

## PEREGRINATION WITH FOURFOURAS AS THE POINT OF DEPARTURE



## FOURFOURAS

On the southwest side of Psiloritis, in the prefecture of Rethymno, spreads the area of Amari, which comprises of two municipalities: the municipality of Sivritos with Agia Fotini as its capital and the municipality of Kourites with Fourfouras as its capital. Amari is the main area of Psiloritis foot and loom as the most unadulterated and pure area in Crete. Small and big villages show up in the landscape of Amari, a landscape full of contrasts. On one side there is Psiloritis with its steep peaks and age-old oak forests. On the other side, there are two more mountains, Kedros and Samitos, demarcating a rich grain-sown valley which gives life to the whole area. Villages are either climbing on gorges or spread on plains and make a difference in this verdurous landscape. Important Minoan dorps and findings are scattered everywhere and reveal the history of the area. All around the mountaintops, glens and footpaths, there are stone-built country churches which show the byzantine glory of Amari. Local people are friendly and hospitable in this region. Fourfouras, the capital of the municipality of Kourites is 43 km away from Rethymno. According to one view, it owes its name to its first settler, Fourfouras, who came from a well-known byzantine family. The village is famous thanks to



Barotsi (1577), the Kastrofilakas census (1583) and Vasilakatas (1630). At Mourtzes site there is the wall painted church of Agios Georgios.

## A TOUR OF IMPORTANT SETTLEMENTS - ROUTES

Villages in the area of Amari are simple, with humble stone lumps and are famous in Crete for their traditional architecture. They are scattered among gorges and glacises. The area's mazy road network connects villages in a way that offers many alternative routes. The main entrances are from Rethymno to the north and from the Messara plain to the south via Timpaki. Road arteries connect this area to Rethymno via Arkadi or Spili, while the local road crossing all south edges of Psiloritis lead to Gergeri and Zaros. The routes via Arkadi and Spili are impressive, the last one crossing the mountainous area of Kedros. Many rural and forest roads climb up to the nearby mountaintops, reaching as far as some hundred meters beneath Psiloritis peak in the area of Lochria.



### Fourfouras - Kouroutes

### Nithavri - Apodoulou - Platanos - Lochria

From Fourfouras we head south and come across the stockbreeding village of Kouroutes, which probably owes its name to the mythical Kourites. Here, there is a shelter belonging to the Mountaineering Association of Rethymno and this is the smoothest road to Psiloritis peak. Going on in the main road, we find Nithavri, a village with a pre-Hellenic name. Very close to this village, there is the cave of Notiki Tripa, famous to speleology fans. Immediately after, we find Apodoulou where there is a Minoan residence and the church of Agios

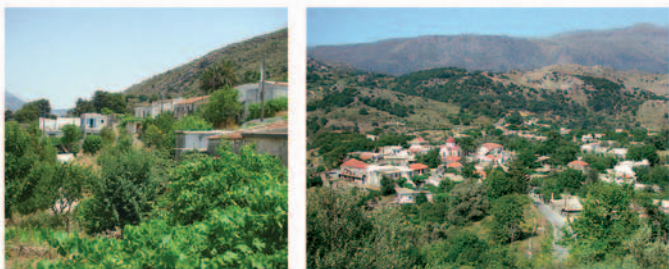


Georgios o Xifoforos. A little further in the south, we turn left and come across the little village of Vathiako with the wall painted church of Agios Georgios. After two kilometers, we arrive at Platanos, the birthplace of the groundbreaking feministic movement of Kalliroi Siganou - Parren. The last village in the prefecture of Rethymno on the way to Messara is Lochria. From here we can go on to the villages of Pano Riza or go back and turn left after Vatheiakio towards Agia Galini for a swim in the sea.

