Our Tale of Two Cities

David and Nicki Jervis

Our Tale of Two Cities

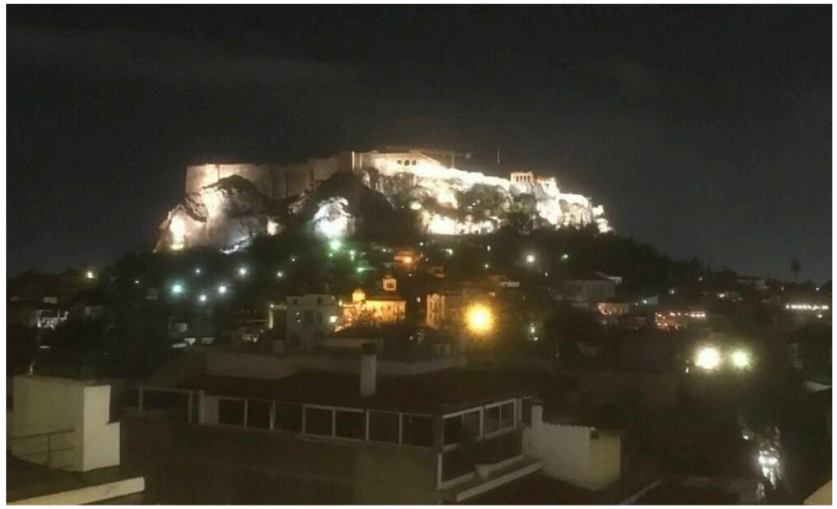
In November 2017, we flew into magnificent Athens on a mission. Nicki was running the oldest marathon in the world. After a gruelling 26 miles 385 yards....mission accomplished. As if that wasn't enough, we made sure we spent time experiencing the majesty of Athens and its history.

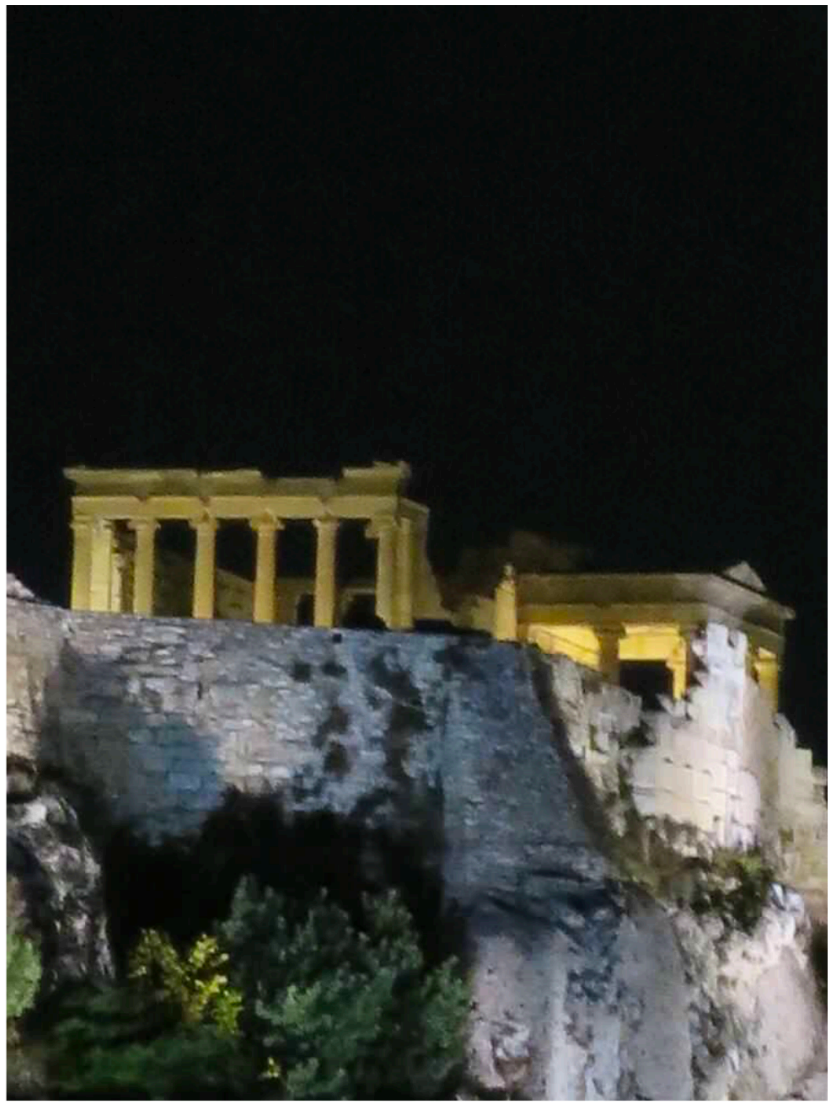
Eight months later we launched into part two of our tale and arrived in the exciting city of Thessaloniki. Our aim was to explore as much of this vibrant place as we could, while still allowing time to rest and relax.....once again, mission accomplished.

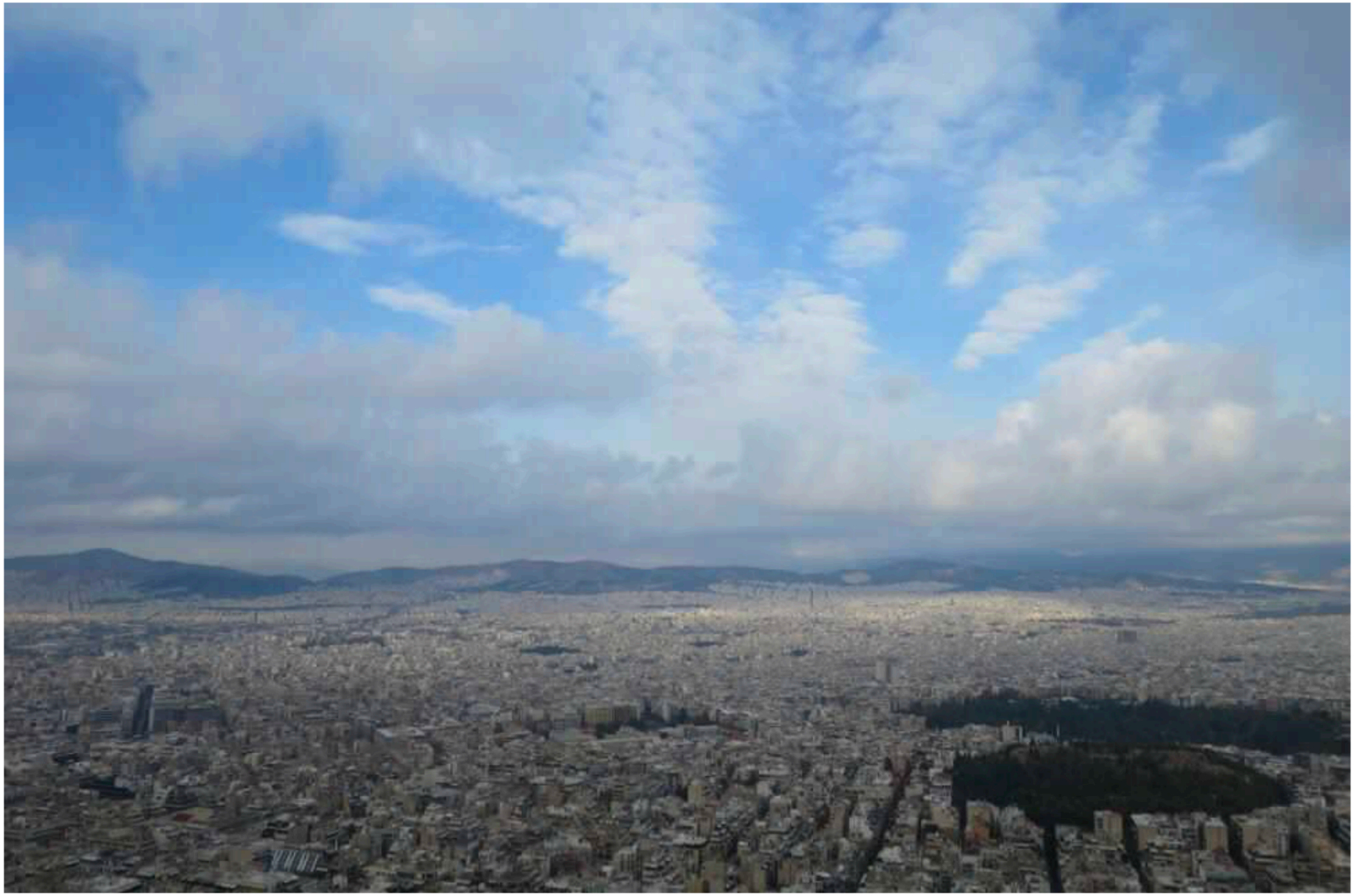
David and Nicki Jervis

A taxi ride from the airport took us to our hotel right in the middle of the constellation of classical antiquities that is ancient Athens.

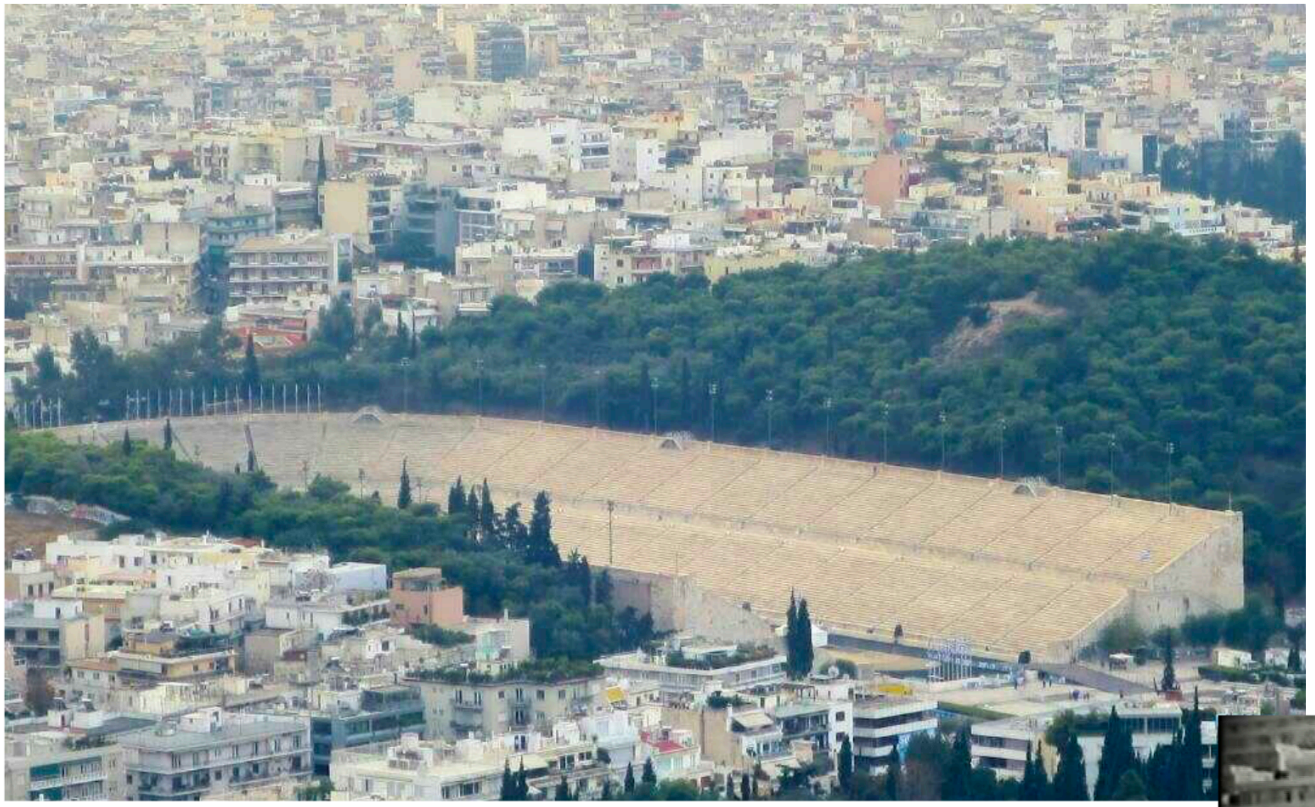
Almost in the shadow of the Acropolis rock, we were able to view the Parthenon from our balcony - a constant reminder that we were living and breathing great history.





