

11 Samaria Gorge National Park

5.40 hrs



Classic tour through one of Europe's longest gorges

The Samaria Gorge is an absolute »must« – mind you, in the high season, up to 3000 walkers daily are thinking the same thing! So, don't expect a good deal of peace and quiet. From the high plateau of Omalos, 1200 m, in the centre of the White Mountains, an alpine path, very steep at the outset, descends through a beautiful valley designated as a national park, as it makes its way to the Libyan Sea. Along the good 16 km stretch leading through splendid pine and cypress forest, rest areas, equipped with fountains and toilets, provide rest stops. What is perhaps the most spectacular landscape that Crete has to offer is traversed here in the lower reaches of this Cretan Grand Canyon which includes the »Iron Gates«. In Agia Roumeli, at the mouth of the gorge, ferries are waiting to provide transport back to the resorts along the southern coast. The posted walking time of 5.40 hrs is rather generously calculated; experienced walkers can arrive at the ferry pier in not quite 5 hrs without taking long breaks. If you get an early start, you can descend to the sea without making haste; the first ferry for Agia Roumeli doesn't leave before 5 p.m.

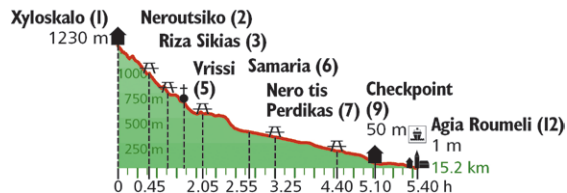
Starting point: Xyloskalo, 1230 m. Approach by bus from Chania to Omalos/Xyloskalo (6.15, 7.45, 8.45; length of journey, 1 hr.), Sougia (from mid-June, Mon–Sat 7.00, length of journey 1.30 hrs.) and Paleochora (Mon–Sat, 6.15, length of journey, 1.30 hrs.). Bus service from Rethymnon and Kissamos with a transfer in Chania. Current schedule available locally and at www.bus-service-crete-ktel.com.
Return: ferry service from Agia Roumeli to Loutro/Chora Sfakion from May until October around 17.30, to Sougia/Paleochora also around 17.30 (current schedules available locally and at www.andyk.gr). The last bus to Chania from

Chora Sfakion daily around 18.30 (waits for the ferry to arrive), from Paleochora daily around 18.15, from Sougia around 18 (Sat and Sun, only). Walkers staying in Paleochora or Sougia enjoy the advantage of taking the ferry directly »home« without having to transfer to a bus.

Height difference: 1250 m in descent.

Grade: long gorge walk, demanding physical fitness, along a well-laid trail; the first 600 m of altitude follows a steep alpine path. Depending on the season and water level, you may have to cross the stream bed several times over sometimes slippery stones; some sections are loose underfoot and require sure-footedness.

For reasons of conservation, you must keep to the main trail. In the upper reaches, very shady, but in high summer, for the last 30-minute stretch to the sea, expect blazing sun and scorching heat which could lead



Early morning callisthenics at the gorge entrance with Gingilos in the background.

to problems relating to heatstroke. Be sure to take enough sunscreen! At the half-way point, in the former village of Samaria, there is a first aid station. Camping and also bathing in the gorge are strictly prohibited, but nevertheless, bring along your bathing gear to enjoy the beautiful pebble beach in Agia Roumeli.

Opening hours: depending on the water level, the gorge is usually open from the beginning of May until the end of October daily from 6.00–16.00 (after 16.00, you can only walk to km 2; spending the night in the gorge is not permitted). The entrance fee is €5.