### Vizari - Asomatos Monastery - Agia Fotini - Meronas - Gerakari - Nefs Amari - Opsigias - Monastyraiki

Taking the main road down to Rethymno, in the middle of a verdurous plain, we come across Vizari. The 17th century three-aisle basilica at Ellinika site reveals the vigour that this area used to have. In the village, there is a woodcraft workshop, where items are created from olive tree wood. Continuing in the provincial road to the north we can visit Asomatos Monastery. Near the monastery, on the way to Nefs Amari, there are two archaeologically important churches, Panagia Kera and Agia Anna. After a short distance, we arrive at Agia Fotini, the capital of the municipality of Sivritos. Here we can find a

small market, a health centre, a gas station and a post office. From Agia Fotini we go up to Meronas, the village with the rich fountains and byzantine memories. The wall painted churches of Agios Nikolaos and Panagia, dating back to the 13th and 14th century respectively, stand out. Meronas, as well as Gerakari, which is next on the way to Spili, are famous for their cherries and morellos. Leaving Gerakari behind, we go left to the villages of Mountain Kedros. We come across the 13th century byzantine church of Agios Ioannis Fotis. After Kardaki, we can either continue to Vrises - Ano Meros - Agios Ioannis - Agia Paraskevi or end up to the Libyan Sea coast or head left to Nefs Amari, the capital of the historical county of Amari. The stone-built campanile dominates the village. On the way to Opsigias we find the single-naved church of Agios Georgios and its cemetery. Then, we arrive at Monastyraki. The archaeological discovery has brought to life a Minoan cluster dating back to the old palace period. In the village, there is the 15th century church of Michael Archaggelos.



### WORTH VISITING (A journey in nature)

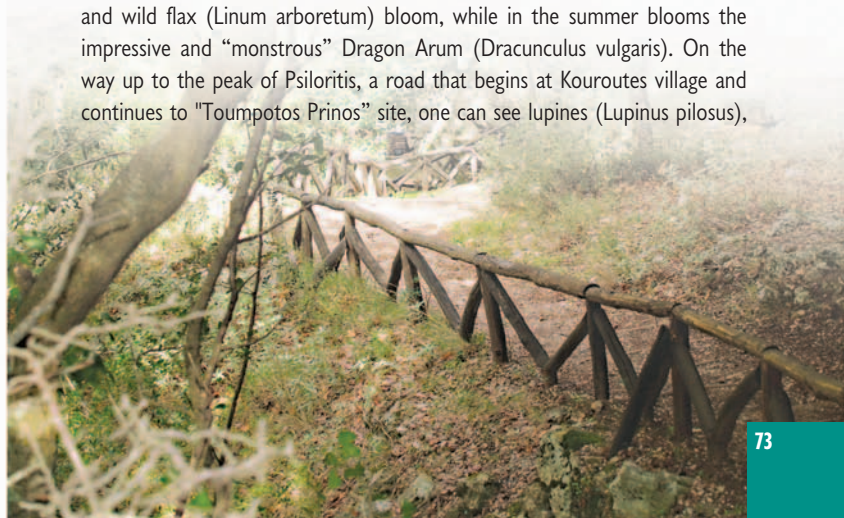
The area of Amari is full of unique characteristics. Geological alterations are intense. Steep cliffs appearing at Kedros and Psiloritis glacises and unfrequented lumps of limestone rocks in Amari plain have resulted from breaches who took the hard rocks to pieces, tipping up the mountains and lowering the breaches. Water abounds here and little streams effuse from the mountain glacis to end up north in Prassianos River, where there is the Dam of Rivers, or north in Ligotis River, which flows almost all year long. Platis River at Vizari supplies water to a reservoir that is useful for irrigative needs. Small and big gorges create ways for the water to leave the mountains. Some of these are: the gorge of Patsos, one of the most beautiful gorges in Crete with rich vegetation and water flowing all year long, the gorge at Platania with the wonderful footpath leading to Panas cave, and the impressively wild gorge of Prassies, which dewater the basin towards the north. Rocks and geological formations are impressive. Limestone and dolomitic rocks prevail in the surrounding mountain areas, while in the val-



ley appear schist rocks. Also, mainly in the north part of the area, but also in the valley of Amarianos marls, sands and argils appear, which are rich in fossils. Around Lochria there are stunning red and brown basaltic rocks. Caves in this area are many and rather inaccessible. Some of the most characteristic are: the cave of Panas at Platania, Notiki Tripa at Nithavri, the cave of Prophitis Ilias at Gerakari, and the cave of Margiles at Elenes, where the first traces of human residence on this island were discovered along with the ones at Idaion Andron at Nida and the cave of Gerani. At the entrance of the gorge of Patsos, there is the cavernous church of Agios Antonios that used to be a sanctuary of Karanaios Ermis (Hermes) during ancient years. In this area, there is a plethora of unexplored and undeveloped caves, such as Siriaki at Platanos and Leska at Fourfouras.

Amari is certainly one of the most interesting areas of Psiloritis, as far as flora is concerned. The gorge of Patsos is a small botanic garden with rich vegetation comprising gigantic sycamore trees, tiny solenopsis mituta, holm oaks (*Quercus ilex*) and the endemic Cretan bear's tail (*Verbascum arcturus*). At the banks of Platis River there are sycamore trees and myrtles. Heading east, towards the village of Thronos, the common myrtle (*Myrtus communis*), which is the first material for the well-known myrtle oil, flowers at the road edges in spring. Many fields are like a "carpet" of colourful red and blue anemones. Hills and fields are full of tiny "bees". At the plateau of Ious Kampos, fields are filled with various species of red endemic tulips (this is the only place on the island where you can find them).

In spring, garden flags (*Iris cretensis*), Stinking Chamomile (*Anthemis chia*) and wild flax (*Linum arboreum*) bloom, while in the summer blooms the impressive and "monstrous" Dragon Arum (*Dracunculus vulgaris*). On the way up to the peak of Psiloritis, a road that begins at Kouroutes village and continues to "Toumpotos Prinos" site, one can see lupines (*Lupinus pilosus*),





various orchids and the endemic valerian (*Valeriana asarifolia*), while in the path to the top it is worth admiring the bloomed *Acantholimon androsaceum* and, if lucky, the endemic and rare *Himantoglossum samariense*. The bountiful water of the valley of Amari creates ideal conditions for rich flora, increasing its importance for many animal populations of Kedros, Samitos and Psiloritis, especially during winter. All the important raptors that nest at the mountain areas of Psiloritis and Kedros use the steep and high mountain glacis as their base and feed themselves either at the north smooth slopes of Mylopotamos or at the valley of Amari. Lammergeyers (*Gypaetus barbatus*), carrion buzzards (*Gyps fulvus*), war eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*), Bonelli's eagles (*Hieraetus fasciatus*), lanerrets (*Falco peregrinus*) and haggards (*Buteo buteo*) are some very important bird species of the valley. The second important point concerning the avifauna of the area has developed during recent years and the reservoir of Vizari, which (due to its large populations of flying insects) seems to favor at least five, protected species of bats. At the valley, we can come across almost all the amphibians and the reptiles of the island (Cretan frogs, green toads, tree frogs,



green lizards, snippets, ocellated skinks and the four snakes of Crete). Finally, the whole area of Amari is considered very significant for the population of the Cretan wild cat. The glacis from Kouroutes to the forest of Rouvas was also a biotope in which for the first time in 1996 the Natural History Museum of Crete after its first description almost a century ago, confirmed with scientific facts the presence of this animal in the island.



## A JOURNEY TO THE MYTH AND HISTORY

In the sacred mountain of the Cretan born Zeus, Kourites, the ancient fighters and first dancers, kept the secret of the king of Gods birth well hidden, striking their shields and dancing war dances that were considered as the roots of the Cretan dances. The land, where myth became one with history continued to bustle with life and create culture. At the village of Elenes, there are traces of residence that date back to the Neolithic era. At Apodoulou village an important Minoan dorp was discovered, while at Monastyraki the building block of the old palace period (2000-1700 BC) is impressive. In ancient times, at the cave of Agios Antonios at the entrance of the gorge of Patsos, Hermes



