

The getaway guide

{ THE ULTIMATE GREEK ODYSSEY }



ATHENS BY THE COMPASS

For a break-within-a-city-break, travel 90 minutes (or less) in any direction from the Greek capital and experience a whole different holiday. **Alice Barnes-Brown** reports



Photography: Marco Argüello

FOLLOW THE SEA

Kanakia beach on Salamina.
Right: fresh lobster from
Salamina's fish market

From the mighty Acropolis to teeming Ottoman streets, sunny days for sightseeing to warm nights for socialising, Athens is the diamond of the eastern Mediterranean. But within 90 minutes of the city, landscapes of a more unexpected kind await: mountain forests sprinkled with mediaeval monasteries, seaside suburbs on the cusp of eco-regeneration, Bordeaux-influenced wineries and, of course, the world-beating beaches that Greece is famous for. The best thing? After a day out, you can be back in time to catch a sunset screening at one of Athens' many outdoor cinemas. But which direction should you choose?

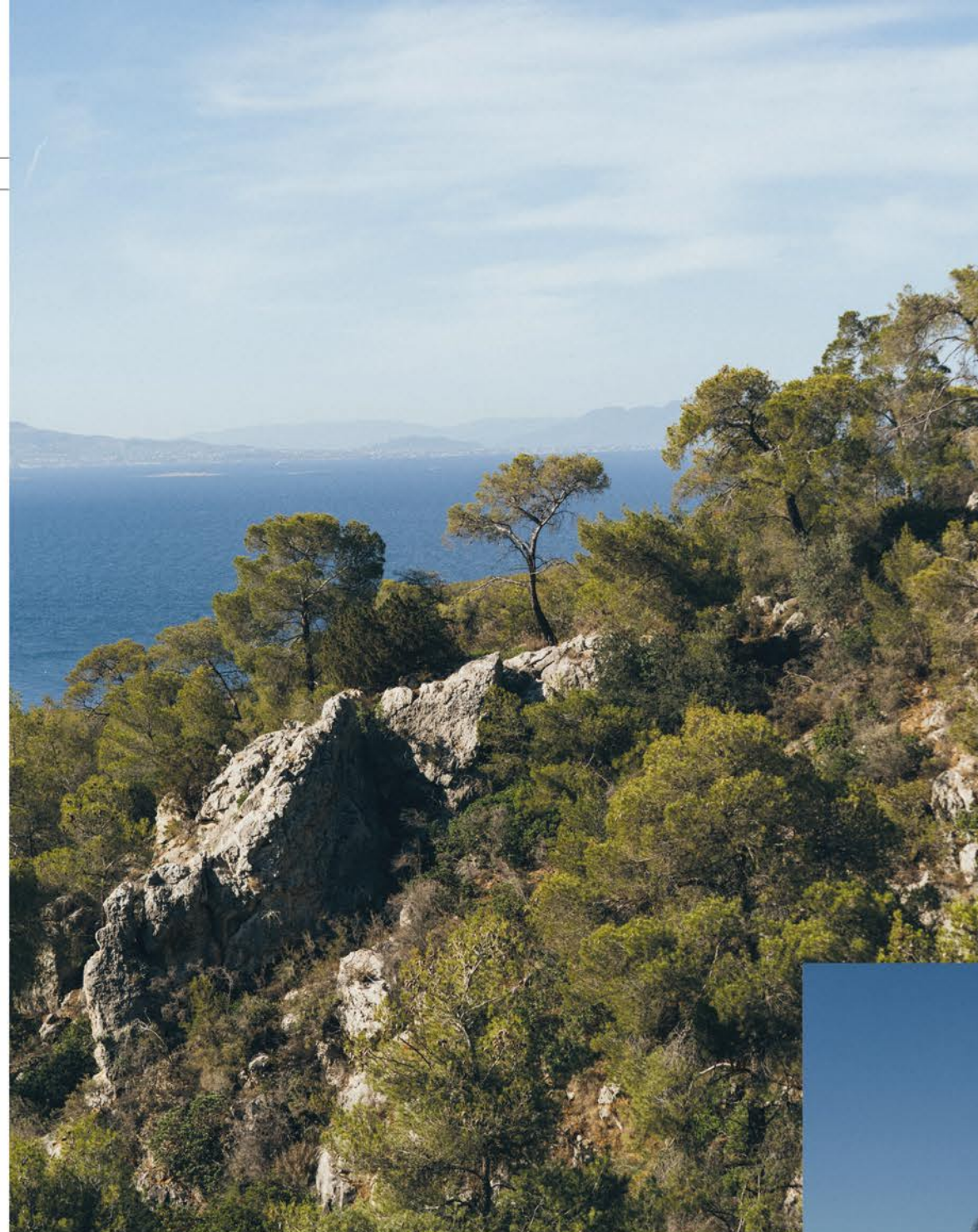
HEAD NORTH FOR HISTORY-INSPIRED BEACH APPEAL

