

Beneath the MATALA MOON

Explore the small Cretan village that became the backdrop to Joni Mitchell's era-defining record, *Blue*

Words: STEPH PHILLIPS

By early 1970, singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell was in need of a getaway. She had just ended her relationship with musician Graham Nash and the couple's friends had mostly taken Nash's side. Mitchell was left depressed and struggled to envision her future after such loss. With the help of her friend Penelope, Mitchell devised a plan to get over her break-up – a trip around Greece.

When Joni and Penelope arrived in Athens, they attracted attention. Cries of 'Sheepy, sheepy, Matala, Matala' from the locals followed the pair wherever they went. When Mitchell asked what the phrase meant, she was told it translated to 'Hippy, hippy, go to Matala.' Although the shouts were delivered

'The locals helped Mitchell stumble across a community that would prove to be her saviour'

in a derogatory way, the locals helped Mitchell stumble across a community that would prove to be her saviour.

In the 1970s, Matala was a small fishing village on the south coast of Crete – a 63km drive from the port city of Heraklion. The village is blessed with beautiful beaches, strong sea breezes, and an intricate cliff-side cave system of unknown origin, but thought



to be originally Roman or Christian tombs. The area had long been a haven for hippies who made their homes in the caves, which were uncomfortable, but free.

Mitchell spent nights drinking at the Mermaid Café where she met her next lover – a tempestuous American chef who worked there. He was introduced to Joni when an explosion at the café blew him through the front door. As Mitchell said in a 2016 interview with journalist Marc Myers, 'That's how Cary [Raditz] entered my life – ka-boom!'

Joni spent her time on the island hiking, drinking the strong Turkish liquor raki at the Mermaid and writing songs on her dulcimer. And she eventually moved into Cary's cave. Matala is forever etched into musical history.



STAY IN... GREECE

Fragiskos Hotel is
50m from the sea.

[easyJet.com/
holidays](https://www.easyjet.com/holidays)



PHOTOGRAPHY: WAXXX



Clockwise from above: Joni Mitchell and her dulcimer with a young friend in Matala, Crete; the seaside village today; Mitchell in 1970



In the song, *Carey*, Mitchell's lover is captured as the 'mean old daddy' who she's with while hearing people 'playin' that scratchy rock and roll/ Beneath the Matala Moon.'

Raditz helped her move on from Nash, but she longed for home. The rough life sleeping in an open cave and washing her hair in the sea had grown tiring and Mitchell returned to California and her life as an artist.

Today, Matala is no longer the bohemian village of Mitchell's *Blue*. It is a thriving tourist destination with an annual beach festival, though the hippies have left the caves, which are now a protected site. With its enviable coastlines, stunning views and long summer nights, Matala still possesses the natural beauty that coaxed Mitchell to write all those years ago.

For more, read Travelling: On the Path of Joni Mitchell by Ann Powers. Steph Phillips is the lead singer of the feminist punk band Big Joanie. bigjoanie.com