

Get up and go

Samaria Gorge, Crete

By **Heidi Fuller-love**

AT 16km in length, the Samaria Gorge is the longest in Europe. It's also one of the most popular tourist destinations on the island. Go now and you can enjoy the rugged landscape and air perfumed with sage, rosemary and thyme.



Handicraft shops line the streets of Agia Roumeli



The rugged gorge attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists each year

Need to know

Wear rugged boots and heavy-duty socks. Bring something to treat blisters or minor injuries.
 - Take a water bottle, but don't bother taking lots of water because you can refill your bottle with fresh water at countless spots on your way along the gorge
 - When taking pictures, be careful to watch your step
 - Keep to the main track and if you're not sure where it is, wait and ask someone
 - Don't pick flowers and take your litter home with you
 - Bring warm clothes as temperatures can descend dramatically towards evening
 - Make an early start - this means cooler temperatures and an even better chance to get ahead of the crowds - and there will be crowds this time of year.

Way to do it

Buses marked Omalos leave Hania for the Samaria Gorge every day between 6 and 8am. Entrance fee to the gorge is 5 euros. There is a regular boat service leaving from Agia Roumeli, to Hora Sfakion or Soglia. From Hora Sfakion, buses return to Hania. If you prefer a guided tour you can book online at www.viator.com. Many Hania-based Cretan operators also provide organised tours to the gorge.

The emblematic *kri kri*, the indigenous Cretan goat

The alternative

Start walking after 12 noon and you'll miss the crowds altogether, but you'll have to spend the night in Agia Roumeli because the last boat out will have left when you get there - unless you're fast.

Samaria facts and figures

Declared a national park in 1962, the gorge is 16km long, starts at 1,250m above sea level, ranges from 3 to 150m in width, extends over an area of 5,100 hectares and is visited by some 300,000 people a year

Insider's tip

Manos of Manos Rooms says: "Don't forget to leave proof that you've done the walk by signing the register, which is kept in a house to the left of the bridge at the village of Samaria in the gorge - not many people know about it."



Highlights

On the roughly six-hour-long hike, keep a lookout for stunning scenery and rare fauna and flora. Rare birds - of which there are more than 50 species - include the dark-brown & white Bonelli's eagle, whose European population is estimated at less than 1,000 pairs, and griffon vultures, one of the largest birds in Europe, whose wingspan may reach 2.8m. You might also catch a glimpse of the emblematic *kri kri* goats that are only found on Crete, but you're less likely to see the extremely shy Cretan polecat.

En route

Begin the hike at the steepest part of the gorge, the *xyloscalo*, or wooden staircase, and you'll follow a series of terraced steps where it's easy to fall if you're not careful. About halfway through the walk, you'll come to the abandoned village of Samaria, huddled beneath a spectacular outcrop of cliffs. This charming village, which resisted the Turks for centuries and kept the Nazis busy during World War II, was abandoned in 1962 when the gorge was classed as a national park. Here you'll find shaded picnic tables and the 14th-century church of Ossia Maria. Another stunning sight is Les Portes. These towering walls of rock, which stand 300m high, are less than 3m apart, and mark the narrowest part of the gorge.

Grand finale

After the dusty walk you'll enjoy lounging on the sandy beach, or lapping up some sapid Cretan fare in one of the town of Agia Roumeli's many tavernas. Still nursing those aching legs, you'll also love the lazy boat ride back from this pretty resort, which is only accessible from the sea, or on foot via the gorge.

Eat like a local

Having worked up an appetite on this long hike, enjoy local specialties prepared in clay pots over charcoal or open fire at the Artemis taverna (www.agiaroumeli.com/artemis_restaurant.htm). Don't forget to finish off your meal with homemade, thyme-flavoured honey drizzled over Sfakian pita.

Stay the night

Budget-minded sleep seekers should make a beeline for Manos Rooms (tel 2825-091505/6944-917646). This friendly family business has basic but comfortable rooms with en suite bathroom and fridge, overlooking the Libyan Sea. Prices from 25 euros for a double. For something slightly more upscale, try Gigilos Rooms (tel 2821-078172). Dubbed the best rooms in the village by the *Lonely Planet* travel guide, this large complex has nicely furnished rooms with gleaming new bathrooms, a communal fridge and a taverna with shaded veranda which leads out onto the beach. Prices from 35 euros for a double.

Photos by Heidi Fuller-love