



# HIP TO BE SQUARE

The essence of Thessaloniki and the city's hippest spots for dining, drinking and culture grazing revolve around its grand squares.

Text Chris Deliso

Thessaloniki is known as a party city; its nightlife is abuzz with trendy bars that attract the young and fashionable

PHOTO KONSTANTINOS TSAKALOUDIS

**G**reece's second city – a five-hour drive north of Athens – has a whimsical pomp to it; this jumps out at you in big open spaces like the central Plateia Aristotelous (Aristotelous Square). Here, grand curved structures like the Olympion Cinema (home to Thessaloniki's film festival), and the stately Electra Palace Hotel resemble giant accordions sidestepping the seafront, where couples take evening scrolls against the porphyry backdrop of sunset over the Thermaikos Kolpos ('Warm Gulf').

Remnants of similarly grandiose constructions – like the ruined, subterranean Palace of Emperor Galerius, further east on Plateia Navarinou – attest to Thessaloniki's timelessness. Marked by informative

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plaques, and a hangout for the city's esoteric breed of chatty anarchists, the maze-like ruins are visitor-friendly. Just north of here, across buzzing Egnatia Boulevard, other indelible remnants of the fourth-century tyrant's rule linger at Kamara, a popular meeting point with an intricately sculpted arch and, above it, the hulking Roman Rotunda, later a Byzantine church and Ottoman mosque.

### Square off

Subtle signs of Thessaloniki's quirky character are fully displayed in its squares, revealing the essence of contemporary Greek urban life. Motorbikes whiz past old men resplendent in fuzzy plaid suits, pontificating on long-forgotten politics from municipal benches, while tattooed students hand out pamphlets on the week's current protest. Passersby peer into the narrow windows of newspaper-crowded kiosks, where the unimpressed attendant's upward eye roll indicates that no, we don't sell bus tickets. Meanwhile, the sounds of a live jazz band emanating from a bookstore compete with the amplified flutes of feather-crested musicians in full Andean garb. Like so many long-time visitors, they are here on a regular pilgrimage.

Structurally speaking, it was a massive 1917 fire that created Thessaloniki's modern look. In the aftermath, inspired French architects devised a grid scheme by which wide streets would run parallel to the sea, interrupted periodically by squares, the whole enterprise knitted together by a bevy of small streets wrapped around historic sites, all sloping sidelong to the water's >>

### DIRECTORY

**Olympion Cinema**  
Plateia  
Aristotelous 10  
Tel +30 2310 378 637  
secretariat@  
filmfestival.gr

**Electra Palace Hotel**  
Plateia Aristotelous 9  
Tel +30 2310 294 000  
www.electrahotels.gr

**Trigones Elenidis**  
Corner D Gounari  
& Tsimiski  
Tel +30 2310 257 510

**Daios Luxury Living Hotel**  
Leoforos Nikis 59  
Tel +30 2310 250 200  
www.daioshotels.com

**Loxias**  
Isavron 7  
Plateia Navarinou  
Tel +30 2310 233 925

**Partizan Bar**  
Valaoritou 29  
Tel +30 694 794 5492

**Paparouna**  
Pangaïou and Doksis  
Tel +30 2310 510 852  
www.paparouna.com

**Coo Café Bar**  
Vasileos Irakleïou 4  
Plateia Hrimatistiriou  
Tel +30 2310 127 4752  
coobarcafe@gmail.com

**Ergon Culinary Experience**  
www.  
ergonculinary.gr

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This summer, look out for the Urban Picnic' festival ([www.urbanpicnic.gr](http://www.urbanpicnic.gr)), which brings together traditional Greek food and drink, live music and cinema amidst Roman ruins

PHOTOS (FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): KONSTANTINOS TSAKALIDIS; KONSTANTINOS TSAKALIDIS@CLICKPHOTOS; CLÉMENT@CLICKPHOTOS; PIXELSTOCK/ALAMY



Moviegoers outside the Olympion Cinema, the venue of the annual Thessaloniki International Film Festival



Wall art adds to the city's vibrancy



Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club, featuring Omara Portuondo, performing in Thessaloniki last Nov



The classic, Greek salad a must-have in summer

During the day, Syngrou street is a quiet neighbourhood filled with stores selling houseware but transforms into a bar-hopping haven come night

PHOTO KONSTANTINOS TSAKALIDIS

## THESSALONIKI HAS ALWAYS BEEN CULTURED, BUT THE BUZZ HAS INTENSIFIED SIGNIFICANTLY IN RECENT YEARS

edge. Since studying at university here in the 1980s, philosophy professor George Karamanolis has relished the city's gregarious, good-natured spirit. "Thessaloniki's cosmopolitanism is visible in its monuments and squares," he says. "A truly rich history has blessed the city with an unpretentious, tolerant and friendly culture – you can really experience this in the cafés and restaurants."

