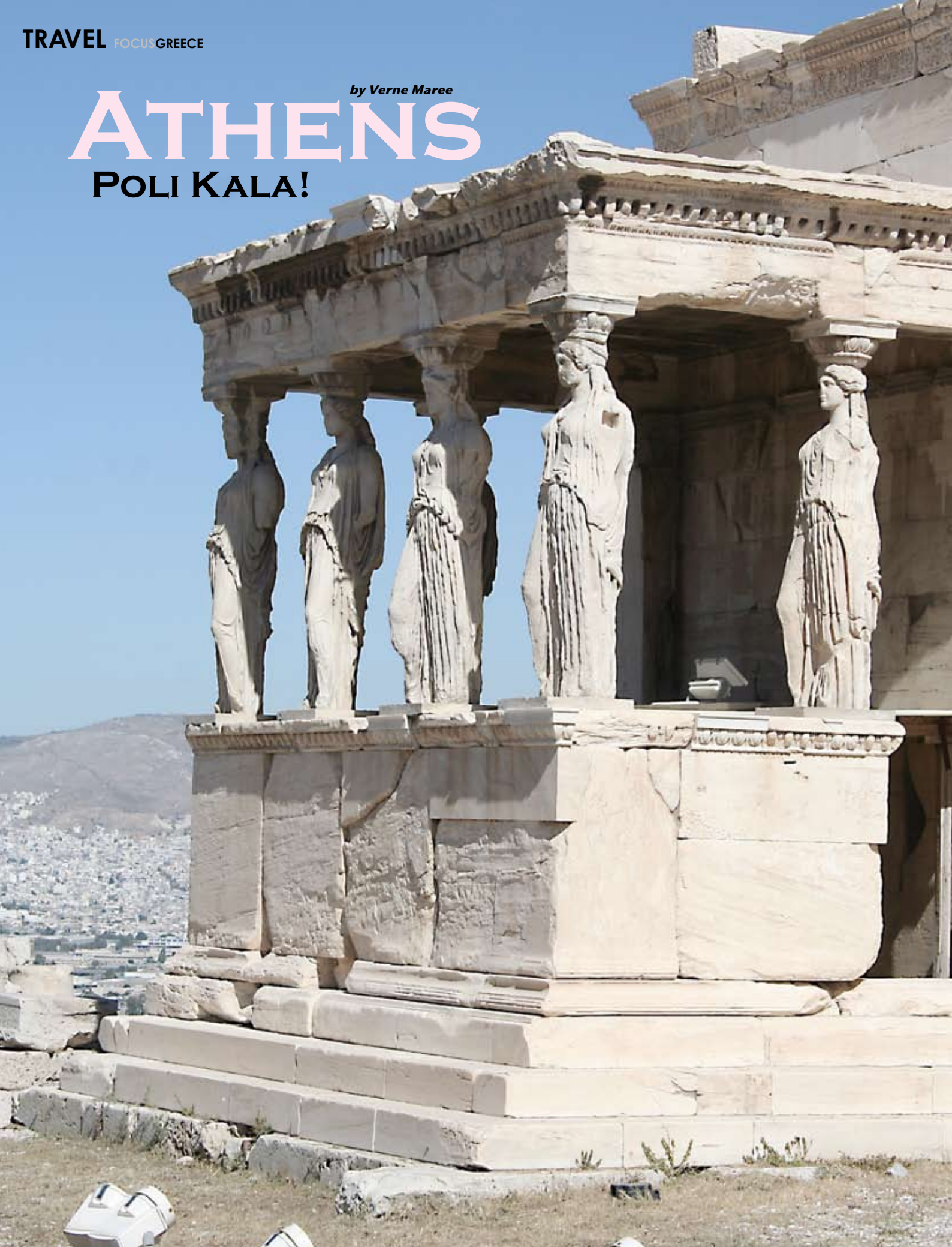


by Verne Maree

# ATHENS

## POLI KALA!



## Greece is not just a series of glorious islands – it also has Athens, one of the world's great cities.

June is the best time to visit – before it gets too hot, and before the stream of tourists becomes a suffocating torrent. Most summer visitors spend just a day or two in Athens, before hopping off to one or more of the islands for which Greece is so famous – Mykonos, Santorini, Skiathos, Corfu and Zakinthos, to mention just a few. But there is plenty to see and do in Athens and the surrounding area. Roy is 'in shipping', as they say, so he needs to go there every year, and – when I'm lucky – I get to tag along.

