



THE NEW ATHENS

SPICY, SHABBY, OPTIMISTIC

*Long-time Athens resident **Diana Farr Louis** has seen the city succumb to economic pressure, but finds that not all the changes have been for the bad*

In the old days, when you arrived at Hellenikon airport on the coast, you smelled Greece as soon as you landed on the tarmac. The scent of thyme from Hymettus and iodine from the sea welcomed you first, followed by the sight of the 'old girl', the Parthenon, with her golden aura and reassuring messages about human greatness, as you drove up Syngrou Avenue into the centre.

Athens has changed enormously in the 50 odd years since I first made her acquaintance, and the approach is no longer quite so romantic. In 1972, when I moved here permanently, it still felt like a small town, where on a stroll through Kolonaki you would run into dozens of people you knew or knew of. Monastiraki was then a genuine flea market with ironmongers and antiques dealers – not shops selling shoes, t-shirts

and souvenirs.

On the other hand, Psyrri – now a warren of restaurants and galleries – was a red light district interspersed with humble workshops; Gazi and Metaxourgeio, trendy entertainment areas today, were blighted by industrial grime; and Plaka, the oldest neighbourhood of all, boasted a honkytonk collection of tavernas amid its ageless antiquities and elegant nineteenth-century houses.

My own home, in the suburb of Maroussi, sat on a dirt road. It was just one of a collection of two-storey houses with gardens. Now, six-storey blocks of flats have replaced all but a couple of them.

During the intervening years between then and now, the changes in Athens took place gradually until the run-up to the 2004 Olympics. In the

feverish effort to modernise transport and build venues, the city became a vast construction site and almost unbearable for us residents. Roads seemed to be dug up again and again, and we despaired of anything being completed on time.

Then, miraculously, by the eve of the Games, we'd acquired a brand new efficient airport, a superb highway

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connecting north, south, east and west in record time, a suburban railway, a tramline from the centre to the coast, and a gorgeous Metro system, whose

every station resembled a mini museum, not to mention a stunning stadium and dozens of attractive installations for sports or other public gatherings. For the whole duration of the Olympics and Paralympics, Athens surpassed all expectations, throwing a month-long party, enhanced by legendary Greek hospitality and infectious 'kefi' – which inadequately translates as 'enthusiasm' or *joie de vivre*.

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Four years later the global economy suffered a downturn. By 2010, Greece's coffers were so empty that the then Prime Minister, George Papandreou, appealed to the International Monetary Fund for help, ignoring warnings from its outgoing head, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, that such help would be more death sentence than salvation.

Since then, we Athenians have watched in dismay as the consequences of bankruptcy and austerity change the face and façades of our beloved city. But Greeks are resilient and resourceful, so this story is not all a tale of woe.

Let me take you on a tour of the places you may already know or would be likely to visit. We'll start in Syntagma Square, the heart of the city, where Evzones stand guard in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and Parliament, King Otto's nineteenth-century palace. It has been the scene of countless demonstrations over the past few years, some violent, as people protest over government policies. The historic Grande Bretagne Hotel has been packed with fewer visiting dignitaries and well-off tourists than journalists, who willingly braved tear gas to film riots from its balconies.

If you had visited two years ago, you would have seen brutal scars left by the anger. Chipped marble steps, naked arcade pillars robbed of their marble cladding, and blackened pavements defaced the historic square and surrounding streets.

But if you were to walk through Syntagma on any sunny day this past February, you would have seen no trace of that damage. Not only was the square spotless, it was festive. Among the lottery sellers, skateboarders, and Seville orange trees glowing with fruit, a few peddlers

were selling blue and white flags even though Independence Day was not for another month. No barriers girded the Parliament. Demonstrations held since our elections of 25 January have been peaceful, with no sign of riot police or hooded anarchists.

It's as if Syriza's victory over the old order and Alexis Tsipras's challenge to Berlin and Brussels have injected Athenians with a long overdue fix of hope and pride.

Will it last long enough to restore prosperity to the broad avenues linking Syntagma with Omonia Square? Shuttered shop fronts are a common sight here. The beggars squatting or standing along the east side of the Grande Bretagne are more likely to be able-bodied, middle-aged Greeks than raggle-taggle gypsies or amputees. Some of the new homeless stash their sleeping bags undisturbed in doorways, and you will want to look away, not wishing to invade their privacy.

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As you walk towards Omonia, the so-called trilogy of neoclassical splendor from the nineteenth century – the University, Academy and National Library – still stand apart from the day-to-day, immaculate and gleaming from a recent scrub.

Omonia itself, once a charming square, has been made over several times since the 1960s and is now more a giant roundabout than the attractive meeting place of yore. While Googling Omonia Square can bring up appalling photographs of junkies, prostitutes, and pitiful immigrants, you are more likely to notice its ordinariness, crowds of just plain folk, Greeks and foreigners of all shades, going about their business in shops that spill over to the curbs. In fact, on a recent walk it looked remarkably tidy and even busier than usual.

