

Crete treat: Mystery and history in Elounda

Twenty-five years after she first visited this picturesque fishing town in north-eastern Crete, Linda Cookson returns to find a place that still exudes the best of island life

Saturday, 14 March 2009



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I am in a hill-top kafenion bar in north-eastern Crete. The heat is dry, and the light on the stones is the colour of straw. Cicadas are clicking their back legs together like knitting needles. Geckos are scrambling up the dusty stone wall to where a looped-up hose-pipe is dribbling water.

This bar is a little oasis - a tiny veranda where a handful of green metal tables fight for space amidst a jungle of geraniums, pink bougainvillea and an assortment of potted chilli plants. Far below me, the thrilling brilliant blue of the Gulf of Mirabello seems to stretch to infinity. Closer to hand, through a swish of bead curtain behind me, I hear Mikhalis - the bar's proprietor - rooting around in the chest freezer of his kitchen. The kitchen itself is a piece of history: plastic tablecloths, wonky wooden shelves coated in pistachio-coloured paint, and a mandolin hanging on a hook.

Mikhalis shuffles back out onto the terrace with a tin tray bearing two beers, a bottle opener and a silver dish of peanuts in their shells. Mikhalis is, I am assured, 96 years old. He gestures for me to do the honours with the bottle opener, then hangs his walking stick over the back of a yellow bucket chair and settles down beside me, beaming broadly. He has two teeth, eyes like currants and the twinkly sort of smile that makes a girl go weak at the knees. When he folds his hands beatifically over his stomach, half-closes his eyes and starts to reminisce, I feel almost star-struck.

Mikhalis' bar is in the mountain hamlet of Mavrikiano, some six miles north of the popular resort of Agios Nikolaos. It's one of a group of small settlements that spill down the mountainside into the seductive embrace of the Aegean. Together with a waterfront strip known as Skisma, the settlements make up the small town of Elounda.

Once a simple fishing village, Elounda has become an upmarket tourist destination - although, thankfully, its evolution has been thoughtfully managed and the charm that first attracted visitors to the region has been largely protected. Down by the harbour, the boats still bob, fishermen still play with worry beads, their wives still mend the nets, and skinny tabby-cats still forage in buckets for fish-heads. The luxury hotels of the region hide further around the headland in private bays. Sophisticated mini-villages themselves, with their own rhythm of water sports, beach bars and spas, they sit discreetly apart from the day-to-day life of the town, but are close enough for visitors to wander down to the waterfront and mingle with the residents.

Normally, I'm a bit of a puritan about luxury developments in simple settings. But the hotel where I'm staying, the Elounda Peninsula Hotel, has to be one of the most gorgeous places I've encountered. And, reassuringly, it seems to be a source of pride rather than an irritation to the townspeople. Its architect Spyros Kokotos - now in his seventies and something of a legend around these parts - has worked entirely in locally sourced wood and stone.

I've arrived up in rustic Mavrikiano fresh from a shamelessly top-of-the-range "Sense of Greece" spa treatment - a salt bath, a seaweed wrap, an olive and tomato facial and a "Zeus" power massage, administered to the soothing sound of running water in a serene temple of glass, stone and wood. I probably smell like a salad, but I'm feeling like a million euros - and if he's at all nonplussed to be conversing with a human vegetable patch, Mikhalis is far too much of a gentleman to say so. He's run his bar, Elpizo ("The Hope") since 1968, four years before the first of the region's large hotels were built.

A wise soul, he's benignly amused rather than indignant about the changes that have taken place in his home village, and more than happy to talk with me about the past.

I've a special interest, I explain to him, because I first came to Elounda some 25 years ago, well before it evolved into a fully fledged resort. I'm fascinated to see how the place has changed. Back then, in the early 1980s, tourism was still embryonic - although the BBC TV series *Who Pays the Ferryman?*, filmed in Elounda harbour in 1977, had started to alert British visitors to the loveliness of the region.

