



Last updated 7/7/2008, by M.C.Tzeng

Vincent and I, along with our sister and brother-in-law Susan and Ken, recently concluded a 14-day trip to Greece and Greek Islands with OAT from 6/16 ~ 6/30/2008. This is my trip preparation notes for Greece, shortened to cover just the OAT itinerary, along with my post-trip comments. This doc has an "Independent Travelers" section on page 3 which may provide useful info for friends who plan to visit Greece independently in the future.

-----

#### **Best time to go?**

The best times to visit Greek Islands are late spring to early summer (mid May to mid June) and autumn, when the tourist infrastructure has geared up but you won't have to contend with the crowds of summer tourists. The weather is usually pleasantly warm during this time, but not too hot.

Avoid the Greek Easter holiday when all the local people leave home and go to islands, the tourist areas are overcrowded and the prices are high. (The Greek Easter usually falls in late April. Check ahead to find out exactly when Easter is in Greece in the year you want to visit.)

The advantage of the spring is that the daylight is longer.

May-June and Sept-October are shoulder seasons, so the prices are similar. Exception for Santorini - September is high season in Santorini, because many European tourists (especially retired) choose that period to visit the island.

October may be too cold and rainy, and if the oceans are choppy, cruise/ferry may not be able to stop at some of the islands because the seas were too rough.

Comment by Mei: When we visited from 6/16 to 6/30/2008, the afternoon temperature was about 100F, it was too hot for us. Definitely plan to visit earlier than mid June to avoid the heat in mid-day.

-----

The organized tour we signed up is called **Classic Greece & the Greek Islands** from OAT (Overseas Adventure Travel):

<http://www.oattravel.com/gcc/general/default.aspx?oid=175049&linklocation=search>

We chose a departure date of 6/16 in order to sail on the traditional and more spacious (100-120 sq ft cabin) "Galileo". The other two small ships used by OAT for this itinerary are the sleek "Harmony G" and the 3-masted "Panorama". National Geographic's "[sailing the Greek Isles](#)" chartered the same "Panorama" ship for an one-week cruise without any additional mainland sites beyond Athens, but charges much more than OAT's two-week trip.

#### **Post trip comments by Mei:**

One thing we neglected to consider is the effect of strong winds on small ships. Each of the three small ships OAT chartered has a cruising speed of 9-11 knots. Galileo is 153 feet long with a beam of 32 feet and 25 cabins. While we were in Greece in mid June, there were continuously very strong winds (on the scale of 6 ~ 7 Beaufort) in the Cycladic Islands. So for the first day our

ship did not sail, we docked at Piraeus. The next morning we sailed south-west to the Saronic island of Poros. The 3rd day we sailed north to the forgettable Aegina (Egina) island to wait and kill time to see if the wind will subside. When it looked like the wind would not die down, we were transferred to a ferry from Aegina island back to Piraeus and then connected to a large ferry (with a speed of 27 knots) to reach Syros island, so at least we finally were on one of the Cycladic islands. Galileo sailed with just the 17 crew, our luggage, plus one guest who had a problem with foot therefore should refrain from walking, from Aegina to Syros to meet with us at 7pm. That enabled all tour members to eat dinner and sleep on the Galileo docked at Syros Island, saving additional costs to OAT if it had to find lodgings for us in hotels.

Maria, the OAT's Greece director, boarded the Galileo at Syros to cruise the rest of the way with our group. Perhaps she heard through our tour guide about the huge disappointments if we were unable to visit Santorini. Anyway, she boarded Galileo in order to make instantaneous decisions based on time table and changing wind situations. The following morning from Syros all tour members took public ferry for a day-trip to visit Mykonos because the winds were too strong for Galileo to safely dock at Mykonos' harbor. The next day Galileo sailed with all of us from Syros to Naxos for a tour and a home-hosted lunch, and then sailed to Ios, a small island half-way between Naxos and Santorini. The next morning, on a Saturday, Galileo reached Santorini at 8:15am, to the delight of all of us. We had until 4:30 pm to explore Santorini. At 5 pm, the captain learned his request to sail Galileo back to Piraeus was denied by the port authority due to a gale in the vicinity our path. If Galileo could not start its slow sailing back to Piraeus that evening, most of us would have missed our flights home from Athens on Monday morning. So Maria and the tour leaders immediately switched gear into Plan B, we were told to pack quickly, boarded an over-night Blue Star ferry at 7:30 pm with our luggage to sail back to Piraeus. Our ferry tickets included private cabins to sleep in. After 10 hours, we reached Piraeus at 5:30 am on Sunday. OAT had two buses waiting for us and drove us to Divani Acropolis Palace Hotel (located at south of the Acropolis) to check in and had a bountiful buffet breakfast.

Now that we unexpectedly had one last full day in Athens, OAT arranged a tour bus to take us to Cape Sounion to see the Temple of Poseidon. At 7:30 pm we had a farewell dinner at a restaurant with a night view of Parthenon of the Acropolis. Over all, OAT did a good job to make plan changes when necessary and absorb the extra costs to ensure customers were safe and happy. Our tour guide, Menelaos did a good job. Menelaos is a sincere young man in his 30's. He told us he was a lawyer by training, but gotten tired of dealing with mostly traffic violation cases, he went to school for 3 years to study to be a licensed tour guide (learning history of arts, history of architecture, history of ..., besides having to be fluent in one foreign language) and has been working as an independent tour guide for 10 years. At every site or museum, Menelaos was our guide, we did not need to bring in another local guide to tell us the history of the places we were visiting.

