For all too many people, Athens is a city that happened two-and-a-half thousand years ago. It’s true that even now the past looms large – literally, in the shape of the mighty Acropolis that dominates almost every view, as well as on every visitor’s itinerary. Yet the modern city is home to over four million people – more than a third of the Greek nation’s population – and has undergone a transformation in the twenty-first century. Continue reading to find out more about...Brief history of Athens The Athens and Epidaurus Festival Accommodation in Athens Athens food and drink Athens nightlife and entertainment LGBT Travel Information for Athens Entertainment in Athens Shopping in Athens City beaches Monastiráki and Psyrrí Sýndagma Omónia and the bazaar North of Central Athens Western Athens Kolonáki and the museum quarter Southern Athens On first acquaintance, Athens is not a beautiful place – the scramble for growth in the decades after World War II, when the population grew from around 700,000 to close to its present level, was an architectural disaster. But, helped by huge investment for the 2004 Olympics, the city is starting to make the most of what it has, with new roads, rail and metro, along with extensive pedestrianization in the centre. The views for which Athens was once famous have reappeared and, despite inevitable globalization and the appearance of all the usual high-street and fast-food chains, the city retains its character to a remarkable degree. Hectic modernity is always tempered with an air of intimacy and hominess; as any Greek will tell you, Athens is merely the largest village in the country. However often you’ve visited, the vestiges of the ancient Classical Greek city, most famously represented by the Parthenon and other remains that top the Acropolis, are an inevitable focus; along with the refurbished National Archeological Museum, the finest collection of Greek antiquities anywhere in the world, they should certainly be a priority. The majority of the several million visitors who pass through each year do little more; they never manage to escape the crowds and so see little of the Athens Athenians know. Take the time to explore some of the city’s neighbourhoods, such as Pláka, Monastiráki and Psyrrí and you’ll get far more out of it. Above all, there’s the sheer vibrancy of the city. Cafés are packed day and night and the streets stay lively until 3 or 4am, with some of the best bars and clubs in the country. Eating out is great, with establishments ranging from traditional tavernas to gourmet restaurants. In summer, much of the action takes place outdoors, from dining on the street or clubbing on the beach, to open-air cinema, concerts and classical drama. There’s a diverse shopping scene, too, ranging from colourful bazaars and lively street markets to chic suburban malls crammed with the latest designer goods. And with good-value, extensive public transportation allied to inexpensive taxis, you’ll have no difficulty getting around. Outside Athens are more Classical sites – the Temple of Poseidon at Soúnio, sanctuaries at Ramnous and Eleusis (Elefsína), the burial mound from the great victory at Marathon – and there are also easily accessible beaches all around the coast. Further afield, Delphi and the islands of the Saronic gulf are also in easy day-trip distance. Moving on is quick and easy, with scores of ferries and hydrofoils leaving daily from the port at Pireás (Piraeus) and, somewhat less frequently, from the two other Attic ferry terminals at Rafína and Lávrio **Brief history of Athens** Athens has been inhabited continuously for over seven thousand years. Its acropolis, commanding views of all seaward approaches and encircled by protective mountains, was a natural choice for prehistoric settlement and for the Mycenaeans, who established a palace-fortress on the rock. Gradually, Athens emerged as a city-state that dominated the region, ruled by kings who stood at the head of a land-owning aristocracy known as the Eupatridae (the “well-born”), who governed through a Council which met on the Areopagus – the Hill of Ares. **The birth of democracy** As Athens grew wealthier, dissatisfaction with the rule of the Eupatridae grew, above all among a new middle class excluded from political life but forced to pay rent or taxes to the nobility. Among the reforms aimed at addressing this were new, fairer laws drawn up by Draco (whose “draconian” lawcode was published in 621 BC), and the appointment of Solon as ruler (594 BC), with a mandate to introduce sweeping economic and political reform. Although Solon’s reforms laid the foundations of what eventually became Athenian democracy, they failed to stop internal unrest, and eventually Peisistratos, his cousin, seized power in the middle of the sixth century BC. Peisistratos is usually called a tyrant, but this simply means he seized power by force: thanks to his populist policies he was in fact a well-liked and successful ruler who greatly expanded Athens’ power, wealth and influence. His sons Hippias and Hipparchus were less successful: Hipparchus was assassinated in 514 BC and Hippias overthrown in 510 BC. A new leader, Kleisthenes, took the opportunity for more radical change: he introduced ten classes or tribes based on place of residence, each of which elected fifty members to the Boule or Council of State, which decided on issues to be discussed by the full Assembly. The Assembly was open to all citizens and was both a legislature and a supreme court. This system was the basis of Athenian democracy and remained in place, little changed, right through to Roman times. Around 500 BC Athens sent troops to aid the Ionian Greeks of Asia Minor, who were rebelling against the Persian Empire; this in turn provoked a Persian invasion of Greece. In 490 BC the Athenians and their allies defeated a far larger Persian force at the Battle of Marathon. In 480 BC the Persians returned, capturing and sacking Athens, and leaving much of the city burned to the ground. That same year, however, a naval triumph at Salamis sealed victory over the Persians, and also secured Athens’ position as Greece’s leading city-state. **The rise and fall of Classical Athens** Perhaps the most startling aspect of Classical Athens is how suddenly it emerged to the glory for which we remember it – and how short its heyday proved to be. In the middle of the fifth century BC, Athens was little more than a country town in its street layout and buildings – a scattered jumble of single-storey houses or wattle huts, intersected by