



athens **The classics never go out of style, but the Greek capital also embraces unapologetically modern art and architecture, buzzing bars and design-driven hotels. Rachel Howard joins the good timers.**

For every visitor to Athens since antiquity, the main attraction has been the Parthenon, the city's centrepiece. Mark Twain saw it, by moonlight, as pink loaf sugar. Evelyn Waugh compared it to Stilton cheese dunked in port, while Virginia Woolf declared (in *Jacob's Room*) that it "appears... likely to outlast the entire world".

The first archaeological site in the world to charge for entry, the Parthenon is still worth every penny. It will make even more of an impact when the scaffolding comes down later this year, after a painstaking restoration project that began in 1975. It's a sweaty hike up marble steps smoothed by centuries of sightseers. Stray dogs nap among the columns, oblivious to the constant whirl of cameras. It's hard to believe that sheep grazed here in Lord Byron's day. Huddled below the Acropolis, the tiled roofs of 19th-century Plaka are hemmed in by a tangle of TV aerials. The concrete skyline stretches as far as the sea. As travel writer Christopher Wordsworth noted wryly back in 1836, "The least ruined objects here, are some of the Ruins themselves."

Yet modern Athens has more to offer than ancient glories. After a fast-track spruce-up for the 2004 Olympics, the city has developed a taste for contemporary art

and architecture. The annual Athens Epidaurus Festival has broken out of its classical confines to embrace world music, directional theatre and contemporary dance in a dozen venues from ancient amphitheatres to disused factories. The Municipal Gallery is taking over an old silk factory and the Greek Film Archive has moved into new premises in the upwardly mobile neighbourhood of Metaxourgio. The National Theatre (with its glorious ceiling paintings) and the Byzantine and Christian Museum (with an uncharacteristically irreverent exhibition of Andy Warhol's *Icons*) both reopened recently after extensive renovations.

None of these projects was as hotly anticipated as the €130m new Acropolis Museum, which finally

opened last summer after 33 years of false starts and law suits. Erecting an unapologetically modern monument just 300m from the most influential building in Western civilisation was always going to be controversial. "You have to be both very arrogant and very humble," says the architect, Bernard Tschumi, who also designed Paris' Parc de la Villette.

Humility is not the most obvious feature of Tschumi's colossal glass, concrete and marble structure. Inside, however, the sober galleries allow the antiquities to sing. All 4,000 artefacts were found on or around the Acropolis; many of them have never been exhibited before.

Giddy glass floors reveal an ancient settlement unearthed during construction, which will open to the public next year. A ramp leads to the soaring Archaic Gallery, where statues are artfully arranged among giant columns – a kore smiles enigmatically at a buff kouros, and a sinewy hunting dog pounces on its prey.

The top-floor gallery – a glass box aligned with the temple overhead –

contains the pièce de résistance: the 160m Parthenon frieze. Crude plaster casts stand in for the sections hacked off by arrangement of Lord Elgin between 1801 and 1805 and sold to the British Museum in 1816. The effect is like botched plastic surgery – an unsubtle but effective ruse to reignite the decades-old debate over the repatriation of the marbles.

Equally contentious is the Greek government's decision to demolish two formerly listed buildings to improve the view from the museum's restaurant. One belongs to the reclusive composer Vangelis. The other is an art deco masterpiece. Forty-eight thousand people have signed a petition to save the buildings on Dionysiou Areopagitou, the boulevard below the Acropolis that was pedestrianised in 2002 as part of an ambitious project to link the city's ancient landmarks with a 10-mile promenade.

"All the architects on this street respected the scale of the monuments and each other's works. In Athens, it's very rare to get so many beautiful buildings side by side," says resident Aristos Doxiadis. Pending an appeal, the owners have staged an architectural competition to reimagine the back of the buildings and pledged to implement the winning design if their homes get a

Above: the entrance of the new Acropolis Museum. Below: Scala Vinoteca attracts a glossy crowd.





reprieve. It's a magnanimous gesture, given that the museum's own backside could do with a makeover itself.

