



**LEFT** Athens' historic Plaka district  
**BELOW** Backstreet shops are packed with woven souvenirs

# Unveiling GREECE'S MAGIC

Greece may be home to classical ruins but its wild landscapes, 200-plus islands and Thessaloniki's Unesco awarded gastronomy give it an eternal appeal, writes **Rebecca Hall**

**I**ridescent shores, ancient whispers and vibrant traditions are found at every turn in Greece, so lose yourself among mountain villages and cobbled lanes to experience the allure of this southern Mediterranean country.

## ATHENS: THE HEARTBEAT OF GREECE

The cradle of Western civilisation, Athens breathes history. The Acropolis, crowned by the Parthenon, guards the capital as a testament to ancient Greek architectural brilliance. At its base, the community of Anafiotika is known locally as a Greek island within the mainland, as its cobbles and sugar-cube houses resemble those seen on Greek isles.

As you meander through the historic Plaka district, let your imagination hear the whispers of philosophers from centuries past. Monastiraki Flea Market is a sensory explosion, with aromas of freshly grilled *souvlaki* and the shouts of stallholders peddling their wares on a Sunday. Local artist Eleni Papadopoulou describes it best. "Athens is where the past meets the present," she says. "You can have a coffee in a modern café while gazing at thousand-year-old ruins."

History comes alive at the National Archaeological Museum - the largest such institution in Greece and the world's most important collection of



## THESSALONIKI: A CULTURAL MELTING POT

Head north to Thessaloniki, a student city and cultural mosaic showcasing its Byzantine, Ottoman and Jewish past.

Don't miss Ladadika, a district near the port that's considered the city's heart. Once home to an olive oil market, it's now a hub of nightlife and gastronomy, with many neoclassical buildings converted into tavernas and bars where students, locals and tourists intermingle.

Perched upon the waterfront, the White Tower, the city's symbol, overlooks the Thermaic Gulf and Mount Olympus - mountain of the Gods - in the distance. Along the promenade stands a statue of the local hero Alexander the Great astride his horse Bucephalus, while the nearby Rotunda and Arch of Galerius are reminders of Thessaloniki's rich Roman history.

Further inland, journey past authentic Macedonian architecture to a castle in the Upper Town, Ano Poli, to admire terracotta-tiled roofs and winding lanes.

Foodies won't be disappointed. Unesco awarded Thessaloniki City of Gastronomy status in 2021, recognising the cultures that have influenced the region's cuisine over the years. This blend of Ottoman, Balkan and Mediterranean traditions has resulted in specialities such as *bougatsa*, a custard-filled filo pastry brought to the region by refugees from present-day Turkey in the 1920s. ▶

Greek art and artefacts. Here you'll find the golden death mask of Agamemnon and the Antikythera mechanism, a Greek analogue computer dating from 400BCE.

But Athens isn't solely about its heritage; it also has a vibrant contemporary scene. Since the economic crisis of 2008, street art has exploded and intricate murals now turn the capital into a giant outdoor gallery, packed with social and political messages. Take a street art tour with Alternative Athens to discover more about how the ancient lives in harmony with the modern.





“In Olympos, women still wear traditional dress and bake bread in communal ovens”

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Homes cling to the coast on Mykonos; a warm welcome awaits on Karpathos; pretty Chlomos village on Corfu; a tempting seafood platter

Head to Poster for lunch, which is popular with the business crowd. Niki VerVelidou from Beetroot design studio in Thessaloniki says, “The hot honey and chilli butter focaccia is to die for.”

**THE CYCLADES: HIDDEN TREASURES**

Venturing south, the Cyclades Islands are the quintessential image of Greece.

Santorini is a magnet for romantics, with cliffs, blue-domed churches and sugar-cube houses. It’s less known for its volcanic vineyards, where vines are deliberately twisted to protect them from the wind. Sample their unique earthy wines on a tour. Dimitris Papadopoulos from Santorini Wine Adventure says, “Taste award-winning volcanic wines on a half-day Santorini wine tour of three traditional wineries.”

Beyond Santorini’s black volcanic sands and the party island of Mykonos, the Cyclades hide underrated havens. Folegandros has a raw beauty, attracting those looking to escape, while Kythnos is even quieter, charming Athenians at weekends due to its easy accessibility by ferry. Aside from its shingle and sandy beaches, it has thermal springs reputed to aid a variety of ailments.

*Who*  
**SAILS THERE?**

Major lines such as Holland America Line, Celebrity Cruises, Azamara Cruises and adults-only Virgin Voyages offer adventures starting and ending in Athens, sailing to the Greek islands, Thessaloniki and further afield to Croatia, Montenegro and Turkey.