narrow lanes. On the Acropolis, a site reserved for the city’s most sacred monuments, stood only the blackened ruins of temples and sanctuaries. There was little to suggest that the city was entering a unique phase of its history in terms of power, prestige and creativity. But following the victory over the Persians at Salamis, Athens stood unchallenged for a generation. It grew rich on the export of olive oil and silver from the mines of Attica, but above all it benefited from its control of the Delian League, an alliance of Greek city-states formed as insurance against Persian resurgence. The Athenians relocated the League’s treasury from the island of Delos to their own acropolis, ostensibly on the grounds of safety, and with its revenues their leader Pericles was able to create the so-called Golden Age of the city. Great endowments were made for monumental construction, arts in all spheres were promoted, and – most significantly – it was all achieved under stable, democratic rule. The Delian League’s wealth enabled office-holders to be properly paid, thereby making it possible for the poor to play a part in government. The fatal mistake of the Athenian democracy, however, was allowing itself to be drawn into the Peloponnesian War. Defeated, a demoralized Athens succumbed to a brief period of oligarchy, though it later recovered sufficiently to enter a new phase of democracy, the age of Plato. However, in 338 BC, Athens was again called to defend the Greek city-states, this time against the incursions of Philip of Macedon. Demosthenes, said to be as powerful an orator as Pericles, spurred the Athenians to fight, in alliance with the Thebans, at Chaeronea. There they were routed, in large part by the cavalry commanded by Philip’s son, Alexander (later to become known as Alexander the Great), and Athens fell under the control of the Macedonian empire. The city continued to be favoured, particularly by Alexander the Great, a former pupil of Aristotle, who respected both Athenian culture and its democratic institutions. Following his death, however, came a more uncertain era, which saw periods of independence and Macedonian rule, until 146 BC when the Romans swept through southern Greece and it was incorporated into the Roman province of Macedonia. **Christians and Turks** The emergence of Christianity was perhaps the most significant step in Athens’ long decline from the glories of its Classical heyday. Having survived with little change through years of Roman rule, the city lost its pivotal role in the Roman–Greek world after the division of the Roman Empire into Eastern and Western halves, and the establishment of Byzantium (Constantinople, now Istanbul) as capital of the Eastern – Byzantine – empire. In 529 AD the city’s temples, including the Parthenon, were reconsecrated as churches. Athens rarely featured in the chronicles of the Middle Ages, passing through the hands of various foreign powers before the arrival in 1456 of Sultan Mehmet II, the Turkish conqueror of Constantinople. Turkish Athens was never much more than a garrison town, occasionally (and much to the detriment of its Classical buildings) on the front line of battles with the Venetians and other Western powers. Although the Acropolis became the home of the Turkish governor and the Parthenon was used as a mosque, life in the village-like quarters around the Acropolis drifted back to a semi-rural existence. Four centuries of Ottoman occupation followed until, in 1821, the Greeks of Athens rose and joined the rebellion sweeping the country. They occupied the Turkish quarters of the lower town – the current Pláka – and laid siege to the Acropolis. The Turks withdrew, but five years later were back to reoccupy the Acropolis fortifications, while the Greeks evacuated to the countryside. When the Ottoman garrison finally left in 1834, and the Bavarian architects of the new German-born monarch moved in, Athens, with a population of only 5000, was at its nadir. **Modern Athens** Athens was not the first-choice capital of modern Greece: that honour went instead to Náfplio in the Peloponnese. In 1834, though, the new king Otto transferred the capital and court to Athens. The reasoning was almost purely symbolic: Athens was not only insignificant in terms of population and physical extent but was then at the edge of the territories of the new Greek state. Soon, while the archeologists stripped away all the Turkish and Frankish embellishments from the Acropolis, a city began to take shape: the grand Neoclassical plan was for processional avenues radiating out from great squares, a plan that can still be made out on maps but has long ago been subverted by the realities of daily life. Pireás, meanwhile, grew into a significant port again. The first mass expansion of both municipalities came suddenly, in 1923, as the result of the tragic Greek–Turkish war in Asia Minor. A million and a half “Greek” Christians arrived in Greece as refugees, and over half of them settled in Athens and Pireás, changing at a stroke the whole make-up of the capital. Their integration and survival is one of the great events of the city’s history. Athens was hit hard by German occupation in World War II: during the winter of 1941–42 there were an estimated two thousand deaths from starvation each day. In late 1944, when the Germans finally left, the capital saw the first skirmishes of civil war, and from 1946 to 1949 Athens was a virtual island, with road approaches to the Peloponnese and the north only tenuously kept open. During the 1950s, the city again started to expand rapidly thanks to the growth of industry and massive immigration from the war-torn, impoverished countryside. By the late 1960s, Greater Athens covered a continuous area from the slopes of mounts Pendéli and Párnitha down to Pireás. Much of this development is unremittingly ugly, since old buildings were demolished wholesale in the name of a quick buck, particularly during the colonels’ junta of 1967–74 (see George Papandréou and the colonels). Financial incentives encouraged homeowners to demolish their houses and replace them with apartment blocks up to six storeys high; almost everyone took advantage, and as a result most central streets seem like narrow canyons between these ugly, concrete blocks. Unrestrained industrial development on the outskirts was equally rampant. Growth in recent decades has been much slower, but it’s only in the last twenty years that much effort has gone in to improving the city’s environment. Although Athens still lags far behind Paris or