

Greek good

It's not too late to squeeze
in a sunny city break to
Athens, writes David Whitley

The Greek capital is simultaneously one of the most-heralded and least-heralded cities in Europe. It is the birthplace of drama, democracy, much philosophy and many of architecture's key tenets.

But it can be the sort of city that people go to for one day, ticking off the ruins, before getting a ferry out to the islands. Athens is worth more time than that, and there are two tricks to encouraging people to spend longer there.

The first is to encourage a greater understanding of classical Athens – seeing the old temples and remnants as more than just photo opportunities. When the stories behind them are brought to life, Athens becomes a great deal more captivating.

The second is to stress that the modern city is worth exploring too. Yes, it is a noisy, often rough-and-ready place, but it is also creative, packed with bars and restaurants, and has a strong artistic streak.

▶ SEE: STROLL THE CITY
Many of the key sites can be strung together in a walking route, and a good place to start is the Classical Lyceum, originally a gymnasium complex that became home to Aristotle's philosophical school in the fourth millennium BC. The explanatory signs are good enough to give a rough overview of what happened where.

From there, take a stroll through the National Garden to the staggering Panathenaic Stadium. This hulking great 60,000-capacity marble horseshoe was the host venue for the first modern Olympics in 1896, and is where the Athens marathon finishes every year.

From there, head to the Acropolis hill, dropping in to the New Acropolis Museum on the way. It opened in 2009 and is brilliantly done, divided up into eras to show how artistic and sculptural techniques changed as Athens evolved.

However, the top floor is the unquestioned highlight. It's designed to be the same size and orientation as the Parthenon, ➔

RIGHT:
Erechtheion

FAR RIGHT:
Taste of
Athens tour

BELOW:
Panathenaic
Stadium



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→ with some original marbles and some reconstructions placed exactly as they would be on the groundbreaking classical temple. This allows you to properly follow the stories being told and see how the artists managed to have some gods seated and some standing to accommodate them all within the triangular pediments. More importantly, the stories of the people of Athens coming to celebrate are also told – it was revolutionary at the time to depict normal citizens on a temple.

From there, it's a sweaty and exposed walk up the Acropolis hill. And it's no exaggeration to call this the most important site in the history of the Western world. The Parthenon is the crowning glory here, with every bit of it shaped and curved to perfectly please the eye. But it's arguably not the most important part of the Acropolis.

On the way up, the trail passes the Theatre of Dionysus, where drama was invented. The Odeon, a big Roman-era



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theatre that is still used for concerts today, is close by, and the Erechtheion, built over several levels to fit the bedrock, was the most sacred site.

It's possible to descend down the other side of the Acropolis, a path that leads to the Ancient Agora. If the Acropolis was the original religious and ceremonial heart of Athens, the Agora was the social, political, administrative and commercial heart. The collection of temples, churches and ruined administrative buildings fits together

like a jigsaw puzzle, and walking through it, you can start to get an idea of what ancient Athens was like.

▶ **SELL: OLD AND NEW**

Athens is one of those places where it is invaluable to have a good guide who can explain what everything is, what it was used for and the stories stemming from it. Context Travel does this with small groups and expert docents, and its three-hour, €85 Acropolis tour does an outstanding job of bringing the temples and theatres to life, before heading to the Acropolis Museum to hone in on the most enlightening exhibits. Notably, it's the sort of tour where it's not just sticking to a script – questions are answered knowledgeably and discussions ensue.

This model is taken to another level on the riveting Socrates, Plato and the Pursuit of Happiness tour, which is currently only available as a private tour (€325 per group). This is led →



by a qualified classicist and explores the area thought to have been home to Plato's Academy. What starts as an exploration of ruins and a look at why Plato chose to set up his school there finishes as a philosophy seminar. Plato's theories and dialogues are presented and discussed in a way that's accessible and understandable to all, but also gets the mind racing.

Another company providing unusual, commissionable tours is Urban Adventures, and the most interesting offerings concentrate on opening up the best bits of modern Athens.

The Bohemian Tales of the City tour (£62) ambles through the backstreets, bars and courtyards of the street art-filled Psirri neighbourhood, showing off the best murals and the bases of arts cooperatives. It moves on to Gazi, where a former gasworks has been turned into a hip nightlife, concert and events space, then parks up on a restaurant terrace for light bites and generous lashings of ouzo.

The Taste of Athens tour (£61) focuses on food, starting in the markets of gritty Omonia before testing out Greek coffee, gorging on feta and spinach spanakopitas, and wolfing down doughy desserts with Greek yoghurt ice cream.

STAY: ROOFTOP REVOLUTION

Athens got a big influx of hotels before the Olympics in 2004, and it now has plenty of competition, meaning many are using modern design and cool rooftop bars to distinguish themselves.

The Fresh Hotel is a notable example – there's a chillout vibe at the rooftop pool by day, until it becomes a fashionable bar-restaurant at night.

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ABOVE: Grande Bretagne's rooftop pool bar

It's located in Omonia, but only a short walk away from more enjoyable Psirri.

It's one of those hotels that's a pleasure to nose around, with cool design touches, whether that's massive colourful spots on the walls or 3D models of city skylines displayed in glass cubes in the lobby. Furniture seems quirkily custom-made rather than mass-produced, and handy curated guides to Athens are provided. Doubles cost from £90.

If the pool is the priority, then Electra Palace is hard to beat. It has one indoor pool and one outdoor pool on the rooftop, with the latter having pitch-perfect views of the Acropolis. Rooms are a touch dated, but are perfectly solid without being inspiring. Doubles cost from £137.

In the more conventional tourist neighbourhood Plaka, and a short stroll from the entrance to the Acropolis, the Hera Hotel has an air of understated

class. The wood panelling and stained-glass ceiling of the lobby are the most obvious examples of this, but it continues upstairs with elegant furnishing and impressive green marble bathrooms. The Hera also offers quirky wooden-framed bikes for hire for anyone who wishes to brave Athens on two wheels. Doubles cost from £71.

Athens' top address, however, has long been the Grande Bretagne. On Syntagma Square, home of the Greek parliament, this grand 19th-century hotel is the one that visiting foreign dignitaries will usually stay at and locals will take their parents to for afternoon tea on big birthdays.

Highlights include chandelier-style light fittings, marble-topped bedside tables, the rooftop restaurant with prime Acropolis views, and the cigar lounge that serves up cocktails specially aged in barrels. Expect to pay from £275. **TW**

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