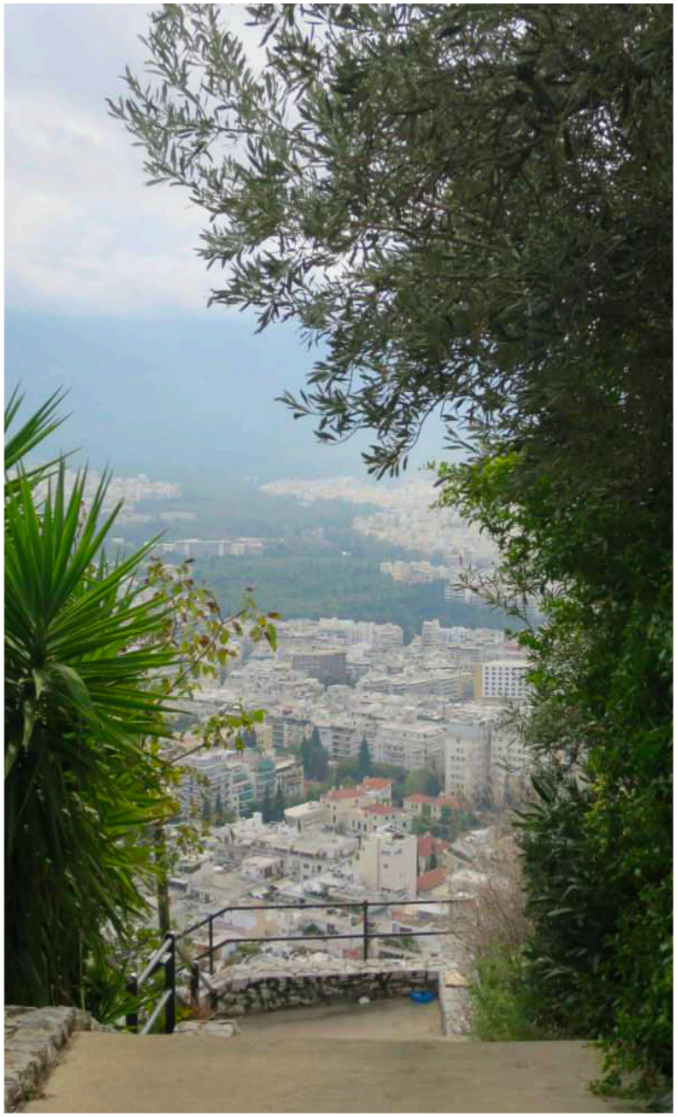


Mount Lycabettus - tallest of the seven hills and the highest point of Athens at 277 metres: Provider of sensational 360 degree views of the white city - a great place to go on the day before running many marathon miles with thousands of others through the streets below.

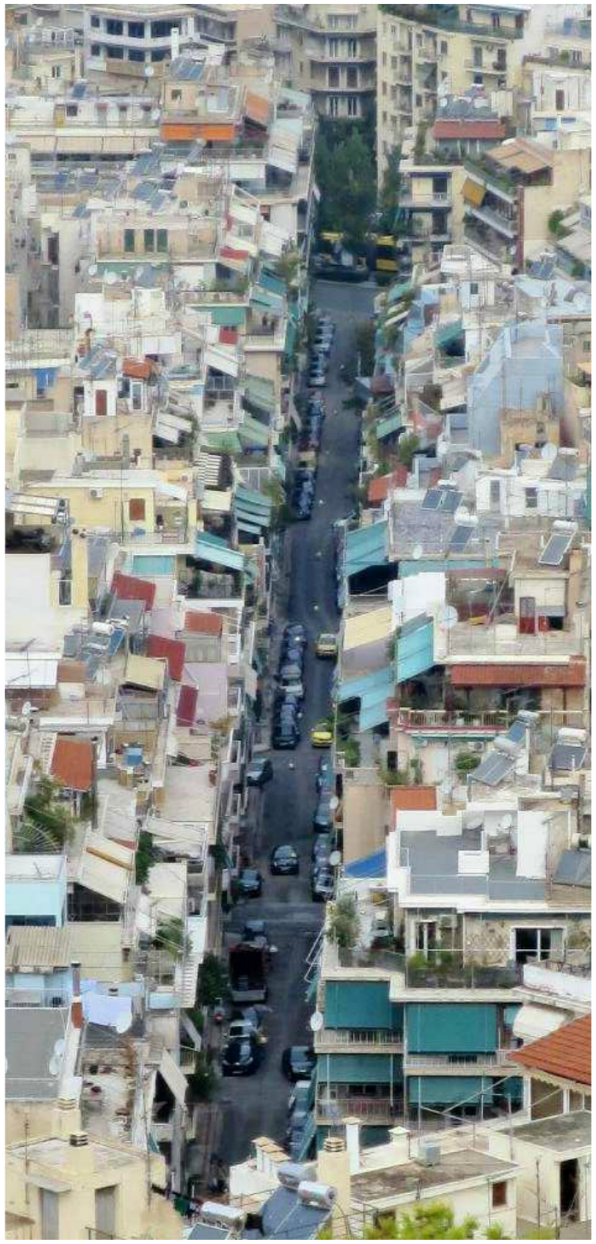


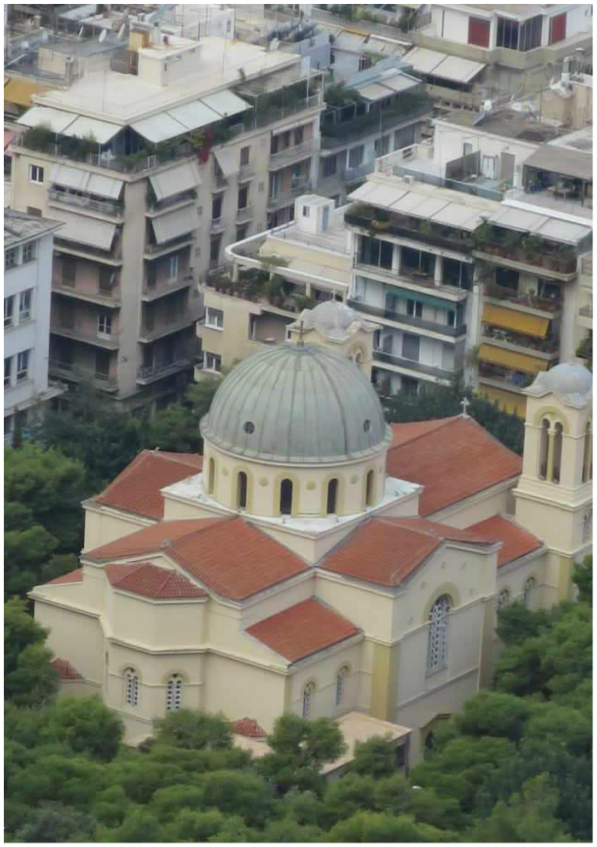
The small photo is of David's Grandmother and friend sitting on the steps of the same stadium in 1926. What symmetry.

The swathe of light brown marble in amongst the greenery is the Panathenaic Stadium - the dramatic finishing line for the Athens marathon. It is an amazing, impressive, open structure - fully capable of embracing the thousands of dreams and ambitions achieved of runners from across the world.

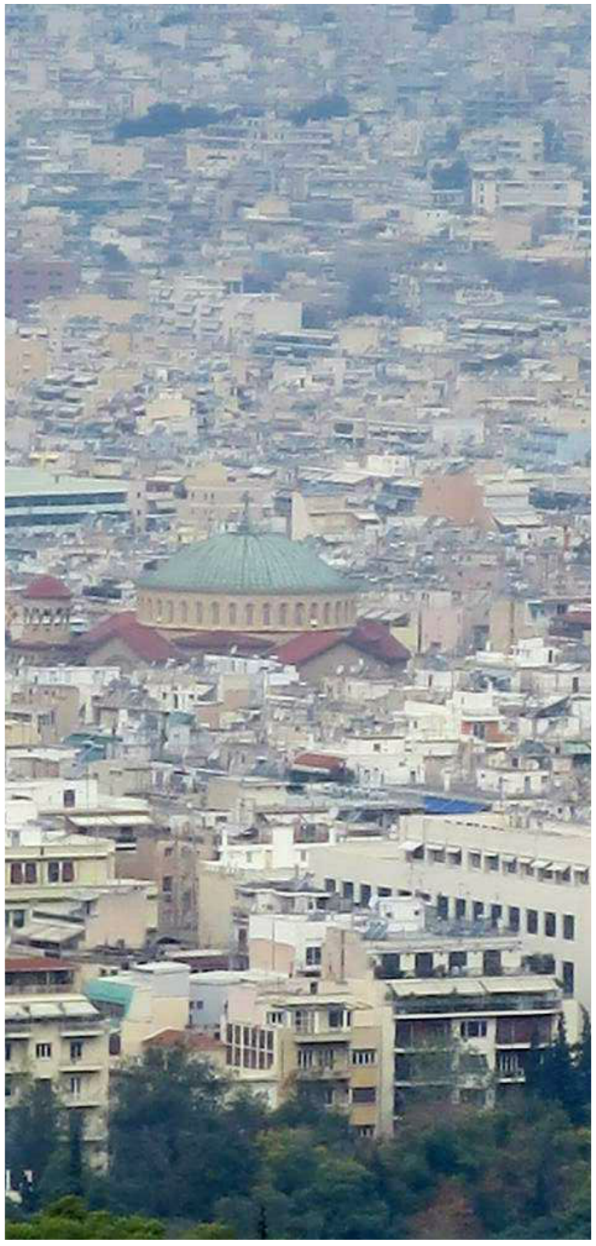


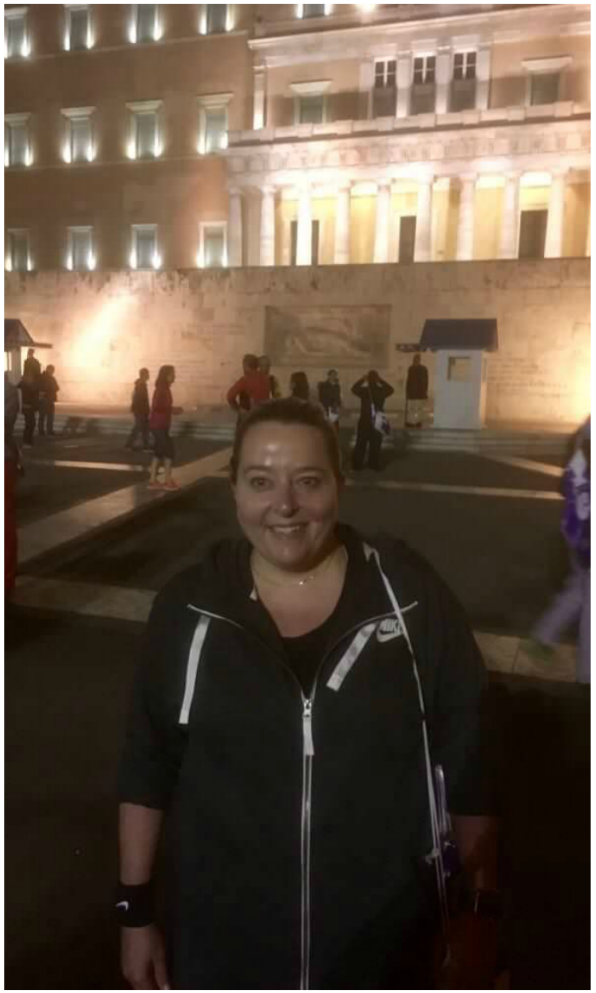
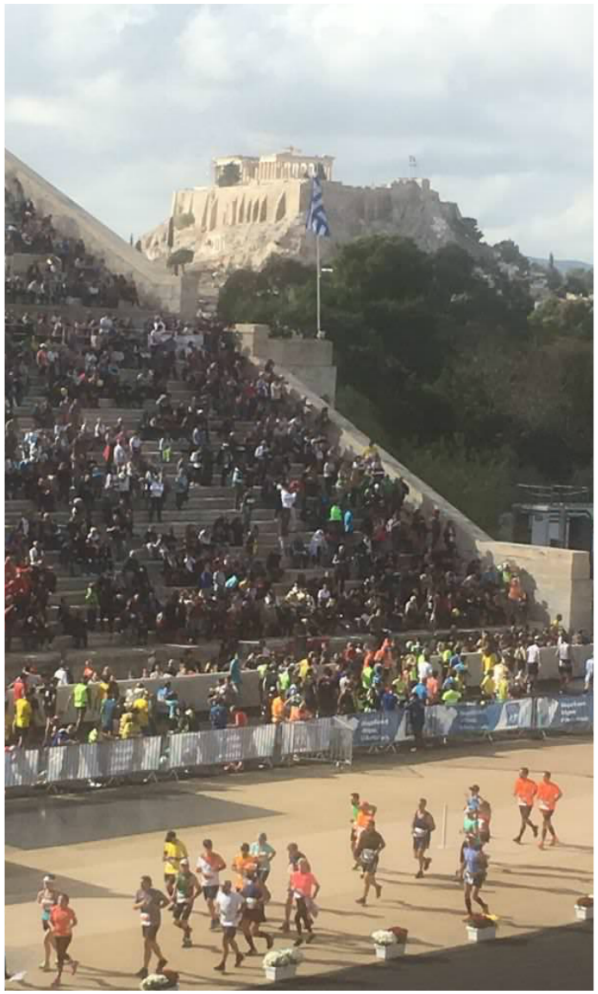
Chapel of St George - a small 19th century Greek orthodox church at the top of Lycabettus Hill.





