

Thursday April 19

We were up quite early today – which meant we had a leisurely breakfast, packed and just sat in the room or on the balcony until checkout time at noon. We then drove to the airport and checked in early for our flight to Athens. We are already talking about what we will do *next* time in Cyprus!

The flight was a little late leaving and there was some choppy air throughout, to the extent that the dinner service was curtailed. However, we arrived in Athens around 6pm, got our bags and then a taxi to the hotel. We are staying at the Grande Bretagne, right on Syntagma Square, the main square of the city. It is a fine old hotel but was renovated for the 2004 Olympics so is in excellent condition.



Hotel Grande Bretagne

After settling in and checking out the restaurants in the hotel (ridiculously expensive) we decided to walk to a restaurant that had been recommended by a friend. It was about a 10 minute walk from the hotel and we had to wait about 20 minutes for a table but we had an excellent meal sitting outside in the pleasant evening air. It was after 11 by the time we got to bed.

Friday April 20

We had breakfast in the rooftop restaurant of the hotel with a fantastic view of the Acropolis. Around 10:15 we took the Hop On/Hop Off bus as far as the entrance to the Acropolis and began the slow walk up the steep, and at times uneven, surface. It was warm and sunny but there was a breeze and some clouds at times which made for good walking conditions.

We stopped many times to admire the amazing ruins of temples, sculptures, civic buildings and of course the Parthenon atop the world-famous Acropolis.

The Acropolis of Athens is an ancient citadel located on a rocky outcrop above the city of Athens and contains the remains of several ancient buildings of great architectural and historic significance, the most famous being the Parthenon. The word acropolis is from the Greek words ἄκρον (akron, "highest point, extremity") and πόλις (polis, "city"). Although the term acropolis is generic and there are many others in Greece, the significance of the Acropolis of Athens is such that it is commonly known as "The Acropolis" without qualification. During ancient times it was known also more properly as Cecropia, after the legendary serpent-man, Cecrops, the first Athenian king.

While there is evidence that the hill was inhabited as far back as the fourth millennium BC, it was Pericles (c. 495 – 429 BC) in the fifth century BC who coordinated the construction of the site's most important present remains including the Parthenon, the Propylaea, the Erechtheion and the Temple of Athena Nike. The Parthenon and the other buildings were damaged seriously during the 1687 siege by the Venetians during the sixth Ottoman-Venetian War when gunpowder being stored there was hit by a cannonball and exploded.

There has been a lot of reconstruction work done in the past 20 years since our first visit but obviously it is a never-ending project to attempt to put all the pieces together and/or make new sections. The Parthenon had been totally destroyed by the invading Ottomans in the 1600s (to the point where essentially nothing was left standing) so it is difficult to imagine the work involved in any attempt at re-building. There have, of course, been other times when major destruction has occurred (both man-made and natural) so there will never be a shortage of work to do on this most famous site in Athens – perhaps one of the most recognizable in the world.



Two great amphitheaters seen from the Acropolis. The Odeion (left) could host 6000 spectators and the ruins of the Theater of Dionysus

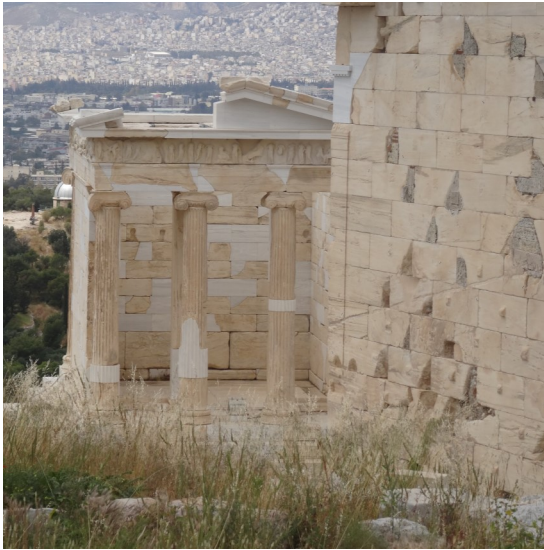


The Propylaea, a monumental gate at the western end of the Acropolis .

This was built to take advantage of the uneven ground just below the summit and still stands as the magnificent entrance to the temples on top.