-----

What to wear? Read the "**Recommended Clothing**" section:

[http://www.oattravel.com/gcc/general/default.aspx?oid=175243&linklocation=trip\\_leftnav](http://www.oattravel.com/gcc/general/default.aspx?oid=175243&linklocation=trip_leftnav)

What to pack? one checked-in bag pp, limited to 44 pounds due to cruise ship vessel. Read the "**Essential Gear**" section:

[http://www.oattravel.com/gcc/general/default.aspx?oid=175247&linklocation=trip\\_leftnav](http://www.oattravel.com/gcc/general/default.aspx?oid=175247&linklocation=trip_leftnav)

#### **Visitor Information:**

The **Greek National Tourism Organization** (GNTO, or ETO in Greece), <http://www.gnto.gr> Look up their office around the world, <http://www.gnto.gr/pages.php?pageID=80&langID=2>. I wrote to their New York office at [info@greektourism.com](mailto:info@greektourism.com) to tell them when and where I'd be visiting and request maps. Two weeks later I received a detailed Athens city map and a Greek country map. These two maps proved to be very useful and are far superior than any maps given out at hotels in Athens. So make sure you write them to obtain maps before your trip.

#### **Online Travel guide to Greece**

- 1) <http://www.greektravel.com/> (American Matt Barrett's popular Greek guide)
- 2) <http://www.athensguide.com/> (Matt Barrett's Athens survival guide)
- 3) <http://www.greektravel.com/lesson1/> (How to visit islands on your own, from Matt Barrett)

#### **Travelogues:**

- Hooked on Greece: <http://www.magicaljourneys.com/GreeceJournals/Karen/index.html>  
From the end of May to the beginning of June, 2001
- Magical Journey: May 2 ~ 22, with a 4-day land tour of "Classical Greece"  
[http://www.magicaljourneys.com/GreeceJournals/magical\\_journey/index.html](http://www.magicaljourneys.com/GreeceJournals/magical_journey/index.html)

#### **Guide Books:**

- Frommer's "Greek Islands" (very good island guide with ferry guide, and also includes Athens. Easy to read)
- Lonely Planet Greece (More in depth, but the small fonts and the black and white maps made the book hard on my eyes to read)

#### **Independent travelers?**

Work with a reputable travel agent in Athens via email to have them book your hotels, ferry tickets & transfers, and book a popular "THREE DAY CLASSICAL TOUR" to visit mainland sites outside of Athens such as Epidaurus, Nafplion, Olympia and Delphi. (see [http://www.greecetravel.com/dolphinhellas/dolphin\\_classical.html](http://www.greecetravel.com/dolphinhellas/dolphin_classical.html) or

[http://www.fantasytravelofgreece.com/Land\\_tours.html#9](http://www.fantasytravelofgreece.com/Land_tours.html#9) for details and prices.)

Meteora is too far north out of the way, and in my opinion, can be skipped. Save the time for somewhere else.

Both [Dolphin Hellas Travel](#) and [Fantasy Travel](#) have been mentioned in TravelZine discussion group. Dolphin Hellas Travel was recommended by a happy Travelzine member who used them on several occasions. Both agencies will work with you to let you choose the islands you want to visit, the number of days on each island, and the type of hotels you will be happy with.

Read (with a grain of salt, of course) <http://www.athensguide.com/agency.html> about why it makes sense to use a local travel agent in Greece. They may be able to book hotels at a better price than you can directly.

For recommended Greece hotels,

- Athens: look up Matt's list at <http://www.hotelsofgreece.com/athens/>
- Outside of Athens, go to <http://www.hotelsofgreece.com/> and click on the particular region you'll be visiting
- Lastly, always look up customers feedback of a hotel at [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com) for additional references.

Greek Ferry Information: <http://www.athensguide.com/ferries.html>

Greek ferries <http://www.ferries.gr/>,  
<http://www.gtp.gr>,  
<http://www.allgreekferries.com>

Your best bet is to buy a ferry ticket from an agent ahead of time. There are many travel agencies near Syntagma Sq. that sell ferry tickets, such as Galaxy Travel  
<http://www.galaxytravel.gr>.

#### **Facts**

Greece is at the southern end of the Balkan Peninsula. It consists of a peninsula and about 1400 islands, of which 169 are inhabited. Roughly, 4/5 of Greece is mountainous.

- TimeZone: 2 hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time. (7 hours ahead of EDT).  
Currency: Euro  
Electrical Voltage: 200 V.  
Telephone: all phone numbers are 10-digit, except for mobile phones.  
International Country Code: 30 (calling a Greek number from US is 011-30-xxx-xxx-xxxx)
- One-third of Greece's 11 million live in the Greater Athens area – you can imagine the congestion of Athens.
- The Greek Orthodox Church is closely related to the Russian Orthodox Church; together they form the third-largest branch of Christianity. Orthodox, meaning 'right belief', was founded in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by Constantine the Great, who was converted to Christianity by a vision of the Cross. Orthodox priests could marry before becoming ordained.

- When visiting a Greek church or monastery, women should wear skirts that reach below their knees and have their arms and shoulders covered. Men should wear long pants.
- Hundreds years of clearing of forest to plant olive tree damaged the ecology. Without the surface roots of the native forest to bind it, the topsoil of the hills was rapidly washed away. (The olive tree has no surface-root system.) Thus, the lush countryside so cherished by the ancient Greeks was transformed into the harsh, rocky landscape that greets the modern visitors today.
- The last Greek king was Constantine II, King of the Hellenes, he was exiled in 1973. His lineage is called the House of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg, which is a line of the House of Oldenburg that is descended from King Christian III of Denmark, to which the royal houses of Denmark, Norway, and the deposed royal house of Greece belong.

## Pronunciation

Go to <http://www.yourdictionary.com>, paste your word into it to hear a version of the pronunciation. However, they are likely to pronounce the word in English, while you may want to learn to pronounce it the way locals pronounce it.

Go to <http://www.greekfestnola.com/speakgreek.html> to hear a few food words pronounced.

