

A CAPITAL
REBORN

ATHENS

BY JAMIE WELCH PHOTOS BY J.W.



The columns of the
Acropolis and Olympian
Zeus, center, and photos
of Piraeus marina

'04

I UNDERSTAND WHY NOBEL PRIZE-WINNING POET GEORGE SEFERIS ONCE SAID, "THERE IS, I BELIEVE, AN INCARNATE FUNCTION IN THE LIGHT OF GREECE." ON A SUNNY SATURDAY MORNING IN EARLY MAY, ON A NARROW COBBLESTONE STREET IN CENTRAL ATHENS, I FOUND MYSELF IN A DIVERSE CRUSH OF CHARACTERS: GIRLS IN TRENDY FASHIONS; MEN PLAYING BACKGAMMON; YOUNG HIPPIES IN BUMBLE BEE COSTUMES BANGING TAMBOURINES; BOYS PLAYING SOCCER; HAND ORGAN GRINDERS PLAYING THEIR SONG; AND GYPSIES DYING TO EXPLAIN HOW MY LIFE WILL UNFOLD.





A

STONE'S THROW FROM THE ACROPOLIS,

The main attraction is the street life, which I found even more compelling than the majestic pillars of the Parthenon, which towers over the area. Cathedrals, museums, craft bazaars and taverns blend Antiquity, Hellenistic and Byzantine eras with Frankish and Turkish occupations and modern Greek culture, but as one shopkeeper reminded me, this 5000-year-old capital is to be experienced, not understood.

"Forget about the history—way too much stuff," he said. "Just relax and enjoy," which is what thousands of visitors will do August 13th to 29th, when the Olympics return for the first time in 108 years. When I was there Athens was still shoe-horning a year's worth of construction projects into the last few months leading up to the games. But it just doesn't matter if the work is completed or not, tourists will find fascinating culture, luxury shopping, fine restaurants, hotels, spas and a nightlife second to none—think spirited table dancing in Greek *tavernas*, discos, raves and all-night toga parties.

Named after Athena, the most benevolent of all the Greek deities, Athens offers something for all. Museums and monuments abound, and for upscale shopping the Kolonaki district—adjacent to Central Athens—is where to find designer clothing, jewelry and hip cafés. It's a veritable who's who of Greek fashion houses—from Charis & Angelos to Sofia Kokosalaki. When it's time to relax, you'll find plenty of cool places around Kolonaki Square, with its fantastic café culture. At Café Poros the locals enjoy cappuccino and *ouzo* while eating *spanikopita* (feta and spinach croissant), *touptas* (torts) or the scrumptious cinnamon pastry *baklava*, and spend hours people watching, which pays off when the occasional celebrity passes by.

The restaurants of Athens are essential to the Greek way of life and you can find something tasty just about anywhere. Not so long ago it would have been difficult to find something other than traditional Greek *tavernas*, but now there are Indi-





CENTRAL ATHENS IS A MESMERIZING SCENE.

an, Moroccan, French, Italian and Lebanese restaurants, and lots of groovy new eclectic joints. I found a gold mine right across the street from Café Poros on Kolonaki Square: Central Funky Restaurant, which serves contemporary cuisine in an upscale, smart atmosphere; techno music fills the air and patrons are up dancing before the sun sets.

Of course you'll find plenty of Greek *ouzeries* and *tavernas* as well, including Spiros Bairaktaris in Central Athens, which has been serving *souvlakia* (think *really good gyro*) since 1879. At Spiros you can sit and enjoy the charming, rustic atmosphere to the sounds of *demotika* (traditional folk) musicians, who are joined in their chorus by the regulars, or you can get *souvlakia* from the guy on the sidewalk carving lamb from a spit.

The crown jewel of Athens hotels is The Hotel Grand Bretagne. Erected at the Constitution Square in 1842, it combines classical and Renaissance elements and just got a major facelift. Its fantastic new GB Spa was inspired by Aphrodite herself: soothing thermal suites; pools; mud chambers; and customized massage therapies—including herbal, deep tissue, aromatic and ancient sand stone—revitalize and replenish.

Other notable hotels and spas include the Athens Hilton, which faces the Acropolis and is opposite the National Art Gallery; the Divani Athens with its huge hamam, sauna, gym, rejuvenation programs and solarium plus massage from various parts of the world; and the new Cocoon Urban Spa, which has three floors decorated in bamboo. I stayed at the Metropolitan Hotel, a favorite among business travelers thanks to an attentive concierge, plenty of meeting halls and excellent restaurants.