The clue is in the name: the Marathon Run Museum explains what this town is best known for. In 490 BC, Pheidippides ran the O.G. (not quite) 26 miles across fennel fields to the Acropolis, where the city's rulers awaited news of a critical battle with the Persians. Running is still a way of life in this laidback town, with joggers thronging the lamp-lit promenade of Schinias Beach. "In the mornings I run by the sea, and in the summers I swim in its crystal clear waters," says local Eleftheria Dimadoni, a teacher and translator at the University of Athens, explaining the town's appeal. Born and raised in Marathon, 53-year-old Dimadoni moved abroad for several years, but found herself returning for Marathon's healthy lifestyle. "I need the sea. My worries are washed away with each gentle wave." And it's not just runners and swimmers that will be happy here – there's also kitesurfing, paddleboarding, and snorkelling. A 5.5-mile hike south of Schinias – via the National Park, which has no fewer than six ecosystems, plus more beaches – is the 2nd-century Sanctuary of the Egyptian Gods. Isis and Serapis, among others, were at one time worshipped alongside the pantheon of Greek gods and their heavily Hellenised statues watch over the sanctified space. Adjacent to the Sanctuary are cushion-covered beach bars with planet-sized *souvlaki* plates and chipped-ice cocktails.

If you want to get serious about stronger refreshments, second-generation Marathon oenologist Chrysanthi Zegini regularly takes day-trippers from Athens around her family's vineyard, Zeginis, to taste indigenous Savatiano varieties. "I grew up here," she says. "My sister and I passed summers on Schinias beach until the harvest, when we helped make the wine." It's a process done entirely by hand, resulting in two rich reds, two dry whites and one fruity rosé. A glass of the trademark Savatiano, with citrus and floral notes, is a perfect treat after a marathon jaunt from the capital.