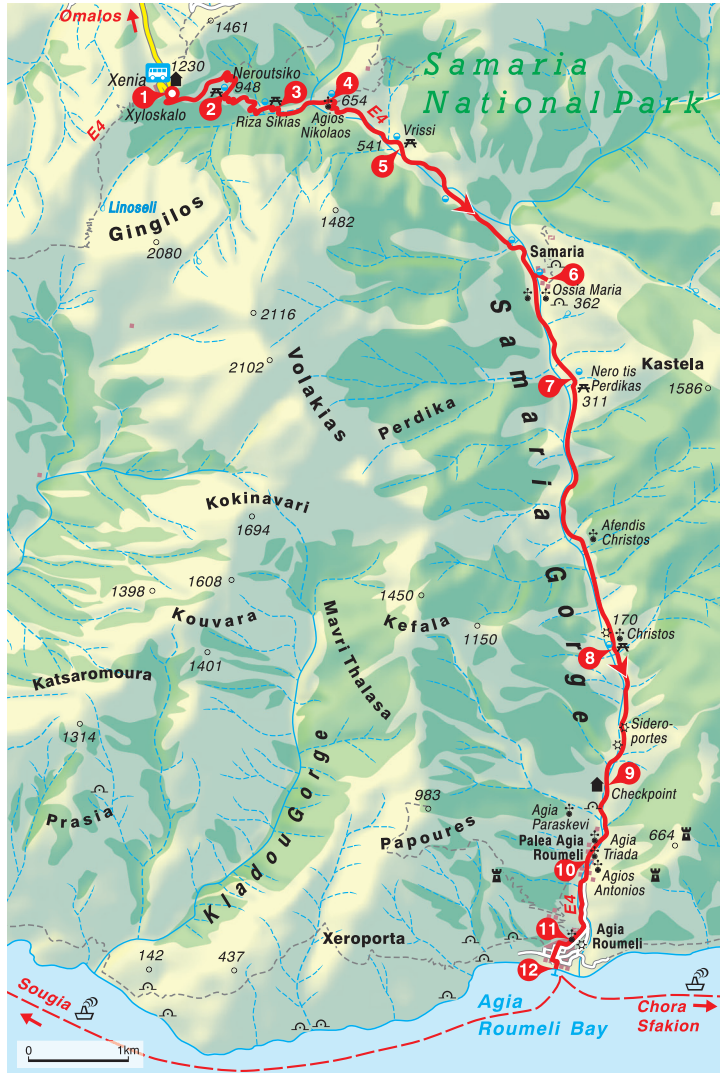
Refreshment: at the starting point, Xyloskalo, there is a cafeteria already open at

7 a.m.; there is a variety of (expensive) snack bars at the Check Point near the gorge exit; numerous tavernas in Agia Roumeli. At the rest areas en route, several fountains provide fresh mountain spring water.

Accommodation: on the Omalos plateau, at 1050 m, is the Hotel Neos Omalos, tel. +30-28210-67269, www.neos-omalos.gr; numerous rooms to rent in Agia Roumeli at the gorge exit.

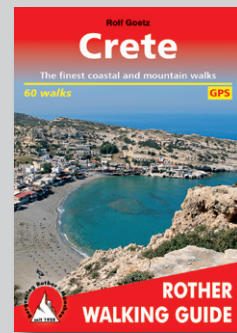
Linking tip: if you prefer not to return to your holiday accommodations on the same day as the walk, spend the night in Agia Roumeli. The next day, you could then walk the E4 along the south coast to Chora Sfakion (Walk 22).

Starting from the car park at the cafeteria in Xyloskalo (1), at first, enjoy the view of Gingilos, with its rugged rock face. At over 1000 m in height, it stands towering like a sentinel guarding the entrance to the gorge; during the first stage of the descent, the mountain will act as our steadfast companion. After buying an entrance pass at the ticket booth (this will be cancelled at the mouth of the gorge), descend along the stepped trail that is flanked by railings. Along zigzags, quickly put some metres of altitude behind you; many



In the rocky upper reaches of the gorge.

