



Information about the Environment and for travellers in Crete:

The island Gavdos in the Libyan Sea

A visit at the most southern end of Europe

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The Hellenic republic is rich at islands and small rock isles, which taken together amount to about 19% of the total area of Greece. Crete, which is largest Greek island, is surrounded by several islets and rocks, of which the largest and at the same time the only permanent inhabited, is the isle Gavdos. The island is located about 22 nautical miles south of Crete (Loutro) in the Libyan sea. It has an expansion of approx. 30 square kilometres. The highest elevation reaches a height of over 360 M. The distance to the African north coast (Bengasi) amounts to approximately 160 nautical miles. Together with their uninhabited, smaller, about 5 nautical miles in northwest direction lying sister island Gavdopoula, Gavdos forms the southernmost municipality of Greece. The islands were taken up to the program Natura 2000, with whose guidelines comprehensive legal equipment is available for the first time to the habitat and protection of species in the European Union.

The climate on Gavdos is moderate. The winters are altogether meeker and more arid, the summer heat waves much less pronouncedly than on Crete. Who can afford temporally and financially, should consider a stay in the autumn or spring. The island then has hardly human visitors, but many migratory birds on their way of or to the north coast of Africa make rest on Gavdos and Gavdopoula, which transform then for a short time in an ornithologists paradise (fig.: a wagtail kind, which winters in Africa). Besides some critically endangered animal species, as for example the monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) lives in surrounding waters. Dolphins, whales and sea turtles can be observed here in their habitat.



But also for those more interested in the Flora is plenty offered (see fig.): so far hundreds of plant types were listed on Gavdos, among them a small inconspicuous thorn-waxes (*Bupleurum gaudianum*) as endemite. The beautiful water-starworts coming from North Africa (*Callitriche pulchra* Schotsman), is settled on the north side of the Mediterranean only here on Gavdos. Particularly near the coast, but isolated also in the island inside, the large-fruited juniper (*Juniperus macrocarpa*) is to be found, which here grows up to high, impressive trees. At the sandy beaches, adapted to the moving dunes, the Mediterranean Thyme (*Thymbra capitata*) is found with clearly extended branches. Otherwise Gavdos is rich covered with Calabrian Pine (*Pinus brutia*) and Phoenician juniper (*Juniperus phoenicea*) (see fig. at the bottom left). The Olive tree, nearly omnipresent on Crete, is here a rather rare sight.



Those who gladly undertake extended walks will get along very well without an vehicle on Gavdos. A network of old and newly arranged paths covers the island besides comparatively few used, asphalted roads. However, these ways are only partially well surfaced and signposted. Localised flattening, as seen in the picture left, soon turn a walk into a challenging hike. Area-suited footwear is recommended! On the way altogether very clean, maintained lay-by invite for a stay.



Visitors can find a lot of nature on Gavdos, beautiful, clean sand beaches, crystal-clear water, and the kind of silence and contemplative, which became so rare in our hectic world in the meantime (fig. below: Beach of Sarakiniiko, left with view of the snow-covered mountains of Crete).

The accommodations are simple and appropriate. Those who need room service and boom night life are here at the wrong place. Even at the beaches of the north coast is relatively less going on for true night owls.



Nevertheless, fans of chapels are right here. On Gavdos it shall give more than a dozen (however mostly rather inconspicuous) praying houses (fig. left: the oldest church Agios Nikolaos in the northwest of the island).

During the peak tourist season Gavdos is visited by many day visitors, who use the improved driving connections between the ports at the south

coast of Crete and the island for a short stay.



In and the 80's and 90's of the past century Gavdos was discovered by hippies and escapists. In our days young Greeks flow in great numbers at Gavdos beaches, in order to experience hippie romance and highlife for a few days in the summer (see fig. left).

