Autumn in Athens

With equal measures of grunge and grace, Greece’s capital is a heady mix of history and edginess. Autumn ushers in a cooler climate that’s ideal for exploring the city. Use the tips below to inform your route.

SIGHTS

Acropolis (odysseus.culture.gr)
The Acropolis is the most important ancient site in the Western world. Crowned by the Parthenon, it stands sentinel over Athens, visible from almost everywhere within the city. Its monuments and sanctuaries of white Pentelic marble gleam in the midday sun and gradually take on a honey hue as the sun sinks. A glimpse of this magnificent sight can’t fail to exalt your spirit.

Acropolis Museum (theacropolismuseum.gr; Dionysiou Areopagitou 15)
This dazzling museum at the foot of the Acropolis’ southern slope showcases its surviving treasures. The collection covers the Archaic period to the Roman, but the emphasis is on the Acropolis of the 5th century BC.

Benaki Museum of Greek Culture (benaki.gr; Koumbari 1)
Perhaps the finest museum in Greece, its three floors showcase treasures, from the Bronze Age to WWII. Especially gorgeous are the Byzantine icons and the extensive collection of Greek regional costumes, as well as complete sitting rooms from Macedonian mansions, intricately carved and painted.

Church of Agios Dimitrios Loubardiars (Thissio, Akropolis)
At the foot of Filopappou Hill, this 16th-century church has a heavy timber roof, marble floors and a permanent scent of incense. A great 1732 fresco of St. Dimitrios, on his horse in a pose copied from ancient images of Alexander the Great adorns the interior.

Kerameikos (odysseus.culture.gr; Ermou 148)
This lush, tranquil site is named for the potters who settled it around 3000 BC, then on the clay-rich banks of the Iridanos River. But it’s better known as a cemetery, used through to the 6th century AD. Ironically, the grave markers give a sense of ancient life: many marble stelae (grave markers) are carved with vivid portraits and domestic scenes.

Marathon Archaeological Museum (odysseus.culture.gr; Cape Sounion)
South of Marathon town, this excellent museum displays local discoveries from various periods, including Neolithic pottery from the Cave of Pan and finds from the Tomb of the Athenians. The showpieces are several larger-than-life statues from an Egyptian sanctuary in nearby Brexiza.

Odeon of Herodes Atticus
(00 30 210 324 1807; Herodeon)
This large amphitheatre was built in AD 161 by wealthy Roman Herodes Atticus in memory of his wife, Regilla. It was excavated in 1857–58 and completely restored in the 1950s. The Athens & Epidaurus Festival holds drama, music and dance performances here in summer, and, occasionally there are blockbuster pop concerts.

Temple of Athena Nike (Acropolis, Dionysiou Areopagitou)
The small but exquisitely proportioned Temple of Athena Nike sits at the southwest edge of the Acropolis, jutting in front and to the right of the Propylaia. Designed by Kallikrates, the temple was built of white Pentelic marble between 427 BC and 424 BC. The building is almost square, with graceful Ionic columns.

Temple of Poseidon (odysseus.culture.gr; Cape Sounion)
The Temple of Poseidon stands on a craggy spur that plunges 65m to the sea. Built in 444 BC – the same year as the Parthenon – of marble from nearby Agrilea, it is a vision of gleaming white columns. Sailors in ancient times knew they were nearly home when they caught the first glimpse of white, and views from the temple are equally impressive.

EATING

Agios Merkourios TAVERNA £££
(00 30 210 816 9617; Varibobi)
Wind past the posh country estates of Varibobi and up the foothills of Mt. Parnitha to reach this busy taverna with a lovely view. At the weekends, it’s packed with Athenians making the pilgrimage for a big family meal.

Hytra MEDITERRANEAN £££
(hytra.gr; Syngrou 107–109)
Head to Hytra at the Onassis Cultural Centre for exquisitely

Don’t miss

Rembetika (blues) songs from Smyrna and other traditional Greek music is a memorable Athenian experience. Visit Steki Pinoklis to hear bands playing most nights and Sunday afternoons (facebook.com/pinoklis; Megalou Alexandrou 102, Keramikos).

Greece, and it’s smack in the centre of Athens. The temple is impressive for the sheer size of its 104 Corinthian columns (17m high with a base diameter of 1.7m), of which 15 remain – the fallen column was blown down in a gale in 1852.

Temple of Olympian Zeus (odysseus.culture.gr; Leoforos Vasilissis Olgas)
A can’t-miss on two counts: it’s a marvellous temple, the largest

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presented Greek food with a hypermodern twist. Though portions are small, flavors are large, which is how it earned its Michelin star. The Hytra Apli menu, also available, is a bit more casual.

**Mandragoras**

Taverna

(00 30 210 417 2963; Gounari 14)

This superb delicatessen and spice shop offers a fine selection of gourmet cheeses, ready-made mezedhes, olive oils and preserved foods. It’s a veritable museum of regional Greek foods.

**Mani Mani**

Greek

(manimani.com.gr; Falirou 10, Makrygonou)

Fond upstairs to the relaxing, elegant dining rooms of this delightful modern restaurant, which specializes in herb-filled cuisine from the Mani region in the Peloponnese. Standouts include the ravioli with Swiss chard and the tangy sausage with orange.

