

The Cretan South Scenic Drive

Gortyna, Phaistos, Agia Triada and the hippie beach caves of Matala. A full-day self-drive guide from getcarhire.com

The Route at a Glance

Start / end	Heraklion (or a nearby north-coast resort)
Distance	About 150 km round trip
Time to allow	A full day, 8 to 9 hours with the sites and a swim
The sea	The Libyan Sea at Matala, Kommos and Red Beach
Best for	Ancient history, plains scenery, a southern beach day

The Drive, Stop by Stop

1. Gortyna

About 45 km and 45 minutes south of Heraklion, near Agioi Deka. The Roman capital of Crete, home to the Gortyn Code, the oldest written law in Europe, the Basilica of St Titus and the plane tree of Zeus and Europa. Allow an hour.

2. Phaistos

A short drive west of Gortyna. The second-greatest Minoan palace, unreconstructed, with a magnificent view over the Messara Plain. Here the undeciphered Phaistos Disc was found in 1908.

3. Agia Triada

3 km west of Phaistos, skipped by most coach tours. A tranquil Minoan royal villa that yielded some of the finest Minoan art. Adds just 10 minutes and well worth it.

4. Matala

On the Libyan Sea coast. The famous hippie beach village, its cliffs honeycombed with Roman-era cave tombs, home in the 1960s to Joni Mitchell and Cat Stevens. Beach, swimming, sunsets. Red Beach and Kommos nearby.

Driving Tips

- The main road south from Heraklion is fast as far as the plain; the climb towards Gortyna has some twists, so take it steadily.
- Many southern roads are unlit. If you stay for the Matala sunset, allow plenty of time and drive carefully back over the mountains.
- Fill up with fuel in Heraklion or Mires, the main market town, not the smaller villages.
- Carry water and sun protection for the large, open, shadeless archaeological sites. Wear sturdy shoes.
- Bring swimwear and a towel for Matala, and cash for site admissions and smaller tavernas.

Where to Eat

This is farming country. The village tavernas around Mires and Pitsidia serve honest, hearty Cretan food at gentle prices. In Matala, the beachfront tavernas turn out good fresh fish with a table on the sand. Look for gamopilafo, the Cretan wedding rice, and the Messara plain's own wine, saved for the evening if you are driving.

Guide by the Digitalhound.co.uk editorial team for getcarhire.com. Compare cheap car hire at Heraklion Airport at getcarhire.com/heraklion.htm. Drive times verified; roads, sites and openings can change, so check locally.