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From Athens' ancient cultural icons to the cuisine of the Peloponnese peninsula and the serenity of the Aegean islands, Greece's tourism numbers are booming.

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Odyssey 2015

With room supply growing, NYC is no longer a cash cow for hoteliers

By Danny King

Recent third-quarter earnings reports reveal that hoteliers' revenue from New York properties is flattening as an increase in supply and a drop in international visitors have slowed growth in what has long been the most lucrative U.S. hotel market.

Executives with Marriott International, Hilton Worldwide, Starwood Hotels & Resorts and Hyatt Hotels all noted during their earnings calls with analysts in recent weeks that the city has deteriorated from a relatively strong market to a weaker one this year, a

trend they say is unlikely to reverse in 2016.

New York "continues to face an oversupply situation and pressure from lower volumes of inbound international travelers due to the strong dollar," Starwood CFO Tom Magas said on an Oct. 28 earnings call. "I think some of the factors that have led to a weaker New York market in 2015 still are present in 2016."

Likewise, Hyatt CEO Mark Hoplamazian said in his company's Nov. 3 earnings call, "We saw weakness in New York City."

Chris Heywood, spokesman for the New York City Economic Development Corp., says the trend they say is unlikely to reverse in 2016. See **HOTELS** on Page 80

[FEWER INBOUND VISITORS AND LESS SPENDING SEEN]

Strong dollar is eating away at slumping source markets

By Michelle Baran

When it comes to currency fluctuations, there are always two sides to every coin. So, while this year's strong dollar has benefited the U.S. traveler abroad, it has posed some challenges for inbound travel from source markets that have

seen their currency slump.

"We've seen a shift in buying patterns," said Joseph Walker, who oversees sales for Amadeo Travel Solutions, a receptive tour operator based in Verona, N.J. Amadeo's president and CEO, Jonathan Zuk, also serves as chairman of the Receptive Services Association of America (RSAA), a network of travel agencies. See **DOLLAR** on Page 84

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From Athens' ancient cultural icons to the cuisine of the Peloponnese peninsula and the serenity of the Aegean islands, Greece's tourism numbers are booming.