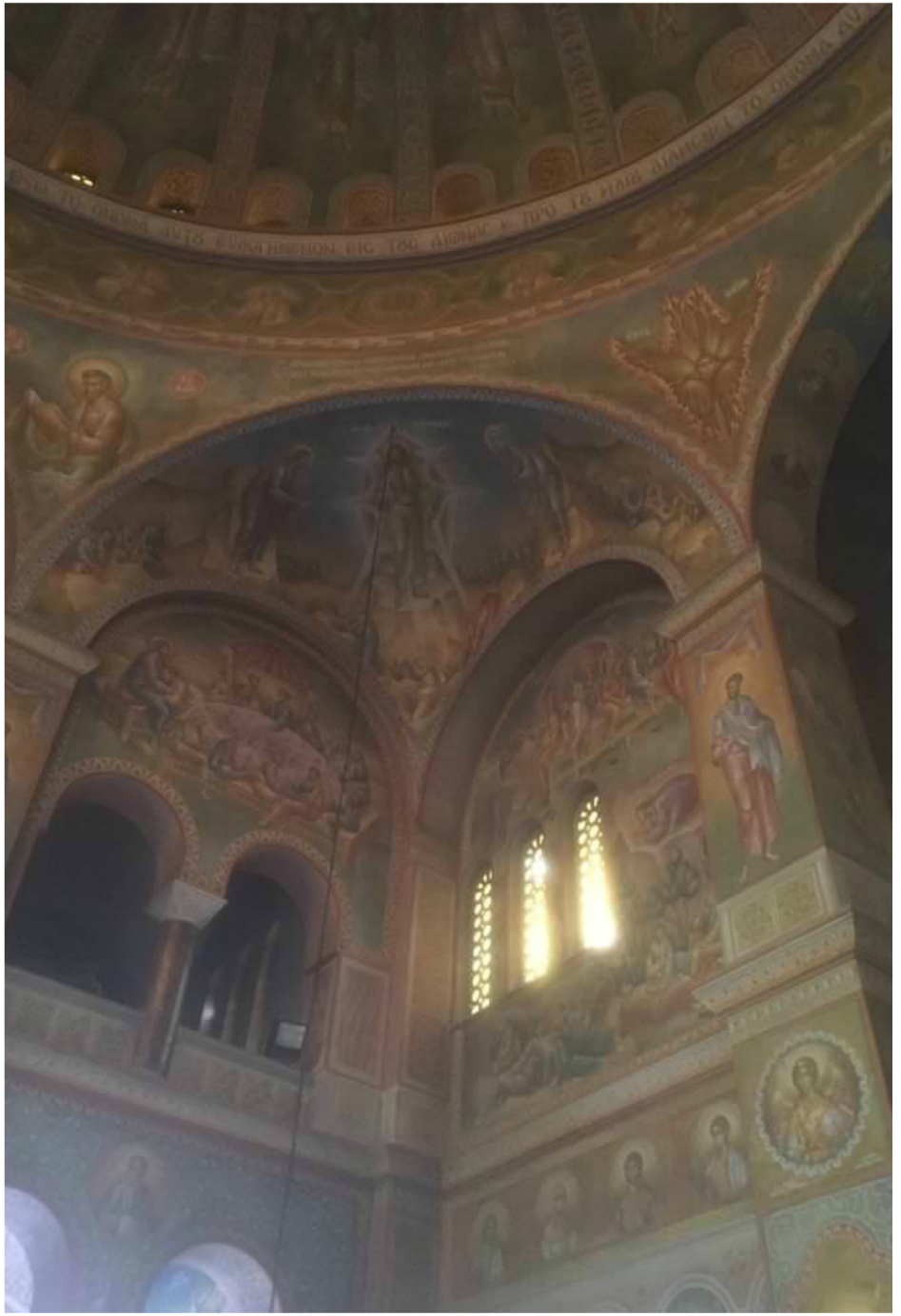
Zoom lens views from Lycabettus Hill



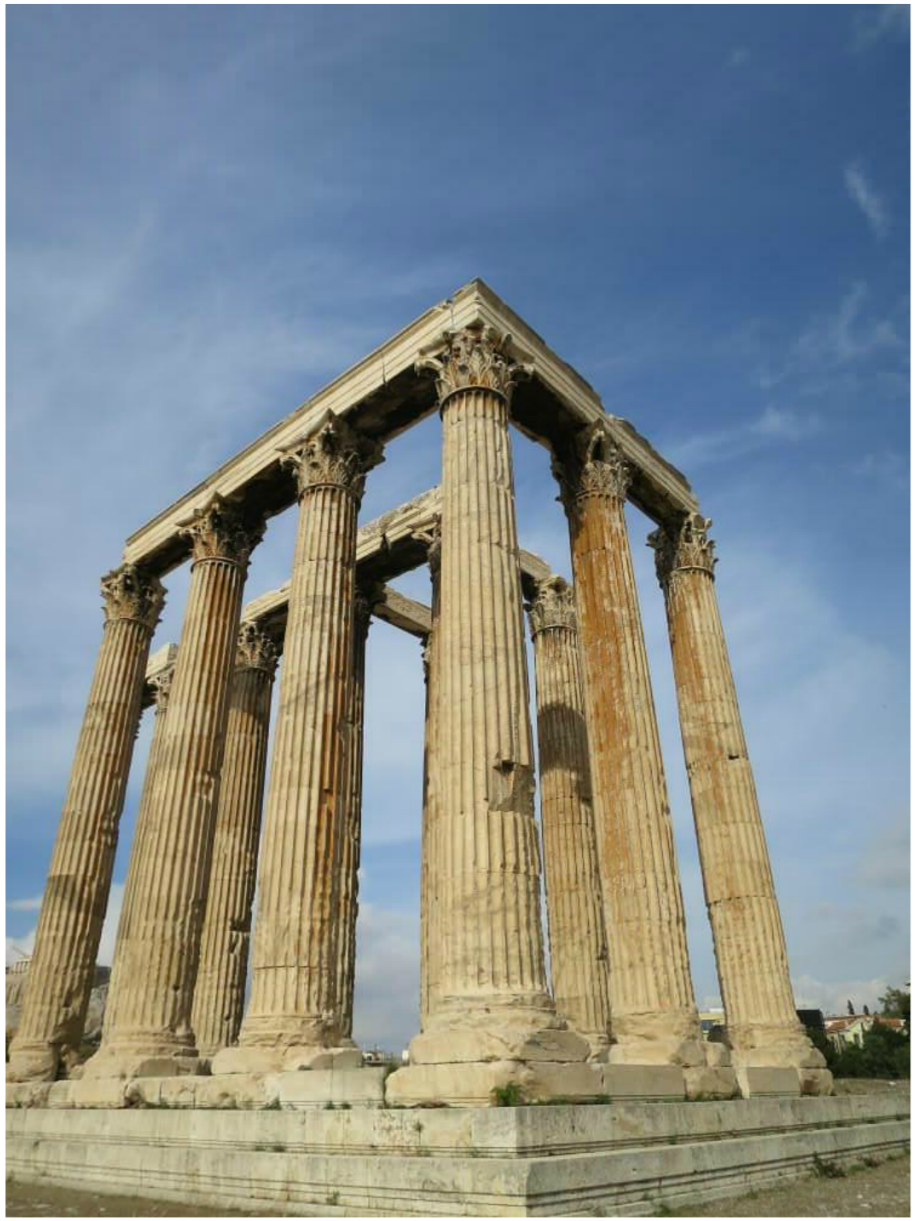
She came - Nicki arriving at 0417 UK time outside the famous Parliament building in a dark but warm Athens, to be taken by coach to the town of Marathon to begin the race. **She saw** - the finish line in the Panathenaic Stadium below the watchful eye of the Parthenon. **She conquered** - proof is the medal round her neck. (A fuller account of her race is in a separate book).

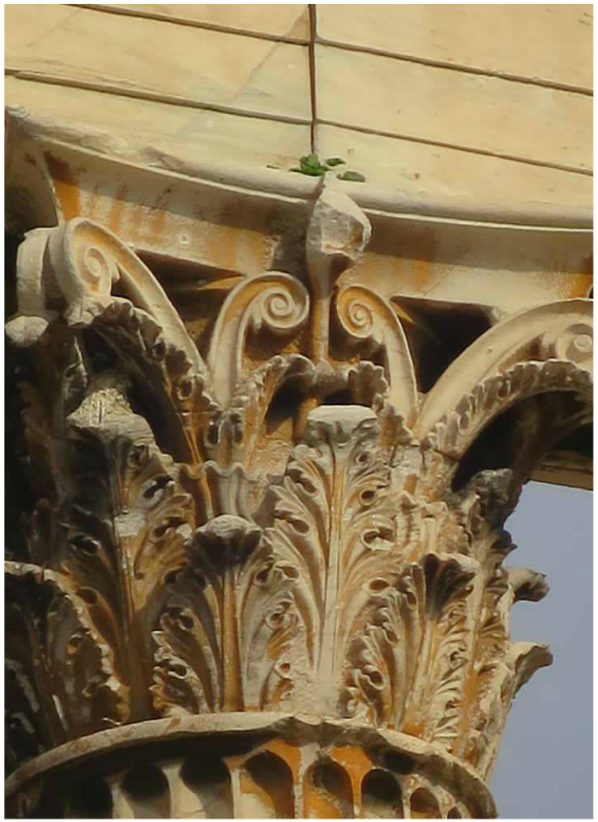
We visited one of the largest churches in the Balkans - the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Panteleimon - to light candles for loved ones. A lovely place with beautiful decorations (opposite) but not that easy to photograph.



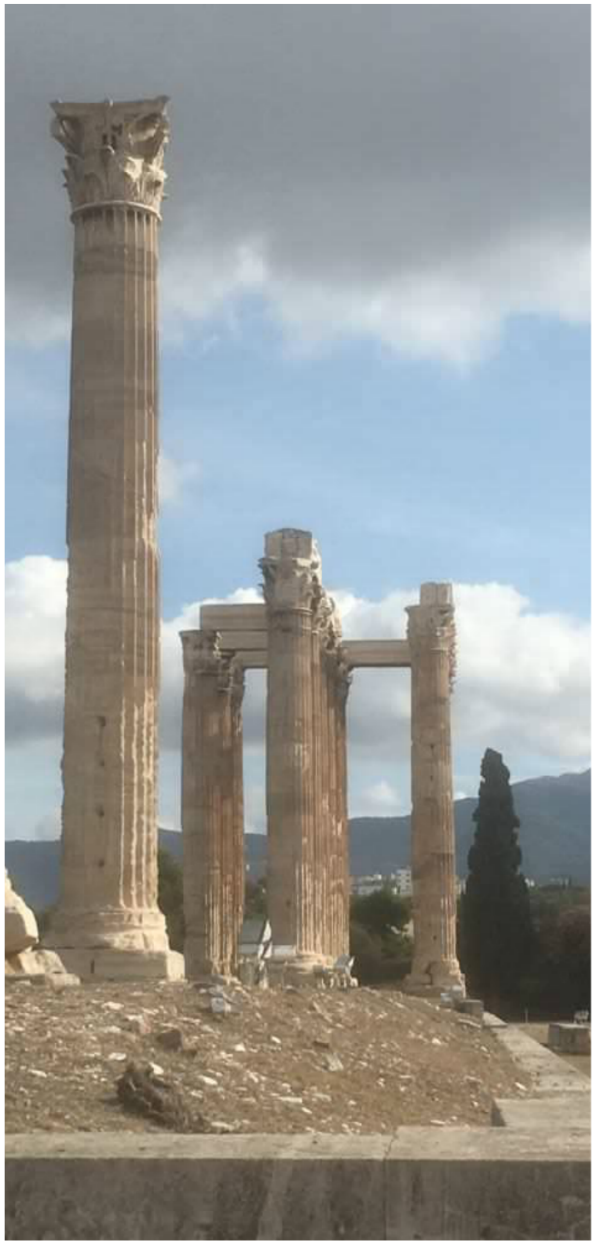
Building of the Temple of Olympian Zeus (seen here in a photo taken from The Acropolis on a previous visit) began around 520 BC. It was supposed to be the greatest temple in the ancient world but work was abandoned when the Athenian leaders of the time were overthrown.

Some 700 years after it was started, work on the huge temple was completed on the orders of Roman Emperor Hadrian - a lover of all things Greek as well as being famous for building walls in other places. It consisted of 104 marble columns and measured 354 x 135 feet. Sadly, the temple was pillaged by barbarians in the third century AD and fell into ruin.

