

Find the alternative...

Athens

Story by Heidi Fuller-Love



Home to a third of the Greek population and hailed as the cradle of democracy, a massive facelift prompted by the 2004 Olympic Games has brought a plethora of modern comforts to age-old Athens. Behind the lustrous façades of upgraded hotels, high-tech eateries and revamped historic quarters, however, there are plenty of secret nooks and crannies for visitors to explore.

Cultural cameo

Glean an insight into the legends and beliefs of ancient Greece with a trip to one of Athens' least-visited archaeological sites. Open daily from 08:30, **Kerameikos** (telephone: +30 210-321-4172), the city's 7th century BCE cemetery – named after the ceramists who had their workshops here for countless centuries – brims with intricately-carved tombstones depicting mythological scenes that are explained in the bijou museum next door.



To really get a feel for this unique city, explore the tangle of alleys behind Kerameikos. Dubbed 'Gazi' because of the foundries that spouted their gas fumes here until the middle of last century, this district is one of the city's most vibrant. The jewel in Gazi's post-industrial crown is **Technopolis** (telephone: +30 210-346-0981), a 30,000m² factory area which has

been converted into a multifunctional arts venue topped with giant, red, neon-lit smokestacks, hosting everything from avant garde theatre and jazz concerts to bizarre photo exhibitions and fashion shows.

Athenian agoras

Any Athenian will tell you that great clothing bargains can be had along Eolou and Agiou Marou streets, while the Athinas Street central food market is the place to soak up bucketfuls of local colour. Visitors with a bigger budget who want to buy authentic Hellenistic statuary should make their way to **Martinos** (telephone: +30 210-321-2414), one of the only stores in Greece licensed to sell antiquities brought in from archaeological sites.

Foot fetishists will want to hunt down **Stavros Melissinos** (telephone: +30 210-321-9247), the 'king of Greek sandals', whose reasonably priced designs, based on the footwear of Plato and Helen of Troy, have graced the feet of A-listers including The Beatles and Jackie O as well as countless humbler hoofs.



Seaside distractions

The sea is never far from this city, whose fortunes have been linked to the whims of the waves for millennia. Canny visitors seeking to escape Athens' blistering summer temperatures should follow the locals who migrate to the nearby Attic Coast.

Popular with chic Athenians, **Varkiza Beach Club** (telephone: +30 210-897-2434) boasts a fine sandy beach surrounded by extensive gardens, where you can lounge on plush, upholstered seats and sip fruit cocktails as you watch tanned Greek gods whizz across the sparkling sea on jet skis.

For a spot of top pampering, head for the **Divani Apollon Palace** (telephone: +30 210-891-1100), a luxurious spa in an elegantly-styled waterfront location 11 miles south of the city, where you'll be pummelled by saltwater jets and steamed in sweetly perfumed aromatherapy saunas, before sinking into a relaxing body wrap.

If you'd like to get a glimpse of the goddess Athena's city from the deck of your own sailboat, call **Ghiolman Yachts** (telephone +30 210-322-8530) and let them whisk you away on a trip to discover the pine-studded charms of the Attic Coast.



Hellenic nights

A good night out for Athenians starts at around 9pm in an ouzerie, nibbling platefuls of *mezedes* (similar to tapas). **Athinaikon** (telephone: +30 210-383-8485), a marble- and pine-clad central Athens institution where Greek intellectuals have met for decades to dine on delicacies ranging from lamb's testicles to live clams, is one of the best places in town to sample this classic Greek nibble. Another mezedes hotspot is **Psiri**, the working class antidote to the well-trodden Plaka district, where you can sample these popular snacks,

served with cloudy glasses of ouzo or cool pitchers of pine-flavoured Retsina wine, in a string of traditional tavernas whose oil cloth-covered tables jostle for pavement space beneath the factory-studded horizon.

When night draws a veil over the Parthenon, **Stoa ton Athanaton** (telephone: +30 210-321-4362), a smoke-filled bouzouki bar perched above the central market is a big draw for traditional music lovers, but the city's movers and shakers make a beeline for **Bios** (telephone: +30 210-342-5335), an achingly cool DJ venue-cum-second-hand-shop, where the sounds are eclectic and the stools and mismatched sofas you sit on are for sale.



Unique sleep

If you're a fan of slumbering in vintage surroundings you'll be glad to know that the 150-year-old **Grande Bretagne** (left) (telephone: +30 210-333-0000), which served as headquarters for the Greek, German and British armies during WWII, has been restored to its 19th-century opulence, with in-room stereos, sleek bathroom suites, and internet add-ons assuring that welcome modern touch.

Seekers of hipper hotels should check out the sumptuously fluid surroundings of the **Semiramis** (telephone: +30 210-628-4400). This state-of-the-art hotel (right), blessed with a reassuringly cosy ambiance, shines out from the centre of the city's chic Kifissia district and was styled by award-winning celebrity designer Karim Rashid.



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