BY PATRICIA SCHULTZ

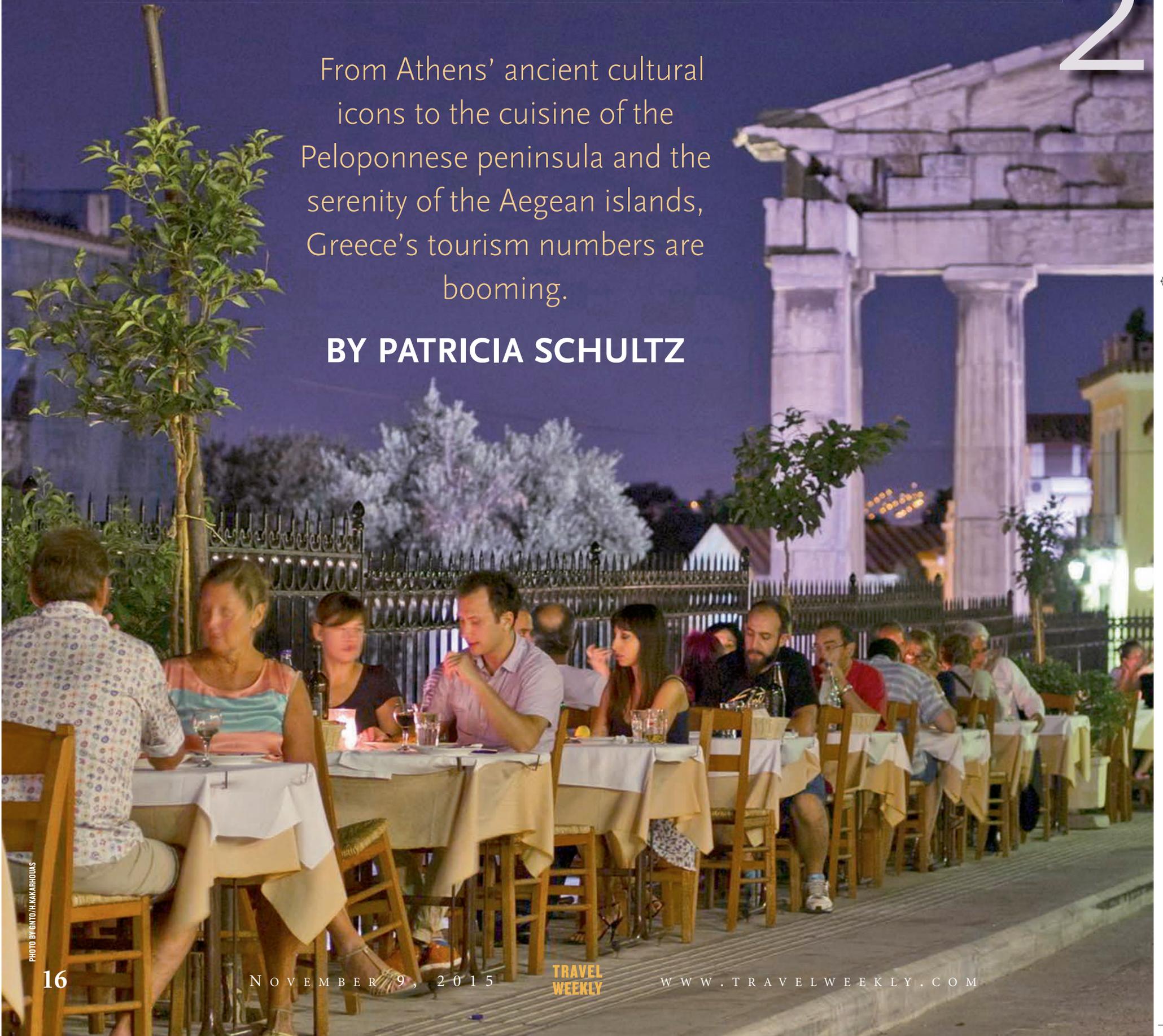


PHOTO BY GANTO/H. KAKARHOUS

KEY 2015

The news is good: The 2015 travel season for Greece has broken all records, and tourism, one of the country's few successful industries and the lifeline to its economic recovery, stands to enjoy an equally healthy season in 2016.

Greece's tourism industry, which accounts for 17.3% of the country's gross national product and employs 19.4% of the workforce, is contributing decisively to what could be the first tentative signs of an economic improvement. But no one is ignoring the difficult times ahead.

I arrived in Greece in late September wondering what crisis conditions would await and how they might impact those who, like me, have long enjoyed a love affair with this special corner of the Mediterranean?

Christos Stergiou, founder and CEO of TrueGreece, the Athens-based luxury travel company that helped me plan my trip, said he was not surprised by the continuous success of Greece as a preferred destination.

"The combination of the country's timeless beauty, the genuine warmth and hospitality of its people, and the multifaceted Greek culture — by this I mean our rich history, customs, art and culinary traditions — is really quite impossible to find elsewhere," he said.

Although the country was undoubtedly in the midst of an economic meltdown that was emblazoned in front-page headlines, the international travel world rallied and, with the exception of a midsummer moment when talk of limited ATM cash withdrawals (that never affected foreign bank card holders anyway) and a possible exit from the eurozone spread, the 2015 season marked a third consecutive record year in terms of visitors and revenue.

Annual arrival figures are expected to reach 26 million and tourism receipts of 14.5 billion euros are anticipated by the end of the year, according to Iossif Parsalis, managing director of the destination marketing organization Marketing Greece.

"We did not simply meet our targets but exceeded them," Parsalis said. "Based on figures from Greece's main airports for the first nine months of the year, international air arrivals rose by 6.2%, to almost 14 million, which represents an increase of 870,000 visitors."

An international favorite

British visitors outnumbered Germans, putting an end to the 10-year domination of German tourists, according to data released by the Bank of Greece. A growing number of French visitors helped offset a decline in Russian visitors, as did a large increase of U.S. tourists, whose numbers have now reached an unprecedented 395,000. I found hotels sold out, ferries brimming with suitcase-lugging passengers and the flights, both international and island-hoppers, with limited-to-no availability.

TrueGreece helped me navigate my way through a still busy time in September. Stergiou's 10 years in the U.S., during which he earned an MBA from Stanford Business School and worked at a Boston consulting firm, provided him with an invaluable understanding of the American traveler; they account for 90% of the customer base of his award-winning travel company, first brought to my attention by Wendy Perin and her spot-on Wow list of destination experts.

"Greece for visitors feels like a very different country than what is portrayed by the media or how it sometimes feels to its own inhabitants," Stergiou said. "Greek tourism is not in crisis."

