

Journeys

# ATHENS GETS ITS GROOVE BACK



*Don't call it a crisis: in the wake of its well documented rocky financial road, Athens has reinvented itself, and its indie fashion, art and food scenes are flourishing, says **Juliet Kinsman**.*

# SINCE OPENING IN 2009, THE

# GLEAMING GLASS OF THE

new Acropolis Museum and the soul-stirring presentation of its priceless contents has been a welcome source of pride for the natives of Athens, a city with one hell of a Hellenic heritage. We know all about the myriad achievements of ancient Greece, but now it's the modern-day triumphs that deserve time in the spotlight. Young, positive artists and creatives – who decided to fight rather than flee – have joined forces, sticking to their passions and breathing new life into the city centre. The side effects of a less-than-healthy economy have been a fresh love for vintage fashion, the proliferation of low-key but sophisticated wine bars, an uplifting camaraderie, which pervades the city's edgy new hangouts, and, now that cars are too expensive for many to run, traffic-free streets and cleaner city air. An intrepid generation of Greek talent is getting the party started again – without bragging about it.

A resident of Athens during the pre-2004 Summer Olympics boom, I enjoyed a spell reviewing restaurants and hotels across this boisterous city. Everywhere was being gilded or gutted, and the urban sprawl was reconfigured with a fancy new infrastructure. A colourful nightlife scene spilled into new neighbourhoods such as gritty Psirri and out-of-town gasworks site Gazi, and the air crackled with optimism and ouzo-fuelled hedonism. Happily distracted by the many macho big-player businessmen popping open the champagne, revellers blithely ignored the mutterings of older hard-working folks worried that their taxes wouldn't cover all this activity.

A decade on, many bubbles have burst and a lot of the economy's cash has long since been secreted away to Swiss bank accounts. Still, I'll dare to declare that as a result, Athens is giving Berlin a run for its money. Not in terms of financial clout, but certainly for its creativity and contemporary cool. (When the Greek

capital's debts reached nadir and social tensions were spiking, pressure fell on its fellow EU members to bail them out and some joked that Greece should be renamed Southern Germany.) The resulting doom-and-gloom news reports were misleading: when you're in the blue-skied city as a visitor it couldn't feel sunnier – figuratively and meteorologically. Truth is, the economy's collapse had a dazzling silver lining, and the city previously considered merely a stop-off for island-hoppers on the way to the Aegean is now a dynamic destination in its own right.

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Syntagma Square still has its pom-pom-shoed changing of the guard display at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on the hour, every hour. And the Hotel Grand Bretagne looks more elegant than ever, presiding over the north-east corner of Constitution Square. But now the five-star grand dame has been joined by Starwood's Luxury Collection with its next-door neighbour, the spruced-up and utterly chic King George.

A few years ago, Athenians would have gasped at travellers being signposted to the seedy lanes just off this main square but now, instead of being lured to the kitsch of Pláka or the glitz of Kolonaki, style-seeking visitors are

discovering New Hotel, which won TripAdvisor's top accolade for 2014, and just south of Syntagma Square, the buzzing bars and hip boutiques of Monastiraki, all of which come blogger endorsed.

When the music-and-cocktail hotspot Six D.O.G.S. opened in Monastiraki in 2009 it marked a new era for the Athens landscape. Now this 'hood is a hipsters' paradise where new outlets seem to pop up weekly. Thank Zeus for *Daily Secret*, an online newsletter set up to alert readers to all the hot new rendezvous in a witty and wise email that leads you to a great-looking website, which might just have you as excited about a trip to Athens as you would be about one to NYC. It was a simple idea, a daily email designed to remind Athenians what they love about their city.

In fact, new local Andria Mitsakos is a designer and publicist who traded Tribeca for an apartment with a view of the Parthenon. "From Manhattan to Miami to Milan, quite simply Athens doesn't compare to another city. NYC has its competitive buzz that fuels ambition, which I respect and need, but Athens takes me down a notch. When you say you're going for coffee here, it's because you can dedicate two hours to the person you're going to see. It's just more human." As the designer behind accessories label Dea Rosa, Mitsakos feels the city offers never-ending inspiration. "Living in Athens, you can't escape the ancient energy that haunts you here."

