

ATHENS DESTINATION GUIDE



Introduction

Athens is one of the world's oldest cities. It has been inhabited for 7000 years. What began as a small Mycenaean community grew into a city that epitomized Greek virtues. The birthplace of democracy. A center for the arts, learning and philosophy. Home to the great minds of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Sophocles and Euripides.

Even under foreign occupation, the city flourished. Thanks to its widely admired schools, Athens was granted the status of free city under the Roman Empire. At different points in its history, it was dominated by the Romans, the Turks, the Franks and the Venetians. Following the 1821 Greek War of Independence, Ath-

ens was chosen by King Otto as the capital of Greece to honor its great history. In 2004, the Olympic Games returned to Athens.

The Plaka

This is the historic heart of Athens. It is the oldest continuously inhabited area in the city, even though there are a few buildings that date beyond the Ottoman period.

The **Roman Forum** lies north of the Acropolis and was built during the reign of Julius Caesar and Augustus as an extension to the Agora (see below). The ruins include four surviving columns marking the western gate and engraved edicts on the southern wall announcing the rules and taxes on the sale of oil. Some of the colonnades and shops of the marketplace itself have also been excavated.

The **Tower of the Winds** lies on the grounds of the Roman Forum, but was built much earlier by a Syrian astronomer in the 2nd century BC. It served as a compass, sundial, weathervane and water clock and takes its name from the external friezes depicting the eight mythological winds.

West of Syntagma Square, the famous **Monastiraki** flea market lies at the end of **Mitropoleos Street**. The stalls are brimming with furniture, antiques, secondhand books, rugs, leather goods and tools.

The nearby streets of Pandrosou, Ifaistou and Aeros also offer a range of shops selling anything from antiques to tourist trinkets.

Syntagma Square is the central square in Athens. The Parliament Building, on the eastern side, originally served as the Royal Palace, thus the square was originally called Palace Square. In 1843 King Otto was forced to grant the people of Greece a Constitution and thus the square was renamed Syntagma—or Constitution—Square. Every major Greek event has been celebrated here.

In 1974, when the military junta was overthrown, the new leader of Greece gave his first speech in Syntagma Square. In recent times, it has been the location of demonstrations against the austerity measures related to the debt crisis. **Ermou Street**, a large pedestrian shopping street, begins on the square's west end and runs all the way to Monastiraki Square.

Behind the Parliament Building is the **National Gardens**, originally the Royal Gardens. They stretch almost 40 acres and encompass many ancient ruins, along with a duck pond, a small zoo, a botanical museum, a cafe and a children's play area. Near the southern end of the gardens is the **Zappeion**. The building is now used for public and private exhibitions and ceremonies and was originally intended as a space for agricultural, industrial and technical exhibitions. During the Olympic Games in 1896 it hosted the fencing championships and in

2004 it served a press and events center for the Olympics.

South of the gardens, across the street, is the **Temple of Olympian Zeus**. This is the largest temple in Greece, even larger than the Parthenon. It took 650 years to complete in the 6th century BC. In 132 AD, the Roman Emperor Hadrian dedicated the temple to Zeus and set a statue of the God inside next to an enormous statue of himself. Both statues have long since disappeared and only 15 of the original 104 columns remain, but it is enough to get a feel for the size of the original temple: 315 feet long and 130 feet wide.

Hadrian's Arch stands nearby. It was built in 131 AD to mark the boundary between the ancient city and the new Athens of Hadrian.

Lisikratous Street extends from the arch and ends at the **Lisikrates Monument**, built to commemorate the victors at the annual coral and dramatic festival at the Theater of Dionysus, just a few blocks away. It is the only monument of its kind that remains intact in Athens.

The Acropolis

The Acropolis was built at the insistence of Pericles, the 5th-century BC political leader of Athens, as part of his rebuilding plan. The awe-inspiring complex later came to embody the political and cultural achievements of ancient Greece.

There are many impressive ruins on “the Rock,” an easily defensible site.

The Beulé Gate

In the 3rd century AD, a new fortification wall was built and this gate was added. It is named after the 19th-century French archaeologist who discovered it.

Temple of Athena Nike

This temple was dedicated to Athena of Victory, the goddess who stands by the Athenians in time of war. Construction took place from 426 to 421 BC. Under Christian rule, it was used as a chapel.

Propylaia

This was the original gate and main entrance to the Acropolis. Under Frankish rule, it was used as the local ruler’s residence and during the Ottoman period, it was the Turkish garrison’s headquarters.

The Erechtheion

This area, just behind the Parthenon, was considered the most sacred in the Acropolis. The eastern part of the temple was dedicated to Athena and the western part was dedicated to the local hero Boutes, the god Hephaestus and other gods and heroes. An olive tree now grows where Athena is said to have first planted her tree in a competition against Poseidon to win the hearts of the Athenians.

