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# Reasons To I♥ve Athens

Now's a good time to hotfoot it to the atmospheric capital of Greece, because the ultimate Athenian summer experience – its exciting annual festival of music, dance and theatre – is on. **JANE FOSTER** picks this and some other compelling and colourful reasons to visit. >>



## 1 NIGHTLIFE

In the city centre, mainstream activity centres around Psirri, where a hive of *tavernas*, bars and clubs offer hedonistic delights into the early hours of the morning. Don't miss trendy Soul (Evrpidou 65, Psirri), where cocktails are served in a red-walled courtyard garden hung with Chinese lanterns, and guest DJs spin hits at the small dance floor upstairs. Come summer, many clubs move to open-air locations along the coast – think palm-lined beachfronts, *chaises longues* by the water's edge and glitzy dance floors with strobe lighting. Names to look out for include Bo (Karamanli 14) and Balux (Posidonos 58). Trendsetting Hoxton (Voutadon 42, Gazi) is an industrial-chic lounge-bar where the young arty types pose against the raw concrete walls of a former warehouse. The most elite club remains Island (Athens-Sounio Road) in Varkiza which lies on the coast. Expect minimalist white decor, champagne cocktails, ethnic chill-out music and a magical setting overlooking a private bay. Recent guests include Paris Hilton.



## 2 BEACHES

If the heat gets too much, take a short ride to the coast. The closest beaches for bathing are in Paleo Faliro, just 6km from town. Beyond that lies quite a few pay-as-you-enter beach clubs. The most upmarket include Balux ([www.balux-septem.com](http://www.balux-septem.com)) in Glyfada, Astir Palace Resort ([www.astir-palace.com](http://www.astir-palace.com)) in Vouliagmeni, and Grand Resort Lagonissi ([www.lagonissiresort.gr](http://www.lagonissiresort.gr)). Expect designer bikinis and glamorous waterside cocktail bars.



## 3 OPEN-AIR CAFES

Greeks love coffee, and there's no better setting to enjoy it than at one of the city's countless open-air cafes. In each neighbourhood, cafes have their own unique identity – from the posh Kolonaki where foreign embassy staff and Athenian yuppies frequent see-and-be-seen design cafes to bohemian Exarhia where students, artists and intellectuals ponder love and revolution.

For a view of the Acropolis (a rocky mound crowned by three ancient temples, the very symbol of Athens) and the Ancient

Agora (the political, commercial and social centre of ancient Athens), get a table on pedestrian-only Adrianou Street, between Monastiraki and Thissio metro stations. The *kafenio* (old-fashioned coffee house) remains the domain of the older generation and is strictly men-only, with locals playing backgammon and setting the world right over *Elliniko kafe* (Greek coffee, short, black and gritty). The younger crowd favours trendy, lounge-style cafes with chill-out music and frappes (iced Nescafe, drunk in a tall glass with a straw). >>



## 4

**ACROPOLIS** No Acropolis, no Athens, that's the truth. Rising up above the concrete jungle that is modern Athens, the 'sacred rock' receives some three million visitors per year, and is bathed in a golden floodlight by night. The Acropolis' crowning glory is the proud 5th century BC Parthenon, supported by 46 marble columns and built as a temple to honour the goddess Athena. Finds from the site are currently displayed in the Acropolis Museum, but this will soon be replaced by the long-awaited, all-glass New Acropolis Museum, designed by Swiss-born architect Bernard Tschumi, due to open in late-2008. Greeks hope this will help persuade London's British Museum to return the controversial Elgin Marbles, an invaluable collection of sculptures and panels that was stripped from the Parthenon in 1801 by Lord Elgin and taken to England.



## 5 MUSEUMS

The ancient Greeks left a treasure trove of perfectly proportioned, awe-inspiring marble statues, elegant terracotta vases and *amphorae* (two-handed vases used to transport wine or oil). See the best at the National Archaeological Museum, near Victoria metro station. In Kolonaki, the Museum of Cycladic Art displays marble figurines

dating back some 5,000 years – said to have inspired artists like Pablo Picasso and Amedeo Modigliani.

The nearby Byzantine Museum is packed with exquisite religious icons, while Plaka's Museum of Greek Musical Instruments showcases a weird and wonderful collection of traditional instruments, from gypsy flutes to shepherds' goatskin bagpipes. You can put on headphones and hear them being played.

