

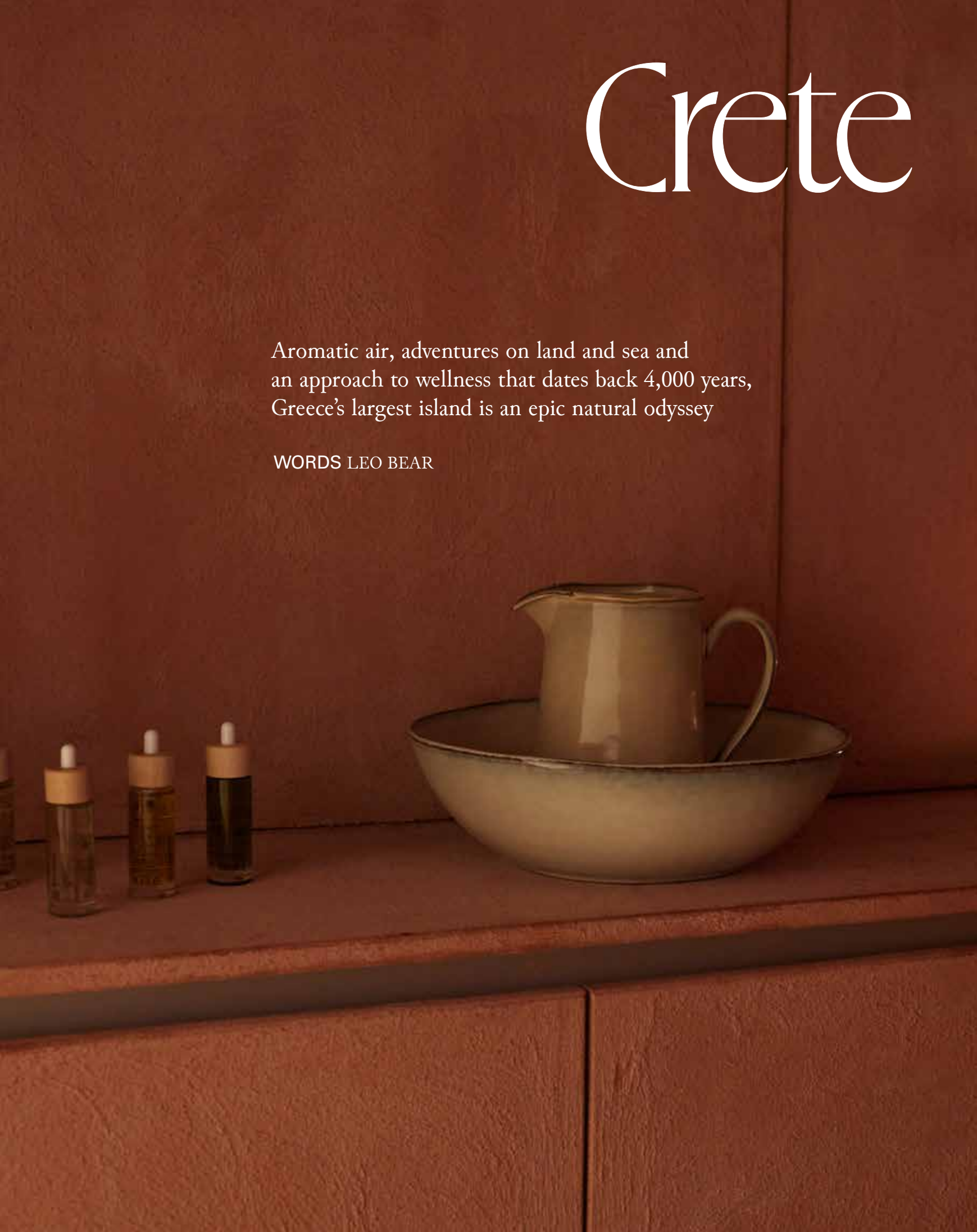
Wild



Crete

Aromatic air, adventures on land and sea and an approach to wellness that dates back 4,000 years, Greece's largest island is an epic natural odyssey

WORDS LEO BEAR





The size of a small country, Crete rewards travellers with endless opportunities to decompress in nature, all under the gentle embrace of its balmy Mediterranean climate

Cretans are proud, resilient people with a deep respect for the land. Natural beauty is abundant on the island and so too are the contradictions. Soft-sand beaches juxtaposed against vertiginous rugged mountains. Gently trickling rivers against thundering waterfalls. Narrow gorges against wide-open canyons. And with size comes freedom. It's easy to escape the crowds; to search out a remote empty beach where waves sparkle and crest; to find a hillside restaurant untouched by time; to immerse yourself in nature.

