Your guide for the trip to Spinalonga
TRAVEL PLAN of SPINALONGA
Welcome to Agios Nikolaos!

Nostos Cruise Company would like to welcome you to our trip to the island fortress of Spinalonga. Before setting out, let us say a few words about the town of your departure, Agios Nikolaos. This is a fairly new town, but its history can be traced back to mid-Minoan times (2100-1560 B.C.).

Archaeological findings from that time indicate intense human activity here in this place.

From the eight century onward, a town called Kamara was located here, and this town served as the port town for the Doric city of Lato, which had been built close to the present day village of Kritsa, and whose ruins can still be seen today. Lato and Kamara made up a unified city-state with its own currency depicting the head of the goddess Elefteria, Protectress of Childbirth, and the head of the god Hermis, Protector of Trade. As with the rest of the inhabitants of Greece at that time, the people of Lato and Kamara believed in and worshipped the Twelve Dieties of Greece.

As time went on, Kamara gained its independence and became one of the most important ports of the Mediterranean, becoming a crossroad of different civilizations, and of trade. Its strategic importance in the control of the Meriterra- nean was recognised by many races including the Arabs, the Genoans, the Venetians, and the Turks, all of whom captured it for a while but never fully occupied it.

The Genoans built a fortress on Kefali hill called Mirabello, and this is where the Town Hall is found today. Mirabello fortress gave its name to the Province and to the Bay of Mirabello.
Later on, Kamara became an important town in the Byzantine period because it was the seat of the dioseese, and one of the oldest Byzantine churches in Crete was built here. This is the church of Agios Nikolaos, found next to the Minos Palace and St. Nikolaos Bay hotels, above a small bay. This is the church which gave its name to the town. Agios Nikolaos is built on seven hills, with a panoramic view of the west-south-western coast of the Gulf of Mirabello.

Mirabello is a Genoan word which means beautiful view, as this is how the Genoans looked at the landscape when they used to visit Crete. Agios Nikolaos soon became a well-known tourism destination because of the combination of the exceptional natural beauty of its landscape, its wonderfully scenic beaches and its incomparably dry and moderate climate, said to be one of the most ideal in Europe, if not worldwide.
One of the first tourist hotels to be built on Crete was the Minos Beach Hotel, constructed here in 1960 and located close to the small natural harbour of the town, and since then tourism developed by leaps and bounds so that the town is now an international tourism destination.

A landmark of the town is the beautiful natural lake in the inner harbour area which is connected to it by a small natural channel. Legend suggests that the gods Athina and Artemis bathed here. Today it makes an unforgettable impression on all who visit it. Its unique and charming atmosphere created by the surroundings of tall red rock and ample greenery, a small open-air theatre and many and varied restaurants and shops will remain in your memories of Crete.

Across from the town you can see the lovely island of St. Panthon, with its church of the same name on top. This place is a name sanctuary for the Cretan wild goat, the Kri-Kri goat.

The town is the capital of the province of Lassithi and the centre of the municipality of Agios Nikolaos which includes the villages of Kala Horio, Prina, Kritsa, Kroustas, Lakonia, Potami, Zenia, Limnes, Elounda, Pines, Plaka, Vrouhas, Seles and Skinias, whose combined population is about 20,000 people.

This entire area, with its charming little bays and its magnificent landscape is unbelievably beautiful and immensely attractive.
Our trip to Spinalonga

Setting out now on our journey from the harbour of Agios Nikolaos, we travel along the coast road where you can see the town hotels of Rea, Hermes, Coral and Victoria as well as many shops and restaurants.

Further beyond you will spot the cove of Agios Nikolaos and along the left coastline there are the bungalows of the Minos Beach Hotel the oldest hotel in town, and in the distance, the Kristal and Ormos hotels, while higher up at the enclosure of the bay is the Minos Palace Hotel and the Byzantine church of Agios Nikolaos which gave its name to the town.
Passing by Minos Palace we see the St Nikolaos Bay Hotel and 500 metres on, the the Mirabello Hotel and Mirabello Village complex, one of the oldest hotels in town that has recently been extensively renovated.

Beyond Mirabello is the Candia Park Hotel, one of the newest hotels and straight ahead, nestled on the side of the hill is Hera Village commanding its panoramic view of the bay.
We will move on for another ten minutes and the boat will turn around the first headland where the magnificent Bay of Elounda appears in front of you. One by one along the south side you can make out the exclusive and beautiful hotels of Elounda: Porto Elounda Village, Elounda Porto, Elounda Mare, Marmin, Elounda Beach and Elounda Bay.

At the end of the bay we will come to a small isthmus with its tiny bridge connecting Elounda with the island of Kolokitha opposite. A small channel joins the Bay of Poros with the Bay of Elounda. (Korfos Bay).

