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Historic Athens: Beyond the Parthenon

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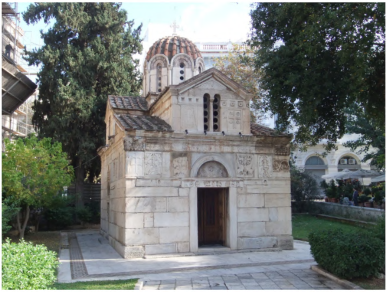
Most travelers don't spend enough time exploring Athens. They fly in, check out the Parthenon, then head for the islands. But Athens is more than a layover—it's a destination. In this guide, I shed some light on Athens' lesser-known historic attractions, particularly its wealth of Byzantine churches and under-visited ancient sites. I also feature a few of the city's most historic restaurants, and explore its oldest neighborhood—the Plaka. The Parthenon is great, and you should certainly see it—but after you do, why not linger awhile? Athens has a lot to offer.



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Saint Eleftherios

Mitropolis Square, Athens, Greece

This little 13th-century church sits in the shadow of the city's main cathedral on Mitropolis Square. Don't let the size fool you-- it's a Byzantine gem. The exterior is particularly noteworthy, with its obscure Christian symbols and ancient relief work depicting calendars and processions. These carvings were scavenged from classical-era ruins in the Agora and elsewhere. The Christian symbols range from a variety of crosses to strange griffons and snakes. The interior is mostly unadorned, though the large hanging light is impressive.

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Keramikos Cemetery

Kerameikos, Athina 105 53, Greece

I'm surprised that more people don't visit this ancient cemetery. It's located close to the Thissio metro station and is included in the Acropolis ticket. We actually walked there from the Plaka, so it isn't really out of the way at all. The grounds are expansive and include the ruins of ancient houses. The residents used to make pottery for cemetery offerings. There's also a small museum with excellent relics from the tombs as well as the Sacred and Dipylon gates.

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Anafiotika

Anafiotika, Athens, Greece

Anafiotika is a small village hidden inside a big city. The narrow lanes and closely packed houses seem more like something you'd find on a Greek Island, which makes sense, because the neighborhood was built by settlers from Anafi. Views are magnificent up here. Looking down you can see Athens spread out before you with Mount Lycabettus in the distance. The Acropolis looms above. All around are cats and potted flowers and ramshackle dwellings...and best of all, hardly any people! Great place to escape the crowds.

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Bakaliarakia o Damigos

Kidathineon 41 Plaka, Athens, Greece

One of the oldest tavernas in Athens, Bakaliarakia has been serving up its signature deep fried codfish since 1865. The main dining room features lots of old photos, some antique firearms, and one glorious ancient column. Order the cod with garlic sauce and wash it down with a carafe of Damigos house white. Don't be surprised if the owner brings you a shot of cherry brandy after your meal...for digestive purposes, of course. Bakaliarakia is a taste of old Athens at a bargain price.

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Restaurant at the Acropolis Museum

15 Dionysiou Areopagitou Street, Athens 11742, Greece

Had an excellent smoked trout fricassee with chickpeas, herbs and spinach at this elegant restaurant in the Acropolis Museum. What could be better than eating fine food amongst the greatest treasures of antiquity? The retsina wine wasn't bad, either. Is it a bit pricey? Sure. But walk out on the patio and take a look at the Acropolis view, and you'll see why. Wonderful place for a lunch break. Allowed me to rest up and re-energize before taking on the Parthenon frieze.

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Ekklisia Agia Dinami

Voulis, Athina 105 57, Greece

Ekklisia Agia Dinami has survived in the ever-changing urban center of Athens since the 15th-century. In order to preserve this tiny Orthodox Church, the Ministry of Education built its office tower around and on top of it. Squeezed between skyscraper columns, Agia Dinami is a popular spot for city workers to stop in the morning, leave an offering, and light a candle. Orthodox Christians will also kiss holy icons in churches, so don't be surprised to find lipstick on them.

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Tilemahos Efthimiadis flickr

Temple of Athena Nike

Acropoli, Dionysiou Areopagitou, Athina 105 58, Greece

At only 11 feet in height, this small temple is easy to miss on the Acropolis. It sits atop the rock wall to the right of the Propylaea Gate, and was constructed around 427 B.C. There are four Ionic columns on each end. A full scale restoration was completed in 2010, so it looks very much like it would have in classical times when Athenians worshipped Athena Nike (Victory) there. They left offerings and prayed that she would help them defeat Sparta in the Peloponnesian War.

