



# A2 Global Traveller

## City Report



# Athens

## Overview

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Athens is a low- to moderate-risk destination for visitors. Protests and social unrest in the city have disrupted transport and this is likely to continue. However, street crime is the most common problem for visitors. Good medical facilities, international hotels and efficient transportation options are available, although heavy traffic and a high rate of road accidents can mean that travelling through the city is slow.

## Orientation

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One of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, Athens has a population of over 3 million. The city is bounded by mountains on three sides and by the Saronic Gulf and the port of Piraeus on the south-western side. The city's centre is focused around Syntagma Square, which forms the central business district and hosts numerous banks, offices and the Greek parliament. High-standard hotels and restaurants are found in this area.

The Parthenon, which forms part of the ancient Acropolis citadel, is one of the city's main tourist attractions. Various museums, including the Acropolis Museum, are located near the Parthenon. Tourists are mainly concentrated in the areas surrounding the Acropolis, including the pedestrianised neighbourhood of Plaka. Monastiraki and Thissio are located to the west of Syntagma Square, and are respectively the city's principal shopping and entertainment districts. Kolonaki, an upmarket residential and embassy neighbourhood with many expensive shops and restaurants, is to the north-east of Syntagma Square.

## Pre-travel

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### Medical requirements

None.

### Restrictions on travel

None.

## Arrival /Departure

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Most international visitors to Athens will arrive at Athens International Airport (ATH) – also known as Eleftherios Venizelos airport, named after the Greek national liberation movement

leader. The airport is located about 25km east of the city centre and its two terminals handle around 13 million passengers annually. Carriers from ATH operate direct flights to many European destinations, Dubai and the U.S. east coast - though many are seasonal.

ATH is a well-organised and efficient airport. Immigration and security procedures are usually quick, although queues for security can take some time during the peak summer season. There are no reported security concerns at ATH and crime is not a major problem in any area of the airport, although pickpocketing is a risk in the arrivals area.

## Local transportation

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### **To / From the airport**

Business visitors not being met on arrival by colleagues are advised to pre-book a hotel car or a place on a hotel bus, if only to avoid often long queues for taxis.

Taxi, metro and bus services all operate from the airport and offer convenient and generally safe travel into central Athens. Overall, however, taxis and private-hire vehicles are the only recommended transport options for first-time visitors or those with a large amount of luggage. A taxi rank is located in a designated area outside Exit 3 of the arrivals building. Taxis operate flat fares for services between the airport and city centre. Trips cost EUR38 between 0500 and 0000, and EUR54 between 0000 and 0500. Taxis can also be pre-booked through the Taxi Union Association (Sata). Call: 0030 210 5239524.

Metro Line 3 runs from Aghia Marina station to Athens International Airport station. The journey between Syntagma Square Metro station, in the centre of Athens, and ATH takes about 40 minutes. Pickpocketing is common on the metro and newly arrived visitors are especially attractive targets for pickpockets, who often operate in groups.

Alternatively, ATH can be reached by the Proastiakos Athens suburban rail service from Larissa Station, Athens' main railway station, in the city centre. The journey takes about 40 minutes.

### **Taxi**

Taxis in Athens are affordable and widely available.

Official taxis are in bright yellow livery, air-conditioned and equipped with meters, which should always be used. Greek taxi drivers are required by law to provide a receipt.

Meters start at EUR1.19 and use a daytime charge of EUR0.68 per km between 05.00 and 00.00; night-time charges are EUR1.19 per km. Surcharges apply to heavy baggage and taxis called by radio.

### **Bus and trolleybus**

Athens has a well-developed public bus network. Buses serving the city centre are blue and white, and buses travelling out to the suburbs are orange. They do not usually stop for passengers unless hailed. Tickets can be purchased in kiosks at the major bus and metro stations for EUR1.20; they must be validated aboard the buses and travellers without valid tickets can expect a fine. Electric trolley buses connect various well-known tourist sites in the city.