From a tourist perspective, I found it was business as

usual. "The Parthenon, does she not still stand?" an exuberant taxi driver once asked us rhetorically.

Following Stergiou's advice, I scheduled a few extra days to experience Athens, a city I had always given short shrift — and Parsalis assured me I was not alone.

"Over the past three years, Athens has experienced an unprecedented revival in popularity among travelers, among them significant numbers of Americans, who, up until recently, considered the Greek capital a stopover on the way to the islands," he said.

In September alone, a month I found ideal to visit the city, with temperatures still in the low 90s, Athens air arrivals rose 23.2% compared with the same month in 2014, and they jumped by 25.6% in the first nine months of 2015.

Marketing Greece has helped spread the word on Athens and all of Greece through its comprehensive new website www.discovergreece.com. It has targeted the international media and the blogger world and encouraged travelers to consider visiting in spring, fall and winter. Being a fan of big cities, I am now an Athens convert and more appreciative of the myriad attractions of a city that one might not consider eye candy.

Athens' plethora of classic sites and museums can be daunting for first-time and return visitors alike. TrueGreece's hand-picked and closely vetted guides help make sense of one of the world's richest collections of antiquities. My favorite remains the incomparable Acropolis Museum in the shadow of the Acropolis itself. The museum's 8.5 million visitors since its 2009 opening illustrate its popularity. Don't miss the excellent restaurant whose Greek specialties can be enjoyed on an open terrace with stunning views of the Acropolis.

The more old-school National Archaeological Museum is a showcase of Greek civilization that will make your head spin, all the more reason that a cracker-jack guide is indispensable.

The Benaki Museum, the country's first private museum, acts as a kind of crash course in Greek history. Housed in the Benaki family mansion, it is unfortunately overlooked by those who underestimate the city's treasure trove of museums. We found the newly restored Byzantine Museum, featuring one of the largest and most stunning collections of its kind, to be almost empty.

Three Athenian hotels

My trio of Athens hotels began with the Grande Bretagne, See **GREECE** on Page 18

A restaurant in Athens' Plaka neighborhood, one of the city's most popular for alfresco evening dining.

In the 12 years since **Patricia Schultz** reinvented the travel book with her international-best-selling "1,000 Places to See Before You Die" (Workman), she has likely inspired the addition of more destinations to travelers' bucket lists than any other living travel writer. The recently released second edition, accompanied by an iPad app, jumped to the top of The New York Times Best-Seller List the week it was released. We are proud to count her among our Travel Weekly Masters Series Contributing Editors.



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a neoclassical Starwood Luxury Collection property long popular with Americans. Its central location on Syntagma (Constitution) Square meant I was a two-minute dash from the hourly changing of the synchronized Evzone guards in front of the Parliament building and within walking distance of just about everything.

Since 1874, its guest book has included everyone from Winston Churchill to Sting, and after people-watching in its stylish lobby, I would add 30-somethings with young children and French Riviera types. Its covered Roof Garden Restaurant & Bar offers incomparable Acropolis views, but it was dinner next door at the King George's rooftop Tudor Hall restaurant where innovative takes on Greek food effortlessly rivaled the view.

The New Hotel, strikingly modern for such an ancient city, is the newest addition to the small but well-regarded Yes Hotel chain. A complete reinvention of the 1950s Olympic Palace hotel, it is located just a few blocks from Syntagma Square on the perimeter of the Plaka, Athens' oldest neighborhood, at the foot of the Acropolis and an easy stroll to

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Scenes from Athens, clockwise from top left: The Acropolis Museum; a graffiti guestroom at the Grecotel Pallas Athena; the view from the rooftop Art Lounge restaurant at the New Hotel; and the Hotel Grande Bretagne, which is centrally located on Syntagma (Constitution) Square.

GREECE

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everything of note.

The Brazilian Campana brothers have imbued their not-for-everyone design aesthetic in a startling lobby lined with recycled wooden pieces and in a street-level restaurant serving great breakfasts (their Sunday brunch is Athens' finest) and a rooftop restaurant that are popular with locals. The 79 spacious guestrooms with airy bathrooms are pared down and sun-flooded but stay refreshingly hip and stylish without alienating travelers of a more conservative bent.

