

Greece lightning

No longer a one-night stand
enroute to the Greek isles,
Athens has established itself
as a thriving metropolis where
antiquity meets street cool





I admit it, deciding to visit Athens in winter prompted raised eyebrows and glances of surprise from all I told. The confession that I failed to drag my lazy carcass up to the legendary Acropolis gained audible gasps and tutts of disgust. But while allegedly out-of-season destinations may appear unusual, the unorthodox is often where the real holiday experiences can be found.

In the interest of balance, it's probably worth noting that while my first explanation redeems: January is when the locals come out to play, when prices are slashed in shops and on accommodation, the intense summer heat doesn't wear you down and less tourists equals no queues. The second may not appear as adequate: Ouzo. Those who have drunk this potent, cloudy and locally produced liquid will empathise. After falling prey to the Greek drink of choice I was not fit for public mingling or indeed a strenuous climb, wonder of the world or not.

My affair with the aniseed-flavoured spirit began at the quaint liquor store Brettos; lured in by the rainbow display of bottles coating its walls and hypnotised by the barrels filled with the strong stuff...

My cockles well and truly warmed, and feeling more Greek by the minute, I decided to take to the city like a local. Slow-paced, calm and relaxed. I didn't have the willpower to climb the 500ft to the ancient city's centre point, the Acropolis. Instead I decided to discover the city surrounding the landmark.

What I uncovered was not just a city rich in history, but also one soaked in chic modesty. A

city more thriving economically than originally thought – a 2008 Union Bank of Switzerland study ranked Athens as the 32nd richest city.

Before the 2004 Olympics, the modern city of Athens was in a greater state of disarray than its ancestral ruins. When locals, up in arms at the council for neglecting the area, heard their city was chosen to host the Games they sighed with fear. They feared the overpriced budgets that Athens couldn't afford and they feared their own subsequent poverty.

However what they received was action, with the government forced to clean up their act, and the city. Maintenance jobs that the nonchalant Greeks would normally have taken years to complete were sped up and soon the city was transformed into a thriving, tourist-friendly metropolis. Once cited as a "city of studies" its main source of income now comes from the shipping and tourism sector. ▶



Top Neo-classical Parliament Building dominates Syntagma Square
Left Famous changing of the guards

While Theseus may have founded Athens, the Olympics delivered a cosmopolitan capital that I set out to explore like an over enthusiastic toddler. Asking questions and reaching out to touch anything within my reach.

THE OLD

I began my city tour, courtesy of Hotel Grande Bretagne, at the heart of modern Athens, Syntagma Square. Dominating the plaza is its Parliament Building. Built in 1840 this colossal example of neo-classical architecture was originally the Royal Palace, after liberation from the Ottoman German King. Today the square is a place where football fans gather to watch the game and snazzy elderly folk walk their dogs.

At the core of the city I delicately waded through the hordes of Athenians on their way to work and play. With a soundtrack of chortling cars and zooming Vespas I walked cracked pathways toward Plaka, the charismatic old town.

One of the oldest in the city, Plaka has been continuously inhabited for more than 5,000 years. You can spend days meandering through its contorted cobbled alleyways, exploring decade-old music shops where cassettes are still sold, bringing back fond childhood memories. In fact everything about this charmingly decrepit quarter transports you to the past. Only the lick of juvenile graffiti slathered across most of its buildings brings you back to the 21st century.

For some reason Plaka is littered with mirror shops, perhaps a cunning tactic so the Acropolis is always in full view. The biggest draw here is its

flea market. You can get literally everything from a Chris Eubank quise cane to a battery, army gear and unique artistry. Hidden treasures are revealed at every corner.

Northwest of Plaka lies Monastiraki, meaning “little monastery” here you will find more trinket shops and markets. Flooded with a sea of tourists haggling over beads and tasselled slippers it’s best to get there early. Follow the length of the markets and you will find it bordered by sizzling kebab stalls and authentic restaurants.