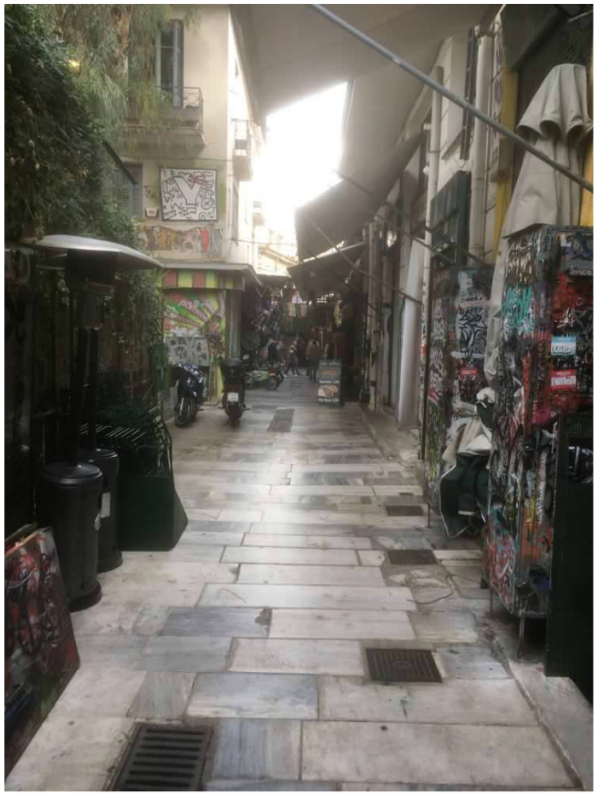




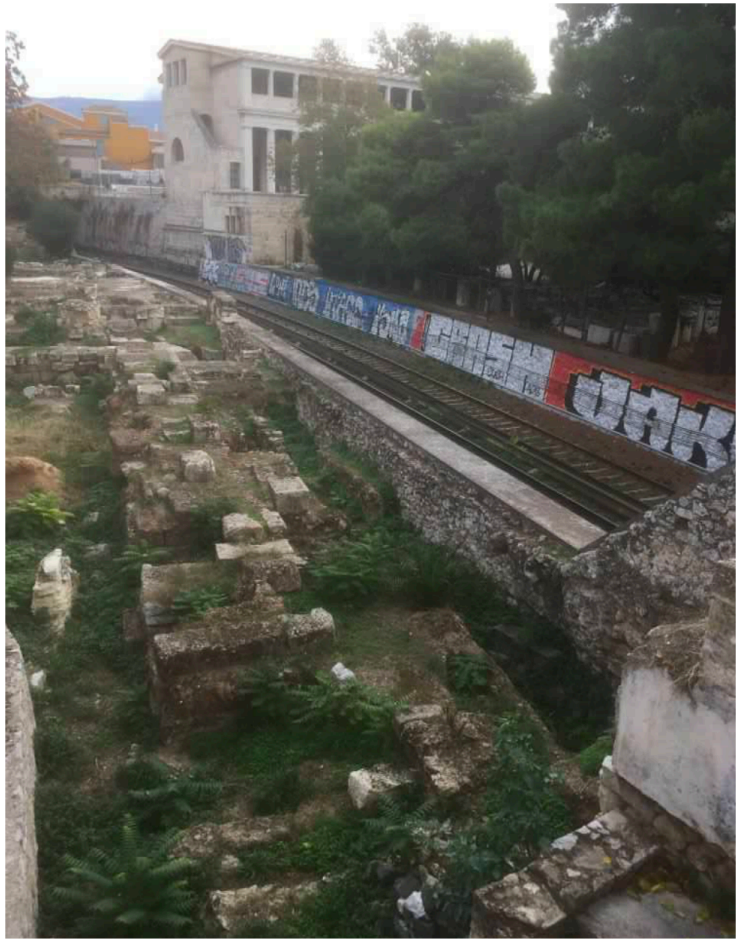
Columns and decoration at the Temple of Olympian Zeus.



Through Hadrian's Arch - the ancient entrance to the temple - you can see a glimpse of the Parthenon. One side of the arch commemorates Theseus, the "Father of Athens" and the other side states: "This is the city of Hadrian."



Athens is an incredibly vibrant, colourful city - especially in the areas around the foot of The Acropolis.

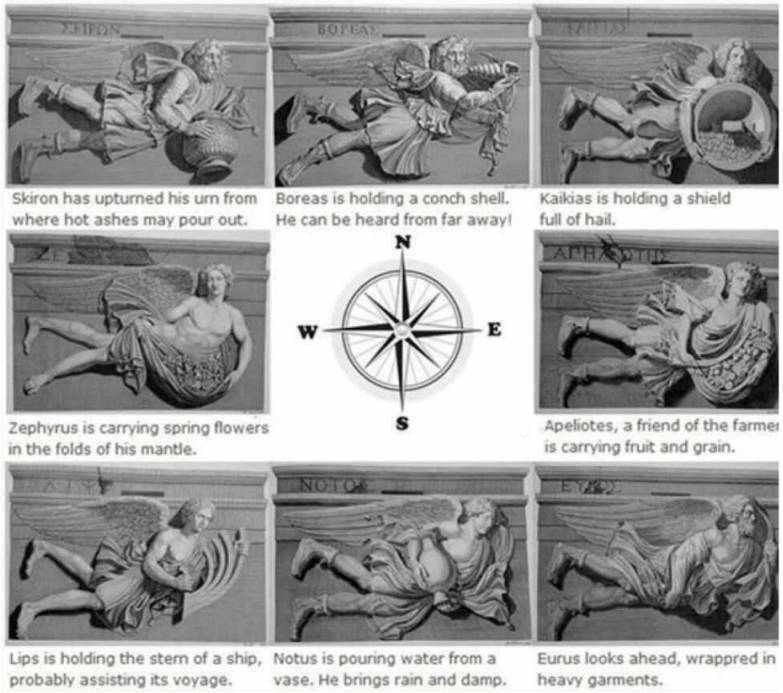


Colourful metro trains travel through ancient sites undergoing permanent excavation.

Tourists gather to watch the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior outside the Parliament Building in Syntagma Square, Athens. The exaggerated movements and colourful uniforms are unforgettable. But few people attend the similar ceremony outside the Presidential Palace, as we did. The soldiers are Evzoni - the name of several elite light infantry and mountain units of the Greek Army. They are now known as the Presidential Guard, primarily a ceremonial unit. Their uniform has evolved from clothes worn by the Klephts, who fought the Ottoman occupation of Greece.

Roman Emperor Hadrian created his Library in 132 AD. It featured lecture halls, reading rooms and shelves for papyrus scrolls.

The best preserved classical monument in Athens, the Tower of the Winds is a magnificent timepiece. All in one, it was a clock, a sun dial and a weather vane. It is octaganol, designed by astronomer Andronikos in 50 BC. Around the top of the Tower are eight flying Gods representing the eight winds. Boreas was the north wind, blowing a conch of cold air (from his name we get words like Aurora Borealis); another called Zephyr can be seen holding a bag of flowers being spread across the land. Opposite is a pictorial of the winds; an idea of what the Tower would have looked like in its prime and what is left of the fascinating water clock which was fed by streams from the Acropolis. The mechanism has long gone but there are lectures available showing how it worked.

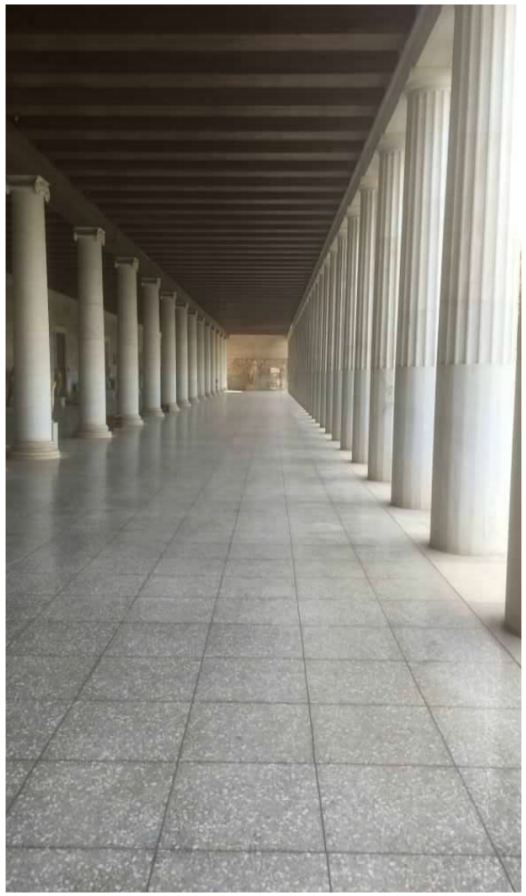
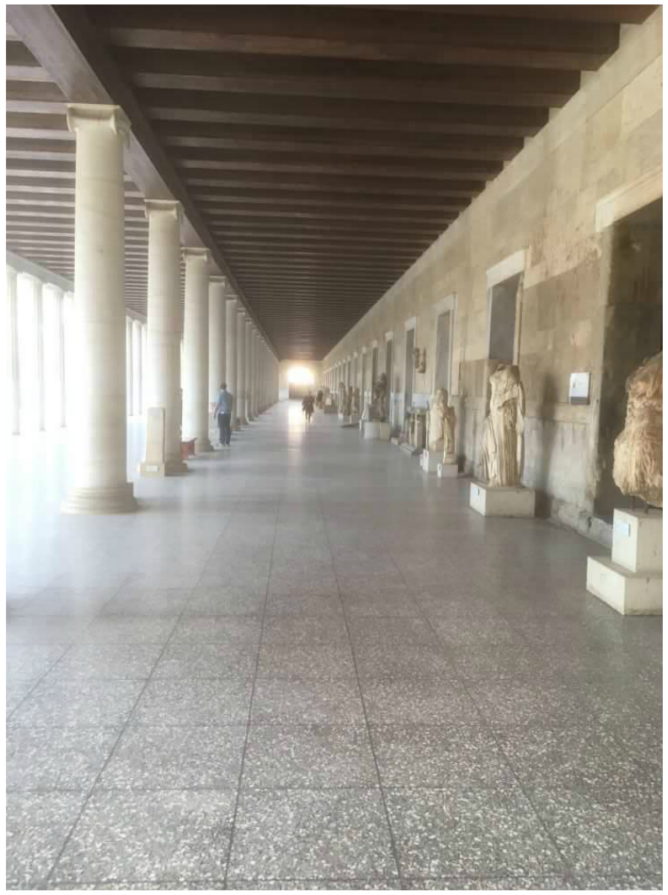
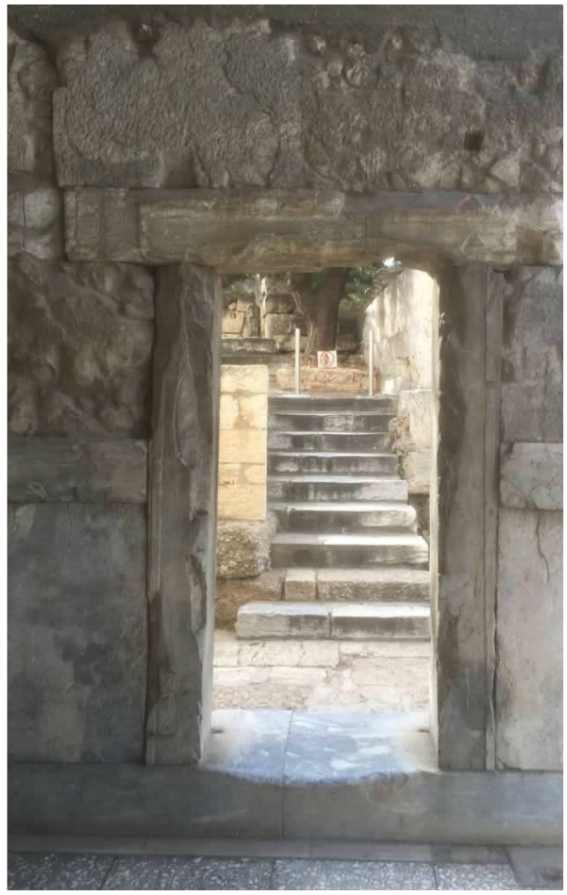

Skiron has upturned his urn from where hot ashes may pour out.
Boreas is holding a conch shell. He can be heard from far away!
Kaikias is holding a shield full of hail.
N
W
E
S
Zephyrus is carrying spring flowers in the folds of his mantle.
Apeliotes, a friend of the farme is carrying fruit and grain.
Lips is holding the stern of a ship, probably assisting its voyage.
Notus is pouring water from a vase. He brings rain and damp.
Eurus looks ahead, wrapped in heavy garments.

You can see the Tower of the Winds at the far end of the Roman Agora - a meeting place in ancient times. The much larger Greek Agora is a leisurely walk away.

The area in the centre of Athens known as the Greek Agora was a place of trading and oratory – a mixture of Speakers Corner, the House of Commons and an open air Brent Cross. It is a large space and can easily consume a couple of hours of wandering as there is much to see. So many highlights including the Stoa of Attalos – a long 2nd Century BC building with many columns and housing a fantastic museum. Sitting high up in the Agora is the best preserved Classical Doric temple in Greece , the Temple of Hephaestus, the god of fire, metalworking, stone masonry, forges and sculpture. Other features are the Odeon of Agrippa and the Monument of the Eponymous Heroes. The photo below is an exhibit from the Stoa Museum which deserves a place on everyone's dressing table – a perfume bottle in the form of a kneeling athlete winding a ribbon about his head as a symbol of victory.

A section of the huge Greek Agora with a view of the Stoa of Attalos at the top of the picture.

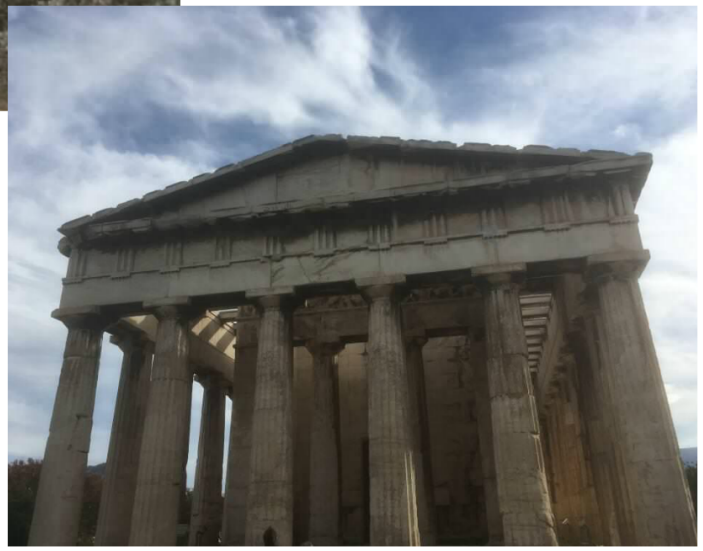
A closer view of the Stoa of Attalos, built by King Attalos of Pergamon. A stoa is a covered walkway or portico. This one was reconstructed in the 1950s.

