

Travel

Just a few hours after landing in Athens, we slipped out of our hotel and up the marbled road leading towards the setting sun. We were on the Dionysiou Areopagitou, a street named after the city’s first convert to Christianity in 50AD, and heading back to even earlier times. A handful of Athenians walked animatedly past. Two dogs played in the last of that day’s early summer heat. To our right, the escarpment of the Acropolis, the centrepiece of sprawling Athens, loomed ever closer.

Perching on a slab of ancient masonry, we peered into the restored grandeur of the Roman amphitheatre, the Odeon of Herodes Atticus. We paused to sniff the newly bloomed poppies and daisies and savour the dry Attic breeze. We were in the heart of a lively modern city, yet on the fringes of one of the world’s greatest historical, artistic and religious sites – and we had it almost to ourselves.

Round a corner, up a dozen crude stone steps, and we were at the gates of the Parthenon. Young men were playing instruments and singing. An artist was sketching the pastel hues of the city below. It was a tableau that could have been from almost any time in the past 2,500 years. We walked on, round the Acropolis, ducking through the candlelit tavernas of Plaka, the old town.

Then, just shy of our hotel, we stopped again. Before us was a monumental gateway: Hadrian’s Arch. On the side facing the Acropolis, a simple inscription reads: “This is Athens, the ancient city of Theseus.” On the other side, facing away, towards the then new Roman city, are the words: “This is the city of Hadrian, and not of Theseus.”

This stern message echoes down the centuries. As we stood there, 1,000 miles to the northeast the continent’s latest invading imperial army was on the march, and Ukrainian towns captured by the Russians were submitting to victors’ inscriptions and historical claims.

A few hundred yards on, we found ourselves outside AthensWas, our boutique hotel. Within minutes, we were ushered to a table at its rooftop restaurant. Gazing out over the Acropolis, we awaited the famed fusion fare of Alexandros Charalambopoulos, one of the city’s most celebrated chefs. Such is Athens: ancient and modern barely a moment from each other, lightly intertwined.

I had last been to Athens six years ago with a teenage son. We had immersed ourselves in its history over five archaeology-rich days. But this time had to be different. It was a weekend break, however heretical this may sound to classicists. My wife had last been to Athens in the 1980s as a child. So after all those years, the Parthenon had to have top billing. Yet we had just three days – and contemporary, spruced-up Athens was also in our sights.

Our plan was simple – day one: the ancient world; day two: the modern; day three: a blend of both. Our first morning, after breakfast on our hotel rooftop, we wandered back up to the Parthenon. Nikolaos Tsoniotis, our guide, was a distinguished archaeologist from the Ministry of Culture. For two hours he worked his magic, bringing life to the ruins and restorations of the Periclean dream. On



Three days, 3,000 years

Athens | On a long weekend break, *Alec Russell* finds new galleries, restaurants and museums – and fresh calls for the return of ancient treasures

Clockwise from top: the Acropolis; Plaka; food at Cherchez La Femme; the terrace and a bedroom at AthensWas; the fragment of Artemis’s foot returned by Italy; Hadrian’s Arch; the Acropolis Museum

Alamy; Reuters

all sides, archaeologists were tapping away with their hammers. It is, as our guide explained, very much a living site.

We gazed over the port of Piraeus in the direction of Salamis and imagined the epic sight beheld by the Persians from the Acropolis at the time of the great sea battle in 480BC – which was to cut short their dreams of a long occupation. Then, via the pillars and carvings, we were hypnotically led through the centuries as rulers and religions waxed and waned, Christian, then Muslim, while the Parthenon pretty much endured. We imagined its first restorers, in the mid-1830s, hard at work just after Greek independence, and two decades after Lord Elgin’s men removed swaths of the Parthenon’s frieze.

Diplomatically, our guide let the stones tell their own story. But just down the hill, Nikolaos Stampolidis, impassioned director-general of the Acropolis Museum and one of Greece’s leading archaeologists, did not hold back. After endless ebb and flow over the years, the



argument over whether the “Elgin Marbles” should be returned from the British Museum – which bought them from Elgin – is bubbling once more and seemingly tilting in the Greeks’ favour.