- **Cyclades** (kih-klah-dez) – these islands are so named because they forms a circle (kyklos) around the island of **Delos**, one of the world's most haunting ancient sites.
- **Hora, or Chora – meaning “the place”, is commonly used for the most important regional town in a island.**

## History

**Cycladic Civilization** : from 3000 BC to 1100 BC, centered on the islands of the Cyclades.

**Minoan Civilization** : from 3000 BC to 1100 BC, developed on Crete. Named after the Greek mythology King Minos, the legendary ruler of the city of Crete and son of Zeus and Europa. (It is not clear if Minos is a name or if it was the Cretan word for "King".)

- The first advanced civilization to emerge from Europe. Declined over the competition against the Mycenaean from the mainland. Abruptly ended around 1100BC, attributed to the eruption of the volcano on Thira (Santorini).

**Mycenaean Civilization** : 1600 -1100 BC, named after the ancient city of **Mycenae** in the north-eastern **Peloponnese**. Ends in 1200 BC when overrun by the Dorians.

## Food and Drink

Post trip comments by Mei:

Personally, we enjoyed appetizers far more than the meat main dishes. We loved *tomato and cucumber* salad ( Greek salad without feta cheese or olive), fried kalamarakia, grilled octopus, fried zucchini, grilled zucchini, grilled eggplant, grilled fish. However, not every Greek restaurant serves mezedes (appetizers), and not every restaurant serves seafood. So have a look at the posted menu outside the restaurant before you walk in.

- Feta – The National cheese of Greece. Made from sheep and/or goat's milk.
- Fish and Seafood - When ordering fish, it is customary to go into the kitchen and choose the fish yourself. **Fresh fish is normally sold by the kilogram** (although some may be sold by the *merida* (portion)), so make sure it is weighted so you don't get a shock when the bill arrives. There are not enough local fish to feed the millions of tourists each summer. The fresh fish on your plate could be flown in from elsewhere. Most place will state if the fish and seafood are frozen, though often on the Greek side of the menu – **indicated by an abbreviated 'kat' or an asterisk**. Smaller fish are often a better bet.
- Meat: mainly pork and lamb. Beef is relatively rare.
- The popular gyros are from the Greek word of 'spin'.
- Almost every part of the animals is used for food.
- **Ouzo** ([OU-zo]) - an **anise**-flavored liqueur (sweet alcoholic beverage) that is widely consumed in Greece. It is similar to French **pastis**, or Italian **Sambuca**, or Macedonian mastika or Turkish **raki**, but a little sweeter and smoother. It can be drunk neat or mixed with water.
- A meal in Greece is highlighted with a selection of hors d' oeuvres, hot and cold (referred to as **mezedes**), which are served in small plates placed in the center of the table family

style. Greeks are not connoisseurs of soup but the few available are meals in themselves.

- **Mezedes** (plural of the word **Meze** which is pronounced as [me-ZE]) – Appetizers that can be anything from a salad, stewed meat and vegetables, sardines, beans, sweetbreads, meatballs, cheese, sausage, or fried fish. A combination Mezedes platter (if you don't want to order each meze individually) may be comprised of such items as melitzanosalata (mashed eggplant with oil, lemon and garlic), taramosalata (Greek caviar spread), dolmadakia (meat or rice rolled in grapevine leaves), **kalamarakia** (deep fried squid), tyropitakia (cheese wrapped in strudel leaves), **kolokithakia** (deep fried zucchini) are usually served with **tzatziki** (or *sadzik*, pronounced as [za-ZEE-kee], is a white dipping sauce made from cucumber, yogurt and garlic), **keftedes** (kef-teh-des, meatballs), stuffed peppers and tomatoes, pickled octopus, and more.
- **Fried kalamarakia** (squid) are also listed in the *mezedes*-appetisers section of the menu in most restaurants since they are trying to discourage you from making a whole meal out of it since it is so cheap. Don't let that stop you. When there is fresh kalamari available the menu will tell you. In fact by law the menus have to let you know whether a fish is fresh or frozen. If you see (kat) in parenthesis next to the fish you are ordering that means it is frozen. When cut and fried it is usually frozen but fresh kalamari is grilled or fried whole. In the *kalamari* family is also **thrapsala** which looks like a squid and tastes like a squid but is not a squid. Like fresh kalamari they serve it grilled or fried whole.
- **Nero** (water); **Garides** (shrimp); **Marides** (smelt) ; **Kolios** (mackerel) – best served grilled. **Sardeles** (sardines); **Sardeles pastes** (raw sardines); **Psarosoupa** (fish soup); **lavraki** (sea bass). When you go to a fish restaurant some of the fish will be sold by the *merida* (portion) and some by the kilo. Look at the price per kilo before you order so you don't get surprised when get the bill. The waiter will always recommend the most expensive fish, but the most expensive fish may not be the most tasty. Read Matt's [seafood guide](#).
- **Moussaka** ([musa'ka] - is a traditional eggplant based dish in the Balkans and the Middle East, but most closely associated with Greece and Turkey. The Greek version, which is the best-known outside the region, traditionally consists of layers of ground (minced) lamb or red meat, sliced eggplant and tomato, topped with a white sauce and baked. It is eaten with **Tzatziki** and pilaf. There are also variants with zucchini (courgette), carrots and potatoes.
- **Souvlakia** ([souv-LA-kee]) – shish kebab, small chunks of pork or chicken flavored with lemon, herb and olive oil, grilled on skewer.
- The main course is a casserole or grilled fish. There are also many delectable meat stews to choose from, as well as plain grilled cuts of meat and of course the well-known charcoal grilled lamb or pork called souvlaki. Fish and shellfish are excellent when caught, cooked and eaten the same day. **Psaria plaki** is a whole fish baked in an open dish with vegetable in a tomato and olive oil sauce. (According to Matt Barrett's [seafood guide](#), grilled fish tasted the best.)
- Salad is usually ordered with the main course and can be prepared with fresh vegetables or cooked dandelions (greens are boiled in water, drained and served with oil and lemon). Horiatiki, the usual Greek salad, consists of tomato slices, cucumber slices, olives and feta cheese dressed with oil and vinegar. All seasonal vegetables, such as artichokes, beans, peas, carrots, and zucchini are often cooked and served together in the casserole dishes rather than separately.
- **Loukoumades** (lou-kou-MAH-thes, plural of Loukoumas, [lou-kou-MAS]) – round donut-center-like pastries that are deep-fried. The Greek version are commonly spiced with clove and cinnamon in a honey syrup and topped with powdered sugar.
- **Estiatorion (restaurant):**  
A conventional eating establishment with tablecloths. Tend to be in the upper price range.  
**Taverna:**  
An offshoot of the traditional countryside eating place. The owner and family members can often be seen preparing meals and serving food. A taverna places a great deal of emphasis on the mezedes and traditional cooking. The upper price range tavernas can be very sophisticated establishments in food, service and decor, even though they rarely are as expensive as the deluxe restaurants.