HEAD SOUTH FOR GREECE'S ANSWER TO TEMPELHOF

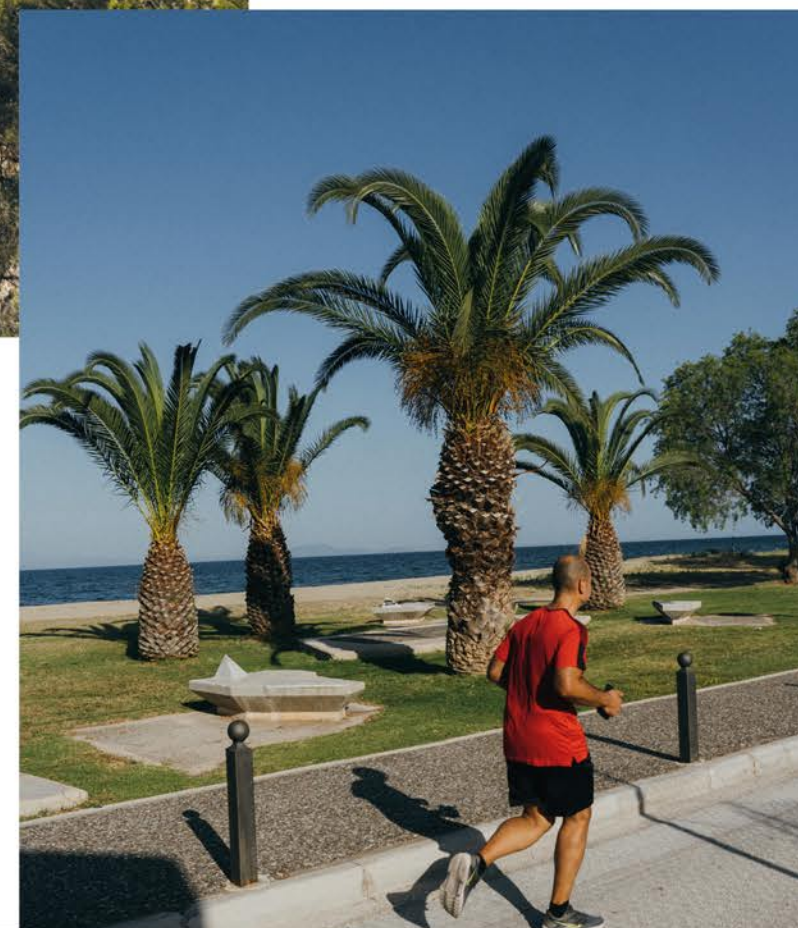
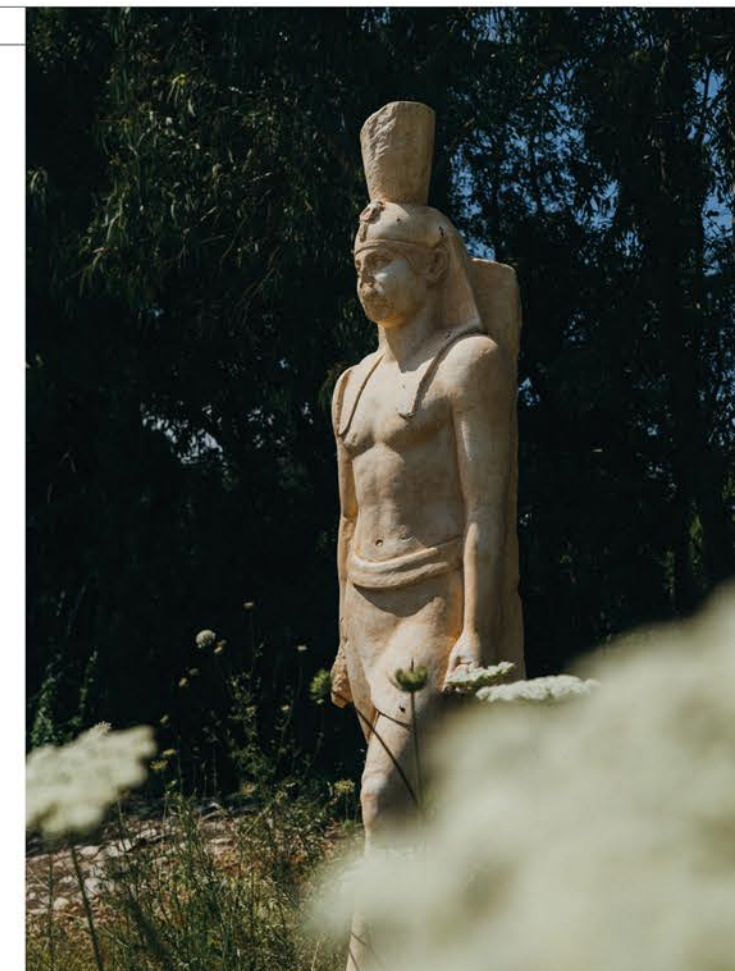
From Syntagma Square, jump aboard the red line of the Athens Metro – adorned with the broken marble torsos, limbs and tunics of ancient statues unearthed during construction – to Elliniko, the line's southern terminus. Twenty minutes later, emerge to big blue sea and sky: this is where the Athens Riviera begins. This fancy stretch of coast and boulevards lined with palms is where Greece's rich and famous keep their



CREATING GREAT

Clockwise from above: Cave of Euripides, where he is said to have written *Medea*; Zeginis wines; Sanctuary of the Egyptian Gods; Zeginis's Savatiano wine in the barrel; jogger on Schinias Beach in Marathon

city homes, but the live music bars on the beach encourage everyone to join the party. The Metro station comes up for air at the newest place of interest: the once abandoned Ellinikon Airport. The city's former civil and military aviation hub, three times the size of Monaco, has lain derelict for two decades. Now, the area is alive with diggers as it is transformed into the Experience Park, Europe's largest coastal park and one of its largest urban redevelopment projects. A taster of the planned megapark opened in December 2021 and the 70-acre family-friendly green space and its visitor centre (set in a former airplane hangar) are already attracting young Athenian families searching for open spaces. Illuminated fountains in a water maze dance to Disney classics, sweet-smelling herb gardens resemble a wild Greek hillside, and there's a forest playground that includes a wooden aircraft.



