

CLASSICAL GREECE & THE GREEK ISLES

The Peloponnese, Mykonos & Santorini

14 days

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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 - Mycenae & Epidauros - Nafplio (Nauplia)

We board our coach to drive to ancient Corinth for a brief visit. Back in ancient times Corinth was one of the three major powers in Greece, and took part in all the battles against the Persians. It was from one of the richest cities and this is quite evident by its remains, including the huge Agora (market place) and Apollo's Temple (6th c BC).

We continue 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 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 Epidauros, 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. We'll tour the site, including, of course, the famous theatre constructed in the late 4th century BC. It is considered to be the most perfect ancient Greek theatre with regard to acoustics and aesthetics; indeed performances in this spectacular setting continue to this day.

We continue toward Nafplio.

Overnight near Nafplio.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Nafplio - Mystra - Sparta

This morning we spend a bit of time exploring the charming seaside town of Nafplio before joining we a dramatic winding mountain drive toward Sparta, arriving mid-morning.

We visit the Museum of the Olive and Greek Olive Oil in Sparta, which aims to highlight the culture and technology of the olive and olive production, which is inextricably linked with the Greek and Mediterranean identity. Unique in Greece, the museum is located in the heart of Laconia, one of the main olive producing locations in Greece.

We continue to our tour of Mystra, an impregnable fortress built by Guillaume de Villehardouin in 1249. When the Byzantines won back the Morea from the Franks, Emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus made Mystra its capital and seat of government. It soon became populated by people from the surrounding plains seeking refuge from invading Slavs.

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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.

Back in Sparta, you may choose to visit the archaeological remains of ancient Sparta (optional), including the 2nd century BC theatre, the site's most discernible ruin. There is not much remaining of this once mighty civilization, but those interested in Spartan history may find the visit rewarding.

Overnight in Sparta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Sparta - Olympia: Site Tour

Today we travel by road to Olympia, arriving in the early afternoon.

After lunch we will have a tour of the site of ancient Olympia and the excellent on-site museum. This was a place in ancient Greece where rival states shed their protective armour and congregated in peace to enjoy the ancient games and make offerings to the Gods. The temple of Zeus once dominated the entire complex and housed the 13 m (43 foot) statue of Zeus, considered by the Greeks to be one of the original Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

We will also see the Stadium as well as the Temple of Hera, which is the site's most intact structure. This is the oldest structure in the precinct, originally dedicated to Zeus as well as Hera, and gradually rebuilt from wood into stone. The walls were of mud-brick with a tiled roof.

The games, which were the most prestigious athletic event in Greece, were held in conjunction with a festival to Olympian Zeus. Three heralds were sent to all the Greek states to announce their date and declare the universal truce, under which all hostilities were suspended for one week. The games were brought to an end in AD 393, under an edict of the Emperor Theodosius that banned all pagan festivals. The temples were destroyed in AD 426.

Overnight in Olympia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 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.

Delphi, nestled amidst the dramatic scenery of Mount Parnassus in Greece, was far more than just a geographical location to the ancient Greeks. It was considered the "navel of the world," a sacred site imbued with profound mythological and religious significance. The myth of the two eagles released by Zeus, converging at Delphi, symbolized its central importance. This location, initially revered by deities like the Earth goddess Gaia, Themis (goddess of justice), Demeter (goddess of agriculture), and Poseidon (god of the sea), eventually became synonymous with Apollo, the god of light, music, prophecy, and archery.

Apollo, after slaying the serpent Python who previously guarded the oracle, established his dominion at Delphi. This marked a shift in the site's spiritual focus, emphasizing reason, order, and the pursuit of excellence as embodied by the god himself.

The Delphic Oracle, renowned throughout the Greek world, served as a powerful source of guidance. Here, the Pythia, the high priestess, would deliver prophetic pronouncements believed to be inspired by Apollo. These pronouncements, often enigmatic and open to interpretation, influenced political decisions, personal choices, and even the founding of colonies.

Beyond the oracle, Delphi was also home to the Pythian Games, a significant Pan-Hellenic festival held every four years. These games, predating the Olympic Games, celebrated athletic prowess and artistic expression, fostering a sense of unity and competition among the

Greek city-states.

The archaeological site of Delphi today offers a glimpse into this rich history, showcasing the Temple of Apollo, the Treasury of the Athenians, the stadium, and other impressive structures that once graced this sacred ground.

In essence, Delphi was a multifaceted center of religious, cultural, and political life in ancient Greece. It served as a powerful symbol of Greek identity, connecting people across the Hellenic world through shared beliefs, rituals, and the pursuit of excellence.