### **Psistaria:**

A barbecue-style eating place with a large spit conspicuously in the center of the entrance. Here one can inspect the roast pork, lamb and chicken. Your selection is priced according to the weight. Salad, French fries, and cheese compliment such a meal.

### **Psarotaverna (fish taverna):**

They specialize in fish and seafood and are almost always found by the seaside or harborside. In a psarotaverna, one will find fresh fare of the day, usually the owners' morning catch.

- **Cafeneons** are coffee shops which also have ouzo and mezedes though they have a limited menu and often they just bring you whatever they happen to have that day.
- **Cafeterias** - large cafes that also have food. They usually have modern toilets and nobody knows or cares if you have eaten there or not.
- **Ouzerie** and **mezedopoulions** specialize in smaller dishes which you eat with ouzo, though they serve wine and beer too.

- **Prices and Tipping:**

In Greece a 15% service charge is usually included in your bill. However, if it is not, or if you are very happy with the service follow the custom of your own country, as things appear much the same worldwide. Waiters, for instance, will expect a 10% tip or less for large bills.

The G.N.T.O. has tried to come to grips with the confusing tipping problem. Menus are usually presented with two parallel price charts. On the left, the price of the food and drink only. On the right, the same price with service and tax added. The service charge is ordained by Greek law, so additional tipping is really a recognition of special service for special requests. **The current Greek custom is to leave some change on the plate with the bill and a smaller amount on the table. The tip on the plate is for the waiter. The tip on the table is for the busboy who served the water, brought extra bread, wine or beer and so on. Busboys work for tips alone.**

- **Entertainment:**

**Bouzouki** 布祖基琴(一種形狀似曼陀林的希臘弦樂器) is the most popular entertainment for the great majority of the Greeks. Named for the mandolin-like instrument called a *bouzouki*, these loud and lively venues are where you'll find all manner of local Greeks throwing flowers and happily dancing on tables until the wee hours of the morning. Bouzouki music is similar to the American Blues, with many adaptations and intensities. The analogy is not accidental either. Bouzouki like the Blues emerged from a sub-culture of unemployed city dwellers persecuted by the authorities and treated as outcasts by the more prominent middle class. Their refuge was born from the small dens and coffee houses they created in the less desirable areas of the city. They found consolation in the music they created which reflected the hard times and their experiences in pain and pleasure, in love and friendship. But the music composed had a unique quality and pathos, as related to the Blues era. It was later adapted and patronized by the wealthy class and in time underwent many changes to emerge as the typical Greek music of today.

Bouzouki nightclubs can be very expensive. Before you join in the traditional breaking of plates, ask the management as to the charge per dozen.

## **ATHENS**

International airport: **Eleftherios Venizelos** (or **El. Venizelos**, named after the great [statesman](#) of modern Greece) <http://www.aia.gr/pages.asp?langID=2&pageID=988> : 27km (17 miles) to the south-east of city center. (There is a Citibank ATM at the arrival level "All users area" also at the departure level, "All Users area".)

Taxi - Allow an hr by bus or taxi to Athens. Taxi is 15E ~ 25E, depending on time of the day and traffic. (Ask an airport official or policemen what the fare should be, or look up at the airport's website to find the official taxi tariff at the time of your arrival, and let the taxi driver know you have been told the official rate before getting into the car.)

Bus - Bus No X95 service to Syntagma Sq every 30 min. Bus No X96 to Piraeus, every 20 minutes, and costs about 4E. Bus No X94, every 10-min, between airport and Metro Line # 3 ([blue line](#)) at Ethniki Amyna.

Metro- The airport's Metro stop is by the airport's Sofitel hotel. Metro blue line (Line # 3, **Egaleo - Athens International Airport**) is a cheap and efficient option for reaching central Athens, especially since buses run erratically and taxis are costly.

(tip: Don't rely on the airport's website and official publications for accurate, up-to-date info.)

What does "**Athens Attica**" mean?

Attica is an ancient periphery (subdivision) in Greece. Consists of the coastal district of east central Greece. Attica is subdivided into the prefectures of Athens, Piraeus, East Attica and West Attica.

