

GREECE SPECIAL 2019

## Athens: the cool new districts

In Pangrati, Koukaki and Kerameikos, energetic locals are breathing fresh life into the capital

**Rachel Howard**

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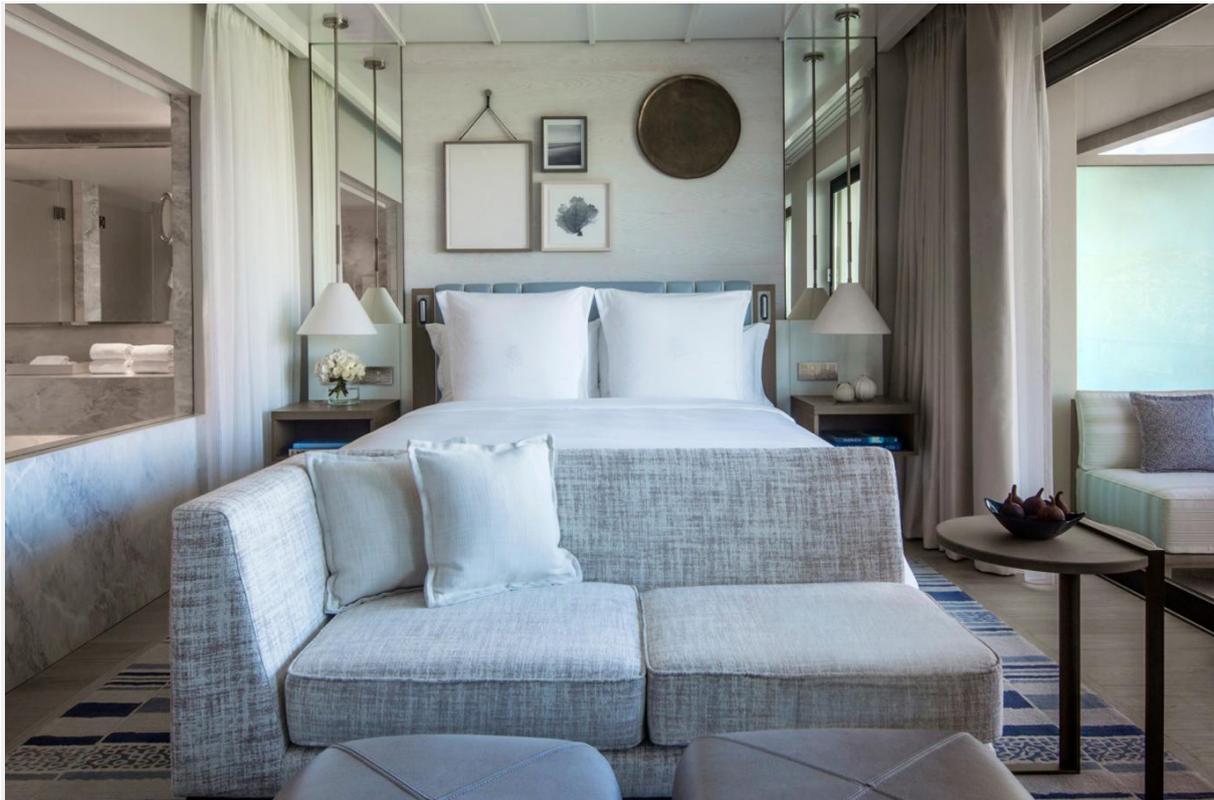


Tre Sorelle restaurant, Pangrati ARSENIS MIARIS

Athens has bounced back. A decade ago, punishing austerity led to shuttered shopfronts, but in the past couple of years, resourceful locals have taken advantage of cheap property prices to set up studios, guesthouses and galleries in empty shops, flats and warehouses. Meanwhile, chefs inspired by the city's increasingly diverse population are putting a new spin on classic Greek ingredients: don't miss the curried lamb with kale and chard at Nolan, near Syntagma Square (mains from £11; [nolanrestaurant.gr](http://nolanrestaurant.gr)). Spirited bars that scarcely seem to close have always been reason enough to visit Athens, but now their mixologists are picking up international awards.