During the summer months liners operate weekly several times between Agia Roumeli, Paleochora, Chora Sfakion, and the port Karave on Gavdos. In addition, excursion boats start of the port Agia Galini or from Matala then toward Karave. In small extent also car ferries are used. The shipping connections are up-to-date callable via Internet. However, the weather comes into the picture for the about 3 hour long passage. In the own interest, visitors should take

time-consuming eventualities into account and leave also in each case enough area for weather-conditioned delays during the summer months. Travellers' who are dependent on medicines and also smokers are well advise, to provide themselves with stock more than sufficiently with their medicine before mounting the ship. And a well meant warning: travellers should NOT use boats without concession „privately “for a few Euros from Crete to Gavdos under any circumstances. If the captains of the regular liners remain in the port, it is usually better for tourists to also hold the feet ashore

The port Karave (fig. below left) is at the east coast of the island. It was enlarged some years ago and offers now good protection all year round. There is an car- and a scooter rental business. also Gavdos' only police station is in the proximity.

An asphalted road connects Karave with the principal place Kastri, which is located in the island inside on 220 m height. Here live just two dozen people. There is a physician station, a school, and the administrative office of the island municipality. In the proximity of the settlement is a landing strip for helicopter (fig. below right). Remarkable is the occasionally gnarly difference between the old, often ruinous stone houses and buildings of newer date, mostly apartment for guests.



Another bituminized road leads towards Sarakiniko, the probably most well-known location of the island. The bay is lined with a broad dune strip (fig. below left), on which above all grow thyme and juniper trees. Here are some taverns and bars, the only food shop and telephone, a car- and scooter rental business, and a amphitheatre where events occasionally take place (fig. below centre). In Sarakiniko fortunately also many private solar plants are operated (see fig. below right).



The name Sarakino possibly refers to a former use of the bay as anchorage by the Saracens. On the rocky, far up in the sea rising promontory, different kinds of rock in different colours, in partly grotesque forms and in quite impressive size are found (see fig. below).



Into the 1930er years, during the Metaxas dictatorship, numerous, banished dissidents lived on Gavdos. Occasionally more than 250 humans (among them prominent heads of the Greek communist movement) have been interned on the island, which, as it says, arranged here small gardens for self-supply. The figures behind the wire mesh fence are to remind to this time.

At the coast in the north and northwest there are secluded beaches to discover such as Pyrgos and Potamos, which are accessible on foot from Kastri, if one follows the path towards Ambelos, in approximately one hour.



The divine beach of Agios Ioannis at the north point, with its fantastically seeming tree forms and the beautiful view on Gavdopoula, is populated in the summer by campers and nudists.

The place Ambelos, the highest situated settlement on Gavdos, is in the west of the island on 300 m height. A dazzling whitewashed little church stands between ruinous buildings of stones. Only two houses are inhabited during our stay. From Ambelos one can look far in all directions.



The lighthouse, re-erected at the end of the 20th Century, is close by. The old signal tower, built in the year 1880 on the highest elevation of the island, was with its fire height of 380 m even years after its activation the second highest beacon world-wide, before it was destroyed by the Germans during the time of the occupation in World War II. The restored lighthouse, in times of the omnipresent GPS, has not been re-established. A small museum is established within the circular building. There is a small Kafenio in the adjoining house. Another small museum and a Kafenio are operated by the priest of the island



municipality in the hamlet Vatsiana

Here, in the geographically southernmost place of Europe, also begins a about 3 miles long gravel path, which leads to the cape Tripiti, where the probably most well-known nature attraction of the isle is: the three enormous rock elbows, rinsed by the sea water from the island rock. An enormous chair marks the southernmost point of Europe. The southernmost tree of Europe is close by. It is a large-fruited juniper.



At the beginning of the 20th Century Gavdos is alleged to have had over 500 inhabitants. After the Greek-Turkish population exchange of 1923/24, but particularly after the end of World War II and in the early 1950er years, ever more Gavdiotes left their homeland and tried to find their luck on Crete or the Greek mainland. Some settlements on the island were given up completely; in the meantime some localities are inhabited by only one family, or also only one individual.