On the southern porch, the **Porch of the Caryatids**, statues of women were used in place of columns. The originals can be seen in the Acropolis Museum.

The Parthenon

Once inside, of course, you will be drawn to the Parthenon, one of the world's most famous monuments. Work began in 447 BC and was completed in just nine years. It took an army of sculptors and painters to finish this temple in such a short time. It was dedicated to Athena, the patron goddess of the city, and its main purpose was to house the Parthenos, the sculptor Pheidias's remarkable cult statue of Athena.

This Doric temple is completely symmetrical, but the architects had to use illusions to counteract the laws of perspective. For example: the base of the temple is higher in the middle than at the edges, there is a slight bulge in the middle of each column to make them look straight, and the columns lean slightly inward.

Over the centuries, the Parthenon sustained heavy damage from war, pollution and alterations. It has been used as a church, a mosque and an arsenal.

Although many of the sculptures have been removed from this temple, there are still a few on the east pediment. Most were removed at the turn of the 19th century, when Greece was ruled by the Ottoman Empire. Lord Elgin, the British ambassador, asked for permission to re-

move the sculptures because he was concerned about the damage being done to the important artworks in the Greek temples.

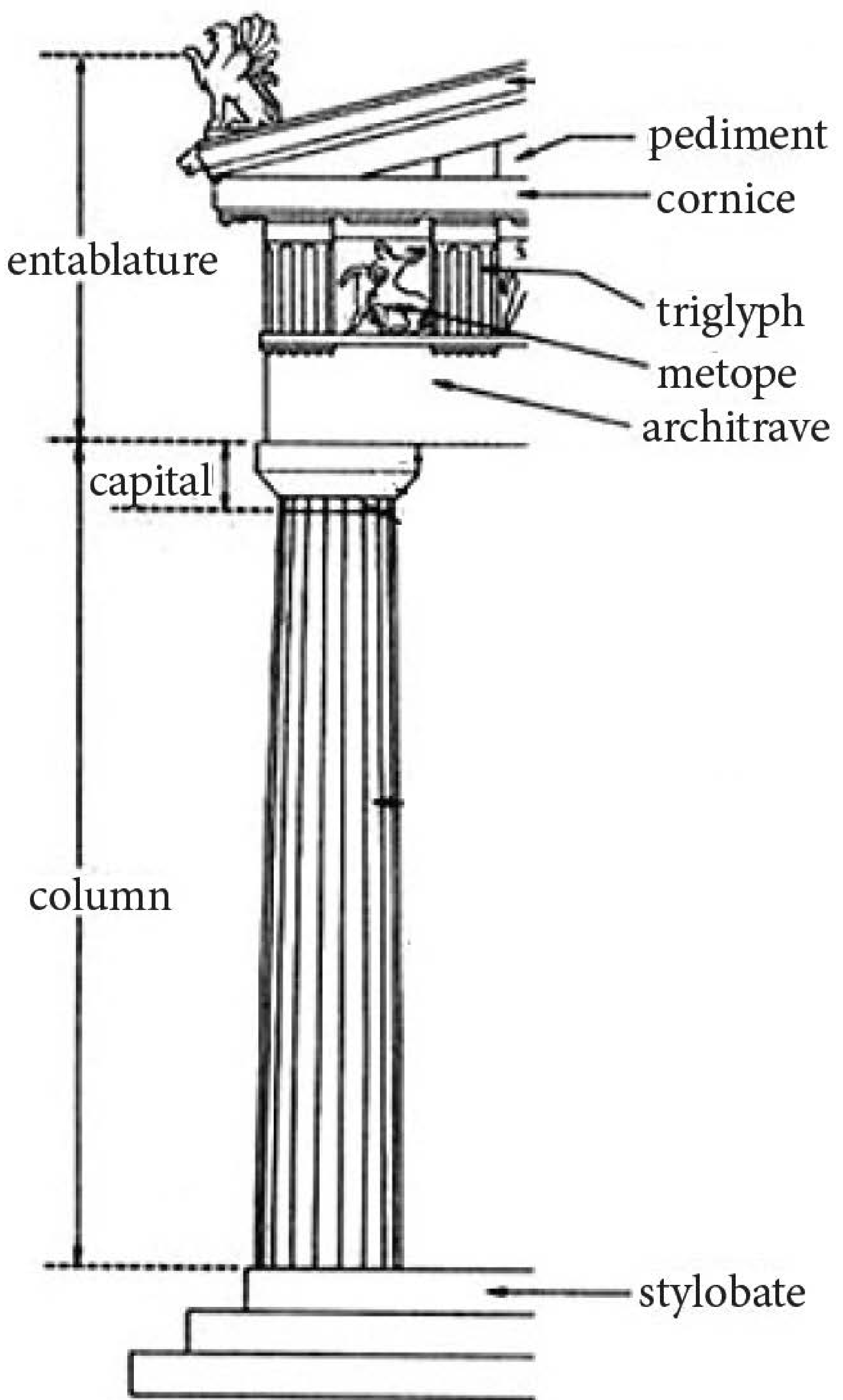
Indeed, under Ottoman rule, a barrel of gunpowder stored in the Parthenon blew up and destroyed part of the building. However, there is great controversy surrounding the sculptures housed in the British Museum, known as the Elgin Marbles.