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Chapel of St. George

Lycabettus Hill, Athens, Greece

This small, white chapel (mid-19th century) sits at the very top of Lycabettus Hill, the highest point in Athens. From here you can look down at every part of the city, and all the way to the Aegean Sea. When it's clear you can even see ships anchored off Piraeus and the islands beyond. The chapel has some nice frescoes (Cleansing of the Lepers, etc.) and depictions of St. George slaying the dragon. There is usually an old man outside selling icons and bottled water.

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Cafe Lycabettus

Lycabettus Hill, Athens, Greece

I've heard complaints about this cafe being overpriced. While it certainly isn't cheap, I thought the prices were fair, considering its location atop historic Lycabettus Hill. The views are stunning, so try to get a cliff-side table. It's a dining experience you won't soon forget. As for the food, I had a seafood fricassee that was delicious as well as visually appealing— a shell-based work of art. People love to go here for a sunset dinner, which is nice, but I'd recommend an afternoon meal, when you can get a good table, and the funicular isn't so crowded.

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to Monastiraki sq.
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OF THE OLDEST CITY OF EUROPE

Kidathineon Street

Kidathineon, Athina, Greece

Kidathineon ("The Marble Street") survived both the Greek War of Independence and the massive fire that decimated the Plaka district in 1884, making it one of the oldest streets in Athens. Filomousou Etaireias Square is here, as is the house of poet and Nobel Laureate George Sefaris (No. 9), the first Greek to receive the literature prize. The street is packed with restaurants, shops, jewelers, art galleries...even an outdoor theater called Cine Paris, the only movie house in the Plaka.

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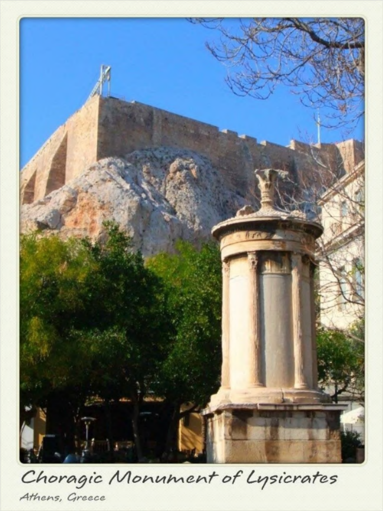

Choragic Monument of Lysicrates

Lysicrates Square, Plaka, Athens

It's hard to miss this large, cylindrical monument at the foot of Tripodon Street in the Plaka. It was erected in 334 B.C. to honor the winning performance in an annual theatrical competition held at the Theater of Dionysus, and was later (1669) incorporated into a Capuchin monastery. It's decorated with Corinthian columns and a frieze showing Dionysus battling pirates and transforming them into dolphins. The monastery is long gone, but there are plenty of cafes around the square where you can relax and ponder the past.

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Souvlaki Row

Mitropoleos Street, Athens, Greece

Souvlaki Row is just off Monastiraki Square on Mitropoleos Street. You will know it by the enormous amount of people it always attracts. It can sometimes be difficult to walk down this street, but it's a worthwhile experience even if you don't stop at one of the famous souvlaki restaurants that line it. You will see people at outdoor tables, talking and smoking and drinking and laughing. The oldest and most famous eatery in this historic lane is Bairaktaris, in business since 1869. I love their gyros.

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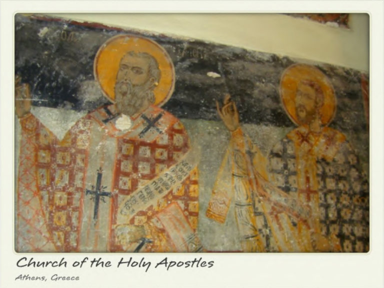
Church of the Holy Apostles
Athens, Greece

Church of the Holy Apostles

Ancient Agora of Athens, Greece

The Church of the Holy Apostles (one of the oldest in the city) dates to 1,000 A.D. and is located in the middle of the Ancient Agora. It was built to commemorate the Apostle Paul's visit to Athens. On a hot day, this is a great place to get out of the sun. There are a number of 18th century frescos to enjoy, and you can usually do it in solitude, as most visitors to the Agora tend to pass this Byzantine treasure by.