London in terms of open space, the evidence of recent efforts is apparent. What’s left of the city’s architectural heritage has been extensively restored; there’s clean public transportation; new building is controlled and there’s some interesting, radical modern architecture. **The Athenian Golden Age** Under the democratic reforms of Pericles, a new and exalted notion of the Athenian citizen emerged. This was a man who could shoulder political responsibility while also playing a part in the cultural and religious events of the time. The latter assumed ever-increasing importance. The city’s Panathenaic festival, honouring the goddess Athena, was upgraded along the lines of the Olympic Games to include drama, music and athletic contests. The next five decades were to witness a golden age of cultural development during which the great dramatic works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and the comedies of Aristophanes were written. Foreigners such as Herodotus, considered the inventor of history, and Anaxagoras, the philosopher, were drawn to live in the city. Thucydides wrote The Peloponnesian War, a pioneering work of documentation and analysis, while Socrates posed the problems of philosophy that were to exercise his follower Plato and to shape the discipline to the present day. But it was the great civic building programme that became the most visible and powerful symbol of the age. Under the patronage of Pericles, the architects Iktinos, Mnesikles and Kallikrates, along with the sculptor Fidias, transformed the city. Their buildings included the Parthenon and Erechtheion on the Acropolis; the Hephaisteion and several stoas (arcades) around the Agora; a new odeion (theatre) on the South Slope of the Acropolis hill; and, outside the city, the temples at Soúnio and Ramnous. **The Olympic legacy** The 2004 Olympics can take much of the credit for getting Athens back on the map and regenerating the city’s infrastructure. Successful as they were in many ways, however, the legacy of the Games is a bitter one. In the rush to be ready on time many of the works went disastrously over budget, while inadequate planning means that few of the costly stadia have found any purpose in life since the Games finished. These decaying white elephants are a potent symbol of Greece’s economic crisis and of the crazed rush to spend money that, ultimately, Greece never had. **Roman Athens** In 146 BC, the Romans ousted Athens’ Macedonian rulers and incorporated the city into their vast new province of Achaia, whose capital was at Corinth. The city’s status as a renowned seat of learning (Cicero and Horace were educated here) and great artistic centre ensured that it was treated with respect, and Athenian artists and architects were much in demand in Rome. Athens, though, was a backwater – there were few major construction projects, and what building there was tended to follow Classical Greek patterns. The one Roman emperor who did spend a significant amount of time in Athens, and left his mark here, was Hadrian (reigned 117–138 AD). Among his grandiose monuments are Hadrian’s Arch, a magnificent and immense library, and (though it had been begun centuries before) the Temple of Olympian Zeus. A generation later Herodes Atticus, a Roman senator who owned extensive lands in Marathon, became the city’s last major benefactor of ancient times. **November 17: the student uprising** In November 1973, students at Athens Polytekhnío launched a protest against the repressive regime of the colonels, occupying the building and broadcasting calls for mass resistance from a pirate radio transmitter. Large numbers came to demonstrate support. The colonels’ regime was determined to smash the protest and, on the night of November 17, snipers were positioned in neighbouring houses and ordered to fire into the courtyards while a tank broke down the entrance gate and the buildings were stormed. Even today nobody knows how many of the unarmed students were killed – estimates range from twenty to three hundred. The protest arguably marked the beginning of the end for the colonels; its anniversary is still commemorated by marches and sombre remembrance ceremonies and the date is an iconic one, used for example by the November 17 terrorist group, which was active in Greece from 1975 to 2002. The Neoclassical Polytekhnío itself, alongside the National Archeological Museum, is not open for visits. **A city with a view** Athens is a city built on hills. Most famous is the Acropolis itself, which forms the backdrop to all the finest views of the city and whose summit also offers wonderful vistas across the metropolis and out to Pireás and the sea. But there are dozens of other viewpoints throughout Athens. Some of the finest views are from the café terraces of Thissío, packed in the early evening as the setting sun picks out the ancient monuments – try Athinaion Politeia or dine on the roof at Filistron. There are other great views from the roof bar at the [Hotel Grande Bretagne](https://www.grandluxuryhotels.com/hotel/hotel-grande-bretagne), Lykavitós Hill, Odhós Eólou, 45° and from Filopáppou Hill. **What’s on in Athens and when** Sources of information on what’s on in English are somewhat limited. There are some listings in a number of free monthly or weekly publications distributed to hotels, but these are partial and not always accurate; better are the weekly [Athens News](https://www.athensnews.com/), with full movie lisitings and coverage of most major events, or the daily local edition of the [International Herald Tribune](https://www.thenationalherald.com/). Much more exhaustive listings including music, clubs, restaurants and bars, but in Greek only, can be found in local weekly Athinorama. These can be bought at kiosks anywhere in the city: look out too for free weeklies like [Lifo](https://www.lifo.gr/) and [Athens Voice](https://www.athensvoice.gr/) (again, Greek only), copies of which can be picked up in galleries, record shops and the like. Specialist record shops are also good sources of information in themselves, frequently displaying posters and selling tickets for rock, jazz or festival concerts. **The Athens and Epidaurus Festival** The annual Athens and Epidaurus Festival encompasses a broad spectrum of cultural events: most famously ancient Greek theatre (performed, in modern Greek, at the Herodes Atticus Theatre on the South Slope of the Acropolis), but also modern theatre, traditional and contemporary dance, classical music, jazz, traditional Greek music and even a smattering of