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6 Amazing Lesser-Known Experiences In Athens, Greece



Mural at Koroupi Station
PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

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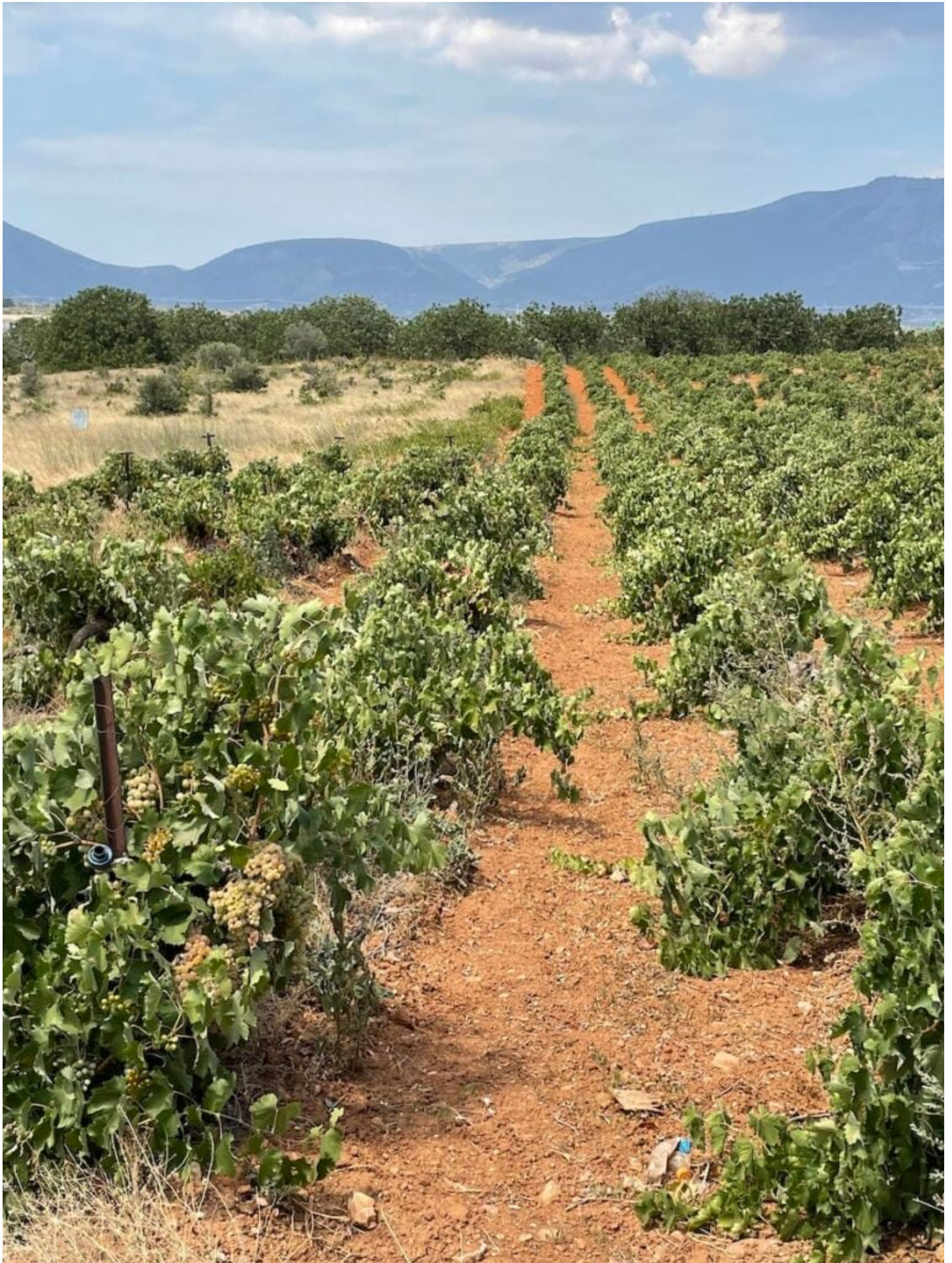
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Anyone who's ever visited Athens, Greece, will no doubt have wanted to explore ancient sites — such as the Acropolis and Parthenon — museums, and shopping options in the Greek capital's eclectic neighborhoods. Most of Athens's activities and sights are centrally located, hence, visitors don't really think to explore where they literally land or will depart from. But you should.

