

CLASSICAL GREECE**Wonders of the Peloponnese****11 days**

Created on: 19 Aug, 2025

Day 1 Arrival in Athens

Today we arrive in Athens, the capital of Greece and the historic capital of Europe. Modern Athens is a vibrant and bustling city, a fascinating blend of ancient grandeur and contemporary life. While steeped in the remnants of its glorious past, evident in its numerous archaeological sites, it pulses with the energy of a modern European capital, offering a rich tapestry of culture, commerce, and everyday life.

Athens has a long history dating from the first settlement in the Neolithic age; in the 5th Century BC, the city's values and civilization acquired a universal significance. In 1834, it became the capital of the modern Greek state and an attractive modern metropolis with unrivalled charm.

Overnight in Athens.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Athens: City Touring

Today we enjoy a guided tour of Athens, the heart and soul of Greece.* A large part of the town's historic centre has been converted into a 3-kilometre pedestrian zone (one of the largest in Europe), leading to the major archaeological sites, reconstructing -- to a large degree -- the ancient landscape, thus allowing us to avoid the city's horrendous traffic. As such, much/most of our tour today will be conducted ON FOOT at a leisurely pace.

We start at the Acropolis (with hopes to beat the heat/crowds), near the site of the Dionysos Theatre. Constructed in the 6th century BC, it is one of the world's oldest theatres and the place where the great works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes were first performed. We will also see a more recent theatre, the Odeon of Herod Atticus from the second century AD, which is still used for concerts and performances.

Ascending to the top of the Acropolis, we will see magnificent buildings dating from the 5th century BC, the Golden Age of Athens. On the highest point on the Acropolis is the Parthenon, often considered the finest monument to Greek civilization. The temple was dedicated to Athena "Parthenos," the virgin and patron goddess of the city.

After our Acropolis tour, we'll descend by foot and enter the Ancient Agora located adjacent to the Plaka, the old town of Athens. Among the numerous sights in this archaeological park are the well-preserved Temple of Hephaistos and the landmark Roman era Tower of the Winds.

Our guided tour ends with a guided visit of the Acropolis Museum, located at the foot of the Acropolis. The museum was built to house every artifact found on the rock, from the Greek Bronze Age to Roman and Byzantine Greece; nearly 4,000 objects are exhibited over an area of 14,000 square metres. After our tour you are free to wander and explore on your own or make your way back to the hotel with your Tour Leader's assistance.

* The exact order of our sightseeing in Athens may be altered by your Tour Leader depending on several variables and their judgement on how best to run today's tour. Please note that our time in Athens may be managed by a local guide (not an AA Tour Leader) for groups of 6 or less.

Overnight in Athens.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Athens - Mycenae & Epidaurus - Nafplio (Nauplia)

This morning we board our coach to head to Mycenae, a citadel occupying the triangular summit of a low hill between two gorges. The Mycenaeans excelled in this style of building using large, unworked stones. These massive fortifications were begun in the 14th century, followed by Tiryns and Dendra, Argos and Athens, as well as a host of subsidiary forts and eventually, a huge wall across the Corinthian

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isthmus. The famous Lion Gate, and similar constructions at Gla and Tiryns, were built in the 13th century BC. Here we will see vestiges of a kingdom that, for 400 years (1600-1200 BC), was the most powerful in Greece. We enter through the Lion Gate and see the Great Court where Agamemnon is believed to have been murdered in one of the chambers.

Later we travel to Epidaurus, a sanctuary of Asklepios, the God of Medicine. The sanctuaries of Asklepios, the healer god, were as much sanatoria, health farms or spas, as places of worship. This was the most prestigious centre of the cult in the Classical period and received a galaxy of splendid buildings spanning the whole of the 4th century BC. Epidaurus came into prominence only in the later 5th century, when the cult was received at Athens in 420 BC and the tragedian Sophocles became its priest. There was a revival at the sanctuary in the 2nd century AD, and worship on the site continued in the form of a Christian basilica.