Overnight in Delphi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Delphi - Kalambaka & the Monasteries of Meteora

Today we drive from Delphi to Kalambaka. Our route leads us across the fertile plains of central Greece, a landscape teeming with life and a testament to the region's agricultural bounty.

As we drive, the scenery shifts dramatically. The rolling hills give way to a more rugged terrain, culminating in the awe-inspiring sight of the Meteora. These monolithic rock formations, rising dramatically from the plain, are a sight to behold.

Later this afternoon, we embark on a panoramic drive around these "Rocks of the Air," marveling at the sheer audacity of the monks who, centuries ago, chose to build their monasteries atop these precarious peaks. The afternoon light casts a golden glow upon the landscape, creating a truly magical atmosphere. We'll have ample opportunity to capture the breathtaking views with our cameras, preserving the memory of this extraordinary sight.

PLEASE NOTE: Depending on our timing today and other logistical considerations, we may accomplish some monastery visits today AND tomorrow morning; your Tour Leader will advise in advance to help you plan. Please note that men must wear long trousers for monastery visits, and women must wear a long wrap/skirt, which you can either bring from home or purchase at the site for just a few Euros.

Overnight in Kalambaka.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 The Monasteries of Meteora - Athens

Today we delve deeper into the mystique of Meteora. This extraordinary complex, second only to Mount Athos in importance within Eastern Orthodox monasticism, is a testament to human ingenuity and unwavering faith. Perched precariously atop towering sandstone pillars, these monasteries offer a breathtaking spectacle against the backdrop of the Thessalian plain.

Due to periodic closures, we'll explore monasteries not visited yesterday, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of this unique monastic community. We'll wander through cloisters, admire Byzantine frescoes, and perhaps even catch a glimpse of the monks who continue to inhabit these sacred spaces.

Later, we journey back to Athens, tracing the footsteps of history. Our route takes us to Thermopylae, a site forever etched in Greek mythology and history. Here, at the narrow pass of Thermopylae, a small but valiant force of Greek warriors, led by the legendary King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans, made a heroic last stand against the overwhelming Persian army.

This poignant stop at Thermopylae will serve as a powerful reminder of the enduring legacy of courage, sacrifice, and the unwavering spirit of the human will to resist.

Overnight in Athens.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 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 9 Athens - Ferry to Mykonos

Early this morning we travel by local ferry from Athens' port, Pireaus, to the island of Mykonos.*

From the harbour waterfront, you can watch the local fishing boats, or venture into the labyrinth of dazzling, white-washed streets to the many churches, tavernas, or shops selling artisan crafts. In the distance stand a string of windmills that once harnessed the breezes of days gone by. The sugar cube buildings are stacked around a cluster of seafront fishermen's dwellings. The labyrinth design was intended to confuse the pirates who plagued Mykonos in the eighteenth and 19th centuries. The whitewashed houses concealing dozens of little churches, shrines and chapels.

* PORTERS ARE GENERALLY NOT AVAILABLE ON THE GREEK ISLES, OR ON FERRIES BETWEEN THEM. You MUST be able to carry / wheel your baggage on and off ferries.

Overnight on Mykonos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Mykonos: Walking Tour & Boat Trip to Delos

This morning we'll take you on an orientation walking tour of Mykonos Chora. We wander the pirate-proof streets of town and see the Paraportiani Church near the quay, an architectural masterpiece of five chapels in one.

We then meet the boat that will take us to the tiny sacred island of Delos (40 minutes away). Delos gives the whole group of islands surrounding it their name, the Cyclades -- so named because they form a circle (kyklos) around Delos. For nearly 1,000 years this sanctuary

was the political and religious centre of the Aegean. Leto, pregnant by Zeus, gave birth to the twins Apollo and Artemis on Delos. 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.

During our guided walking tour of Delos, we will see the Agora of the Competialists, Roman merchants or freed slaves who worshipped the guardian spirits of crossroads; the Sanctuary of Apollo, the three temples of Apollo and the Sanctuary of Dionysus. In the House of the Masks we are able to see a mosaic portraying Dionysus riding on a panthers back. The theatre here could seat 5,500 people.

We return to Mykonos where you will have free time to explore Mykonos town on your own.

Overnight on Mykonos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Mykonos - Ferry to Santorini

Today we take a ferry or hydrofoil (depending on scheduling) to the island of Santorini.

