Choosing Between Balos and Gramvousa or Dia Island for a Day at Sea

Spending a full day exploring the sea around Crete is one of the most memorable things you can do on the island. With so many routes to choose from, the decision often comes down to two popular options: the northwestern voyage to Balos Lagoon and Gramvousa, or the eastern trip to Dia Island. Each offers a different kind of experience, and the right choice depends on what you value most in a day on the water. This article compares both routes so you can decide which one suits your preferences.

What Each Route Offers

The trip to Balos Lagoon and Gramvousa is one of the most famous day excursions from Crete. Boats depart from Kissamos or Chania and head toward the rugged western coast. The first stop is usually Gramvousa, a small island with a Venetian fortress and a sandy beach. From there, the boat continues to Balos Lagoon, a shallow turquoise bay where the water meets white sand. The landscape is dramatic, with cliffs and wild terrain surrounding the lagoon.

Dia Island, on the other hand, lies just north of Heraklion. It is a protected nature reserve, and only a limited number of visitors are allowed each day. The boat trip is shorter, and the focus is on swimming, snorkeling, and relaxing in a quiet environment. The waters around Dia are known for their clarity, and the island itself is mostly untouched, with no beaches developed for tourism. You anchor off the coast and swim to shore or spend time on the boat.

Both routes are full-day trips, but they differ in travel time, scenery, and activities. Understanding these differences helps you match the trip to your mood and expectations.

Balos and Gramvousa: A Day of Grand Landscapes

The journey to Balos and Gramvousa takes you to one of the most photographed spots in Crete. The lagoon itself is the main draw, with its shallow, warm water and fine sand. The water changes color depending on the light, shifting from bright turquoise to deeper blue. You typically have a couple of hours at Balos to swim, walk along the sand, and take in the view. The beach is not organized, so you need to bring your own supplies, including food, water, and sun protection.



Gramvousa adds a historical element to the trip. The island has a Venetian fortress on its hilltop, and many visitors climb up for panoramic views. The beach at Gramvousa is also pleasant, though it can get crowded when several boats arrive at once. The water is clear and good for snorkeling, and water shoes are useful because the seabed near the shore can be rocky.

One thing to keep in mind is the wind. The northwestern coast of Crete can be exposed, and the sea can become choppy. If you are prone to seasickness, this route may be less comfortable, especially on the way back in the afternoon when the wind often picks up. The boat ride itself is part of the experience, with views of the coastline and the open sea, but it can be long, sometimes two hours or more each way.

For those who love big landscapes, untouched beaches, and a touch of history, this route is hard to beat. It feels like an adventure, and the memory of floating in the turquoise water of Balos stays with you.

Dia Island: Quiet Waters and Underwater Life

Dia Island appeals to a different kind of traveler. The trip is calmer and more focused on the sea itself. Because the island is a protected reserve, the number of visitors is limited, so you never feel crowded. The boats anchor in sheltered coves, and you can swim in clear, calm water. Snorkeling is excellent here, with rocky seabeds and patches of seagrass that attract fish. If you enjoy observing marine life without the rush, Dia delivers.

The boat ride from Heraklion is shorter, usually around an hour. This means more time in the water and less time traveling. Many trips include a lunch stop on board or at a small taverna on the island, depending on the tour. The atmosphere is relaxed, and the focus is on enjoying the day at a leisurely pace.

Dia is also a good option if you want to avoid the crowds that sometimes gather at Balos and Gramvousa. The experience feels more exclusive, and the natural setting is pristine. There are no sandy beaches in the traditional sense, so you swim from the boat or from small pebble coves. Water shoes are a good idea here too, as the shoreline can be rough.

The main limitation of Dia is that there is less to see above the water. The island is dry and rocky, with no villages or historical sites to explore. The beauty is in the sea and the quiet. If you prefer a day of swimming and sunbathing without a lot of walking or sightseeing, Dia is a great match.



When to Choose Each Option

Your choice really comes down to what kind of day you want. If you are drawn to iconic landscapes and do not mind a longer boat ride, Balos and Gramvousa offer a more varied experience. You get the lagoon, the fortress, and the open sea all in one trip. It is a classic excursion for a reason, and it appeals to travelers who want to see something unforgettable.

If your priority is swimming, snorkeling, and peace, Dia Island is the better pick. The water is often calmer, the crowds are smaller, and the whole pace is slower. It is especially good for families with children, for anyone who gets seasick easily, or for those who simply want to float in clear water without a packed itinerary.

Another factor is your departure point. If you are staying in or near Chania, the Balos and Gramvousa route is more convenient. If you are based in Heraklion or the northern coast east of it, Dia is the natural choice. Each route makes the most sense for the area it serves.

For travelers who want help comparing all the options and finding a trip that fits their preferences, EuroAquaTours offers a useful guide to Crete cruises and boat tours by departure area, route, and travel style. It is a good starting point if you are still deciding which day at sea is right for you.

Practical Tips for Either Trip

No matter which route you choose, a few things will make the day better. Sun protection is essential. The sun over the sea is strong, and you are exposed for hours. Bring a high-SPF sunscreen, a hat, and sunglasses. Reapply after swimming.

Water shoes are a good investment. Beaches and coves in Crete are often pebbly or rocky, and water shoes let you walk comfortably in and out of the water. They also protect your feet from sea urchins in rocky areas.

Bring your own water and snacks, especially if you are going to Balos and Gramvousa, where facilities are limited. On Dia trips, food may be provided, but it is always good to have extra water. A dry bag is useful for keeping your things safe from spray on the boat.



Finally, check the weather forecast. Wind can affect both routes, but it is more of a factor on the northwestern trip. If the wind is strong, the boat may not sail to Balos at all, or the crossing may be uncomfortable. Flexibility with your plans helps.

A Final Comparison

To summarize the main differences: Balos and Gramvousa offer dramatic scenery, a mix of beach and history, and a longer journey. Dia Island offers calm waters, excellent snorkeling, and a more relaxed pace. Both are full-day trips that give you a real escape from the busy resort areas.

The best choice depends on your personal taste. Think about whether you want to explore a famous lagoon or spend the day swimming in a quiet reserve. Either way, you will come back with a strong sense of the Cretan sea. If you are still unsure, browsing the route descriptions on EuroAquaTours can help you see what each trip involves and make a more informed decision.