rock. The Herodes Atticus Theatre is a memorable place to watch a performance on a warm summer’s evening – although you should avoid the cheapest seats, unless you bring along a pair of binoculars and a cushion. Other festival venues include the open-air Lykavitós Theatre on Lykavitós Hill, and the two ancient theatres at Epidaurus. For the latter, you can buy inclusive trips from Athens from the festival box office, either by coach or boat – the two-hour boat trip includes dinner on board on the way home. Performances are scheduled from late May right through to early October, although the exact dates vary each year. If you can, it’s worth booking in advance (credit card bookings at [greekfestival.gr](http://greekfestival.gr/)); tickets go on sale three weeks before the event at the box office. As well as online, programmes are available from tourist offices or from the festival box office in the arcade at Panepistimíou 39 (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4pm, Sat 9am–2.30pm). There are also box offices at the Herodes Atticus Theatre (daily 9am–2pm and 5–8pm) and Epidaurus (Mon–Thurs 9am–2pm and 5–8pm, Fri & Sat 9.30am–9.30pm) for events at those venues only. **Accommodation in Athens** Hotels and hostels can be packed to the gills in midsummer – August especially – but for most of the year you’ll have no problem finding a bed. Having said that, many of the better hotels are busy all year round, so it makes sense to book in advance. In the cheaper places especially, ask to see the room before booking in – standards vary greatly even within the same building. Wherever you stay, rooms tend to be small, and noise can be a problem; you’ll get slightly better value, and a greater chance of peace, away from the centre. **Athens food and drink** Athens has the best and the most varied restaurants and tavernas in Greece – and many places are sources not just of good food but of a good night out too. Fast-food and takeaway places are also plentiful – the usual international chains keep a relatively low profile, and there are plenty of more authentic alternatives. Reservations are rarely necessary – indeed the simpler places probably won’t have a reservation system (they can usually squeeze in an extra table if necessary) – but it is worth calling ahead at the fancier restaurants, or if you’re planning a special trip across town. While Pláka’s hills and narrow lanes can provide a pleasant, romantic evening setting, they also tend to be marred by high prices, aggressive touts and general tourist hype. Still in the centre, areas like Psyrrí, Monastiráki and Thissío (or Gázi a little further afield) are where the locals go for a meal out; lively and fashionable. Omónia is business territory, a great place to grab a quick (or a long) lunch. For better value and traditional food, it’s well worth striking out into the ring of neighbourhoods around, all of which have plenty of local tavernas: Exárhia, Neápoli, Áno Petrálona, Pangráti, Koukáki or the more upmarket Kolonáki are all good bets. On the coast the big attraction, not surprisingly, is fish. The pleasure harbours of Pireás, especially, are a favourite Sunday lunchtime destination. **Athens nightlife and entertainment** In the city centre of Athens, the most vibrant nightlife is in and around Psyrrí, Gázi and Thissío but there are bars and clubs almost everywhere, mostly kicking off around 10 pm or later. Bars listed here mostly focus on music or morph into clubs after midnight; North European-style pubs are rare – try Brettos or James Joyce. There are also plenty of cafés that function as bars at night; 7 Jokers or Arodou. **Beach Parties** Some central Athens air-conditioned clubs remain open year-round, but in summer the scene really moves out to the long stretch of coast from Fáliro to Várkiza, where huge temporary clubs operate on and around the beaches. If you head out, bear in mind that the taxi fare will be just one of several hefty bills, although admission prices usually include a free drink. **LGBT Travel Information for Athens** Athens’ gay scene is mostly very discreet, but the city has its share of bars and clubs; most, these days, are in Gázi. For further information, check the gay sections in the listings magazines or the excellent website [www.gaygreece.gr](http://www.gaygreece.gr). Athens Pride takes place in the first week of June ([athenspride.eu](http://athenspride.eu/)). **Entertainment in Athens** Live traditional Greek music is one of the capital’s big attractions but you have to visit during winter to see the best acts; in summer many musicians head off to tour the islands. This winter period – from around October to May – is also when the major classical music, ballet and drama performances are staged, and the sporting calendar is at its busiest. On the other hand, summer is the festival season. Most significant is the June-to-September Athens & Epidaurus Festival of dance, music and ancient drama, but there are also annual rock, jazz and blues events, while you may see big international bands at one of the major outdoor venues. **Shopping in Athens** Shopping in Athens is decidedly schizophrenic. On the one hand, the bazaar area is an extraordinary jumble of little specialist shops and stalls, while almost every neighbourhood still hosts a weekly street market. On the other hand, the upmarket shopping areas of the city centre, and the malls and fashion emporia of the ritzier suburbs, are as glossy and expensive as any in Europe. Somewhere between the extremes, in the city centre you’ll find endless stoas, covered arcades off the main streets full of little shops. Some have been expensively refurbished and house cafés and designer-label stores; most, though, are a little dilapidated, and many still specialize in a single product – books here, computer equipment there, spectacles in another. **Bazaars and markets in Athens** Even on a purely visual level, the central bazaar and nearby flower market are well worth a visit, while the surrounding streets, especially Evripídhou, are full of wonderfully aromatic little shops selling herbs and nuts, and others concentrating on supplies for a peasant way of life that seems entirely at odds with modern Athens – rope, corks, bottles and preserving jars. On Sunday mornings from around 6am until 2pm, between Monastiráki and Thissío metro stations, you will find a flea-market of authentic Greek junk (used phone cards and the like) spread out on the pavements, especially along the metro lines towards the Thissío end of Adhrianoú. Among the best and