

# A not-so-merry dance

Andreas Hofer is greeted by a whole troupe of Zorbas after an exhausting day of solo ski touring



'The White Mountains hover above the old Venetian port of Chania'





# along Greek peaks



Maybe it was not such a good idea to ski on Greece's most southerly island.

What looked like hosts of countless tombstones erected haphazardly every night on the tarmac in front of Chania airport, Crete, were actually thousands of suitcases. They were carefully inscribed with names, surnames and addresses of their owners, and some even had half-length portraits affixed to them. These were the meagre belongings of countless low-paid Bangladeshi labourers, evacuated by their

Chinese masters from war-stricken Libya. Inside the brightly lit concourse, watchful Chinese plain-clothes police and bored Greek coastguards goaded the jaded crowd into obedient line-up of refugees, waiting to board a row of jumbo jets chartered to take them home into poverty. Not all of them were willing to suffer a forced return without resistance. Fifty of them had jumped into the sea before their rescue ship could berth. "We found only half of them," said the man who handed me my skis and avalanche rucksack. "And four of them were dead." ▶

'My kit probably weighed not much less than a soldier's combat gear when tiptoeing through Helmand province. When I lifted it all the next morning, skis tied up, and boots in hand, I almost fell over.'



Charles Dubouloz and Stéphane Brosse on Pachnes - the second highest elevation in Crete



It cannot be said with any real certainty how Lefka Ori - the White Mountains of Crete I was intent to cross on touring skis - got their name. Perhaps because in the summer months, this barren landscape of grey rock - which stretches more than 20 miles as the crow flies from west to east - radiates like a natural beacon for many miles over the glistening Mediterranean. In early March, as you stroll along the harbour front at the Venetian city of Chania - with gaudy fishing boats bobbing along the pier, the Ottoman lighthouse braced against a fresh wind from the west, and a dainty patchwork of narrow streets, steps, and patrician town-houses dozing in the mild sun - another explanation seems possible. Then the Lefka Ori massif is covered in thick blankets of pristine snow, and 50 peaks rising higher than 2 000 metres above the coast hover like turrets of a fairytale castle in a pastel sky - a view unknown to millions of summer tourists.

After an hour's driving through heavy rain and then snowfall, our convoy passed the Omalos plateau (1050m), the regular starting point in summer for dehydrated, sun-scorched hikers in shorts and sandals on their punishing march through the Samaria Gorge - a ravine formed by sheer cliffs more than 1000 metres high, which in some places narrow down to a width of not more than a few metres. We were dressed for temperatures well below freezing though, and the fog

reflecting our headlights in the night was so dense that we had to get out of the car to manoeuvre the drivers safely through hairpin bends. 'We' - meaning me and my friends from the Greek Mountain and Climbing Federation of Chania, and the French ski-touring champions Charles Dubouloz and Stéphane Brosse. For many years Brosse jointly held the record for the Chamonix-Zermatt 'Haute Route', with a time of 21 hours and 11 minutes. (His time was beaten only this year, just a few days after he came back from Crete.) To put this into context: any normal person taking on this race would hike, weather allowing, for at least five days.

The French were planning yet another record in Crete: to cross the Lefka Ori from Omalos to the village of Askifou - a distance of 55 kilometres, and a total climb of 4700 metres in altitude - in less than six hours.

Against all odds, and to my surprise, we actually made it that same night to the Kalerghi Refuge (1650m), where Christos, the innkeeper at the refuge, and a crackling log fire awaited us with hearty Greek mountain food: pilaf rice and juicy pork, stewed in vegetables and white wine with so much garlic in it that our night on mattresses and bunk beds promised to be interesting. Celebrating our rescue from a Cretan blizzard with local wine and raki, Manos, from the Chania Mountain and Climbing Federation, raised his

glass to the French. Looking deeply into the champions' eyes, he proclaimed solemnly: "I'm sure you will set another world record!" The bespectacled Brosse, clearly pleased that Manos seemed so confident, replied modestly: "Why you are so sure?"

"Because nobody has ever done it before. Even if you had to crawl on all fours from Omalos to Askifou, you'd be the fastest!"

The two men roared with laughter at this, which made them suddenly look just like anyone else.