Meanwhile just about 50 humans live on Gavdos, who operate animal husbandry and agriculture. Professional fishing does not matter. A main source of income for many Gavdiotes represents the tourism during the summer months. Upon request in the taverns it is easy to find a possibility for a island circumnavigation by boat. The islanders usually are good sailors, who also have an experienced view for the weather. A Trip to the islet Gavdopoula is probably interesting in particularly for nature friends, because this isle does not offer a „bathing beach “(fig right: better than a walk: Unorthodox tourist transport by helpful island inhabitants).



Many surfaces on Gavdos are terraced, however mostly with difficulty access and therefore unsuitable for cultivation with tractors (fig. below left). In earlier times above all grain was cultivated (in close proximity to Kastri there is the still the partly intact building of a former mill, fig. below centre and right), large herds of sheep, goats and even cows it shall have given on Gavdos.



Some few natural sources of fresh water are distributed over the island. In recent time one tries to cover the rising water requirement, which is based on the increasing touristic development, by the drilling of new wells. Most of the water needed for the agriculture is still caught in cisterns.

Since a large-scale project for the production of power with solar collectors failed some years ago due to maintenance lacking and left everywhere technics refuse, the requirements of electric are currently covered again by the usage by Diesel generators. There is a power station in close proximity to Kastri, but many households are too far from the network of distributors, so a connection isn't be payable. Thus, as in old times, generators rattle everywhere, but also solar plants are operated increasingly.

The resulting garbage is removed to a large extent by ship. The waste water flows into seeping pits. In the meantime environmental protection has a pleasing strong lobby on the island. It is paid attention to cleanliness. Dustbins are set up at the hiking trails, however occasionally there's a hitch with emptying. Who wants to camp at the beach, can do so easily most of the time. Some taverns permit the use of their sanitary plants for just a few Euros per day

Gavdos has its own radio station; „The Lighthouse OF South “(FM 88,8), whose program (from Charis Alexiou to Frank Zappa) can be received in large parts the south coast of Crete, and is quite popular (<http://gavdosfm.gr/>).

So far nobody never seriously archaeologically researched on Gavdos. It may be accepted that the island is settled since the Neolithic Age; essentially Gavdos divided the eventful history of Crete. The Gavdiotes refers smiling to two prominent visitors: thus its gladly said, the island Gavdos is identical with the isle Ogygia described in Homers Odyssey, where the nymph Kalypso held Odysseus for 7 years; as a second guest of the island in former times Paul the apostle is named, who is to have suffered shipwreck here on a journey to Rome

In the year 1996 Gavdos got into the headlines, because a Turkish admiral required, when planning a NATO manoeuvre, to exclude Gavdos from the exercise since the affiliation of the island to Greece was contentious. Two years later the sister islands Gavdos and Gavdopoula moved together into the journalistic focus. The frightened public received learnt about plans, the approx. 3 km long, up to 1 km broad and up to 131 m high island Gavdopoula to completely strip to a uniform height of 5 m and to provide with moles and a concrete cover. On Gavdos the accommodations for the workers of the new container port should be set up, and created supply installations.

Also Timbaki, a location at the south coast of Crete, was in discussion as location of a container port also for many years. But large parts of the into question coming pictorial sand beach, where critically endangered sea turtles places their eggs, are particularly protected by the European nature protection guideline.

In October 2009 the concession for the operation of pier 2 and 3 in the container port of Piraeus has been taken over for 35 years by the state-owned Chinese COSCO Pacific Ltd., the world-wide fifth-largest container shipping company, which extend the Greek port with substantial moneys (it's spoken of scarcely 4 billion euro) to a hub of the goods traffic between the Far East and Eastern Europe as well as the Balkans area. The large container ships of the COSCO now pass Crete and the neighbouring islands.



That is good for Crete's south coast. Well for the beautiful sisters Gavdopoula and Gavdos. Well for all life here. And well for us Island enthusiasts. By the way; some visitors of Gavdos, of whom many return annually like migratory birds to „their“ island, Gavdos, that is no island at all, Gavdos, that is a way of life!

Pictures: *Maria Eleftheria*;

Map at the headline: www.wikipedia.de