“There’s something playful about an area that used to be an air force base becoming a park where people can come and enjoy themselves,” says The Experience Park’s mastermind, landscape architect Thomas Doxiadis. His proudest achievement? The incredible amount of former aerodrome material that has been repurposed, from saving eucalyptus trees, to turning runway concrete into sculptures, steps and seating. Sitting on a marble runway-slab-turned-bench, he adds, “Treat junk with a bit of love and attention, and you’ll bring out its beauty.”

HEAD EAST TO CONQUER ‘MAD MOUNTAIN’

On final approach by plane to Athens Eleftherios Venizelos (international airport), a fabulous view of the city sparkles to the left. It’s quickly obscured by the shadowy slopes of Hymettus, a domineering 1,000m peak nicknamed ‘Trellovouno’ (‘Mad Mountain’) but worth a half-day trip out from the city hub to experience its wealth of wilderness and plant life.

As you travel east from the centre, the compact apartment blocks of the studenty Zografou district fall away to the cooling cypress, Aleppo pines and 44 protected species of orchid that frame Hymettus’ little-known hiking and biking trails. Some 100km of those trails are currently being mapped on an app, due for release later this year, increasing the mountain’s accessibility.

“There are orchids that flower as early as Christmas time, the eternal scent of wild thyme and sage, the colourful display of millions of wildflowers blooming in spring, and bulb flowers popping up after the first autumn rains,” says Chantel Kyriakopoulou-Beuvink, owner of eco and wildlife tour operator Natural Greece, of the mountain’s dazzlingly rich array of flora.

The main stop on a Hymettus trek is the Kaisariani Monastery, an 11th-12th century Byzantine jewel 350m up the mountain within terraces of olive grove. It’s a 2km, fairly flat walk from the nearest bus stop, or drivable all the way. Behind the monastery’s bolted wooden door, storyboard-esque frescoes draw the eye up to the image of Christ in the main dome, plus there are the remnants of a library and a bathhouse akin to a mediaeval spa.

Modern city-dwellers make their pilgrimage to Kalopoula ravine, 12 minutes’ walk from Kaisariani, and a source of refreshment since time immemorial. There’s an ancient spring for cool water and, nowadays, a canopy-covered canteen in which to mop up an oil-drizzled butterbean and tomato soup or meatballs with hunks of sourdough bread. That should be sufficient to fortify you for the remaining 9km (elevation gain of 600m) to the top – and the panoramas over Athens, the Aegean and beyond are worth the hike.

EAT AND GO
Right: butterbean and tomato soup at the Kalopoula canteen. Below: the Hymettus hiking route



ANCIENT AND MODERN

Right: the Byzantine Kaisariani Monastery. Above: Experience Park grows in the once abandoned Ellinikon Airport

Three things to do in Athens now

The bar
six.d.o.g.s

Ask an Athenian where to go after dark, and there’s a fair chance they’ll name-drop this multi-levelled Monastiraki haunt. In the daytime, submerge in the sandpits with an iced tea, or ponder the avant-garde art in the exhibition space. At night, dance to music spanning everything from DJs to ‘80s darkwave revival’. sixdogs.gr

The culture
[Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre](http://Stavros.Niarchos.Foundation.Cultural.Centre)

Faliro is famous for two things: the Olympiakos stadium and this astonishing Renzo Piano-designed venue, opened in 2016. Named after a philanthropic member of the Niarchos shipping family, it houses the Greek National Opera, a one-million-book National Library, and a 21-hectare sloping park that provides vistas of the Acropolis and Aegean. snfcc.org/en

The restaurant
[Liondi Taverna](http://Liondi.Taverna)

On an Acropolis-facing street crowded with waiters summoning passers-by into their establishments, Liondi is the one that doesn’t need to try so hard. 1950s styling, simple ingredients and family-grown Agiorgitiko red wine are the secrets of their success. In 2021, Liondi won the Restaurant Guru’s award for the best moussaka in Athens. liondi.com



