

A modern

Athens may be an ancient city, but
it's also moving with the times

WORDS RACHEL HOWARD



classic



T

here aren't many cities in Europe where you can spend a winter's day in your swimsuit, but Athens is one. Warmed by thermal springs, Lake Vouliagmeni is only a 20-minute drive from downtown Athens,

but it feels like an island resort, and that's the beauty of the Greek capital: its mixture of concrete jungle and glittering coastline, ancient ruins and tightly packed apartments, highly charged street art and age-old monuments is thrilling. And the contrast between its past and present has never been more evident. The city's heritage – from the towering Acropolis to the ancient Agora – has been a magnet for travellers for centuries, but these days its contemporary culture scene is also pulling in a new crowd.

Much of the recent buzz has been generated by the new Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre (snfcc.org). Designed by internationally acclaimed architect Renzo Piano, it comprises a new national library and opera, covered by a green roof that slopes down into a 42-acre park. Free activities ranging from yoga and gardening classes to music festivals, outdoor movies, and sailing lessons on the man-made canal, attract throngs of locals day and night. The lofty aim of this €630 million landmark is “the cultural and social revitalisation of Athens”. And it's already working.

“Not long ago, Athens was just a stopover on the way to the islands,” says Iphigenia Papamikroulea,



cultural manager of The Art Foundation (TAF, theartfoundation.metamatic.gr). “Most people wouldn't even stay one night, but now we have tourism even in winter.” Situated on a graffiti-lined alley in Monastiraki flea market, TAF is located in one of the oldest houses in Athens. Built around a hidden courtyard, it has at different stages housed a women's prison, stables, boarding house, and warehouse, until some enterprising Athenians cleared out the junk and converted it into a gallery and bar in 2009. With their original stone floors, lopsided shutters and peeling plaster, the rooms around the atrium serve as pop-up shops where you can browse handmade clothes and jewellery while DJs spin jazz on a turntable.

On the ground floor, Oh So Souvenir is a permanent showcase for 80 local designers who are redefining Greece's cultural identity for the 21st century. You'll find pixelated embroidery beach towels by Postfolk, cheery stationery hand-printed on a 100-year-old press by Neanikon, Myrto Lykopoulou's elegant ceramics imprinted with her grandmother's lace doilies, and ANAIA's miniature Doric column that breaks up into four espresso cups. →





LAKE VOULIAGMENI and the Acropolis (far left) are some of Athens' classic attractions **THE ART FOUNDATION** (left) and the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre (below) are some of the city's newest draws

“Not long ago, Athens was just a stopover. Now it’s busy all year round”



“Athenians are fantastic hosts. We genuinely love showing people around and sharing our city”

“Many of these pieces are created by artists and architects who have had to rethink their approach to making a living, by creating smaller, more affordable objects. It’s a survival strategy,” explains Papamikroulea. It’s typical of the do-it-yourself ethic borne of Greece’s economic crisis, which began almost a decade ago. Faced with fewer job opportunities and very limited state funding, young Athenians banded together to forge their own future. Tech startups, artist-run collectives, alternative city tours, and cooperative restaurants are now flourishing. In run-down areas like Kerameikos, Psyri and Kypseli, derelict buildings are being revived as galleries, bars, and workshops.

A few years ago, young Greeks were emigrating in droves; now artists and creatives from all over the world are moving to Athens. “It’s partly thanks to the cheap rents, but also for the quality of life,” says Christina Dilari, project coordinator at TAF. “Foreigners are buying up empty lofts around Omonia and Victoria. You can see a constant transformation in these neighbourhoods. First and second-generation immigrants have contributed to this transformation, creating a multicultural dynamic with ethnically diverse cafés and shops.”

This welcoming attitude to outsiders is typical of the hospitable Greeks. “Athenians are fantastic hosts. We genuinely love showing people around, sharing our city,” says Papamikroulea. “And everyone speaks English.” Perhaps that’s why Airbnb has taken off in



THE ACROPOLIS MUSEUM (above and left) allows people to explore the city’s incredible heritage in modern surroundings

Athens: it’s not just a way of generating an income, but an opportunity to make friends. “There was a lack of mid-range and budget hotels in Athens, but now you can stay in a great location for very little and really feel like a local,” says Dilari.

In 2017, Koukaki, in the foothills of the Acropolis, was the fifth most popular neighbourhood worldwide on Airbnb. It’s easy to appreciate the area’s appeal: you can jog among antiquities on pine-forested →





“The thing I love most in Athens is the feeling of freedom”

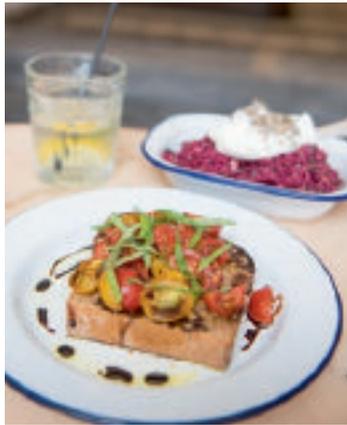


BRETTOS (left) is the oldest distillery in Athens and a firm tourist favourite
THE CLUMSIES (above) and Baba au Rum (right) are consistently among The World’s 50 Best Bars

Philopappou Hill, admire exquisite artefacts at the Acropolis Museum (theacropolismuseum.gr), buy block-printed t-shirts and scarves at Athena Design Workshop, read CP Cavafy with your coffee at Little Tree bookstore, and mingle with hipsters over green juice and kimchi quesadillas at Bel Ray. At avant-garde cocktail bar Meerkat (meerkatcocktailsafari.com) you can even jump behind the bar to create your own signature cocktail with Romain Krot, a Frenchman who left The Experimental Cocktail Club in Paris to set up shop here with his Greek wife. But it wasn’t just love that brought Krot to Athens. “It was the right moment for me to open my own business, but in Paris it would have cost four times as much,” he says. “Plus, the scene in Athens is really exciting.” Two more Athenian bars, The Clumsies (theclumsies.gr) and Baba au Rum (babaaurum.com), are consistently named among The World’s 50 Best Bars. But there’s a bar for every tribe on every street corner – from Brettos, the oldest distillery in Athens, where you can sample ouzo, Metaxa, and 37 varieties of liqueur, to trendy newcomer Fill the Bracket, which excels at old-fashioned classics, to unpretentious wine bars such as Warehouse and Heteroclito where knowledgeable staff will introduce you to the flourishing Greek wine scene.