### Getting Around

1) Metro: <http://www.ametro.gr/page/>, then click on the English flag for English language. Here is the metro's PDF map: [http://www.ametro.gr/files/pdf/AM-Athens-metro\\_ext\\_en.pdf](http://www.ametro.gr/files/pdf/AM-Athens-metro_ext_en.pdf) **Alert: On a crowded Metro, groups of pick pockets abound, two distract you and one picks your wallet.**

- Tickets must be validated at the machine at platform entrances. The penalty for traveling without a validated ticket is 29E, or 40 times the ticket price.
- 0.80E per trip, except on line 1 (Green line) which is divided into 3 segments. Within a segment you pay 0.60E; a journey covering more than one segment cost 0.80E.
- The 1E ticket is valid for 90 minutes on the entire Athens urban transport network (metro, bus and trolleybus) but does not include train or bus to the airport.
- A daily 3E ticket valid for 24 hours, and a weekly 10E ticket, with the same restriction on airport travel. You have to be doing a fair bit of travel to make the daily and weekly ticket worthwhile.

2) Buses and Trolleybuses: 0.5E per ticket. Ticket must be purchased before you board, either at a transport kiosk or at most *periptera* kiosks and validated on board.

3) **Athens Sightseeing Public Bus Line:** <http://www.oasa.gr/index.asp?pageid=105> , 5E. Bus No. 400, covering 20 key locations in Athens (similarly to Rome's bus No. 110). In high season, bus run every 30 min between 7:30am and 9pm. Tickets can only be purchased on board. Tickets are valid for 24 hours and can be used on all public transport, excluding the airport services. One loop is 90 minutes, a good way to get an orientation without walking. Buses are run by OASA, Athens's public bus company. Bus stops are blue and scattered along the route the bus takes. A recorded voice announces the name of each stop. Stops on the trip include [The Acropolis](#), [Temple of Zeus](#), [Plaka](#), [Syntagma-Parliament](#), The University, [Omonia Square](#), [Keramikos](#), [Monastiraki](#), [Psiri](#), [Thission](#), [The National Museum](#), [Benaki Museum](#), the [National Gallery](#) , the [Central Market](#) and the Ambelokipi (stop #12, Panathinaikos Athlitikos Omilos, or PAO, a multi-sport club. *Pan-Athenian Athletic Club*). PANATHENAIC STADIUM (stop #14, [Panathinaiko Stadium](#), built fully of white marble. This is where the first Olympic Games of the modern era took place in 1896. In ancient times the site was used to host the athletic portion of the [Panathenaic Games](#) in honor of the Goddess [Athena](#). In the [2004 Olympic Games](#), the Panathinaiko Stadium hosted the [archery competition](#), and the finish of the Marathon). Bus stops are a two-meter tall huge blue sign <http://www.athensguide.com/sightseeing-bus.htm>. Schedules and maps are posted on the stop sign, including the time the bus will arrive at that particular stop (maybe). Bus route map, see <http://www.athensguide.com/map/sightseeing-bus.htm> or a better one, <http://www.oasa.gr/pdf/400-1.pdf>

### Attractions :

The center of Athens is very compact, and most of the sights are within 20-25 minutes walk of the **Syntagma** (Constitution) **Sq** which is generally regarded as the city's center. The triangle of Syntagma Sq, **Monastiraki Sq**, and **Omonia** (Harmony) **Sq**. are the three hubs of metro and buses.

Here is but a short list of attractions tailored based on the short time we have in Athens. Consult Frommer's book for additional choices:

- **Syntagma (Constitution) Sq.** – (pronounced similarly to "Sin-da-ma") The Parliament, Tomb of the unknown soldier, the changing of the guard takes place every hour on the hour. Ermou is the main shopping street off Syntagma.
- **Monastiraki** – little Monastery, the former heart of Ottoman Athens.
- **Plaka** – The oldest neighborhood of Athens, is in the shadow of Acropolis. The name Plaka probably come from *pliaka* (old). Lined with shops and charming old restaurants, but is also a tourist trap. For example, fresh fish is sold by the kilogram, so make sure it is weighted and understand the final price before ordering. If you feel you get burned, stand

- your ground and threaten to call the tourist police and pay nothing before they arrive. Often the mere threat of calling the tourist police has the miraculous effect of causing a bill to be lowered.
- **Acropolis** (high city) –
    - **Parthenon** (means *virgin apartment*) – the largest Doric temple ever completed in Greece, and the only one built completely (apart from its wooden roof) of Pentelic marble.
    - **Nike** – The winged goddess of Victory
    - **Erechtheion** – (the “ch” is pronounced as “h” as in Horray, and the accent is at the “theion”) a temple situated on the most sacred site of the Acropolis. Named after Erechtheus, one of the mythical kings of Athens. Recognizable by the 6 maiden columns (**Caryatids**) that support its southern porch. So called because the models for them were women from Karyai (modern day Karyes) in Lakonia. Those 6 maiden columns you see are plaster casts, 4 of the originals are in the **Acropolis Museum** – at the southern base of the Acropolis. One of the originals is in British Museum in London, part of the so called “**Elgin Marble**” removed by Lord Elgin from Acropolis between 1801-1812. At that time the Acropolis was still an **Ottoman** military fort, Elgin requested permission from the Ottoman Sultan access to Acropolis, including the Parthenon and the surrounding buildings. He allegedly persuaded the Ottomans to let him remove some of the marbles in order to preserve them from destruction in the fighting during the **Greek War of Independence**. The Greeks eventually won independence from the Ottoman Empire. Read all about it in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erechtheum>
  - **Ancient Agora**  
Agora means an open "place of assembly" in ancient Greek City-state. In early Greek History free-born male land-owners who were citizens would gather in the agora for military duty or to hear statements of the ruling king or council. Later in Greek history, the agora served as a **market place** where merchants kept stalls or shops to sell their goods. Admission charge 4E.
    - Start from the **Agora museum** in the reconstructed **Stoa of Attalos**. (*stoa* = roofed arcade, *Attalos* refers to King Attalos II of **Pergamon**) The museum has a model of the Agora as well as collection of finds from the site.
    - The section between the passenger terminal and the metro station are full of pick pockets. Traveler beware.
  - **Central Market** – on Athinas street north of Monastiraki Sq. Seafood, meat, fruits, olives, you name it. This is where the Athenians shop. Read Matt's guide of Central Market: <http://www.athensguide.com/agora.html>, and here are some [pictures](#) of the market. Warning: you may lose appetite after seeing all these animal heads and animal parts.
  - **National Archaeological Museum** - acres of collections, go only if you have time. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Archaeological\\_Museum\\_of\\_Athens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Archaeological_Museum_of_Athens) or [http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/1/eh154.jsp?obj\\_id=3249](http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/1/eh154.jsp?obj_id=3249) Red-and-black-figured vases, bronze statues, Mycenaean gold, marble relief of gods and goddesses, frescoes from Akrotiri – the Minoan site on the island of Santorini. One of the most interesting sections is the Mycenaean hall with all of **Heinrich Schliemann's** ([\[ˈʃliːman\]](#)) gold finds from Mycenae. 1/3 miles (10-min on foot) north of Omonia Sq. Metro: Omonia; or 10 minute walk from Metro Viktoria station (Green line). Admission 6E.
  - **Benaki Museum** – Greece's finest private museum, Antonis Bernakis. 5 blocks east of Syntagma Sq. Metro: Syntagma or Evangelismos. Admission 6E

### Shopping in Athens

- Gold and silver jewelry with modern Greek designs, or reproduction of ancient Greek jewels. (Syntagma Sq. or Kolonaki areas.)
- Fur coats and jackets (Syntagma Sq)
- Copper Utensils, Clay and ceramic goods.
- Woven wool and cotton jumpers with unique designs and leather goods and shoes (on Ermou Street and Kolonaki Sq.)

### Restaurant in Athens:



- **O Thanasis** : (Mitropoleos 69, just off Monastiraki Square. Metro: Monastiraki.) For a casual lunch, an OAT team lead recommends **O Thanasis**. This place is very popular with the locals and can get quite busy—especially during the weekends. But it's worth it just for the incredible shish kebab, *souvlaki*, and nice thick pita bread. For to go and sit down. There are tables inside and out, but if you want to take in the scene, definitely try to sit outdoors. A great lunch for two will only run you about \$10. Cash only. Souvlaki is one of the most famous and most eaten Greek food. It is usually beef, lamb or pork meat that is served on a round pita bread with lettuce, tomato, onions, and tzatziki (a yogurt sauce with cucumber and a lot of garlic). That is if you eat it in a souvlaki shop. If you want take-out the pita bread is rolled. You take it with you in packed in wax paper which keeps it all together and eat it while walking. Souvlaki is to Greece what the hamburger is to the US. There are a lot of good souvlaki shops in Athens especially on Mitropoleos street, very close to Monastiraki square. Here is a you tube segment of the making of Souvlaki filmed at O Thanasis: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhCG-ONMVrg> and here are pictures of the O Thanasis restaurant: <http://www.athensinfoguide.com/eatingtrares.htm> Mitropoleos runs east-west. We ordered and shared Tomato-Cucumber salad, tzatziki with Pita bread, chicken souvlaki, pork souvlaki, and shish kebab (with mixed lamb and beef). Every one loved the tender chicken souvlaki and the exceptional tzatziki. The total bill for the 6 of us came to 36 Euro (We also consumed two 1.5 liter of bottled water). Thanasis does not serve seafood, therefore no grilled Octopus or squid. But everyone enjoyed an inexpensive and delicious meal at Thanasis. Definitely recommended.
- Obviously, one needs to find a restaurant with night view to the Acropolis for dinner. Some one recommended "**Attico**", (located on the same street as the entrance to Acropolis, across from the bus parking lot. Roof top seating overlooks the lit Acropolis and the menu is great. Reasonably priced but reservations are a must!) which we did not have opportunity to check out ourselves. We did check out another recommendation, **To Kouti** (The Box) at 23 Adrianou Street (Metro: Monastiraki), but found it not only serves only Mediterranean food not Greek food, but also it has no views to the Acropolis. The upstairs windows are too small for a view to the Acropolis. However, we settled at **Diodos** (Two Roads) at 19 Adrianou Street, two doors down from To Kouti. **Diodos** has a very nice outdoor seating area with views to the Acropolis from the north. Since we were looking toward Acropolis from the north, the building we saw high up on the rock was the Erechtheion, not the Parthenon with a giant crane.

### **Lodging** : 2 nights in Athens

The tour brochure listed 3 designated hotels,

- (1) The classy **St. George Lycabettus**, or <http://www.stgeorgeathenshotel.com/> located at the foot of Lykavittos (or Lycabettus) Hill, with a roof-top pool, close to the upscale shopping area of Kolonaki (to the north east of Syntagma), or
- (2) **Hera Hotel**, a boutique hotel, rated as the # 27 in popularity of Athens hotels by [tripadvisor](#) reviewers (as of this writing). Just outside of Plaka, and 2 blocks south of the Acropolis; or
- (3) **Holiday Suites**, a boutique hotel with just 29 suites, is a short walk from the **Megaro Mousikis (Music Hall) metro station** - two subway stops east of Syntagma Sq on Line # 3 (the blue line). This hotel receives [mix reviews](#) on TripAdvisor. It turned out our team was assigned to this hotel, so we took time to get familiar with the [hotel map](#). I read on TripAdvisor that it's a 20-min walk from this hotel to Syntagma Sq along the pleasant *Vas. Sofias*. But on Athens city map it is 15 blocks to Syntagma Sq. To far to walk, in my opinion. (Comments by Mei: We liked our spacious and clean room on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor at this Holiday Suites. I don't know what caused the negative reviews at tripadvisor because we liked it. Besides, the hotel offers guests free use of 30-min internet-connected computer at the lobby while most hotels charge 5 Euro per hour for internet connection.)

### **Piraeus** (or spelled as **Pireas**)

Name of the port, located 10 km southwest of Athens, reachable by the Metro line # 1 (Green line).

The city and port of Piraeus was made famous by the 1960 movie "[Never On Sunday](#)". Listen to its Academy Award winning [theme song on You Tube](#). The star of the movie, [Melina Mercouri](#), later ran for public office and was elected to the Parliament.

There are three ports in Piraeus :

- The largest is called **the Central port (Megas Limin)**, on the western side of the peninsula, which is the departure point for public ferries, hydrofoil and catamaran services.

On the eastern side there are two harbors for private yachts:

- **Zea Marina (Limin Zeas)** – on the eastern side, is our terminal for this OAT private ship, and
- the picturesque **Mikrolimano** (Small Harbor), is also on the eastern side.

### **Meteora & Kalambaka** (Meh-teh-o-rah)

**Meteora** (Meh-teh-o-rah) - see <http://www.meteora-greece.com/>, or <http://www.greecetravel.com/meteora/monasteries.html>

**Kalambaka** is one of the most ancient cities of Thessaly (Central Greece), near the rock towers of Meteora. The main street is very touristy, lined with restaurants and souvenir shops.

Lodging: 2 nights at the 4-star [Divani Hotel Kalambaka](#). 5 Euro for internet connection for the first hour, then 3 Euro per hour after that. The two ladies at the front desk are not very friendly. They must be tired of tourists asking similar questions day in day out.

Restaurant:

- **Restaurant Meteora** (Ikonomou 2) in Kalambaka, at the Town Hall square. (There are a total of 3 fountain squares along the main street.) You may think you've accidentally wandered into someone's home. That's because Mrs. Kaiti, one of the owners of this cozy, family-run restaurant, likes to invite diners to sneak a peek at the action in the kitchen. On the menu, you'll find traditional favorites like *moussaka*, an eggplant casserole; *saganaki*, lightly fried squares of *kefalotyri* or feta cheese; and *keftedes*, meatballs made from beef or lamb and flavored with mint and oregano. For dessert, you can't go wrong with the baklava—a house specialty—or *loukoumades*, fried balls of dough drenched in honey and sprinkled with cinnamon. We had one lunch here. You go into kitchen to see what are available and point to what you want, it is 9 Euro per plate. Greek Salad is 6 Euro. It is not inexpensive, but with pleasant outdoor seating and quick service (by pointing the food you want at the kitchen) made it every efficient. Open for lunch only. Closed at 4 pm.
- We enjoyed dinner at **Taverna Panellinion**, located at the Town Hall square, across the street from Restaurant Meteora. We ordered many appetizers and just two meat entrees to share. The fried zucchini, fried calamari and grilled octopus are all very good.

### **Delphi & Tholos / Arachova**

**Delphi** (although the word is usually pronounced as "Delf-eye" in English, but according to [Merriam-Webster Pronunciation](#) and [wikipedia](#), as the ancient town in Greece it is pronounced as "thel-Fee" or "del-Fee" in Greek manner.

– a major site for the worship of the sun god [Apollo](#). Built on the slopes of Mount Parnassos. See <http://www.greecetravel.com/delphi/> or <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delphi>; and here is the Oracle of Delphi: <http://www.greecetravel.com/delphi/oracle.html>. The center of Delphi is the sanctuary of Apollo, on the southern tip of the mountain slope.

**Tholos** (meaning dome) – refers to the "Tholos Temple" in Delphi, sanctuary of Athena. [http://www.sacredsites.com/europe/greece/tholos\\_temple\\_delphi.html](http://www.sacredsites.com/europe/greece/tholos_temple_delphi.html). Tholos is probably the most widely recognized building on the site because of the color of the marble and the fact that it is a round temple.

Do you know the whole Delphi and Tholos area were first excavated just in 1892 by a French team led by [Theophile Homolle](#) of the [College de France](#)? It was buried beneath a town. The whole town was moved to a new area so that his region could be excavated.

**Arachova** (or Arahova, pronounced as "a - Ra - ho - va") – a mountain small town 12km from Delphi [http://arachova.tripod.com/arachova\\_engl.htm](http://arachova.tripod.com/arachova_engl.htm) Today, Arahova is renowned for its colorful rugs and carpets.

Lodging: 2 nights at the 5-star [Santa Maria Arachova](#). This hotel offers free wireless connection from their lobby if you have your own computer, which we had and enjoyed getting connected to home news and email.

### **The Cyclades** (kih-klah-dez) **Islands**

The best months to visit these islands are May, June, and September; the worst month is August when vacationing Greeks fill every hotel room on the islands. (And July is too hot.)

The islands below are listed in the order we'll be visiting on this OAT tour. Read Frommer's "Greek Islands" guide book for details and maps of each island.

## **Paros (Never mind, a mistake on my part. We are visiting Poros, not Paros)**

**Paros** is the island to the west of Naxos. **Paros** is often mentioned in the same breath as Mykonos and Santorini, but is cheaper than Mykonos and Santorini – thus is called "**poor man's Mykonos**". See [www.greektravel.com/greekislands/paros](http://www.greektravel.com/greekislands/paros) for Matt's introduction. The marbles from this island are soft, therefore are suitable for sculptures.

Paros is the "transportation hub" of Cyclades: Almost all island ferries stop here en route to someplace else. The island has an appealing capital, inland villages of great charm, and excellent beaches.