Athens has the energy of a city in a constant flux of metamorphosis. It goes beyond the folklore stereotypes delivered through Greek tourism and it awakens visitors' emotions and rewards the sophisticated traveller seeking to study urban transformation. I've never felt more optimistic about the city that gave birth to the fundamental concepts of our civilisation and about its ability to keep inspiring its citizens. >>



SIX D.O.G.S



PAPADAKIS

## EATING & DRINKING

### AVOCADO

Vegetarian Sydneysiders no longer have to leave their hankering for healthy smoothies or fruity salads at home – the organic, local and seasonal movement has landed in Athens, and this café is its mothership.

**Nikis 30, Syntagma; [avocadoathens.com](http://avocadoathens.com)**

### LUKU (LUKUMADES)

The name of this could-be-in-Manhattan cutie applies to the stars of the menu: deep-fried doughnut balls steeped in honey and cinnamon, which pair perfectly with a cup of local Taf coffee.

**21 Eolou, Monastiraki**

### PAPADAKIS

Chef/owner Argiro Barbarigou is praised for her cookbooks and TV appearances, but she can still be found here finessing the fresh, full Greek flavours in the kitchen of this contemporary taverna in upscale Kolonaki. Grouper with a lemon-egg sauce? This dame knows how to make seafood sing.

**47 Voukourestiou & 15 Fokilidou**

### OINOSCENT

Head to this little beauty tucked away in a side street not far from central Syntagma and be prepared to be surprised by the quality of the homegrown vintages available.

**45–47 Voulis. [oinoscent.gr](http://oinoscent.gr)**

### SIX D.O.G.S

Live bands, inspired cocktails and a glorious little garden make this vibrant venue, fashioned from four separate bars, a favourite with folks in the know.

**6–8 Avramiotou, Monastiraki**  
**[sixdogs.gr](http://sixdogs.gr)**

**INSIDER'S TIP:**  
Cash is king over credit cards in this town.



OINOSCENT



LUKU



LUKU

## WHAT TO DO

### DOPIOS CITY TOUR

Connect with locals, which is what 'dopios' means in Greek, through this Athens-born online service and arrange to have an authentic insider's city tour.  
**[dopios.com](http://dopios.com)**

### NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Installations, photography, paintings and video bring this brand new space dedicated to contemporary talents to life.  
**17–19 Vasileos Georgiou B & Rigiliis; [www.emst.gr](http://www.emst.gr)**

### ACROPOLIS MUSEUM

Nowhere is the contrast of old and new more staggering than in architect

Bernard Tschumi's bold four-level glass-floored showcase for Greece's ancient ruins and millennia-old statues.  
**15 Dionysiou Areopagitou; [theacropolismuseum.gr](http://theacropolismuseum.gr)**

### HAMMAM BATHS

After pounding the pavements get a good pummeling on the heated marble slabs at this spa, a new take on ancient baths that gives Istanbul's finest a run for their peshtemal towels and wooden slippers. Whether you're up for a scrub and steam or a full backrub, a spell here is totally relaxing.

**17 Agion Asomaton and 1 Melidoni Thissio; [hammam.gr](http://hammam.gr)**



ACROPOLIS MUSEUM



MYRTO

## SHOPPING & FASHION

### GREECE IS FOR LOVERS

You'll need to book an appointment to check out the kitsch objects here, but it's worth it. You're as sure to leave with a big smile as a sack of original souvenirs, from sunglasses-sporting Hermès (God of wealth and luck) and Aphrodite beeswax candles to skateboards made in the style of ancient Greek pottery.  
**50–52 Valtetsiou; [greeceisforlovers.com](http://greeceisforlovers.com)**

### MYRTO

Here in her Kessariss showroom, Myrto Anastasopoulou's original nature-inspired jewellery designs are as bold as they are delicate. Whether you're a big-time buyer or a casual browser, take the time to pop in.  
**7 Panepistimiou; [myajewellery.com](http://myajewellery.com)**

### KILO SHOP

A fresh approach to peddling vintage: you can buy second-hand clothes and accessories by weight here. Located on what was once the poshest of shopping streets, it fits in well with the area's new flea market-chic look and feel.  
**120 Ermou; [kilo-shop.gr](http://kilo-shop.gr)**