Unsurprisingly, the palm-fringed town square that runs parallel to the quayside is much more cosmopolitan than when I first visited. In those days, it was nothing more than a simple patch of earth, with a scattering of almirikia trees. All in all, the village centre contained just three raki bars, a single restaurant, two bakeries, a barber's shop and his grandfather's mini-market. Nowadays, of course, it's much busier. Although the garish neon signs of one or two of the new bars and restaurants hint at a subliminal paradise lost, you need only to go back a few layers into the side-streets to find local people living a life that's been all but unchanged over the decades. At Maritsas, the oldest kafenion in town, the lead prices are still given in drachmas rather than euros, the air is thick with cigarette smoke and the backgammon boards are in permanent use. In front of Maritsas, the narrow road is as full of diesel fumes and as noisily Cretan as ever, packed with gesticulating drivers.

The town's setting remains breathtaking - not just as a fishing port, but also as a cultural meeting place. As you look inland from the harbour towards Mount Oxa, there's a curiously North African feel here. The low buildings of the square, its dusty surface and its palm trees all give more than a hint of Egypt. (The southernmost Greek island, Crete is 160 miles south of Athens and only 200 miles from the coast of Africa.) But the lure of turning away from the square to gaze seawards is irresistible.

Elounda's harbour, known as the Gulf of Korfos, is a natural lagoon. Bordered by rugged peninsulas, and with the island of Spinalonga guarding the harbour entrance, it's a shelter-within-a-shelter - a silken sweep of deepest turquoise that is enclosed within the wider blue waters of the Gulf of Mirabello. With such a prime location, it's no wonder that successive occupiers - the Minoan, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Venetian and Ottoman empires - have all left their mark on Elounda's heritage. In particular, the town hosts two of the most important archaeological sites of Cretan history: the relics of the ancient sunken city of Olous and the Venetian fortress on the island of Spinalonga.

In its glory days, from 500 to 200BC, Olous was one of the most powerful trading centres in Crete. The city had a population of 40,000, its own king and its own currency. Now, the ruins sleep beneath the clear shallow waters off the Spinalonga peninsula, a kilometre east along the waterfront from the modern harbour at Skisma and joined to the mainland by a causeway.

On a calm day, when the sea is unruffled, you can make out the rubble of long-lost streets and alleyways just by standing at the water's edge. Further out to sea, the wider underwater metropolis provides a happy hunting-ground for snorkellers and divers.

The stroll from Elounda's harbour-front towards Olous is a trip down memory lane for anyone who remembers *Who Pays the Ferryman?* A string of colourful bars and restaurants with terraces overlooking the sea, leads direct to the Ferryman taverna, where much of the action for the TV series was filmed. The front terrace is larger now, and a brightly painted name-board (looking uncannily like a pub sign) has been added. But the taverna's quaint mosaics and secret side stairway smothered in oleander – all prominent in the drama – remain unchanged.

The Ferryman is run by 35-year-old Akis Sfirogiannikis. It was first opened by his family in 1974 (as Vasilis taverna), and he has an album of wonderfully evocative photographs from the taverna's earliest days, as well as from the filming. In pride of place – and also displayed on the wall as a sepia-tinted enlargement – is a black-and-white picture of his grandmother, Maria. It was taken in the early 1970s. Wearing a dark dress, apron and headscarf, she is sitting on the rocks below the taverna spinning flax on a staff.

As you leave the Ferryman, the final stage of the walk to Olous takes you past the oldest building in town. A stone cube, it dates from the 1930s and was formerly a carob factory. Nowadays, it lives an altogether more jazzy existence. Outside, decorum reigns in the form of Thalassomylos, a traditional waterfront taverna with a blue-roofed jetty where fishing boats moor up against old tyres. Inside, within the flesh-pots of the Katafigio Club, lurks a strip joint, done out in dark wood and red velvet and adorned with peeling posters of sequin-clad lovelies.

Mercifully, no such schizophrenia has spilled across to the Kolokithia peninsula, which leads to the remains of Olous. Sadly, my former favourite haunt – a ramshackle hang-out known as the Canal Bar – is now a crumbling ruin. But, otherwise, the causeway area is almost exactly as I remember it: empty, exposed, a little eerie.

The Canal Bar took its name from the small waterway that forms a channel between the Gulf of Korfos and the open sea of Mirabello. It's crossed by a narrow bridge linking the peninsula with the mainland, and a few small motor boats are moored there. But Venice this isn't.

The landscape is stark and wild, with two deserted windmill towers presiding over a rubbish tip of bleached driftwood logs, abandoned boat trailers and assorted junk. Apart from standing guard over the hidden secrets of Olous itself, this unprepossessing patch of scrubland also harbours the ruins of an ancient basilica dating back to the first century.

