

A GREAT GREEK REVIVAL

Spring has come to Athens and the city is more vibrant than ever

by Rob McGibbon

OUR affable guide Yannis asks if I have been to the city before, and I cheerily admit I was last here in 1984. His eyes widen and he says, wistfully: 'Ahh, you were here during the Age of Innocence.'

Back then, I was a nippy 19-year-old with an unimpaired mop of curly hair and the sculptured abdominal section worthy of a Greek statue. It cost £1 a night to roll out my junior sleeping bag on a hostel roof, and a litre of Amstel was 30p.

I lived like a prince during five dreamy weeks of island-hopping. The only problem was Athens, where I missed my Monarch flight home, and then spent three hungry days walking its fetid, inhospitable streets and sleeping at the airport before I blagged the airfare money. It left

a bad taste. Go back? I'd rather give Medusa the eye.

But I finally returned with my wife, Emma, and our nine-year-old son, Joseph, on the promise that Athens has changed. To my delight, and relief, it has.

The blue-sky warmth of spring makes the city more bearable than in the height of summer, when you will be shoulder-to-shoulder at every historical site.

We booked private guides on two days, a luxury worth taking. Yannis, from Athens Insiders,

led us around the Plaka central area, focusing his talk on mythology. We lapped it up like wannabe Athenas (goddess of wisdom).

On another day, an archaeology expert called Evita (yes, really) from *Greeking.me* guided us through the fascinating ruins of the Ancient Agora (marketplace) and up to The Acropolis, where we were each given iPad Minis.

Special software transforms whatever is before your eyes into a 3D depiction of how it

would have looked 2,000 years ago. Ingenious.

The strong educational aspect to Athens makes it a more meaningful break with children, but these days it is also a safe and friendly city with a young, energetic vibe.

Athens bears visible scars of the economic crisis that has engulfed Greece since 2009.

There are burnt-out buildings, boarded-up businesses, and angry graffiti is splashed everywhere. However, all this



Picture: GETTY

Ancient attraction: The Acropolis, overlooking the city, will thrill the whole family

generates an interesting edginess. Athens is emerging from its financial calamity as a vibrant and cosmopolitan destination.

There is a great choice of hotels for all budgets. We stayed first at the New Hotel and then pushed the proverbial boat out by switching to the chic Electra Metropolis, with a spectacular terrace and pool with views of The Acropolis.

There are also countless fashionable restaurants. We ate food of the gods — eel, octopus and pork belly — at Feedel Urban Gastronomy.

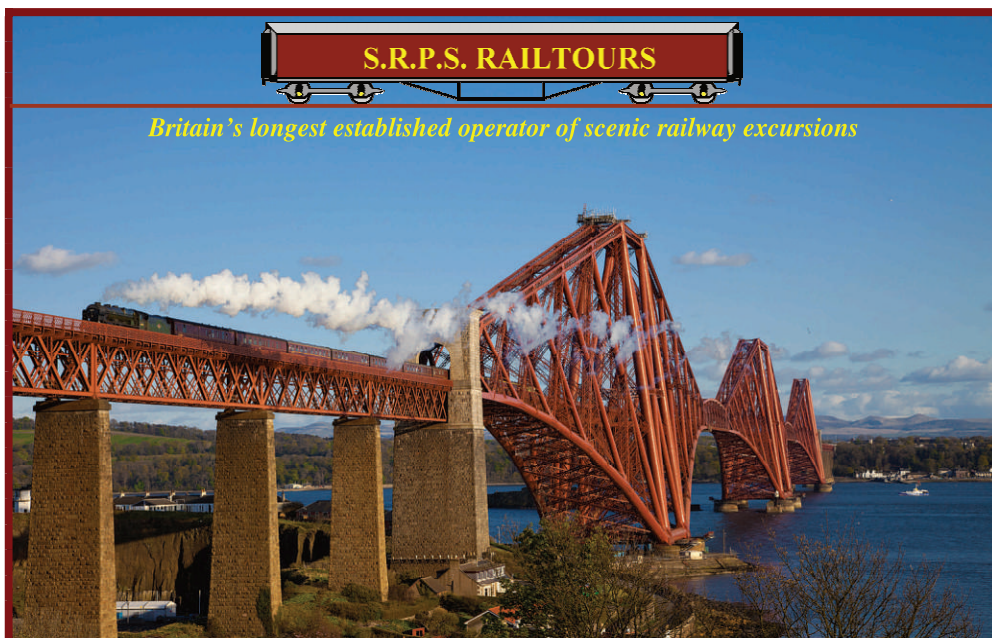
One afternoon, we retreated from cultural overload to a pottery class at DotAhart, run by artists Athena and Voula. Joseph proudly made 'Zeus', who now rules from a kitchen shelf. Another day, we took the fast ferry (just over an hour) to admire the beauty of Hydra.

An old man asked Joseph what he liked most about Athens. 'Everybody is so kind,' he shot back. The man beamed: 'This is the best advertisement for us.'

TRAVEL FACTS

AEGEAN Airlines (*aegeanair.com*) flies to Athens from £229 return. Double rooms at Electra Metropolis (*electrahotels.gr*) from £245, and at New Hotel (*yeshotels.gr*) from £195. More information at *greece.com*. Tour guides from *athensinsiders.com* and *greeking.me*.

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