The Acropolis Museum was built in the 1990s to counter the argument that the city’s dire pollution meant the sculptures would deteriorate if reinstated on

the Parthenon. It is stunning. Stampolidis gave us a whirlwind tour. Describing the frieze as “the most perfect thing ever done by human hands”, he pointed to the facsimile of the originals – which are still in London – saying, “How can we accept this?”

“The British side was saying, ‘Where will you put them?’ Now the arguments have changed and they have decided to call the British Museum an encyclopedic museum.” Stampolidis is enthused by the recent agreement by Italy to give back “forever” a fragment from the Parthenon’s eastern frieze, showing the foot of the goddess Artemis. This he sees as a template for a possible return of the Parthenon sculptures.

The British Museum has long argued that as a museum of the world, it is the ideal home for the Marbles – but the pressure on it is intensifying against the backdrop of a growing global clamour for restitution of artworks to their countries of origin. In late May, the British actor and writer Stephen Fry said he had a “passion” for returning them and predicted they would be welcomed by two million people in the streets of Athens.

We raced across the city for a tour of the National Gallery, reopened last year after an eight-year renovation project, in time for the 200th anniversary of Greek independence. It’s a stylish mod-

ern building whose most memorable works are of the independence struggle. As we headed in search of dinner in Plaka, I was in no doubt that Stampolidis’s conviction and certainty – and the confident redesigned gallery – reflected a city that seems to have recovered its “mojo” after the sovereign debt crisis just over a decade ago.

The next day, we were up early and striding through the heart of Athens. It was the annual Open House day, when some of the city’s most famous and varied architectural landmarks are open to visitors. In the space of a few hours, we were whisked from building to building by sparky 20-something Athenians, whose enthusiasm for their country’s and Europe’s future was captivating.

My highlight was the exquisite mansion that is the Loverdos Museum. Built by German architect Ernst Ziller in the 1880s, it was then owned by financier and collector Dionysios Loverdos, and opened to the public as a museum last year. It houses a range of post-Byzantine icons and pictures in a series of stunning rooms, with cupolas, mosaics, murals, ceiling paintings, altars and more.

After a morning immersed in relatively modern architecture, including the National Theatre, we sat in the sun, reading and watching Athens go by. Dinner was very much in the 21st century at the improbably named Cherchez La Femme, just down from bustling Syntagma Square. Specialising in the Greek equivalent of tapas, it is one of Athens’ many lively new restaurants, as recommended by our polymathic contributor Fani Papageorgiou. It was just what was needed: the heart of Athens is small and walkable – and walked we had!

Just after dawn on our third day, on a whim, we took a ferry from Piraeus to the island of Hydra. A brisk two hours

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skimming across the Saronic Gulf, and we were in the spiritual home of Leonard Cohen and his fans. It is easy to see why he stayed off and on for years with his girlfriend and muse Marianne Ihlen.

Years ago, far-sighted Hydrans successfully petitioned the authorities to ban cars. Out of season, it is still a place of poetry and dreams – even if in high summer it is more of a chichi resort than in Cohen’s heyday. By chance, the FT’s former arts editor Peter Aspden was there. He met us at the quay and whisked us up the coast to his favourite beach. We had come ill-equipped, without swimmers or towels, but who could resist those crisp blue waters?

After a bracing swim and a long warming-up conversation in the sun about restitution, the Parthenon and more, we walked round the next headland. We found a dreamy family restaurant looking out over the mainland. A lazy lunch of snapper and prawns later, it was time to lollop down the hill for our early evening ferry back to Athens.

The following morning we were circling over southern Greece bound for London. Three thousand-odd years of history in three days...

Alec Russell is the editor of FT Weekend

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More on visiting Athens at [discovergreece.com](#). Alec Russell was a guest of AthensWas ([athenswas.gr](#); doubles from €242 per night) and Aegean Airlines ([aegeanair.com](#)). Entry to the Acropolis Museum ([theacropolismuseum.gr](#)) costs €10; entry to the Loverdos Museum is free ([loverdosmuseum-bma.gr](#)). Cherchez La Femme ([cherchezlafemme.gr](#)) is at Mitropoleos 46

POSTCARD FROM... TENERIFE

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The next Vuelta al Teide takes place on May 6 2023; see [vteide.com](#) for information on how to enter. For more on visiting Tenerife, including accommodation options, see [hellocanaryislands.com](#)

Torrents of sweat had already erupted from my head as I approached a daunting road sign above Los Cristianos, a town on the south coast of Tenerife. I was barely 10 minutes into a ride on the Spanish island. It had started at my hotel, where I left my family by the pool after smothering the kids in factor 50. “El Teide, 47km,” the sign read. As I looked beyond it, my own sun cream began to drip into my eyes. Fellow bald cyclists may be familiar with what I like to call the “Piz Buin squint”. The sign might also have included the warnings: “all uphill”, “really hot” and “not actually dormant”.