Below is the Erechtheion a Temple dedicated to both Athena and Poseidon and decorated with the famous Caryatids





The Temple of Athena Nike is a small temple on the Acropolis of Athens, dedicated to the goddess Athena Nike. Built around 420 BC, the temple is the earliest fully Ionic temple on the Acropolis. It has a prominent position on a steep bastion at the south west corner of the Acropolis to the right of the entrance, the Propylaea. In contrast to the Acropolis proper, a walled sanctuary entered through the Propylaea, the Victory Sanctuary was open, entered from the Propylaea's southwest wing and from a narrow stair on the north. The sheer walls of its bastion were protected on the north, west, and south by the Nike Parapet, named for its frieze of Nikai celebrating victory and sacrificing to their patroness, Athena Nike.

Nike means "victory" in Greek, and Athena was worshipped in this form, representative of being victorious in war. The citizens worshipped the goddess in hopes of a successful outcome in the long Peloponnesian War fought against the Spartans and their allies.



The Parthenon



We were on the hill for about 2 ½ hours before walking down to get back on the bus. We took this around most of the area of the central city – with excellent and detailed commentary – and saw a number of other sites of this great city.



Left: The Olympic Stadium, originally built in 144AD, excavated in 1869 and refurbished and lately used in the 2004 Modern Olympic Games.

Right: Three beautiful buildings of the University of Athens

We got off the bus at an area near the Plaka, Athens' Souk-like conglomeration of shops, cafes and street market. We wandered until we found a café for a late (3pm) lunch and once again were able to sit outside and enjoy our Greek salad and drink.

We continued our walk through Plaka towards the hotel and arrived at the Presidential Palace just in time to watch the ceremonial changing of the guard.



Changing of the Guard at the Presidential Palace

From there we simply had to cross the street (!) to get back to the hotel – after seven hours of sightseeing.

We ate again in the Plaka, this time indoors (there was a strong breeze blowing) at a more upscale restaurant. It was an excellent meal with great service, albeit costing about three times the one we had last night!

Saturday April 21

We had an earlier breakfast today as we were being picked up for our day-long tour soon after 8am. We drove northwest out of Athens along the Aegean coast to our first stop at the Corinth Canal. This deep trench (25 meters wide at the bottom and 6 kilometers in length) was built in the 1800s to provide a waterway between the Aegean and Ionian Seas, and making redundant the roadway that had previously been used (after unloading ships' contents at one end, dragging everything overland, and re-loading at the other end). It is a very deep cut (several hundred feet) and must have been quite a challenge to dig 150 years ago. I suppose one measure of the difficulty is that the Romans tried when they had conquered Greece but gave up – and, as we have seen here and in so many places – there is little that defeated the Romans when it came to engineering and building.



From Corinth, we drove another hour through some beautiful countryside to our first major site, that of the Acropolis of Mycenae. Mycenae was one of the earliest major centers of Greek civilization and was the home of the King Agamemnon, who reputedly waged the war against Troy (successfully). He was, however, a ruthless person and had killed his daughter before setting out to war. This ultimately led to his being killed when he returned to Mycenae and his tomb is one of the highlights of the visit to this site.



In the second millennium BC, Mycenae was one of the major centers of Greek civilization, a military stronghold which dominated much of southern Greece and parts of southwest Anatolia. The period of Greek history from about 1600 BC to about 1100 BC is called Mycenaean in reference to Mycenae. At its peak in 1350 BC, the citadel and lower town had a population of 30,000.

The Acropolis here is much smaller than the one in Athens and our guide gave us an excellent description as to why this one in particular (rather than several larger ones in the area) was selected for the center of the city. In fact, she gave us an amazing amount of information on “everything” Greek and presented it in a factual, unbiased manner without embellishment and with a real respect for the difficulty in getting the facts on happenings of 3000 or more years ago.

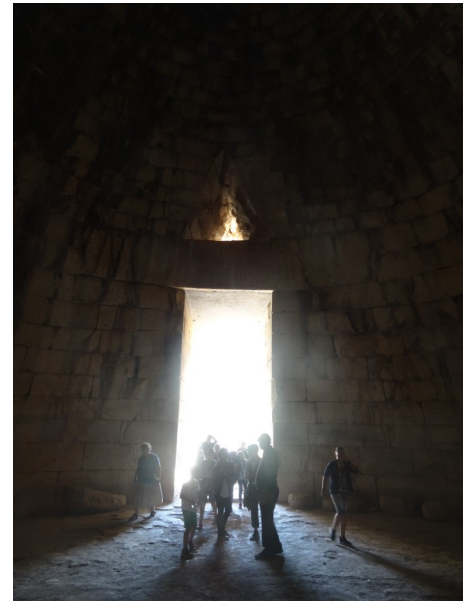


The Lions' Gate at the entrance to the acropolis at Mycenae.