In the bay we see the charming village of Elounda, the setting for the t.v. series "Who Pays The Ferryman?". Elounda got its name from the ancient city of Olous, and was until recently, a small fishing village. However, because of its exquisite natural beauty and its magnificent scenery, it has become a bustling cosmopolitan town today.

It was here in the waters of the Bay of Elounda that the British Imperial Airline supply hydroplanes took off and landed daily during the Second World War on route for Cairo and India. Now we find ourselves exactly in the region of the ancient city of Olous.

This city was one of the hundred most important Doric states in Crete, and during the mid-Minoan period it had its own currency and co-existed along with the other cities of Lato, Driris and Istron, all of which had signed peace treaties between them as well as with the city of Rhodes.

In ancient Olous, they particularly worshipped the god Artemis Britomartis whom they considered as their protector, and whose statue is one of the few found on Crete.
Eventually, Olous was destroyed and sunk under the sea. No-one knows the reason why as there are no written records of its demise. Some explanations include geological shifts, earthquakes and the eruption of the volcano on the island of Santorini. There is very little that you can see from ancient Olous except for some rock foundations close to the shore, and one mosaic showing flowers and dolphins located behind the church, possibly the remains of some temple. The artifacts that have been found here can be viewed in the museums of Agios Nikolaos and Heraklion. To the left of the canal you can see salt-works from which salt was extracted from the seawater until quite recently.

Moving on from here we will go behind Kolokitha to a small cove protected from the open sea by a tiny island called Glaronisi. Here we will stop for a while so that you can have a swim in the crystal clear waters surrounded by magical scenery. Soon we will start our ten-minute trip past the volcanic shores of Kolokitha to the island of Spinalonga.
Approaching Spinalonga

A rock outcrop in the middle of the entrance to the bay, with imposing Venetian walls and fortifications, Spinalonga stands ready to prevent the incursion of any enemy ship into the Bay of Elounda. We will sail all around the island so that you have ample time to enjoy it and take photographs before disembarking to walk around the island.

Passing by the defences of Lucas Michael you will have the opportunity to view and photograph the inscription of the name of the founder of the fort which reads: LUCAS MIC (HAEI) PRO (VISOR) GE (NERALIS) CR (ETAE) IL AN (NO) MDLXXXVIII (15 June 1579).
In the interior of the island you can see houses that were built by the Venetians and later extended by the Turks, and more recently inhabited by people suffering from the disease of leprosy. Across from the island you will be able to make out the village of Plaka from which most of the transfers to Spinalonga took place. You can also gaze on the Bay of Elounda and spot the village of Elounda in the distance from a different angle.
The island of SPINALONGA

HOW SPINALONGA GOT ITS NAME
Spinalonga is a small rock-island with a perimeter of 850 meters found at the entrance to the Bay of Elounda. In ancient times, the island was called "Kalidon", and a castle was built on top of it by the residents of ancient Olous. In subsequent years, this place was referred to as "stin Elounda" meaning "towards Elounda" in Venetian writings. During Venetian times, the Venetians had difficulty in pronouncing "stin Elounda" and so they transformed the name gradually to become "Spinalonga", a word that was closer to their own language and meant "long thorn" and this is how the island is called today.

THE VENETIAN PERIOD
The Venetian period of Crete began in 1204 and around the year 1570, it came to be recognised that the Bay of Elounda could be useful as a safe haven for Venetian ships, so it was decided to build a fort at Spinalonga as a defense for the region. Construction began in 1579 and by 1586 a massive fort had been constructed on top of the ruins of the ancient castle. By 1630, the fort had been armed with 35 canons of various sizes and there were about 300 soldiers stationed on the island.

THE TURKISH PERIOD
In 1669, the Turks conquered Crete but Spinalonga and the forts at Gramvousas and Souda remained under Venetian rule as the Turks consistently failed to overtake them. Venetian resistance to Turkish assault at these forts lasted until 1715, when finally Spinalonga reluctantly gave itself up. Spinalonga then became an affluent Ottoman community, in comparison to the situation in the rest of Greece.

The Turkish residents made a good living from fishing and trade. In 1881, there were 227 Turkish families installed in the homes and buildings on the island enjoying the protection of the Venetian fort. In December of 1889, the Turkish occupation of Crete ended.
SPINALONGA - A refuge for the forgotten

A significant date in the history of Spinalonga is 1903, because it was then that the Greek Government made the decision to turn the island into a hospital colony for people suffering from leprosy. Now the unbearable pain of leprosy came to dominate the island.

The proud fort and its fortifications prepared to become a place of suffering and exile. Its inhabitants were gathered from caves and remote huts throughout Crete and were forced to live in this unconquerable fortress island far away from the community of the rest of Crete. This practice of isolation may seem harsh to us now, but then it was considered to be the best solution for these unfortunate people. Men and women from all over Crete who were victims of the disease took over the abandoned homes of the Turkish invaders and slowly started to rebuild their lives here. The first residents of the island had a difficult time as the place was completely disorganised.