Vast geological upheavals have given this island its unique form resulting in the nickname, "Pre-Historic Pompeii." The effect of terracing makes this unlike any other island, Greece's most visually stunning. Santorini is the island of churches, wine, and donkeys! From as early as 3000 BC the island developed as an outpost of Minoan civilization until around 1650 BC when the volcano erupted. At this point the island's history became linked with the legend of Atlantis.

At some point in our visit, we'll stop in at the The Museum of Prehistoric Thera. It was built on the site of the old Ypapanti Church, destroyed in the 1956 earthquake. The museum houses a very large number of ancient artifacts from various excavations on Santorini, such as at Akrotiri and at the nearby Potamos site.

Overnight on Santorini.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Santorini: Akrotiri & Island Tour

Visually, Santorini is the most spectacular of the Cycladic islands. With its brilliant flooded caldera, high cliffs and charming villages, it is the Greek Isle of everyone's dreams. Our coach tour today will take us to Santorini's many highlights.

We begin with a visit to Akrotiri for a thorough guided tour. Excavations have revealed a complete prehistoric Minoan city with squares, streets, and two-storey houses, which contained marvelous frescoes. The buildings date to the late 16th century BC. No skeletons or treasures have been found in Akrotiri, so historians think that the inhabitants were forewarned of the eruption and were able to escape. The excavations have yielded evidence that has revolutionized our knowledge of the Late Bronze Age; indeed the town has been called a "Bronze-age Pompeii."

We will also visit the hilltop village of Pyrgos, once the capital of the island and home to more than 30 churches. The village is composed of traditional houses built around the Venetian Castle and the small streets follow the shape of the hill. Climbing from the square up to the castle of Pyrgos, the stone houses crowd more densely together within the labyrinth of narrow vaulted lanes.

Our drive around the island will also take us up to the Prophet Elias Monastery built on the highest point of the island in 1711 AD. Though we will not visit inside the monastery, the view from here is breathtaking.

Fira is the capital of the island and the most important village. Perched on the edge of an impressive cliff 260m high, the town offers great panoramic views over the submerged volcano. Here the small streets are filled with all kind of shops, cafes, and restaurants. After an orientation walk through the town, you might choose to visit the impressive Archaeological Museum in your spare time (optional). This museum features many artifacts dating back to the time of the Cycladic Civilization. The most impressive legacies of this civilization are the statuettes carved from Parian marble -- the famous Cycladic figurines. Like statuettes of Neolithic times they depicted images of the Great Mother. Other remains include bronze and obsidian tools and weapons, gold jewelry, and stone and clay vases and pots.

Return to Kamari Beach (those who wish to extend their time in Fira can return to Kamari using the public bus system).

Overnight on Santorini.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Santorini: Fira - Imerovigli - Oia / Free Afternoon

This morning (to beat the crowds) we will head to the small town of Oia (pronounced "EE-ah"), situated at the northern tip of the island.*

Built on a steep slope of the caldera, many of Oia's dwellings nestle in the niches hewn in the volcanic rock. This was once a major fishing port but is principally known these days as perhaps the most dramatically-situated towns in the whole of Greece. The peak of prosperity for this small port town was reached in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; at that time the locally based merchant fleet plied its trade in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially from Alexandria to Russia. The two-story captains' houses built on the highest part of the village are a reminder of the village's former affluence. Oia is a place where many artists have found their inspiration... and here we will wander the narrow streets and old ruins, and enjoy the stunning views of the caldera with panoramic views of the rest of Santorini and the Aegean Sea.

After our visit we will double back by road toward Fira, hopping off at a caldera-side district called Imerovigli from where we will walk (downhill) along the rim enjoying the stunning caldera views and dramatic setting. Our route leads through the suburb of Firostefani, with ever-changing views as the perspective of the island changes minute by minute. En route we will look out to Skaros, the remains of a Venetian Castle built in 1207 by Marco Sanudo, the ruler of all Cyclades at that time.

Once we arrive in central Fira, the balance of the day is free to explore on your own. Your Tour Leader is available to assist with options -- perhaps extend your time in Fira, shopping, strolling, soaking it all in, or head down to one of Santorini's famous black beaches or hike up to the ruins of Ancient Thira.

* PLEASE NOTE that the sequence events described above may vary at the Tour Leader's discretion depending on a number of variables, including cruise ship arrivals, weather etc. One constant - to avoid crowding in Oia - will remain a priority. Your Tour Leader will keep you apprised ahead of time.

Overnight on Santorini.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Departure from Santorini.

KALO TAXIDI/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast