



Greek Revival



Clockwise from right: A patron at Beaver, a female-owned co-op café; the grounds of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center; on the streets of Athens; Tyre, a sculpture by Ai Weiwei, from an exhibition of his work at the Museum of Cycladic Art.



Despite the adversity it has faced in recent years—maybe even because of it—Athens has become an incredibly fun place to wander.

by **STEPHEN HEYMAN**

photographs by **JULIAN BROAD**



I started where everyone does, in the mythic Athens, the tourist Athens.

But when I reached the Acropolis, I kept walking: past the stands selling archaeological schlock, past the spectators on Segways, into the park that surrounds Philopappou Hill. I took a seat on a rock ledge overlooking olive trees, where a few smart Athenians had strung hammocks to watch the sunset. Someone was playing a bouzouki. Someone else was practicing the trumpet. Everywhere there were ruins. The yawning sun cast the whole park in a strange sepia glow.

I followed ancient stone pathways to the western edge, clambered down a dirt trail, and emerged in Petralona, a neighborhood that felt like it was in an entirely different city. It had bougainvillea, jasmine, cats, funky 1960s apartment buildings. Everyone was on their terraces, on the street. I had that pleasant sensation, unique to urban travel, when you find *your* neighborhood, relax your shoulders, and think, *I could live here*. I sat down at a sidewalk café and asked for an ouzo. “No, we drink raki,” the waiter said with a smile, “because we are from Crete.” An icy pitcher arrived. The sharp, anise-flavored liqueur went down smoothly with what I had ordered: sausage marinated in vinegar, tomatoes sprinkled with oregano, olives, cheese.

Soon it was dark. I was pleasantly drunk, wandering again. Every restaurant was flung open, the interiors empty, the tables and chairs spilled onto the street. You could not tell, based on the confusion of small plates arriving and departing, whether people were just starting dinner or almost finished. No one, as far as I could tell, had any intention of leaving.

I approached an old red building with film reels mounted on its façade; ZEFYROS, the sign said. I knew it was a cinema, but I didn’t realize until I was inside that it was open to the night sky. I took a seat at a patio table in the garden. The air was cool and vaguely botanical, the walls covered in vines. The film was black-and-white, Italian with Greek subtitles, and the only thing I understood was that I did not want it to end.

WHEN MARK TWAIN arrived in Athens, in 1867, his ship was quarantined, so he sneaked ashore after dark. As he recounted in his grouchy travelogue *The Innocents Abroad*, he bribed his way into the Parthenon, stole a “gallon of superb grapes” from a nearby vineyard, and then completely bypassed modern Athens while dismissing its inhabitants as “pirates,” “villains,” and “falsifiers of high repute.” On his boat the next day, having visited only moonlit ruins, Twain concluded, “We have seen all there is to see,” and set sail for the islands.

To this day, Twain’s attitude persists with some travelers. The rap on Athens is that it’s ugly, dirty, even dangerous, that you should just get in and get out. *See the Acropolis, eat a gyro, and hop a ferry to Santorini.* The Greek capital may be many things—chaotic, complicated, enthralling—but a layover should not be one of them. This city demands attention.

It deserves it, too, especially right now. Years of economic catastrophe and political fecklessness have instilled in its residents an almost heroic fatalism. I recently spent a week in the city talking to everyone from soup-kitchen volunteers to anarchist waiters to local art- and fashion-world denizens. No one I met believes a real recovery is coming. But what’s inspiring is that Athenians are getting on with their lives anyway. They’ve stopped waiting—for the government to get its act together, for the EU to bail them out. They’re finding ways, small and large, to move forward.

This process, however painful, has unexpectedly dynamized Athens. A desperate creative energy has gripped its art world. Chronically underemployed young people are launching cooperative restaurants and cafés. And an audacious generation of entrepreneurs is investing in locally made luxury products. All of this creative bootstrapping has coincided with an unexpected surge in foreign tourism. A record 27 million people visited Greece in 2016. Suddenly, the city’s cafés are full, restaurants are opening, and hotels are going up.

At the same time, Athens has experienced an eruption of high culture. In recent years, it has become a hot spot for avant-garde performance, like Katerina Evangelatou’s staging of Euripides’ *Rhesus* as a *Sleep No More*—style journey at Aristotle’s Lyceum. The prestigious German art festival Documenta began a three-month run here in April, its first-ever event outside its home country. And last fall, after more than a decade of management fiascos, the National Museum of Contemporary Art opened in a once-derelict 1950s-era brewery south of the Acropolis, showcasing leading Greek artists and international stars like Shirin Neshat and Bill Viola.

The view of Athens
from Philopappou Hill,
near the Acropolis.



Clockwise from right: Clothing by the fashion label Zeus & Dione; video spheres by the Greek artist DeAnna Maganias at the Rebecca Camhi gallery; the terrace at Ble Papagalos, a café and bar; Kafeneío Saïtes, a co-op café, where backgammon is a popular pastime.



Even more ambitious is the \$750 million Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, the new home of Greece's national opera and library. Designed by Renzo Piano, this waterfront temple to the arts sits atop an artificial hill in the working-class neighborhood of Kallithea, overlooking a rambling park filled with aromatic herbs. The building at once references and defies Athens's classical architecture: its scale is epic, but the columns and canopy roof are built out of a paper-thin concrete that makes it look like it's about to float out to sea.

YOU CAN GET so lost in Athens's anarchic beauty and sprawling vastness that you forget, if only for an evening, that this city is living through a depression. Over the past decade, Greece's GDP has fallen 25 percent. Youth unemployment hovers around 60 percent. Exacerbating all of this is Greece's role in Europe's refugee crisis: more than a million people fleeing conflict have arrived on its shores on their way to other countries. "It's almost like you can't complain about your own situation anymore," a local gallerist, Nadia Gerazouni, told me. "Because the refugees are here to remind you what real misery is."

Gerazouni is the director of the Breeder, one of the city's most influential art spaces. It is located down a pedestrian alleyway in Metaxourgeo, a graffitied old factory district. Gerazouni likes the atmosphere. She appreciates the way the brothel owners and the neighborhood pharmacist gather in the mornings to discuss whatever mural work the gallery has put on its façade—such as the bawdy characters painted by Ath1281, a local street artist. While acknowledging how much Greeks have suffered, Gerazouni sees upside in disaster. What if, she asks, Greek art is entering a kind of Weimar period, a creative flourishing born out of instability and economic ruin? "The fact that the art market here has shrunk to the point of extinction has been very liberating for artists," she says. "There's no commercial impulse, and this makes them produce *really* interesting work."

With her giant glasses and flowing brown hair, Gerazouni would not look out of place in a gallery in New York's Chelsea or London's East End. At the Breeder, a former ice cream factory that's now all smoky steel and cool concrete, she showed me large-scale paintings by Stelios Faitakis, who recently unveiled a major mural commission at the Palais de Tokyo, in Paris. Adorned in gold leaf and dripping with bloody red, Faitakis's work blended Greek Orthodox religious iconography with the dystopian mood of Expressionist artists like Otto Dix.

Gerazouni pointed to what looked like a crumpled, water-stained cardboard box. "This is white marble," she said, enjoying my shocked expression. The sculpture was by Andreas Lolis, who deploys all his artistic gifts to make the most

sacred of Greek materials look worthless, like a discarded shipping container or a homeless person's shelter. You don't need to be an art critic to understand the metaphor.

Rebecca Camhi, another top gallerist in Metaxourgeo who represents international artists like Rita Ackermann and Nobuyoshi Araki, can't quite bring herself to share Gerazouni's optimism. "I'm not giving up, but I say that every year," she told

me. Camhi got her start in Paris and comes off as a world-weary, glamorous eccentric. She loves Greece, but is frank about its shortcomings. In 2008, she moved her namesake gallery to a light-filled Neoclassical town house in Metaxourgeo. After the Breeder took up residence nearby, Camhi hoped that the whole neighborhood would transform into a vibrant cultural quarter.

Since the crisis hit, Camhi has tried to stay afloat by doing fewer shows, selling Greek artisan-made goods, and hosting an occasional supper club on her garden patio. "All the Greeks care about is eating and drinking," she said, only half-joking. "One of these days, when I can no longer take it, maybe I'll open a restaurant."

Still, she persists. Last fall, she filled the gallery with stunning architectural installations by the Greek-American artist DeAnna Maganias. And she still believes that Metaxourgeo can blossom into a bohemia. She took me to a broad, tiled public square two blocks from her gallery where Seychelles, one of the best restaurants for New Greek cuisine, opened a few years ago. The laid-back café Ble Papagalos recently joined it.

At night, young Greeks stream into the alleyways between the Metaxourgeo and Kerameikous metro stations. Follow them and you'll discover some of the best nightlife spots in Athens, like the sexy patio bar Cabezón or the untucked after-hours canteen Louis. To spend an evening here is to experience a strange kind of cognitive dissonance, as you try to square the knowledge that Athens is in crisis with the feeling that it's never been more alive.

RONY HAS ALWAYS been a local specialty in Athens, but that seems particularly true today. You

wouldn't expect an extravagant cultural complex like the Niarchos Center to rise in the midst of a grinding depression. You also wouldn't expect that the most successful businesses to emerge from the crisis would sell luxury goods. And yet, in the leafy, upscale neighborhood of Kolonaki sits Yoleni's, a gleaming new seven-floor Greek-food emporium that stocks Cretan escargots, gold-flecked Corinthian honey, and super-premium olive oil. (Continued on page 66)

↓
**The
Details**
Hotels,
restaurants,
and art,
page 68

You can get so lost in Athens's anarchic beauty
that you forget, if only for an evening,
that this is a city living through a depression.



(Athens, continued from page 57)

The place is the Greek answer to Eataly. Styled like a 1950s provincial grocer, with vintage refrigerators and burlap sacks of grain, the store is full of charming stations offering hand-made spanakopita and cold-pressed cucumber juice. Yoleni's hopes to carve out a global niche in fine food in much the same way that Coco-Mat, another breakout Greek business, has done with luxury bedding.

