

#DestinationHighlightAgiosNikolaos

Spinalonga: The Island of History and Resilience

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PORT 
OF AGIOS NIKOLAOS


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CRETE





Spinalonga: The Island That Tells the Story of Crete

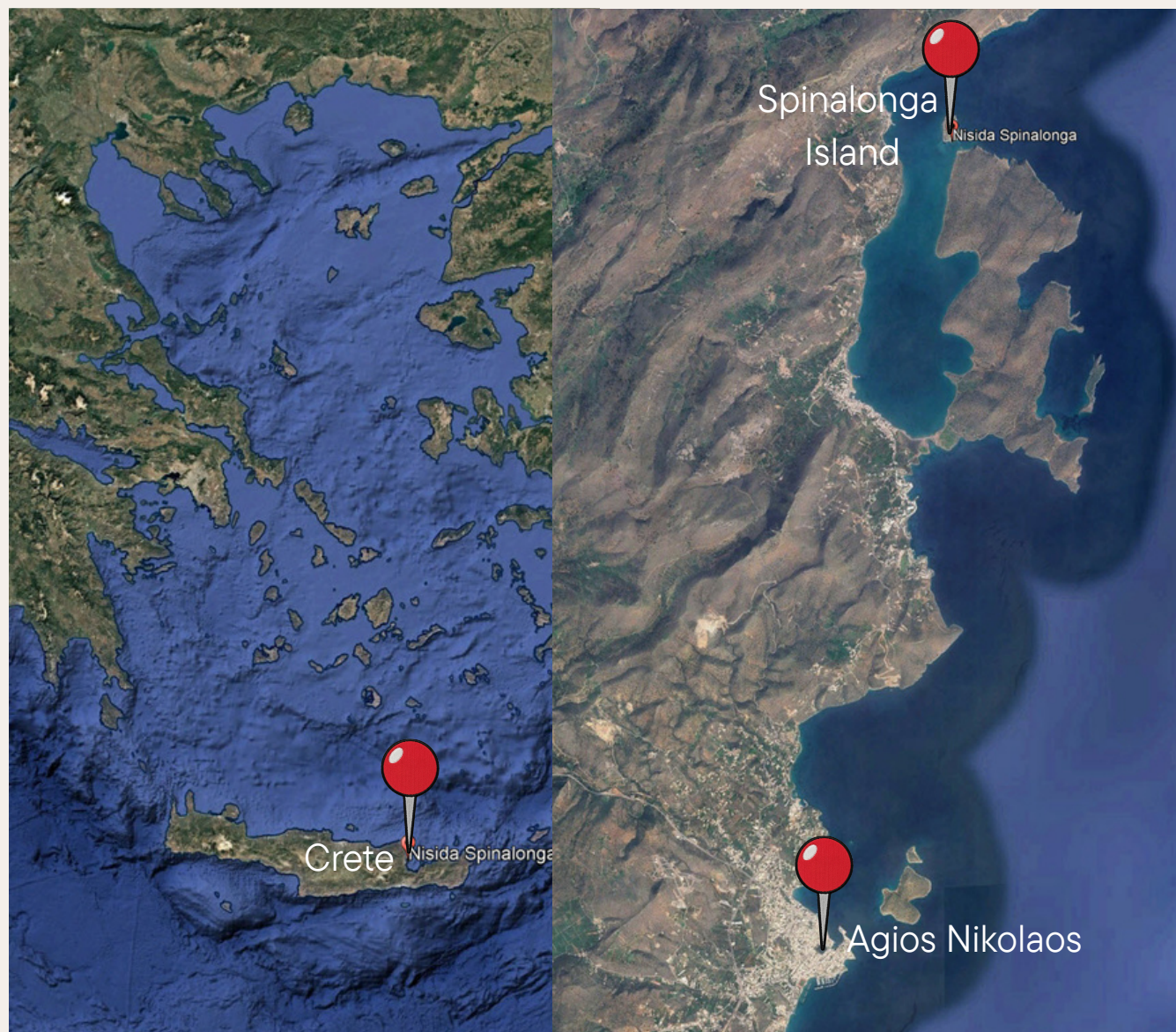
Just across the waters of Mirabello Bay, near Agios Nikolaos and Elounda, lies one of the most remarkable historical sites in the Mediterranean.

Spinalonga is a small island with a powerful story. Over the centuries it has served many roles, from a strategic Venetian fortress to one of the last leper colonies in Europe.

Its stone walls, narrow streets, and abandoned houses reflect centuries of history and human experience. Today, the island stands as a place of great energy, remembrance and reflection, attracting visitors from around the world who wish to understand its unique past.

For those arriving on a cruise ship in Agios Nikolaos, Spinalonga represents one of the most compelling cultural experiences in the region.

Its proximity to the port makes it an accessible and unforgettable excursion, allowing visitors to connect with one of Crete's most powerful historical stories within a short journey across Mirabello Bay.



A Fortress in the Sea



Spinalonga's strategic location at the entrance of the Gulf of Elounda made it an ideal defensive position.

In 1579, the Venetians fortified the island, constructing massive stone walls, bastions, and defensive structures to protect the valuable salt pans of Elounda and control maritime activity in the region.

The fortress quickly became one of the strongest defensive positions in the eastern Mediterranean. Even after most of Crete fell to the Ottoman Empire in 1669, the Venetians continued to hold Spinalonga for several decades due to its strong fortifications.

Today, visitors walking along the fortress walls can still admire the impressive engineering and strategic design that once protected this important outpost.

The Island of Isolation

In 1903, Spinalonga entered a new and very different chapter in its history when it was established as a leper colony for people suffering from Hansen's disease. At the time, the illness was widely feared and misunderstood, and those diagnosed were forced to leave their homes and families.



Patients from across Greece were sent to Spinalonga, arriving by boat and entering the island through a tunnel that later became known as the "Gate of Dante." Crossing that entrance meant stepping into a life of separation from the outside world.

Yet life on Spinalonga gradually evolved into more than a place of isolation. Over time, the residents began to build a small but organized community within the fortress walls. Houses were repaired, streets were maintained, and shops, cafes, and workshops began to operate. There were even schools, religious services, and cultural activities that helped preserve a sense of normal life.



In the 1930s, the community became more organized as residents advocated for better living conditions, medical care, and infrastructure. Electricity, sanitation, and improved housing were gradually introduced, allowing the island to function almost like a small town. For the people who lived there, Spinalonga was not only a place of exile. It became a place where friendships were formed, families were created, and dignity was preserved despite the difficult circumstances.

Today, the remains of the houses and streets stand as a powerful reminder of the human stories that unfolded on this small island. Spinalonga represents not only a chapter of hardship in modern Greek history but also a testament to resilience, solidarity, and the strength of the human spirit.

A Story That Reached the World

The powerful history of Spinalonga has attracted international attention and inspired books, documentaries, and historical research. The island's unique past, shaped by centuries of conflict and human resilience, has made it one of the most compelling historical sites in Greece.

One of the most influential works inspired by Spinalonga is the bestselling novel ***The Island* by Victoria Hislop**. Published in 2005, the book introduced millions of readers worldwide to the story of the leper colony and the lives of the people who lived there.

The novel later inspired the highly successful television series ***The Island (To Nisi)***, produced in **2010** by a Greek television network. Filmed in and around Spinalonga and the nearby village of Plaka, the series recreated life on the island during the years of the leper colony.

With its strong storytelling, historical setting, and emotional performances, the production became one of the most watched and acclaimed television series in Greek television history. It brought the story of Spinalonga to a wider audience and helped introduce the island's remarkable history to viewers both in Greece and internationally.

Today, Spinalonga stands not only as a historical site but also as **a powerful symbol of memory, resilience, and human history**.



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One of Crete's Most Visited Historical Sites



Agios Nikolaos

Today, Spinalonga is the second most visited archaeological site in Crete, following only the Palace of Knossos. On a national level, it consistently ranks among the top five most popular archaeological sites in Greece

Thousands of visitors arrive each year to walk through its narrow streets, explore the remains of the settlement, and admire the impressive Venetian fortifications that still surround the island.

The combination of dramatic landscapes, rich history, and unique architecture creates an atmosphere unlike that of any other place in the region.

For many travellers, visiting Spinalonga is not just a historical excursion. It is an emotional and memorable experience that reveals a different side of Crete's past.



A Unique Experience A Step Away from Agios Nikolaos

The last person to leave Spinalonga was **Father Chrysanthos Katsoulogiannakis**, the island's priest. While the leper colony officially closed in 1957 after a cure was found and the remaining patients were transferred to Athens, Father Chrysanthos refused to leave immediately.

As the cured patients finally departed Spinalonga, the island fell into a profound silence—except for one man. Father Chrysanthos Katsoulogiannakis, a priest who had originally volunteered to serve the colony, refused to leave with the others. Although he was not a leper himself, he chose to remain as the island's sole inhabitant for five more years.

Driven by his faith, he stayed to fulfil the Greek Orthodox tradition of performing memorial services at specific intervals, from 40 days to five years, for those buried in the island's cemetery. For half a decade, he lived alone in the ghost town, lighting candles for the "forgotten" so they would not be abandoned in death as they had been in life. In 1962, once he had honoured the memory of the very last person buried there, **he finally shut the door behind him, praying it would stay closed forever**. His solitary stay on the "Island of Silence" is remembered as a powerful act of devotion, ensuring that those who died in isolation were not forgotten even after the cure was found.



Saint Panteleimon Church