The hotel scene is heating up, too. Perianth is the hippest new entry, a 1930s building on cafe-lined Agia Irini Square, in Monastiraki, filled with modern Greek art (doubles from £107, B&B; [perianthhotel.com](http://perianthhotel.com)). Next up: Greece's first Four Seasons, on the Athens Riviera, a Blue Flag-festooned coastline that Athenians have managed to keep largely to themselves — until now. You can expect plenty of influencers taking selfies on the boardwalk when the hotel opens in late March (doubles from £370, B&B; [astir.gr](http://astir.gr)).

The Athenian seaside scene may come as a surprise, but so will the vibrancy of its inner-city neighbourhoods. That's where you should go to get a sense of how locals avoid "the barrenness of a busy life" (Socrates's words, not mine) in this rollicking 24-hour city.



The new Four Seasons on the Athens Riviera RICHARD WAITE

### **Pangrati**

Basil and Elise Goulandris's £2.3bn art collection, which includes works by Picasso, Cézanne and Modigliani, moves into the Goulandris Museum of Contemporary Art in October. This will shine a spotlight on Pangrati, a downtown quarter of densely packed apartments radiating off several squares, popular with the Athenian intelligentsia.

You'll find these local poets and theatre directors at Lexikopoleio, a foreign-language bookshop whose owner, Odile, is a delightful source of local knowledge ([lexikopoleio.com](http://lexikopoleio.com)), or talking politics over lamb chops at Mavros Gatos, one of the many classic tavernas clustered around Proskopon Square (mains from £6). After dinner, head to a late film at the open-air Oasis cinema, on Pratinou Street: vintage posters decorate the lobby and plants sprout from miniature columns lined up below the screen (admission £7).

Pangrati's cafe society centres on two squares with a scruffy charm. Just off the first, Platia Varnava, is Baba Ghanoush — a tiny falafel joint that serves wholesome salads and irresistible chips (mains from £4; [babaghanoush.gr](http://babaghanoush.gr)). Across the street, trendy locals play pinball at Superfly, a cafe-bar packed with retro games ([facebook.com/superflycafebar](https://facebook.com/superflycafebar)).

Hipsters are muscling in on the second, Proskopon Square. If you can handle the heavily tattooed waiters with man buns, Frater & Soror is loud and lively, with a great line in twisted G&Ts (£7).

The real hipsterfication of Pangrati is happening on Archelaou Street — until recently a nondescript thoroughfare opposite the Athens Conservatory. Now every little shopfront is a cool cafe, design studio or nail bar. Join the asymmetrically coiffed set brunching on coconut-milk rice pudding and matcha lattes at Ohh Boy (cakes from

£4; [facebook.com/ohhboygr](https://www.facebook.com/ohhboygr)), shopping for leather clutches and graphic tunics at Hallelujah ([hallelujahdesign.gr](https://www.hallelujahdesign.gr)), or lunching on perfect courgette, cherry tomato and gorgonzola pizza, accompanied by negronis, at Tre Sorelle (pizzas from £8; [facebook.com/tresorellepizza](https://www.facebook.com/tresorellepizza)).

Work off lunch with a trot around the lofty track that overlooks the marble Panathenaic Stadium, built for the 1896 Olympics (£4; [panathenaicstadium.gr](https://www.panathenaicstadium.gr)), or stroll through the First Cemetery of Athens, on the other side of Arditos Hill, where the elaborate gravestones are framed by bitter-orange and olive trees (admission free).



Views of the Acropolis in Koukaki ALAMY

### **Koukaki**

The radically modern Acropolis Museum (from £4; [theacropolismuseum.gr](https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr)) changed the fortunes of Koukaki, the neighbourhood wedged between the Parthenon and pine-forested Philopappou Hill. Have a picnic on the Hill of the Nymphs, a wooded spot part way up the larger hill, or at the Pnyx, a clearing that was once “speakers’ corner”, where the citizens’ assembly met in the earliest days of democracy. Pick up a hamper at Pantopolion, a fantastic source of obscure Greek produce, from lamb prosciutto to pistachio butter (from £5; [pantopwlion.gr](https://www.pantopwlion.gr)). After lunch, continue upwards to the top of Philopappou Hill for giddy views of the Parthenon in one direction and the sea in the other.

