



Wait, This Is Athens?

Just 10 miles outside the city center, the beaches, hotels, and restaurants of the revived Athenian Riviera offer a revelatory new way to experience the Greek capital. **BY ELENI N. GAGE**

HERE ON THE BEACH in mythical Greece, it feels as if time has slowed to one long, golden hour. As the sun dips below the horizon and everything is flushed with a rosy glow—from the ancient ruins behind you to the plate of fresh-grilled octopus being delivered to your table—it's hard to believe you're not on a remote island somewhere in the Cyclades, but just a half-hour drive from the capital's frenetic center on an enchanting stretch of coast known as the Athenian Riviera.

Running from the busy suburb of Faliro to the windswept Temple of Poseidon on Cape Sounion, this

35-mile strip of sand has been a bolt-hole for well-to-do Athenians for more than half a century. They know it as a place to bask on the beach, perhaps take in some ancient architecture, and dine at one or two of the sophisticated Athens restaurants that have opened outposts along the shore.

In the past, foreign visitors to the Riviera have been mostly limited to diaspora Greeks and the yacht owners who moor their boats in the marina. This summer, however, all that is likely to change, thanks to a massive investment project on the cape of Lemos, including the launch, next month, of the **Four Seasons Astir Palace Hotel Athens**—the first Four Seasons in Greece (fourseasons.com; doubles from \$985). For some, the new hotel will be an introduction to the area, but for many others, and Greeks in particular, it will represent the reinvention of a modern classic. That's because it →

Skalakia Beach, one of many places to swim on the 35-mile Athenian Riviera.

will occupy the Astir Palace—a sprawling 1961 landmark built during the contemporary city’s heyday, after World War II and the Greek Civil War, but before the military dictatorship that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974.

Throughout the 60s, the hotel was the place to be seen. “There is a saying that anybody who was anybody has slept in one of the beds at the Astir Palace,” says Efi Pratsoli, corporate marketing director of Astir Palace Vouliagmeni. Frank Sinatra once had to flee adoring crowds through the hotel kitchen, while Brigitte Bardot caused a stir by strolling the beach in a wide-brimmed sun hat and a tiny pink bikini. The Astir Palace continued to attract big names right up until 2016, when the final guest before the hotel closed was Barack Obama, on his last official visit to Greece as president.

In June, the hotel will reopen after a \$123 million renovation, with 303 redesigned guest rooms; eight restaurants, including a branch of the Nobu franchise, Matsuhisa Athens; and a spa inspired by the teachings of Hippocrates. The restaurant at Astir Beach, formerly a TGI Fridays, will relaunch as the latest from **Nice-n-Easy**, a farm-to-table restaurant group with seven outposts around Greece (niceneasy.gr; *entrées* \$25–\$50). “In the old days, the Fridays would close at eight,” says founder Dimitris Christoforidis. “That was a crime, because the sun sets right in front of you.” The new Nice-n-Easy will stay open until 11:30 p.m. and serve contemporary Greek cuisine.

The Astir complex will shine a spotlight on the coast just south of the city for visitors who may have seen Athens as a place to fly in to, see the Acropolis, then escape from, by boat or by air, to the island of their choice. Why would you,



Above: The Four Seasons Astir Palace Hotel, opening in June. Below: The Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion, on the Athenian Riviera.

when you can stay at the beach and still have access to the cultural sites of central Athens? “What I love about the city is that it has so much to offer,” says cookbook author Tatiana Blatnik, who lives in Athens with her husband, Prince Nikolaos, the son of the former king of Greece, and runs the active-travel website thehact.com. “You have mountains in the north, the sea in the south, and the city center—and you can be in any of these environments in less than half an hour.”

Blatnik raves about the organic farm owned by the **Margi** (margifarm.gr; *tour and dinner* \$98), a small, family-run boutique hotel and restaurant in inland Vouliagmeni. “They offer this farm-to-table experience where you get eggs from the chickens and fresh cheese from the goats and the chef creates a delicious local meal,” she says.

Seafood is another big draw, whether it’s grilled whole fish at a low-key taverna like **Louizidis** (2 *Ermou, Vouliagmeni*; *entrées* \$8–\$26), sushi at **Kohylia** in the **Grand Resort Lagonissi** (lagonissiresort.gr; *entrées* \$25–\$38), or the cuttlefish risotto at Michelin-starred **Varoulko** (varoulko.gr; *entrées* \$68–\$74) near the port of Piraeus, a half-hour’s drive northwest of Vouliagmeni.

Another must-do is to take a dip in **Lake Vouliagmeni** (limnivouliagmenis.gr), a thermal-spring-fed lagoon with a world-class wellness facility and restaurant attached. The waters are said to relieve everything from eczema to trauma, though many visitors just go to take in the spectacular scenery.

Whichever you choose, you may find that on your next Greece trip, you decide to make Athens a destination, rather than just a stopover. **x**

NEXT STOPS

Three trips to pair with a stay on the Athenian Riviera, as chosen by Christos Stergiou at expert tour operator True Greece. truegreece.com.

PORTO HELI, THE PELOPONNESE
2½ hours by car
Make Amanzoe (aman.com; *doubles from* \$1,200) your base for touring the sights of the southern mainland.

SPETSES, THE SARONIC ISLANDS
2 hours by ferry
Stay at Poseidonion Grand Hotel (poseidonion.com; *doubles from* \$200) while exploring this sophisticated island.

HALKIDIKI, NORTHERN GREECE
A 1-hour flight, plus a 1-hour drive
Zone out on the private beach at Sani Resort (sani-resort.com; *doubles from* \$290).



FROM TOP: COURTESY OF FOUR SEASONS ASTIR PALACE HOTEL; ATHENS: OLENA KACHMAR/ALAMY