

WANDERLUST ▶

An Athenian Odyssey



Clockwise from top: Aegean bliss at the resort's Dream Villas; The resort's Galazia Atki restaurant; Sushi at the stylish Kohylia; Kohylia's chic Oriental bar; Outdoor seating at Kohylia; Dinner with a view at the resort's Captain House.; The resort's deluxe beachfront bungalow; The executive waterfront suite's indulgent bath.

Drawing from its mythological roots, the luxe Athenian Riviera is a classic, fabled shapeshifter. Ananya Bahl checks into the region to find out how it seamlessly switches between its ancient and avant-garde identities.

The most conspicuous thing about Athens is its ability to pop surprises at every corner. A walk through bustling Monastiraki Square that's brimming with flea markets or the hip Thessio with its vibrant bars and cafés, could reveal a cordoned-off archaeological site quietly coexisting amidst all the hullabaloo. This doesn't refer to the mighty Acropolis that looms over the city or the Ancient Agora – those are the obvious spots that would show up on any Athens itinerary. Instead, these are those oft-unnoticed sites that – with almost-deliberate stealth – hold within their stony remains, years of undiscovered history – and there are plenty strewn across the city. By these prehistoric remnants, are street-side buskers crooning the latest pop hits, hip hop dancers catapulting their bodies energetically into the air, and people lining up for street-style souvlaki in between shopping jaunts. That's Athens for you: classic yet contemporary, traditional yet chic, obvious but still so mysterious.



Clockwise from top: An aerial view of the Grand Resort Lagonissi's peninsula; Fun bars and restaurants next to the Acropolis; The Academy of Athens on Panepistimiou Street; The ceremonial guard at the Parliament of Athens; Tourist at a rooftop bar with views of the Acropolis; The mighty Parthenon as seen from a distance.



Albeit, the surprises don't end there. About ten miles south of the centre of Athens is a stretch of land flanked by the cerulean Aegean Sea. Christened as the 'Athenian Riviera', the area is rife with upscale shopping districts, indulgent spa hotels and restaurants that spell panache. Its best and most alluring quality, though, is that the region makes you feel like you're doing a quintessential Greek Island-hopping vacation without actually leaving the mainland.

I check into the Grand Resort Lagonissi, member of the prestigious Leading Hotels of the World clique. The resort is located on a 72-acre private peninsula and has hosted several celebrities including Jennifer Lopez, Mel Gibson, Leonardo DiCaprio, Kylie Minogue, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. "Feeling blue" takes on

a whole new meaning at my deluxe bungalow with a sharing pool – it's tricky for the eyes to decide when the pool gives way to the shimmering waters of the Saronic Gulf. The afternoon is reserved for the spa where water takes over: I'm pampered by a unique hydro- aromatherapy treatment post which a dip in the balmy waters of the sea at the resort's private beach is mandatory. Here, Loren Eiseley's words come to mind: "If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water."

One thing you absolutely cannot miss is the sunset at Cape Sounion. The resort arranges the excursion and I'm treated to a glorious view of the centuries-old Temple of Poseidon, perched on a cliff, overlooking the sea, while the day says a magnificently golden good bye. Back at the resort, we indulge in an elaborate sushi spread at Kohylia – a stylish Oriental oasis headed by a Filipino chef – with a view of the yachts lining the mini Mediterranean marina: another "globalized" Athenian juxtaposition that is a highlight! I can't help but smile to myself.

Not far from the resort is Glyfada: an upscale suburban hotspot where the chic elements of society mingle. It's a place where Athenians unabashedly flaunt their latest finery and the only prerequisite to merge into this eclectic, fashionable cartel is to stand out. I step into Boutique 52 for the latest trends from Greek designers like Athina Korda and Stelios Koudounaris, buy minimalist baubles at Pogonatos Jewelry, and hop by the Blender Gallery to soak in some contemporary Greek art. Nearby is the 2,000-year-old Lake Vouliagmeni that's a



Not far from the resort is Glyfada, an upscale suburban hotspot where the chic elements of society mingle. It's a place where Athenians unabashedly flaunt their latest finery and the only prerequisite to merge into this eclectic, fashionable cartel is to stand out. I step into Boutique 52 for the latest trends.



natural spa owing to its rich hydrogen sulphide deposits, making it a soothing place to unwind. Adamant not to leave Athens without sampling a classic mezze meal, I gorge on mussels, tzatziki, dolmades, gyros, stuffed tomatoes, and the works, washed down with the intoxicating Greek Ouzo at the Grand Resort Lagonissi's beachside Mediterraneo restaurant. While watching the sunset, I'm reminded of the tragic story of King Aegeus jumping to his death from Cape Sounion because of a misunderstanding about his son, Theseus's supposed death. I wonder how he could bring himself to end his life amidst this unending beauty? Didn't the exquisite setting talk him out of death? I settle the dilemma with this justification: "It's all Greek to me!" ■