



A GREEK



Kaushik Mitra is tantalised by the aroma and flavours of Greece

After four eventful and enjoyable days in Cappadoccia and Istanbul we headed further west. A short Turkish Airline flight across the Mediterranean Sea got us to the Greek capital of Athens, a city with a glorious past. The first thing that hit us as we landed in Athens was the heat. If Istanbul was warm and summery, Athens was hot and sultry. The one hour drive to our hotel, the Intercontinental Hotel, was pleasant as we soaked in the milieu of a new unfamiliar land.

Amazing Athens

Athens is a sprawling city built amidst seven historic hills and surrounded by picturesque mountains. It is inhabited for more than 3,000 years and is widely known as the cradle of Western civilization. The city, which is the birthplace of democracy, is still recovering from the recent economic downturn. Cynically, the place is almost a reflection of that dwindling economic state. Why is it that most of the buildings along the way into town wore a weary look and appeared to be in urgent need of a fresh coat of paint? The streets looked relatively deserted. We were curious to know more and tried in vain to strike a conversation with our Greek cab driver who we realised knew exactly three words of the Queen’s English.

Once we checked into our hotel, there was some respite. The Intercontinental is a sprawling hotel with a panoramic view of the city and the Acropolis from the upper floors. We then headed out for lunch at a nearby Greek restaurant. Feasting over delicious Greek Avgolemeno soup of rice, lemon and egg drop, was a

ODYSSEY



revelation. Getting around the city is quite convenient as we found out. One can hail a cab in most parts of the city or take a bus ride to most of the touristy locations. We decided to take one of the numerous Intercontinental shuttles to the city centre or the Syntagma Square which is also the hub of public transportation in the city with buses, trolleys, trams, and the metro all stopping here.

Steeped in history like most of Athens, the Syntagma or Constitution Square got its name from a protest in 1843 challenging king Otto to grant a constitution to the people of Greece. Its main attraction is the Parliament building which was earlier the Royal Palace. We watched the time-bound tradition of the change of Guards jostling with an eager crowd of tourists. A leisurely walk around the central fountain and the numerous statues dotting the square got us to the starting point of Ermou Street, the happening fashion and shopping district of Athens. For all the die-hard shopaholics, this is the place to lighten your wallet. Later in the evening we found ourselves a quaint local café and relished a meal of Souvlaki (grilled meat) wrapped in Pita bread and Galaktoboureko, an indulgent treat of custard-filled pastry. The place is full of eateries

ranging from local Greek restaurants like Tzitzikas kai Mermigas a favourite with the locals to the GB roof garden which is the signature restaurant of Grande Bretagne Hotel and has the best views of Athens including the Acropolis. If you are in the mood for snack and dessert there are plenty of choices with Burger bars and pretty patisseries. If you have a sweet tooth, make sure you try the Greek Honey cake and butter cookies.

Sights and sounds of Athens

The next morning, we had a city tour planned. One has the option of choosing the hop-on-hop-off Red and Blue route open top buses or a conducted group tour in a coach. We opted for the latter and were taken back in time by our garrulous tour guide. The tour started with the Panathenaic stadium originally built in 566BC and renovated for use at the Olympics games held in 1896. Next stop was at the temple of Olympian Zeus, the largest temple in Greece built in 132 BC. Dedicated to Zeus Olympios, this magnificent temple stands right in the center of Athens and is a fitting reminder to all visitors of the glorious legacy of the city. Notable among other tourist attractions we visited on the city tour were the

quaint Plaka district at the foot of the Acropolis with its unique traditional street side cafes, green leaf canopies and narrow cobbled lanes. The area is well-known for its food, boutique shops and cafes and, no trip to Athens is complete without a meal in Plaka. Our city tour ended with a visit to the most frequented tourist spot in Athens, the Parthenon on Acropolis hill. This involved a reasonable amount of climbing in hot humid conditions and tested our fitness levels, but in the end, it was well worth the effort. On top of the Acropolis standing next to the Parthenon one cannot but be overwhelmed by the amazing Greek architecture dating back to 432BC. The view of Athens is equally stunning from the top of the Acropolis. This was indeed the "Peak" of our Athens sojourn.