Where to stay

Hotel Grande Bretagne

A rooftop breakfast warmed by the baked-orange glow of the Hellenic Parliament, an indoor palm grove that cools the lobby, and a peaceful subterranean spa: Greece's answer to the Ritz is surely the last word in Athenian luxury.

ba.com/grande-bretagne

NEW Hotel

Evil eyes, pottery-style paintings and postcards of old Athens adorn the walls of the funky NEW hotel. Outside, queues frequently throng the hotel bakery; the *bougatsa* (filo custard pies) are worth waiting for.

ba.com/newhotel

Electra Metropolis

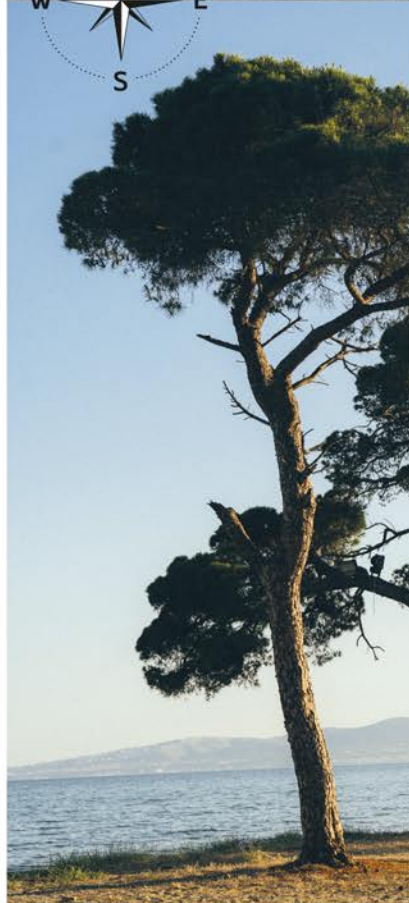
Glass is everywhere at this elegant modernist hotel. In the foundations, it reveals remains of the 5th century BCE Themistoclean Wall, the primary defence of Athens in antiquity. Plus, one side of the pool is transparent, like a big, luxurious fish tank.

ba.com/metropolis

Royal Olympic

Five-star Royal Olympic has a leafy location next to the Temple of Olympian Zeus. Low-lit rooms with premium fabrics ease guests into the land of nod, but a nightcap at the retractable-roof Ioannis Bar won't go amiss.

ba.com/royal-olympic



HEAD WEST FOR AN OFFBEAT ISLAND ADVENTURE

"This is the island that changed the track of civilisation in Europe," says blogger Evgenia Mataragka of *Travel The Greek Way*. The Athenian hiker specialises in responsible travel to Greece's more under-the-radar destinations, such as Salamina. While the wooded island shot to prominence as the location of a major naval scuffle with the Persians in 480BC, Salamina's modern history has been less illustrious. "Salamina is right across from Athens' most industrialised area, which hasn't served it well. Thankfully, in the last 20 years, things have turned around," Mataragka explains.

A €1 ferry from the port of Perama is one thing that's attracting a new generation of visitors. But what else? Plane tree-lined streams and salt-blown seafood to rival the finest Cycladic *psarotaverna* mean Salamina has become a weekend retreat for city-weary Athenians. A trip to Salamina's Municipal Fish Market reaps rewards in two forms – freshly-caught octopus from the morning's trawl and – if haggling proves fruitful – lashings of complimentary ouzo, for good fortune. Or so the seller might say.

Mataragka's advice is to drive through the chicanes, churches and cacti of Salamina's hills, but cantering along with a pony from the posh Salamina Riding Club is a cooler way to get about. Seek shade in the Cave of Euripides. Hidden in the caverns, the classical poet is said to have written his tragedies here.

Overlooking Kanakia beach is the Mycenaean Acropolis, Ajax's sea-view palace complex abandoned in 1200BC. Why the legendary strongman is said to have made his home here is easy to see: the slosh of Saronic Gulf waters against sun-bleached grey pebbles remains the loudest sound around. "This is what Greece is, to me," says Mataragka. "Green, clear, and quiet."



GETTING THERE

British Airways flies direct to Athens daily from London Heathrow. Flight time: 3 hours, 40 minutes

SHOP AND FLOP

From top: fresh fare at Salamina's Municipal Fish Market; Schinias Beach in Marathon