The X14 (Syntagma Square – Kifissia), 040 (Piraeus – Syntagma), 500 (Piraeus – Kifissia), and 11 (Ano Patissia – Neo Pangrati) bus services run on a 24-hour basis, but other services stop at varying times before 2300. Airport buses also run on a 24-hour basis.

## **Metro**

Athens' metro service is clean, efficient and well managed. It has three lines: Line 1 (Green Line) from Piraeus to Kifissia via the centre, Line 2 (Red Line) from Anthoupoli to Agios Dimitrios, and Line 3 (Blue Line) from Egaleo to Doukissis Plakentis and the airport. Services run from 05.30 to 00.00 on weekdays and from 05.30 to 02.00 on Fridays and Saturdays.

Metro tickets cost EUR1.20 and can be used on all metro and bus services within a single 70- minute period apart from services to the airport. They can be purchased from machines or manned kiosks at all stations. 24-hour tickets costing EUR4 are also available.

Despite efforts by police to crackdown on pickpockets, there continues to be a high number of reported thefts on the Athens metro, particularly on services connecting the city to ATH. A common tactic used by thieves involves one person distracting an individual while another steals valuables, such as wallets, cell phones, or purses from unsuspecting tourists.

## **On foot**

Heavy traffic, poor parking and bad driving mean that walking through Athens can be unpleasant. However, several streets in the central area are pedestrianised and travelling on foot in such areas is for the most part safe.

## **Hotel car**

Chauffeured hotel cars are readily available and should be used in preference to self-drive vehicles. Only those with previous experience of Athens traffic and a sound knowledge of its geography should attempt to drive themselves in the city.

# **Accommodation**

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Secure accommodation is widely available in Athens, with hotels of all standards located across the city. High-standard hotels usually have good security procedures, less so at cheaper establishments.

# **Security and safety**

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## **Crime**

Athens has a moderate crime rate. Street crimes like pickpocketing, bag-snatching, robbery and assault are the type of offences most likely to affect visitors.

Pickpocketing and bag-snatching occur frequently, notably within the metro system, railway

stations, crowded areas and bus stops serving the airport. Pickpockets often operate in groups under the pretence of helping passengers boarding buses with their luggage or giving directions.

Theft of unattended valuables is also common, particularly from vehicles or in restaurants. This type of crime increases during the Christmas season and at Orthodox Easter. Although no area of the city is immune to street crime, it occurs with a higher frequency in Omonoia Square, Vathis Square, Sofokleous Street and the area around Syntagma Square. Travellers at venues such as restaurants and bars with street-facing terraces should avoid placing valuable items on tables

Organised criminal gangs involved in drug trafficking, human trafficking and fraud are active in Athens, but are unlikely to trouble visitors unless provoked.

## **Terrorism**

Compared to other European countries such as France, Germany and the U.K. Greece has not experienced mass-casualty Islamist terrorist attacks. However, Greek far-left and anarchist groups have carried out a series of attacks targeting foreign interests, commercial properties and embassies in Athens in recent years. While attacks carried out by these groups rarely intend to inflict casualties, the use of incendiary devices and petrol bombs poses a risk to bystanders.

In recent months members of the anarchist group Rouvikonas have staged a series of attacks against foreign embassies, government buildings and property owned by foreign businesses. While generally non-violent, these attacks often involved causing material damage to buildings, such as breaking windows and spray-painting walls with slogans. The Athens police force has been criticised for not doing enough to prevent these attacks.

Fringe far-left, anti-American groups have also targeted U.S. interests in Athens in the past. While relatively rare, attacks featuring lethal weapons have taken place. In 2007, a far-left group fired a rocket-propelled grenade into the heavily protected U.S. embassy building in the centre of Athens. No injuries were reported.

A flashpoint for violence between anarchist groups and police is the Exarcheia neighbourhood in central Athens, located about 1.7 km north of Syntagma Square. The neighbourhood is popular with different, sometimes rival, anarchist groups and has often been the site of violent riots. The Exarceia police station is frequently targeted by anarchists, who have on several occasions hurled incendiary devices at the station and attacked vehicles nearby. Violence can erupt at a moment's notice, and business travellers should avoid the area if possible.