Over the blue sea

Early next morning we headed to the Piraeus Port for our ferry to Mykonos. There are several ferry lines plying between Athens and the Greek Islands on the Aegean among which are Blue Star ferries and Hellenic Seaways. One can book tickets online or at the port or, through the local travel agents. The cruise time from Piraeus to Mykonos is roughly six hours. We

boarded our boat, grabbed ourselves a table on the deck and enjoyed the sublime view of the endless horizon of water in front of us. Could this be one of the most enjoyable journeys across the Aegean?

Magical Mykonos

Right in the centre of the Aegean, among the smallest islands of the Cyclades complex lies Mykonos. This is the most famous island thanks to its breathtaking natural beaches, soothing blue and white landscape, cosmopolitan character and happening nightlife. The entire island is pulsating with excitement in the form of music and happy-go-lucky tourists. It's a unique place where glamour meets simplicity. The historical context is intriguing as well. According to mythology, Mykonos was formed from the petrified bodies of giants killed by Hercules and the island was named after the grandson of Apollo, "Mykonos." We definitely did not miss our share of fun here!

We checked into the San Marco Hotel perched along a hillside overlooking the azure waters of the Aegean. The blue and white colour scheme of the hotel was striking and in synch with pretty much all the buildings on Mykonos. A quick bite and we headed out to explore the island. Starting with the main town of Chora, we wandered around the cobbled pedestrian shopping streets, thronging with tourists young and old. The place is colourful and busy with charming cafés and stylish restaurants. We were back again in the evening for dinner and some Greek souvenir shopping in Chora. The array of touristy shops and their attractive displays are

bound to seduce the shopaholic in you. The place can burn a big hole in your pocket as it did in ours despite best intentions to practice shopping abstinence.

Next on the itinerary was Alefkandra or 'little Venice' one of the most picturesque parts of the island with its majestic villas and colourful balconies almost kissing the sea and bearing a striking resemblance to Venice. Walking along the winding narrow streets of Little Venice we came to the Paraportiani church which is most popular of the 400 odd churches on the Island of Mykonos. What makes this church unique is its construction which is an asymmetrical conglomeration of four churches into one with four different architectural styles i.e. Byzantine, vernacular, traditional and the western style. The church is a photographer's delight of pure white shades against the blue sky above and azure sea below.

There are numerous places to look around in Mykonos. Sun kissed white beaches with adjacent cafés where you relax and can sip your poison with the blue expanse in front. For the water sports lovers one can go diving, windsurfing, sea parachuting or jet skiing. For the historically inclined, a visit to the Archaeological or Maritime museum is certainly worth a visit.

The best time to enjoy Mykonos is early in the morning when all the night clubs and bars had shut shop and the town is quiet and serene. We were up early the next morning and enjoyed hiking along the coast, walking up the hills and around the famous windmills returning to the hotel for a sumptuous continental lunch. In the evening, we headed back to Chora



to soak in the "Mykonos by Night" experience. If you are a party animal Mykonos is just the place for you with its numerous trendy bars and clubs. The night parties go on until the next morning and continue in the famous bars of Paradise and Super Paradise beach. We settled for a nice family seafood dinner at the elegant Aneplora restaurant at Kalafatis bay.

Homeward bound

Next day, it was time to say good bye to Mykonos as we boarded the afternoon ferry back to Athens. That evening we hung around Plaka and settled for a traditional open air café for dinner. Later that night back at our hotel, we packed our bags in readiness for the longish flight back to Delhi via Istanbul. We took advantage of our late afternoon flight to pay another visit to the Acropolis museum. The entrance to the museum is unique with its transparent glass floor beneath through which you can see the excavated ruins of the ancient city of Athena. It's impossible to walk along Athens and not be moved by the glorious heritage of the city. Where else in the world will you find such contrast? Stylish modern boutique shops on one side of the road and standing right across these is the 3000-years-old Temple of Zeus.

Our Greek Odyssey was over and we wished it had lasted longer as we boarded our flight to Istanbul and onwards to New Delhi. For all those who love historical places those who love the sun, sand and the good times, Greece is a must-do holiday destination. ■



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