

# Holiday at Hotel Aquila Porto Rethymnon, Crete

1<sup>st</sup> May to 8<sup>th</sup> May 2012

The holiday was chosen from the Olympic Holidays brochure and the flight turned out to be via Monarch Airlines. The flights were changed to later times about a week before the start of the holiday and both outward and return were much later than originally stated. We arrived at Heraklion Airport at about midnight and were finally got to the hotel at about 02.00 am on Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> May. There we found that the hotel had a problem with rooms and that we were to be in a room for 2 nights and then moved to a second room for the rest of the week. Fortunately the first room was an upgrade and we also benefitted later in the week with 2 free lunches in the à la carte restaurant. So we went along with it.

## Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> May

On the Wednesday morning we could not lie in bed as we had to collect a rental car at 10.00am and we knew that the office was a little way from the hotel. It turned out to be 6km and we had to find our way there by bus – taxis seemed to be hard to come by. Anyway, we managed and spent the first day exploring the surrounds of Rethymnon and the countryside inland. The island is very hilly and the roads are quite narrow and twisty, particularly as you go further up the valleys towards the mountains. Sometimes there is no tarmac. There was snow on top of the mountains but the impression of the island was of green-ness with lots of olive groves and vines. While parked up for lunch, a man in a ute drove up and started shouting up the hillside. His flock of sheep, heralded by their bells came down for the food supplement he had put in a trough by the road. There were many Toyota utes on Crete being the replacement for the donkey and cart. All the roads are littered with small wayside shrines. The older ones made from steel sheet (about the size of a biscuit tin), and the newer ones made from concrete or similar. The garden centres were selling them. Once back at the hotel, we had dinner and were not late to bed, having had a busy 2 days.

## Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> May

We were out early, leaving the hotel to do the room change for us. We had left our suitcases packed and ready to move. No reason for us to waste a day attending to minor details like room changes. We drove to Knossos (spelling varies with no apparent reason). We explored the site thoroughly, dodging the coach parties. We did not look into the throne room as the queue was too long. The site is mostly excavated, with some reconstructions to show how the archaeologists and historians think the buildings looked and functioned. We had lunch in a small café outside the Knossos site and then continued south to Gortyn (or Gortys). We arrived at about 3.00 pm to find it had just closed. We looked at what we could. The Gortyn site was a vast place under the Romans and the Archaeological site contains only a very small part of the original city. Most of the place is completely ruined. We did find a very old olive tree (about 1600 years) with a roman column trapped within the trunks. Notice boards are needed to explain it and there were not many of those. ( in the museums and archaeological sites the notice boards are nearly all in Greek and English. I am not sure what the French and other nationalities think of that.). While in the carpark we saw a shepherd taking his flock for milking, all with their bells ringing. We also went and visited a small church/shrine dedicated to ten martyrs before continuing on to Phaistos but found the site had closed at 4.00pm. We returned to the hotel for dinner, a stroll along the promenade and bed.

### **Friday 4<sup>th</sup> May**

We left the hotel at 09.00am to drive to Phaistos Minoan Site. We had difficulty finding the correct road south – this was a recurring problem all over the island. The roads do not have numbers, and direction signs are difficult to pick up as they are a mixture of greek script and roman script, and the spelling varies. The only road with a number is on the north coast and is the New Road and goes pretty well all along the north coast. Sometimes it is dual carriageway and other times normal two way. The road number is E75 according to the maps, but varies between E75 and E65 on the ground – no idea why. We eventually arrived at Phaistos at about 11.00am, just in time for a coffee. We then went and explored the site and took photographs. It is not a big site and it was not busy. There were some nice reconstructions and plenty of descriptive panels in English. We then continued along to nearby Gortyn Roman Site, where we had a picnic lunch. Then we explored the archaeological site. There are not many buildings to explore – a ruined basilica (Basilica of Agios Titos) a small theatre (odeum or Odeion) with a reconstructed ambulatory at the rear of the seating. This contains part of the stone slabs inscribed with a Code of Laws and dated to about 500BC. The inscription is not complete as parts have been looted during the last 2-300 years since it was identified. Also, the original inscription referred to other laws or inscriptions which are no longer available. This is reckoned to be the earliest written Code of Law found in Europe. Later we drove round to where the remains of the stadium or race track are said to have been found. It is all overgrown with vegetation again and difficult to pick out – just a jumble of stones. On the way back to Rethymnon we found our way to Agia Triada, a Minoan summer palace built on a hillside. The palace was occupied during the late period 1700 – 1400BC . It suffered during the cataclysm of 1450BC but was re-occupied and a Dorian town built to one side. At one side of the complex is a much later 14<sup>th</sup> century church of Agios Georgios. We returned to Rethymnon through the Mesara Valley – a very green, fertile area of southern Crete full of olive trees, vines, lots of glass houses growing fruit and vegetables.