The plan was for them to check out the terrain the next morning - but otherwise to relax before their big day. We mere mortals would start before sunrise on a two-day hike, including another overnight stay in a refuge half way there.

So we had to carry not only our ski gear and safety equipment, but also sleeping bags, camping gear, food and water for two days, and a few bottles of wine to keep us warm at night. My kit probably weighed not much less than a soldier's combat gear when tiptoeing through Helmand province. When I lifted it all the next morning, skis tied up, and boots in hand, I almost fell over.

There's nothing more exhilarating than seeing the sun rise over snowy peaks, breathing the crisp and frosty morning air - and then heading straight back to bed. Unfortunately this was not an option. While the French would have to start from Omalos, 5km down the mountain, we asked Christos to drive us a little further *into* the mountains - in fact as far as the road would go before the snowline began. Even though we'd have to walk now for many hours, with a medium-sized household hanging from our shoulders, it was undeniably a beautiful morning. The mountains were bathed in a soft light, embedded in small cotton clouds and rooted in the thick fog which had spread all over Crete beneath us.

After only a few minutes, my Greek fellow-travellers, all in hiking boots and therefore without any skis to carry, were already well ahead of me. At Poria, a plateau at 1450 metres, the snow was still so patchy that I couldn't yet make use of my skis. □



## Exploring the snows of Crete

And my touring boots, although lighter and more flexible than alpine ski boots, wore heavily on my legs while I was staggering behind my friends uphill. But soon, the snow surface became solid, and I could finally bring my skis into play.

The route from Kalerghi to the Katsiveli refuge hut made its way along a summer hiking track, signposted E4. As I had to deviate from it in search of connected snowfields, I quickly lost sight of my friends. When I reached the first peak, Melidaou (2133m), I could see my group for the first time again: not much bigger than ants now, crawling many kilometres behind me! Such is the beauty of touring skis. On snow, nothing can take you further, and nothing will be faster. A point Amundsen had illustrated quite convincingly when he outpaced Scott, who travelled mainly on foot or by pony in their race to the South Pole.

Alone, I continued along the ridges, passing Petradhe (2092m) and then skiing down to a group of desolate barns, following the ski tracks of Christophe Moulin and George Klaudatos, the French and Greek mountain guides, who had staked the course the week before. Quite some snow had fallen in the meantime, but the green (ascent) and red (descent) route-marking flags - rattling on long bamboo sticks in the wind - could still be clearly seen. The sky was now deep cobalt and the sun weighed down mercilessly. Exposed slopes started to avalanche, and I had to apply yet more sun cream. In the snow in front of me I could see the tracks of *kri-kri*, the Cretan ibex. These rare animals often make use of these routes to make walking easier. After three hours, I saw the Katsiveli hut, where we were supposed to stay overnight. But it was only 11am! The hikers, battling their way through deep snow, were probably still many hours away, and the hut was of course locked. Worse: the wine was

in Manos' rucksack, not mine. Lured by the gaily flapping bannerets, I decided to carry on.

Passing behind Modaki (2225m) - which looked more like a cone of frozen lemon sorbet than a mountain - I climbed Pachnes, at 2453m the second-highest elevation in Crete (Psiloritis, in the Ida Range, birthplace of Zeus, is just three metres higher). The route was now leading through gentle valleys and over a chain of moderately steep 2000-metre peaks, never varying more than 400 vertical metres from top to bottom.

From Ghrias Soros (2332m) I glided down a beautiful wide slope in deep powder. This felt like quite an achievement, but not for long. The wind was picking up now on the ridges, and I had to hold fast to my skis, my poles, and my woollen cap. I feared that at any second, a powerful gust of wind might pick me up like some ill-designed kite, and hurl me into the abyss below. Taking off my touring skins at the various summits proved increasingly difficult. I had to fold them while, at the same time, holding fast to all my other equipment which I still needed rather badly!