It's good for you too. The latest research shows that when we feel awe and wonder in nature, it shifts us into a more compassionate, empathetic, pro-social state of mind. Dr Paul Piff, Associate Professor of Psychological Science at the University of California Irvine, goes as far as to say that time spent outdoors in wild spaces is one of the most meaningful experiences humans can have. "A sense of natural awe can reduce fixation on day-to-day worries," says Piff, "and reorient people to life's bigger picture."

Perhaps the American scientist had been spending time in Crete's Lasithi province. Located in the unspoiled eastern realm of the island with Agios Nikolaos to the north, the Dikti mountains to the west and the palm forest of Vai towards the tip, the landscape surrounding Elounda Hills is about as wild and untouched as it gets in Europe.

"Embrace Crete's wild side and not only will you be awestruck, you'll tap into the true character of the island," says Christos Manousakis, founder of Crete Experience, one of the island's leading private hiking and touring companies. Operating since 2013, Manousakis knows every nook, cranny and gurgling spring the island has to offer. "I encourage my clients to abandon their cars and follow the island's ancient Minoan paths on foot," he says. "This way, they can let go of the modern world and start connecting with nature." From scaling the rugged peaks of the Dikti mountains (which ascend to 2,148 metres) to exploring the waterfalls at Sarakina gorge and the legendary cave of Zeus, nothing is off-limits for his patrons so long as they possess a sturdy pair of walking boots.

For something tamer, the Lasithi plateau with its seasonal greenery and vast emptiness is a popular choice for nature lovers but you needn't travel that far. The Katharo plateau, just 15 kilometres from Elounda Hills via the picturesque village of Kritsa, delivers a powerful jolt of tranquillity yet flies totally under the radar. The name 'Katharo' translates as 'clean' or 'pure' and here the air deserves to be inhaled deeply. An area of outstanding natural beauty where golden eagles and griffon vultures swoop, it's magnificent all year round but visit in the spring and you'll witness an orchestra of wildflowers bursting into life: cyclamen, rockroses, swaying poppies and crown daisies pepper the landscape. Moreover, the plateau's remote location lends a sense of timelessness. Save for the wind rustling the leaves and the gentle tinkle of goats' bells, there's little to disturb. So, take your time. Walk mindfully. Savour the stillness. Even better, slip off your shoes and tap into the natural energy of the planet. 'Grounding' or 'earthing' is the therapeutic technique of simply walking barefoot outdoors. It might sound prosaic but studies show that direct skin contact with the surface of the earth can alleviate stress, reduce inflammation, improve sleep and boost mood.

For the ultimate cushioning underfoot, point your compass in the direction of the forest of Kroustas (25 kilometres from Elounda Hills) where pine needles blanket the forest floor. Wandering the myriad trails in the shade of centuries-old cypress, oak and olive trees is sure to trump any mindfulness app you might consider downloading to your phone.