most central street markets are: Mondays, Hánsen in Patissíon (Metro Áyios Eleftheríos); Tuesdays, Lésvou in Kypséli (Metro Viktorías) and Láskou in Pangráti (trolley #2 or #11); Fridays Xenokrátous in Kolonáki, Dhragoúmi in Ilísia (Metro Evangelismós/Mégaro Mousikís), Tsámi Karatássou in Koukáki (Metro Akrópoli) and Arhimídhous in Mets, behind the Panathenaic Stadium; and on Saturdays Plakendías in Ambelókipi (Metro Ambelókipi) and Kallidhromíou in Exárhia. Usually running from 7am to 2pm, these are inexpensive and enjoyable, selling household items and dry goods, as well as fresh fruit and vegetables, dried herbs and nuts. **City beaches** People swim from the rocks or seawall almost anywhere on the coast southeast of Pireás – especially the older generation (the youth tend to head down towards the fleshpots and pay beaches of Glyfádha) – but the closest pleasant beach to the centre is Edem, reached by tram to the Edem or Báthis stops. A small patch of sand with cafés and tavernas, this is busy and urban but fine for a quick swim and sunbathe and, remarkably, has Blue Flag status. There are other free beaches near the Flisvós, Kalamáki and Zéfyros tram stops. **Monastiráki and Psyrrí** Monastiráki, to the north of Pláka, is substantially less touristy than its neighbour, though there are still plenty of sights and extensive opportunities for eating, drinking and shopping. The area gets its name from the little monastery church (monastiráki) on central Platía Monastirakíou. The square, with its handy metro station, marks a return to the traffic and bustle of commercial Athens; full of fruit stalls, street performers, lottery vendors and kiosks. This neighbourhood has been a marketplace since Ottoman times, and it still preserves, in places, a bazaar atmosphere. The main market lies straight up Athinás from here, towards Omónia, but nearer at hand you’ll see signs in either direction that proclaim you’re entering the famous Athens Flea Market. Psyrrí, northwest of Platía Monastirakíou, is a former working-class district that is now home to Athens’ busiest nightlife as well as some quirky shops. This is also a great place to eat and drink: between them, Monastiráki and Psyrrí probably have more eating places per square metre than anywhere else in Athens. **Athens Flea Market** These days the description of the streets around Platía Monastirakíou as a flea market is a bit of a misnomer – there’s plenty of shopping, but mostly of a very conventional nature. Odhós Pandhróssou, to the east, is almost entirely geared to tourists, an extension (though not quite literally) of Adhrianoú. West of the square the flea market has more of its old character, and among the tourist tat you’ll find shops full of handmade musical instruments, or stalls selling nothing but chess and tavlí boards. **Sýndagma** All roads lead to Sýndagma – you’ll almost inevitably find yourself here sooner or later for the metro and bus connections. Platía Syndágmatos, Constitution Square, to give it its full name, lies roughly midway between the Acropolis and Lykavitós hill. With the Greek Parliament building (the Voulí) on its uphill side, and banks, offices and embassies clustered around, it’s the political and geographic heart of Athens. The square’s name derives from the fact that King Otto was forced by popular pressure to declare a formal constitution for the new Greek state from a palace balcony here in 1844. It’s still the principal venue for mass demonstrations and political rallies. **The Greek Parliament and Tomb of the Unknown Soldier** The Voulí, the Greek National Parliament, presides over Platía Syndágmatos from its uphill (east) side. A vast, ochre-and-white Neoclassical structure, it was built as the royal palace for Greece’s first monarch, the Bavarian King Otto, who moved in 1842. In front of it, goose-stepping evzónes in tasselled caps, kilt and woolly leggings – a prettified version of traditional mountain costume – change their guard at regular intervals before the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. On Sundays, just before 11am, a full band and the entire corps parade from the tomb to their barracks at the back of the National Gardens to the rhythm of innumerable camera shutters. **Omónia and the bazaar** While Pláka and Sýndagma are resolutely geared to tourists and the Athenian well-heeled, Platía Omonías (Omónia Square) and its surroundings represent a much more gritty city. Here the grand avenues imagined by the nineteenth-century planners have been subverted by time and the realities of Athens’ status as a commercial capital. Heading up from Monastiráki, the bazaar area around Odhós Athinás is home to a bustling series of markets and small shops spilling into the streets and offering some of urban Athens’ most compelling sights and a cosmopolitan ethnic mix. It’s also a neighbourhood being increasingly recolonised by the drug addicts and prostitutes who were cleared out in time for the Olympics; a process accelerated by the economic crisis. Platía Omonías itself – brutal and shadeless – has little to offer in terms of aesthetics but it is the heart of Athens for a good portion of the population: a continuous turmoil of people and cars. **The Bazaar** The city’s bazaar area is concentrated on Athinás and Eólou streets. Here the unsophisticated stores still reflect their origins in the Oriental souk system with each street specialized in selling certain goods. Hence the Monastiráki end of Athinás is dedicated to tools; food stores are gathered around the central market in the middle, especially along Evripídhou; there’s glass to the west; paint and brasswork to the east; and clothes in Eólou and Ayíou Márkou. Always raucous and teeming with shoppers, kouloúri (bread-ring) sellers, gypsies and other vendors, the whole area is great free entertainment. **The meat and seafood market** The lively heart of the neighbourhood is the central meat and seafood market, occupying almost an entire block bordered by Athinás, Evripídhou, Eólou and Sofokléous. The building itself is a grand nineteenth-century relic, with fretted iron awnings sheltering forests of carcasses and mounds of hearts, livers and ears – no place for the squeamish. In the middle section of the hall is the fish market, with all manner of bounty from the sea squirming and glistening on the marble slabs. **The fruit and vegetable market** Across Athinás is the colourful fruit and vegetable bazaar, surrounded by streets where grocers pile their stalls high with sacks of pulses, salt cod, barrels of olives and