

6 – CRETE: KHANIÁ, PALAIOCHÓRA, RÉTHIMNO AND IRAKLION

Friday, 14 May

Walter and I both got up at about 5.45 a.m. and quickly prepared to leave. Before we departed, Walter took a few photographs of dawn breaking over the misty plain. We were down at the 'Buses Stop' before 6.30, but our bus to Iraklion did not appear until nearly seven o'clock. We killed time by standing by the village fountain listening to the water gurgling, and watching goats (with great dangling teats), donkeys and people ambling by.

The bus was an old boneshaker with only a handful of country folk on board. We drove through several villages familiar to us by now, then began to descend from the plain by a dramatic mountainous route. Passing many deep valleys and a few isolated villages, we now made our way towards the main road to Iraklion. I then fell asleep until I was woken by Walter when we reached the familiar museum square in the capital.

From here we tramped to the other end of town and arrived at the western gate, where we expected to find a bus going to Khaniá, but found nothing. We asked some local people where we should go and were directed to an insignificant bus stop by the gate. As no buses were forthcoming, we found a café nearby and had a late breakfast. As Walter was not convinced that we were at the right bus stop, we took a taxi to the main bus station so that we would be sure of getting a seat on a bus. It was just as well that we had taken a taxi, for we would never have found the bus station.

Having paid 300 drachmas each for our tickets, we boarded a luxury coach at 10.45 and set off along the monotonous coast road to Khaniá. I soon fell asleep again thanks to the heat and the lack of air in the coach.



We stopped for half an hour at the town of Réthimno and then continued, eventually arriving at Khaniá by about two o'clock. In the very noisy and chaotic bus

station we tried to find out the times of buses to various other places, but after an unsuccessful hunt, we left. Once we had got our bearings, we made our way towards the harbour and walked along the noisy, uninteresting and dusty streets in search of accommodation. We soon discovered a run-down place in a side street, where we paid 500 drachmas for a large room containing four beds.

Afterwards, when it had turned cloudy and cool, we went out to walk around and see the town. By the time we had arrived at the harbour and surveyed the decaying old Venetian buildings, we quickly came to the conclusion that the place was a dreadful dump. Yet another let-down! So far I had been rather disappointed by this overrated island and now suggested that we leave it and head for Santorini, an island that Walter had wished to see.

We walked along the pier and then found our way to a quiet square, where we peeped into a nearby church then sat down in a café to enjoy a beer. We then returned to our room to don warm jumpers as it had turned cool. Afterwards we returned to the bus station, where we finally got information about bus times. Later we went rambling around some of the narrow streets lined by crumbling Venetian houses, which proved to be quite interesting, then sheltered in a café as it had begun to drizzle rain. Here we treated ourselves to a couple of *ouzos*, served with elaborate appetizers.

At about half past six we made our way to a nearby restaurant, where we dined cheaply on fish, salad, bread and wine. After a leisurely meal we then made our way to another café, this time a more modest affair, where we had Turkish coffee followed by *raki* and nuts. When we had tired of watching uninteresting crowds and traffic, we quickly returned to our room, for it had started to rain again. I finished this disappointing day by reading some information about the islands and writing my diary.

Saturday, 15 May

Both of us woke early this morning to the sight of yet another leaden sky. Walter had planned to walk to the harbour to take shots of the sunrise but, once he had seen the dark clouds outside, decided not to bother. While he lay on in bed, I went out and took a leisurely shower. The water, heated by nothing more than the sun, was hardly tepid, but it was adequate.

At 8.30 we left the crumbling old building and made our way to the crowded bus station, where we bought tickets, at 160 drachmas apiece, to Palaiochóra on the south coast of the island. We did not particularly want to go there, but had decided to make the journey in order to see some of the mountain scenery. It was not the best of days to go, as the mountains would be enveloped in cloud, but there was nothing else to do. I suggested that we keep our eyes open for 'rooms for rent' notices in the villages, travel all the way to Palaiochóra and then return to a village for the night.