Although much of Athens is self-consciously modern, the classics never go out of style. Shabby Theklas Street (where Lord Byron fell for "The Maid of Athens", 12-year-old Teresa Makri) is home to Pantelis Melissinos, whose leather sandals are named after his celebrity clients – Jackie O, John Lennon, and Prince (the Prince of Spain, not the vertically challenged pop star). The more philosophically inclined can follow in the fashion footsteps of Socrates or Plato. Melissinos's sister, Olgiana, runs a less commercial sandal emporium on nearby Normanou Street. Next door is The Art Foundation, a gallery with a hidden courtyard that becomes a buzzing bar after dark.

Bars are big business in Athens, a city that doesn't really get going until after midnight. Even the old red light district, Kerameikos, is now peppered with buzzy bars such as Nixon, where pretty young things flirt beneath a vintage chandelier. Bare bulbs beckon less glamorous punters to the nearby bordellos. The gypsy squats and car mechanics of neighbouring Gazi have been crowded out by bars, restaurants and artists' lofts since a metro station opened in 2007. Once the hub of the gay scene, these days Gazi is the cool place to be. Mediterranean restaurant Canteen (or its in-house bar Swing) is currently the place to be seen. The architects, Andreas Kourkoulas and Maria Kokkinou, also created the Benaki Museum on Pireos

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Avenue, an eye-catching showcase for architecture and design exhibitions. The gift shop is a good place to pick up original pieces by local potters and jewellers.

Kourkoulas and Kokinnou have also made their mark at Scala Vinoteca, where you can sample Greek vintages from the wall of wine bottles and mezzes by top chef Christoforos Peskias. The glossy crowd reflects the location in uptown Kolonaki. Bypass Gucci and Prada and head to Le Weekend for colourful kaftans, beach bags, and bangles, handmade by owner Efharis. At Papadakis, power brokers guzzle octopus stewed in honey and wine, sea urchin salad, and deep-fried baby shrimp. The bougatsa – syrupy filo oozing warm custard – is irresistible. If you can't get a table, try the burgers at the Periscope

Clockwise from top left: Cucina Povera has modern Greek food. Arion Resort and Spa at Astir Palace Bungalows. The landmark hotel Grande Bretagne.

hotel's cocktail bar, which opened in October.

Apart from the legendary Grande Bretagne, as much of a landmark as the Parliament building across the street, Athens had a dearth of decent lodgings until construction tycoon Dakis Joannou turned his hand to design-driven hotels such as the Periscope. Joannou's Yes! Hotels are as much a showcase for his modern art collection as for contemporary designers such as Karim Rashid (who created the Day-Glo Semiramis) and Fernando and Humberto Campana (who will bring eco-chic to the Yes! Athens hotel, opening in late 2010, with a

vertical garden by Patrick Blanc).

The next star architect to hit town is Renzo Piano, who has been commissioned by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation to create a €450m cultural park in the seaside suburb of Faliron. Opening in 2015, it will include an Opera House, National Library, and open-air concert hall.

A revival of the city's 50km coastline is already under way. Since Starwood took over the waterfront Astir Palace resort, it has renovated the beach bungalows, upgraded the Arion Spa, and scored Matsuhisa Athens, designed by David

Rockwell. The sushi at other Nobu restaurants may be better, but only the Cape Town branch can compete with its sensational seaside setting. It's a perfect spot for a passionfruit martini as yachts drift off into the sunset. For a more low-key dinner with equally sensational views, head across the bay to Akti, where you can feast on deep-fried calamari and grilled red mullet in refreshingly authentic surroundings.

Athens may be changing fast, but there are still pockets where time stands still. In Anafiotika, a miniature Cycladic island marooned below the Acropolis, cats snooze under cascades of bougainvillea. With tiny tables tumbling down the stairway, Yiasemi is an adorable bistro where you can linger for hours with an ouzo and a succession of home-cooked mezze. At

outdoor cinemas, chain-smoking Greeks blithely gossip on their mobile phones while Audrey Hepburn takes a Roman holiday beneath a canopy of stars. (Athenians have brushed off the July 1 smoking ban with their usual anti-authoritarian insouciance.) In Ano Petralona, a neighbourhood famous for its dirt-cheap tavernas, customers peer into pots of braised goat and lamb fricassee at Economou's taverna.

