

Travel

Greece is the word

Discovering ancient ruins and traditional tavernas, *Giselle Whiteaker*, follows the philosophers' path on a trip to Athens

Sharjah's low-cost airline is renowned for great fares to some regional holiday spots, but sometimes it's nice to set your foot further afield.

So, when Air Arabia recently launched a route to Athens, Greece, I couldn't get on the plane fast enough.

So fast in fact, it could have been the inaugural Athens flight - there was a huge branded cream cake at the departure gate.

Once off the plane a quick look at my 2003 Athens guidebook mentioned that the airport metro line would be open later that year - but it seems six years on it's still not completed. It's heart-warming to see Dubai is not the only city with infrastructure delays!

After a crowded bus journey to our hotel, we decided the 45-minute walk recommended in the

guidebook would orientate us, but once again the 2003 edition let us down.

The only way this walk could take 45 minutes is if you strapped a jet pack on your back. It took us four hours, but was worth every minute.

We started at Plateia Monastirakiou, an open square with a small church and fruit sellers with the reddest and tastiest strawberries for sale.

At the city's parliament building be sure to check out the guards wearing the traditional Greek outfit of thick white stockings, heavy woollen pleated skirt and tunic, and shoes with pom-poms on the toes.

They perform a funny march, lifting one leg high, very slowly, then drawing it back and scuffing it over the tiles before placing it down.

Probably the only reason people don't stand there laughing at them is that they are carrying big guns.

A few churches later we found ourselves at the Acropolis, wandering through tiny laneways.

This area is where the labourers who built Athens after independence lived. The houses are small, but all whitewashed, with brightly

painted pots and plants surrounding them. The whole place epitomises the postcard image of Greece. There are plenty of outdoor cafes, ranging from cheap kebab shops to upmarket tavernas. The food all over Greece is delicious and fresh, with sharp flavours.

I recommend lamb lemonata - lamb stewed in a sauce containing feta.

The next day, after the overnight downpour slowed to a drip, we tried to beat the tour buses to the Acropolis, leaving the hotel at 8am.

Athens is spectacular from a height - the pretty white buildings are densely packed and interrupted by green hills and ruins.

The Acropolis was not as big as I expected, although the Parthenon is immense, looking amazingly imposing even from a distance.

From the Acropolis we wandered past the impressive Temple of Olympian Zeus before making our way down the hill through the Ancient Agora, the old marketplace.

If you close your eyes you can almost imagine toga-wearing philosophers debating the meaning of life in the square.

GETTING THERE
Air Arabia now flies direct to Athens. For availability, prices and information, visit www.airarabia.com

Back in the centre of the capital we sat down for souvlaki - a little like shawarma, but better, with spit-roast meat wrapped in thick pita bread with tomato, onion, and tzaziki sauce. Once fuelled up, we wandered past the original Olympic Stadium before heading to the First Cemetery, seeking some of the philosophers' graves. We heard Hydra island is popular place for tourists to spend a few days, so we boarded an ugly metal tub of a ferry, named the 'Flying Dolphin' - but which I later renamed the 'Groaning Slug'. It was not a pleasant journey, but took less than two hours. In Hydra we strolled the harbour and the town, exploring narrow alleyways and back streets. There's no motorised transport - only donkeys - so many streets are donkey-width. Up early the next day we allowed ourselves a solid breakfast to get ready for a mountain hike, advertised as 'strenuous' up to a monastery. It started with a comfortable incline before the road wound around the base of the mountain, becoming steeper and narrower the higher it went. Then it really did get strenuous. The views were fantastic and

not only could you see Hydra town creeping up the hill, but also Saronic Gulf islands. We hiked back down and rewarded ourselves the daily souvlaki to find the harbour bustling with donkey owners. Back in Athens, a taverna in the middle of the meat market served us dinner. We thought about going to a rembetika club, apparently a den of old-style blues, but found they only open from midnight to 6am. There was no way our tired legs were going to let us stay upright until midnight, so we headed back to our hotel. The next day was our last and, as we were sad to be leaving, to put a smile back on our faces we decided to visit the Sea Turtle Rescue Centre in Glyfada. After an hour on a bus we arrived at the town but nobody had heard of the centre. We tried a hotel and they knew nothing, but did point the way to the advertised address. We got a long walk in, but didn't see any turtles. Despite these trials, we left Athens with smiles on our faces and memories of fabulous food, friendly people, and a whiff of a country considered by some to be the birthplace of civilisation.

PHILOSOPHERS' DEN: Stop for a break at the Ancient Agora

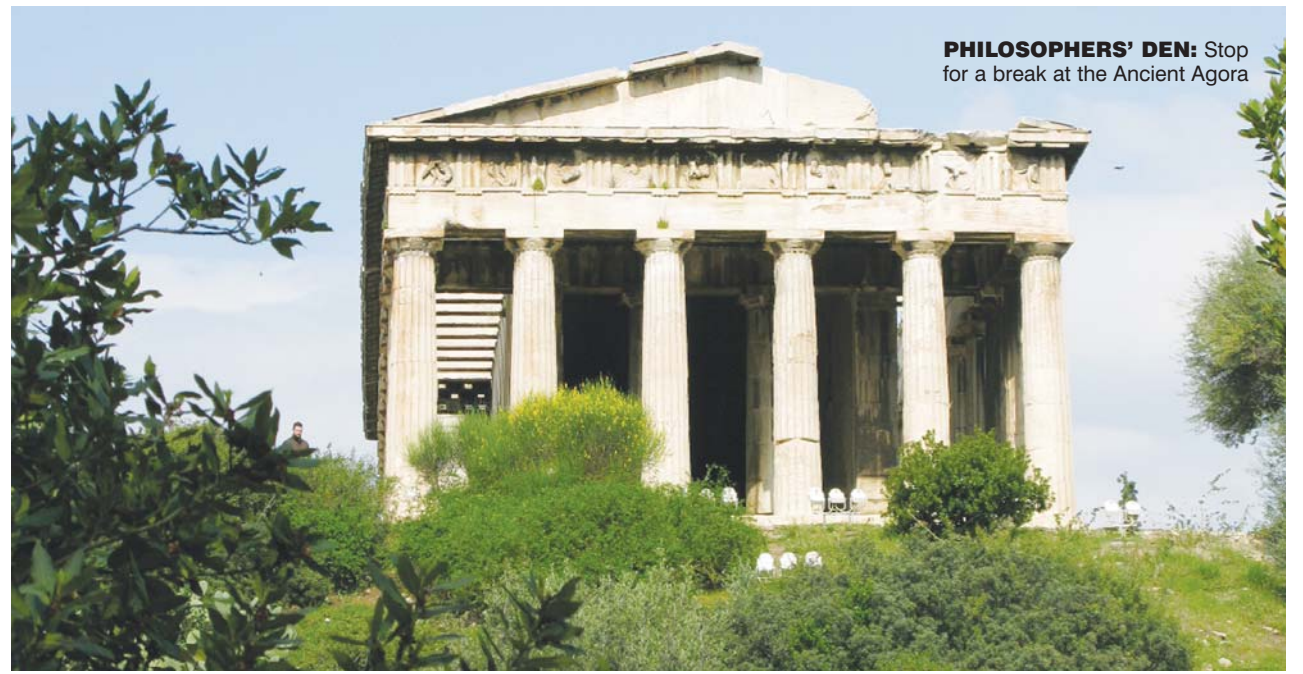


PHOTO OPPORTUNITY: Enjoy the scenery in Hydra