“The thing I love most in Athens is the feeling of freedom. You can break the rules, be relaxed,” says Krot. “Even if you don’t have much money, you can go out and stay for hours in a café with just one coffee. Nobody will hassle you.” Coffee culture is as important as cocktail culture in this sociable city. →

PHILOS (right) is a cool new bistro and shop in a beautiful repurposed neoclassical building **THE CHURCH OF AGIA MARINA** (far right) is located in Kerameikos, a district that is slowly transforming **SEYCHELLES** (below) is a popular new taverna



“Wandering around, I often feel as if I’m on holiday in my own city”

The style set get their caffeine fix at Philos, a bistro and shop in a charmingly weathered neoclassical residence. Students linger in the retro blue chairs at Ble Papagalos ([facebook.com/BlePapagalos](https://www.facebook.com/BlePapagalos)), a perfect people-watching spot on Avdi Square. A few blocks away, at the far end of Kerameikos, is Latraac ([latraac.com](https://www.latraac.com)), a café and skateboard hangout, where local boarders practise on a half-pipe and mingle over beers and beetroot houmous, avocado and halloumi rolls.

Kerameikos, a shabby, working-class neighbourhood, is not yet on the tourist trail – but it won’t stay under the radar for long. Chef and food writer Carolina Doriti recently launched a food tour of Kerameikos for Culinary Backstreets ([culinarybackstreets.com](https://www.culinarybackstreets.com)), a global outfit that specialises in digging out authentic, independent eateries. “There’s an inspiring vibrancy in this chaos,” enthuses Doriti. “In Kerameikos, you have Michelin-starred restaurants like Funky Gourmet,

Aleria and Athiri, up-and-coming chefs hosting supper clubs at Bios, traditional *kafeneia* (cafés) and new-wave tavernas like Seychelles, which is so popular that you can’t even find a table on a Monday night. When I wander around the area, I feel like I’m on holiday in my own city.”

It often feels like everyone in Athens is on holiday. At all hours, the sidewalks and squares are packed with spontaneous revellers of all ages. Restaurants serve dinner at 1am and bars never seem to close.

“The city’s struggles have fuelled a creative boom in Athens and helped us to find new ways of making the most of what we have. Simple ingredients, sunshine, and a vibrant culture,” says Doriti. “The other day, I saw some graffiti that really summed up this spirit: ‘Athens, city for people, not for profit.’”

✈ Wizz Air flies to Athens





The places to see the modern face of Athens



Neon

Check out site-specific art installations in abandoned spaces around Athens (past venues have included a parking lot, the National Observatory and Athens Conservatoire), curated by a non-profit organisation on a mission to make contemporary art accessible. neon.org.gr



Athens Walkthrough

Discover the secret life of the city's arcades with graphic designer Natassa Pappa. From typographers to bookbinders, these walking tours champion small, independent businesses. cargocollective.com/intostoas/Athens-Walkthrough



Crust

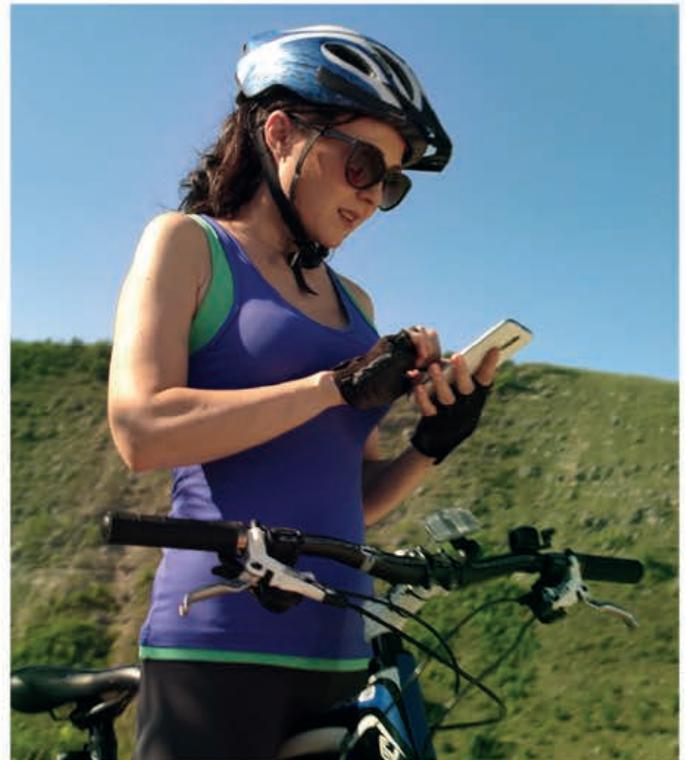
Dig into parmesan, truffle and mushroom pizza upstairs then get down to indie bands in the basement at this day-to-night hangout on Protogenous, surely the hippest street in Athens right now. crust.gr



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