I had asked for this. Mount Teide, the 3,715m volcano that punches through the Atlantic above Tenerife’s black-sand beaches and karaoke bars, has been on my cycling radar for years. Just as tourists have long flocked to the island’s resorts and sun, professional cyclists have made seasonal migrations to its rarefied roads.

Tenerife is a tectonic gift to the sport. Lying some 1,300km southwest of Spain, it is on the latitude of the Sahara Desert. Its roads, meanwhile, peak at more than 2,356m (you’ll need a cable car ticket to go higher). The routes from the island’s four corners to the top are often spoken of as the longest continuous climbs in Europe (although



I’d argue Granada to the summit of Pico de Veleta in Spain’s Sierra Nevada pips them). Either way, it’s rare for such a climb to start at sea level.

Bradley Wiggins and Team Sky trained for weeks on Teide, including in Tenerife’s mild winter, before his Tour de France and Olympics wins in 2012. There have been rumours that the Vuelta a España, or Tour of Spain, might one day include a Teide stage. And now amateurs are increasingly flying there to train like the pros – or at least to gasp for air in their tracks.

Days before my visit in mid-May, 1,000 cyclists had gathered for the fifth Vuelta al Teide, a 175km timed event

Amateur cyclists are increasingly flocking to the 3,715m-high volcano to train like the pros – or at least to gasp for air in their tracks

including the big climb. Participation has quadrupled since the event’s launch in 2017, as Tenerife realises its potential to rival Mallorca or the mountain meccas of the Alps and the Pyrenees.

As I began my own climb – and a 122km loop including 3,000m of ascent – I was reminded of Mont Ventoux, the Provençal maker and breaker of Tour de France legend. It, too, rises from nowhere in a series of increasingly barren and exposed slopes, punishing riders who struggle to find a rhythm.

The beach resorts soon disappeared in a haze below me. The sun kept rising. There was no shade among the aloe vera plantations and villages of Teide’s lower slopes. My first target, at almost 2,200m, was the southern rim of the vast Cañadas crater, the collapsed remnants of an earlier volcano that is up to 16km across. The road then drops into the crater before a 7km push up to the cable car station at the foot of the central cone of Teide, which formed within the caldera more than 150,000 years ago.

A pine forest above Vilaflor, Tenerife’s highest village, offered only momentary respite. Back in the fierce sun above 2,000m, it was hard to know what was dragging me most – fatigue or thin air. An orange blur whizzed down past me. Online detective work later revealed it as a group from Ineos

Grenadiers (formerly Team Sky), including Geraint Thomas, who was training on the volcano for the Tour de France. Pros tend to eschew the beach and stay at the Parador hotel, one of the few buildings in the thin air and monastic quiet of the Cañadas crater.

And what a crater! One second I was busting a gut on a typical high-mountain road, the next I was descending into Mars. I passed rock stacks and scree slopes tinged red or an alien blue-green, and pink flowers as tall as me that are known as “towers of jewels”. There were giant cactuses, skittish lizards and vast fields of black lava that had spewed forth in an eruption in 1798 (Teide last erupted in 1909 and remains active, if quiet).

The otherworldliness was a welcome distraction as I hit a headwind before the steep ramp to the cable car station. Catching my breath at the café, I knocked back tortilla and doughnuts like a hungry pelican. The greater reward was the descent. After briefly backtracking across the crater, I looped northwards, dropping fast into the early afternoon heat. I grinned, my brakes squealed. After a cruel series of hills along the sweltering coast road, I slumped to the floor of my hotel room clutching a cold beer – and memories of a mountain like no other.

Simon Osborne