After a quick breakfast of bread rolls and orange juice, we set off on a packed luxury coach at nine o'clock, travelled westwards along the main coastal road and then turned southwards towards the mountains. Because of our seat numbers, Walter and I had become separated; an elderly Greek man sat beside me. Walter had better luck, for he was joined by a good-looking young Greek girl. The journey was quite entertaining as many of the local people, who chatted among themselves

animatedly, got on and off. Some of them got off in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere, though no doubt there was a little village somewhere nearby.

Thanks to the stuffiness of the bus, I had to struggle to keep awake. Despite the murky conditions outside, the scenery seemed to be reasonably dramatic as we climbed up into the mountains. Although the landscape was more lush around here, the villages were still just as scruffy, tumbledown and uninteresting. We never saw one 'rooms to rent' sign or hotel in any one of them, and had no great desire to stay in any particular one.

On went the bus, zig-zagging up the hairpin bends that overlooked deep valleys, until we were surrounded by cloud and rain. However, when we headed downwards and left the cloud behind, the weather began to clear up. By 11.30 we finally arrived in the dreadful little dump that was Palaiochóra: a featureless seaside resort full of spaced-out youngsters with rucksacks. I found a place with rooms immediately and we were shown into a smart bedroom with a bathroom by an elderly man, who charged us 500 drachmas for the night.

Afterwards we went walking along the headland, enjoying the view of the bay and the sea, then returned to the village to buy bread, cheese, salami, a tomato, butter, biscuits and some beer. We then returned to the headland, where we selected a sheltered spot and sat down to an enjoyable picnic lunch in the fresh air.

Fed and rested, I set off for a walk up the mountains while Walter took himself off to the beach (spelt 'beech' here). Although very windy by now, the sun was shining. Climbing uphill proved to be rather tough going. I was enjoying the exercise but, as the scenery proved to be so uninteresting, I turned back for the village after an hour and a half or so. I arrived back just in time, for a gale had blown up by then and I was almost swept off my feet several times.

I joined Walter just before five o'clock in our room. After resting, we ventured out at six o'clock and found a café where we drank a generous helping of *ouzo* with *mezédés* (appetizers) for just 30 drachmas. We then made our way to a noisy restaurant, where we ate an enormous helping of chicken with chips and salad, washed down with some cheap red wine. We escaped from this place as soon as we had finished and went to another café (also noisy) and there ordered Turkish coffee, then large glasses of *raki* with nuts. Here the local people were playing cards and the young backpackers were playing backgammon. We stayed in the place until about ten o'clock, then returned to our room and prepared for bed.

Sunday, 16 May

This morning Walter roused me from a solid sleep interspersed with some fitful dreaming, at twenty to seven. By seven o'clock we were boarding a bus – another luxury coach – for Khaniá. As there was only a handful of people on board, we two sat at the back and enjoyed the best views. As the sun was shining, the mountain scenery looked considerably better today, though it still was not marvellous. The journey, like the previous day's, was made interesting by the getting on and off of the local people: smart businessmen, elderly farming types and little old ladies in black. One such lady was very vivacious and talkative.

Towards the end of the journey, when we neared the uninteresting coastline and main road, I began to doze. I woke up when we arrived back in Khaniá. In a café I ate a bread roll, an orange, some biscuits and a Turkish coffee by way of breakfast, and

set off briskly for the town centre, leaving Walter behind to relax and mind the luggage. As the archaeological museum would not be open until ten o'clock, I went across the road to a church, where I experienced about twenty minutes of an Orthodox service. People came and went and children wandered around while the priests prayed and a singer chanted to a drone sung by several boys. One of the priests then started to preach what sounded like a hellfire and brimstone sermon in a thundering voice, to which nobody seemed to pay any attention. On the right-hand side of the church old men sat in high wooden seats, while smartly-dressed younger men stood; on the left-hand side were the women and girls.

