

By Richard Varr

Athens breathes history thanks to reminders at nearly every street corner. From almost any vantage point, views of the Doric- and Ionic-columned temples of the hilltop Acropolis are hard to miss, especially when illuminated at night. Greek god figurines cram store shelves alongside hand-painted Greek vases, Byzantine-style icons and Spartan helmet souvenirs. For visitors to this capital city, considered the cradle of Western civilization, it doesn't take long before three things become apparent: ruins, artifacts and the colorful trappings of traditional Greek culture.

While the first two are set in stone, so to speak, at the many archaeological sites and museums, what makes a visit even more memorable is the immersive cultural environment. From restaurants with classic Greek cuisine, for example, waft aromas of grilled souvlaki. One hears the unmistakable plucking sounds of the eight-stringed bouzouki in background music. Packages of Kalamata olives, spices for flaky *tiropitas* (triangular pastries) and *keftedes* (meatballs), and boxes of honey-soaked baklava hang from racks in shops along busy pedestrian streets.

Although the city's archaeological sites with their stone columns and chipped ruins continue to gradually crumble from industrial pollution and weather, the Greeks have saved countless precious artifacts that offer vivid glimpses of ancient civilizations, remnants showcased in several world-class museums. Dominating the display cases are painted Greek vases—some so well preserved that it's hard to believe they're 3,000-plus years old. The National Archaeological Museum, Greece's largest museum, has artifacts dating back to the 7th millenni-

PORT OF THE MONTH

ATHENS

um B.C. The Acropolis Museum, opened in 2009 and an active archaeological site, boasts an outstanding collection of youthful male and female statues known as, respectively, *kouroi* and *korai*. And the Ancient Agora's Stoa of Attalos is home to key finds from antiquity.

Cruise travelers embark their ships at Piraeus—a port since ancient times—located about six miles southwest of the city. Also serving cargo vessels and daily ferries to the Aegean islands and other destinations, the port is the largest in Greece and one of the Mediterranean's busiest, serving upwards of one million cruise ship passengers and 20 million total passengers each year. Port statistics show 643 cruise ship calls in 2019. Each terminal has tourist bus parking for shore excursions organized by the cruise lines or local tour operators. Tour choices range from Athens highlights to farther-afield sites such as the seaside Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion and Temple of Apollo at ancient Delphi, and places on the Peloponnese peninsula. The most popular option is a city tour that heads straight to Athens' signature tourist attraction, the Acropolis, with stops at museums and in the Plaka, or Old Town.

In fact, no trip to Greece would be complete without a stop to see the Acropolis' aging temples. The main structures were built during the Classical period in the 5th century B.C., considered the pinnacle of ancient Greek civilization, a time when Plato, Socrates and other philosophers walked Athens' streets.

"The meaning of Acropolis comes from *akro*, which means high, and *polis*, which means city," explains tour guide Koula Vasiliki. "The ruins were within a religious area for worship of the goddess Athena. The Greeks used to gather with celebrations during summer holidays with games for the gods."

Standing on the highest point of the Acropolis, the Parthenon, built between 447 and 438 B.C., is Greece's greatest Doric temple and a monument to its place in history as one of the finest temples in the ancient world.

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GATEWAY TO ANCIENT GREECE AND THE AEGEAN ISLANDS



Photos by Y. Skoulas/Greek National Tourism Organization



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Must-see sights in Athens include the Parliament building in Syntagma Square (shown here with Lycabettus Hill) and Temple of Olympian Zeus.

The Erechtheion, distinguished by its Porch of the Caryatids, is one of the most memorable sights at the Acropolis. The statues are replicas.

Reaching the flattened hilltop involves a moderate hike. Once at the top, beware of uneven and worn rocky pathways that have become slippery even in dry conditions. Visitors first walk through the Roman-era Beule Gate and then uphill again to the Propylaea, a grand entrance adjacent to the small and well-preserved Temple of Athena Nike, built as a tribute to the defeat of Persian invaders. Dominating the plateau is the colossal Parthenon, one of the world's greatest temples, which once housed a 40-foot-high chryselephantine (gold and ivory) statue of the goddess Athena, the city's namesake. No trace of the statue remains today, but a smaller Roman-era version is in the National Archaeological Museum.