Among other fresh-faced arrivals to Athens' contemporary hotel scene is the Grecotel Pallas Athena, just off the central Omonia Square and adjacent to Town Hall. A bright and fun lobby will appeal to young and young-at-heart guests with its quirky modernity, made comfortable and enjoyable by a great staff and amenities such as a terraced restaurant whose breakfast of fresh Greek specialties, and a corner dedicated to traditional dishes from Crete (a nod to the home of the hotels' owner) was one of the best I had in town.

The Grecotel chain celebrates its 40th anniversary this year and now runs 30 properties, mostly in Greece and mostly waterfront, such as the Cape Sounio Exclusive Resort outside town in what is being dubbed the Athens Riviera, promising an island experience without leaving terra firma.

So ubiquitous is the street-art scene throughout Athens that the Pallas Athena hired five prominent graffiti artists to cover the walls in beautiful murals of different palettes and styles in most of the guest rooms.

The graffiti found just about everywhere in town inspired the Huffington Post to recently call Athens "one of the 21st century's emerging street-art meccas." Graffiti is nothing new in town: the word can be traced to the ancient Greek word *graphi*, meaning to write, and some of it can be impressively beautiful. In fact, professional artists are sometimes hired by local authorities to cover empty two- and three-story walls.

Much of it, however, is the result of discouraged teens (unemployment for those under age 24 is 48%, and many are leaving the country) who deface everything with their "tags," while a new wave of graffiti is more socially and politically aware.

I signed up with Athens Insiders to further explore the city's street art scene and evolving cultural vibe, stroll the vibrant neighborhoods, find the best customized sandal maker and, in short, see the city through a local's eyes.

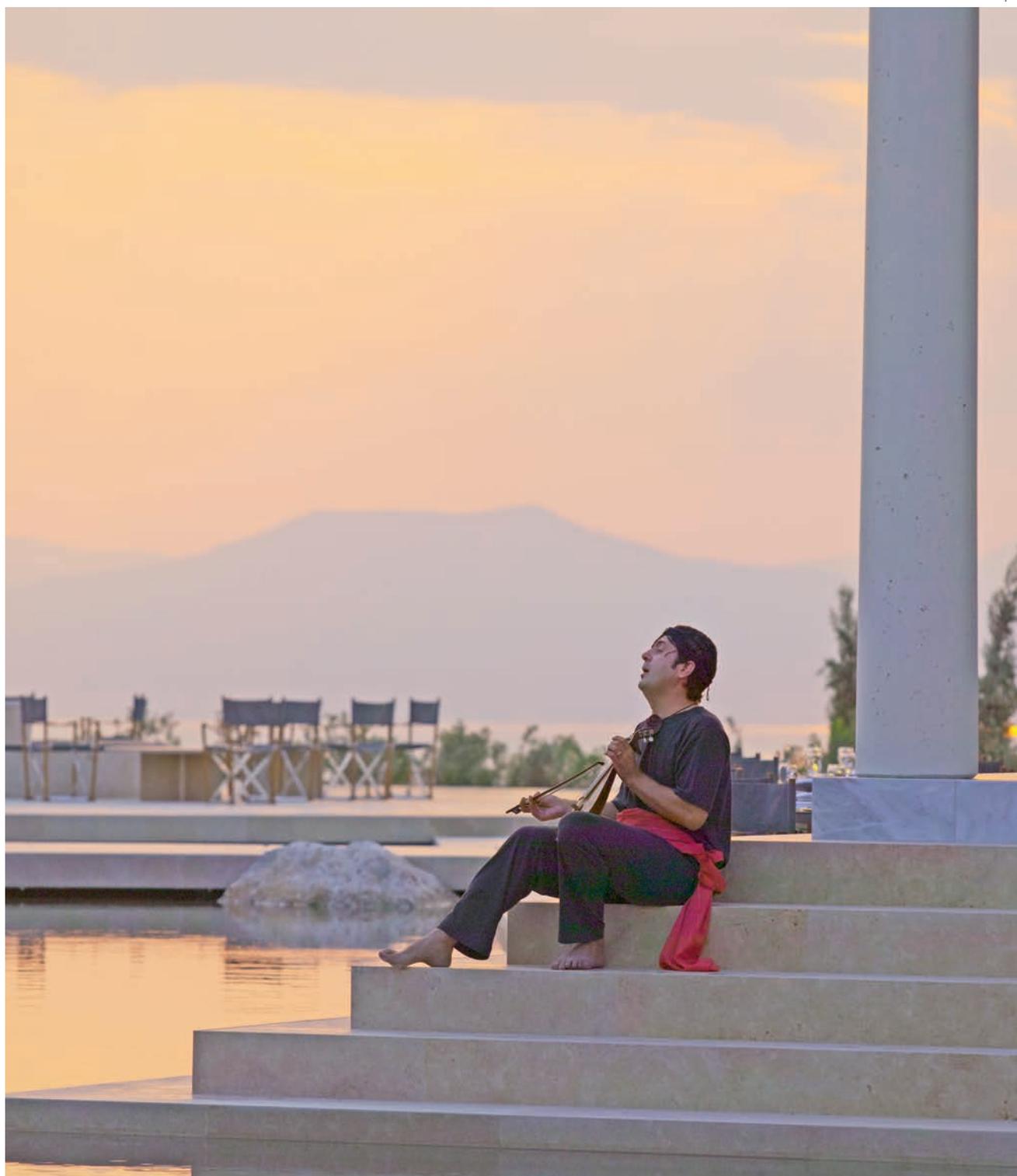
Walking tours might not be unusual in other big cities, but until recently they were scarce in Athens. I loved the idea behind Athens Insiders: that well-educated, entrepreneurial young people are choosing not to leave, to stay in the city they love and — more proof that crisis can breed creativity — founding this small company that offers visitors a wide range of walking tours both organized and tailor-made.