Then wander down to Dionysiou Areopagitou, a promenade below the Acropolis that throngs with dog-walkers, bouzouki buskers, families and tourists. It’s even more magical at night, with the Parthenon gleaming overhead. Want to bone up on your Greek mythology? Do so with a “freddo”, or iced cappuccino, at Little Tree, a bookstore-cafe that’s open until 11pm ([facebook.com/littletreebooksandcoffee](https://www.facebook.com/littletreebooksandcoffee)).

As you continue to head south, Koukaki's working-class roots start to show. Among the mechanics and upholsterers, Tuk Tuk is a cheerful nook that serves authentically fiery Thai curries (mains from £7; [facebook.com/tuk-tuk-thai-street-food](https://www.facebook.com/tuk-tuk-thai-street-food)). At Materia Prima, an intimate and unpretentious wine bar, natural wines are paired with knockout dishes such as burrata, bergamot and walnuts, or seasonal salad with caramelised lotus fruit, onion cream and roquefort. The chatty and passionate owner, Michalis Papatsimbas, will get you fired up about the renaissance of Greek wines (mains from £11; [facebook.com/materia.prima.winebar](https://www.facebook.com/materia.prima.winebar)).

Shopping for souvenirs? Skip the emporiums around the Acropolis Museum and look instead for Val Goutsi ([facebook.com/valgoutsiworkshop](https://www.facebook.com/valgoutsiworkshop)) and Trabala ([facebook.com/trabalastudio](https://www.facebook.com/trabalastudio)), a pair of one-woman ceramic studios that are a block apart. It's impossible to pick a favourite.



The Panathenaic Stadium, Pangrati ALAMY

## **Kerameikos**

This compact, charmingly run-down neighbourhood just below Omonia Square was once the potters' quarter. The atmospheric, overgrown and curiously overlooked cemetery of the same name is an 11-acre archaeological site full of monumental tombs, haunting statues and wildlife. The neighbourhood has been hovering on the cusp of gentrification for a while, and there are pockets of cool amid the hookah bars and red-light "studios". Its crumbling cottages and warehouses are favoured by street artists: Alternative Athens runs a brilliant tour led by a graffiti artist who knows where to find the best murals and can tell you the stories behind them (£35pp for three hours; [alternativeathens.com](http://alternativeathens.com)).

Kerameikos also has some of the most exciting and affordable food in Athens. Order pork cheeks in mavrodaphne wine, and artisan cheeses with homemade chutney and sesame snaps, at Seychelles (mains from £8; [seycheles.gr](http://seycheles.gr)), or try the little shack at the Latria skate park, which turns out excellent all-day breakfasts and hosts pop-up parties after hours (Friday-Sunday, from £4; [latraac.com](http://latraac.com)).

There's no sign outside Taverna, Gogo Deloyianni's 1970s-styled supper club in the Bios arts centre. You can mix and match items on the seasonal menu, which focuses on Peloponnesian dishes such as fried eggs on *trahanas* — grains fermented in buttermilk — and bone marrow on toast (mains from £8; [bios.gr](http://bios.gr)). After dinner, head to the roof terrace for cocktails with Acropolis views.

Elvis, a hole in the wall decorated with posters of the King, where barflies and taxi drivers vie for the handful of stools, is the place for a late-night souvlaki. It's skewers only, they'll sneer if you ask for a wrap (from £1.50; Plateon 29).

*Fly to Athens with Aegean, British Airways, easyJet or Ryanair. The Foundry has 12 apartments in a former type factory with an Acropolis-view roof garden (studios from £78 a night, B&B; [thefoundryhotelathens.com](http://thefoundryhotelathens.com)). Live in Athens has a selection of studios and suites, including a 19th-century townhouse in Thissio (one-bedroom flats from £70 a night; [liveinathens.net](http://liveinathens.net))*