Athens today is far cleaner, greener and more pleasant than it was when I was last there, a few months before the city so successfully hosted the 2004 Olympics. Then, it was a vast and dusty building site, but locals and visitors alike are now reaping the benefits: noticeably better facilities, including a superb tramway from Athens south down the coast to Glyfada.

We like to stay in or near the Plaka, a maze of picturesque lanes that huddle at the foot of the Acropolis. It's undeniably a tourist trap, full of souvenir shops crammed with worry-beads, knock-off icons and 'antiquities', interesting art and clothing boutiques, and cafés and tavernas. At the same time, it has an old-world, romantic feeling – to me, it's the heart of Athens.

We generally stay at The Athenian Callihroe, a fairly hip boutique hotel just five or ten minutes' walk from the Plaka. It's nominally a five-star hotel, but for expats from Asia, the service is a bit bumpy. There's no pool, and the gym is scanty. It isn't cheap, either, at S\$480 a night. With the advent of the euro and the demise of the drachma, Greece is no longer the inexpensive

destination it used to be. (That said, it was the week of Posidonia, the biennial international shipping conference and exhibition; Athens was full of shipping types, and hotel prices had soared.)

What the Callihroe does have, however, is the best rooftop restaurant in Athens (2005). It has a stunning night-time view of the brilliantly lit Acropolis. The food is outstanding, yet unpretentious; the service friendly and enthusiastic.

Our starters included the best *taramasalata* (cod-roe dip) I have tasted.

On our next visit, we're going to try the small Hera Hotel (S\$300) in the Plaka. It looks charming, and also has a rooftop garden with – you guessed it – a view of the Acropolis by night.

### Ancient Greece

Athens would be worth visiting for the Acropolis alone. If you're staying centrally, you can walk up to it through the Plaka. It's a bit of a climb, but a pleasant one. Just be sure you have sturdy footwear on; there's a lot of very slippery marble everywhere and I almost came a cropper a few times. The Acropolis site opens at 8am; go as early as possible to avoid the crowds.

Marvel at the magnificent Parthenon, the most important monument of the Western world; the Beule Gate; the Propylaea; and the Temple of Athena Nike. My favourite is the Erechthion: its pediment is supported by graceful caryatids – larger-than-life female forms. Four of the five original caryatids are safely housed in the Acropolis Museum, well worth popping into. Your 12-euro (S\$24) ticket is valid for 48 hours, and gives you entry to five other nearby sites, including the fascinating Roman Agora.



**Left:**  
*The Erechthion*

**Top Right:**  
*Yes, that's Aphrodite swatting Pan with her sandal – at the National Archaeological Museum*

**Below:**  
*The iconic Parthenon*



If you have time for only one museum, make it the National Archaeological Museum. It's just a 30-minute walk from the Plaka, and entry was free on the Monday afternoon I was there. Pride of place goes to the precious hoard of gold, amber and other artefacts from the prehistoric Mycenaean period, discovered at various sites on the Peloponnese peninsula. We had hired a car and driven down through Corinth to the Peloponnese to visit the ruins at Mycenae and Epidavros just the day before, so it was a real thrill to see the beautifully fashioned gold death-masks, bronze swords and gold and amber jewellery that were found there.

There are also vast galleries devoted to marble treasures, vases, bronze creations and so on. What is more, everything is laid out with historical logic, and clear explanatory notes in both Greek and English. The hour-and-a-half I spent there barely scratched the surface – it's a superb museum.

**Food**

As usual, we made a pilgrimage one night with our Athenian friends to one of the string of 'meat restaurants' out at Vari, on Vari Koropieou Road, where you have various Greek *mezedes* such as *kalamakia* (fried, tiny calamari), *horiatiki* (Greek salad), cheese-stuffed roasted peppers, and deep-fried aubergine and zucchini, followed by lamb and pork on the spit, *kokorotsi* (lamb offal wrapped in intestines, if



you must know), and – best of all – lamb (but usually goat, actually) – casseroled in a heavy pot buried in charcoal.