A 'Grecovore' vacation

Greek cuisine must be one of the world's most underrated, and I joined a walking tour offered by Culinary Backstreets to experience the real deal along the little-visited backstreets of the atmospheric Plaka neighborhood.

An insightful and delicious experience for first-timers and return visitors, it offered us all kinds of trivia from our highly knowledgeable and passionate chef/guide. (Did you know the average Greek consumes about 50 pounds of cheese a year? Most of it is feta, which is eaten with everything.) We sampled countless delectables, ranging from the completely unknown to the very familiar: delicate handmade goat yogurt with honey (the Greek yogurt carried in American

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Top, the restaurant at the Amanzoe Resort in Port Heli. The property sits atop a hill with breathtaking, 360-degree vistas of land and sea. Bottom left, Argiro Barbarigou, one of Greece's most famous and awarded female chefs. Her Athens restaurant is Papdakis. Bottom right, the pool area at the Amanzoe.



PHOTOGRAPH BY TEBBETTS

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stores is pathetic by comparison) to a scrumptious array of warm-from-the-oven sweets to what must be the finest souvlaki ever, served at a third-generation, impossible-to-find hole-in-the-wall.

I asked Argiro Barbaragiou, the TV personality and author of multiple cookbooks, why the world isn't clamoring for Greek food.

"The biggest misconception is that Greek cuisine is just about moussaka, tzatiki, souvlaki and lamb" she said, when in fact, "It is the very basis of the Mediterranean diet and based on excellent raw and home-grown materials you find everywhere in this country."

Barbaragiou went on to list olives and extra virgin olive oil from the Peloponnese peninsula, sweet tomatoes from Santorini, thyme honey from the Aegean islands and fish caught just that morning. We experienced all of this and more at her stylish restaurant, Papadakis, in the upscale neighborhood of Kolonaki, where we sat outside under orange trees.

"You always remember what you eat on vacation" she told me, "especially when it is paired with Greek hospitality, which is unparalleled."

Food lovers call the Peloponnese a Greek Tuscany. It is an ancient land of kalamata olives, the orange groves of Sparta and Argos and the rolling vineyards of Nemea, whose wines are impressing many on the international awards circuit. Overlooked by those who head for the islands, the Wales-size peninsula enjoys fewer crowds. "This is the real Greece," friends had told us.

Pampered, with a view

Greece's first Aman resort opened in the Peloponnese in 2012, another reason to hop on the three-hour boat ride to Port Heli (only slightly longer than the trip by car). The Amanzoe (*aman* is Sanskrit for peace; *zoe* is Greek for life) sits atop a hill with breathtaking, 360-degree vistas of land and shimmering sea, the perfect re-creation of a classic vil-

lage, all soaring marble columns and reflecting pools. It is the very epitome of luxe serenity.

There are 38 freestanding pavilions with private pools, endless views, his-and-her bathrooms (with seven privately owned villas also for rent) and everywhere the smell of lavender, thyme, rosemary and white oleanders that lined the winding footpaths. More than 300 olive trees were sensitively accommodated, some said to be more than 800 years old.

