



## A proud heritage

From the site of the original Olympiad to, perhaps, the true Atlantis – among the magical charms of modern Greece hides a truly unforgettable selection of historic sites, writes native expert travel writer, **John Malathronas**

**With 3,000 years of history at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, it's no wonder that Greece today offers the visitor an unparalleled array of cultural and archaeological gems.** This country of vibrant cities and picturesque islands contains no fewer than 17 UNESCO World Heritage Sites. And although the more familiar ones, such as the Acropolis of Athens or Olympia, stem from the age of classical antiquity, the Sites as a whole range from prehistoric to much more modern times – and they reflect the wide spectrum of civilisations that have populated the country's shores and made modern Greece what it is today.

As befits a country that has looked to the sea for its commerce, colonisation and conquests, Greece's most accessible UNESCO properties are on or near its extensive coastline. Indeed, before the advent of air travel, the main access to Athens was from the water. On a clear day, you can stand on the monumental gates of the Acropolis – an ancient citadel and sacred sanctuary in one – and observe the ferries departing the port of Piraeus where, in 480BC, the Persian fleet landed and its soldiers marched on to burn Athens itself.

The Athenians who took the advice of the diviners too literally ('The city's wooden walls will

**Left: Dazzlingly white, picturesque Santorini**  
**Above: despite the passing of 2,500 years, the Acropolis is as much a symbol of Athens as ever**



save you') perished, but the ones who interpreted the oracle correctly – the 'wooden walls' being Athens' battleships – defeated Xerxes in a naval battle outside Piraeus. The destruction already caused by the Persians led to the Acropolis being rebuilt during the Golden Age of Athens, and created the elegance of its marble buildings as well as their architectural harmony.

The sleepy village of Katakolon, perched on a long, pine-covered peninsula, is the gateway to Greece's other world-famous UNESCO territory – Olympia. Katakolon, a quiet fishing community of 300-odd souls, is the place to relax at a friendly harbourfront taverna and look out to sea while feasting on delicious freshly caught seafood and ice-cold beer. For some this is

enough, but most venture inland to experience the magic of Olympia. Today's serene site, surrounded by hoary olive groves, is beautiful in itself, but to the ancients it was an important part of their lives: Olympic competitions were used to measure time; hostilities were suspended during their duration; and, as only Greeks could compete, the games were a bond that held together a nation split into a variety of city-states.

**Steps, cults and royal tombs**

Nauplia became the first capital of modern Greece in 1829, and it is the 18th-century Palamidi fortress, hovering above the city, that catches the eye today. Of course, not everyone is willing to climb the fort's 857 steps, however impressive the view from its bastions, but the city is favoured by Greeks who come here simply to relax in its atmospheric, cobbled streets. It is easy to lose days wandering under narrow balconies overhanging with bougainvillea and jasmine.

Nauplia is the gateway to two of Greece's most spectacular UNESCO jewels. The first is Epidaurus, the site of a temple to Apollo's son – Asklepios – whose healing powers inspired an ancient cult that persisted long after Christianity took hold. The adjoining town prospered with the influx of the sick and infirm, and a string of monumental buildings were erected, including the ancient theatre, which is still in use. Tour guides demonstrate its acoustics by spreading the members of their group in the higher stands and striking a match centre-stage; nobody fails to hear the resulting swish.

The second UNESCO property in the area includes the Bronze Age settlements of Mycenae and Tiryns. According to myth, Mycenae was the kingdom of Agamemnon, hero of Homer's *Iliad* and commander of the Greek forces throughout the Trojan war. The travails of his dynasty left an astonishing legacy of city gates, mighty Cyclopean walls and deep, Egyptian-like royal tombs that were erected a barely believable 10 centuries before the buildings on the Acropolis.

Greece's 'capital of the north', Thessalonki, has been one of the most important Balkan ports since the Roman era, and is itself a Heritage Site containing no less than nine different UNESCO monuments for visitors to explore. Apart from the arch of Galerius and the 'Rotunda' – a round temple of Zeus converted to the world's oldest surviving Christian place of worship – treats include Byzantine churches that range from the 7th-century basilica of Aghios Demetrios, with some of the earliest Christian mosaics to be seen anywhere, to the brick and stone chapel of Aghios Nikolaos Orfanos, whose unprepossessing exterior hides a surfeit of intense, vibrant 14th-century frescoes.

**Heading offshore**

The capitals of Greece's most visited islands – Rhodes and Corfu – are also UNESCO Sites. Rhodes Old Town, a shady warren of medieval lanes, was the headquarters of the Knights of St John after they were forced to flee the Holy Land in 1309; the city only succumbed to Suleyman the Magnificent in 1522 after a long siege. Today's visitors can arm themselves with maps and explore the fascinating old quarter; dine and relax at picturesque Mandraki Harbour while gazing at its

