

Elounda and Spinalonga Scenic Drive

Mirabello Bay, Elounda, Plaka and the island fortress of Spinalonga. 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 boat
The boat	Plaka to Spinalonga, just 5 minutes across
Best for	History, coastal scenery, a moving island story

The Drive, Stop by Stop

1. Agios Nikolaos

About 65 km and 1 hour east of Heraklion on the toll-free A90. Elegant harbour town built around the near-bottomless Lake Voulismeni. Car parks near the harbour.

2. Elounda

10 km north of Agios Nikolaos. Upmarket resort on Mirabello Bay. Beside the causeway lie the submerged ruins of ancient Olous, visible in the clear shallows.

3. Plaka

5 km north of Elounda. The local secret: the boat from Plaka to Spinalonga is the shortest crossing at just 5 minutes, the cheapest, and runs every 15 to 20 minutes. Free car park by the water.

4. Spinalonga

The Venetian island fortress and former leper colony (1903 to 1957), made famous by Victoria Hislop's novel *The Island*. Allow 90 minutes to walk it. Small admission fee, little shade.

The Plaka Boat Secret

Almost every organised tour leaves from Elounda or Agios Nikolaos, because that is where the big operators are contracted. The independent driver has a better option: drive to Plaka, park in the free car park, and take the little fishing boat across in just 5 minutes. It is cheaper, runs frequently, and gets you onto Spinalonga before the tour crowds arrive mid-morning. Buy the boat ticket and island admission separately at Plaka to save money and keep control of your timings.

Driving Tips

- The A90 from Heraklion to Agios Nikolaos is a modern, toll-free dual carriageway. Easy driving throughout.
- The coast roads to Elounda and Plaka are well surfaced but narrower and more winding. Take the bends gently.
- Park in the free Plaka car park by the waterfront; it fills in peak season, so arrive early. Watch the yellow no-parking lines.

- Carry cash for the boat and island admission. Bring swimwear, a hat, sunscreen and sturdy shoes for Spinalonga.
- Check the last boat return time before you cross, and watch for strong afternoon winds that can disrupt sailings.

Where to Eat

In Plaka, the waterfront tavernas serve the day's catch with Spinalonga framed across the strait, the finest spot for a long lunch after the boat. Elounda has smarter, pricier restaurants with bay views, and Agios Nikolaos everything from lakeside cafes to harbour fish tavernas. Look for fresh fish and the fruity olive oil of the Lasithi hills.

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