wheels of cheese. A clear sign of Athens’ increasing multi-ethnicity is to be seen in the streets around Evripídhou just west of here, where a growing community from South Asia, predominantly Bengalis, gather around spice-rich minimarkets. **Odhós Eólou: the flower market** Pedestrianized Odhós Eólou is far less frantic than parallel Athinás and benefits from café tables in the street and benches to rest on. Its gentler nature is also reflected by the goods sold here: where Athinás has power tools and raw meat, Eólou offers clothes and the flower market. The latter, gathered around the church of Ayía Iríni at the southern end of the street, has stalls through the week but really comes alive on Sunday morning. Eólou itself follows the line of an ancient road, and the sight of the Acropolis as you approached Athens in ancient times must have been awe-inspiring. The views remain impressive today, with the Erechtheion’s slender columns and pediment peeking over the edge of the crag at the bottom of the street. **North of Central Athens** North of the centre there’s just one sight of any note, the fabulous National Archeological Museum, the finest collection of ancient Greek artefacts anywhere, and one of the world’s greatest museums. Otherwise it’s a rewarding part of the city for a wander – restaurants, bars, cafés and bookshops abound, while Exárhia and neighbouring Neápoli are among the city’s liveliest neighbourhoods. Traditionally the home of anarchists, revolutionaries, artists and students, Exárhia is pretty tame these days, but it’s still the closest thing in central Athens to an “alternative” quarter. On Saturdays, locals flock to the colourful street market on Kallidhromíou from early morning till lunchtime. Just above, the little-visited Stréfis Hill provides some great views and a welcome break from the densely packed streets and dull apartment blocks surrounding it. **The National Archeological Museum** The National Archaeological Museum is an essential stop on any visit to Athens. However high your expectations, this unrivalled treasure trove of ancient Greek art and sculpture seems to surpass them. The interior is surprisingly plain – there’s nothing flashy at all about the displays – but clear and well labelled. You could easily spend an entire morning or afternoon here, but it’s equally possible to scoot around the highlights in an hour or two; arriving early in the morning or late in the afternoon should mean you won’t be competing with the tour groups for space. Opening times vary in the summer and winter, although Mondays typically open in general until 19.30 pm. **Mycenaean and Cycladic Art** Directly ahead of you as you enter, the Mycenaean halls have always been the biggest crowd pullers. The gold Mask of Agamemnon, arguably the museum’s most famous piece, is almost the first thing you see. Modern dating techniques offer convincing proof that the funerary mask actually belonged to some more ancient king, but crowds are still drawn by its correspondence with the Homeric myth and compelling expression. Among the other highlights are a golden-horned Bull’s Head displayed alongside a gold Lion’s Head; gold jewellery including a diadem and a gold-foil cover for the body of an infant from Grave III (the “Grave of the Women”); the Acropolis Treasure of gold goblets, signet rings and jewellery; the gold Vafio cups, with their scenes of wild bulls and long-tressed, narrow-waisted men; and dozens of examples of the Mycenaeans’ consummate art – intricate, small-scale decoration of rings, cups, seals and inlaid daggers. There’s work in silver, ivory, bronze and boars’ tusks as well; there are baked tablets of Linear B, the earliest Greek writing (mainly accounting records) and Cretan-style frescoes depicting chariot-borne women watching spotted hounds in pursuit of boar and bull-vaulting. It’s a truly exceptional display, the gold shining as if it were in the window of a jeweller’s shop. Still earlier Greece is represented in the adjoining rooms. Room 5 covers Neolithic pottery and stone tools from Attica and elsewhere and runs through to the early Bronze Age. The pottery shows sophisticated decoration from as early as 5000 BC, and there are many figurines, probably fertility symbols judging by their phallic or pregnant nature, as well as simple gold ornaments. Room 6 is home to a large collection of Cycladic art from the Aegean islands. Many of these idols suggest the abstract forms of modern Cubist art – most strikingly in the much-reproduced Man Playing a Lyre. **Ancient Sculpture** Sculpture makes up a large part of the museum’s most important exhibits, following a broadly chronological arrangement around the main halls of the museum. Early highlights include a statue of a kore (maiden) from Merenda (Myrrhinous) in Attica, in room 11. Her elegantly pleated belted chiton (dress) bears traces of the original paint and decoration of swastikas, flowers and geometric patterns. Nearby is a wonderful grave stele of a young doryphoros (spear-bearer) standing against a red background. Room 13 has the Stele of a Young Warrior, with delicately carved beard, hair and tunic-folds, and the Kroisus kouros (statue of an idealized youth), who looks as if he’s been working out; both are from the late sixth century BC. **Classical Art** Just a few highlights of the massive Classical art collection can be mentioned. Room 15 boasts a mid-fifth-century BC bronze Statue of Poseidon, dredged from the sea off Évvia in the 1920s. The god stands poised to throw his trident – weight on the front foot, athlete’s body perfectly balanced, the model of idealized male beauty. A less dramatic, though no less important, piece in the same room is the Eleusinian Relief, showing the goddess of fertility, accompanied by her daughter Persephone, giving to mankind an ear of corn – symbol of the knowledge of agriculture and associated with the Mysteries of Eleusis. In Room 20 is a small marble statue of Athena, a copy of the great cult statue that once stood in the Parthenon: it’s a scary figure; the vast original, covered in gold and ivory, must have been extraordinary. The Little Jockey of Artemission, a delicate bronze figure seeming too small for his galloping horse, was found in the same shipwreck as the Poseidon. Room 28 has some fine, fourth-century BC bronzes including the Antikythira Youth, thought to depict either Perseus or Paris, from yet another shipwreck, off Andikýthira, and the bronze head of a Boxer, burly and battered. Still more naturalistic, in room 29, is the third-century BC bronze