

GREECE

"We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their roots in Greece."

Percy Shelley



Greece offers sunshine, whitewashed houses with bright-blue shutters, delicious food, and a relaxed lifestyle. As the cradle of Western civilization, it has some of the world's greatest ancient monuments. The ancient Greeks – who reached their Golden Age apex in Athens in the fifth century BC – have had an unmatched impact on European and American culture: democracy and mathematics, medicine and literature, theater and astronomy, mythology and philosophy. All of these, and more, were first thought up by a bunch of tunic-clad Greeks in a village huddled at the base of the Acropolis.

Athens and the Greek Islands

Today the capital of Athens is the teeming home of 3.75 million people, about one-third of the country's population. Athens is a fascinating mix of ancient ruins and an old center with modern upgrades – world-class museums, fun pedestrian zones ringing the Acropolis, fine public transport, and a state-of-the-art airport. By day, tour the Acropolis, the Agora, and the history-packed museums. Light a candle alongside black-clad widows at an icon-filled church. Haggle with a sandal maker at a busy market stall, or have coffee with locals in an old town café. At night, join the pan-European party of eating, drinking, and dancing in open-air tavernas. Athens is a great city to see, and worth a few days to explore.

Then take a vacation from your busy vacation and board a ferry from Athens to any of the many picturesque Greek islands. Cruise the Aegean Sea, rent a villa, and make the island your home for a week. Explore a tight, twisty maze of whitewashed cubic houses with vibrant trim. Dig your toes into the sand while basking under a beach umbrella. Go for a dip in the crystal-clear, warm Aegean Sea. Sip an iced coffee along a bustling harbor-front, watching fishermen clean their catch. Hike well-worn paths to ancient sites. Indulge in fresh seafood at a rustic seaside taverna while watching the sun gradually descend into the sea.

Culture

Greek people warmly welcome visitors to their country. They strive to demonstrate *filotimo* (love of honor), roughly translated as being open and friendly and doing the right thing. You'll find two Greeces: traditional/rural and modern/urban. In the countryside, you'll see men on donkeys, women wearing headscarves, and families harvesting olives by hand. In bigger cities, it's a concrete world of honking horns and buzzing mobile phones. As the rural exodus continues, cities are now home to a majority of Greeks. Despite modern changes, many Greek men and women play traditional roles. Women generally run the home; fewer women join the workforce than in other European countries. Men like to hang out at coffee shops, playing backgammon, watching sports on TV, and arguing over politics.

The Greek Orthodox Church – a rallying point for Greeks during centuries of foreign occupation – remains part of everyday life. Ninety-five percent of all Greeks declare themselves Orthodox, even if they rarely go to church. Orthodox elements appear everywhere. Icon shrines dot the highways. Black robes, cake-shaped hats, and families in tow mingle with parishioners on street corners. Greeks routinely pop into churches to light a candle, asking for favors.

Greeks are family-oriented, with large extended families. Kids live at home until they're married, and then they might just move into a flat upstairs in the same apartment building. The "family" extends to the large diaspora of emigrants. Three million Greek-Americans keep ties to the home country through their Orthodox faith and their festive celebratory traditions. On warm summer nights, families spill into the street to greet their neighbors on the evening stroll. For entertainment, they go out to eat, where they order large amounts and share it family-style: fava bean dip, tzatziki dip (yogurt and cucumber), grilled peppers stuffed with feta cheese, Greek salad, fresh fish, and ouzo (anise-flavored liquor). And when the music plays, it's time to dance.

Culturally rich, Greece has given the world the Olympic Games, tall tales of Gods (Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite), and exciting heroes (Achilles, Odysseus, Hercules). From Socrates to Onassis, Greece has a classical past and a proud present. It's easy to surrender to the Greek way of living. With its long history, incomparable sights, and simple lifestyle, Greece has a timeless appeal.

Greece Today

After adopting the euro in 2001, the Greek economy boomed. EU subsidies flowed in for major infrastructure projects, such as highways and high-speed rail. As host of the 2004 Summer Olympics, Athens cleaned up its city and installed a new airport and Metro. But the worldwide recession that started in 2008 hit Greece hard. Unprecedented bailouts from the EU and the International Monetary Fund required Greece to institute severe economic reforms, sparking massive protests. The recently elected center-right government has pledged to reenergize the post-bailout economy. Ever suspect, Greeks remain cautiously optimistic, exercising a wait-and-see approach to whether things will actually change.

Immigration is another hotly debated topic. People are divided over how the nation can and should accommodate the thousands of economic and political refugees who arrive here. Greeks also argue among themselves about the nation's high military spending, the draft, and excessive privileges for the Greek Orthodox church, the state religion.

Despite these issues, tourism has rebounded vigorously, with hotels filling to capacity. Throughout the recent upheaval, most Greeks maintained a sunny outlook – and it appears that their optimism was not misplaced. By no means is Greece out of the economic woods, but things don't seem as dire. And, considering that the Greek language and culture have survived for more than two millennia – despite being conquered by Romans, Turks, and Nazis – there's good reason to feel confident that they'll overcome the latest turmoil, too.

Interesting Facts About Greece

- Greece is often considered to be the world's first democracy dating back to the 5th century. It was a system of direct democracy, where citizens with voting-rights voted directly on legislation. Only adult male citizens had voting-rights.
- The Olympic Games originated in Ancient Greece. Just before the games started, all city-states agreed to a temporary truce.
- Ancient Greeks believed that Mount Olympus was home to the gods. They held many festivals to honor the gods and goddesses.
- Ancient Greece produced some of the world's greatest theater, literature, and philosophy.
- Aristarcus of Samos suggested that the planets orbit the sun in the 3rd century BC.
- Greece is one of the sunniest countries in the world with more than 250 days of sunshine on average. Some islands even see about 300 days of sun per year.
- Greek food is famous and delicious: tzatziki, feta cheese, moussaka, gyros, spanakopita, souviaki, Greek salad, calamari, kleftiko, and many more dishes.
- 98% of the population are ethnic Greeks, with Albanian, Armenian, and Bulgarian minorities.
- There are more than 2000 islands, but only 170 of them are populated.
- 40% of the total population reside in Athens. Thessaloniki is the second largest city.
- The island of Ikaria is one of the world's blue zones where people have the longest lifespans.
- Grandparents usually live with their children's families until they die.
- At traditional Greek weddings, everyone dances and throws plates.
- There are more tourists in Greece than Greeks during the summer.
- Greece has one of the richest varieties of wildlife in Europe: 116 species of mammals, 18 species of amphibians, 59 species of reptiles, 240 species of birds, and 107 species of fish.
- Wild dolphins and endangered monk seals and loggerhead turtles swim in the Greek waters.
- Greek is the oldest written language still in existence. It has continuously been used for more than 5000 years, influencing English and other languages with thousands of words.
- The country's real name is the Hellenic Republic, or Hellas, the original word for Greece.
- Alexander the Great was Greek. Conquering land from Greece to Asia, his conquests and accomplishments gave rise to the later Hellenistic period.
- There are more than 4000 traditional dances around the country.
- After giving a compliment, Greeks might make a puff of breath through pursed lips, as if spitting. This is meant to protect the person receiving the compliment from the "evil eye".
- Football (soccer) is the national sport in Greece.
- Ancient Greek pottery was decorated with scenes of soldiers, gods, or daily life.
- It's more common to celebrate name days instead of birthdays.