We continue toward Nafplio.

Overnight in Nafplio.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Nafplio - Mystras - Monemvasia

We will take some time this morning to stroll through the beautiful sea side town of Nafplio. We will learn the history of this town, particularly relating to its importance in the early 19th Century. Greece won its independence from the Ottomans in slow painful stages throughout the 19th and into the 20th centuries. During the earliest years of the new republic, Nafplio served as the first Greek capital, and it was here that the first head of state of independent Greece, Ioannis Kapodistrias, tried to create a viable polity from the diverse and mutually antagonistic groups who had struggled for independence. But Kapodistrias failed to unite the ever-feuding factions and was eventually assassinated. The "Great Powers" of the day--Britain, France and Germany--stepped in and forced the Greeks to abandon their idea of a republic and instead to become a kingdom. They chose a German prince to rule over the Greeks, Otto of Bavaria, who built his royal palace in the centre of Nafplio. His statue -- not a particularly popular one these days -- stands on a street in the seaside city.

Later today we will travel south, stopping at Mystras,* a Frankish-built Byzantine fortress town dating from the 13th century AD, which served as the Byzantine capital of the Morea as the Peloponnese was known. During the rule of the despots, while the empire plummeted into decline elsewhere, Mystra experienced a renaissance, but then declined under Turkish rule. It was captured by the Venetians in 1687 and it thrived once again with a flourishing silk industry and a population of 40,000. It was recaptured by the Turks in 1715, and from then on it was downhill all the way. It was burned by the Russians in 1770, the Albanians in 1780 and Ibrahim Pasha in 1825. Not surprisingly, at the time of Independence it was in a very sorry state, virtually abandoned and in ruins, though since the 1950s much restoration work has taken place.

We then head southward continuing towards Cape Maleas. This isolated peninsula, located off the east coast of the Peloponnese, is home to a stunningly set town often called the "Gibraltar of the East": Monemvasia. Accessible only by a long causeway, the town is an enormous and ancient fortress.

* Please note that this site is built on a mountainside, which means that exploring it involves hills and stairs and steadiness on one's feet. If you have any concern/questions, please consult with your Tour Leader who will be familiar with your abilities at this point in the trip.

Overnight in Monemvasia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Monemvasia Touring & Free Time

This morning we have an on-foot introduction to the enchanting medieval town of Monemvasia, perched dramatically on a rocky peninsula and steeped in history. As we wander through the cobblestone streets, you'll discover the unique blend of Byzantine, Frankish, and Ottoman influences that have shaped this ancient gem. Our half-day walking tour will reveal the town's hidden treasures, including stunning museums and historic churches.

With free time in the afternoon, you can explore at your own pace, soak up the breathtaking views, or simply relax in this captivating setting.

Overnight Monemvasia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Monemvasia - Nestor's Palace - Mani Peninsula

This morning we travel in a westerly direction to the southernmost peninsula of Greece, known simply as The Mani. We will enjoy a driving tour down this rugged finger of land towards Cape Tenaro, the mythical entrance to the underworld. While on the Mani Peninsula, we will visit the amazing cave systems at Pyrgos Dhirou and learn why this region was often overlooked by invaders. The Dorians never made it this far south, and the Romans passed it by as unimportant. The region did not even accept Christianity until the 9th century AD. Later the Venetians and French, and even the Russians, left this area alone. Even the Turks left the Maniots to themselves, reckoning that they would eventually do themselves in with the violent blood feuds they fought among themselves. Instead, in 1821, the feuding tribes united, rebelled against the Ottomans, and initiated the Greek Wars of Independence which eventually lead to the formation of the modern Greek state.

We will overnight near the village of Oitylou on the Mani Peninsula.