**Poros** (the word means "straits" or "ford", crossing place through shallow water)

The only **Saronic** Gulf island we'll be visiting. **Poros** is separated from **Peloponnese** by a narrow channel only 370 meter, and a 3-minute boat ride to cross that channel. Since Poros is easy to reach from the mainland, weekend Athenians and many tourists flock here each summer. Poros is made up of two linked islands: Sphairia or Sferia, the southern part, and Kalaureia, also Kalavria or Calauria (meaning 'gentle breeze'), the northern and largest part. Matt's guide on Poros: <http://www.greektravel.com/greekislands/poros/>

(Comments from Mei: When approaching the harbor, the mountains rising above the sea, red-roofed houses along the harbor, and the tall Cyprus trees reminded me of the lovely scenery at Lake Como in northern Italy)

## **Tinos**

Known as the Holy Island, Tinos is the most important destination in all of Greece for religious pilgrims, yet it remains one of the least commercialized islands of Cyclades – and a joy to visit for that reason.

(Quoting Matt Barrett) Tinos is the easiest island to get to from Mykonos and as different as two islands can be from each other. Tinos could be called the antidote to Mykonos, with traditional white Cycladic villages, beautiful beaches, many of them empty, great food at lower prices and over 1000 churches. See [www.greektravel.com/greekislands/tinos](http://www.greektravel.com/greekislands/tinos)

## **Delos & Mykonos (Mikonon)**

**Mykonos** – a very popular destination for jet setters. Famous for its shopping and night life. Matt's introduction: <http://www.greektravel.com/greekislands/mykonos/information.htm>

**Delos** - a 20-min boat ride from Mykonos. The mythology tells us Apollo and his sister Artemis were born on this island. The island was considered by the ancient Greek to be the holiest of sanctuaries, the sacred center around which the other Cyclades circles. For nearly 1,000 years this sanctuary was the political and religious centre of the Aegean. In the 18th century BC, the annual Delia Festival was established on the island to celebrate the birth of Apollo. Delos was populated during its height in Hellenistic times with wealthy merchants, mariners and bankers from as far away as Egypt and Syria. It is one of the most remarkable archaeological preserves in the world. Always a place set apart, Delos has rules different from other islands: in ancient times, people were not allowed to die or be born on this sacred island. Today they are not allowed to spend the night, and the site can be visited only between 8:30am to 3pm, and not at all on Monday. See Matt's introduction of Delos:

<http://www.greektravel.com/greekislands/delos/information.htm>

- This is a place you'll definitely need sunglasses.
- Recommend visiting as early as possible in the day, especially in the summer when the crowds and heat become overwhelming by early afternoon.
- Sturdy shoes and water are necessary; a hat, sun block and food are advised.

## Santorini (also known as Thira)

Around 1450 B.C. a volcano blew out the island's center, as a result a spectacular harbor that is part of the enormous **caldera (crater)** was formed. To this day, some scholars speculate that this destruction gave birth to the myth of the lost continent of Atlantis.

In short, Santorini is one of the most spectacular islands in the world. And the real wonder is that Santorini exceeds all glossy picture-postcard expectations. Its two principal towns, **Fira** and **Oia**, perch at the summit of the caldera; as you approach by ship, their whitewashed houses resemble a dusting of new snow on the mountaintop. Matt's intro on Santorini:

<http://www.greektravel.com/greekislands/santorini/>

- **Fira** – Santorini's busiest and most commercial town.
- **Oia** (pronounced as ee - ah) – considered by many as the most beautiful village on the island. The path from Fira to Oia is 6 miles, allow yourself 3 hours if walking, or take a 15-minute bus. This is where scores of visitors waited to shoot photos of sunset over the caldera. But as I read, any high elevation town (such as Imerovigli) will get you the same beautiful sunset, you don't have to go to crowded Oia for that.
- Ancient Akrotiri – a major excavation, this Minoan outpost was buried during the catastrophic volcanic eruption of 1650 BC.
- If you have several days on the island, try to visit some of the charming villages such as **Emborio, Pargos**, or the hamlet of **Gonias Episkopi**.
- Try one of the wineries, book through your hotel. **Boutari Winery** is the island's largest, and Greece's best-known win export.
- Keep an eye out for the tasty, tiny unique Santorino tomatoes, white egg-plants, and large, zesty capers.
- Use caution when walking around Santorino, especially at night. Keep in mind that many drivers are newcomers to the island and may not know every twist and turns.
- If you call a taxi, you are required to pay the driver fare from Fira to your pickup point.

## Naxos

Green, fertile, and self-sufficient, well-connected to other islands by ferry. The **Venetians** ruled this island from 1207 until the island fell to the Turks in 1566. Some descendants of the Venetians still live here. The Venetian architecture is obvious in the fortified towers that puncture the hillside. Also specific to Naxos is the abundance of small **Byzantine chapels**. Matt's comment on Naxos:

<http://www.greektravel.com/greekislands/naxos/>

We went to a home-hosted lunch at a family's home in Naxos. The house was very spacious and pretty, with marble floors and white marble steps. The husband is a construction contractor, the family has 3 cars, quite well-to-do by Greek standard. We had a delicious home cooked meal, all vegetables are from the family's garden.

**Plaka (Naxos)** – Naxos has the longest stretch of sea sand in the Cyclades, and **Plaka** is the most beautiful and pristine beach on the island.

## Syros (Siros)

The island's capital, **Ermoupolis**, is also the administrative capital of the Cyclades. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this was the busiest port in Greece – far busier than Piraeus – and a center of ship-building. You'll see several surviving shipyards along the harbor. Signs of the island's former affluence are concentrated in the vicinity of the harbor where mansions abut the rocky waterfront.

**Ermoupolis** is rated by Frommer's book as one of the best Scenic Villages/Towns. Walk uphill from the harbor to *Ano Siros* (upper Siros) and you'll find an old *kastro* (fortress) and a miniature whitewashed Cycladic village. Matt's introduction:

<http://www.greektravel.com/greekislands/syros/information.htm>