

GREECE

Agamemnon to Alexander

Overview

The birthplace of Western philosophy and democracy as well as a wellspring of literature, architecture and art, ancient Greece is rightfully known as one of the cradles of Western civilization. Our tour of the great sites of ancient and medieval Greece focuses especially on the worlds of the Aegean Bronze Age and the Macedonian rulers Philip and his son Alexander the Great, whose exploits altered the ancient world forever.

Our journey of 5,000 years of history takes us first to Crete and the sprawling palace of King Minos and others, along with the charming, well-preserved Minoan village of Gournia. We'll then move on to Athens, home to the Acropolis, ancient Agora and superbly organized museums before heading to the Peloponnese, where we explore the world of Agamemnon and the warrior Mycenaean kings. Next, we travel north to the iconic classical sites of Olympia and Delphi, the picturesque port of Volos, and Meteora, with its stone pinnacles crowned with Byzantine-era monasteries. Finally, we arrive at Thessaloniki, gateway to ancient Macedon.

Tour leader

Dr John Tidmarsh was Part-Time Lecturer in Greek and Roman archaeology at the University of Sydney and is the former President of the Near Eastern Archaeology Foundation. He was previously Associate Director of the University of Sydney's excavations at Paphos, Cyprus, and was also Senior Investigator at the university's excavations at Torone in Greece.

Essential information

Tour dates: April 23–May 11, 2023

Price per person: \$12,995

Supplement for sole use of double room: \$2,295

Maximum number in group: 16

Start: 6.00pm April 23, Divani Acropolis Hotel, Athens

Finish: After breakfast, May 11, Mediterranean Palace Hotel, Thessaloniki

Fitness level

★★ Good overall fitness required

Itinerary

Athens (1 night), Heraklion (3 nights), Athens (2 nights), Nafplio (2 nights), Pylos (2 nights), Olympia (1 night), Delphi (2 nights), Volos (1 night), Thessaloniki (4 nights)

Further information and bookings

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Highlights

Minoan Crete

Discover the Minoan civilization that flourished from c.2000-1500 BCE and its influence on Western European art and architecture today through sites like King Minos's palace (home to the legendary Minotaur).

Athens

Experience Athens, which at its height epitomised the best of Greek virtues that gave birth to democracy. Wander through the Agora, centre of city life, and explore the Acropolis, Greece's defining symbol of cultural achievement.

Mycenae

Explore Mycenaean citadels of the Late Bronze Age, like the palace of Agamemnon, with its Lion Gate, monumental tombs, and Cyclopean walls, as well as the citadel of Tiryns and the beautifully preserved Palace of Nestor.

Amazing Museums

Investigate thousands of years of accumulated history through a dazzling array of museums that provide relevance and context to the sites visited on the tour.

Pella and Vergina

Visit the premier cities of the ancient Macedonian kingdom including Pella, the kingdom of the military commander Phillip II, with its palace complex, agora and opulent houses embellished with fine pebble mosaics.

Detailed itinerary

Included meals are shown with the symbols B, L and D.

Sunday 23 April - Arrival

The tour commences at the hotel in Athens at 6pm. Meet your tour leader and fellow travellers in the lobby of the hotel for drinks followed by dinner. Overnight Athens [D]

Monday 24 April – Heraklion Archaeological Museum

This morning we transfer to Athens Airport and board a flight to Heraklion. We arrive in Crete and transfer to our hotel before John conducts an orientation tour of the Venetian city on foot. In the afternoon we visit the excellent Archaeological Museum in Heraklion. Its collection includes Minoan artefacts and wall paintings from Knossos and the other Minoan palaces as well as the mysterious Phaistos Disk. This evening we enjoy a welcome dinner in a local restaurant. Overnight Heraklion [B, D]

Tuesday 25 April – Phaistos and Knossos

This morning we travel to Phaistos, a Minoan royal palace complex on a dramatic hilltop site overlooking the Messara Plain. After lunch we visit Crete's most famous site, the Minoan palace complex of Knossos. The area shows occupation from Neolithic times, but the first palace was established c. 1900 BC. This was destroyed by an earthquake 200 years later and completely rebuilt. The site is a complex of administrative, residential, and religious structures that offers an excellent idea of what life in Minoan Crete may have been like. Overnight Heraklion [B, L]