head of a Philosopher, with furrowed brow and unkempt hair. **Later Sculpture** The most reproduced of the later sculptures is a first-century AD statue of a naked and indulgent Aphrodite (room 30) about to rap Pan’s knuckles for getting too fresh – a far cry (a long fall, some would say) from the reverent, idealizing portrayals of the gods in Classical times. There is also an extraordinary bronze equestrian portrait statue (without the horse) of the Emperor Augustus. **Minor Collections** Less visited, but still extremely worthwhile, are the collections hidden away at the rear of the museum and upstairs. These include, downstairs the Stathatos collection, with some truly exquisite jewellery; a wonderful Egyptian room; and the bronze collection. This is an exceptional display of thousands of items: weapons, figurines, axes, cauldrons, jewellery, mirrors, kitchen implements; even bronze sandals. Perhaps the highlight is the Antikythira Mechanism, at the far end. Dating from around 150–100 BC, it was discovered in a shipwreck off the island of Andikýthira in 1900, but modern scanning techniques have only recently revealed its full complexity. It is believed to be an astronomical computer capable of predicting the movements of stars and planets, and its sophisticated use of differential gears is unique – technologically, it was at least 1500 years ahead of its time. Upstairs is a collection of hundreds of vases, if anything still more spectacular, with a full explanation of manufacturing techniques, changing styles of decoration and the uses of the different types of vessel. As ever, the highlights are from the Classical era. Up here, too, is a display on the excavations of Akrotíri on Thíra, including some of the famous Minoan frescoes discovered there. **Western Athens** Some of the most interesting up-and-coming areas of Athens – Thissío, Gázi, Keramikós and Roúf – lie to the west of the centre, where the recent extension of Metro line 3 has acted as a further spur to the pace of change. Nightlife and restaurants are the chief attractions here, but there’s also a cluster of new museums and galleries. Here too is Kerameikos, site of a substantial section of the walls of ancient Athens and an important burial ground. South of Thissío, things are rather more traditional. The hills of the Pnyx and Filopáppou offer a pleasant, green escape from the city as well as fine views down over the Acropolis and Agora. On the west side of the hills, the residential zone of Áno Petrálona is a real delight, entirely untouristy, with some excellent tavernas and a great open-air cinema, though absolutely nothing in the way of sights. **Thissío** The cafés of Thissío, with tables set out on huge terraces above the Agora site, offer some of the finest views of the Acropolis, especially at night. Head south from Metro Thissío and you can follow pedestrianized Apóstolou Pávlou past these terraces and right around the edge of the Ancient Agora and Acropolis sites. It’s an especially rewarding walk in the early evening, when the setting sun illuminates this side of the rock and the cafés start to fill with an anticipatory buzz. As you follow the street round there are a number of small excavations at the base of the hills on your right. First, immediately below the church of Ayía Marína, is a rocky area identified as the earliest known sanctuary of Zeus in Attica; there’s not a great deal to see through the fence, but it’s clear that the rocks have been cut into terraces. **Kolonáki and the museum quarter** Kolonáki is the city’s most chic central address and shopping area. Walk up from Sýndagma, past the jewellery stores on Voukourestíou, and you can almost smell the money. It’s also from Kolonáki that a funicular hauls you up Lykavitós Hill, where some of the best views of the city can be enjoyed. The neighbourhood’s lower limits are defined by the streets of Akadhimías and Vassilísis Sofías, where grand Neoclassical palaces house embassies and museums. **The Benáki Museum** The often overlooked but fascinating Benáki Museum houses a private collection donated to the state in the 1950s by Antónis Benákis, a wealthy cotton merchant. Its exhibits range from Mycenaean jewellery, Greek costumes and folk artefacts to memorabilia of Byron and the Greek War of Independence, as well as jewellery from the Hélène Stathatos collection. Among the more unusual items are collections of early Greek Gospels, liturgical vestments and church ornaments rescued by Greek refugees from Asia Minor in 1922. There are also some dazzling embroideries and body ornaments and unique historical material on the Cretan statesman Eleftherios Venizelos, Asia Minor and the Cretan Revolution. An additional attraction, especially if you’ve been dodging traffic all day, is the rooftop café, with views over the nearby National Gardens. The museum shop stocks a fine selection of art books and CDs, plus some of the best posters and postcards in the city. **The Museum of Cycladic Art** The small, private Museum of Cycladic Art is a beautifully presented collection that includes objects from the Cycladic civilization (third millennium BC, from the islands of the Cyclades group), pre-Minoan Bronze Age (second millennium BC) and the period from the fall of Mycenae to around 700 BC, plus a selection of Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic pottery. **The Cycladic Collection** The Cycladic objects are on the first floor – above all, distinctive marble bowls and folded-arm figurines (mostly female) with sloping wedge heads whose style influenced twentieth-century artists like Moore, Picasso and Brancusi. The exact purpose of the effigies is unknown but, given their frequent discovery in grave-barrows, it’s possible that they were spirit-world guides for the deceased or representations of the Earth Goddess. Their clean, white simplicity is, in fact, misleading, for they would originally have been painted. Look closely, and you can see that many still bear traces. **The Ancient Greek Collection** Of the ancient Greek art on the upper floors, the highlight is the superb black-figure pottery, especially a collection of painted Classical-era bowls, often showing two unrelated scenes on opposite sides – for example, one of the star exhibits depicts revellers on one face and three men in cloaks conversing on the other. **The Museum of Cycladic Art** On the ground floor and basement, there’s a tiny children’s area and a good shop, as well as a pleasant café (with vegetarian choices) in an internal courtyard. A covered walkway