Overnight near Oitylou.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Mani - Olympia Touring

Today we embark on a scenic drive along the rugged west coast of the Peloponnese, with the turquoise Ionian Sea unfolding before us. Our first stop takes us to the captivating Palace of King Nestor, an archaeological gem nestled amidst lush greenery and commanding breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape. This ancient Mycenaean palace, steeped in legend and history, is said to be the fabled home of the wise and just King Nestor, immortalized in Homer's epic Odyssey. As we explore the recently excavated ruins, imagine the grandeur of a bygone era.

Next, we'll journey to the revered site of Ancient Olympia, birthplace of the Olympic Games. Step into the footsteps of ancient athletes and philosophers as we wander through the extensive ruins, taking in the majestic Temple of the Olympian Zeus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The Archaeological Museum here offers a fascinating glimpse into the history of the Games, which first began in 776 BC. Uncover the stories behind the ancient Olympic flame, the athletes who competed, and the cultural significance of these iconic games. As the sun sets over the ancient site, we'll retire to our accommodations in Olympia, surrounded by the beauty of the Peloponnese countryside.

Overnight in Olympia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Olympia - Delphi Touring

We drive across the Rio-Antirrio Bridge en route to Delphi, arriving in the early afternoon. On arrival we will have a guided tour of this spectacular site and its excellent museum.

According to mythology, Zeus released two eagles at opposite ends of the world and they came to rest at Delphi, dramatically situated on the slopes of Mount Parnassus, overlooking the deep ravine of the Pleistos river. This striking and somewhat remote location was considered the 'navel of the world.' Delphi is known as the centre of worship for the God Apollo, son of Zeus who embodied moral discipline and spiritual clarity. But even before the area was associated with Apollo there were other deities worshipped here including the earth goddess Gea, Themis, Demeter and Poseidon, the well known god of the sea. By the end of the Mycenaean period Apollo had displaced these other deities and became the guardian of the oracle.

Delphi was the site of the Delphic oracle, the most important oracle in the classical Greek world, and it was a major site for the worship of the god Apollo. His sacred precinct in Delphi was a Pan-Hellenic sanctuary, where every four years athletes from all over the Greek world competed in the Pythian Games, the precursor to the Olympic Games.

Overnight in Delphi

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Delphi - Kalambaka & The Monasteries of Meteora

As we leave the mystical site of Delphi behind, our journey takes us through the lush central plains of Greece, a fertile breadbasket that has nourished civilizations for centuries. The rolling hills, verdant fields, and rustic villages paint a picturesque scene, showcasing the country's rich agricultural heritage.

As we approach Kalambaka, the landscape transforms dramatically, with the iconic rocks of Meteora rising majestically from the plains like giant sentinels. Our panoramic drive offers breathtaking views of these towering rock formations, crowned with ancient monasteries that seem to defy gravity. The afternoon light casts a golden glow, creating perfect conditions for capturing stunning photographs. We'll make strategic stops along the way, allowing us to absorb the scenery and set the stage for a more in-depth exploration of the monasteries tomorrow.

Overnight in Kalambaka.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 The Monasteries of Meteora - Thermopylae - Athens

Today we revisit the Meteora, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the most significant complexes of Eastern Orthodox monasteries in the world. Perched atop towering sandstone rock pillars, these ancient monasteries seem to defy gravity, their architecture a testament to the ingenuity and devotion of the monks who built them. As we explore several of these magnificent structures, you'll uncover the rich history, stunning frescoes, and serene atmosphere that define this sacred place.

After our visit, we'll journey back to Athens, stopping at the historic site of Thermopylae, where the legendary Battle of Thermopylae took place. Here, the brave Spartan King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans made a heroic stand against the vast Persian army, etching their names in the annals of history. As we walk in the footsteps of these legendary warriors, we'll relive the drama and sacrifice of this pivotal moment in ancient Greek history.

After our stop, we'll continue to the vibrant city of Athens.

Overnight in Athens.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Departure

Departure from Athens.

KALO TAXIDI/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast