

Mountain villages east of Ierapetra



Sources: www.crete-today.com and www.ierapetra.gr

Photos: www.crete-today.com and my own

Agios Ioannis

Agios Ioannis is a small traditional village built at the slope of the hill “Katalimata” 500m above the sea level and 18 km away from Ierapetra.

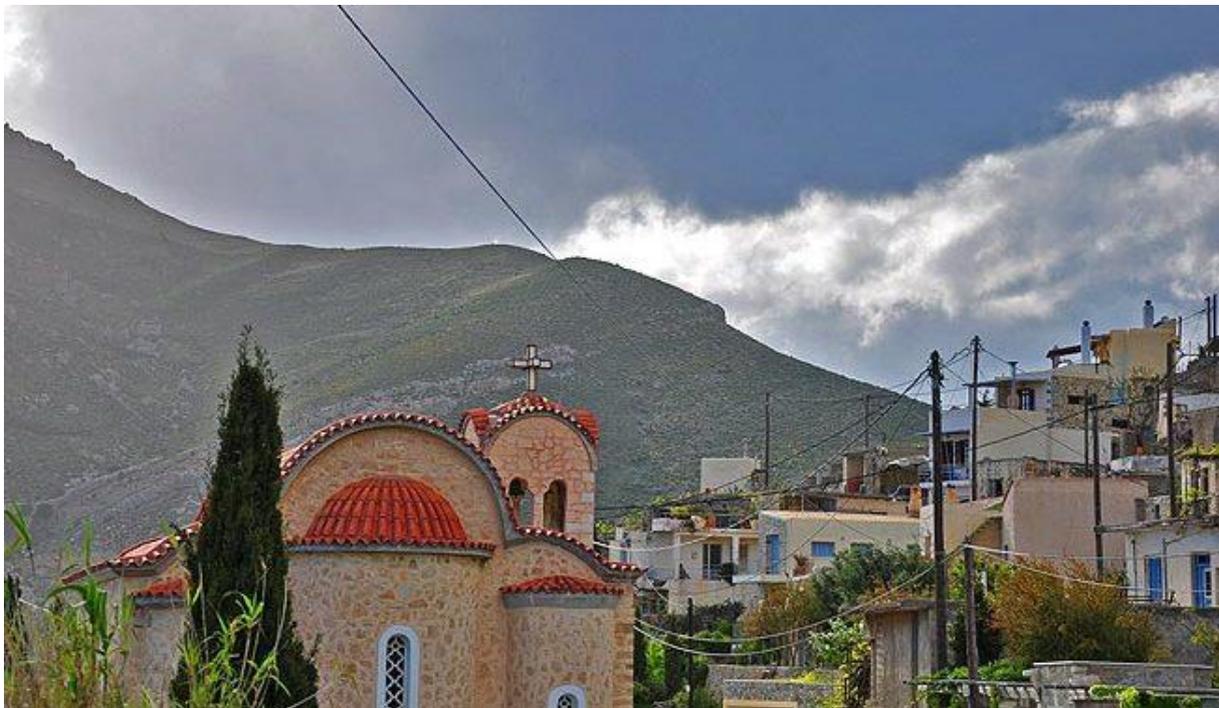
As you ascend the way to the village you enjoy an unlimited view of the settlement. The picture is impressive and prepossesses you for a pleasant walk in its traditional narrow roads.

Unfortunately when you arrive and get out of your car, your former impression will change. You will face entire neighborhoods completely desolated. You will walk across roads, where only ruins and rubble rule.

In 1583 the Venetians called the village San Zuanne, with a population of 157 inhabitants. In 1940 Agios Ioannis reached its heyday with 752 inhabitants and the village throbbed with life. Now the only people who are interested of buying the ruins and the old houses are foreigners who want to renovate them for a holiday home.

The former inhabitants of Agios Ioannis have moved down to the coast, where the touristic development and the agricultural development (greenhouses) help their easier and better living.

The scene you will face is full of antithesis. In a magic landscape with an open view to the Libyan Sea it is located this hidden paradise. Though it is a desolated village, we consider it as the most attractive village at the south-eastern Crete. It is considered the “Lastros” of the south, though uninhabited.



