

Snow-capped mountains and sun-kissed beaches offer year-round appeal on this Greek island

RETREAT TO CRETE

by Fred Redwood

CRETE has long had a thriving expat community. Retirees love the leisurely pace of life on the fifth largest island in the Mediterranean.

The scenery is a mixture of mountains, beaches and picturesque fishing villages, and Crete has not suffered from mass tourism. It's hot in summer and so mild in winter that you can swim in the sea in December.

So where is the best spot to buy into this most idyllic lifestyle? Along the coastal resorts, where the Cretans run their own holiday businesses, prices can reach around £3,600 per square metre.

However, you will find the expat community a few miles inland where prices are a fraction of that.

It is estimated that around 200 expats live near Vamos. They have their own internet-based support group, The Crete International Community (thecic.eu) meeting up for bazaars, coffee mornings and group walks.

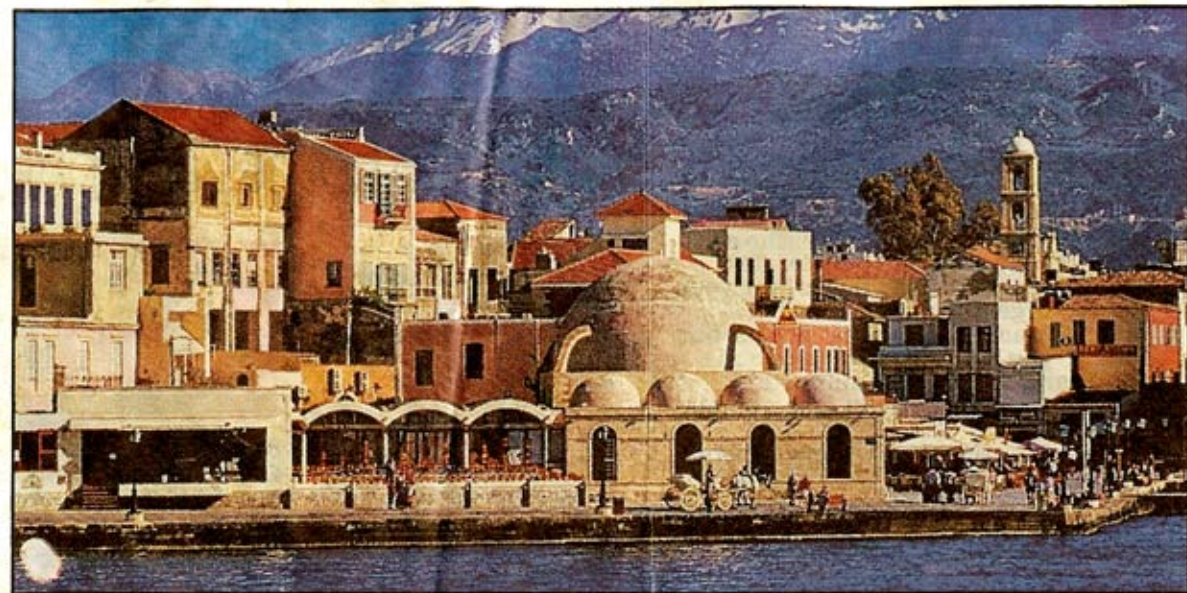
So what is Crete like for new-

comers to the island? 'It is a beautiful way of life,' says Linda Rogers, 62, who moved there with her husband, Mike, 74, three months ago. 'But everything takes longer than in Britain.'

'The health service is marvellous if there's something seriously wrong. But if you go to the surgery with a minor complaint, you could be there all day, as each person in the waiting room makes their own case to be seen. Everything here is a drama.'

But in Crete, many expats are finding it perfectly possible to live through the economic downturn, with better financial times on the horizon.

'Like everywhere else in the world Crete has suffered in the past 18 months, with property prices falling by about 20 per cent,' says Charles Weston-Baker, of Savills. 'However, prices have bottomed out now, and I would expect the island to become



Picture: PHOTOLIBRARY

Heavenly: In temperate Crete, at places such as Chania, you can swim in December

even more popular when the new international airport at Sitia is finished.'

According to Mr Weston-Baker, now is a good time to buy on Crete and there are some attractively priced homes on the market.

Litsarda Villas, for example is a development of nine villas, each with a third of an acre, just a few kilometres outside the village of Vamos and a ten-minute drive from the sandy beaches of Almerida and Georgoupolis.

The villas, which vary in size between two and five bedrooms, come with stone terraces, heated pools and air-conditioning, and stand within recently planted gardens full of orange, lemon and olive trees. Sold fully furnished, they cost between £225,000 and £380,000.

And they could provide an income. The £4,500 licence fees demanded

by the Crete authorities before you can let a property to tourists have been paid by the developers, Caversham-Barnes of Berkshire.

Said Marie, of Caversham-Barnes, estimates that each villa should fetch around £1,400-£1,800 a week in the high season.

AS FOR the cost of living, the strong euro means that the days when British pensioners could live off the fat of the land are over.

However, the Rogers, who exchanged a three-bed bungalow in Lincolnshire for a five-bed villa with a view over the Aegean Sea, find that money goes further than in Britain if they budget carefully.

'Basics such as wine and bread are

far cheaper than the UK' says Linda.

But Crete isn't for everyone. The bureaucracy can be mind-bending and the simplest bank transaction can require an interview. Driving on the island would test the patience of Job and computerisation is years behind.

However, some British expats, such as Alan Shaw, 62, from Kent who swapped his highly pressurised sales job eight years ago for a gift shop in Almyrida, have found this to be a blessing. 'The secret is to find the real Crete and not try to live a holiday existence,' he says. 'It is a completely different, far slower, way of life. I wouldn't go back to Britain for anything.'

■ **LITSARDO Villas, Caversham-Barnes, 0118 9483202, caversham-barnes.com; Crete Property Consultants, 0845 337 2717, creteproperty.co.uk**