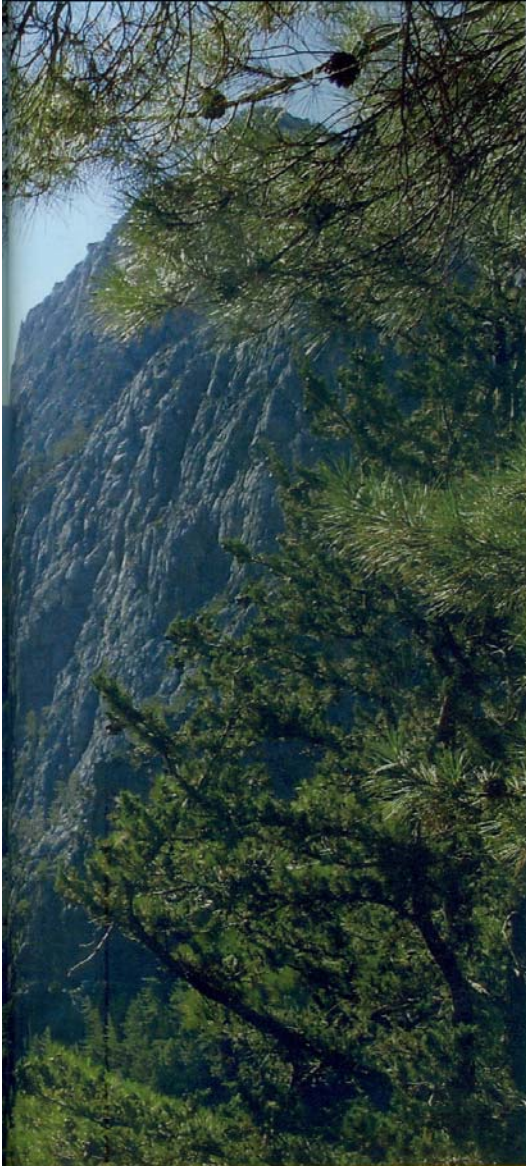


Hiking the Samarina Gorge

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Photos by Sherri Moshman Paganos

Crete's Samaria Gorge is not the longest or deepest in Greece, but it is a voyage of fascinating variety that takes hikers in, year after year. **Sherri Moshman Paganos** shares an itinerary of constant rediscovery.

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he air in Omalos early on a summer morning feels surprisingly cool. Here, at 1,250 meters near the crest of the White Mountains of Crete, is the gateway to the Samaria Gorge. The bus has arrived from Hania, a little over an hour away on a road that twists and turns, and unloaded its cargo of hikers from all over.

In an area full of gorges and splendid scenery, Samaria is the "great gorge" – 16 kilometres, one of the longest in Europe. I shiver in my tank top and seek out the sun to warm me although I know that soon I'll be desperate to avoid it during the hike. At the outdoor snack tables, people are stocking up on last minute sandwiches, cheese pies, crackers and fruit before starting the descent. Curious, I look around at footwear; despite the recommendation for hiking boots or heavy athletic shoes with thick socks, I'm surprised to see plenty of sandals with no socks, sandals with socks, and thin sneakers. Surely, these shoes will be destroyed by the end, if not before. Besides having the right footwear, you should of course have a hat, sunglasses and suntan lotion, food to snack on, and a bottle of water that you can refill at the springs along the way.

"Ready?" I ask my 20-year-old daughter, a veteran of this hike as I am. She adjusts her sunglasses as we study the list of prohibitions: "no radios, no singing, no throwing stones, no 'excessive' noise, no alcohol, no smoking except in rest points, throwing rubbish only in the bins." Not following any of these rules, it is warned, will lead to prosecution and punishment. Samaria Gorge is a national park, entrance fee 5 euro.

Adjusting our backpacks, we start off. In the beginning part of the gorge, aptly called "Xyloskalo," meaning 'wooden stairs,' you hold onto wooden railings to aid you in the steep and slippery descent. You need to take this part slowly because it's easy to slip on these well-worn stones. But if you're watching your feet carefully, you risk missing the splendour of the scenery.



Agia Roumeli, at the end of the gorge. "When you exit the gorge, what you see right outside is the old town that was destroyed by floods in the 1950's and then moved further away."