Schinokapsala

Combining the beauties of the mountain with those of the sea, the local community of Schinokapsala stands out for its impressive mountainous relief.

We find Schinokapsala at an altitude of 432 meters. It is an amphitheatrically built village with an endless view of the Libyan Sea. The waters of the area offer Schinokapsala a very dense vegetation with “Leivadakia” pine tree forest being predominant on the north of the village and ideal for hiking trips.

The history of the village goes deep in time. The Venetian census of 1583 registered 162 inhabitants and according to the legend its name derives from the adventures of the first settler who used to live in a cave that was protected by kermes oaks (“schinoi” in Greek), but at some time after a wildfire that occurred the kermes oaks were burnt and the charred (“kapsalimeno” in Greek) landscape finally gave the area its name. Then the village was abandoned but that was not the case for its very fertile fields that were being exploited mostly by the residents of Oreino. Those people leavened the village and since 1928 (when the next census registered 165 residents) the population started increasing dramatically. The new community, which no longer depended on Oreino, was established around 1950 and reached its peak in the 60’s and the 70’s when more than 100 children studied in the primary school of the area and the village, as well as its coffeehouses, were crowded with people.

Now, the number of the residents has dramatically fallen, but the beauties of the village and its exceptional climate have attracted the interest of many people and many are the foreigners who, either permanently or occasionally, chose to live in Schinokapsala by buying houses and land plots.

The legendary coffeehouse that has been open for more than 50 years offers traditional local dainties and there are also apartments to let in the village. It is worth visiting the bottling plant where the wine of excellent quality is bottled.

In Schinokapsala there are many remarkable churches, the most outstanding of which is of Saint Georgios with the exceptional wall paintings on the south of the village.



Orino

This is one of the most westerly villages of the Sitia District towards the border shared with the District of Ierapetra.

The village is up in the mountains at 640 m altitude and the name itself means «mountainous». It is a picturesque village with a magnificent view and rich vegetation. It is surrounded by a pine-tree forest and at the south of the village is the big Butterfly gorge. The local people contract the name to Orno, and it was listed thus in the 1583 Venetian census with 217 inhabitants (180 in 2017).

Evans in his «Diary» mentioned the existence of ancient remains at both Lenika and Skafi. There is a location belonging to the village called Solomos, so perhaps a branch of the Solomos family lived here at one time; there are also the remains of an old tower which bore their name.

In the Early-Christian church of the Transfiguration (Metamorphoseos tou Sotiros), there used to be an inscription on the lintel – «A General of Byzantium came here». The church of Agios Dimitrios, which also has frescoes, belongs to the 12th century AD.

In the village Orino there are old houses with walnut trees, bunches of grapes, flowers and fruit trees. In the summer a small river flows through the village and there are hiking trails to explore. For those who just want to make a short stop in the village, there is a kafenion where you can order a drink or a small bite to eat.



Stavrochori

It is a historic large village of Lasithi, renowned for its 24 churches and the festivals in memory of its Saints that take place during the whole year. It is built at an altitude of 313 meters, at a very important location among the other villages of the area and this is something that played a major role in its future development.

Its name derives from a variation of the older name, which was Stravodoxari and probably referred to the crooked (stravo in Greek) bow (doxari in Greek) of the lyre of a legendary musician of the village, as many people believe; however, there are more explanations for the name. Some claim that its first name was because the village when seen from a long distance, looked like a crooked bow, while it has been also mentioned that the first settler of the village after the liberation of Crete by Nikephoros Phokas in 961, was named Stravodoxaris.

The picturesque narrow alleys of the village intersect at the picturesque small square at the centre of the village. There, at the place where now most of the coffeehouses are, used to be the watchtower of the village, which formed part of a whole series of more of them that would spread up to the sea at every 300 meters, in order to warn the residents about the attacks of the conquerors- signs of its hectic history.

The numerous churches and chapels, 24, are of great interest in the area. The festivals that take place in the memory of Saints during the whole year attract the locals back to their village; the most popular festival is the one that takes place at the Monastery of Panagia Lygia on the 15th of August. The picturesque church of Saint Konstantinos, on the south of the village, stands out as it is built next to a waterfall that keeps running during the whole year, creating thus pictures of rare beauty.

