of the ‘FIRKA fortress’ (also known commonly as a barrack). The division command was controlled from there during the Ottoman period and a museum tour guide explained that when Crete and Greece unified, the Greek flag was raised for the first time at that very museum.

The last place of historical interest I visited was the Yiali Tzami” which translates to “Seaside Mosque”. The mosque was dedicated to Chania’s first Turkish governor and is the oldest Ottoman building in Crete. The building of the mosque has huge religious and historical significance as recent archeologic studies show that a Catholic church used to stand in its place. The Venetians converted a large majority of the churches into to mosques by destroying the existing architecture and renovating the insides as well as building minarets and fountains used in washing rituals. The great differences between Gerani and Chania are majority due to the difference in the architecture and infrastructure – Chania has vast influences from the Ottoman era and most of the buildings that now house restaurants or cafes were made by Turkish architectures and builders.
6th July

After the first day in the old town, I wanted to learn a lot more about the Christian buildings that remained after the Ottoman period and I hoped to see the remains of the older era influences. During the second day in Chania, I decide to explore the inner town starting off with the cathedral of the assumption of the Virgin Mary. The church has strong ties to the history of the town as during the Cretan revolt it was commonly used as place of refuge. The construction of the church was astonishing with a Trimartyri which is a 3 aisle basilica. It was clear from the first gaze that there were multiple structures and decorations that had Venetian influence. The use of cornices around the outside of the church was heavily used by the ancient Egyptians and was prevalent in a lot of ancient Greek architecture. Square carved columns that stood like pillars held up the construction from the inside.

I then visited the Municipal market which initially attracted me due to the copious amount of traditional delicacies! The entire architecture of the market is based on chariot engineer drawings which gives the building its unique character to resemble markets in Marseilles. There were initially 4 wings each catering to 4 distinct departments – butchers, fishmongers, fruit and vegetables. The main purpose of the market was to bring the people of the town hope and more income as Chania was becoming a popular trade centre. However, as visitors' numbers stated increasing the market developed themselves to cater to the tourist market, with now a majority of the shops selling souvenirs. In the market I had the honour of tasting different types of raki, olives and cheese as well as tasting some of Chania’s finest wine.

In the old town there is a Cretan house that depicts the daily lives of those who lived in Chania during the first half of the 20th century. It was here at the folklore museum where I got an in-depth understanding of the traditional life of a Chania resident. It showcased many home crafts, rural lifestyle and industry work that would have existed before Chania became a tourist town.
7th July
On the 7th of July, I travelled to Balos lagoon which is right at the tip of Gramvousa island which were both spectacular sights to see. Seeing the idyllic scenes and natural habitat was the perfect way to end a fantastic trip before returning home early the next day.

Conclusion
In conclusion, my week adventure to Crete allowed me to complete all my objectives for that trip. It has shown me the importance of development needed in cities in order to provide a sustainable economy and the clever balance of modern tourism mixed in with the preservation of valuable history. The trip has opened my eyes to the possibility of taking my degree and applying it to a career where I will have the opportunity to travel more. I would definitely recommend Crete especially Chania as a place to visit as it is bursting with historical secrets, friendly people, beautiful scenery!

Itinerary

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