

CRETE

THEY ARE THE ONLY GAYS IN THE VILLAGE!



About two years ago, two perfectly nice guys decided to sell their successful pub in Norfolk, pack up their possessions in their Renault Espace and drive south to chase the dream. They ended up in **Crete** – a long way from Norfolk – bought part of a 500-year-old monastery and decided to open the first all-gay B&B on the island. With just three letting rooms (and only one small bathroom), **Stuart** and **CJ** took the little village of **Galipe** just a bit by surprise. Without doubt, Stu and CJ bring the famous claim in *Little Britain* to life – they ARE the only gays in the village!

When you land at **Heraklion Airport**, you put your watch forward two hours and your calendar back 20 years. The largest of the Greek islands and independent of Greece until 1913, Crete has no gay life at all, as there are no gay men on it. There are men who like having sex with men but, of course, they're not gay. Once you can get your head around that, then you can start to enjoy Crete: a stunning, mountainous island with hundreds of beautiful beaches and many tiny villages that really are medieval. You will then appreciate how the 200 or so unsuspecting inhabitants of **Galipe**, a tiny village 20kms from Heraklion, reacted to the arrival of these two gentlemen from Planet UK, with the installation of their eight-man Jacuzzi, their exquisite little touches that we know and love so much, and the amount of pink.



Having never before been to a Greek island, we decided that Crete would be as good a place to start as any and found **Villa Zeus** on the net. After collecting us from our BA flight, CJ ushered us into a room that was very nice, clean and attractive, with a TV – showing only Greek programmes – and a little fridge. There was one small window high up in the wall, and French doors, which opened out onto a passage that led to a small balcony overlooking a little patio and the next house.

Cretan villages are built with no apparent planning; houses are just put up as and when required over many hundreds of years, and views – much needed by foreign tourists – are of no particular interest to the locals.

The welcome was warm – maybe just a little too warm – with drinks and a barbecue cooked by CJ. Stuart, his partner of eight years, presided over the drinks before whisking me off to a **kafenion**. The favourite form of entertainment for all Greek villages, it's a sort of combination shop, bar and general gossip zone for the local men, furnished with plastic chairs, wobbly tables, packing cases full of whatever the villagers need, and dimly lit with neon lights. No one spoke any English, and having just arrived and feeling disorientated, I was just a bit concerned and asked to go back to the villa where Mike, my partner, had been left in CJ's hands.

This then is the traditional Villa Zeus reception. Both the boys have full-time jobs on the island and so the B&B is very much a sideline, offering a DIY breakfast of cereal, fruit juice, coffee, yoghurt and total peace. The flies are the busiest things in Galipe. Without a car you are totally stuck; there is absolutely no 'life' as we know it in any of the pretty villages, some of which appear abandoned.

We pre-arranged to hire a car and the next day Stuart drove us the 17kms to the nearest beach town – **Kokkini Hani** – and we collected a car from the first of the many friendly and helpful Cretans that we met. Driving on the island is interesting. There is only one decent road, the **New National Road**; we saw the old one (don't go there). The mountain roads are fine, as long as you have a good head for sheer drops, and the views are literally breathtaking. But traffic on these roads is almost non-existent, apart from tourists with a death wish. Most local drivers drive with one hand hanging out of the window, one holding a phone, another holding a cigarette and the fourth presumably holding the steering wheel. Road markings are purely for decoration and overtaking on blind bends is mandatory.

Visit the beautiful southwest of Crete and avoid the overdeveloped tourist zones of the northeast at all costs. Think the Spanish costas 20-plus years ago and you get the idea. There is a large expat community developing on the island, mainly Dutch, Belgian and British, as properties are still quite cheap by our standards. This year's bestselling novel by **Victoria Hislop**, *The Island*, tells the story of Crete during WWII when the Germans invaded. It was obviously essential reading on our flight out.

Two Dutch boys, Erik and Jurgen, have just opened a new Internet café bar, **Café Nesta**, right on the beachfront, which gave us a great base. Take a look at www.cafenesta.com. They are endeavouring to open up 'gay Crete', which is obviously out there somewhere. If you are thinking of visiting the island, contact the boys at Café Nesta first for some good advice and suggestions of where to stay. There is just one late-night gay bar, **The Eros in Malia**, catering mainly for tourists. There's one tiny gay beach, **Golden Beach**, which can only take about ten people, and where there is a cave as there always is, but you need to swim to it.



Would we go to Crete again? Yes, we met some great people, escaping from the isolation of the only gay B&B and the overcrowding of the Heraklion coast, we found ourselves in some of the most fantastic scenery, with stunning empty beaches, swimming in the famous crystal-clear, sapphire-dark sea and eating great food. Oh, and just a word about the men of Crete – wow, so this is where the definition of Greek god comes from!



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