## **Political and social unrest**

Athens has been the scene of numerous protests in recent years. These have intensified since the government introduced highly unpopular austerity measures – including pension reforms and government spending reductions – as part of three bailout agreements with European and international creditors since 2010. The sovereign-debt crisis has led to widespread social unrest. Despite the formal conclusion of a third bailout programme in August 2018, ongoing supervision from creditors to ensure that Greece produces high budget surpluses will likely mean that austerity measures will continue. This heightens protest risk in the Greek capital. Most protests take place outside the parliament building on Syntagma Square.

Since January 2018, large-scale rallies have also been held throughout Greece, in response to the government initiating negotiations to resolve a long-standing naming dispute with neighbouring former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). On 4 February, over 140,000 protesters, many waving Greek flags, gathered in Syntagma Square in opposition to any

potential compromise by the far-left Syriza ruling party in the dispute. Following an agreement in June between Athens and Skopje, which was strongly criticised by nationalist groups in both countries, Macedonians voted in a referendum on 30 September to support the agreement. In September, a group of nationalists wearing masks threw stones at police in the northern city of Thessaloniki, prompting officers to respond with tear gas. Such protests will continue amid a tense political and social climate. The Greek parliament is likely to vote on the agreement sometime between January and March 2019.

Anti-U.S. demonstrations targeting international banks or embassies do occur and can become violent. They often begin at Athens University before moving towards the Greek parliament buildings in the city centre. Transport around targets for protest is likely to be affected by large-scale demonstrations.

## **Strikes**

Strikes have often coincided with anti-austerity protests as public sector workers have been one of the groups hardest hit by a series of reforms implemented by successive Greek governments.

Walkouts by public transport workers are relatively common in Greece and have the potential to significantly disrupt travel in Athens. In June 2018 public sector employees working on the metro, city bus, and electric trolleybuses went on strike, bringing all public transport services in Athens to a halt. Visitors in Athens planning to use public transport during strikes should review their travel plans prior to departure.

## **Xenophobia**

The large influx of refugees, particularly from the Middle East, to Greece, has led to an increase in nationalist and xenophobic sentiment. The far-right Golden Dawn, historically a fringe political movement, is now the third-largest party in Greece. There have been cases in Athens where Golden Dawn supporters have verbally and physically attacked migrants. Migrants regularly frequent Victoria Square near the city centre.

Business travellers, particularly those of African or Middle Eastern origin, should exercise additional situational awareness and seek to de-escalate any potential confrontation with locals if possible.

## **Female travellers**

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Athens is generally a safe destination for female travellers. However, tourists have been targeted in sexual assaults, with groping and verbal harassment the most common forms of harassment experienced by foreign nationals. Women walking late in the evening should avoid walking alone along poorly-lit streets and alleyways if possible.

## **Cultural issues**

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None.

## Medical issues

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Athens has good healthcare facilities for both emergency and routine treatments. Many doctors speak English, and a high standard of care is widely available, although public facilities have suffered from the effects of austerity in recent years. Overcrowding and longer waiting times are increasingly problematic.

Private facilities are popular amongst expatriate residents and wealthy Athenians; recommended private facilities include Hygeia Hospital (+30 210 682 7940) and Mitera Hospital (++3- 210 682 0110). Pharmacies are widely available throughout the city, offering an excellent selection of medication for routine conditions.

Public ambulance services reached on 112 or 166 will not transfer patients to private hospitals. Private ambulance services are offered by the private hospitals recommended above.

## Natural hazards

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Athens is located in a seismically active zone, although serious earthquakes are rare. Summer forest fires close to the city are rarely a direct threat to the city but the smoke can add to Athens' smog, raising the risk for those with respiratory conditions as well as potentially disrupting air travel.

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