Wednesday 26 April – Gournia and Malia

Today we head to the Minoan town of Gournia, named for the hollow vessels found at the site. Gournia was excavated by an American team of archaeologists in the early part of the 20th century and consists of a central palace, some sixty houses and an interconnecting road system. We explore another Minoan site at Malia, the third largest palace on Crete. Originally constructed c. 1900 BCE it was later destroyed and the ruins we see today are of the second palace rebuilt c. 1650 BCE. The palace was discovered in 1915 and excavations of the entire town continue today. Overnight Heraklion. [B]

Thursday 27 April – Athens Archaeological Museum

We depart our hotel in Heraklion and board a flight to Athens where we transfer to our hotel. After lunch we visit the National Archaeological Museum of Greece, with its incomparable collection of Mycenaean and classical period art and artefacts. Originally built to house finds from around Athens, it has become a truly national museum with collections devoted to prehistory, sculptures, metallurgy and pottery. These pieces will remain with us during the tour as exemplars of many of the sites we shall visit throughout the country in the coming days. Dinner is in a local tavern. Overnight Athens. [B, L, D]

Friday 28 April – Athens Agora and the Acropolis

There is a talk in the hotel this morning preceding our walk through the Agora, centre of the ancient city where citizens assembled for a wide variety of administrative, cultural, religious and political purposes. We continue up to the Acropolis. The Parthenon, Erechtheion, and the exquisite temple of Athena Nike are the centrepieces of the ancient buildings on the Acropolis and encapsulate both the beauty and achievements of ancient Greece. We complete our tour with a visit to the Acropolis Museum, where artefacts recovered from the site and spanning thousands of years are displayed. Overnight Athens. [B]

Saturday 29 April – Mycenae and Tiryns

We depart for the Plain of Argos and arrive at Mycenae, the seat of Agamemnon who served as leader of the Greek coalition at Troy. This morning we walk through the famous Lion Gate, see the Shaft Graves of Circle A and climb through the site to the crowning Megaron Palace where the Mycenaean king would have held sway over much territory. Blending back into the rocky hills, the ruins of this ancient powerhouse are in a spectacular location atop the citadel and ringed by well-preserved Cyclopean walls. This afternoon we stop at the smaller Mycenaean citadel of Tiryns. Celebrated by Homer for their strength, the walls of Tiryns still impress as does the well-preserved acropolis, entrance ramp and gate house. We arrive at our hotel and settle in before dinner in a local restaurant. Overnight Nafplio. [B, D]

Sunday 30 April – Nafplio and Epidauros

This morning we walk through the narrow-cobbled streets of the old town of Nafplio, characterised by Venetian architecture, through Syntagma Square to the Archaeological Museum to see the finds discovered from Tiryns, Mycenae and Epidauros. We visit the baroque fortress of Palamidi, standing 216 metres above the town. This afternoon we visit the impressive site of Epidauros, the location of the Asclepeion, one of the most famous healing centres of the Classical world. The well-preserved 4th-century BCE theatre is regarded as the best in Greece. Overnight Nafplio. [B]

Monday 1 May – Pylos

Departing Nafplio we pass through Kalamata - the second largest town in the Peloponnese and famous for its olives and olive oil - on our way to Pylos. On route, we explore our immediate surroundings in order to examine the role of Pylos during the Peloponnesian War, as well as its role in

hastening the end of Ottoman rule in Greece. We arrive in Pylos and freshen up before dinner in a local restaurant. Overnight Pylos [B, D]

Tuesday 2 May - The Palace of Nestor

Using the small town of Pylos as our base, we visit the 'Palace of Nestor', seat of power for wise king Nestor in Homer's *Iliad*. This recently restored site contains one of the best-preserved Mycenaean palaces ever excavated. Overnight Pylos. [B]

Wednesday 3 May - Olympia

We depart Pylos for the ancient site of Olympia, birthplace of the Olympic Games and where the Olympic flame is still lit every four years. Home to the Temple of Zeus, one of the Wonders of the Ancient World, the sanctuary at Olympia not only lies in a beautiful and peaceful setting, but its largely non-reconstructed remains allow a unique opportunity to visualise how this complex would have looked during its heyday. The archaeological museum is a treasure trove of artefacts excavated from the sacred precinct including superb architectural sculptures from the Temple of Zeus itself. Overnight Olympia. [B, D]