### Institutional favourites

For a taste of old 'Saloniki, George points to old-school shops like Trigones Elenidis, which has been selling golden cones of sweet, cool vanilla cream (like a Greek version of cannoli) since 1960, just east of Plateia Navarinou. As a shop that sells only one product, it harks back to the Thessaloniki of yesteryear; it's just a short walk from the city's most prominent landmark, the rounded Lefkos Pyrgos (White Tower), standing above the sea on its eponymous square. Just west of here, also overlooking the waterfront on Nikis Avenue, is the ultra-minimalist Daios Luxury Living Hotel, Thessaloniki's pioneering leader in simple sophistication, marked by smooth surfaces, elegant baths (with amenities courtesy of Bulgari), an excellent restaurant and sublime sea views.

Back on Plateia Navarinou's western side, little Isavron Street leads to Loxias, a long-time favourite of local intellectuals where décor includes a piano, bulging wine casks and a downstairs bookshop. With walls lined by books and images of old Thessaloniki, and an intimate back balcony overlooking Roman ruins, Loxias remains a tranquil spot for coffee or wine and *mezedes* (varied Greek appetizers) right in the busy downtown. The unique combination, says friendly owner and bibliophile Ioannis Kyprianidis, is meant to celebrate "Greece's unique 'banquet' mentality – after all, the maxim 'eat, drink and philosophize' sums up our tradition."

### Culture and celebrations

As a major student city Thessaloniki has always been cultured, but the buzz has intensified significantly in recent years. Its urban cultural renaissance can be felt in places like Syngrou/Valaoritou Streets, just below Egnatia.

Once known mostly for an peculiar mix of secret police 'safe houses' and staid embroidery shops, the area was until recently ill-lit, spooky and unvisited at night. Now it's a boisterous nightlife hotspot. Popular places here include Partizan Bar, a 24/7 hangout great for live music. One of the area's current cultural faves is Coo, an 'experimental bar' located on a small (and tongue-twisting!) square, Plateia Hrimatistiriou. Combining bar, art gallery and performance space, Coo has become a fixture for Thessaloniki's arty alternative set.

For fine (but unpretentious) dining, try Paparouna just southwest on cosy Plateia Morihovou in the revitalised Ladadika restaurant district; it occupies a period structure with vividly painted walls and ceilings, its ever-evolving menu including artfully-prepared salads, mouth-watering seafood and delicious pastas complemented by a deep wine list (plus superb live music). >>

### Thessaloniki fast facts

#### Time zone GMT+2

Zealand. Others should check their status and procedure with their local Greek embassy or online, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website [www.mfa.gr](http://www.mfa.gr)

#### Public transport

There's a dependable fleet of buses (and a subway still under construction), but central walking distances are short. City bus info is available at [www.oasth.gr](http://www.oasth.gr)

#### Shopping hours

Generally 8am-3pm on Mon, Wed and Sat; 8am-2pm and 5-9pm on Tue, Thu and Fri

#### Average temperatures

In summer, 29°C and in winter, 10°C

#### Entry requirements

Visas are not needed for citizens of many countries including the EU, USA, Canada, Australia and New

#### Travellers' tip

Information and maps are provided at the Greek National Tourism Information office (Near the White Tower at Tsimiski 136 Tel +30 2310 252170 [www.visitgreece.gr](http://www.visitgreece.gr)). Also see [www.saloniki.org](http://www.saloniki.org), an unofficial but useful website with numerous links.

Olives and olive oil are mainstays of Greece's Mediterranean cuisine





**Cosmopolitan appeal**

While it's no secret that the bad economy has put many Greeks in a less celebratory mood than usual, you couldn't tell here. The city's tenacious mayor, Yiannis Boutaris, remain optimistic. He attests to what many other locals believe: Thessaloniki's unique appeal, he says, derives from its identity as "a crossroads of cultures, and a settlement for multiple ethnic and religious communities." Since being elected, Mayor Boutaris has sought innovative ideas to improve the city's attractions. For example, despite Greece's occasionally prickly relationship with neighbouring Turkey, Mayor Boutaris sees the Ottoman Turkish heritage as an asset, and once-derelict hammams and mosques have been reborn as art galleries and cultural spaces. All in all, it's clear to Mayor Boutaris that the city's appeal rests on sturdy foundations: "Thessaloniki's long, modern waterfront promenade and its rich culinary tradition, along with the lively youth presence and its exciting nightlife, all make Thessaloniki a unique experience," he says.

As Lefteris Eleftheriadis, an author and expert on Greek food and drink who also runs food tours across Greece through Ergon Culinary Experience, points out: "Thessaloniki is becoming a real hub for new ideas," he enthuses. "We have vibrant communities, an impressive mix of gastronomic cultures, great nightlife and history to explore. Today, the city is really living up to its motto: 'Many stories, but one heart!'" ■



  
 Malaysia Airlines flies from Kuala Lumpur (KUL) to London (LHR) twice daily on the A380; from LHR, oneworld partner British Airways flies to Thessaloniki (SKG)

PHOTO TRAVEL PICTURE / ALAMY

Diners at one of many waterfront restaurants that face the Beach Promenade, which runs along Nikis Avenue all the way to the White Tower