Anyone who knows Athens well can tell you that, if Syntagma and Kolonaki represent the genteel Western face of the city, then Omonia and Athinas flaunt its boisterous, exotic Anatolian side. Although you'll see some remarkably distinguished old buildings here, the

shops housed in them typically offer bargain wares, while vendors hawking everything from sunglasses to vegetable peelers stage sideshows on the pavements in front of them. An occasional migrant may try to flog a carton of contraband cigarettes, but nothing more sinister, at least not during the day.

The area around the Varvakeio Central Market has changed very little in the past 40 years. It's still my favourite part of town. While butchers and fishmongers can make the covered market an assault on all the senses, the surrounding streets could be Middle Eastern souks, with each block dedicated to a single line of products. But every shop here is devoted to food and cookery, be it fruit and veg, cheese, sausages, kitchen wares, and most memorably, on Evripidou Street, herbs and spices in such profusion that you would think you're in Istanbul or Gaziantep.

A block or two further afield, you'll find pavements cluttered with plastic flowers, or baskets, rope, tin buckets, fireplace equipment and heavy-duty garden tools. The warren of pedestrian streets in the old commercial district holds more souks given over to buttons and bows, belts and bags. Here, evidence of the 'crisis' resurfaces in the form of abandoned shops, more than you'll find in the edibles quarter.

Accompanying them is a fairly recent phenomenon that will strike you almost everywhere you wander in Athens: street art. This can range from the most banal vandal's black tag on a newly painted wall, to paintings that could rival Banksy's. The most brilliant are worthy of a gallery or publication in an album. They often provide social commentary or allegory, whether cynical or sad, zany or fantastical. And they often brighten up a dingy, unloved street, though sometimes the anger or irreverence behind them defaces a restored neoclassical building that deserved to be left in peace. You can even join a tour of the best 'decorated' streets.

Another phenomenon produced by our depression – which is hurting far more than the Great Depression of the 1930s – is the proliferation of eateries and cafés. In many parts of Athens, boutiques selling clothes, glasses, shoes and jewellery have closed down only to reopen as all-day restaurants, wine bars, ice cream parlours, doughnut/cupcake/meringue shops, falafel nooks, pita (pie) emporiums, crêperies – you name it. It's almost as if food, cheap and portable, is



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the only safe investment. But ephemeral or not, the presence of so many diverse places to eat out brings life to previously depressed or neglected areas, such as Agia Irini Square and Petralona, while masking the effects of austerity in more mainstream quarters.

In fact, austerity does not seem to have fazed our ever-vibrant café society. Athenians have not lost their passion for squeezing into a tight space with their fellow citizens, to sip a coffee, smoke a cigarette, and discuss politics. Forget the ban on smoking; places that impose it are the exception to the rule.

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Meanwhile, culture shows no signs of drying up despite the financial squeeze. Posters for concerts, plays, recitals, readings – some free of charge – plaster walls and doorways all over town, while the institutions, though struggling, still bring international stars.

The Athens Concert Hall, which now offers live HD performances of New York's Metropolitan Opera and London's National Theatre, has lowered its prices; the Onassis Centre has a

rich programme of plays, concerts and exhibitions, while two major venues are scheduled to open in the near future: the long awaited Museum of Contemporary Art in the old Fix Brewery, and the Niarchos Foundation's ultramodern complex for the Lyriki Skini (Opera House) and National Library at Palio Faliro.

And if you were to visit the Acropolis Museum, inaugurated in 2009, or hop onto the Happy Train that carries tourists from the Roman Forum round the Agora and down the pedestrianized boulevard Apostolou Pavlou below the Acropolis, you would not suspect anything but 100 per cent prosperity. The street, museum, and antiquities are thronged, regardless of the season.

A city, of course, is more than buildings, more than ancient monuments or boarded shop fronts. And while even in the best of times, Athens would never win a beauty contest, it has always had a quirky charm that stems directly from its people. Now, even though parts of it may look shabby, they still put a bright face on things. Athenians seem politer and more considerate than in the past; they are quick to respond to a smile or a wry comment about our shared destiny. They haven't lost their ready wit.

Less obvious to the visitor, volunteerism, practiced by a very small fraction of the population before the

Olympics, has taken off as citizens try to compensate for the State's inadequacies in sectors such as food aid, soup kitchens, replanting burnt hillsides, cleaning up beaches, collecting medicines, used clothes, and blankets for the homeless, free language classes, even free clinics.

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As an American friend once remarked to me after a walk through Athens, 'this is better than a three-ring circus'. The description still holds true. Stop for a moment as you cross Monastiraki Square. Whether it's African drummers or teenage boys breakdancing, there's always something going on. Athens is a big outdoor theatre. But always make a point of looking up. Presiding over it all under the clear Attic sky is the Acropolis, our pole star, our rock, even when encumbered by scaffolding.

Has Athens changed? Of course, and it always will. For as Heraclitus is said to have pronounced some 2,500 years ago, 'All is flux, nothing stays the same'. Many of the young, at least, are positive. 'Athens is the future, Berlin is the past', is a phrase I hear often. May they be proven right.