**Eleftherios Venizelos, the legendary Cretan revolutionary and long-term Greek Prime Minister**



Fanis Manousakis

From Soros Askifou (2210m), I enjoyed a long descent in granulated spring snow, which suggested a final highlight - were it not for the fact that I was still in the middle of nowhere. It was already 2pm, and I still saw the little green flags happily marching up yet another steep mountain. I suddenly realised that I hadn't had anything to eat or drink since we'd left camp in the early hours. I'd been focusing so hard on reaching the other side of the mountains while it was still daylight that I hadn't even stopped once. A handful of dried apricots, half an almond bar, and two bottles of water felt like the best meal I'd had in a long time. 🟢

**‘The hikers, battling their way through deep snow, were probably still many hours away, and the hut was of course locked. Worse: the wine was in Manos' rucksack, not mine.’**

Dimitri Kornaros



## Exploring the snows of Crete

After a few minutes, I was on my way again. But now climbing had become more tiring. The last stretch from Paspalomiti (2155m) and Fanari (2170m) to Kastro (2219m) felt longer and harder than I'd bargained for. But then the finale seemed within my grasp. Now, more and more mountains had just their peaks dipped in snow, with spinach-green maquis and gnarled dwarf oaks sprawling over the lower slopes. All day I'd seen nothing but snow. Now, far to the east, lush green valleys stretched to the horizon, crisscrossed by Lilliputian country lanes with cars the size of pinheads crawling along them. Finally, the last descent to the valley of Niato - close to Tavri, the refuge on the other side of the White Mountains!

At 1400 metres, the snow cover started to melt away, grazing goats appeared, and even some rather emaciated little black cows. The 300-vertical-metre 'walk' downhill over razor-sharp rubble and through the dense undergrowth of thorns proved to be the most punishing part of the traverse. With skis again on my back, I staggered down for another two hours until I tumbled, exhausted, into a bunch of only mildly surprised men, who were sitting in a brand-new Jeep, with brand-new binoculars and large maps spread over the dashboard. They looked comically out of place, like city dwellers trying to steal a sheep for the first time.

As it turned out, they were Red Cross volunteers preparing for a worst-case scenario: for someone like me to be rescued. As I was apparently their first 'incident' this weekend, they were more than willing to drive me to the village of Askifou, another 5km on a winding dirt track. They stopped in front of a dimly lit village *cafenion* (coffee house). I thanked everybody profoundly, hefted my gear from the roof rack, and stepped into what looked like a shabby café - but was in truth the assembly point of the complete male cast of Alexis Zorbas, including all extras: theatrically



St. Mary's chapel in Theriso, at the foot of the White Mountains

proud men in knee-length, black goatskin-boots, black shirts with buttons open to the waistline, in order to flash wildly sprouting chest hair, belts with daggers, burning eyes, and upward-twisted candelabra moustaches. They were steeped in a heated discussion, which seemed to have drifted into an open blood-feud precisely as I walked into the saloon. They all froze and looked at me in disbelief. A skier on the 'set' - this must be a terrible slip-up, or the landlord's moonshine was showing some first nasty side effects. To find out, they immediately poured me a shot, and eyed me expectantly: "Raki good?"

Meanwhile the French, according to their blog, had covered a distance of more than 51 kilometres, climbing 3215 metres in altitude, in a total time of 5 hours and 58 minutes. Certainly a new record, Manos, as it took me considerably longer: despite all my shortcuts, I had been almost nine hours on my feet.

Exhausted yet proud, I called my driver from Chania, put out my wet clothes and skins to dry on stools around the central iron stove, and toasted

my new friends from the Zorbas set: "Yamas, yamas, and to your health, comrades. Raki good!"

I had spent 24 hours in the mountains in all - enough time for Chania to go completely crazy, it seemed. It was carnival time. Transvestites in large numbers were roaming the streets when I returned to my hotel, some dressed as good-time girls, others as nurses and Dolly Parton look-alikes. One girl - a real one this time, in a cowboy hat - pulled out an imitation Smith and Wesson, and took aim at me, laughing loudly before she pulled the trigger. Bang bang! My heart skipped a beat on this last day of carnival.

The next day would be the beginning of Lent, or 'Ash-Monday'. In the realm of strict Orthodoxy, no food would be served now for at least three days. Not a very promising time for my next destination:

the Monastic Republic of Mount Athos. The oldest - and certainly the most bizarre - democracy on earth. 🇬🇷

**Andreas Hofer stayed at the Casa Delfino boutique hotel, 9 Theofanus Street in the Old Harbour, Chania. [www.casadelfino.com](http://www.casadelfino.com)**