**Seychelles**

Greek

(00 30 210 119 1478; Kerameikou 49)

There’s an excellent selection of rarer Caribbean rums and a whole range of cocktails, from classic tiki drinks to new inventions. This is one of just a handful of good feel-good bars on this strip.

**Drinking**

**Baba Au Rum**

(habakouram.com; Klitos 6, Monastiraki)

This bar-restaurant is one of the best in the city for a chill coffee or a louder evening, all in view of their beloved Acropolis.

**Gazarte**

(gazarte.gr; Vostadon 32–34)

At this varied arts complex with a cool cocktail bar, you’ll find a cinema-sized screen playing videos, amazing city views taking in the Acropolis, mainstream music and a trendy 30-something crowd. A ground-level theatre hosts music and comedy. There’s occasional live music and a restaurant to boot.

**Mary Pickford**

(facebook.com/marypickfordbar; Akti Kalamidion 54–56)

This seaside rooftop bar in the Peloponissos district offers a bit of Hollywood style and views that stretch past the harbour towards the Acropolis and Lykavittos Hill. The drinks menu is just as expansive, with six categories of cocktails; it’s the Days of Summer, a mix of Greek grape spirits and rosemary and lemon liqueurs.

**Upupa Ego**

(facebook.com/upupaegosethebar; Alkminis 7)

This bar-restaurant is one of the best in the city for a chill coffee or a louder evening, all in view of their beloved Acropolis.

**Veneti**

(00 30 210 523 0740; Plateia Romanos 9)

Legendarily café Neon, famous for a whole range of cocktails, is a full victim to the financial crisis. But the cavernous space got a decent new tenant in Veneti (aka Beneth, if you read the letters in English), which has filled the lower level with good-quality pastries, cookies, pies and even hot meals. There’s a seating upstairs and out on the square. Service is excellent - staff are welcoming and friendly, and give great recommendations for things to see nearby. There are several other branches of Veneti around town.

**Arts explosion**

Recent years have brought a burgeoning of arts in Athens. Even as the city struggles with other aspects of political and social life, Greece’s musicians and performing and visual artists are hard at work and a new type of multi-use gallery has sprung up to host all disciplines. Some feel like museums, others like nightclubs – and for some it depends on the time of day. One of the most impressive, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre (snfcc.org, pictured above), holds the National Library and the National Opera, and a large park. Here are a few others.

**Theoncharis Foundation for the Fine Arts & Music**

This excellent centre (pictured, right) has three levels of exhibitions featuring local and international 20th and 21st century artists, a theatre and an art shop and a pleasant café. Music performances are held between September and May (01 gr; Leoforos Syngrou 187).

**Six Dogs**

Monastiraki)

The rustic rear-garden courtyard is a place for quiet chats with coffee and drinks, while the bar jams the lane to the front at night. There’s theatre and art too (sixdogs.gr; Amarantou 6–8, Monastiraki).

**Bios**

Onassis Cultural Centre

(00 30 210 523 0740; Plateia Romanos 9)

In an industrial Bauhaus building near Gazi, this avant-garde, multi-level venue has a bar, live performances, art and new-media exhibitions, a basement club, a tiny art-house cinema and a roof garden (bios.gr; Perissos 84).

**Technopolis**

This superbly converted Athens gasworks presents multimedia exhibitions, concerts and events (technopolis-athens.com; Pireos 100, Gazi).

**Contest for Athens**

The founding of Athens is enshrined in myth. Prior to ancient kings, the story goes, founded a city on a huge rock near the sea. The gods of Olympus proclaimed that it should be named for the deity who could provide the most valuable legacy for mortals. Athena (goddess of wisdom, among other things, pictured below), produced an olive tree, symbol of peace and prosperity. Poseidon (god of the sea) struck a rock with his trident, creating a saltwater spring, to signify great maritime power. It was a close contest, but the gods judged that Athena’s gift, which would provide food, oil and fuel, would better serve the citizens – though of course Athens today draws its wealth from Poseidon’s domain as well.
Sleeping

**Athens Backpackers**
Best for a hostel option (backpackers.gr)
The popular rooftop bar with cheap drinks and Acropolis views are a major draw at this hostel favourite.

**Athens Was**
Best for the Acropolis (athenswas.gr)
A short walk to the Acropolis east gate, this hotel’s staff are friendly, adding a warm touch to the minimalist decor.

**Be My Guest Athens**
Best for a peaceful atmosphere (bemyguestathens.gr)
This newly built hotel is for those seeking calm: the minimalist black-white-and-grey colour scheme is soothing.

**Electra Palace**
Best for couples (electrahotels.gr)
This classically elegant place is suited to romantics: have breakfast under the Acropolis on your balcony.

**Lozenge**
Best for a neighbourhood feel (lozengehotel.com)
This sleek Kolonaki hotel has a lovely roof terrace and café that’s popular with older residents.

**Phaedra**
Best for family-run comfort (hotelphaedra.com)
Almost all the rooms at this snug hotel have balconies overlooking a church or the Acropolis. The rooms are cosy, the staff friendly and the location unbeatable.

FURTHER READING
Pick up our Pocket Athens guide (£7.99) for more on the Greek capital, or download our Guides app – which includes Athens – for free from app stores.