

Going Crowd-Free in Crete

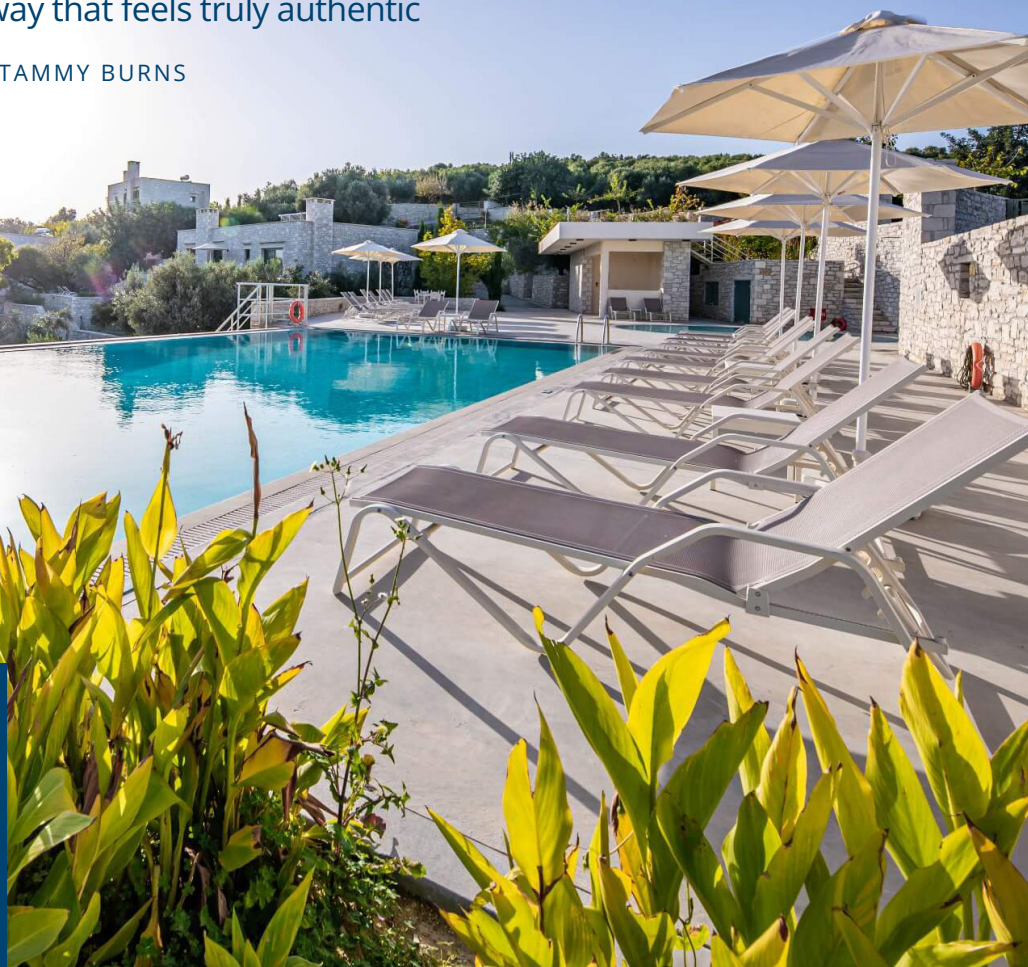
A stay at Dalabelos Estate offers the chance to experience this Greek island in a way that feels truly authentic

BY TAMMY BURNS

In rural Crete, the air smells like thyme and oregano and citrus. It wafts through our villa window, along with the sounds of rooster caws at dawn and the jangle of bells as sheep are herded home at dusk.

While many of Crete's tourists—a record 6.6 million in 2025—head to the massive resorts on the coast, my boyfriend and I are at Dalabelos Estate, an intimate agrotourism retreat in the countryside, to try to connect with the real Crete.

Dalabelos is tucked within the rolling hills of Angeliana, a small agricultural village that's only an hour's drive from the island's main airport in Heraklion. But it's so serene, with sweeping views of olive groves under the shadow of snow-capped Mount Ida, Crete's tallest peak, that I feel like we're a million miles away.



For five generations the property has belonged to the local Petrodaskalakis family, although until 2004, it was mainly olive trees on the land. Today, it includes a large vineyard and an orchard of orange, fig, mulberry, pomegranate, almond, walnut, carob and quince. Vassilis Petrodaskalakis leads guests on tours through the fields (or you can quietly explore on your own), while his wife Maria, a chef, gives hands-on cooking classes in her small kitchen. During harvest season, guests can even participate in olive or grape picking.

Vassilis says he was inspired to start hosting guests after temporarily living on the mainland and missing the music, food and healthy lifestyle of Crete.

"It is a place with a great history and enormous energy," he says. "The mountains, the beaches, the monuments, the natural beauty and people of this island—for me, as a Cretan, it contains all the creative magic of the world."

He explains that Dalabelos gathers all his homeland's graces in one place. "Here, people can coexist with nature and wildlife. They talk, joke, hang out, reflect, learn and taste what the gardens, the crops and the whole cycle of life has to offer."

One morning, while I'm lounging by the infinity pool that overlooks the farm, I spot Vassilis hand-picking vegetables and wild herbs for that evening's dinner—the menu changes daily depending on what's ripened and what Maria is inspired to prepare. It is all organic, farm-to-table and exquisite: delicate zucchini blossoms and vine leaves stuffed with rice and fragrant mint, crispy fennel pies with garlicky tzatziki, smoky slices of apaki (a traditional Cretan cured pork) and the

freshest, sweetest tomatoes I've ever tasted, doused in peppery olive oil and creamy feta.



The wine is sourced from both Dalabelos and neighbouring vineyards, and the obligatory raki, a Cretan digestif that's served with dessert after every dinner across the island, is brewed by Vassilis.

An experimenter, Vassilis asks if we want to try his latest variation: Cretan whiskey, distilled from grapes like raki, but aged in oak barrels. It goes down much smoother than the raki, rich and warm, and even my Scottish partner agrees it's a skilled take on the "water of life." After dinner, we share a few drams in the music room of the main building, where folk instruments line the shelves—Vassilis leads weekly workshops on the history and tradition of Cretan music.

The estate consists of just 10 studios, plus a few cottages and apartments, which means you quickly get to know your fellow guests. At dinner on the terrace one night, sheltered under a mulberry tree canopy, we chat with a couple from England. Like us, they wanted to find a part of Crete that felt far away from the throngs of tourists.

As the sky fades from cornflower blue to cobalt to inky black, out along the sea's edge we spot the bright lights of those coastal resorts. I have no doubt they're beautiful places to stay, but in the quiet stillness, I feel the land soaking into my skin, and I know this is the real Crete we came to see.