But the best way to experience the Olympics is, of course, by yacht, preferably right after spending some relaxing time in the spectacular Greek Islands. There are seven notable marinas along Athens' shoreline, and the good news is that all pri-

Below: The tranquil harbor in Vouliagmeni and the view from the Athens Hilton

Facing page: Views from picturesque Zeas marina and the rooftop of the Grand Bretagne



vate yachts are welcome and every European-flagged vessel is allowed to charter in Greek waters, which wasn't the case before 2002, when only Greek flagged vessels were allowed. If you haven't made arrangements yet, you might consider chartering a Greek-flagged vessel that already has a berth in Athens.

"The Greek crews are from a new generation and they know how important it is to shine during the Olympics," said Makis Georgakas of Marine Marketing, one of the oldest brokerage houses in Greece. "The crews have excellent local knowledge and the yachts have Athens berths, so it will be the most convenient way to charter during the Olympics."

The northernmost megayacht marina along the Athens coast is Marina Zeas, which is located in the coastal suburb Piraeus. In the quaint harbor you'll find large charter yachts moored next to lateen-rigged fishing boats. Dozens of sidewalk cafés and fish restaurants run along the south end of the marina, where young couples dine with their children, parents and grandparents. I tried the grilled fish at one of Piraeus' oldest taverns, which is up on top of the hill overlooking Zeas Marina (sorry, the name was all Greek to me).

"Come, I show you," said my waiter Andreas when I asked him which fish he recommended. Inside the restaurant he pulled out a freshly iced *sargus*, which looked and smelled very fresh, and twenty minutes later it was on my plate, seasoned and grilled to perfection—absolutely scrumptious—and a Greek side salad was almost mandatory.

Just south of Piraeus, in the coastal town of Faliro, is Flisvos Marina, which accommodates large megayachts. According to manager Sissy Pavlopoulaou, Flisvos has 170 berths accommodating yachts up to 240' LOA, and they are planning to increase the number of slips to 300 for the Olympics, "but the number of berths depends on the length of each yacht," she said.

The next one down the coast, Alimos Marina, has 1200 berths for yachts up to 112' LOA. It looked chock full, but the



dockmaster told me that they are also constructing new floating docks, and many of the local yachts will be leaving town during games in order to free up space for visiting boats.

There are four more marinas in the beachside town of Glyfada, which is getting a new tramline. Glyfada also has excellent upscale shopping malls, a charming boardwalk amusement park and many fine restaurants, including Panino, which specializes in tasty Italian food and prompt, top-shelf service.

The southernmost of all the coastal villages in the Athens area is also the most beautiful: Vouliagmeni, where you'll find mansions, lots of palm trees, manicured boulevards, rocky cliffs, aqua waters and excellent beaches. The marina management told me they're full for August, but there is a good natural harbor where anchoring might be a suitable alternative to getting a berth. Vouliagmeni has two luxury resorts—Astir Palace and The Divani Apollon Palace and Spa—a bevy of restaurants and an excellent nightlife.

Michael Skoulikidis, President of the Hellenic Yacht Brokers Association, was very optimistic that the Olympics will help lift Greek yachting to a new plane. "Greece is a great destination because we have thousands of islands, calm seas, sunny weather and no tides or trade winds," Skoulikidis said. "We also have a big season so you can find anything you want: diverse culture, ancient temple ruins and an amazing night life."

I'll have to agree with Michael on his last point in particular, because when the stars come out over Athens its Dionysus—the Greek god of wine and song—who rules this city of six million. It's an intense nightlife and there's something for everyone: bars, operas, concerts, discos, raves, and traditional Greek taverns where the locals clap and dance on the tables until the sun comes up over the Acropolis. So get your toga costume ready folks, it's almost time for some good old-fashioned hedonism—*opah!* ■

ATHENS 2004

CHARTER FLEET

THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF GREEK-FLAGGED MEGAYACHTS OVER 80', BUT THOSE WITH PERMANENT BERTHS IN ATHENS WILL BE OPTIMAL FOR EXPERIENCING ATHENS 2004. HERE ARE NINE CHARTER YACHTS WITH SLIPS IN ATHENS, AS WELL AS GREEK CAPTAINS AND CREWS.