Some 35% of the Aman-lovers here hailed from the U.S., while the majority are European who welcome an Aman experience without the travel time to Asia (the luxury chain's 30th property is scheduled to open in Kyoto in 2016).

We seemed to be the only ones capable of pulling ourselves away from the peaceful life for the 20-minute boat ride that whisked us to nearby Spetses, a delightful, car-free island where a horse and carriage took us past handsome homes, moored yachts and stylish boutiques popular with well-heeled Athenians. Aman's private beach club and acclaimed spa would have to wait until my next visit.

The Peloponnese boast important archeological sites that Aman guests can easily explore as day trips, but we chose to relocate to Nafplion, a beautiful waterfront town an hour's drive away. Small, strollable and with a palm-lined quayside full of cafes and restaurants, Nafplion was briefly the first capital of the newly independent Greece in 1833. It is less than two hours by car from Athens, and although many visitors come for the day, the Nafplia Palace & Villas was our perfect base for two days of exploring the area.

Located within the ruins of the Akronafplia Fortress, the oldest of the city's three castles, rising high above the old town, it offers stunning views, all enjoyed from the hotel's newly built annex of terraced suites, some with private pools.

The reason to come is Mycenae, ground zero of a formidable kingdom that gave its name to a golden era of civilization. The amazingly well preserved theater of Epidauros, one of the most magnificent of the ancient world, boasted perfect acoustics and seating for 15,000. It is still used today

The well-preserved theater of Epidauros in Mycenae is still used today as an evocative venue for summertime performances of ancient comedies and tragedies.

as an evocative venue for summertime performances of ancient comedies and tragedies.

On to the islands

We had saved our island stay for last. Of the estimated 6,000 islands scattered about the Aegean and Ionian seas, only 227 are inhabited. Santorini and Mykonos (sister islands in the volcanic, whitewashed Cyclades group) made this year's Conde Nast Traveler's list of the World's 20 Best Islands. They're also among the most visited.

Other long-time favorites such as Rhodes, Corfu, Crete (the largest and southernmost), Naxos and Paros also share much of the limelight. Everyone has a favorite, and the choice is highly personal.

"We Greeks live like frogs around a pond," Socrates wrote of the Aegean lined with its coastal cities and dappled with a galaxy of islands.

I turned to Nigel McGilchrist, a British scholar and author whose 20-volume series on the Aegean islands is the definitive guidebook to the region and a 10-year labor of love on a Homeric scale.

"Each island, often no more than a mountain in the sea, is an individual and is utterly different from the next," he said. "There is the stunning, visual beauty of them all: the dramatic profiles, the colors of stone and olive and sea, the sound of the wind in the pines and the intoxicating smell of herbs."

Did he have any favorites?

"Amorgos for its wilderness and grandeur. Car-free Hydra for its simple and elegant architecture. Samos for its wild orchids and butterflies. Paros for its sophistication, good food and stylishness. Tilos because it is quiet and an ecological

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paradise.”

TrueGreece was a little more cautious when asked to name its favorites, and Stergiou explained that he avoided categorizations that might lead to wrong decisions.

“Instead, I aim to match guests’ desires and dreams with a destination that is ideal for them,” he said.

He didn’t need to worry about me. Having visited most of the big-ticket islands — from my student-budget trip to Crete in 1974 to a recent island-hopping Silversea cruise and many other trips in between — I already knew what I wanted to see this time: tiny Patmos, the Dodecanese island within sight of the Turkish coast. It was home to an exiled St. John, who wrote his Book of Revelations here, and the Agha Kahn, an honorary citizen whose extended family still visits. It is loved for its intriguing blend of the sacred and the glamorous.

Stergiou couldn’t fault my choice. He had grown up spending summers on Patmos, and his parents own and manage Petra Hotel & Suites, commonly considered one of the finest boutique hotels in Greece, and one of the reasons I had long wanted to visit.

The absence of an airport helps keep crowds at bay, and I relied on Aegean Air’s extensive network servicing more than 30 destinations in Greece (and, since acquiring Olympic in 2013, 100 destinations in 42 countries) and caught a flight to the neighboring island of Kos. The flight lined up well with the ferry departing Kos for Patmos. But first it gave us an up-close look at the refugee situation at Kos’s small harbor, one that is greatly impacting the Greek islands closest to Turkey’s western shores.