I left at ten, crossed the road and went into the museum, where I looked at everything in about twenty minutes. Because it was Sunday, I did not have to pay an entrance fee. There were some excellent examples of very early coffins, all of which looked in good condition, and a good collection of Minoan pots, figurines and artefacts. One case full of pots, discovered nearby in 1969, looked almost new; not one of the pots was cracked or in any way defaced. Also on display were later Greek mosaics and small statues.

Afterwards I hurried back to the bus station and at 10.30 set off with Walter on another coach for the boring journey to Réthimno. This we reached at around midday, when it was raining. We stayed in the station until the rain eased off and then went in search of a room, which we found very quickly. We took a large room with three beds for 500 drachmas.

After I had washed my hair and we both had washed some clothes, we wandered out and lunched on toasted cheese sandwiches, beer and a doughnut. Afterwards we walked around the little city, which we did not find very exciting. Like Khaniá, it contained crumbling Venetian buildings, most of which were of not much interest. Today being Sunday, the place was dead and rather depressing. We paid 20 drachmas to walk around the ruins of a large Venetian fortress, in which there was very little to see. When we had looked around the town, we returned to our room, collected some reading material and set off for the park. We spent a while there reading, chatting and watching some children play.

Later we climbed to the top of a nearby minaret to enjoy an aerial view of the old town, which was quite impressive, then found our way to the old Venetian port, a pretty corner complete with little fishing boats and restaurants nearby. We found somewhere cheap to eat and after an *ouzo* ordered our evening meal. I chose baby squid, Greek salad and bread, and Walter ordered shrimps. With this we shared a small bottle of white wine.

After we had finished our meal and had relaxed, we wandered off to a small square and there, in a café, drank some Turkish coffee, followed by a delicious *mandarini* liqueur served with peanuts. I loved this drink and was determined to buy a bottle of it. We then walked along the seafront to see the place lit up. As Walter now wanted a nightcap, I reluctantly joined him in another café, where we sampled the local *mournoraki* (even more fiery than ordinary *raki*) with nuts. Finally we returned to our room and prepared for bed.

Monday, 17 May

I woke this morning at about half past seven. Although it was a bright morning, it was still windy outside. Soon after eight o'clock we left and walked to the bus station

in order to catch the bus to Iraklion. As we were too early, I left Walter to mind the luggage and went off for a walk. I examined a ruined mosque and then made my way to a little market, where I bought an apple.

We had thought that the bus would travel along the old road by the mountains, but unfortunately it drove along the boring main road. The journey began at nine o'clock and we arrived back in the horrible capital by half past ten. Our plan had been to travel on the *Ios* boat to Santorini but, after we had taken a look at the very rough sea, we decided against this. By now it had clouded over and the wind was blowing harder than ever.

Annoyed by this turn of events, we wandered up the main street and took note of the various boats that would be going to Santorini and other islands. Fortunately we discovered that a boat would sail to Santorini on the following morning at 7.45 a.m. As we had given up any idea of travelling elsewhere today, we quickly found accommodation in a spartan room and later wandered off to change money and have a quick snack.

Afterwards we walked to the Historical Museum, where we found that it was closed until 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Walter went off to take some photographs and I went to the Archaeological Museum, which was also closed as it was a Monday. Feeling thoroughly fed up and bored by now, I wandered off to the El Greco Park, where I sat until I became restless. I then returned to the Historical Museum, where I waited for Walter.

He finally appeared and we paid 50 drachmas to go in. After all this, we saw around the museum in less than an hour and left feeling more bored than ever, for there was little of interest to be seen in it. Dejected by now, we returned to our humble room, where Walter washed his hair and I read my book, then dozed.

We sauntered out later, drank an *ouzo* near the market and then, at about seven o'clock, went to a good restaurant where we had quite an enjoyable meal. This evening I chose minced meat stuffed in vine leaves with bread and a salad of lettuce, and drank some rosé wine. The price for all this was quite reasonable. We then went wandering through the noisy and dirty streets, drank a coffee in a tumbledown café run by a kind elderly lady, and finally returned to our lodgings for a night's sleep. We decided that we would leave tomorrow, whatever the weather!