



Athens & Around

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Why Go?

Ancient and modern, with equal measures of grunge and grace, bustling Athens (Αθήνα) is a heady mix of history and edginess. Iconic monuments mingle with first-rate museums, lively cafes and alfresco dining, and it's downright fun.

The historic centre is itself an open-air museum, yet the city's cultural and social life takes place amid these ancient landmarks, merging past and present. The magnificent Acropolis rises majestically above the sprawling metropolis and has stood witness to the city's many transformations.

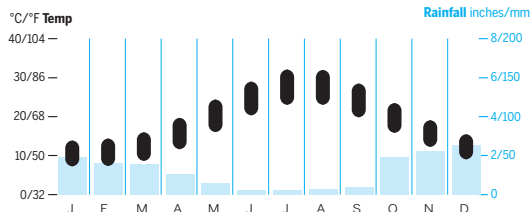
Post-Olympics Athens is conspicuously more sophisticated and cosmopolitan than ever before. Stylish restaurants, shops and hip hotels, and the emerging artsy-industrial neighbourhoods and entertainment quarters like Gazi show Athens' modern face.

The surrounding region of Attiki holds spectacular antiquities, like the Temple of Poseidon at Sounion, and lovely beaches like those near historic Marathon.

Embrace Athens and its environs for all they have to offer.

When to Go

Athens



Jun Soak up the city's ancient history before jumping out to the islands to soak up the sun.

Late May-Oct Athens' cultural centrepiece, the Hellenic Festival, lights the city with drama and music.

Sep Weather cools and the social scene heats up as residents return from the islands.

ATHENS ΑΘΗΝΑ

POP 3.8 MILLION

History

EARLY HISTORY

The early history of Athens is inextricably interwoven with mythology, making it impossible to disentangle fact from fiction. What is known is that the hill-top site of the Acropolis, with two abundant springs, drew some of Greece's earliest neolithic settlers. When a peaceful agricultural existence gave way to the war-orientated city states, the Acropolis provided an ideal defensive position.

By 1400 BC the Acropolis had become a powerful Mycenaean city. It survived the Dorian assault in 1200 BC but didn't escape the dark age that enveloped Greece for the next 400 years. Then, in the 8th century BC, during a period of peace, Athens became the artistic centre of Greece, excelling in ceramics.

By the 6th century BC, Athens was ruled by aristocrats and generals. Labourers and peasants had no rights until Solon, the harbinger of Athenian democracy, became *arhon* (chief magistrate) in 594 BC and improved the lot of the poor, with reforms such as the annulment of debts and the implementation of trial by jury. Continuing unrest over the reforms created the pretext for the tyrant Peisistratos, formerly head of the military, to seize power in 560 BC.

Peisistratos built up a formidable navy and extended the boundaries of Athenian influence. A patron of the arts, he inaugurated the Festival of the Great Dionysia, the precursor of Attic drama, and commissioned many splendid works, most of which were destroyed by the Persians.

Peisistratos was succeeded by his son Hippias in 528 BC and Athens rid itself of this oppressor in 510 BC with the help of Sparta.

ATHENS' GOLDEN AGE

After Athens finally repulsed the Persian Empire at the battles of Salamis (480 BC) and Plataea (again, with the help of Sparta), its power knew no bounds.

In 477 BC Athens established a confederacy on the sacred island of Delos and demanded tributes from the surrounding islands to protect them from the Persians. The treasury was moved to Athens in 461 BC and Pericles (ruler from 461 BC to 429 BC) used the money to transform the city. This period has become known as Athens' golden age, the pinnacle of the classical era.

Most of the monuments on the Acropolis today date from this period. Drama and literature flourished with such luminaries as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The sculptors Pheidias and Myron and the historians Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon also lived during this time.

RIVALRY WITH SPARTA

Sparta did not let Athens revel in its newfound glory. The jockeying for power between the two led to the Peloponnesian Wars (see p717) in 431 BC, which dragged on until 404 BC, when Sparta gained the upper hand. Athens was never to return to its former glory. The 4th century BC did, however, produce three of the West's greatest orators and philosophers: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

In 338 BC Athens, along with the other city states of Greece, was conquered by Philip II of Macedon. After Philip's assassination, his son Alexander the Great, favoured Athens over other city states. After Alexander's untimely death, Athens passed in quick succession through the hands of his generals.

ROMAN & BYZANTINE RULE

The Romans defeated the Macedonians and in 186 BC attacked Athens after it sided against them in a botched rebellion in Asia Minor. They destroyed the city walls and took precious sculptures to Rome. During three

CONTEST FOR ATHENS

As the myth goes, Athena, the city's namesake and patron deity, won this honour in a battle with Poseidon. After Kekrops, a Phoenician, founded a city on a huge rock near the sea, the gods of Olympus proclaimed that it should be named after the deity who could provide the most valuable legacy for mortals. Athena (goddess of wisdom, among other things) produced an olive tree, symbol of peace and prosperity. Poseidon (god of the sea) struck a rock with his trident and a saltwater spring emerged (some versions of the myth say he made a horse). The gods judged that Athena's gift would better serve the citizens of Athens with nourishment, oil and wood. To this day the goddess dominates Athens' mythology and the city's great monuments are dedicated to her.