

TRAVEL

Athens is a jewel despite noise, pollution

BY JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

I was prepared to dislike Athens. A daughter had visited there as a college student and could hardly wait to leave and head for a more tranquil Greek isle.

A son had visited there, and wasn't permitted to ascend the Acropolis because heavy rains had made the marble stairs slick. What was left, he said, was the noise of motorbikes and pollution. He was happy to fly on to Istanbul.

But it seemed ridiculous not to take advantage of the fact that the ship we took through the Turkish and Greek islands (stay tuned) disembarked in Athens.

So rather than "land and run," we spent two days exploring this ancient Greek city — not nearly enough.

We were totally awed by the Acropolis, despite the cranes and scaffolding of reconstruction. Walking up the steps to the Propylaea gate was Art History 101 come true. There, indeed, was the first mixed use of Doric and

ionic columns. Emerging on the other side to see the Erechtheion to the left and the Parthenon to the right was a powerful experience.

The roof of the Erechtheion, the smaller and distinctly more feminine of the two buildings, is supported by those amazing Caryatids (six maiden pillars). What you see are copies, since all but one of the real pillars have been removed to the Acropolis Museum to avoid further deterioration. The missing maiden can be found in the British Museum.

The Parthenon, considered by many to be man's supreme architectural achievement, appears flawless. Its proportions were designed to coincide with the viewer's eye — for example the columns are slightly wider on one end to make them appear perfect. Many of the original friezes and sculpture have been removed for preservation purposes. The Acropolis Museum, neatly tucked into a corner of the complex, fills in some of the blanks — at least those that aren't in the British Museum!

Exploring the neighborhoods, Anafiotika and Plaka that lie in the shadow of the Acropolis is sheer delight. They are a blend of residences, tavernas, and shops that eventually give way to the central city.

Metro-Detroiters know already that Greek food is delicious. So avgolemono (chicken soup with lemon and rice), souvlaki, moussaka and baklava will be very familiar. I was surprised, and my husband delighted, to find they make Greek salad without beets.

Athens has a host of impressive museums, including the National Archaeological Museum that is considered the most important. We had to pick and choose since we also wanted to spend time on the streets and in the National Gardens. Athens' version of New York City's Central Park offers sanctuary from the noise and traffic of the city and includes playgrounds, a duck pond and a small zoo as well as hundreds of species of plants and trees.

We loved the Benaki Museum, the oldest private museum in Athens, housed in a neo-classical building that is the former home of the Benakis family. It displays the historical and cultural development of Hellenism as it unfolded in the course of



Old and new: My husband snapped this photo of me in Athens. A construction crane, juxtaposed against the ancient Acropolis, gives you a picture of what the city looks like as it prepares for the 2004 Olympic Games.

many centuries. A wonderful rooftop garden cafe is a perfect anecdote to glazed-over senses.

The tiny Jewish Museum was worth the time it took to find it in a renovated neoclassical building near the Plaka district. The exhibits, on seven levels, are reached via a winding staircase with natural light emanating from a domed ceiling. (The architecture is obviously influenced by Manhattan's Guggenheim Museum.) They trace the 2,300 years that Jews have lived in Greece. It is somewhat surprising that just a single level is devoted to the Holocaust in which 87 percent of Greek Jews died. We stayed at the Athenaeum International, which has a great pool, night-time views of the Acropolis and Mt. Lycabettus, and a free van to Syntagma (Constitution) Square every hour. The square is where the action is: Mime shows for children on weekends; the constant changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier; Athenians meeting and greet-

ing over coffee.

Traveling to Athens between now and the Olympics will allow you to see more than we did of the preparations for the 2004 Olympics. We were happy to set foot on the turf of the Panathenaic Stadium, with roots dating back to 330 B.C., rebuilt in 1896 for the first modern Olympics. Its 80,000 seats are deemed too few for today's games.

I ended up loving Athens. Yes, it is noisy and polluted. But we found these small annoyances in the scheme of its overall treasures. It's not only worth a visit but a re-visit. If you are tempted to make reservations for the 2004 summer Olympics, I say go for it.

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is a former managing editor of the Eccentric Newspapers and current op ed columnist. Your questions and comments are welcome by calling (734) 953-2047 or e-mailing jberne@att.net



On guard: Ed Berne helps one of Athens' elite soldiers guard a government building.



Always on Sunday: Street performers delight young and old on an Athens street that's closed to traffic on Sundays.

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