

# SPENDING TIME IN THESSALONIKI... and maybe Athens too

Rare Bird Club of BirdLife International  
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**Whilst the nature in the region is certainly some of Europe's finest, you may also have heard that Greece has something of a history. There are even a few ruins scattered around...**

A trip in and out of Thessaloniki gives a perfect opportunity to visit some of the ancient world's finest monuments and cities, such as Thessaloniki itself, then Athens, the oracles at Delphi and Dodoni, the towering monasteries of Meteora and ancient cities such as Aigae (Vergina), Dion (under Mt Olympos), Epidavros, Pella (the second capital of the Macedons) and Phillipi (where Octavius and Mark Anthony defeated Brutus and Cassius, and later where St Paul was imprisoned).

If you'd like some tips on visiting these, please ask Sarah to put you in touch with Chris at Balkan Tracks, but for now, here's a brief introduction to your arrival and departure city, Thessaloniki.

## ***Thessaloniki***

As a major port city, Thessaloniki - or Salonika - has been at the heart of the region for centuries. Founded in 315 BC by Cassander of Macedon, it became the second largest and wealthiest city of the Byzantine Empire, behind only Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul). Conquered by the Ottomans in 1430, Thessaloniki then passed to modern Greece on 8 November 1912.

Remains from throughout history survive today amongst the modern buildings and this small city has 15 UNESCO heritage sites within a short walk of each other, including the Roman market and forum, tiny churches, cathedrals, monasteries and the castle atop the Old Town. The city boasts rambling cobbled streets with tiny shops and taverns, mosques and hamman dotted around the city.

Indeed, the [city's UNESCO website](#) is a good start. It's not very user friendly, but if you scroll down under the map, you can go left-to-right through the 15 UNESCO sites. Or download their dedicated [UNESCO City Map](#).

Thessaloniki has an incredible archaeological museum, together with fine photographic, Byzantine and Jewish history museums – indeed, on the eve of WWII, Thessaloniki had Europe’s largest Jewish population.

One mustn’t forget Mediterranean café culture at its best along the coastal road and throughout the city. It’s simply a superbly relaxed yet little known and visited gem of a town.

Mark Mazower's book, **Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews**, is essential reading for those considering a stop here.

A **reading list** and **recommended hotels** will be found in the Tour Confirmation package for those who book on, but if you’d like to see it early, please do get in touch.

### ***Athens***

Even with COVID, it is expected that multiple daily flights will connect Thessaloniki to Athens, and there is also a train that takes around four hours and has some wonderful views as it chugs along the coastline for part of the route. It’s not a modern intercity, but has first-class compartments for six people, regular second class compartments and a restaurant car.

Athens itself won’t need much of an introduction, but the recently opened museum for the Acropolis is not to be missed. Its top floor has 360° floor-to-ceiling glass, offering views all around Athens and right up to the Acropolis itself. Most impressively of all, inside is a life size replica of the Parthenon, complete with original friezes. It is something to behold. Together with the tomb of Phillip II in Vergina, they must surely rate as Europe’s most impressive and atmospheric museums.

Add in the marble stadium for the first modern Olympics in 1896, the Roman agora, temple to Poseidon and Sounio... the list goes on.

Athens is well worth flying in and out off.