sections are protected by chain link fencing which, at least, catches the smaller rocks as they fall down from up above. The path leads through a splendid mixed forest of mountain cypress, kermes oak and, in the lower reaches, Turkish pines. Every couple of hundred metres there are caches of water for fire-fighting in case a forest fire should break out. In shady spots, you'll find sizeable patches of the Cretan violet (*Cyclamen creticum*). Ironwort (*Sideritis syriaca*) is also growing here; when the plant is dried, the finished product is sold throughout Central Europe as Cretan mountain tea. Three-quarters of an hour later, the rest area, **Neroutsiko (2)**, 948 m, sheltered beneath a spreading plane tree, offers a good spot for the first break. There is a WC here and a fountain where you can refresh your drinking water supply. A good 20 minutes later, reach the rocky stream bed of the gorge for the first time; on the left bank of the bed, a trail leads to the rest area **Riza Sikias (3)**, where additional fountains can be found. In early spring, the rare Cretan helleborine is flowering here, but when the gorge opens in May, it is already withered. As compensation, walkers build hundreds of cairns at this spot to pay their respects to the gorge. Shortly past Riza Sikias, cross over the stream bed of the gorge (dozens of crossings will be made during the walk), big, smooth, round boulders fill up the bed. Oriental plane trees act as companions during the following, not quite so steep, descent. Ancient cypresses, some as old as 600 years, tower above a cosy spot situated near the quarry-stone chapel of **Agios Nikolaos (4)**, 654 m. The chapel stands on the same site, legend has it, where an ancient sanctum dedicated to Apollo stood in the 6th century BC. In the clearing nearby, peonies, Cretan arum lily and Dragon Arum, some specimens growing to a height of 1 m, are flowering in May – from a botanical perspective, certainly one of the most spectacular spots in the entire gorge. From the chapel, cross through a



stately cypress forest to continue on to the rest area of **Vrissi (5)**, and after a short intermediate ascent, climb back down again to **Samaria (6)**, 362 m. In front of the abandoned village, the stream bed of the gorge is crossed via a bridge. In the ancient, partially-restored, stone houses, you will find a first-aid station and toilets; a village fountain has also been included. Picnic tables, under fig and mulberry trees, are usually fully occupied around midday. A good half of the route now lies behind us. From Samaria, cross over the bridge again and continue descending along the right bank. 2 mins later, pass the **Christos Chapel**, which appears to seek protection by squatting under a rock face. On the opposite side of the gorge, you can spot the Ossia Maria Chapel (presumably the namesake for the gorge), peeking out through the cypress trees, as well as the ruins of **Kato Samaria**. The trail changes to the other side of the stream bed for the gorge (here, a good 20 to 30 m wide) via a bridge – you can well imagine the size of the torrent that rushes through here on its way to the sea after the winter rainfall. Past the rest area, **Nero tis Perdikas** (in English, »Partridge Spring«) **(7)**, 311 m, the actual gorge begins. Now continue directly along the stony stream bed, heading for the first bottleneck. The torrential stream is crossed several times via stepping-stones, some of which are slippery. Walk beneath rugged rock faces and scree slopes to the rest area **Christos (8)**, 170 m, snuggling under shady pines; a couple of paces above the rest area, is the chapel of the same name. This is the last major rest area along the stretch to the sea. A couple of minutes afterwards, a log-paved trail leads through **Sideroportos**, the »Iron Gates«. With a mere 3 m distance between the vertical and sometimes overhanging, gorge walls, towering 300 m above, this is the supreme bottleneck of the canyon. Afterwards, the gorge broadens once more. Along walkways and over bridges, the river is criss-crossed several times until finally reaching the national park border at the **checkpoint (9)**, 50 m, where your ticket will be cancelled. A row of kiosks are offering refreshment here. Now it's only another 3 km to reach the ferry. A cobbled trail leads soon along groves of olives and carob trees, passing the abandoned houses of **Palea Agia Roumeli (10)**. In spring of 1952, a flash flood carried away a part of the village and the inhabitants built a new village directly on the sea as a result. At the village limits, cross over a stone bridge to the Agia Triada church and the cemetery (if you are too tired to walk anymore, a shuttle bus for the ferry is available here in the high season). A concrete-paved road leads, in 20 mins, to the new village of **Agia Roumeli (11)**. At a fork on the village limits, continue straight ahead and, 3 mins later, bear slightly to the right. Finally, in the village centre, just past the Pension Sorbas, reach the ticket office for the ferry; keep left from there and a few paces will bring you to the **ferry dock (12)**.

Sometimes rickety wooden walkways – here, in front of the Iron Gates – aid in crossing the torrential stream.