Views in and outside the Stoa of Attalos, which houses a small but excellent museum.

Seen from The Acropolis, the Stoa of Attalos with the Church of the Holy Apostles in the foreground. (Photo courtesy of Wikipedia)

The Temple of Hephaestus



The Temple of Hephaestus served as the Greek Orthodox Church of St George Akamates from the 7th century until 1834. (Photo courtesy of Wikipedia)

A beautiful way to spend a sunny Sunday (or any other day) is to take the "walk around the rock" - a stroll around the foot of the Acropolis. It can be a gentle pastime or quite vigorous if you choose to go 'off piste'.

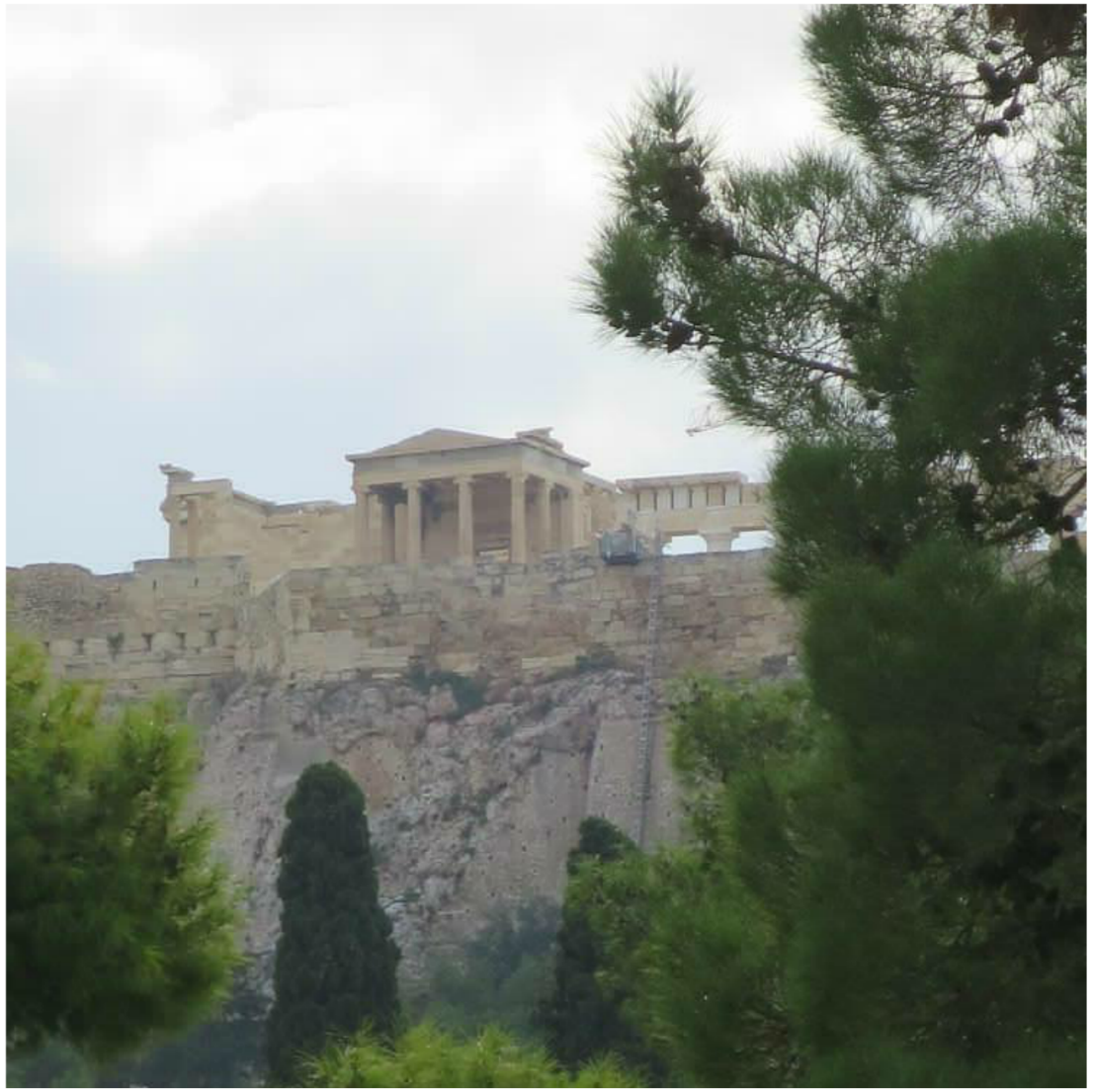
You might start your walk at the ancient Street of the Tripods, near this, the Momument of Lysicrates - the world's oldest monument in the Corinthian style.

Lysicrates was a naval hero but also a sponsor of theatrical shows and erected this in 320-330 BC as a tribute to his chorus's victory in a competition.

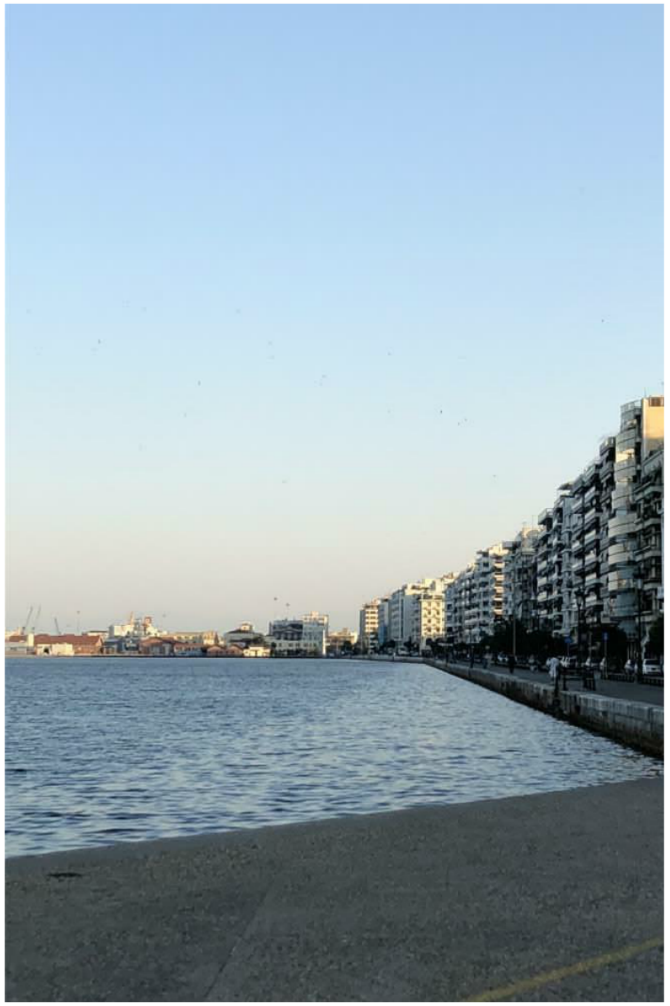
Much of the walk round the rock is along the Grand Promenade (above) which was considerably enhanced as part of the preparations for the Athens Olympic Games in 2004. The walk takes you round to the Greek and Roman Agoras and back into the centre of Athens.

You may notice on your journey this statue of General Yiannis Makriyannis - one of the many heroes of the Greek War of Independence.

It is perhaps stating the obvious but almost wherever you go in Athens , a quick glance upwards and you will have a view of the symbol of this great city - The Parthenon.
Somewhere more modern but containing a glorious display of antiquities is the Acropolis Museum (right).



Farewell to The Acropolis: Having explored Athens, even though only scratching the surface of its many glories, we begin Part Two of our tale some 500 kilometres away in the city of Thessaloniki.



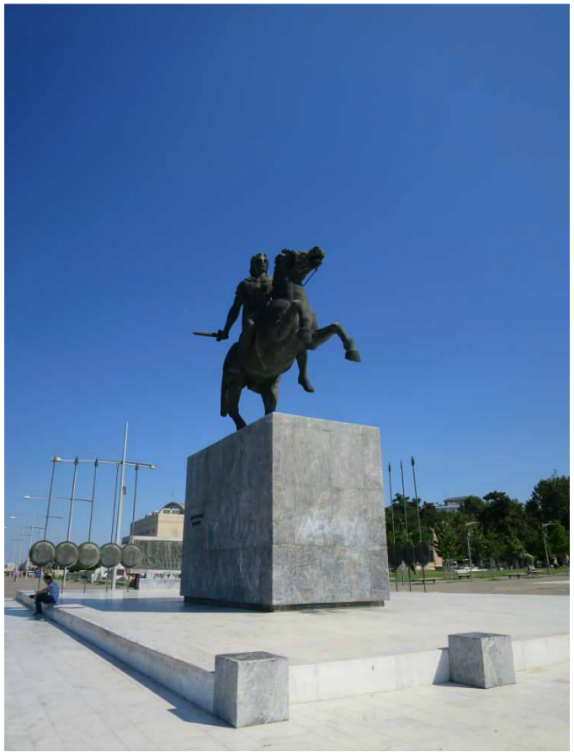
Thessaloniki is smaller than Athens with about half the population. Like Greece's capital it is a lively, busy place but does feel a little more relaxed. It is probably to do with the water - the sea !

When walking along the lengthy sea front, just minutes from the city centre, there is a sense of space and, if you are early enough, a feeling of peace. Also it is an ideal and beautiful place for Nicki to run.

The moon shines above the White Tower , the symbol of Thessaloniki, capital of the Macedonia province of Greece.

Thessaloniki was founded by Cassander, King of Macedon, in 315 BC and named after his wife, Thessalonike, daughter of Philip the Second.
The city's symbol and that of the Macedonian region of Greece, the White Tower was built in the 15th century to replace its destroyed 12th century predecessor . It is also known as the Tower of Blood because of its period as a notorious prison.
Thessaloniki has a long history of many races and religions living peacefully together - punctuated, of course, with periods of murder, massacre and mayhem.
Perhaps the darkest episode in this colourful history is the destruction of the extensive Jewish community by the Nazis in the Second World War. More about that later.

Before the city was formerly founded, the man who became the hero of Thessaloniki, Macedonia and beyond, had been born, lived and died - Alexander the Great. His massive statue on the sea front is awe inspiring.

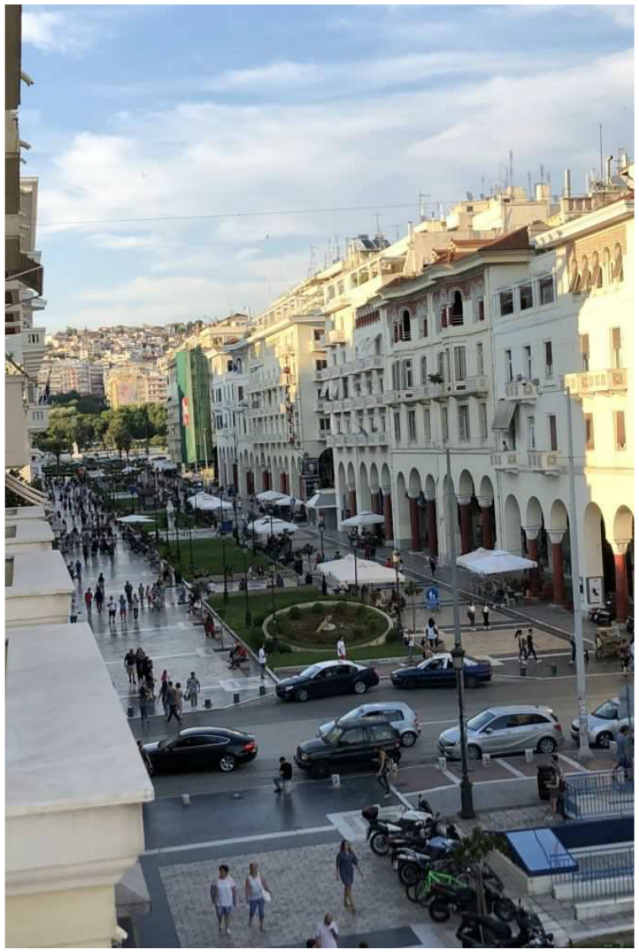


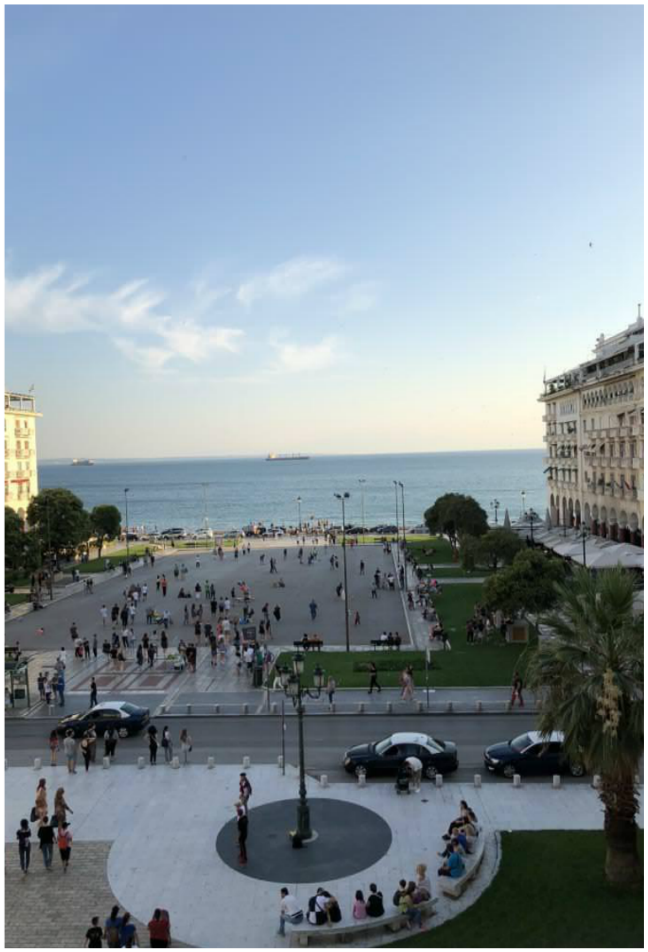
It was about 340 BC that Phillip II of Macedon asked Aristotle to educate his son, Alexander. The great philosopher taught the boy “how to think, not what to think”.