HOPE SURVIVES

But with indomitable spirit they rose above their pain and despair and created their own miraculous revival, gradually doing up the old homes to create a community of their own to rival that of the community outside. They turned the main roadway into a shopping street, building a bakery, a coffee shop, and a grocery store in which goods transported in from the outside world were sold. They gathered rainwater in the Venetian stone water tanks and later built two larger ones on the north-eastern side of the island in front of the church of Agios Georgios and the other opposite the pier where boats dock today.

Many of the residents reared goats and chickens, and in the scant soil between the rocks they grew garden produce and planted fruit trees. On the island there were two churches which had been built previously by the Hainides and these provided for the spiritual needs of the population. On the slopes of the eastern side, they built their cemetery.

In 1912, Crete was united with the rest of Greece. The leprosy victims began to receive financial assistance from the Government and their lives subsequently improved. They created a more contemporary society which included a president, a priest and a teacher. Weddings were held here on the island of Spinalonga and from these marriages 100 children were born, all of whom were healthy. The government
took responsibility for these children and sent them to be raised in government-sponsored nurseries.

Life went on in this island exile, and in time its residents searched for ways of entertainment, and so they built a hall where they played shadow theatre and created a theatrical group which put on performances and organized dances and so on. The island also boasted four tavernas, and among its population there were barbers and hairdressers.

Life for these people who had been left without hope took on new meaning. In 1937, the Greek government built a proper hospital here and from then on doctors and nurses used to visit the sick regularly. To accommodate new arrivals, a couple of two-storey apartment buildings were put up, each with a common kitchen. Electricity came to Spinalonga in 1930, supplied by a generator located outside the Venetian walls of the fort, and in this way Spinalonga had electrical power when the rest of the people in the villages of Crete were still using oil lamps and later, gas lamps.

A cure for leprosy was found in 1954, and many of the residents of Spinalonga got well and returned to their families. The last remaining people with the most serious cases of the disease were transferred to the hospital of St. Barbara in Athens where some still live today.

Spinalonga, as a refuge for victims of leprosy, was closed down in 1957. The feeling of human pain and suffering remained, however, enclosed behind its walls for many decades, and we believe that the visitor to Spinalonga can still feel this aura of suffering, tinged with the triumph of survival, while visiting the island today.

Leprosy, or Hansen’s disease, named after the Norwegian doctor who discovered the microbe that caused it in 1894, is a contagious, communicable disease that primarily affects the skin and the extremities and to a lesser extent, the nervous system.

It usually exhibits itself as inflammation and ulcers on the skin, and often attacks the hook of the nose, the ears, the lips and the fingers.

The appearance of a person suffering from leprosy is unfortunately repulsive and disgusting, and this is why they were isolated from society. Medication and a healthier diet curtailed the spread of the disease, and today there remain only about ten million carriers of the disease worldwide.
Our trip home

Now our walk around the island comes to an end, and we return to the boat for the short trip back to Agios Nikolaos. On the way back we will pass along the outer side of the island of Glaronisi where you can see the cave of the pirate Barbarossa.

The BARBAROSE HAIR TIN PASHA was a Turkish pirate who controlled the region of the Gulf of Mirabello around 1534 and this was possibly one of the reasons why the Venetians built the fort at Spinalonga. Myth and legend suggest that he used to hide in a cave and as this is the only one here, people call it "The Cave of The Pirate Barbarossa".
The island of Agii Pantes

Just before we arrive at the harbour of Agios Nikolaos, we will stop at the island of Agii Pantes where you may catch a glimpse of the Cretan Kri-Kri goat and other wild goats of Crete that have inhabited the island since Minoan times, and are representative of both power and freedom. This island is today a designated refuge especially protected for this species.
Thank you!

Finally leaving behind us the beautiful Bay of Mirabello and the magnificent island of Spinalonga, we return to the harbour of Agios Nikolaos.

Nostos Cruise Company would like to thank you for travelling with us to Spinalonga, and we sincerely hope that this trip will remain in your memory as one of the highlights of your visit to Crete.

We wish you
happy holidays!
NOSTOS FLEET

OSTRIA
Length 41m Breadth 7.10m
Capacity 350 pax. Cruise speed 12 Knots
Full Restaurant & bar on Board, Sun decks,
Water Sport Facilities,
Air conditioned Salon sun beds

LATO
Length 29m Breadth 6.80m
Capacity 250 pax. Cruise speed 12 Knots
bar on Board, Sun decks.

ELENA
Length 26m Breadth 6m
Capacity 170 pax. Cruise speed 12 Knots
Bar on Board, Sun decks.

KALIDON
Length 33m Breadth 8.60m
Capacity 427 pax. Cruise speed 12 Knots
Bar on Board, Sun decks.

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