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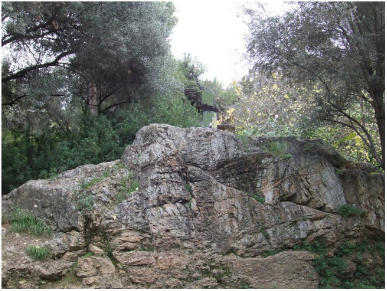

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Queen Amalia's Rock

National Garden, Athens, Greece

Before the National Garden became the National Garden, it was Queen Amalia's back yard. She lived in the Royal Palace (now the Parliament Building) with her husband King Otto and spent many hours wandering the grounds. This rock was one of her favorite spots. You can climb up and have lunch at a little table on top, and pretend you are Queen Amalia or King Otto. There are a lot of Marginated tortoises in the area to keep you company.

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ΑΜΕΡΙΚΑΝΙΚΗ
ΑΓΟΡΑ
ΑΘΗΝΑΣ 30

Aghia Kyriaki Church

28 Athinas St., Athens, Greece

This miniscule church is nestled between modern buildings on busy Athinas Street. If you're walking out to the Central Market watch for it on your right. It was built in the 15th-century and was probably used as a chapel for an old cemetery that once resided in the area. The cemetery and any other historic buildings have long since disappeared, leaving the church as the sole reminder of what once was. It's a very incongruous site amongst the noisy modernity of Athinas Street.

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Geros Tou Moria

27 Mnisikleous Street, Athens 10556, Greece

Fun taverna on the rustic "Restaurant Steps" of Mnisikleous Street in the Plaka. I like to sit outside under the grapevines, where I can watch the old men chasing cats away from their tables by clicking empty water bottles at them. People roam from table to table chatting and socializing. There's a fairly extensive menu, but you can't beat a plate of grilled sardines and a bottle of Alfa beer. Just watch out for sneaky kitties-- they like sardines, too.

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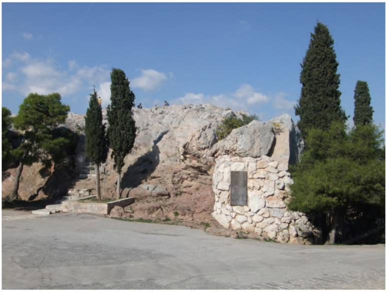

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Mars Hill

Next to Acropolis in Athens, Greece

Climbing on Mars Hill is an adventure, and downright dangerous after a rain. The bare marble is very slippery, and it's fun to watch people crawling over it crab-style, on all fours. Historically, the hill has been the seat of Athens' Council of Elders, a criminal tribunal, and the spot where the apostle Paul delivered his famous sermon to the Greeks. There's plenty of undeveloped land around the rock for hiking, and the view of the Acropolis' Propylaea Gate is unparalleled.

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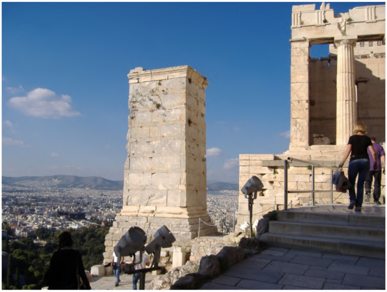

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Monument of Agrippa

Acropoli, Dionysiou Areopagitou, Athina 105 58, Greece

It will take some imagination to picture this towering, 25-foot tall, pedestal in 178 B.C., when it was topped with a huge bronze statue of a 4 horse chariot. The driver of the chariot was an Olympic champion that year. The monument is located on the Acropolis, to the left of the Propylaea Gate, and is made of yellow-streaked marble blocks. In later years it held statues of Antony and Cleopatra, and finally Agrippa, the Roman general (Augustus' son-in-law) for whom it's named.

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Sanctuary of Asclepios

South Slope of Acropolis, Athens, Greece

The south slope of the Acropolis was home to a number of sanctuaries in ancient times. This one was made up of a temple, two halls and an altar dedicated to Asclepios, god of healing, and his daughter Hygieia. Sick people would come here to stay overnight, hoping to awake in the morning having miraculously been cured. When this temple was excavated in 1876, everything but the base was in ruins. Archeologists carefully studied the artifacts surrounding it and began a meticulous reconstruction, which is still in progress.

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Roman Forum

Via della Salara Vecchia, 5/6, 00186 Roma RM, Italy

When the Romans were running Athens, this was their commercial hub. There were lots of shops under a long, covered colonnade. Later, when the Ottoman Turks took over, they turned the forum into a grand bazaar and built a mosque there. The mosque remains, minus its minaret. After the Turks were thrown out of Greece, every minaret in Athens was destroyed. You can also see the ancient Tower of the Winds, a combination clock/weathervane famous for its relief carvings of the eight winds.