### **Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> May**

Today we managed to find the New Road fairly easily as we were getting more familiar with the town. We drove west towards Chania. We parked on the headland by the Venetian Harbour and walked along the quay to the town centre, stopping at bar/café for a Caffe Latte. We explored the maze of narrow streets in the old town until we found the Archaeological Museum. We paid our Euro to go in to see what they have. ( Being over 65 we had reduced entry fees for a lot of places.) Later, we went back to the car for a picnic lunch, by which time the wind was getting pretty stiff – still mostly sunny. We then went back to the old town to look at a greek church – full of decoration – and a covered market. We also found an italian gelateria – only a small range of flavours, but they did have Nocciola and Fragola. We returned to the hotel with time to spare for exploring more of the local area, including the local greek orthodox church, again full of decoration painted and silvered with great chandeliers.

### **Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> May**

We drove to Kissamos Kastelli, a bit further on from Chania. The town was mostly shut, including the Archaeological Museum, which should have been open. We had a coffee and then continued on to visit Polyrinia. It was a good walk up the hill from the village centre, although we did find a vehicle road up there on our way down again. On the hilltop is the site of a prehistoric village (pre-Minoan). There are helpful notices. There is also a more modern church with churchyard full of tombs, most of them seem to have been repaired and clad in new marble sheets. There is also a further climb to the acropolis, but we did not succumb to the temptation. On our way back down we called in at a recently restored and opened information centre run as a voluntary effort by a man from London. We were not sure if he had a greek wife, but for some reason he has retired to Polyrinia in Crete. We returned to Kissamos but found the Museum still shut. After lunch in a local café we returned to the hotel. On the way we stopped to view a tiny church – Ayios Stefanos. This was so small, only about 6 people could be inside at once. There were some benches just outside. We also photographed some roadside shrines on the way. Refreshments and a walk along the promenade, with a paddle in the sea, rounded off the day. The beach was lovely sand but it shelved steeply into the sea which was cold. In some areas the hotels had organized sun loungers and umbrellas but there was plenty of spare beach with 2 beach volleyball courts near the hotel. As Rethymno is a university town, there were lots of students on the beach in the early evening and a regular procession back to the top of the town in time for evening meal.

### **Monday 7<sup>th</sup> May**

We returned the rental car to the office and then caught a bus back to Rethymnon. We had a free lunch in the à la carte restaurant at the hotel and then walked up to the old town to find the Archaeological Museum. It closed early at 3.00pm but at least we had found it. The direction signs are few and far between and you have to start at the right place to be able to follow the signs, and then you can always lose them and get lost. This afternoon the first sign for the museum that we saw was 3 feet from the door! When we arrived in our room we found a note asking us to report to the front desk to discuss check out tomorrow. We obtained a promise that we could stay in the room until 16.00. Dinner was a Greek style buffet.

### **Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> May**

Our last day, but the flight had been put back to 00.30am on Wednesday, with our pick up from the hotel scheduled for 21.30. We walked down to Old Town to visit the Archaeological Museum. It consisted of one large room with glass cases containing many small finds and some larger items, sarcophagi and statues, arranged around the room. It was quite interesting. We then visited the Venetian fortress known as the Fortezza. It was built in 1573-1580. There are quite a few buildings in the interior to be looked at, but few can enter. Lunch was our second free one at the à la carte restaurant of the hotel and was very enjoyable. Afterwards we retired to our room for a rest and shower before finally packing and exiting the room. Leaving our luggage in the luggage room we went to a mini-golf course we had seen earlier in the week. We played this with a great many laughs and then had a drink in the snack bar. Then we walked along to Old Town sitting and eating an ice cream on the way. Later we had some tea at a café. We were duly picked up by our taxi at about 21.15 and arrived at the airport in time for checking in. The flight left a few minutes early and was only about half full. Birmingham was reached about 25 minutes early. The car was collected and home reached about 03.45am.