The settlement of Samaria.

In the first part of the descent, periodically signs warn you: "Great Danger! Walk Quickly!" Wire mesh is supposed to catch the falling rocks. Because of the steep descent, you notice that when you stop, your knees start to shake and buckle. This part of the gorge is very hard on the knees; in fact the hike generally is not for those with knee problems.

When you get to the first rest stop called "Neroutsiko" (little water), you fill your bottle with clear cold water from the winter snows and rains and sit gratefully under the shade of the broad-leaved plane trees. If it's a summer day crowded with hikers (on peak days, the number can reach 3,000 or more) it will be harder of course to enjoy the wildness. If you manage to get away from others and remain absolutely quiet, you're rewarded with a symphony of chirps and twitters of all kinds of birds. That quiet is a tonic.

I notice three classes of hikers: a) those in terrific shape who see the hike as a challenge to see how fast they can go through, and consequently see very little; (b) the slackers, who drag their feet, take long rests, and converse oblivious to their surroundings; and (c) the moderate hikers, who take short rests along the way let the natural beauty of the place recharge their psychic batteries.

After Neroutsiko the terrain changes as you reach the bottom of the gorge – now you're walking over dry river beds in and out of the shade. Walking, a line from a poem by E.E. Cummings: comes into my head: "the leaping greenly spirits of trees." Keep looking up to catch the different colours of green, from dark army to the lightest pale green, and to inhale the sweet scent of the pines. Even though it's summer, the colours are striking. Spring however is the recommended time to go for the best colours and fewer crowds; the gorge is usually open from May through October, depending on the weather. The gorge is closed on days when rain makes the gorge too dangerous. Far off you hear the wind crying and the sound of water roaring near by – and closer of course, the voices of your fellow hikers.

The next rest stop is Agios Nikolaos, a church from Byzantine times built on the ruins of the ancient temple of Apollo. This area was inhabited from antiquity. In front of the church grows a giant cypress tree, which a nearby plaque tells you has a circumference of 6.5 meters (!) and is reputed to be over 2,000 years old. In ancient times the

wood in this area was exported to Egypt and also used in the columns at the Minoan palaces on Crete at Knossos and Phaistos.

After Agios Nikolaos, the terrain changes again as you're walking mostly on pebbles or larger stones on the river bed, crossing on unsteady bridges made of logs with a piratical 'walking the plank' feeling. Finally, you reach the abandoned village of Samaria, about halfway through the hike. Here is the largest rest stop, with picnic tables. Today, the houses are used by guards. There's also a doctor and forest service headquarters, as well as a couple of mules that can take you out if there's an emergency. You can find rangers around at the various rest stops, walking the paths and communicating with each other by radio.

Samaria, founded during the Byzantine era, was inhabited until 1962 when it became part of the park. A story goes that in the 14th century, the commander of the Venetian garrison in Sfakia had tried to kiss the beautiful "Chryssomaloussa" ("Goldilocks") and when she resisted, he used his sword to cut off her hair. To avenge the insult, the Skordilis family killed the Venetian garrison and their commander and took refuge in Samaria. The Venetians tried unsuccessfully to enter the gorge and punish the family. In the end, there was an "uneasy peace" and the beautiful Chryssomaloussa became a nun in the convent of the Blessed Mary of Egypt (Osia Maria), which you can still see in the village. Later, during Cretan revolutions, fighters knew they could shelter here. During the German Occupation, the gorge played an important role in hiding Greek partisans.

Staying overnight inside the gorge is generally forbidden. Tickets are checked on exit to be sure no hikers are missing. However, some rooms have been renovated for researchers, and if you know someone who's in the forestry service or is doing research, you might be able to get a pass to stay in Samaria. Jennifer and Alex Phoundoulakis were lucky enough to get permission to spend a night in early October, thanks to a friend doing forestry research at the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Chania. Staying in the abandoned village was a rare treat. The kri kri, Crete's elusive mountain goats, come out after the hikers leave (forestry personnel feed them). Jennifer recalls hearing badgers and ferrets and lying on the bridge gazing up at the sky with its endless tapestry of stars. "The isolation really makes you wonder how it was for the people who were living there."



The author's daughter, Suzanna, in the "portes".



