

## Athens



Figure 1: Athens, Greece

### Introduction

The city of Athens was the birthplace of Western civilization and is still one of Europe's great cities. In ancient times it was the most important Greek city-state. Today it is the capital and chief center of commerce and industry of Greece. The city attracts a large number of tourists each year to visit its historic sites that date to ancient times.

### Location and Climate

Athens is located on a peninsula that stretches southeastward into the Aegean Sea. The city is surrounded by the Plain of Attica, which in turn is surrounded on three sides by mountains. The city proper covers an area of 15 square miles (39 square kilometers). The metropolitan area has an area of about 165 square miles (427 square kilometers). Athens' seaport, Piraeus, is 5 miles (8 kilometers) away on the coastal plain. The core of the ancient city consists of a flat-topped mass of rock known as the Acropolis. Close to the Acropolis is a lower rock, the Areopagus. Northeast of the Acropolis, the pointed summit of Mount Lycabettus (Likavittós) rises to a height of more than 1,100 feet (330 meters). There are several other smaller hills.

The location of Athens was favorable for its early growth. The Plain of Attica provided good conditions for farming, while the surrounding mountains gave protection against enemies. There were good natural harbors, yet it was distant enough from the coast to prevent surprise attack from the sea.

The climate of Athens is Mediterranean. The summers are hot and dry, at times oppressive. Winters are mild and wet. Wells, aqueducts, and pipelines were built to hold water to supplement the scarce rainfall.



Figure 2: Piraeus is the port of Athens, Greece. It lies on Phaleron Bay, about 5 miles (8 kilometers) southwest of Athens.

## ***Modern City***

When Athens became the capital of the new kingdom of Greece in 1833, it was a small town of Turkish-style houses clustered at the foot of the Acropolis. The modern city developed around this older core, which became known as the Pláka. Much of it was constructed in the 19th century around squares and parks that formed part of a planned street pattern. Royal palaces, a university and national library, a parliament house, and a reconstructed stadium for the Olympic Games of 1896 were all built. Most of these public buildings are made of white marble in the classical style. Today the Pláka is prized by Athenians and visitors alike for its picturesque streets, restaurants, and cafés.



*Figure 3: One of the duties of the evzones—members of an elite Greek infantry unit—is to guard the Monument of the Unknown Soldier, in Athens, Greece.*

The center of modern Athens is Síntagma (Constitution) Square. On one side stands the Old Royal Palace; now called the Parliament Building, it is home to the Greek parliament. Behind the building is the National Garden, one of the city's largest public parks. In front of the building is the Monument of the Unknown Soldier, guarded by colorful evzones—members of the select Greek infantry unit who wear the traditional white skirt.

Many cultural institutions and historic sites lie within walking distance of Síntagma. Two long avenues—Venizelou Street and Stadiou Avenue—lead northwest from Síntagma to Omónia (Concord) Square. Venizelou (also called Panepistimíou Street) is home to the University of Athens and the Greek Academy, the oldest research institution in Greece. West of Síntagma lie the National Observatory, the Acropolis Museum, and the Acropolis itself. An oblong plateau of rock that rises abruptly above the city, the Acropolis is home to a wealth of historic structures, including the Parthenon and the Theatre of Dionysus.

Just southwest of central Athens lies the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center. This cultural, educational, and recreational complex houses the Greek National Opera and the National Library of Greece. The Center also includes the vast Stavros Niarchos Park, a beautifully designed outdoor space with gardens, playgrounds, and open areas for concerts and other events.



*Figure 4: Athens is the capital and largest city of Greece.*

Beginning in the 1950s, much of old Athens was demolished to make room for modern buildings. The movement of large numbers of people into the capital from rural areas led to severe traffic congestion. The many automobiles, especially taxis, caused air pollution at levels that threatened not only the public health but also the city's ancient monuments. Pollution controls were introduced to limit the damage caused by the automobiles and by industrial pollution. A key

effort was the development of the Athens Metro. This modern public transit system opened in 2000, adding two new underground electric lines to the city's transit system.

Most of the people of Athens are ethnic Greeks, though a small proportion of the population is foreign-born. Athenians and visitors to the city enjoy a plethora of cultural and leisure activities. The generally warm and sunny weather allows for abundant outdoor dining and social events. Plazas and parks are common in most parts of the city, as are sidewalk cafés and restaurants. Nighttime Athens offers a diverse array of entertainment, from nightspots offering traditional Greek music to symphony concerts, ballet, opera, and classical theater. Many performances take place in open-air theaters, from the restored Odeon (Theater) of Herodes Atticus to the modern facilities of the Stavros Niarchos Cultural Center.