connects to the nineteenth-century Stathatos House, magnificently restored as an extension for temporary exhibitions. **The Byzantine and Christian Museum** Excellently displayed in a beautiful building, the Byzantine and Christian Museum is far more wide-ranging than you might expect. Exhibits start with art from the very earliest days of Christianity, whose fish and dove motifs can’t disguise their extremely close parallels with Classical Greek objects. There are displays on everyday Byzantine life; reconstructions of parts of early churches (mosaic floors and chunks of masonry, some even from the Christian Parthenon); a Coptic section with antique clothing such as leather shoes decorated with gold leaf; and tombs, in some of which offerings were left, again a reminder of a pagan heritage. But the highlights are the icons, with the earliest being from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. There are dozens of lovely examples, many of them double-sided, some mounted to be carried in procession, and you can follow the development of their style from the simplicity of the earliest to the Renaissance-influenced art of the sixteenth century. Alongside the icons are some fine frescoes, including an entire dome reconstructed inside the museum. **The War Museum** The only “cultural” endowment of the 1967–74 junta, the War Museum becomes predictably militaristic and right-wing as it approaches modern events: the Asia Minor campaign, Greek forces in Korea, Cyprus and so on. However, the bulk of the collection consists of weaponry and uniforms, with a large collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century swords and handguns, and a particular concentration on the World War II era. Earlier times are also covered with displays on changing warfare from Mycenae through to the Byzantines and Turks, and an array of models of the acropolises and castles of Greece, both Classical and medieval. Outside are artillery pieces and planes, including a full-scale model of the Daedalus, one of the first-ever military aircraft, which dropped bombs on Turkish positions in December 1912 during the Balkan Wars. **The National Gallery** Despite housing some 9500 paintings the National Gallery is a bit of a disappointment. Its core collection is of Greek art from the sixteenth century to the present, and of the artists shown here only El Greco is well known outside Greece. One of the few modern painters to stand out is Nikos Hatzikyriakos-Ghikas (Ghika), well represented on the ground floor. On the mezzanine is a small group of canvases by the primitive painter Theophilos. Perhaps more interesting is the large temporary exhibition space, often hosting major travelling exhibitions. Near the National Gallery lie what are believed to be the fourth-century BC foundations of Aristotle’s Lyceum – where he taught for thirteen years and to which Socrates was a frequent visitor. Surrounded by museums, this seems an appropriate place for it, but important as the discovery is for scholars, there’s nothing actually to see. **Southern Athens** South of the centre there are very few sights, but the quiet residential districts here, easily accessible, are full of character and home to excellent restaurants and cafés that see few tourists. Immediately south of the Acropolis lies upmarket Makriyiánni, revitalized by the presence of the new Acropolis Museum; adjacent Koukáki is a plainer neighbourhood with numerous hotels and good local places to eat. Mets, a steep hillside area on the other side of busy Syngroú avenue, and neighbouring Pangráti have a wealth of small, homely tavernas and mezedhopolía. The latter also boasts buzzing local nightlife and good shops along Imittoú avenue, and an impressive street market every Friday on Odhós Arhimídhous, off Platía Plastíra. **Pireás** PIREÁS (Piraeus) has been the port of Athens since Classical times, when the so-called Long Walls, scattered remnants of which can still be seen, were built to connect it to the city. Today it’s a substantial metropolis in its own right. **What to do in Piraeus** The port and its island ferries are the reason most people come here; if you’re spending any time, though, the real points of interest are around the small-boat harbours of Zéa Marina and Mikrolímano on the opposite side of the small peninsula. Here, the upscale residential areas are alive with attractive waterfront cafés, bars and restaurants offering some of the best seafood in town, and there’s an excellent archaeological museum. **History of Piraeus** The port at Pireás was founded at the beginning of the fifth century BC by Themistocles, who realized the potential of its three natural harbours. His work was consolidated by Pericles with the building of the Long Walls to protect the corridor to Athens, and the port remained active under Roman and Macedonian rulers. Subsequently, under Turkish control, the place declined to the extent that there was just one building here, a monastery, by the end of the War of Independence. From the 1830s on, though, Pireás grew by leaps and bounds. By World War I, Pireás had become the nation’s predominant port, its strategic position enhanced by the opening of the Suez and Corinth canals in 1862 and 1893 respectively. Like Athens itself, the port’s great period of expansion began in 1923, with the exchange of populations with Turkey. Over 100,000 Asia Minor Greeks decided to settle in Pireás, doubling the population almost overnight – and giving a boost to a pre-existing semi-underworld culture, whose enduring legacy was rembétika, outcasts’ music played in hashish dens along the waterside. **Archeological Museum of Pireás** The Archeological Museum of Pireás boasts an excellent collection, and for Classical enthusiasts merits a special trip. The displays begin upstairs, where one of the star exhibits is a bronze kouros (idealized male statue) of Apollo. Dating from 530–520 BC, this is the earliest known life-size bronze, here displayed with two similar but slightly later figures of Artemis and Athena. They were all found in 1959, in a store-room, where they had supposedly been hidden in 86 BC, when the Roman general Sulla besieged Pireás. Many other items in the museum were dragged from shipwrecks at the bottom of the harbour, including, in the last room on the ground floor, second-century AD stone reliefs of battles between Greeks and Amazons, apparently mass-produced for export to Rome (note the identical pieces). Other highlights include some very ancient musical instruments, and many funeral stelae and statues.