Stavrochori was also the birthplace of violinist Stravogiannios, one of the most important musicians in Crete with a great contribution to the special musical tradition of Lasithi.

The local community of Stavrochori also includes Tsikkalaria, a dependency of the area, the name of which derives from the construction of crocks (tsikali in Greek), but it is now abandoned and in the wider area luxurious buildings have been constructed aiming at the touristic exploitation.



Lapithos village

One kilometre northeast of Stavrochori there is Lapithos, a village where just 25 inhabitants live (2011 census) and it is also a very old and historic village as proved by a reference that dates back to 1779. It is thought that it was named after ancient Lapiths, a Thessalian tribe of the Greek mythology relating with the Centaurs.

Chrisopigi

Until 1955 this village was known by its old name Roukaka, which must be of Turkish or possibly Arabic origin. It is situated on the road that runs from Sitia via Achladia to Stavrochori and is not far from this last, among the foothills of the mountain Koprokefala and about 30 km from Sitia. Castrofylaca listed it for the 1583 Venetian census as Rucaca with 262 inhabitants.

During the years of the Turkish occupation, it was a village with one of the biggest Ottoman populations and it had a large mosque. In 1866 Roukaka was the base for the Administrative Revolutionary Council of the notables of the Sitia District. Later, in 1897 when the Turks of the village were surrounded by Christian revolutionaries they were saved by the intercession of Ambrosios the Metropolitan of Ierositia (Ierapetra and Sitia) who came supported by a troop of French sailors.

The cave Theryiotripa is in the area belonging to the community, as is also the hamlet Bebonas to the west of the village near the border of the District.



Agios Stefanos

30 kilometres east of Ierapetra there is Agios Stefanos, a homonymous picturesque village.

The settlement of Agios Stefanos is built on a hill, at an altitude of 453 meters and it is a typical example of the mountainous culture of Cretan people. Its privileged position offers a unique view of the Libyan Sea and the mountains of Thrypti.

The older ones must probably remember the settlement since it was named “Gras”, a name about the derivation of which there are many opinions. Its modern name is due to the impressive holy temple of Agios Stefanos, which stands out for its special architecture and its internal and external decoration. It is the main reference point of the village and right next to it there is the small square with the coffeehouses where the locals gather. Agios Stefanos is densely inhabited and stands out for its meandering stone-paved alleys. Somewhere there, you will find Kimeri, the old (now renovated) spring of the village with its typical arch in the ponds of which the women used to wash their clothes at the time when water supply had not reached the houses of the settlement yet.

In the past, “Kastelos” or “Fortetsa” used to stand out on the ruddy, steep hills of the village peak. A Venetian fortress, which is now abandoned, is thought to have been built at the foundations of the citadel, most probably during the Greek Dark Ages, and according to the legends of the village it was destroyed by the attacks of renowned pirate Barbarossa. Although the area has not been systematically excavated there are findings that suggest that it has been inhabited since the 9th century B.C.



Pefki Village

This village (420m altitude) is 36 km from Sitia and 30 from Ierapetra, situated on a small road which runs from Agios Stefanos to Stavrochori; it can also be reached by a side road (about 6 km) which turns inland from the main Sitia Ierapetra road at the rise at Makrigialos. A quite big part of this road passes through the "Pefkiano" gorge, a wonderful landscape with plenty of pine trees.

A little before Pefki we have a panoramic view of that typical traditional Cretan village. It is built with narrow paved streets and old stone built houses. A small folklore museum provides information on the history and the day to day life of the village. The name is clearly derived from the pine trees that cover this area (pefki : pine trees). It was not mentioned in Castrolifera's 1583 census. Above Pefki, on the peak Kastelopoulo, a small Late-Minoan building has been located; this was perhaps a watchtower or beacon.

Walkers on their way to the coast through Pefki Gorge, enjoy the natural beauties of the place, the sun, fresh and full of aromatic air of the countryside, the mountains and the sea.

The cave of Vreiko is located about 2km north-east of the village of Pefki, Makrigialos. It is a cave and gulch and the known depth is 25-30 metres. The Entrance is an open and flat place that looks like a threshing floor. In the entrance, there are stairs that make the entry and exit to the cave easier.