Founded in 1988, Coco-Mat has gone global, opening stores from SoHo to Seoul. The company's springless mattresses—made entirely from natural materials like dried seaweed, coconut fiber, and Mongolian horsehair—can cost as much as a Volvo. The new Coco-Mat flagship, also in Kolonaki, doubles as a high-end hotel. It's a rather awkward configuration for hotel guests, who stumble into the lobby at night only to discover they're in a mattress showroom. Still, the whole project radiates eco-friendly bonhomie, from the cuddly organic linens to the recycled-wood bicycles for guests to borrow.

Perhaps the most sophisticated business to emerge from the crisis is the fashion house Zeus & Dione, which was founded in 2013 by Mareva Grabowski, a Harvard Business School grad and former executive for Deutsche Bank, and Dimitra Kolotoura, who previously ran a London-based travel-PR company. The pair wanted to create a modern label out of ancient craft traditions. They sourced talent from all over Greece and helped revive the silk industry in Soufli, which once supplied couture labels like Chanel and Dior. Their clothes are minimalist yet luxurious, like a beachy, folkloric version of Chloé (where head of design Lydia Vouvouni cut her teeth). Their collections, which have been featured in *Vogue* and are stocked by Bergdorf

Goodman and Le Bon Marché, routinely sell out. In Athens, the brand now has an airy boutique inside the famous Hotel Grande Bretagne.

Grabowski's takeaway from the crisis was that Greeks could no longer rely on the public sector, tourism, and shipping to support themselves. "This whole model of not really producing anything was dysfunctional," she said. "When it collapsed, it forced people to start thinking differently, to realize the old way had no future."

O **FALL THE** examples of crisis-era entrepreneurship, one of the most heartwarming is the rise of cooperative cafés. The traditional Athenian coffee shop, or *kafeneío*, has been a fixture here since the Ottoman occupation. For many people, it's a second home—a place to hash out family problems, play backgammon, enjoy the day's first drink. It is of course also where you take your coffee, which in the summer is Nescafé whirled with sugar and ice into the classic Greek frappé.

In Athens, mom-and-pop *kafeneía*, with their straw-seat chairs and cheap table wine in metal carafes, have been overtaken by bigger, slicker establishments. But the economic crisis has given this traditional staple of Greek culture a new lease on life. A few years ago, unemployed and overeducated young Greeks began opening their own austerity-era versions of Greek coffee shops. Helped in part by a new business law, they pooled whatever money they had or could borrow, raided their home kitchens, used humble local ingredients, and split whatever they made.

One of the first cooperative *kafeneía* was To Pagaki, which opened in central Athens in 2008, at the height of the global financial crisis. It established the template: modest prices, anarchist literature, Zapatista-grown coffee, and a contagious spirit of youthful solidarity. Others have since riffed on the original recipe. In Petralona, I visited a foodie co-op café, To Perivolaki, which serves delicious meze, house-made lemonade, and unpasteurized beer from the Ali microbrewery in Thessaloniki. A 15-minute walk takes you to yet another

iteration: Beaver, which calls itself a *cooperativa*. Note the feminine ending. This place was created "by and for women," though men are welcome. The vibe is hard-edged: found furniture, raw concrete columns, lights hanging from electric cords. The beer is cheap, the room filled with smoke and laughter.

It's impossible to visit these co-op cafés without being struck by their scruffy charm, by the sweet welcomes of the workers, by how each place prepares a little \$2 or \$3 peasant platter loaded with cheese, bread, cold cuts, olives—a way for those who are hard up to eat cheaply. The cafés reminded me of a line by the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis: "How simple and frugal a thing is happiness."

Alas, frugal happiness is the only kind many young Greeks can afford. Three out of four recent university graduates have left the country to find jobs. For most who remain, like Maryanne Kanellopoulou, a 32-year-old with degrees in psychology and education, there is no work. "I tried to find something, anything," she told me. "Restaurants, tutoring Greek, nothing worked. This was my only chance."

By *this*, Kanellopoulou means Saïtes, the co-op café she and five friends created a few years ago in the Athens suburb of Nea Smirni. It has wooden mobiles, political literature espousing workers' rights, and excellent homemade meze like *tzatziki* and chickpea fritters. "We're trying to find solutions together," Kanellopoulou said. "It's hard because none of us planned to do this, but at least we know that we're helping our friends, supporting small Greek farmers, and not taking advantage of people. That, to me, is more important than making money."

This depression, while difficult, has also given many Greeks a chance to rethink what their lives should be about. "This is not just an economic crisis, it's also a crisis of values," said Gerazouni, the gallerist, echoing a sentiment I heard often. "This situation forces us to be more innovative, to be happy with less, to enjoy the sunset, the sea, or country life, to grow our own vegetables. Slowly, this is changing the whole mentality. In a way, it sets things straight." ■