



Divine: Microasia bar in Gazi inspires rooftop drinks; the Parthenon honors goddess Athena.

48 HOURS

Timeless Athens

Current economic woes seem a hiccup when viewed against the ancient history of the Greek capital. | **By JANE FOSTER**

SOME THREE million visitors are expected to flock to Athens this year—despite its economic troubles. Last May, Greece accepted a \$147-billion bailout to avoid bankruptcy. The austerity measures that followed don't really affect travelers, who will still find a sometimes chaotic modern city with an unlikely mix of ancient Greece's greatest treasures, Byzantine churches, and concrete apartment blocks—as well as a now blossoming contemporary art scene.

WHAT TO DO A pedestrian-only promenade connects the **Acropolis**, a craggy hill crowned by three ancient temples, to Athens's other top archaeological attractions—the **Agora** (marketplace), the **Kerameikos** (cemetery), the **Theater of Dionysus**, and the **Temple of Olympian Zeus**—making it possible to explore the area around the Acropolis entirely on foot, just as the ancients would have done.

Nearby, the light-filled **New Acropolis Museum**, opened in 2009, displays statues and stone carvings from the Acropolis site. On the top floor lies a full-size recreation of the marble frieze that once ran around the top of the fifth-century B.C.

Parthenon, the Acropolis's largest and most venerated temple. Plaster copies stand in for the missing pieces, the so-called Elgin Marbles, that reside in London's British Museum despite decades of wrangling by Greek authorities to have them returned.

Below the Acropolis, the **Central Food Market** brims with stalls piled high with strawberries and broccoli in spring or peppers and zucchini in summer. Out front, temporary stalls sell nuts, dried figs, and Greek honey—that favorite staple of the Olympian gods.

Hidden in a narrow side street leading into nightlife hub Psyrri, legendary sandalmaker **Melissinos** crafts leather sandals based on ancient designs. Clients have included Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Maria Callas, and John Lennon.

A five-minute walk away, check out Athens's contemporary art scene at **TAF** (www.theartfoundation.gr), where formerly ramshackle 19th-century outbuildings serve as gallery spaces hosting exhibitions and installations by young Greek artists and photographers.

The **Onassis Cultural Center**, inaugurated in December 2010, has two main stages, an exhibition space, lecture hall, open-air

performance spaces, and a rooftop restaurant. Events in 2011 include an exhibition by Greek artist Jannis Kounellis and a concert with works by Greek composer Georges Aperghis.

Before leaving Athens, don't miss a hike from Kolonaki, a well-to-do residential district, up a zigzag path through pine woods and agaves to the city's highest point, the 986-foot **Mount Lycabettus**. At the top, hikers find a tiny white Orthodox church and a series of stone terraces affording panoramic views over the city, the surrounding mountains, and out to sea—all of Athens in a glance.

WHERE TO EAT At Michelin-starred **Varoulko**, chef Lefteris Lazarou creates dishes from what he finds fresh at the fish market that morning, whether monkfish or cuttlefish. From spring through fall, tables are set out on a chic roof terrace. The less formal **Café Amissinia** serves mid-range Greek dishes such as *pita* (phyllo pastry pies filled with cheese or vegetables) and *dolmades*. Both restaurants offer amazing Acropolis views.

Or join locals for modern taverna fare with Cretan influences such as *arnaki frikase* (lamb and spinach fricassee) or *kolokythokeftedes* (zucchini balls) at **O Skoufias** in Gazi, formerly an industrial zone, now Athens's hippest nightlife area.

WHERE TO STAY At the foot of the Acropolis, the serene **Electra Palace** (from \$209) offers a pool, a romantic restaurant, and an Acropolis view from its rooftop terrace.

The youthful **O+B Athens Boutique Hotel** (from \$140) is within walking distance of both the Acropolis and Gazi. Its 22 rooms and suites feature wood floors and minimalist furniture in tones of beige and brown.

For good value, the **Philippos** (from \$116), just around the corner from the New Acropolis Museum, has 50 airy rooms, several of which boast large balconies looking out on the Acropolis. ■



The New Acropolis Museum displays Greek antiquities reclaimed from foreign museums.