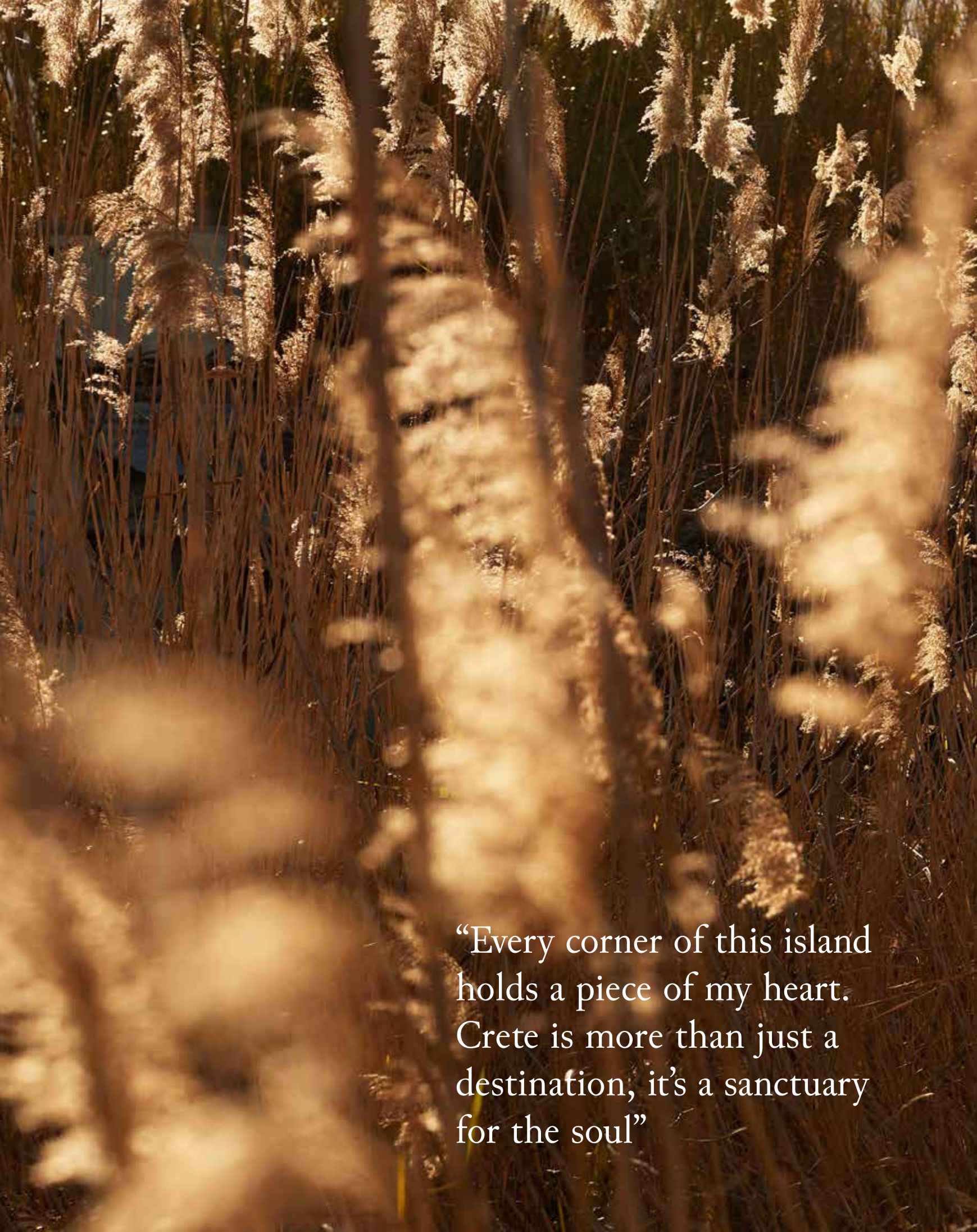
Be sure to plunge your feet into Lasithi's warm sands and crystalline waters too. Divers speak of waters so clear, visibility reaches up to 25 metres. As well as the kaleidoscope of marine life darting among the coastline's flourishing reefs and swaying seagrass beds, ancient sunken settlements lie in wait.

Immerse yourself in Crete's wild side – on land and sea – and the days will stretch out longer. They'll feel fuller. More vivid. And you'll feel better for it.

As custodians of this precious land, let us vow to preserve it.

Previous spread Crown daisies flowering in Crete; Bioaraoma's nature-inspired products
This page The White Mountains of Crete





“Every corner of this island holds a piece of my heart. Crete is more than just a destination, it’s a sanctuary for the soul”

NATURE



Previous spread Biodiversity in the Cretan hills
Left Wild grasses and reeds blowing in the wind
Above Manousos Padiaditis, founder of Bioaroma

Untamed Beauty

Wellness is in the air in Crete, literally. Aromatic herbs grow wild across the island and archaeological findings suggest the Minoans, an ancient civilisation that flourished during the Bronze Age, had a deep understanding of herbal remedies. Today, the Cretan herb Dittany, in particular, is prized for its medicinal properties (and is said to aid digestion and help heal wounds), while sage, oregano, lavender and rosemary have long been recognised for their calming therapeutic benefits.

Inland, where Lasithi’s scenery morphs into a patchwork of olive groves, vineyards and citrus orchards, local people hold onto ancient practices, blending herbs with ingredients such as olive oil and honey to soothe ailments the way their ancestors would have done.

Conserving this ancient wisdom is one of the cornerstones of Bioaroma, an Agios Nikolaos-based skincare brand founded in 2007. Blending modern science and century-old Cretan traditions, the company’s 100 per cent natural products are made using plants and herbs (more than 150 at the last count) grown on the family’s 100-acre estate.

“At Bioaroma, we believe in skincare that is good for the skin, the soul and the planet,” says founder Manousos Padiaditis. “Our commitment to organic certification ensures our products are free from harmful chemicals and pesticides, safeguarding the health of our customers and the environment. It’s a promise we hold dear.”

Asked to explain what is so special about Crete, Padiaditis’ eyes fill with pride. “Every corner of this island holds a piece of my heart. Crete is more than just a destination, it’s a sanctuary for the soul. From the rugged mountains to the crystal-clear waters, every inch exudes wisdom. It’s a place where you can reconnect with nature, immerse yourself in tradition and discover the true essence of Greek hospitality.”

With a perfumery, soap factory, seed press and essential oil distillery on site, a visit to Bioaroma’s HQ is a must during your stay.