

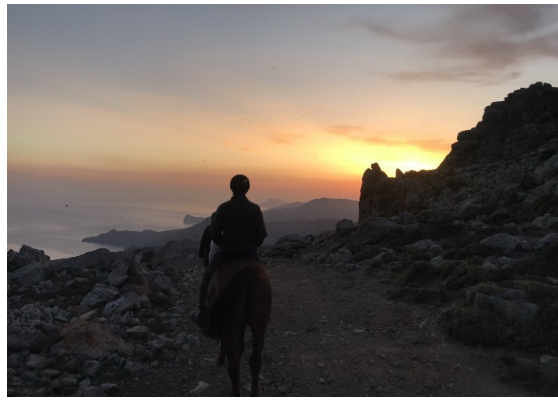
Horse riding and relaxation on the Island of the Gods

From chapel to chapel, between the mountains and the sea



Full of anticipation, I set off for Crete with a friend at the start of April, where we'll be spending a week at a lovingly designed resort in the secluded south. Together with two other guests, we're warmly welcomed by Chef Marcos himself at Heraklion Airport and driven to the resort, which is just over an hour's drive away. Unfortunately, it's already dark, so we can't see anything of the mountainous landscape. The final stretch winds its way up into the mountains and, after countless bends, we've finally reached our destination! After a quick look around our wonderful and cosy, warm apartments, we head straight to dinner, where Marcos's wife, Popi, treats us to a divine feast. In Greece, people love to eat together, and new dishes keep appearing on the table, from which everyone helps themselves to their heart's content. Everything is homemade, including the at least four types of cheese that are served daily. After tzatziki, mutton, Greek salad, grilled vegetables and much more, we're actually already completely full when dessert is served with the obligatory raki. This always consists of a variety of pastries garnished with honey. The food has already won us over 100 per cent. Full and content, we fall into our beds, looking forward to the next day. Unfortunately, it turns out to be rather stormy, so we start the day by having a leisurely breakfast in the hotel restaurant with freshly squeezed orange juice and freshly baked bread

. The view from the window is stunning! The resort is nestled amongst the rugged mountains, with the striking Kofinas to the east and the deep-blue sea to the south. The rocky mountains, criss-crossed by canyons, drop steeply straight down into the water. The resort itself is situated in a very quiet and extremely idyllic mountain village; in fact, half the village belongs to the resort. There are only 15 residents here; the remaining little houses have been lovingly renovated by Marcos as holiday homes. There's also a lovely pool in a stunning location overlooking the sea. And colourful flowers and fragrant herbs bloom everywhere along the stone steps and narrow lanes. Unfortunately, it's too windy on the terraces today, and horse riding is also in doubt given the strong gusts. Without further ado, Marcos offers us a trip to Tripiti beach, so we set off in the jeep along a winding mountain road with stunning views. At the end of the road, we continue along a gravel track to a narrow gorge, which we cross on foot, eventually reaching a picturesque cove with fine black pebbles, grey rocks and deep blue water. After cooling our feet in the pleasantly warm water, we enjoy a delicious lunch at the beach bar.



In the afternoon, however, we'd like to go on our first ride and get to know our horses. After all, there are virtually no trees in this barren landscape that could fall on your head, and the few gnarled olive and pine trees easily withstand the north wind. I'm assigned a handsome chestnut horse called Kerapnos (meaning 'Lightning' in German). He isn't particularly affectionate and seems only moderately interested in me, but our riding guide Lea thinks highly of the gelding, whose handsome head and large eyes betray his partly Arabian lineage. Lea is from Germany, so we get on wonderfully well, though the loud gusts of wind make conversation difficult and everyone concentrates on their horse. The horses are fairly calm given the weather, though it soon becomes clear that the mare my friend is riding is in heat, and Lea's stunningly handsome Arabian stallion is, of course, highly interested. All in all, the ride to the chapel – a good hour's ride away – is a bit unsettled, although all the horses really pull themselves together. In between, we're able to enjoy the view of the picturesque coastline and the mountains, but as the storm shows no sign of letting up, we're glad when we all arrive back at the stables safe and sound. Once the horses have been looked after in their stalls and the lovely, light, open stable, we treat ourselves to a coffee and a raki.