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1 • ALEXANDRA

LOA & Builder:163' - Benetti
 Guest Cabins:seven
 Crew:eleven
 Olympics Rate:from 350,000 Euros/week
 Regular Rate:From 235,000 Euros/week

2 • ACAJOU

LOA & Builder:150' - Esterel Cannes
 Guest Cabins:five
 Crew:eight
 Olympics Rate:Upon Request
 Regular Rate:Upon Request

3 • O'PARI

LOA & Builder:138' - Intermarine
 LOA:138'
 Guest Cabins:six
 Crew:eight
 Olympics Rate:from 250,000 Euros/week
 Regular Rate:From 135,000 Euros/week

4 • HARMONY

LOA & Builder:136' - Greece
 Guest Cabins:six
 Crew:eight
 Olympics Rate:Upon Request
 Regular Rate:From 10,000 Euros/day

5 • SIRIUS

LOA & Builder:131' - Sirius
 Guest Cabins:six
 Crew:seven
 Olympics Rate:from 15,000 Euros/day
 Regular Rate:From 11,000 Euros/day

6 • OURANOS

LOA & Builder:100' - Falcon
 Guest Cabins:five
 Crew:six
 Olympics Rate:Upon Request
 Regular Rate:Upon Request

7 • ANGEL

LOA & Builder:88' - Canados
 Guest Cabins:five
 Crew:five
 Olympics Rate:From 91,000 Euros/week
 Regular Rate:Upon Request

8 • AMPHITRITE

LOA & Builder:80' - Falcon
 Guest Cabins:Five
 Crew:four
 Olympics Rate:Upon Request
 Regular Rate:From 38,500 Euros/week

9 • ATLANTIS

LOA & Builder:80' - Ferretti
 Guest Cabins:four
 Crew:four
 Olympics Rate:Upon Request
 Regular Rate:From 40,000 Euros/week

ATHENS 2004

BY THE NUMBERS

MARINAS

Flisvos Marina (Tel: +30 210 982 9218 Fax: +30 210 988 7354 Web: flisvosmarina.com Email: spavl@flisvosmarina.com) **Marina Alimos** (VHF Channel 71 Tel: +30 210 988 0166 Fax: +30 210 988001) **Marinas Glyfadas** (Tel: +30 210 891 2281 Fax: +30 210 8942 140 Web: glyfada.gr) **Vouliagmeni Marina** (Tel: +30 210 896 0012 Fax: +30 210 896 0415 VHF 19) **Zeas Marina** (Coordinates: N 37° 56.2' E 23° 38.9' VHF Channel 9 Tel: +30 210 428 4100 Fax: +30 210 428 7533 Web: medmarinas.com Email: zea@medmarinas.com)

LUXURY HOTELS & SPAS

Cocoon Urban Spa (Tel: +30 210 656 1975 Email: cocoonurbanspa@hotmail.com) **Divani Apollon Palace & Spa** (Tel: +30 210 89 11 100 Web: divanis.gr Email: divanis@divaniapollon.gr) **Grande Bretagne Hotel & GB Spa** (Tel: +30 210 333 0000 Web: gramdbretagne.gr Email: info@grande-bretagne.gr) **Hilton** (Tel: +30 210 728 1000 Web: Athens.Hilton.com Email: sales-athens@hilton.com) **Intercontinental** (Tel: +30 210 9206 000 Web: interconti.com Email: athens@interconti.com) **Ledra Marriott** (athensledramarriott@marriotthotels.com) **Metropolitan Hotel** (Tel: +30 210 7281 000 Web: chandris.gr Email: metropolitan@chandris.gr)

MUSEUMS

Acropolis Museum (+30 210 323 6665) **Agora Museum** (+30 210 321 0185) **Benaki Museum** (+30 210 367 1000) **Byzantine Museum** (+30 210 721 1027) **Canellopoulos Museum** (+30 210 321 2313) **Frissas Museum** (+30 210 323 4678) **Maritime Museum** (+30 210 451 6264) **Melina Mercouri Cultural Center** (+30 210 345 2150 / 210 341 4466) **Museum of Greek Popular Musical Instruments** (+30 210 325 0198) **National Art Gallery** (+30 210 723 5857) **National Historical Museum** (+30 210 323 7617) **Vorres Museum** (+30 210 664 2520)

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48 (+30 2106411082) **Aiolis** (+30 2103312839) **Aleko's Metropolitan** (+30 2103319650) **Alexandra's** (+30 2108832711) **Balthazar** (+30 2106412300) **Bar Guru Bar** (+30 2103246530) **Browns** (+30 2107207000) **Caprice of Mykonos** (+30 2103619646) **Central Funky Restaurant** (+30 2107245938) **Connection** (+30 2106440030) **Cosmos Bar and Restaurant** (+30 2106729150) **Frame** (+30 2107214368) **Galaxy Bar** (+30 2107281402) **Interni Ristorante** (+30 2103468900) **Messiah** (+30 2107294290-91) **Mommy** (+30 2103619682) **Ou'Yo** (+30 2109820820) **Ratka** (+30 2107290746) **Rock and Roll** (+30 2107217127) **Tade Efi Anna** (+30 2103213652) **To Kouti** (+30 2103213229) **Wabi Louge** (+30 2106233792 / 2108017673) **Yoga Bala** (+30 2103311335)

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