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Hadrian's Library

Athens, Greece

There isn't much left of this Roman-era library, but it must have been a wonder in its 2nd century A.D. heyday. Emperor Hadrian, a great admirer of Greek culture (he was known as "Graecula" or "Little Greek"), equipped the expansive complex with lecture halls, gardens and art galleries. The best preserved part of the library is an outer wall with Corinthian columns. There isn't a whole lot to see inside, but admission is included with the Acropolis ticket, so it's certainly worth a walk-through.

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Lord Byron Monument

Corner of Vasilissis Amalia and Vasilissis Olga

The English poet Lord Byron fought with the Greeks in their war for independence from Turkey. He died of sepsis in Missolonghi (1824) where he was preparing to join the attack on Lepanto fortress. After his death, Byron became a hero to the Greek people. Some say he might've become King of Greece had he lived. This large 1896 statue by French sculptors Alexandre Falguière and Henri-Michel Chapu shows a woman (Hellas, the personification of Greece) crowning the Romantic poet with laurel leaves.

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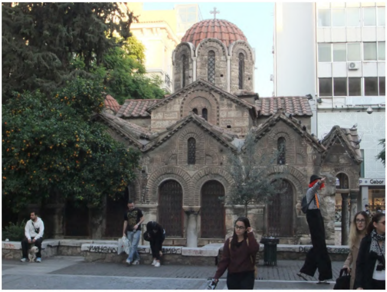

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Church of Panaghia Kapnikarea

Ermou & Kapnikareas, Athina 105 56, Greece

Panaghia Kapnikarea provides a nice dose of spirituality on highly commercial Ermou Street. It dates to the 11th century and is among the oldest places of worship in Athens. The style is classic Byzantine with a stone exterior, arched windows, tile roof and cupola. There is a very fine mosaic (glass and gold leaf) of Mary and Jesus over the door that looks old, but is actually a contemporary work. Inside, the floor plan is a typical Greek cross, and icons abound.

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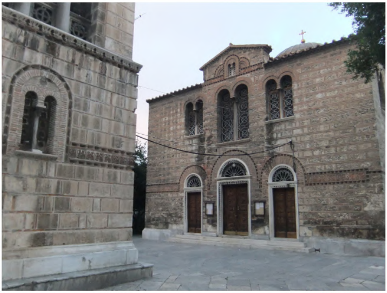

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Sotira Lykodimou Church

Filellinon 21, Athens, Greece

This Byzantine church, constructed in the 11th century, is the largest medieval building in Athens. It was purchased by the Russian government in 1847, restored, and made the parish church for the Russian Orthodox community. Locals call it the "Russian Church." Its octagonal dome is unique in Byzantine design, and features the usual image of Christ as Pantocrator ("ruler of all") looking down from above. The decor is quite interesting with Arabic caligraphy and works by German painter Ludwig Thiersch. There is also a tall bell tower.

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Adams Hotel

6 Chairefontos | at Thalou, Athens 10558, Greece

Friendly little hotel in the heart of the Plaka. You get a lot at the Adams for a very small price: perfect location, friendly staff, lobby bar...they will even do your laundry at a reasonable charge. Our room had a balcony with a stellar view. We loved to sit out there at night with a bottle of wine under the illuminated Acropolis. Rooms also have refrigerators, which is a big plus if you're on a budget: cold milk every morning for cereal. We were awakened late at night a couple times (loud talking in the street, revving motors), but that's the Plaka.

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Estia - Cafe Restaurant

35 Kidathineon | Plaka, Athens, Greece

Nice cafe on historic Kidathineon Street in the most scenic area of the Plaka. The people who operate it are very friendly, especially the guy who works the street out front. I don't remember his name, but he was from Crete and is very proud of his home island's olive oil ("the best in the world!"). Definitely sit outside under the canopy so you can people-watch and enjoy the quaint Plaka atmosphere. I had the calamari, which was grilled to perfection.

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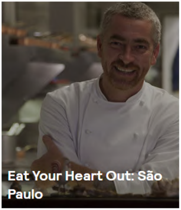
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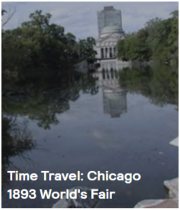
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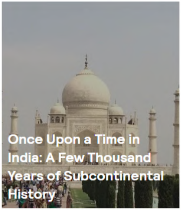
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