



**visits4u Case Studies:
Historical Centre of Athens
Athens, Greece**

Historical Centre of Athens



Athens, Greece

Title: The Historical Centre of Athens as an Accessible Destination

Description

Tourism in Greece is a major industry and the key source of foreign income. Based largely on sea, sun and world heritage monuments, tourism development is now focusing on diversifying the range of offers and higher quality of services in order to strengthen the economy. In the modern era, tourists have come to Athens both for its historical significance but also as a stopover along the route to the islands of the Aegean and beyond.

The historical monuments of Athens and its museums, are the most visited sites in Greece. Over 1.5 million people visited the Acropolis World Heritage site in 2012 and almost 5 million people visited the New Acropolis Museum in the first 3 years after its opening in 2009.

The city's historical centre was developed and renovated in preparation for the Olympic and Paralympic Games, according to the Greek Accessibility Guidelines and urban planning legislation. The International Paralympic Committee's expectations for an accessible city were also a motivating factor

for creating an accessible environment for all. Today, the legacy of the 2004 Games can be seen in the accessible pedestrian environment and public transport network of the city centre.

Becoming inclusive:

1. Description

The case study describes how Athens, after being awarded the Olympic and Paralympic Games 2004, embarked on a transformation of the historical centre of the city, incorporating accessibility for all, as a key element in the building, infrastructure and public transport system.

It was a turning point for the country and especially for the host city, resulting in great developments in infrastructure and urban planning. The preparations for this world-class event have contributed to significant improvements in the quality of the tourism offer, including new motorways, roads, railways, the new international airport, public transport, hotel accommodation and the renewal of the city centre. Although accessibility provisions for persons with disabilities had already been introduced in policies, planning and design works, these requirements were not widely introduced or respected. Due to the Games, access became a key requirement for all projects, including the ‘unification’ of the archaeological sites and the provision of wheelchair access, for the first time, to the symbol of Greek civilization, the Acropolis.

2. Description of steps taken, changes and progress

- **Unification of Athens Archaeological Sites**

Athens' archaeological sites are the principal elements of the city's cultural heritage, reflecting its historical continuity since ancient times. The archaeological sites of Athens were regarded as “a museum open to the world” and for decades, their unification had been a dream for architects and urban planners. Therefore, the Unification of Athens Archaeological Sites was included in the City of Athens General Urban Plan addressing:

- The promotion of the historical character of Athens and the upgrading of its central area.
- The improvement of the quality of life for all its residents and the protection of the natural environment.

Among the specific targets of the plan were:

- The upgrading and decongestion of Athens' and Piraeus' central areas with emphasis on the conservation of their historical character and on the promotion of their urban image.
- Planning of strategic urban renewal interventions.

The term "unification" implies the creation of a network of major cultural landmarks such as the principal monuments and archaeological sites of the city, interconnected with a sequence of open spaces and green areas, service facilities and areas designated for cultural activities and recreation.

The principal objectives of the plan were:

- The organization and upgrading of the archaeological sites.
- The creation of a high quality pedestrian network, which connects the archaeological zones and recreates, in part, ancient pedestrian movements.
- The creation of green areas and open spaces in conjunction with new planting in the pedestrian network.
- The rehabilitation and conservation of monuments and renovation and upgrading of buildings (refurbishment of facades, building maintenance, removal of advertisements etc).
- The reshaping of some of Athens' most historical squares.
- Design and implementation of a traffic and parking management scheme that caters for visitors and residents and resolves through traffic pressures including a fixed-rail tramway, which will service the main pedestrian corridors.
- Design and implementation of a land-use plan affecting neighbouring areas that will protect residential areas, while safeguarding at the same time normal conditions of function for the existing commercial uses, light industry and artisans establishments.

Great attention has been paid to the needs of people with mobility impairments and blind/visually impaired in the design of the pedestrian walkway.

The state archaeologists had a specific role in the project. They proposed to replace asphalted roadways with cobblestones to evoke a traditional

character. A smooth stone path was not included in the walkway, which would have given more comfort to wheelchair users and people with pushchairs and those with walking difficulties. Nevertheless, many of these citizens and visitors enjoy moving freely throughout the new pedestrian route.

A continuous tactile route for guiding blind persons was included in the paving. During its construction there was a close consultation with the Panhellenic Union of the Blind. It may be noted that this is not the “standard” tactile paving, as specified in the Greek Accessibility Guidelines. Instead, it was agreed with the archaeologists that the blind route should not have a color contrast but that it should be made of marble and with only three wide raised, flattened lines (instead of the standard pattern which has six narrow ridged ones).

- **Disabled Access to the Acropolis - World Heritage Site**

The Acropolis is the best known symbol of ancient Greek civilization, and a UNESCO world heritage site. Its oldest monuments including the Parthenon, date back 2500 years. The site is 160 meters high and it had remained inaccessible to people with various types of disabilities until the organization of the Paralympics Games in 2004. For decades the only access to the top was by a steep and twisting footpath with many steps cut in the rock, and without handrails. Access was difficult and even dangerous in wet, slippery conditions.

Therefore a solution was reached by constructing an elevator (open type-without well) as the least disturbing and reversible intervention. The lift was placed on the north slope of the Hill and covers a distance of 70 m. from the foot to the top of the site. To further facilitate access to the elevator, a special separate entrance north of the main entrance to the site, has been constructed, where a van can transport mobility impaired visitors to a conveyor platform, which can then transfer both wheelchair and person to the elevator.

More over a specially defined path was constructed at the site to ensure a smooth tour meanwhile W.C. facilities for people with disabilities are available both on the west slope of the hill, as well as on the east side of the site.



Ascent to the Acropolis by lift and wheelchair user viewing the Erechtheion

(<http://www.accessibletourism.org/resources/case-study-10-ec-athens-historical-centre-greece.pdf>)

- **New Acropolis Museum**

The New Acropolis Museum is located below the Acropolis. It is a landmark for Athens and it is the 3rd most popular museum in the world. Designed by the Swiss architect, Bernard Tschumi, it opened in 2009. Accessibility has been considered, focusing mostly on the requirements of wheelchair users. Wheelchairs are also available free of charge at the Museum entrance for those with walking difficulties.

- **Transport**

The historical centre of Athens is served by public transport. The Athens Urban Transport Organization - OASA is the largest mass transit system of Greece. From July 2011, the Athens Mass Transit System consists of: a bus network, an electric trolleybus network, Athens Tram system, the Piraeus-Kifissia urban railway (ISAP), the Athens Metro system and a suburban rail system.

The transport system is designed to be accessible to wheelchair users and other persons with disabilities. The extent to which accessibility requirements for disabled passengers has been integrated in the transport planning, contributes to a very high level of access throughout the centre of Athens and the regenerated area when compared with other European historical cities. The new Metro system, combined with the renovated electric railway, is regarded as one of the most accessible in Europe, combining high technical standards and full accessibility with art and cultural exhibits at the stations.

It is important to mention that OASA provides accessibility information in its main website and other relevant websites as well as a Guideline to Passenger Rights and advice to people with disabilities about how to use the public transport system. Public transport staff receives continuous training to cater for these passengers with respect, taking into account any modifications concerning assistance of disabled passengers and the law. OASA provides door-to-door service from Monday to Friday, between 08.00 o'clock to 22.00 hours with three specially designed vans which take up to 7 people and three wheel chairs. This service is provided to paraplegics and tetraplegics and the service is upon request.

3. Main stakeholders / actors

- Ministry of the Environment, Planning and Public Works
- Ministry of Culture
- Municipality of Athens
- Unification of the Archaeological Sites of Athens S.A. - EAXA
- Acropolis Museum Board
- Athens Urban Transport Organization - OASA
- Panhellenic Union of the Blind

4. Results and Impact

Joining the archaeological sites by a pedestrian route was an innovative plan which has created a new accessible environment in a city centre that suffered greatly from motor traffic. The regenerated area continues to benefit from giving better access to everyone and has become the focal point for tourist offers and especially for disabled visitors.

The new Metro system, combined with the renovated electric railway, is regarded currently as one of the most accessible in Europe, combining high technical standards and full accessibility with art and cultural exhibits at the stations.

This wide-scale initiative has contributed to a renewed image of the city, attracting more tourists and providing opportunities for new businesses to be established in spite of the recent years' financial crisis.

5. Lessons learnt

This intervention has broken the boundaries of what of what was considered possible in adapting heritage sites, resulting in world-wide

recognition that people with disabilities have right to visit and enjoy cultural heritage sites on equal terms with others. Generally, the pedestrian area constitutes a proven good practice example of tourism accessibility, which is now being used as a model for other Greek cities.

The accessible public transport system is a key factor in enabling citizens and tourists to access and enjoy the historical centre. Stations are well placed to serve major points of interest, such as museums, and encourage shorter and longer walks for people of all ages, abilities and fitness levels.

Heritage routes also contribute to business development and new economic opportunities, as visitors are open to enjoying various activities in the area, relax, eat, drink and shop in a pleasant and calm environment.

Although the historical centre of Athens has very good physical accessibility and it is served by accessible public transport, meeting the needs of disabled visitors, for many years the good level of access (compared with other European heritage cities) has not been understood as a valued selling point by the tourist authorities. This appears to be changing now, with new action plans for 'City Break' tourism, walking tours and senior tourism being promoted by public and private organizations.

Further information

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/404>

http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/3/gh351.jsp?obj_id=2384

<http://www.accessibletourism.org/resources/case-study-10-ec-athens-historical-centre-greece.pdf>

www.theacropolismuseum.gr/

www.oasa.gr/

<http://www.culture.gr/en/service/SitePages/view.aspx?iID=2579>



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