The marvels of Olous aren't necessarily immediately visible to a visitor. But the same can't be said of Elounda's other archaeological claim to fame: the island of Spinalonga. A rocky outcrop at the entrance to the Gulf of Korfos, Spinalonga is unmissable from wherever you stand on the waterfront. It's dominated by the ramparts and bastions of a huge defence fortress built by the Venetians in 1579. Recently, as the setting for Victoria Hislop's best-selling novel *The Island*, Spinalonga has provided Elounda with a renewed period in the spotlight for British visitors.

Visits to Spinalonga are the abiding memory from my first trip to Elounda. Like Hislop, I was fascinated not by the island's military history, but by a much more recent – and disturbing – period of its past. For decades from 1913, it was a leper colony serving the whole of Greece. Its small inner network of run-down streets and houses, abandoned by Turkish occupants at the end of the previous century, became home to the so-called "living dead".

Hundreds of lepers lived and died here – marooned far from friends and families, yet separated from the sounds and lights of normal life on the mainland by only a narrow strip of water. It wasn't until July 1957, just half a century ago, that the last remaining sufferers were relocated to a hospital near Athens. Inevitably, a sadness seems to cling to the ghost-village they left behind. When I first visited, the evacuation of the island was recent enough for there still to be traces of cobalt blue paint on doors and window frames. The rows of small houses had collapsed into a hotch-potch of roofless, windowless shacks – baking in the heat, buzzing with insects, and invaded by weeds and prickly pears. But heart-breaking pieces of personal debris still remained in the shells of these former homes – pots, pans and bits of china standing on rotten shelves.

In the early 1980s, the only way to get to Spinalonga was by asking a fisherman to take you. Once you landed, you could expect to have the island pretty much to yourself. That's all very different now. Tourist craft sail half-hourly from Elounda and the island receives up to 2,000 visitors a day in high season – which means that your chances of an atmospheric, contemplative ramble are much reduced. Tour groups shuffle through at a snail's pace. Guides from rival companies jostle with each other for the best places to block the flow and shatter the silence with noisy commentaries.

A building in the old high street has been renovated as an outlet selling books and engravings. And the lepers' former cinema is now a coffee shop catering for tourists.

But, even in the face of these less welcome changes, the past is never too far away in Elounda. As I'm discovering during my stopover at Mikhalis', rural life is little altered in the hill-top villages. (We've moved on to the raki now, and a dish of olives has suddenly appeared from nowhere.) And Mavrikiano is by no means the only hidden gem. A couple of kilometres up the coast to the north, the sleepy fishing village of Plaka is also still as simple and unspoiled as any 21st-century visitor could hope to find.

With a handful of indigenous potters and artists living alongside fishermen and taverna owners, it has a slightly hippyish feel – there are Narnia-like lamp-posts, a rough pebble beach with a sun-bleached boardwalk and some quirky bits of street art.

Even better, there are plenty of locals who are more than willing to take you over to Spinalonga after the tour boats are finished for the day so that you can experience the island when it's quiet. Elounda revisited, after 25 years, is still very much my sort of place.

Getting there

Elounda is 40 miles from Heraklion airport, which is served by easyJet (0905 820 0905; easyjet.com), Thomsonfly (0870 190 0737; thomsonfly.com), First Choice (0871 200 7799; firstchoice.co.uk/flights) and Fly Thomas Cook (0901 576 0576; flythomascook.com).

The writer travelled with Sovereign Luxury Holidays (0870 200 6677; sovereign.com), which offers packages to the Elounda Peninsula All-Suite Hotel from April to October. A seven-night stay departing on 1 May costs £1,530 per person including breakfast, flights from Gatwick and transfers. The cost staying at the Porto Elounda De Luxe Resort is £821.

To reduce the impact on the environment, you can buy an "offset" through Abta's Reduce my Footprint initiative (020-7637 2444; reducemyfootprint.travel).

Staying there

Elounda Peninsula All Suite Hotel, Elounda, Crete (00 30 28410 68012; eloundapeninsula.com).

Porto Elounda De Luxe Resort, Elounda, Crete (00 30 28410 68000; portoelounda.com).

Eating & drinking there

Ferryman taverna, Elounda (00 30 28410 41230).

More information

Greek Tourist Office: 020-7495 9300; gnto.co.uk

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