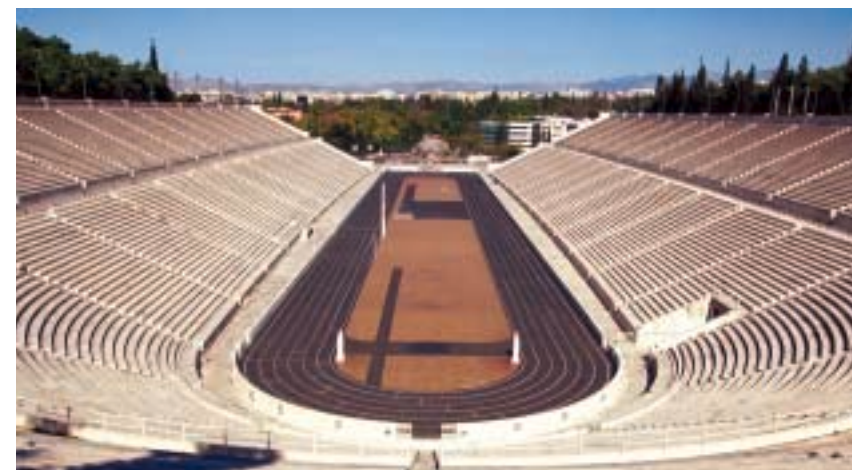


**The Olympic capital**

The centrepiece of the successful Athens Olympics in 2004 was the Olympic Stadium at Maroussi, which was designed by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. While the existing sports ground was being expanded and revamped, a suspended, arched glass and metal roof was put in place over 10,000 square metres, to cover 71,000 spectators; it hangs on two giant arches that tower 80 metres high and extend to over 300 metres. Stark white against its hilly backdrop, the venue still hosts athletics competitions and football tournaments.

The original 1896 stadium, built for the first modern Olympics, is much simpler than Calatrava's masterpiece, but it is still the people's favourite. Its open-air horseshoe structure with marble seats fits under the Acropolis, evoking memories of Epidaurus and Olympia, and providing a poignant link between Ancient and modern Greece.

Clockwise from top left: the white-washed streets of Thera, on Santorini; a real sense of tranquillity amid the ruins of Olympia; the 1,700-year-old arch of Galerius is one of nine UNESCO monuments at Salonica; the stadium built for the first modern Olympics is the people's favourite; reminders of Greece's role in founding Western civilisation are found everywhere





medieval windmills; and swim, sunbathe and then watch the sunset at the nearby sandy beach.

Corfu's Old Town lies safely between the imposing Old Citadel and the functional New Fort. Although there are still touches of the Venetian fortifications that once stood here, it was really the British post-Napoleonic occupation and the subsequent civic reconstruction that shaped today's city profile: this is, after all, a Greek island with its own cricket pitch!

Those who want authentic Venetian colour should sail to Cephalonia, a few hours away, and visit the fishing village of Fiskardo. It's a real step back in time to when *La Serenissima* ruled the Mediterranean. Cephalonia is an island of 11 blue flag beaches with clear, translucent waters, and mountain peaks that stand over 1,500 metres tall. Another option is the ruined Venetian castle on Zakynthos that succumbed to a catastrophic Ionian earthquake in 1953. This is the musical island of Greece, where the inhabitants have a singing accent and use operatic Italian words in everyday speech, a place where rare sea-turtles will come to lay their eggs on the pristine sands of remote sea coves and where, on weekend evenings, the locals serenade for pleasure in remote mountain villages.

Knossos, on the island of Crete, boasts a partially restored Minoan Palace which, with its vividly coloured murals and inspired reconstruction, captures the imagination in ways that many other archaeological sites do not. It is currently on UNESCO's tentative list, waiting for its status to be finalised. The palace is a product of the oldest European civilisation, which



Clockwise from top left: **Whitewashed Santorini is quite a sight; the Palamidi Fortress hovers above the city of Nauplia; a fresh fish stall in Crete, typical of the Greek isles; the mural at Crete's Palace of Knossos is around 3,700 years old; see the changing of the Evzones (royal guards) at Athens' Parliament**

reached its apex a full four centuries before Mycenae. Its maze of 1,000 interlocking chambers provided the setting to the myth of the Minotaur, a mythical half-man, half-bull that consumed seven boys and girls from Athens, paid as a nine-yearly tribute to King Minos. It was the king's lovestruck daughter, Ariadne, who provided the hero, Theseus, with a sword and a ball of red thread so that he could kill the monster and find his way out of the labyrinth safely.

The cause of the collapse of the Minoan civilisation can be seen on the glorious island of Santorini, which is approached through a still-active volcanic caldera; looking up the steep rim, the blinding-white dwellings look like intricate icing on a giant cake. The landscape is as spectacular from above: seasoned travellers have been silenced to tears watching the sunset from Thera or Oia, two towns suspended at the edge of the marine crater. Recent excavations at Akrotiri have discovered a city that was buried underneath lava when the volcano exploded, causing a tsunami that may have destroyed the Minoan society. With whisperings that this is the true location of the mythical Atlantis, Santorini is the UNESCO-Site-That-Ought-To-Be – but as the mystery is still being unravelled, that may have to wait a little longer.

**You could take in all these sights on a P&O Cruises holiday. See the back page of this magazine for cruises visiting Greece over the coming months, or browse your fourth edition P&O Cruises 2008 brochure or the P&O Cruises 2009/10 Preview brochure. Alternatively you can simply visit [www.pocruises.co.uk/greece](http://www.pocruises.co.uk/greece)**