The next night, we did the seafood thing at Zephyros – again one of a row of restaurants, but this time at Mikrolimino (meaning 'small harbour') in the port of Piraeus. We sipped the local beer, Mythos, as the sun set over the yacht basin and the beautiful people cruised by in convertibles. The seafood was sublime: raw clams that tasted like the sea, barbecued octopus, lightly battered prawn tails, and that was literally for starters. As is the custom, we traipsed off to the kitchen with the restaurateur to choose our fish – a platter of small red mullet and a big seabass baked for us in virgin olive oil and lemon juice. Simply delicious!

The favourite fast food in Greece is *souvlaki*, and one of the best places for it is a tiny hole-in-the-wall spot called Nick's in Ariadnou Road in the Plaka. For about S\$3 you get a fresh pita bread wrapped cone-wise around slivers of spit-grilled pork, lamb or chicken, fresh onion, tomato and lettuce and a dab of *tsatsiki* (cucumber and yoghurt dip).

**Top right:**  
*Fruit barrow in the Plaka*

**Top bottom:**  
*Succulent lamb, and real Greek Salad*

**Far left:**  
*Member of the Greek mafia with a frappé on the Plaka! (Alias Roy T)*

## Food Facts

- Greeks only start dinner around 10pm.
- Lunch happens anytime from 1pm to 5pm.
- Real Greek yoghurt is the only yoghurt worth eating.
- Greek coffee (*yliniki*) comes in small cups and is ordered *gliko*, *metrio* or *sketo* (sweet, medium or unsweetened).
- The curiously popular *frappé* is a rather sickly concoction of strong Nescafé powder shaken up with ice, with or without condensed milk.
- A decent Greek will not let you drink *ouzo* without eating something.
- Proper Greek salad (*boriatiki*) does not have lettuce.
- Potato chips are fried in olive oil.
- The local wine, *retsina*, is an acquired taste. (Fifteen years ago, it took me about 30 seconds to acquire it.)
- You will put on weight in Greece.

Balcony at Nafpliou

## Out of Athens

I took the tram from Fix station, two minute's walk from our hotel, down to where the line runs out 40 minutes later at Glyfada beach. I could have taken a bus from there to the lovely sandy beach at Vouliagmenis; instead, I came back to Kalamakia, one of the half-a-dozen popular beaches on the way back to the city. It wasn't beautiful, but getting down and sandy with a bunch of picturesque locals was an interesting experience.

A standard range of sightseeing trips can be booked through one of the many travel agencies in the tourist areas, or through your hotel. They include: a half-day city tour, which does not much more than point out the sights; a day trip south to the beautiful ruins at Sounion; one-day or two-day trips to the oracle at Delphi (we did this on a previous trip, and it's well worthwhile); and a full-day cruise to nearby islands. The cruise wasn't wonderful, but is worth doing if you are not planning a full-blown island visit.

We hired a car for one day and drove down south via the Corinth Canal to the exquisite seaside resort of Naftplio. This favourite getaway for Athenians (just one-and-a-half hours away) is famous for being the first capital of Greece, and for its graceful early



18th-century Venetian architecture. There are three picturesque citadels – Akronapflia Fortress, the oldest; Palamidi Fortress, the biggest; and lovely little Bourtzi, picturesquely situated on an islet a few minutes' away by ferry. It was a Sunday, and the pavement cafés along its palm-lined esplanade were full of happy Athenians shooting the breeze.

On the way back, we came across the pretty town of Ancient Epidavros and ended up having a late lunch of *pastitsio* (mince and egg macaroni) and *horiatiki* (Greek salad) at a family-run *taverna* on the beach. It felt so much like an island experience that we had to remind ourselves that this was the mainland.

The week in Athens was over far too soon. Before this trip, I hadn't quite realised how much the mainland of Greece has to offer. Now that I have, you can bet I'll be back as often as I possibly can. *Yia sas!*\*\*

\*'Hello' or 'goodbye'

\*\*To us! (Greek for 'Cheers!')

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**Callihroe Restaurant**  
 (+30) 210 9215353-7

**National Archaeological Museum**  
 210 8217717

**GETTING THERE:**

**The quickest way is by Singapore Airlines direct to Athens. We took advantage of one of Gulf Air's regular promotions on business class, which means a brief stop in its very comfortable, award-winning lounge at Bahrain Airport.**

*Bourtzi Castle off the seaside town of Nafpliou*