Despite treading modern asphalt roads I still stumbled across ancient ruins of the Greek agora (old market area). The ruins sit like the aftermath of a robbery in front of the obligatory Irish pub, James Joyce. Philosopher’s Socrates, Plato and Aristotle once roamed the paved slabs of this ancient market place.

To the east of the original agora and connected by a paved street, lies the Roman forum. Constructed with donations from Julius Caesar and Augustus, it is flanked by the monumental gate of Athena Archegetis. The gate is a prominent ruin among remnants of columns cut down and used to build a protective wall around the Acropolis.

Nearby stands a quaint mosque. One of only four in the city it’s a reminder of the Byzantine period and Turkish occupation.

Down the road from the Roman agora proudly stands the Arch of Hadrian, built in honour of the benefactor emperor. An inscription on the side of the arch facing the new city reads “This is the city of Hadrian and not Theseus.” ▶

WINTER IN ATHENS

While you may not need your sunscreen and snorkel during winter in Athens, you will require stamina. January brings great shopping sales in this mini couture haven and lots of activities. A short drive out of the city centre opens up a range of adrenaline-pumping opportunities such as hiking, mountain-climbing, white-water rafting, kayaking, horseback-riding, biking, and trekking through gorges. Athens truly comes alive during the winter months. While snow in the city centre is rare, snow-capped mountains make it ideal for skiing.



Left The Flea Market in Monastiraki
Above Some of the charismatic ruins at the Acropolis

WORDS ALEXANDRIA GOUVEIA IMAGES PHOTOLIBRARY AND ALAMY



SLEEP

HOTEL GRANDE BRETAGNE

TEL: +30 210 333 0000,

www.grandebretagne.gr

A hotel so stunning and popular it could turn away Madonna without repercussions. Boasting more than 130 years of hospitality excellence, the hotel has joined an elite list of the world's most prestigious properties as part of the Luxury Collection. First-class services include the Luxury Collection Luggage Liaison in which the guests can arrange to have their baggage picked up from the airport and delivered straight to their door. With the help of the concierge guests can expect tailor-made indigenous experiences. Located in the heart of

Athens and lording mesmerising views of the Acropolis the hotel is a modern landmark in the city.



THE NEW

Although I failed to reach the Acropolis and the three temples that have withheld two-and-a-half millennia of turbulence, I did the next best thing and visited its new museum, aptly titled the New Acropolis Museum. Boasting Swiss and Greek architecture and contemporary designs it purposely contrasts the obvious beauty of the ancient monuments. The three-storey edifice was built to hold all of the artefacts from the original Acropolis museum and house reclaimed relics most notably from Lord Elgin, English ambassador to Constantinople. He stole the greatest parts of the monument's sculptural decoration and sold them to the British Museum.

THE SCENE

One of the most revered gods of ancient Greece was Dionysus, the god of wine and inspirer of

madness. As such the Greeks feel it's almost their duty to take partying seriously. A kaleidoscope of bars and cafes line the city's delightfully ageing districts - Psyrri, Kolonaki and Gazi - where the buzz of the Greek islands is recreated. Yet unlike the party isles the scensters are a mixed bag of young and old. Coffee lovers sip cold frappes, while the unruly tackle the local spirits. Live music spills out of the bouzoukias (clubs) pumping new life into the historical streets.

For the Jimmy Choo totting crowd head to the fashionable Psyrri and for a spot of celebrity hunting try Kolonaki Square - it's where the famous and beautiful go to be ostentatious.

If you can only make it to one bar during your visit be sure to make it the Roof Garden at Hotel Grande Bretagne where panoramic views of the city's Acropolis and Kallimarmaro stadium are so romantic they could encourage strangers to fall in love. And as if that wasn't alluring enough the Mediterranean cuisine is as hearty as it is flavoursome.

THE LEGEND

Embroided in drama, tragedy and democracy before most Mediterranean nations had even sipped on their first espresso, Athens possesses an unrivalled legacy combining the ultimate ingredients of history, hedonism and supreme beauty. ■

GETTING THERE ↓

Qatar Airways flies to Athens xxx times a week

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Top Athens' famous cityscape Above and right The New Acropolis Museum