Variety Cruises and Celestyal are local operators, offering in-depth knowledge of the range of destinations.

Cruises in Greece are usually seasonal, except with some larger lines, running from May to late October. If you’re child-free then now’s the best time to go, as you avoid the heat of July and August and you can enjoy a quieter voyage with children back at school.

Paros, although more cosmopolitan and hence busier, is no less beautiful than its neighbours, with golden sand, peaks and traditional villages. Syros, the Cycladic Islands’ capital, is a cultural hub, richly endowed with fine Venetian and neoclassical architecture.

**THE DODECANESE: HISTORY AND TRANQUILITY**

Sailing southeast brings you to the Dodecanese. Rhodes stands out with its Old Town, a Unesco world heritage site. Walking through its cobbled streets, you can feel the presence of the Knights of St John while the Palace of the Grand Master and the Street of the Knights transport you back to a time of chivalry and conquest.

Symi, with its neoclassical houses and beaches, is perfect for those seeking peace. Fisherman Yannis Papadimitriou says, “Symi is a paradise. The sea is our life, and it’s as clear and beautiful as it was in my grandfather’s time.” While today most visitors come to snorkel in hidden coves, the island is known for its soft, naturally grown sponges, which divers began collecting in the 1840s. The ‘dirtier’ a sponge looks, the more natural it is. The cleaner looking yellow ones in

shops have been treated with chemicals to make them more attractive.

Karpathos, at the southern end of the archipelago, provides a glimpse into traditional Greek island life. In Olympos, women still wear traditional dress and bake bread in communal ovens. The isle’s rugged terrain and secluded beaches are ideal for adventurous travellers, many of whom come to windsurf and hike.

**THE IONIAN ISLANDS: VENETIAN ELEGANCE AND NATURAL SPLENDOUR**

Heading west, the Ionian Islands beckon, with lush landscapes and fine architecture – the legacy of

Venetian rule between the 14th and 18th centuries. Corfu Old Town captivates visitors with pastel-hued buildings, its varied colonial history earning it Unesco world heritage status.

Lefkada, connected to the mainland by a causeway, boasts some of Greece’s best beaches, such as Porto Katsiki and Egremni, both of which have limestone cliffs that plummet into turquoise waters. A local event planner, Claire Salisbury, says, “Lefkada is blessed with amazing beaches plus a unique archipelago of private offshore islands such as Skorpios, once owned by the shipping tycoon Aristotle Onassis.”

The legendary home of Odysseus, Ithaca, is less touristy, offering a more introspective journey. The isle’s rugged coastline and tranquil bays make it ideal for sailing, and its picturesque harbour in Kioni is perfect for a quiet evening.

**EMBRACING GREECE’S TIMELESS MAGIC**

Greece enchants and inspires at every turn, offering a journey through time and beauty. Each destination, whether famous or hidden, tells a story of history, culture and natural splendour. Greece isn’t just a place; it’s a feeling. It’s in the warmth of the sun, the taste of olives and the sound of the sea, which will stay with you long after you’ve left.



Chlomos - Marketing Greece, fish - Marketing Greece

Mykonos - Robert Harding/Shutterstock, woman - Laurin/Shutterstock

*Why*  
**YOU SHOULD GO**

**1 FOR THE BEACHES**  
From hidden coves and Santorini’s black volcanic sand to the Ionian Islands’ sweeping white beaches, Greek landscapes rival the Caribbean’s.

**2 FOR THE FOOD**  
Greek gastronomy is more than moussaka. Sample other favourites such as *briam*, a roasted vegetable casserole with tomato sauce and feta. It’s perfect for vegetarians.

**3 TO EXPLORE ANCIENT RUINS... OR NOT**  
While there are ruins aplenty to discover, ‘go Greek’ and adopt a relaxed attitude to life. Sink into a sunlounger and while away a day to the sound of the waves.

**4 FOR THE HOSPITALITY**  
The concept of *filoxenia* – a love of strangers expressed through hospitality – originated in Greece. The country’s warmth isn’t just down to its weather; it radiates from its people, too, leaving you feeling as if you’re a family member.

**Get on board**

**Celebrity Cruises’** 10-night Best of Greece cruise aboard *Infinity*, return from Athens via Volos, Thessaloniki, Limassol (Cyprus), Rhodes, Kusadasi, Santorini and Mykonos, departs on 18 April 2025, from £1,151. [celebritycruises.com](http://celebritycruises.com)

**Variety Cruises’** seven-night Jewels of the Cyclades cruise aboard *Galileo*, return from Athens via Poliegos, Folegandros, Santorini, Antiparos, Paros, Delos, Mykonos, Syros and Kythnos, departs on 25 April 2025, from £1,199. [varietycruises.com](http://varietycruises.com)