To sample modern Greek food (and some of the country's finest wines, currently enjoying a renaissance), head to Cucina Povera. Sommelier Yannis Kaimenakis, who launched his career at the now defunct 48, has teamed up with chef Kleomenis Zournatzis, whose menu changes daily. If you're lucky, it will include fried whitebait with white tarama and dried cherries and lamb shank in beer and coriander sauce.

In Athens, meals of shared mezze seem to go on forever. Lunch easily slides into supper. Athenians are not bons viveurs in the stuffy, snobbish French sense. They have their own word for it – *kaloperasakides* – which loosely translates as "good timers". Dilys Powell put her finger on it in her mid-century memoir, *An Affair of the Heart*: "I still thought of Athens as a place of sun, friendly, elegant, cosmopolitan; a place of chattering cafés, smart parties, and sophisticated argument; a place to sit on a summer evening amidst the murmur of crowds and the glimmer of bright dresses..." ♦

THE HIT LIST

HOTELS

Prices are for a double room per night with breakfast. **Astir Palace Bungalows**, 40 Apollonos St, Vouliagmeni (+30210-890 2000; www.astir-palace.com), €244. **Hotel Grande Bretagne**, Constitution Sq (+30210-333 0000; www.grandebretagne.gr), €320. **Periscope**, Haritos 22, Kolonaki (+30210-729 7200; www.periscope.gr), €150.

RESTAURANTS, BARS, CAFES

Prices are for a three-course meal for one with half a bottle of wine. **Akti**, Leoforos, Poseidonos 6, Vouliagmeni

(+30210-896 0448), €45. **The Art Foundation**, Normanou 5, Monastiraki (+30210-323 8757; www.theartfoundation.gr). **Canteen**, Iakchou 8, Gazi (+30210-345 1508), €35. **Cucina Povera**, 13 Eforionos, Pangrati (+30210-756 6008), €40. **Economou**, 41 Troon, Petralona (+30210-346 7555), €30. **Matsuhisa Athens**, Astir Palace Resort, Vouliagmeni (+30210-896 0510). **Nixon**, 61b Agisilaou, Keramikos (+30210-346 2077; www.nixon.gr). **Papadakis**, Fokilidou 15, Kolonaki (+30210-360 8621), €60. **Scala Vinoteca**, Sina 50, Kolonaki (+30210-361 0041). **Yiasemi**, Mnisikleous 23, Plaka (+30210-321 8929).

SIGHTS

The Acropolis, ticket booth above Dionysiou Areopagitou & Apostolou Pavlou (+30210-321 4172-3; www.culture.gr); usually 8.30am-6.30pm. **The Acropolis Museum** (left) Dionysiou Areopagitou 15 (+30210-900 0901; www.theacropolismuseum.gr), Tues-Sun 8am-8pm. **Benaki Museum**, 138 Pireos & Andronikou St (+30210-345 3111; www.benaki.gr), Wed, Thurs, Sun 10am-6pm, Fri, Sat 10am-10pm. **Byzantine and Christian Museum**, Vassilissis Sofias 22 (+30210-721 1027; www.byzantinemuseum.gr). **Municipal Gallery**, Avdi Sq, Metaxourgeio. **National Theatre**, Agiou Konstantinou 22-24 (+30210-528 8170; www.n-t.gr).

SHOPS

Olgiana Melissinos, Normanou 7,

Monastiraki (+30210-331 1925; www.melissinos-sandals.gr). **Pantelis Melissinos**, Agias Theklas 2, Psirri (+30210-321 9247; www.melissinos-art.com). **Le Weekend**, Fokilidou 7b, Kolonaki (+30210-362 5211).

LESS THAN AN HOUR AWAY

About 45 minutes by high-speed catamaran, Aegina (below right) is a pleasantly scruffy island. Most visitors are Athenian weekenders who go to the fish market behind the harbour to guzzle grilled octopus and ouzo, then cocktails at Perdikiotika bar. The ancient site of Aphaia is rarely crowded and amazingly well preserved.

WHEN TO GO

Go in June or July for the **Athens Festival** (+30210-9282 900; www.

greekfestival.gr), or in February for three weeks of carnival revelry. Avoid August, when the city shuts down.

HOW TO GET THERE

Rachel Howard was a guest of Periscope. **British Airways** (www.ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Athens three times daily, from £145. **Aegean Airlines** (www.aegeanair.com) flies from Heathrow twice daily, from £152.