## 6 CENTRAL MARKET

Stall holders vie for shoppers' attention within these vast, iron-and-glass market halls built in 1870. The seafood section displays glittering silver-scaled fish, slippery octopus and squid on

mounds of ice; in the meat section, energetic butchers carve and trim their choicest cuts; and in the fruit-and-vegetable area, stalls are piled high with Mediterranean garden produce – tomatoes, figs and peaches. Small open-

fronted stores sell olives, nuts, dried fruits, and fragrant herbs and spices. The Central Market is on Athinas Street, linking Omonia Square and Monastiraki, and is open Mon-Sat, 7am-3pm. >>



**7 ISLANDS** Few cities offer the opportunity to escape for a day to an idyllic island. But ride the electric train to Athens' port, Piraeus, hop on a boat, and you can do just that. The nearby Argo-Saronic islands are served by regular ferries and high-speed hydrofoil catamarans. The nearest, Aegina (1hr 30mins by ferry; 45mins by catamaran or hydrofoil), boasts an ancient Greek temple and several pretty fishing villages; tiny Angistri (2hrs by ferry; 1hr 10mins by catamaran or hydrofoil) has no major sights but a peaceful nudist beach; while the exclusive, car-free hideaway of Hydra (3hrs 45mins by ferry; 1hr 40mins by catamaran or hydrofoil) – much loved by Hollywood royalty Leonard Cohen, Joan Collins and Bryan Ferry in the 1970s – offers a handful of chic boutique hotels in restored mansions. It's also possible to take an organised, one-day cruise and see several islands at one go. It's best to book a seat during the peak season of July to August.

For more information, check out [www.greekferries.gr](http://www.greekferries.gr) for ferry services and [www.hellenicseaways.gr](http://www.hellenicseaways.gr) for high-speed catamaran and hydrofoil services. >>



**9 PLAKA**  
Athens' oldest residential quarter sits in the shadow of the Acropolis. Touristy it may be, but it is also undeniably charming – its narrow, cobbled streets lined with pastel-coloured, bougainvillea-clad neo-classical mansions, small hotels, souvenir shops and traditional *tavernas*, some with live music. While here, be sure to check out Anafiotika, a cluster of whitewashed houses built by settlers from the island of Anafi. A village atmosphere prevails, despite the crowds, and as Plaka lies close to all the top sights, it is the perfect base for a short stay. >>

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**FOOD**

Trendy Athenians are snubbing the calorie-laden dishes that granny made. *Moussaka* (layers of aubergine, potato, mince and tomato, topped with bechamel sauce and baked) and *fasolia* (butter beans in a heavy tomato and garlic sauce) are still served in old-fashioned *tavernas*, but modern fusion cuisine, with its liberal use of fresh herbs and spices, prevails. Michelin-star restaurants include Spondi (Pyrronos 5), for French-Mediterranean cuisine, and Varoulko (Piraeus 80), for its creative seafood. For a snack, grab a *souvlaki* (spit-roasted meat in *pita* bread with garlicky *tzatziki* and tomato) from 'O Kostas' (Adrianou 116), a 'hole-in-the-wall' kiosk in Plaka.



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**10 WEATHER** Blessed with a Mediterranean climate, Athens enjoys hot, dry summers when the sky is a deep blue, the sun shines every day and the nights are balmy. Temperatures average 30°C through July-August, but occasionally hit 40°C. Wear light cotton clothing, sunglasses and sun protection cream, and drink plenty of water.

**11 GAZI** The antithesis of Plaka, this former industrial zone is now a hub of alternative bars and clubs, and late-night, funky eateries (left). Urban regeneration began here

in 1999, when the former City Gasworks (after which the neighbourhood is named) was converted into a multi-purpose arts complex named Technopolis. The disused gas tanks and brick outbuildings are now a series of spaces for exhibitions, concerts and theatre, and the towering brick chimneys are lit red at night as a symbol of new art in an urban environment. In addition, the neighbourhood's abandoned warehouses and neo-classical buildings are fast being refurbished, and the new Kerameikos metro station is due to open this summer.

PHOTOGRAPHY: R. IAN LLOYD / PHOTOLIBRARY / IML IMAGES

## 12 THE HELLENIC FESTIVAL

Last but not least, why Athens should be on your summer travel agenda: the 2007 Hellenic Festival ([www.hellenicfestival.gr](http://www.hellenicfestival.gr)) features a diverse line-up that includes Russia's St Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra, the Vienna Boys' Choir from Austria, British entertainer Elvis

Costello, the Greek National Opera, and the State Orchestra of Athens paying tribute to Greek opera singer Maria Callas, one of the world's most recognised and best-selling classical voices, who passed away 30 years ago. The main venue is the 2nd century AD open-air theatre carved into the Acropolis. The festival runs till September. ■

### FAST FACTS

**CURRENCY**  
The Euro (EUR)  
US\$1 = 0.743 EUR

**VISA**  
Requirements vary. Contact the nearest Greek embassy or visit [www.hellas-info.org/Services/visa.html](http://www.hellas-info.org/Services/visa.html).

**BEST TIME TO VISIT**  
May-June and September-October when the weather is warm and sunny but the main attractions are not overcrowded.

**GETTING THERE**  
Singapore Airlines flies 3 times weekly from Singapore to Athens.

**MORE INFORMATION**  
[[www.gnto.gr](http://www.gnto.gr)]

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