Phillip was assassinated in 336 BC and the boy quickly became a man known to the world as Alexander the Great. Using the knowledge imparted by Aristotle, he became one of the greatest warring leaders in history – a military genius. He never lost a battle and created a massive empire, founding over 70 cities and stretching across three continents.

By the age of 25 he was not only leader of the Greeks, overlord of Asia Minor, Pharaoh of Egypt but also Great King of Persia.
What would have happened if he had lived longer, one can only imagine, as he died of a fever at the age of 33.

Aristotle (pictured right) now sits just along the seafront in Aristotelous Square, overlooking all the varied activities in that busy place.





Arranged for us by favourite and fantastic agents, Fantasy Travel, of Athens, we stayed in the Electra Palace Hotel. Left is our view up the street and right, Aristotelous Square and the sea.

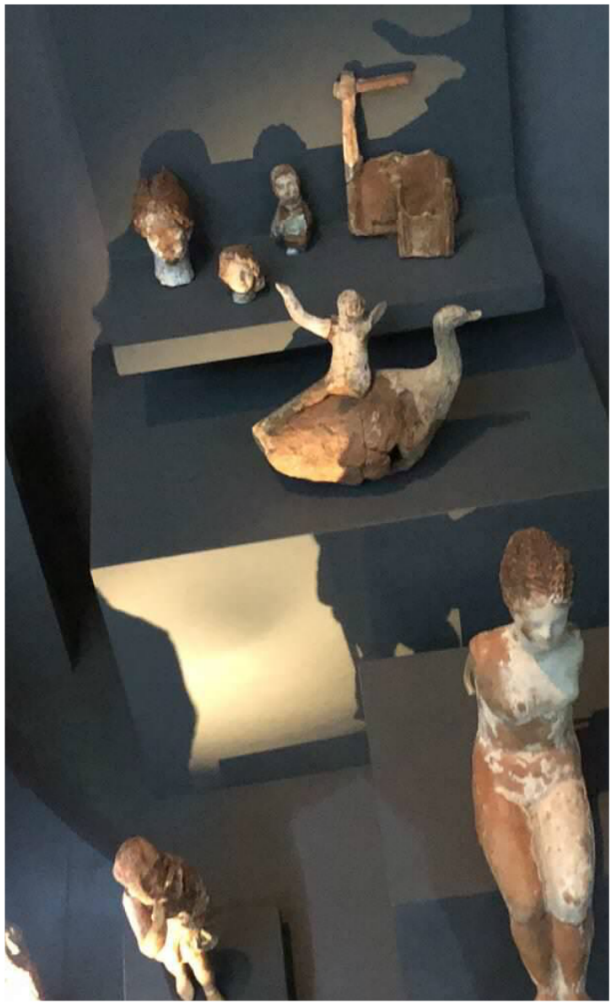
Greece is quite rightly proud of its magnificent museums and Thessaloniki has its fair share. The best known is the city's Archaeological Museum and exhibits from there will be featured on the next few pages.

As a starter,here is Aphrodite, goddess of beauty, charm and love.

Another fascinating place is the Museum of Byzantine Culture - photos from there featured in an earlier book.

Later, the stark and disturbing contents of the Jewish Museum will be revealed.

The ancient Greeks were gifted at crafting tiny clay models of people and animals to be buried in graves as gifts for the Gods. Above, very small feet and a leg carved in ivory. Below, bronze figures of Hermes and Heracles.



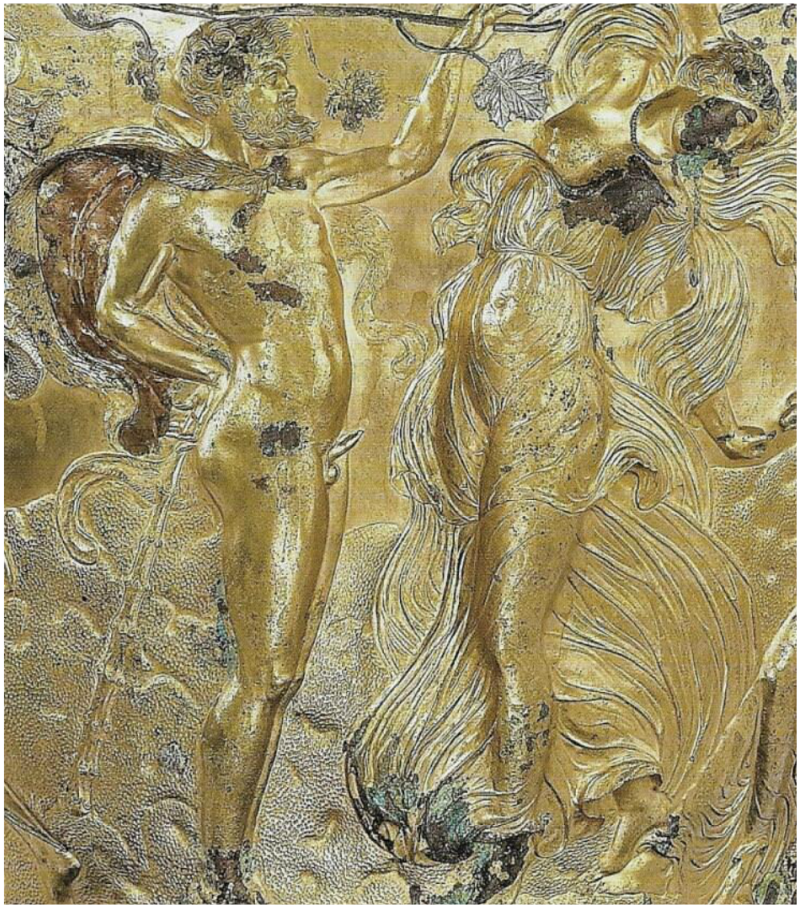
More examples of the offerings - votives - to the Gods, often found in excavations of ancient graves.

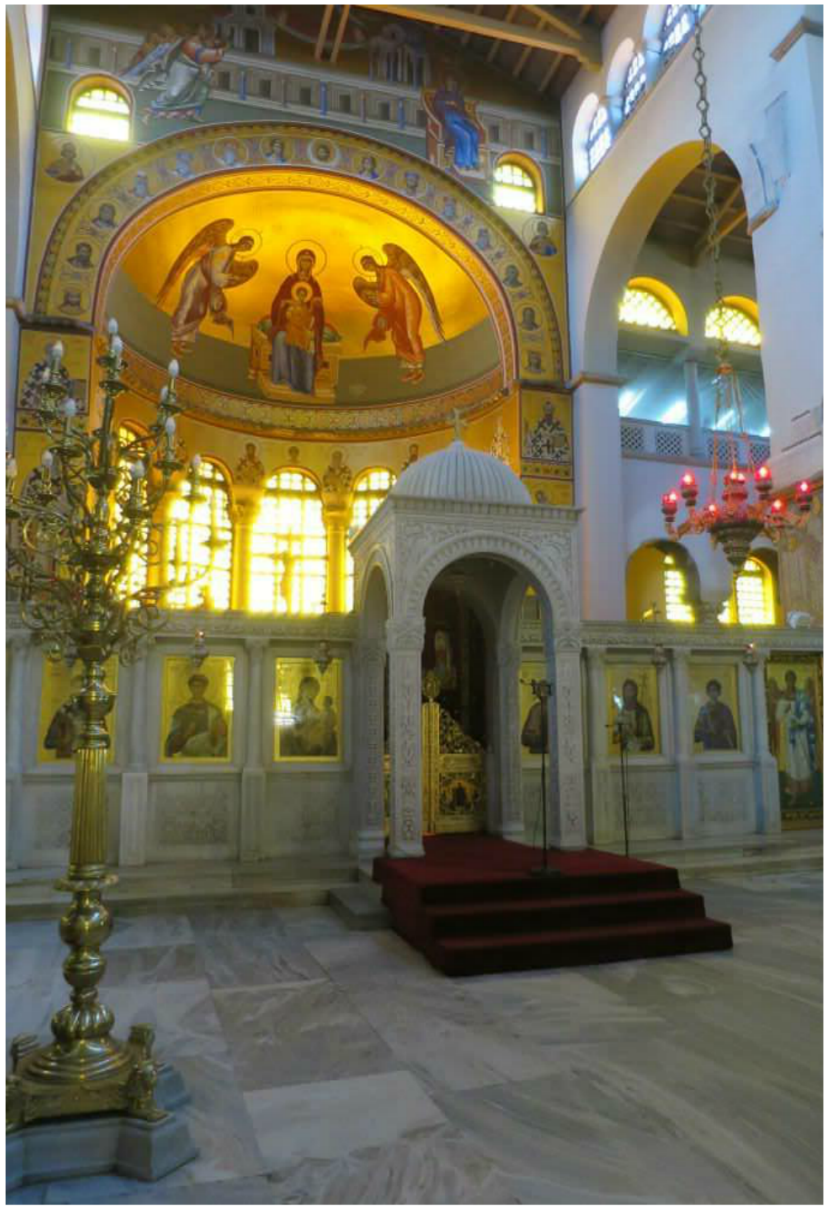
Left, inkwells and styluses (pens) from the 5th Century BC found in nearby Halkidiki.

Students would write on wooden tablets covered with wax. The hard stylus cut the letters into the soft surface and erasing was done by using the broad end of the stylus.

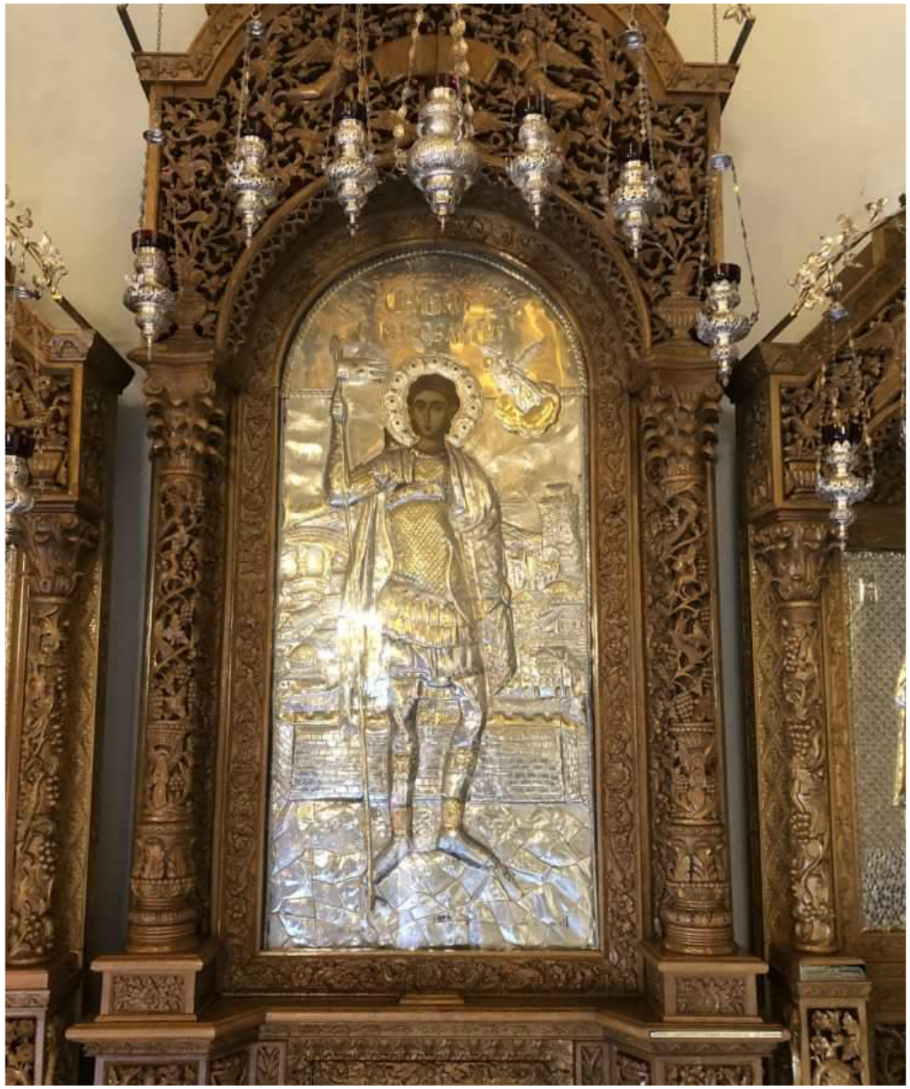
Right, small containers for liquids - usually wine - and food, as offering for the Gods.