This is the only known sculpture in Bronze Age Greece.



We spent about an hour walking up the hill and, in my case, finding a pathway down the back side which eventually led to the main entrance. ***The tomb of Agamemnon***, which is a huge dome about fifty feet in height, was located just outside the village, built into the hillside and very much reminiscent of others we have seen in Ireland and Scotland.



From Mycenae we drove to a stop for lunch and then on to the town of Nafplio. This had been the first capital of Greece after independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1834 – but for only one year before Athens took over. It was, however, an interesting and attractive town with a history from ancient times (there is an acropolis settlement) to being occupied (and fortified) by the Venetians and by the Turks. It sits right on the water of the Aegean and has two steep hillsides on which are the Venetian and Mycenaean fortifications. We had only about 45 minutes but we were able to stroll the quaint streets of the old town and watch the hundreds of locals and tourists enjoying the sun and a late lunch.



Nafplio with its Venetian (left) and Ottoman fortifications and pleasant town center.

Our final stop was at the ancient Greek city of Epidaurus which, once again, had a huge archeological site (which we didn't have time to explore) and an amazing amphitheater built into the hillside. This was the major reason for our visit to Epidaurus and was well worth the climb up the hill. The amphitheater is amazingly well preserved with much of the original stone work in place and the rest very well restored to blend with the old. It had been built originally in 400BC but was expanded to provide more seating 200 years later and the guide made the point that it was simply enlarged without interfering with the original structure – and maintaining the excellent acoustics of the former. It is said to have some of the best acoustics in the world and our guide attributed this to a number of factors, including the limestone, the climate and, of course, the design. It can seat over 12,00 people and is used to this day for summer plays and concerts.



We then drove back to Athens, arriving back at the hotel around 7pm, giving us enough time to clean up and walk to the Plaka for another meal in a crowded outdoor restaurant.

Sunday April 22

We spent a couple of hours in the morning walking through the Plaka and doing our souvenir shopping – and, of course, sitting down for a drink.

Mid-afternoon we picked up the bus for our guided tour to Cape Sounion, about 1 ½ hours to the south of the city. Once we were out of the city center we drove along the Aegean coast, mostly at sea level but occasionally climbing to a few hundred feet above the water. The coastline is extremely attractive and all the beaches on the route were well populated on a warm Sunday afternoon.



Views along the drive from Athens to Cape Sounion

The main attraction, however, at the extreme southern tip of the peninsula was the Temple of Poseidon, set high on a promontory overlooking the Aegean Sea and at the main sea lane entry to Athens and other cities in Greece. The spot had been picked for a city in ancient times as a defensive measure for Athens but it also served as a major transit point for goods being imported and as a shipbuilding port. Hence it became rather prosperous and – as with all settlements – needed a god to both protect it and to whom appropriate homage could be paid. It is no coincidence then that the god Poseidon was selected for this temple site, which is much smaller than the Parthenon in Athens but equally well situated and held similar importance in the several centuries BC.



The Temple of Poseidon at Sounion was constructed in 444–440 BC during the ascendancy of the Athenian statesman Pericles, who also rebuilt the Parthenon in Athens. It was built on the ruins of a temple dating from the Archaic period and is perched above the sea at a height of almost 200 ft. The design of the temple is a typical hexastyle, i.e., it had a front portico with six columns. Only some columns of the Sounion temple stand today, but when intact it would have closely resembled the contemporary and well-preserved Temple of Hephaestus beneath the Acropolis, which may have been designed by the same architect.

As with all Greek temples, the Poseidon building was rectangular, with a colonnade on all four sides. The total number of original columns was 34: 15 columns still stand today. The columns are of the Doric Order. They were made of locally quarried white marble and were 20 feet high, with a diameter of 3.1 feet at the base and 31 inches at the top. At the center of the temple colonnade would have been the hall of worship (naos), a windowless rectangular room. It would have contained, at one end facing the entrance, the cult image, a colossal, ceiling-height 20 feet bronze statue of Poseidon.





Without trying to recall the myths surrounding Poseidon and Athena (of which there are many) suffice it to say that both gods competed for naming the city that we now know as Athens. Obviously Athena won that particular round but Poseidon was given – amongst other accolades and trophies – the perhaps equally important job of defending Athens and the entire area from this spot at Cape Sounion. In fact, it would appear that both Poseidon and Athena shared similar positions amongst the deity and in both Athens and here at Sounion there are temples to both – but obviously only one city that we recognize today!

It was a slow drive back to Athens (sunny Sunday with pleasant temperatures) so it was 8pm before we were back at the hotel and almost nine before we set out for dinner – another pleasant outdoor experience.

Monday April 23

This was our final day in Athens and we spent the majority of it in the Acropolis Museum. This is a relatively new (and very modern) structure built at the base of the Acropolis and is dedicated entirely to that site, its history and development, and most importantly to house its treasures.



The five original Caryatids still in Greece. What the Parthenon pediment looked like.

The whole of the third floor of the museum is built to the same measurements as the Parthenon but has an additional 30 feet wide walkway all around it such that visitors can see what had once been the frieze and porticos of the original building.

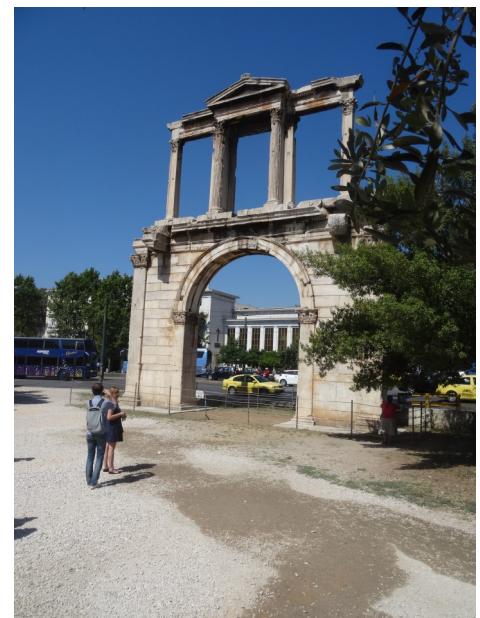
The “new” frieze includes original pieces where they are available and plaster copies where originals have gone missing (many in the British Museum, thanks to the pillaging Lord Elgin) such that the eye really sees the works of art as they were (without any color, as they would have had in 400 BC) and in the same relative position to those of the original.



The Parthenon frieze reconstruction

Obviously it would have been easy enough to put the original bits in place and leave gaps or, alternatively, to build the whole thing with the plaster castings. But someone chose to provide a mixture (which, I think would have been an interesting debate to attend when the decision was being made) and has the added benefit that “old” pieces can replace the plaster replicas as they are unearthed in ongoing excavations – or when the British decide Greece should be the home for these features of antiquity.

The museum is extremely well laid out and with its fine collection, some great video and digitally enhanced displays, and lots of descriptive wording for each piece. It is well worth a visit and provides a wonderful enhancement to the visit to the Acropolis site, clearly visible from almost anywhere in the museum



***One last view of the Acropolis from the museum.
Hadrian's Gate which we walked past every day!***

The Arch of Hadrian, most commonly known in Greek as Hadrian's Gate is a monumental gateway resembling – in some respects – a Roman triumphal arch. It spanned an ancient road from the center of Athens, Greece, to the complex of structures on the eastern side of the city that included the Temple of Olympian Zeus. It has been proposed that the arch was built to celebrate the arrival of the Roman Emperor Hadrian and to honor him for his many benefactions to the city, on the occasion of the dedication of the nearby temple complex in 131 or 132 AD. It is not certain who commissioned the arch, although it is probable that the citizens of Athens or another Greek group were responsible for its construction and design. There were two inscriptions on the arch, facing in opposite directions, naming both Theseus and Hadrian as founders of Athens. While it is clear that the inscriptions honor Hadrian (“His” inscription reads: “This is the city of Hadrian, not of Theseus”!), it is uncertain whether they refer to the city as a whole or to the city in two parts: one old and one new. The early idea, however, that the arch marked the line of the ancient city wall, and thus the division between the old and the new regions of the city, has been shown to be false by further excavation. The arch is located 300 yards southeast of the Acropolis.

We walked back to the hotel via the Plaka (and another coffee shop) and spent the rest of the late afternoon relaxing before heading out for dinner on our last evening in Athens. We ate at the same restaurant we had enjoyed on Saturday and had another good meal, sitting outside on a very pleasant evening.

Tuesday April 24

We were up about 7:30, had breakfast, checked out and in a taxi to the airport by 9am. Our flight left Athens at a little before noon on a 10 ½ journey to New York. There we had a two hour layover before the final leg to Cincinnati and were home in Mason by 9:30 after a wonderful trip in which we saw a lot of amazing historical sites.