*Figure 5: Built by Herodes Atticus in 161 ce as a memorial to his wife, the Odeon (Theater) of Herodes Atticus is a popular entertainment venue in modern Athens.*

Sports and sporting events have a prominent place in modern Athens. Soccer is especially popular, as are golf, riding, and basketball. Two key events each year are the Athens Classic Marathon, held in late autumn, and the international Acropolis Rally, held each June. The latter attracts racing car enthusiasts from around the world. The city has twice hosted the Summer Olympics, first in 1896, heralding the first occurrence of the modern games, and then again in 2004.

Athens is the commercial and transportation center of Greece. With Piraeus it produces most of the country's manufactured products. Industries include textiles, shipbuilding, food processing, metallurgy, engineering, oil refining, and chemicals. Publishing and tourism are also major industries. Athens forms the center of the Greek railroad network and is linked by major highways with the northern and

southwestern parts of the country. Piraeus, the largest port, accounts for about half the country's seaborne trade. Athens International Airport, southeast of the central city, handles considerable international traffic, especially during the tourist season.

### ***Ancient City***

The site of Athens has been inhabited since before 3000 B.C. The earliest buildings date from the late Bronze Age, about 1200 B.C., when part of the town spread to the south of the citadel on the Acropolis. During this period a wall was built along the edge of the rock. The 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. was a period of great growth. The old, primitive shrines began to be replaced with large stone temples, thus changing the Acropolis from a citadel to a sanctuary.



*Figure 6: The city of Athens, Greece, contains ruins of ancient monuments in addition to modern neighborhoods.*

In 480 B.C. the city was captured and destroyed by the Persians. The Acropolis buildings were burned and the houses in the lower town mostly destroyed. When the Athenians returned the next year they immediately began to rebuild. Over the next 30 years they built only fortifications and some secular buildings. The Acropolis and its destroyed temples were left as a reminder of Persian atrocities until a peace with Persia was reached in 449 B.C.



*Figure 7: The ruins of the Parthenon stand atop the Acropolis of Athens, Greece.*

Over the next 40 years the city developed its classical form. The Agora, the center of civic life, was located near the Areopagus, where the high court sat, and the Pnyx, where the Athenian assembly met. The Agora was both marketplace and public meeting place. It contained two stoas, or long colonnaded halls. The Agora also contained the Theseum, one of the best preserved temples in Athens. This building is older than the similar but larger Parthenon, which dominates the Acropolis.

The Acropolis was rebuilt in gleaming white marble beginning in 449 B.C. Construction on the Parthenon began in 447 B.C. and was completed nine years later. The large, richly decorated temple was dedicated to Athena and contained a huge statue of the goddess. The Erechtheum, with its caryatids—or marble female figures—supporting the roof, and the Temple of Athena Nike were also built on the Acropolis during the same period. This collection of temples was approached

through the Propylaea, a large entrance building. The Theater of Dionysus, built in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. at the southern base of the Acropolis, was the city's drama center. The city was connected with the port of Piraeus by the parallel Long Walls, which formed a corridor 550 feet (170 meters) wide.

After Athens lost the Peloponnesian War in 404 B.C. its place as the premier city-state in Greece was also lost. The city went into a decline that lasted until the period of Roman control three centuries later. Although the Romans sacked Athens and pulled down the Long Walls in 88 B.C., they later built many magnificent buildings. The emperor Hadrian, in particular, completed a huge Temple of Olympian Zeus built and a library and a gymnasium. He also constructed a large arch and an aqueduct that still serves the city. Herodes Atticus built the Odeum, a theater that has been restored and is still in use. The Romans had their own Agora, which contained the Tower of the Winds, one of the earliest weather observatories.

At the end of the Roman period, the city began to decay. Several temples were turned into Christian churches during the Byzantine period and after the city fell to the Crusaders in 1204. The Ottoman Turks occupied Athens in 1456 and began an almost 400-year rule. They turned the Parthenon into a mosque and occupied other classical buildings.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Propylaea and the Parthenon were severely damaged when explosive powder stored in them exploded. Further damage was done during fighting between the Turks and the Venetians. The latter tried to remove some of the Parthenon sculptures and broke them, while the Turks destroyed several ancient monuments to build defensive walls. In 1801 the British ambassador to Turkey, Thomas Bruce, the seventh earl of Elgin, was given permission by the Turks to remove many remaining sculptures. Known as the Elgin Marbles, they are now in the British Museum in London, England. Fighting during an uprising in 1821 did further damage. Population (2011 estimate), city, 655,780; metropolitan area, 3,168,036.

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