Unfortunately, the forecast isn't any better for the following day either, so in the evening we discuss an alternative plan. Marcos suggests we drive to one of the Minoan archaeological sites, which we're happy to accept. After all, the Island of the Gods is renowned for its ancient history. From around 3000 BC,

the island was already inhabited, and the Minoans – named after the mythical King Minos – cultivated a highly developed civilisation, built palaces and aqueducts, had one of the very first written legal codes, and were already using their own script, which they also used to record laws. Several Minoan inscriptions have been found in caves and ruins across the island. The Midras archaeological site, with its ancient olive trees and historic ruins, effortlessly transports you back to ancient times, and it's easy to imagine that at any moment an ancestor might appear, walking down the hill in leather sandals and a flowing robe...

Afterwards, we stock up on all sorts of delicacies at the tourist shop next door, from olive oil and herbs to honey. Feeling satisfied, we carry on to Midras for lunch, and by the afternoon we're back at the resort. After the excursion, we visit the farm animals: Hundreds of sheep and goats, with lots of lambs and kids, are scattered across the grounds, which stretch for kilometres down to the coast. There are also around 60 hens and roosters, three pigs, three small Cretan cows, a few cats and a little 'guard dog', whom we regularly find dozing on the sofa at reception, though. Fortunately, there are virtually no predators on the island, so even the chickens – some of which like to sleep in the open stable with the horses – are quite safe even without a dog. It's a really lovely farm. The horses are kept alternately in their stalls and in the open stable, which also includes a huge paddock. This means the two stallions always get plenty of exercise and can also spend time in the group with the geldings from time to time. Everything is light and airy, and you can tell from the horses how calm Marcos is with his animals (and his guests too). His father, Michaelis, is in charge of cheese-making, processing the fresh sheep's milk every morning. My girlfriend and I spend the time until dinner reading by the pool on the sun loungers, where the wind is bearable and the view is magnificent.



The next day, nothing stands in the way of a day's ride at last: the sun is shining and the wind is gentle and pleasant today. We leave the mare in heat at home this time and set off with four geldings and a stallion. The ride is fairly leisurely, with short stretches of trot and canter. The view of the Massara Plain as we ride over the first hilltop is magnificent: vast countryside with endless olive groves lies at our feet, and behind it rises Crete's highest mountain, Psiloritis, still covered in plenty of snow. Wide mountain tracks lead along the steep mountainsides and across pastures that are green in April, where we come across hundreds of goats and sheep. They clamber all over every rock and constantly cross our path. We stop for a break at a small chapel. Marcos arrives with a picnic, which we enjoy in the shade of the olive trees. The chapels, which can be found everywhere, are unlocked and occasionally serve as

as a place of shelter and an overnight stop. We marvel at the images of the saints before setting off again. The path winds gently upwards in wide hairpin bends, offering a magnificent panorama, up to the foot of Mount Kofinas. Here we take another short break at yet another chapel in a beautiful spot overlooking the sea. On Kofinas, which drops steeply down towards the sea, eagles and other birds find the perfect habitat. Later on, we'll see the odd eagle or two circling overhead. By evening, we're back at the farm, and the hearty evening meal tastes twice as good after a long day in the saddle.

The Greeks are so hospitable that they always serve far too much food; even today we can't manage to finish it all. Fortunately, there are chickens and pigs who'll be delighted with the leftovers. A pig couldn't ask for a better meal than this...