### SECOND HAND LUX

Pre-loved, high-end designer labels find their way back onto rails and shelves here for fashion lovers who are after luxe for less.  
**27 Haritos, Kolonaki; [secondhandlux.gr](http://secondhandlux.gr)**

### DIMITRIS PETROU

Dimitri Petrou's elegant tailored approach to fashion-forward leather creations and romantic lace details has been luring foreign fashionistas to the city for exclusive fittings. The perfect spot to splash out on that special-occasion dress.  
**23 Kanari, Kolonaki**



DIMITRIS PETROU



## LOCAL TASTEMAKER

COSTAS VOYATZIS, ART AND DESIGN BLOGGER ([YATZER.COM](http://YATZER.COM))

When Costas went off to do military service in 2006 he was worried the momentum he'd gathered working on design magazines would disappear, so he started Yatzer, a blog to keep up with everything while he was a soldier. Yatzer is now a full-time job and one of the world's leading design websites. "I look back at the opening ceremony of the 2004 Olympic Games and it was a celebration of Greek history and identity, a panorama of our past and present. Before the Olympic Games, it was a time of prosperity, but I believe we have found ourselves again as we had forgotten our values, our history, our roots. The Greeks are hospitable by nature, and any visitor can experience our hospitality whether in Athens or on a remote island. Every day I pass the New Acropolis Museum – it's a stunning building – and I'm happy to see that it has so many visitors every day, even in winter."

Costas loves...

### ATHENS FESTIVAL

"It takes place early in summer with high-quality and international events and an extensive ancient drama programme at the venerable Theatre of Epidaurus."

### A BOULEVARDIER AT 42 BAR

"Like a Negroni, but instead of gin it's bourbon." 3 Kolokotroni, Athens

### THE BREEDER GALLERY

"Aris Zambikos was commissioned by George Vamvakidis and Stathis Panagoulis to renovate this characterless '70s building and the architect created this award-winning space." 45 Iasonos

## WHERE TO STAY

### NEW HOTEL

Yes! Hotels group owner Dakis Joannou flaunts his cred as a world-class art collector at this TripAdvisor Travellers' Choice 2014 Winner. The air is scented with a sultry spicy fragrance, the eccentric lobby walls are clad in recycled wooden furniture, and each bedroom is tricked out in hi-tech everything and write-home-about-it mattresses. Meanwhile the stylish bakery-cum-restaurant New Taste is as popular with style-seeking business travellers as local movers and shakers after a watermelon martini in the evening.

**Rooms from \$218 a night.**

**16 Filellinon; [yeshotels.gr](http://yeshotels.gr)**

### HOTEL GRANDE BRETAGNE

Built in 1874, this neoclassical stunner opposite parliament has offered calm and class to celebrities and shipping magnates alike, whatever the political climate. As glam now as when it emerged from its multi-million dollar facelift over a decade ago, gleaming marble, flamboyant floral arrangements and valuable antiques promise a setting as grand as luxury five-star

hotels can provide. The panoramic views from its rooftop restaurant and pool are as dazzling as the entries in its guestbook. Soul uplifted, have a whirl in the subterranean spa, with its vast pool and gamut of therapy and steam rooms, and mind and body will soon be soothed too.

**Rooms from \$334 a night.**

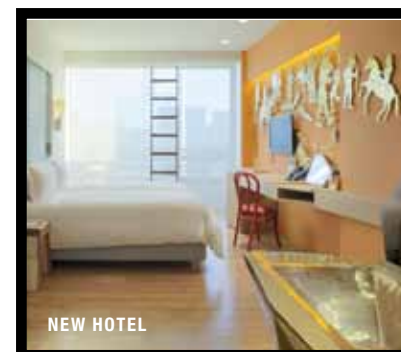
**Syntagma Square; [grandebretagne.gr](http://grandebretagne.gr)**

### ALICE INN

Those with Bohemian tastes more along the lines of Airbnb will appreciate this new Plaka townhouse converted by Greek-Scot (and architect) John Consolas and named after his grandmother. As a host, he couldn't be more helpful, whether lending you a book to read or helping with planning a tour of this edifyingly history-steeped neighbourhood. A true home from home, guests are invited to make use of the kitchen, dining and reading rooms too. He has big plans for the courtyard garden.

**Rooms from \$30 a night.**

**9 Tsatsou; [aliceinnathens.com](http://aliceinnathens.com)** ➔



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