Ruins of the smaller Erechtheion stand on the supposed site where the gods Poseidon and Athena battled for naming rights to the city. The highlight is the Porch of the Caryatids with six figures of maidens as supporting columns. All the statues are replicas, with the originals in the Acropolis Museum.

Also key to Athens' Classical period was the Ancient Agora, now mostly ruins. This complex of temples and civic buildings, easily visited on foot, was a center for business,

politics and government activities. Highlights include the rounded Tholos, where Athens' City Council met, and the hilltop Temple of Hephaistos, the Agora's best-preserved structure. The reconstructed Stoa of Attalos, an



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Tourists through the Plaka, Athens' atmospheric Old Town district filled with tavernas and souvenir shops.

elongated building lined with Roman and Greek statues, now serves as a museum with many of the site's remarkably preserved artifacts—burial urns, voting chips and even a sophisticated water clock used for timing

talkative politicians.

The Plaka and adjacent Monastiraki neighborhood make up Athens' pulsing historic center, where views of the Erechtheion—especially striking when bathed in floodlights at night—dominate the cityscape. Along the narrow streets and city squares is a sprinkling of Byzantine churches—small chapels emblazoned with saintly icons in stone interiors. Dating back to the 12th century A.D., Panagia Gorgoepikoos is dwarfed next to the Mitropolis, the marble-walled, 19th-century Cathedral, which is the official church of the Bishop of Athens. The centerpiece of a small square along the grand pedestrian Ermou Street is the 11th-century Kapnikarea Church, dedicated to the saint Empress Irene, who ruled Byzantium at the turn of the 9th century. A short walk down Ermou leads to Monastiraki Square and the domed, 10th-century Pantanassa Church.

The 11th-century Nikolaos Ragkavas is another popular church in the Plaka, with nearby streets leading up to the twisting alleyways of the whitewashed Anafiotika neighborhood just below the steep slopes of the Acropolis. This cozy district,

with the feel of a Cycladic village, was settled in the 19th century by Peloponnesian War refugees from the island of Anafi, just east of Santorini.

Monastiraki sits just northwest of the Old Town, its streets skirting clusters of both ancient Greek and Roman ruins, including the Roman Agora with the remarkably well-preserved 1st-century B.C. Tower of the Winds. The octagonal, 40-foot-high marble structure was built as a water clock and weather vane with carved caricature reliefs representing winds blowing in from different directions. Nearby, stately Corinthian columns remain from Roman Emperor Hadrian's Library, a 2nd-century A.D. complex.

Come lunch- or dinnertime, I head to the so-called "Souvlaki Row" string of restaurants leading off Monastiraki Square. Outdoor tables with umbrellas and awnings line the narrow, courtyard-like street as diners flock for the skewers of grilled chicken, pork, lamb and beef. Gyros sandwiches stuffed with onions, tomatoes, tzatziki sauce and french fries are cheap, costing \$3 or \$4 and often enough for two meals. My favorite restaurant on Souvlaki Row is O Thanasis, where my moussaka portion crowded the plate along with a fresh tomato-and-cucumber salad dressed with olive oil, onion slivers and spices.

From the square, an overhead sign leads the way to Athens' lively flea market, a shopper's dream. I walk the narrow street and peer into shop after shop with figurines of Greek gods, philosophers, centaurs and serpent-tailed Medusas. Icons line the walls above the racks of souvenir Achilles helmets. Hand-painted vases are big business as many family-owned businesses take pride in their replicas of museum artifacts depicting such mythological tales as Homer's poems *Iliad* and *Odyssey* or Athena's and Poseidon's quest to be the city's namesake.

A music store sells six- and eight-string bouzoukis, the lute-like instrument key to the distinctive sound of Greek folk music. Another shop sells icons on silk. ("We put them on the back of doors, the top of the bed, in the car or anywhere in the house," says the

store owner.) Perhaps my most unusual find was a chess set with Greek gods and a round board. ("This is an ancient Greek game played like chess, but you have to think of it in circles, which makes it more difficult. The best players in the world practice with this," says the saleswoman.) How to play it? Instructions are included.

On a nearby street rimming the grounds of the Ancient Agora, vendors clutter tabletops with yet more goddess statues, jewelry, leather handbags, crosses, watches, old coins and

icons. One shows me what he claims is a 115-year-old Zeus sculpture (priced at 120 euros), while another wants 10 euros for a small Athena figure alongside a most unusual, hand-sized metal fly. Curving metal olive branches have become a popular jewelry choice with women as hair decorations, which I find alongside bracelets with eye designs. "It protects you from bad energy," says the vendor selling the bracelets. "If someone thinks bad things about you, it reflects it back."

Among ancient Greece's greatest struc-

Many shops are stocked with figurines alluding to Greece's Classical period and hand-painted vases such as those at Workshop Electra Raikos.



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CRUISING THE AEGEAN LIKE A GREEK



Celestyal Cruises

Celestyal Cruises' two ships sail to the Greek Islands and elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

The only Greek-based cruise line, Celestyal Cruises offers a number of Greek Islands itineraries from the Port of Piraeus on two medium-sized ships—the 966-passenger *Celestyal Crystal* and 1,450-passenger *Celestyal Olympia*. "It's a family-like ship, so the crew and passengers become very close," says Crystal Captain Nikolaos Vasileiou.

Celestyal also takes pride in offering passengers what it calls true cultural immersion, which I certainly experienced last fall aboard the *Crystal* on Celestyal's new "Eclectic Aegean" itinerary. Shouts of "Opa!" echo through the main lounges during Greek dance lessons, onboard lectures unveil 5,000 years of Greek history before arrival in ports of call and cheese-filled *tiropitas* are featured during Greek cooking lessons. "Guests have the opportunity to taste, and after that we have a lecture on using olive oil instead of butter," says Assistant

Cruise Director Tereza Alerizou. "People get involved—they smile and laugh, enjoy and eat."

In the Aegean, Celestyal offers seven-night sailings and quick-paced, three- and four-night itineraries of the Greek Islands, including Mykonos, Santorini, Crete, Rhodes, Patmos and Milos. The cruise line branched out last fall with new seven-night "Eclectic" itineraries that include Istanbul; Volos, Greece, for excursions to the mountaintop monasteries of Meteora; Canakkale, Turkey, for excursions to Troy and Gallipoli; and the Greek islands of Crete, Santorini and Mykonos. Also new are seven-night "Three Continents" cruises calling at Alexandria and Port Said (Cairo), Egypt; Ashdod, Israel; Kusadasi (for Ephesus), Turkey; Limassol, Cyprus; and the Greek island of Rhodes.

For more information on Celestyal Cruises, log on to www.celestyalcruises.com/en/cruises.

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KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Cruise Lines That Call: AIDA, Azamara, Celebrity, Celestyal, Costa, Crystal, Cunard, Hapag Lloyd, Holland America, Marella, MSC, Norwegian, Oceania, P&O, Princess, Pullmantur, Regent Seven Seas, Royal Caribbean, Seabourn, SeaDream, Silversea, Star Clippers, TUI, Viking and Voyages to Antiquity.

Port Passenger Services: Cruise terminals have lockers, cafes, free Wi-Fi, duty-free shops, currency exchange booths, taxi and limousine services, nearby metro and public bus access, and free transport buses between terminals.

Cruise ships dock at three terminals with a total of 11 berths, including those able to handle the largest new-generation megaliners. Terminal A (Miaoulis), the main terminal, is in walking distance of the Piraeus city center and the metro station with trains to central Athens and the airport. Terminal B (Themistocles) sits at the port's edge and is adjacent to Terminal C (Alkimos).



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At Monastiraki Square, one of the busiest spots in Athens, sits Pantanassa Church.

Location: Athens is situated on a peninsula jutting out into the Aegean Sea in southern Greece.

Population: 665,000 within the city proper and 3.75 million in the metropolitan area.

Language: Greek, but English is widely spoken in tourist areas.

Currency: Euro.

Weather: Athens enjoys a relatively mild Mediterranean climate with average winter temperatures in the 40s and 50s Fahrenheit and warm summers reaching into the 90s. The hottest months are July and August; it feels especially scorching when visiting the Acropolis, where there's little or no shade.

Sightseeing Tip: Save money with the 30-euro Combination Ticket to the Acropolis and other historic sites (about \$34) during the summer months. Normal summer admission to the Acropolis alone is 20 euros, but the Combination Ticket also includes entry to the Ancient Agora, Hadrian's Library, Roman Agora, the cemetery and museum at Kerameikos, and the Olympieon with the ruins of the colossal Temple of Olympian Zeus. Winter admission rates are half of summer rates, but not for the Combination Ticket.

Tourist Information: Athens' Tourist Information Center is located just south of the Acropolis, adjacent to the Acropolis Museum. (www.thisisathens.org). For information on other parts of Greece, log on to the Greek National Tourism Organization's website, www.visitgreece.gr.

tures, the Temple of Olympian Zeus was the largest, although it was actually completed by the Romans more than 600 years after construction started in the 6th century B.C. The temple, with only 15 of the original 104 Pentelic marble Corinthian columns remaining today, once housed both a statue of Zeus and Roman Emperor Hadrian, who commissioned its rebuilding. The emperor also commissioned the building of his namesake Hadrian's Arch, just opposite the temple, in 131 A.D. to mark the boundary of ancient Greek Athens from the New City of Hadrian. Today, Corinthian columns top the well-preserved arch that, like many of Athens' venerable structures, reflects a golden glow in the waning sunlight.

From the arch, I cross traffic-choked Andrea Syngrou Avenue to enter the Old City once more, walking just a block or so to Lysikrates Square. The centerpiece of a small plaza of ruins, the round Lysikrates Monument with its Corinthian columns was built in 334 A.D. as a tribute to the sponsor of a group of actors performing at the Acropolis' Theatre of Dionysus. The area around the square now bustles with outdoor restaurants and shops, including Workshop Electra Raikos, a storefront business selling both icons and hand-painted vases of mostly museum replicas.

"Vases with decorative artworks were used for everyday living in ancient Greece, for storing water, olive oil and wine," explains store owner Mikas Raikos, who shows me a newspaper article about his son, who paints many of the replicas. He then reveals a photo of a museum vase that was copied and now is on his store shelf. "This one is from Troy with Achilles, Hector and Paris," he explains. "Every piece has a different history."

Just outside Old Town, Syntagma Square is central Athens' chief transportation hub for catching hop-on, hop-off buses and both the Metro and buses to Athens' Eleftherios Venizelos International Airport and the Port of Piraeus. Adjacent to Greece's Parliament building, it's a popular spot for protests and demonstrations. Just below the front walls of Parliament sits the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, with the Changing of the Guards ceremony on Sunday mornings featuring the slow-stepping Evzone guards in their traditional pleated kilt uniforms.

The majesty of the Acropolis, as seen from the Ancient Agora, never fails to awe visitors.



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The elite Evzone guards create a spectacle at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

While Athens is usually the hands-down day-trip destination for cruise ship passengers, Piraeus bustles with its own open-air restaurants, a food market and a flea market amidst neoclassical architecture. Piraeus' Archeological Museum includes 4th- and 6th-century B.C. bronze statues of Athena, Artemis and Apollo pulled from surrounding waters in 1959. Adjacent to the museum is the Hellenistic-period Theater of Zea with its well-preserved orchestra area from the 2nd-century B.C. With models of ships, maps and uniforms, the Hellenic Maritime Museum traces the port's ancient history through World War II.

For those with extra time to spend before or after a cruise, ferries and hydrofoils depart from the Port of Piraeus to more than 20 Greek islands, some close enough for an overnight stay or even a day trip. For example, it's a half-hour to Aegina, where the 5th-century hilltop Temple of Aphaia is one of the best-preserved Doric temples in all of Greece. An hour-and-a-half away is Hydra, unique because it has banned motorized traffic, leaving visitors to explore by foot, donkey or water taxi.

First-time visitors with just a day to spare most likely will spend it in the heart of Athens, where enriching lessons in Greek history and culture await. Lucky are those for whom Athens is a turnaround port—just think of all the pre- and post-cruise options. **CT**