Until Oct. 20, 537,000 migrants and refugees had been registered by the Greek authorities since the beginning of the year. Most were focused on moving north, aware of Greece’s unemployment woes and determined to reach Germany before the winter sets in.

Nearby Lesbos island has seen the greatest number of arrivals, and several cruise lines temporarily stopped calling there until the situation is resolved. Locals on the islands and in Athens are more impacted by the numbers, but visiting tourists generally remain unaware as Greek officials and international organizations strive to organize each day’s arrivals.

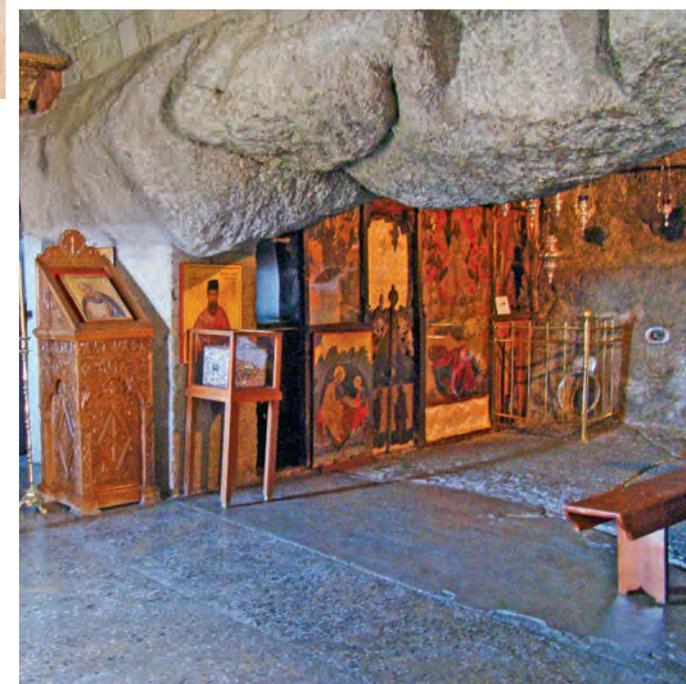
Aegean magic

Patmos was 2.5 hours away by the Athens-bound ferry heading north. The helpful owners of the Petra Hotel & Suites, who apparently never sleep, were up at midnight to warmly greet us upon our arrival in Patmos.

The Stergiou family and their young smiling can-do staff effortlessly run a very special hotel of just 11 rooms and suites (in a style more pan-Mediterranean than the usual white-washed and blue motif found everywhere) with open views of gorgeous Grikos Bay whose uncrowded beach is a two-minute walk away. They lavished us with care (and delicious home-cooked meals on their open dining patio — breakfast is not to be missed) and that inimitable Greek hospitality we kept running into at every turn.

The 3,000 inhabitants of this 13-square-mile island rightly believe they live on blessed ground. We spent hours visiting the peaceful but eerie Cave of the Apocalypse, where St. John is said to have heard the voice of God, and the fascinating, still-functioning hilltop monastery built in his honor in the late 11th century. Jointly, they comprise one of Greece’s 17 Unesco World Heritage Sites and include the perfectly preserved Chora village that surrounds it, a photographer’s field day.

But there is much to explore and enjoy outside of the island’s religious legacy. Its landscape can be both wild and dramatic, but also serene with countless coves and many beaches that invite lazy afternoons. Small unpretentious tavernas dot the island (the simple and honest food at family-run Leonidas would be hard to beat) alongside more upscale restaurants such as the popular American/Greek



Top, Petra Hotel & Suites on Patmos Island. Above, the Cave of the Apocalypse on Patmos, where St. John the Apostle was said to have written his Gospel and the Book of Revelations.

owned Benetos, which cater to the island’s growing number of discerning visitors. A mini-cruise to a handful of nearby, sparsely populated islands confirmed just how delicious a leisurely lunch of simple and fresh food can be, as well as what is meant by the expression Aegean blue. Yes, Patmos is special for the calm and serenity it promises, since time immemorial.

My September adventure had come to an end on a high note. It was a memorable odyssey through a land of timeless history, beauty and *filoxenia* (hospitality), all enhanced by the Greek people I met along the way. They are masters at the art of *carpe diem*, living life to the fullest even in the most difficult of times. I wish them a healthy and peaceful 2016.