Kranaios was worshipped. Ancient Sivritos, today known as Thronos, presented a period of flourishing from the Geometric era to the early Byzantine period. In all historic periods, Amari brought out eminent figures. During the second Byzantine period and the Venetian invasion, noble lords, such as Vlastoi, Kallergides, Varouches and Chortatzides lived here. Manouel Vernardos the Cretan, one of the founders of "Filiki Etairia" (Friendly company), was born at Amari. In modern history, Amari was the centre of resistance in Crete. Christians of Ampadia experienced the worst suppression of the Turks-Cretans living in this area. Amari residents experienced Nazi atrocity because of their participation in the National Resistance, which reached its climax with the holocaust of the villages of Kedros in August 1944. At Monastyraki there is one of the most important archaeological sites in the whole prefecture of Rethymno. It is a whole building block dating back to the old palace period (2000-1700 BC). At Amari, the plethora of Byzantine monuments of all types and eras is really impressive. The basilicas at Sivritos (Thronos) and Vizari reveal the early development of Christianity, as well as the existence of an episcopate in the area.



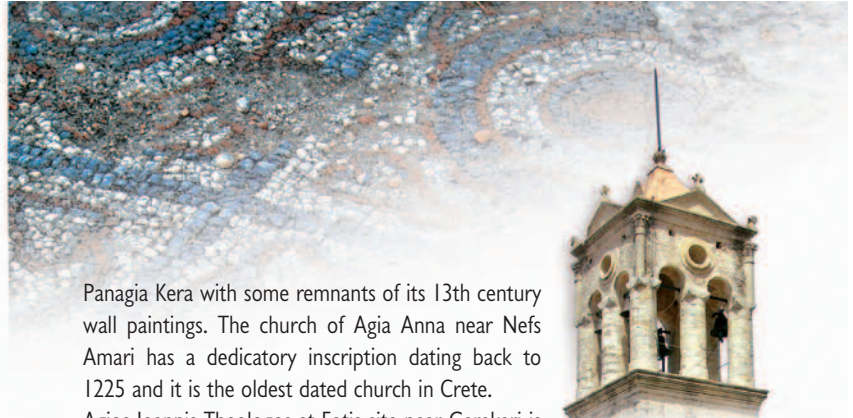
### Monasteries

The Byzantine Monastery of Asomatoi flourished in the last years of the Venetian occupation, while in the middle of the twentieth century it was converted into a School of Agriculture. Now it is being reconstructed and efforts are being made for it to operate as a monastery again. Agios Antonios at Veni, near Volionas, which was a glebe of the historic Monastery of Arkadi is the religious centre of the area and attracts a large number of worshipers on 15 August. Another important monastery was abandoned Monastery of Kaloidaina at Ano Meros.



### Churches

The church of Koimisis Theotokou at Thronos is built on an early Christian basilica. Today we can see the remains of the mosaic of the old church. At Vizari, at a 2 km distance away from the village, there is a 7th century early Christian three-aisled basilica, which was ruined during an Arab invasion in the 9th century. Near the monastery of Asomatoi is the byzantine church of




Panagia Kera with some remnants of its 13th century wall paintings. The church of Agia Anna near Nefs Amari has a dedicatory inscription dating back to 1225 and it is the oldest dated church in Crete.

Agios Ioannis Theologos at Fotis site near Gerakari is an arch-covered church with dome and 13th century wall paintings. Visitors can admire the church of Agia Paraskevi at Amari, the 14th century monastery of Asomatoi of Panagia at Meronas and the church of Agios Georgios Xifoforos at Apodoulou (14th-15th centuries). On the western wall of the church of Panagia at Agia Paraskevi, the owner Georgios Varouhas and his wife are pictured (1516). The churches of Agios Onoufrios at Genna and Archaggelos Michael at Monastyraki are of exceptional beauty and archaeological interest.



### TOURISTIC INFRASTRUCTURES

Amari is a destination that can offer holidays with a quest for tastes, smells and sensations. It is a place that invites you to get to know the nature and traditional life of Crete. Tourist facilities in the area of Amari are making their careful steps always with the perspective of a moderate touristic development. Agrotourist guest houses, small lodgings and rented apartments can welcome visitors after contacting the owners. In the food service sector, there are many taverns scattered in the villages of Amari, which welcome visitors and offer him delicious Cretan food. But the coffee shops in the villages are a real revelation to those who visit them. Along with coffee, there is chattering with the frequenters, so that, with this unforgettable simplicity and hospitality, Amari calls you to visit it again. For climbing lovers, the mountaineering shelter on the way from Kouroutes to Toumpotos Prinos is ready to host visitors after contacting the Mountaineering Association of Rethymno.



## CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS CELEBRATIONS ALL YEAR THROUGH

Amari is a place of unique characteristics and experiences rhythms of the Cretan tradition that are far away from time. Either through the simplicity with which we celebrate every occasion, such as sheep sheering, raki production, weddings, and christenings or through the big celebrations of Saints, which are traditionally a chance for people to attend mass, pray and meet in original fairs

with food and good wine. These celebrations certainly take place at Amari with the impressive byzantine churches scattered in every corner of the country, ready to welcome the prayer-visitor, re-experience the sweet psalmody under the light of candles and revive old byzantine memories. We suggestively mention some celebrations beginning in the summer, the fair of Agia Marina on 17 July at Monastraki and the celebration of Profitis Ilias on 20 July on Mountain Kedros. Climbing on the mountain is a custom for people of Amari and they do it every year. Agios Antonios at Veni, which is a glebe of the monastery of Arkadi, attracts a large number of people on 15 August and it is one of the most famous fairs of the area, while Panagia at Meronas is the largest fete of this village with many celebrations taking place in August. The celebration for the Transfiguration of the Saviour at Ano Meros on 6 August, as well as the one of Agios Titos on 25 August at Nefs Amari attract many believers, as does the fair of Genesis Theotokou on 8 September at Fourfouras. The municipalities of Amari, Sivritos and Kourites organize cultural celebrations every summer in the villages, which are enjoyed by both residents and visitors. But also in the winter, Amari offers a traditional celebration which is famous in the whole prefecture of Rethymno. On Clean Monday, carnival scenes revive at Meronas. Many visitors go there to enjoy the games called “lerades”,



“camel”, “Chotzas”, “shoemaker”, “bear”, “match-maker” and other traditional games. They have the chance to play like children again and get tipsy with tsikoudia, dancing and singing which are done boundlessly here. Since the last few summers, there is a traditional harvesting and threshing at Fourfouras and Meronas, which is worth watching, since it is perfectly organized by the local people.

## WHAT TO BUY BEFORE LEAVING

The area around Amari is mainly farming and stockbreeding and produces many local products of premium quality. A trip to Amari will satisfy the visitor who is in search for something unique. You can buy pure olive oil, wine, tsikoudia, local cheese products directly from the producer or the village shops. Cherries and morellos from Gerakari are quite well-known. If you hap-



pen to be there, look for standardized desserts, morello juice and a special morello drink at the village coffee shops. Cherries, apples and pears produced at Amari are really famous and it is worth buying some in the season when they grow. Edible olives produced in Ampadia are also well-known and they are a product with protected designation of origin (PDO). They are also available in standardized form. In the more mountainous areas, herbs are picked up. The thyme honey of Amari is of premium quality, since this place is ideal for apiculture. The wood sculpture workshop at Vizari, the pottery workshop at Kalogeros, the stone dressing workshop at Apostoloi and the buskin shop at Ano Meros are cores of folk art, where you can buy souvenirs. Housewives maintain the knitting tradition with the screw beg as a domestic activity.



## Useful telephone numbers

Municipality of Kourites	28330 22070
Municipality of Sivritos	28330 22802
Agia Fotini Health Centre	28333 40000
Amari Police Station	28330 22222
Psiloritis National Park	28340 31606
Agia Fotini Post Office	28330 22210
Pancretan Bank at Fourfouras	28330 20200
Agia Fotini Pharmacy	28330 22777
“Land of Psiloritis” Network	28340 31008
Mountaineering Association of Rethymno	28310 57766



### NEAR THE AREA

The south coasts of Crete offer an exit towards the sea for visitors of Amari. In the east, there is Kokkinos Pargos and Timpaki, while in the prefecture of Rethymno is Agia Galini, which offers delicious fish and marvelous beaches. North of the entrance of Arkadi, access to Mylopotamos and northern Crete is easy, while to arrive at Rethymno we follow the road to the Dam of Rivers.