The next day, the plan was actually a two-day ride to a remote monastery. However, as the route includes a long, challenging section on foot and our fellow riders are getting on in years, we decide instead to make up for the second day's ride and set off in two groups towards Tripiti Bay. The route is mostly downhill – sometimes gentle, sometimes a bit steeper – but always with a stunning panorama of mountains and sea. The landscape here has a slightly reddish hue and we enjoy the ride in glorious sunshine. Once again, goats and sheep are our constant companions, and we're constantly being watched from the rocks and slopes. The goats scramble about on every rock face, no matter how steep. A whole flock of vultures is also circling above our heads.

We stop for a short break at a magical spot, with the ruins of a Minoan village (and, of course, a chapel and olive trees). We don't come across a single soul on our ride, and the silence is simply wonderful. Eventually, we reach the Tripiti Gorge again, which we cross on horseback this time – something we naturally enjoy even more. At the beachside restaurant, a sumptuous lunch awaits us, featuring rice, fish, stuffed vine leaves and so on – and once again, we can't manage to eat it all. On the way home with Marcos, we enjoy the odd lovely stretch of trotting and cantering; the horses are having fun too and are fresh and lively, despite the constant uphill climb and the warm weather. Satisfied after a long, wonderful day's riding, we finally arrive at the stables at dusk.

On the last day, we visit the remote monastery by jeep. A portly, bearded monk in a black robe opens the door to the large chapel for us; with its golden chandeliers and ornate biblical murals on the walls and ceiling, it is well worth seeing. Around 15 monks and numerous animals live here today. For guests, there are simple shared rooms with a toilet and washbasin. A short walk

leads to a huge cave right above the cliffs. A small chapel has been built here too, inside the cave. I'm starting to feel as though I'm on a pilgrimage. There seems to be one chapel for every 10 inhabitants, as well as 100 sheep and goats. The monks produce honey and salt, which they sell in the shop, and some of it finds its way into our luggage too.

The idea now is to walk the trail from the monastery to a coastal village. The path runs above the coast through partly rocky terrain dotted with gnarled trees. We see numerous caves along the mountainside. The area was once home to its earliest inhabitants, as well as many hermits. Today, sheep and goats use the caves as shelters. The path is challenging in places, so it takes us around two hours to cover the four kilometres. The yellow and purple arum lilies and callis that we spot along the way are particularly striking. Once we arrive in the village, we meet Marcos, who has brought us more delicious snacks from the kitchen in the support vehicle. After a welcome refreshment with a view of the sea, we drive back to the farm. We saddle the horses for a short farewell ride. As not everyone is riding, I have the chance to try out Sifis, a brown horse that is 80 per cent Cretan. There are around 500 of them on the island. They are small, hardy little horses that can also tackle mountain passes; they're very comfortable and sure-footed. Even the Minoans had ponies back in the day. Sifis is an extremely lovable and cuddly chap, and the sunset ride along narrow goat tracks to a viewpoint overlooking the rugged coastline is great fun. The farm also has three Russian Orlov trotters; they're slightly larger, love to gallop, and are very keen to run and highly enduring, with impressive knee action. Marcos also breeds with the wonderful Arabian stallion. A pretty little Andalusian-Arabian filly from last year is in the open stable, and a sibling is due to join her in the summer. But now we say goodbye to the horse gang we've grown so fond of, as dinner is already waiting. As we leave, Kerapnos is extremely friendly and interested; the scepticism from the first day has clearly faded.

One last time, we enjoy moussaka, tzatziki, Greek wine and raki. We fall into bed late. The next day, it's an early start, as our fellow rider is flying back at midday. The rest of us are spontaneously invited by Marcos to a little sightseeing tour of Heraklion, including a gyros and a drink right in the heart of the lively city centre. We're overwhelmed by the wonderful hospitality. A week spent with warm-hearted people, lots of lovely animals and in secluded natural surroundings. Add to that the beautiful accommodation and the food – truly divine!

A big shout-out to Marcos, Popi and Lea, who seems to have truly embraced the laid-back Greek way of life and is always very considerate and patient with both people and animals. They really did fulfil our every wish!

Jessica Kiefer, April 2024

Link to the programme: www.reiterreisen.com/tgc007.htm