The impressive Derveni krater (40 kgs in weight and 3ft high) was excavated, complete with cremated bones inside, from a grave near the city. It depicts the sacred wedding of Ariadne and Dionysus and is decorated with wedding guests in various states of intoxication and excitement. A krater is a mixing vessel.



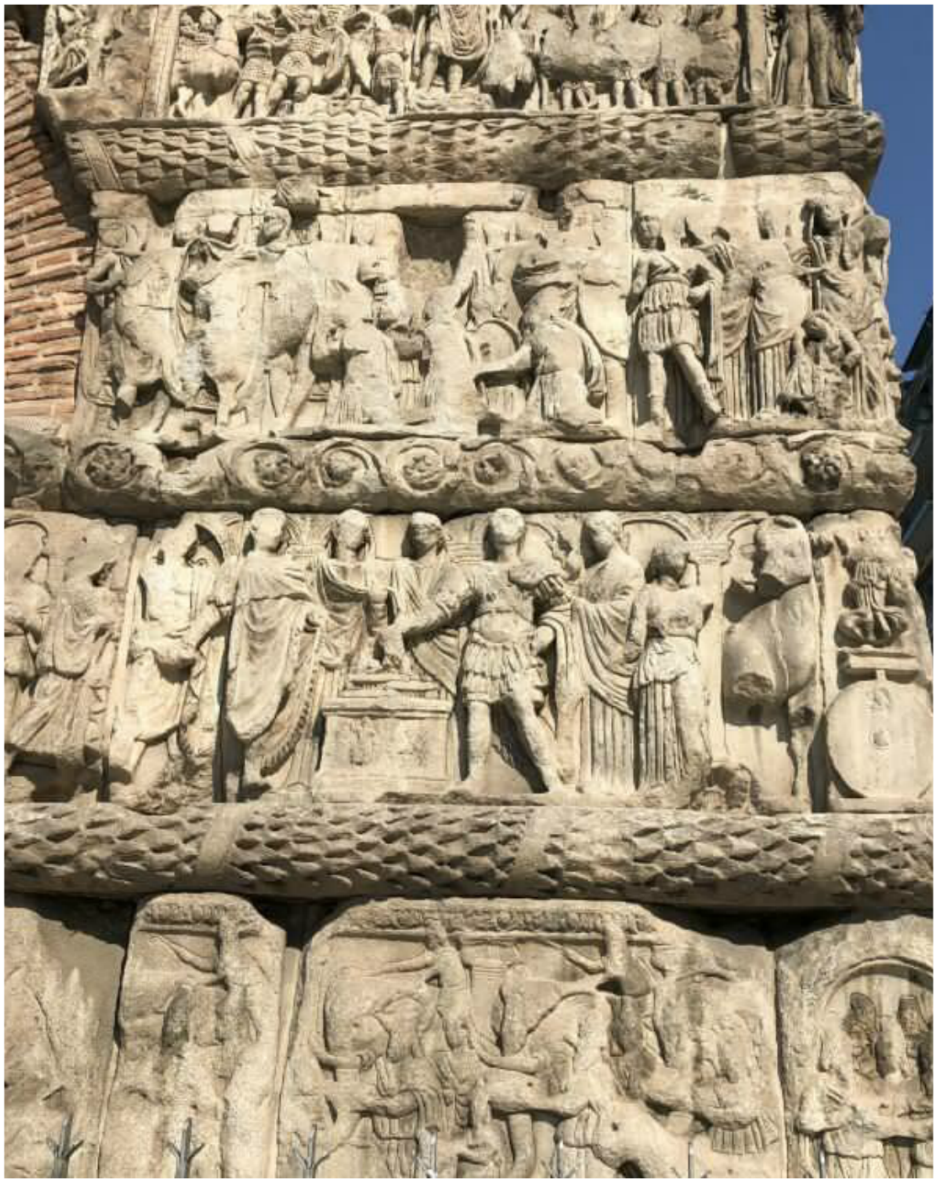


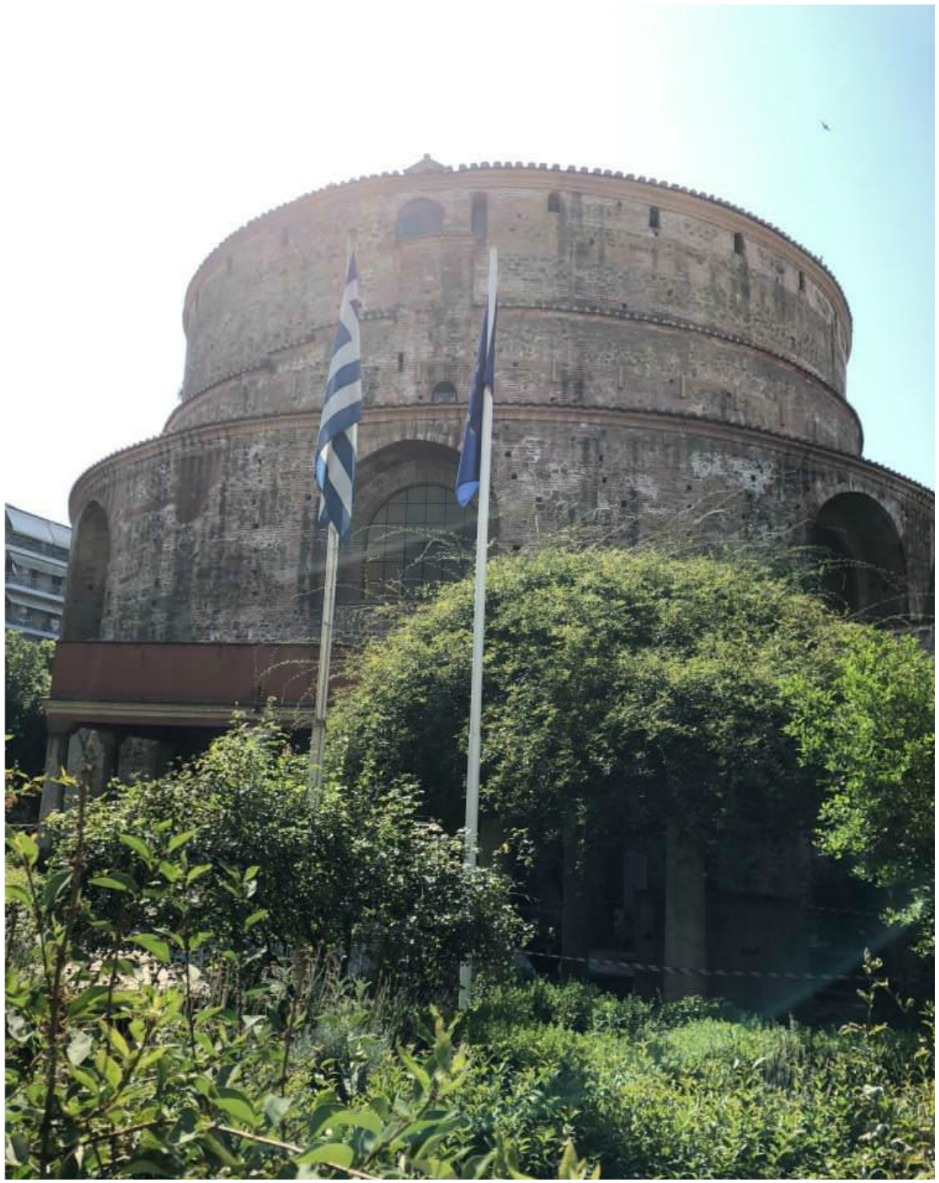
The Church of St Demetrios, built in the 5th century BC. is very important in the Greek Orthodox religion and regarded as Thessaloniki's cathedral.
It is a busy place - a working church with people coming and going, kissing icons, lighting incense, burning candles and praying as an integral part of their daily lives.
Below, Nicki waits to pass by the bones of St. Demetrios.



St Demetrios became a martyr when he was executed after professing his Christian faith

In the 4th century AD, Roman Emperor Galerius commissioned this huge arch, not surprisingly called the Arch of Galerius, and The Rotunda (also known as the Church of Agios Georgios). These two buildings were joined together by a walkway and were part of the Emperor's domain in the city.





Close up of intricate adornments on the Arch of Galerius and a view of The Rotunda, which is now a historical monument under the Greek Ministry of Culture with access granted for various festivities during the year. Claimed by some to be the oldest Christian church in the world, it is 30m high with 6m thick walls.

A visit to the remarkable Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki - a lovingly restored building, bulging with information and sadness - is a moving experience.
Photography was not allowed but I have copied some of the pictures from a book purchased at the museum.

Not satisfied with sending 50,000 Jews from Thessaloniki to be murdered in the death camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau, the Nazis destroyed their beloved cemetery containing over 300,000 burials from the previous 500 years.

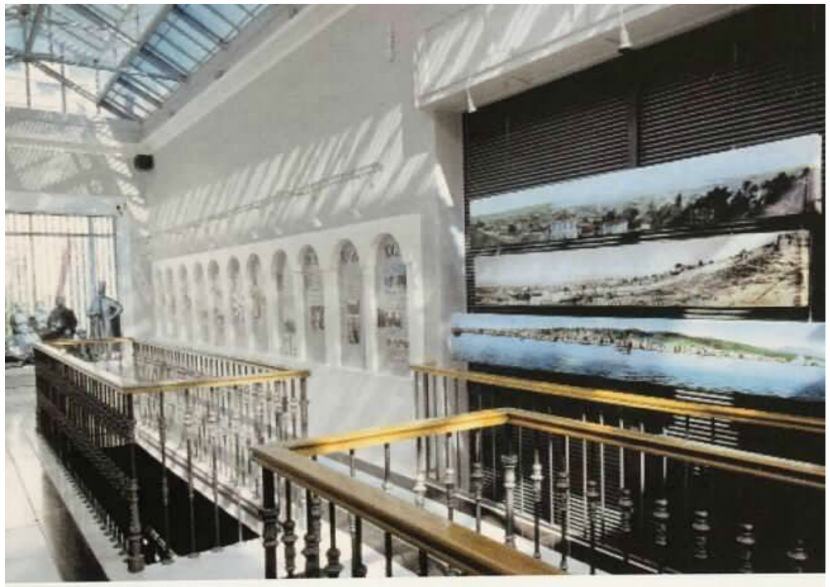
Hitler targeted the living but also attacked the dead.

The lovingly cared for, often highly ornate, graves from the 324,000 sq metre site were broken and used for building materials and in road construction.

This obscenity in 1942 was a prelude to the extermination of an entire community that had lived in Thessaloniki for over 2000 years. At one point, in 1873 they were 70,000 strong - over half the population of this vibrant and multi-cultural city.

Destruction began, as in many places, with the Germans listing names, stealing and destroying homes and property, pushing Jews into ghettos, insisting on the wearing of the yellow star, humiliating them in public, making them carry out hard labour (often resulting in death) and then shipping them out on train after train. They said they were going to a new town, to a new life in Poland.

Instead, it was to the gas chambers and death.



Front door to the Jewish Museum and two of the rooms telling the story of the long history of Jews in Thessaloniki.

More photos of the Museum and its exhibits

Below, the cemetery after destruction - people scrabbled frantically in the ruins, searching for the graves and remains of their loved ones.

The Nazis insisted that Jews wore the yellow star. This elderly couple (left) retain their dignity and defiance in the face of unimaginable adversity.

Thessaloniki rises steeply up to the city's acropolis and the Ano Poli - the Upper Town.

Ano Poli is the oldest part of Thessaloniki and the most traditional as it preserves the Ottoman and Byzantine fabric, having escaped most of the ravages of the great fire of 1917 which destroyed much of the rest of the city.

It features narrow streets, old squares and houses in traditional Greek and Turkish architecture.
Much of the old city walls remain, as can be seen above.