Thursday 4 May – To Delphi

Today we travel to Delphi, chosen by the Greeks as the navel of the Earth and located on the spectacular cliff face of Mt Parnassus. This afternoon we visit the Delphi Museum and view its collection of treasures including the marble Sphinx of Naxos and the marvellous Charioteer, one of the finest extant bronze statues from the classical world. We check in to our hotel and enjoy dinner in a local restaurant. Overnight Delphi. [B, D]

Friday 5 May – Sanctuary of Apollo

This morning we travel to the walled monastery of Hosias Loukas. An important monument of the Middle Byzantine period, the lavish frescoes and marble and mosaic decorations reflect the classic decorative style for this era. This afternoon we visit the impressive and mystical archaeological site of Delphi, home to the most important oracle of the ancient world whose influence on rulers and the ruled alike was profound. Political decisions were made and colonies around the Mediterranean were founded only after consultation with the Oracle. We explore the Temple of Apollo, treasuries, the theatre, stadium and Altar of the Chians. Overnight Delphi. [B]

Saturday 6 May - Thermopylae

This morning we head east to Volos. Along the way, we make a short detour to the site of Thermopylae,

Hotels

Hotels have been selected principally for their central location.

Athens, **Divani Palace Acropolis Hotel** (3 nights)

Heraklion, **GDM Megaron Hotel** (3 nights)

Nafplio, **Hotel Grande Bretagne** (2 nights)

Pylos, **Phillip Hotel** (2 nights)

Olympia, **Hotel Europa** (1 night)

Delphi, **Hotel Anemolia** (2 nights)

Volos, **Hotel Volos Palace** (1 night)

Thessaloniki, **Mediterranean Palace** (4 nights)

Weather

Spring is a pleasant time to travel through Crete and mainland Greece and temperatures should not vary too much through the regions we visit on tour. Expect temperatures averaging between 24–26° C throughout with minimums between 12–15° C. There is only a slight chance of rain.

Fitness requirements for this tour

GRADE TWO ★★

This Grade Two tour is physically demanding. To participate on this tour, you should be able to:

- keep up with the group at all times
- walk for 5-7 kilometres over the day at a moderate pace
- stand and slow walk for up to 90 minutes galleries and museums
- negotiate walking up and down slopes and over uneven ground
- walk up and down steps and slopes
- get on and off a coach with

the location of the famous last stand by Spartan soldiers during the 480 BCE Persian Wars. Little remains at the site except for a bronze statue of Leonidas, the warrior King of the Spartans, erected in 1955. Overnight Volos. (B, D)

Sunday 7 May

We depart for Meteora to see the amazing landscape of steep-faced sandstone pinnacles, often crowned with a Byzantine monastery. Access to the monasteries required long ladders tied together or large nets and baskets used to haul up both goods and people. Reaching the top required a leap of faith as it is said the ropes were only replaced “when the Lord let them break”, symbolising the fragility of life. We continue to Thessaloniki our base for the next three days. Overnight Thessaloniki. (B, D)

Monday 8 May - Thessaloniki

Founded in 315 BCE by Cassander of Macedon, Thessaloniki's history spans some 2,300 years. An important metropolis by the Roman period, Thessaloniki was the second largest and wealthiest city of the Byzantine Empire. The city is home to numerous notable Byzantine monuments, as well as several Roman, Ottoman and Sephardic Jewish structures. Today we start by visiting the palace, Arch and Rotunda of Galerius, the Byzantine citadel and two incomparable museums: The Archaeology Museum and the Museum of Byzantine Culture. Overnight Thessaloniki. (B)

Tuesday 9 May – Pella and Vergina

Today we take an excursion to visit the premier cities of the ancient Macedonian kingdom: Pella and Vergina. In this world of Alexander the Great and his father, Philip II, we visit Pella and view the beautifully executed pebble mosaic floors, the well-presented site museum and the streets and buildings of a city that, for the briefest of moments, ruled from Greece to India. At Vergina we visit the theatre where Philip II was assassinated and visit his tomb. Overnight Thessaloniki. (B)

Wednesday 10 May – Byzantine Churches

This morning we visit two important Byzantine monuments: the church of St. Sofia (Hagia Sophia) and the church of St Demetrius (Hagios Demetrios). These originally 7th and 8th - century churches have suffered the vicissitudes of time but still retain tantalising glimpses of the fine early Byzantine wall mosaics and frescoes which survived the 9th- century iconoclast movement. This evening we conclude our tour with a farewell dinner in a local restaurant. Overnight Thessaloniki. (B, D)

Thursday 11 May – Departure

Our tour concludes today after breakfast at the hotel. (B)

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