The settlement of Samaria.

Though a nice snooze in the Samaria shade would be tempting, you've got to keep going. Guides recommend not resting more than 30 minutes, to avoid muscle cramps when you start again. This next leg is the most pleasant, walking down by the river – often dry, but in some places running in clear little rills. You cross and recross the river bed, sometimes on shaky bridges, sometimes on strategically located stones. The terrain changes again as you climb up where you're looking down at the streams. The hardest part comes as you descend again and find yourself walking on huge boulders with the sun beating down on you. There are signs telling you to be alert for unusual plants growing in the cracks. Despite the heat and my growing fatigue, I spot tiny leaves poking out. It's said there are 450 varieties of wildflowers in the gorge.

Finding streams again, we decide to take off our shoes and socks and do some wading in the clear cold water. Instant revival!

Near the end of the gorge you reach the most unusual and certainly the most photographed spot, known as "Portes" or "Gates" or also called "Iron Gates" but nobody knows how the "iron" reference originated. Here the imposing cliffs tower to 350 meters high but are only 3 meters apart. Reach out to touch the walls, you feel strangely protected by the huge cliffs so close to you.

Some tour companies offer what is known as the "lazy hike" from the Agia Roumeli exit up to the "Portes". Keep walking in the shade and up ahead you see – is it a mirage – what looks like a refreshment stand! We stop and enjoy cold orange juice under the leafy plane trees. Then it's the exit, and in the distance is it the Libyan Sea – or another mirage? Yes, but 2 km lie ahead to the town of Agia Roumeli and its beach, where you plan to throw off your sweaty clothes and dive in the water.

Agia Roumeli is the site of the ancient city of Tarra, which minted its own coins and was known throughout Crete for its sanctuary of Apollo. When you exit the gorge, what you see right outside is the old town that was destroyed by floods in the 1950's and then moved further away. You're almost there! In some ways this is the worst part of the hike; although it's level, the sun beats mercilessly on you as you pass cage after cage of goats, sheep, and chickens. Keep walking you tell yourself, there's the sea, I can almost feel that cold water...

Many hikers get right on the boat for Hora Sfakion, (Sfakia) where they can catch a bus back to Hania (or Rethimnon or Heraklion). It is far better to take the time to sit down in a taverna for a cold drink and/or meal or better yet, to get rid of the dust and heat of the gorge by diving into the translucent turquoise sea.

My husband remembers free camping on the beach of Agia Roumeli in the 1970s. There were no real tavernas then, or electricity, just a place that cooked eggs and potatoes for him and his friends. Agia Roumeli has changed since then, of course. Shops sell the usual t-shirts, worry beads and sandals, and there are tavernas, hotels and rooms to let. Until 6:00 when the last boat leaves Agia Roumeli, the beaches are full of hikers, shedding their hiking boots and clothes like reptiles. But after 6, Agia Roumeli becomes a different place altogether, almost a ghost town, isolated by mountains that give it an end-of-the-world feeling.

We decide to spend the night in the Hotel Agia Roumeli, which offers a perfect view of the Libyan sea and the mountains. It's lovely to be swimming and to see the other hikers go, leaving the beach to you, but almost eerie to walk around the town and see the hundreds of empty chairs that were full from 2 to 6. At the Taverna Manos, we recognize a few fellow hikers from the gorge. As in all tavernas in west Crete, at the end of the meal we are offered raki and a generous plate of ice cold watermelon. Stars blanket the sky, there's serenity. Time slows down here.

The next morning, if recovered from the gorge, you can visit the Turkish fortress, a 30 to 60-minute climb. The sun is fierce, though, even in the early morning; better to stay on the beach with the families that arrive at Agia Roumeli in a very civilized manner, by boat from Hora Sfakion or other resorts along the south coast, like Paleohora, Sougia, or Loutro. With its lovely white hotels with blue shutters, looking like a Cycladic island resort, Loutro is as compact and tidy as Agia Roumeli is wild.

Back in Hania we nurse sore legs, which will stay that way for a few days, but what's a little soreness in the face of the satisfaction from hiking the gorge? In a world of flux and change, it's reassuring that there remain some changeless treasures of nature, such as the stunning Gorge of Samaria.