The Greek government does not accept the legality of the sale and claims that the sculptures belong in Athens. The British Museum argues that they saved the statues from ruin and without their intervention, the statues would surely be lost.

The Structure of a Doric Temple

These temples stood on a three-stepped base called the *crepidoma*. The columns typically had no base, and they were thicker in the middle and tapered towards the top. You will see that the capital (or top of the column) was a rectangular slab, not the decorative leafy capitals common to later temple styles.

The *entablature* is the portion of the structure above the columns, which includes a triangular pediment. The *frieze* is the space between the pediment and the columns. Note the alternating pattern of *triglyphs* (the three vertical bands) and the *metopes* (the square spaces, which could have been decorated or left plain).



Other Sights of Interest within the Acropolis

Beyond the main portion of the Acropolis there are many “newer” additions. The **Theater of Herodes Atticus** was built in 161 AD and restored in 1955 for outdoor concerts. The **Stoa of Eumenes** runs along the eastern side of the theater. This detached portico was used as a promenade or meeting place.

On the opposite end is the **Theater of Dionysus**, built from 342 to 326 BC. Above that

is the **Panagia Spiliotissa**, a chapel set into a cave in the Acropolis rock. Two Corinthian columns sit above the entrance to the chapel, the remains of choragic monuments erected by the sponsors of successful dramatic performances held at the theater.

The New Acropolis Museum

The new museum is located about 1000 feet southeast of the Rock of the Acropolis, on Dionysiou Areopagitou Street. The original museum next to the Parthenon was too small to house all of its treasures, so the new Acropolis Museum was built with over 150,000 square feet of exhibition space, ten times that of the old Museum.

The **Gallery of the Slopes of the Acropolis** houses artifacts from the sanctuaries founded on the slopes of the Acropolis and objects that the Athenians used in everyday life from all historic periods. Ruins of one such sanctuary were found under the museum itself and the transparent floor provides views of the archaeological excavation.

The **Archaic Gallery** houses pieces spanning from the 7th century BC until the end of the Persian Wars in 480 BC. This period is characterized by the development of the city-state and the transition from aristocracy to tyranny, and then democracy.

There were great achievements in economics, art and intellectual life.

The Parthenon Gallery tells visitors about the sculptural decorations of the monument. You can also see ancient marble inscriptions recording the costs of the construction of the Parthenon. The friezes, both originals and replicas, are displayed here to recreate the story that visitors to the Parthenon would have read on the panels.

Propylaia, Athena Nike, Erechtheion, the last gallery of the museum, contains artifacts from the other major monuments of the classical Acropolis, including the ceiling of the Propylaia, sculptures from the parapets of the Temple of Athena Nike and the original Caryatids of the Erechtheion.

Near the Acropolis

The area surrounding the Acropolis was the center of public life in Athens. **Filoppapos Hill** (the Hill of the Muses), the highest point in the south of Athens, was the location of a fort that played an important defensive role in the city's history. On its northern slopes, there are several rooms carved into rocks, rumored to be Socrates's prison.

West of the Acropolis is **Aeropagus Hill**, the seat of the Supreme Judicial Court. Beyond that is **Pnyx Hill**, where the Ekklesia (citizens' assembly) met. These sites do not contain any ruins of note but if you're looking to take a hike, they afford magnificent views of the Acropolis in the distance.

To the north of Pnyx Hill, on the **Hill of the Nymphs**, the 19th-century Observatory sits on the site of an old sanctuary dedicated to nymphs and childbirth. Nearby is the Church of Agia Marina, an impressive 20th-century building.

Moving east (northwest of the Acropolis), you'll find the **Ancient Agora**, a complex of public buildings and temples. It was the political and religious heart of ancient Athens and the center of commercial and daily life.

There were schools, stoas (covered promenades lined with shops), a prison, the city's mint and even an olive oil mill. The two-story **Stoa of Attalos** still stands today. It was rebuilt in the 1950s on the original foundations using ancient building materials. The stoa is used as a museum to exhibit artefacts from the Agora.

The **Temple of Hephaestus**, also on the grounds, is incredibly well-preserved. All of its columns and pediments are intact and it has most of its original roof, thanks to its conversion to a Christian church in the 7th century AD. It was built around 450 BC on what was then the western edge of the city in the metal-working district, so it was dedicated to the god of blacksmiths and metallurgy.

Also on the grounds of the Ancient Agora is the **Church of the Holy Apostles**. This church dates from the Byzantine era and is among the oldest in Athens, probably built in the late 10th century.



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