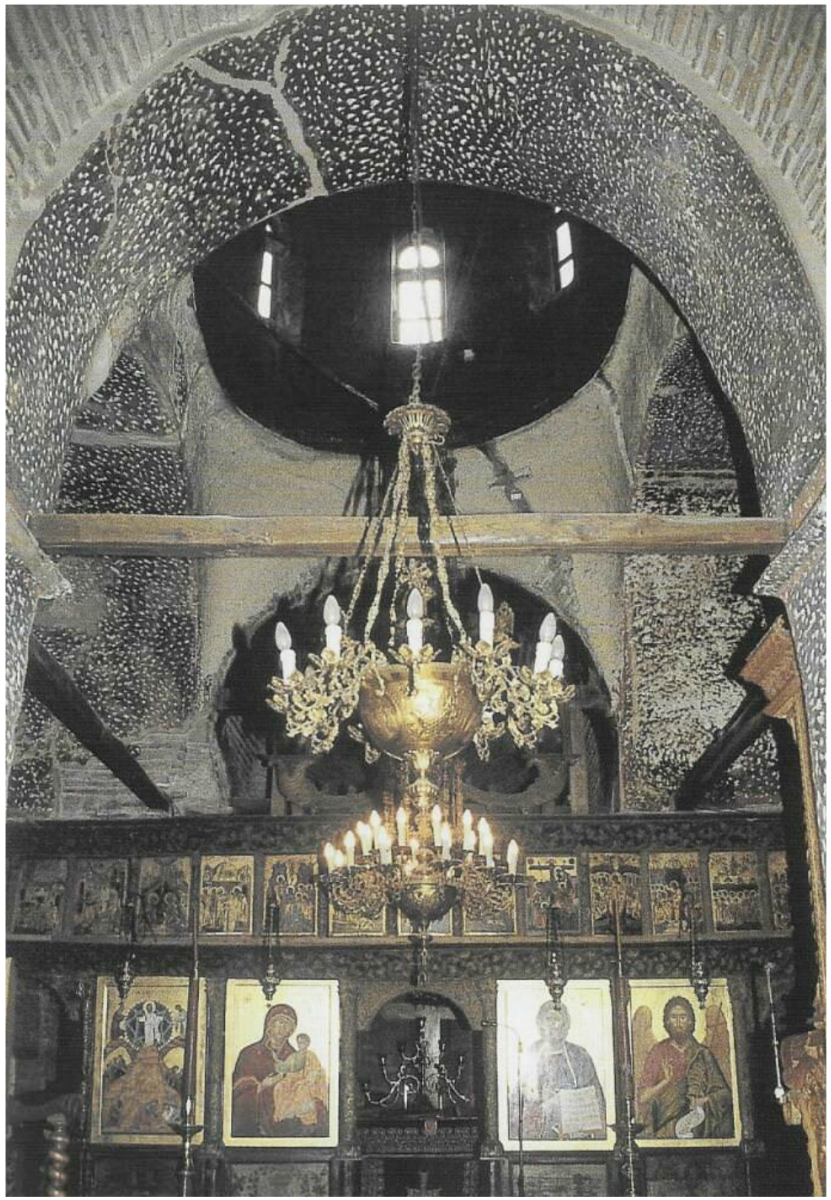
Views from the Ano Poli. In the top photo, The Rotonda is there, down below.

On clear days Mount Olympus - home of the Gods - can be seen 100 km away.

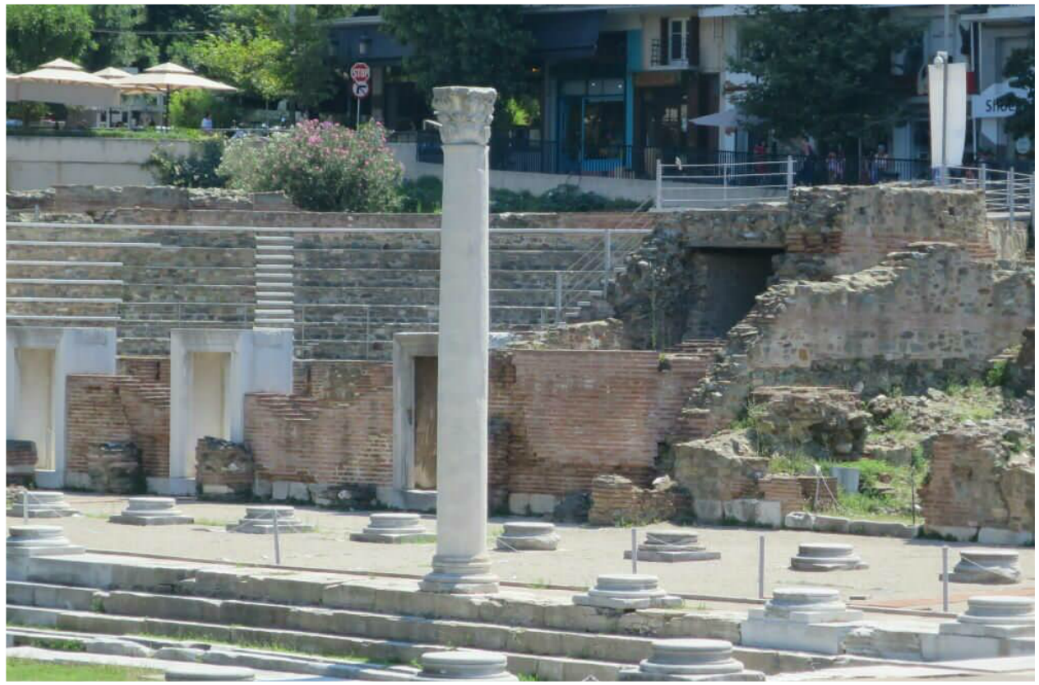
Up at the 'top' of the city in the Upper Town is a beautiful monastery which has been operating since 1350. It bears the remarkable name 'The Holy Royal Patriarchal and Stavropegic Monastery of Vlatadon'.

It has been described as 'the balcony of Thessaloniki' - the photo below shows why.

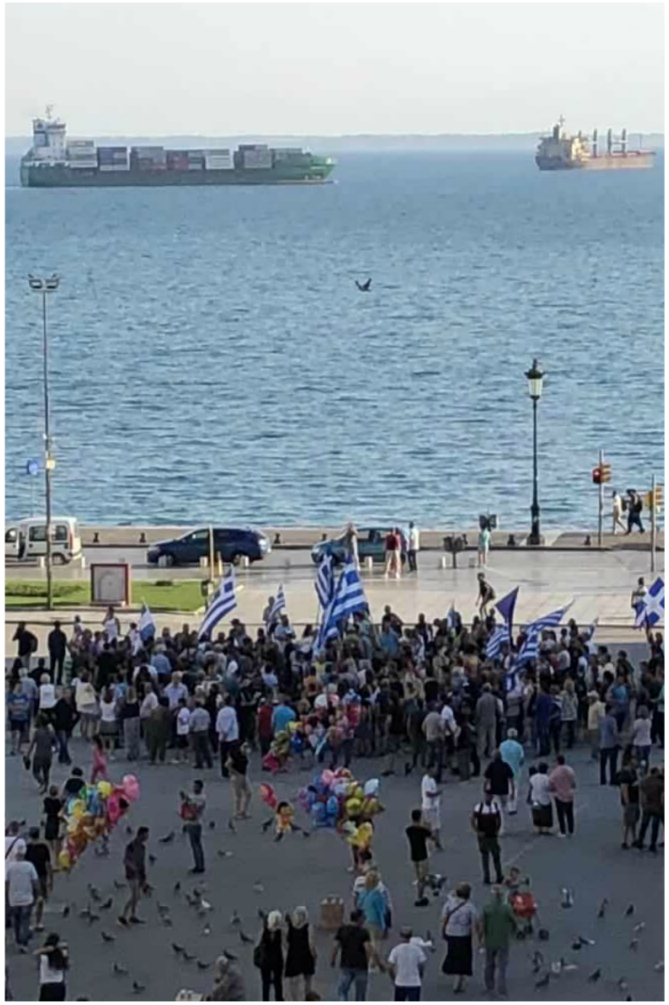
It is a very active monastery and also on site is the Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies and accommodation for theological students from around the world.



No photography is allowed in the monastery but I copied this picture (right) from a guide book. It is a view of the interior of the Katholikon.

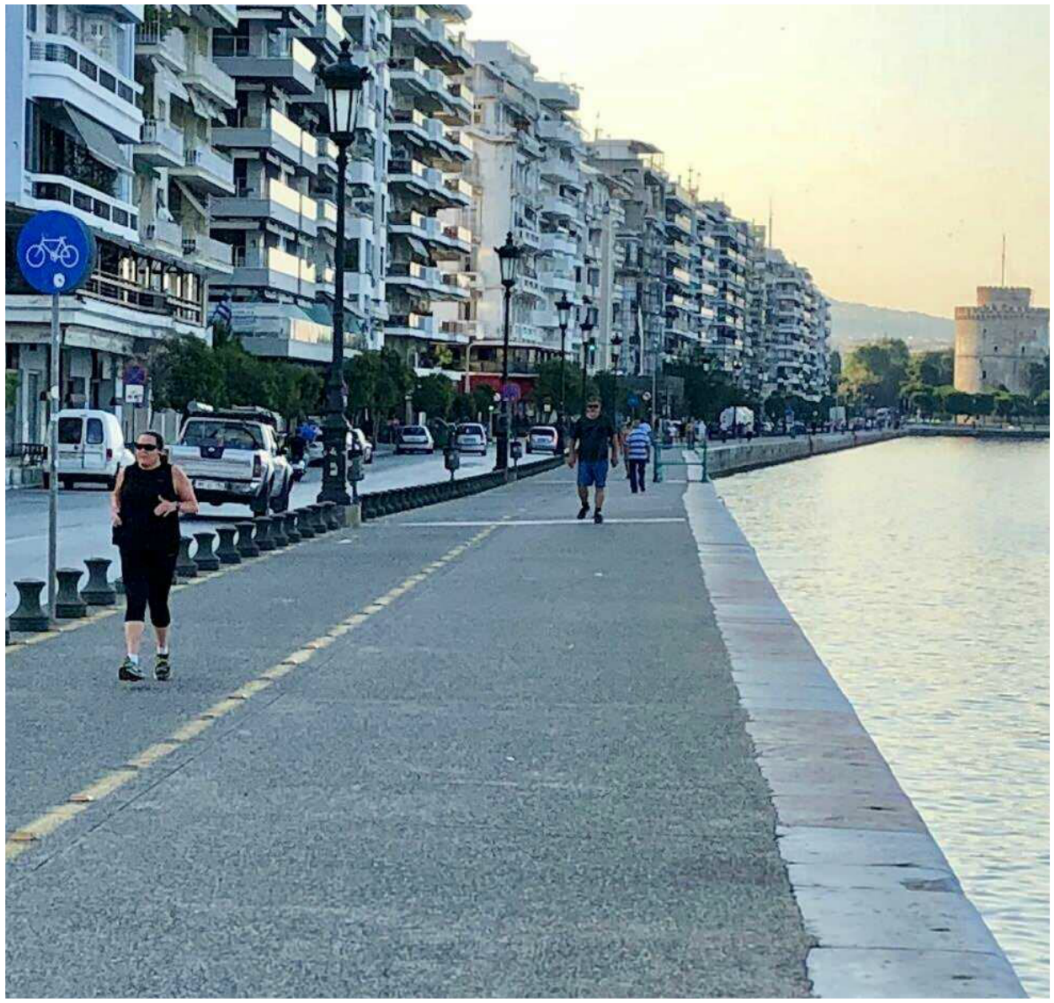


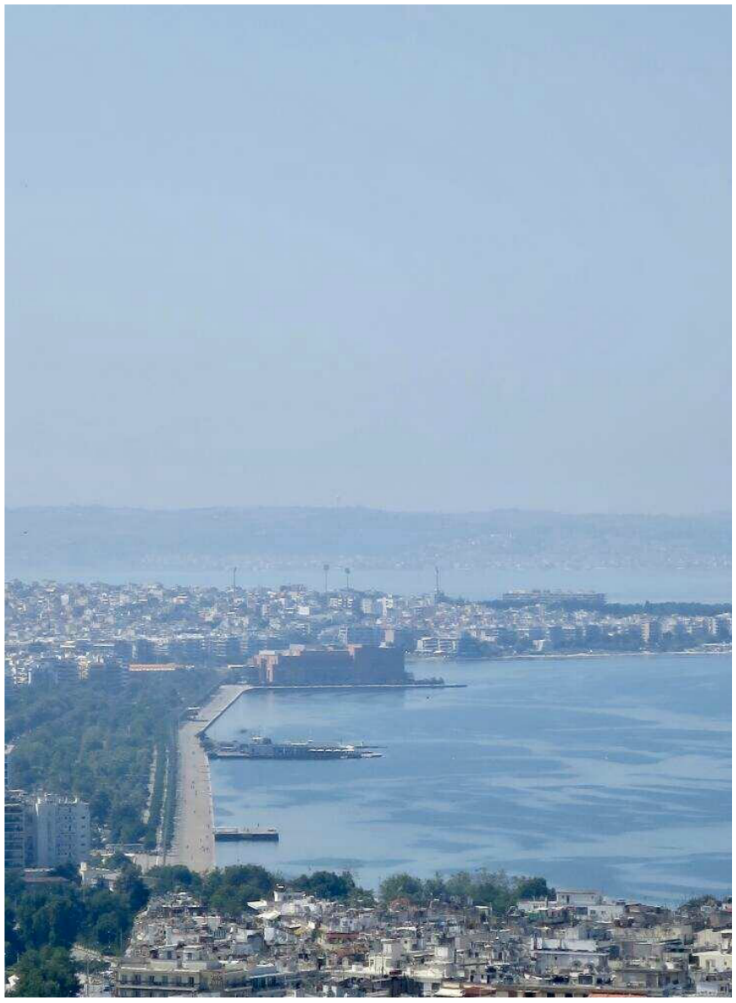
Excavating is a constant activity in the middle of Thessaloniki (and all around). The reason the planned metro is years late is because everytime work begins, another archaeological treasure is revealed.



Back to Aristotelous Square and the water. Protestors gather to continue the fight against the proposed name change of their neighbours - FYROM - the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia, while the ships come and go across the Thermaic Gulf.

A final view of Aristotelous Square from our hotel room and, for showing us so much of this stunning city, grateful thanks to our taxi driver Dimitris (right) - a superb guide and a real gentleman.





Just like the constant presence of The Parthenon in Athens, the White Tower is never far away in Thessaloniki. Farewell to a great running track as we look across beyond the hazy city limits towards the three prongs of Halkidiki in the far distance.

The flag proudly draped over two great cities and many precious and extraordinary antiquities.