The region surrounding Athens Airport — less than an hour's drive from the city center — is teeming with alternative, lesser-known attractions that should definitely be on your itinerary.

Rare for an international airport, Athens is not located in an industrial zone. Located in Spata, a town 12 miles east and less than an hour from central Athens, the airport can be found slightly inland in the agricultural region of Eastern Attica, also known as Mesogaia. Made up of approximately six villages, in Greek, *Mesogaia* means “middle land.” It is named as such because it literally lies in a valley “bowl” (the middle), in the foothills of Mount Penteli and Mount Hymettus.

Here, you’ll find a plethora of unique natural and cultural places to explore. Surrounded by nature, vineyards, hidden churches, and Frankish towers, the Mesogaia region is waiting to be explored. It is perfect for a small trip before you depart on your flight to round off your stay in this unique city.



Vineyards around Mesogaia region of Athens

PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

1. Wine Tours

As mentioned, Spata is a big wine-growing area. Indeed, as you fly into Athens Airport, it's possible to see the vineyards laid out below you.

Greek mythology tells us that Dionysus, the God of Wine, shared his secrets of wine-making with the residents of this region. Mesogaia is thought to be the oldest and largest wine-producing region in Greece and it is where *Retsina* originates — a Greek white resinated wine that's at least 2,000 years old. There's also a good selection of dry wines from the locally-cultivated Savatiano grape.

Take part in a [wine tour](#), which allows you to taste four different varieties and create your own unique blend with a custom-made name tag to take back as a unique souvenir.

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A freshly harvested fig
PHOTO CREDIT: VOURYIA TOURS

2. Figs And Pistachios

Aside from the several vineyards, a tour of the Mesogaia region around Athens Airport will showcase the many figs and pistachios that grow here.

Syka, or “figs” in Greek, are a popular staple in Greek gastronomy and have been growing for decades in this region. They are especially prevalent in the region’s village of Markopoulo with two specific brands: Royal Figs of Markopoulo, with green-colored skin and red flesh; and the Royal Black Figs of Markopoulo, with their purple/black skin, more translucent than the green one.

Due to its hot and dry summers, Greece has an ideal climate and is among only 10 countries with the largest production of pistachios, allowing the nuts to intensify their quality and unique flavor in the region. As well as buying bags of figs from tourism shops, the region of Mesogaia has many fig groves where you can see them grown and farmed locally.



Extra virgin olive oil extraction process in the outskirts of Athens

PHOTO CREDIT: THEASTOCK / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

3. Olive Oil Tasting

Referred to as “liquid gold” by Greek philosopher Homer and its healing properties recognized by the famous Ancient Greek physician Hippocrates, the olive tree was sacred in Ancient Athens and associated with being the city’s protector. Furthermore, the olive tree was and has been essential to everyday life as it was used as fuel for lighting and firewood.

Athletes taking part in the Olympic Games would cover their bodies with olive oil and winners were crowned with an olive wreath.

Mesogaia produces excellent-quality extra virgin olive oil from the Athinolia, Koroneiki, and Manaki varieties. A tour around the region will take you to see some olive-producing factories and let you taste a different variety of oils.



Touroulakia bread invitation

PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

4. Embroidered Bread Of Mesogaia

Now, here's something really unique and an opportunity to take away an extra special souvenir.

Embroidered bread is a custom utilized in many parts of the country. As well as annual holidays such as Easter, Christmas, and New Year's, embroidered bread was also made to mark many significant life events such as births, deaths, engagements, baptisms, and weddings.

But the tradition is dying out mostly because it has not been passed down from generation to generation. The bread ovens used to bake these breads are no longer in use and the traditional *Tourtoulakia* — small bread baked as an invitation to a special event, especially weddings — has been replaced with paper invites.

The breads of Mesogaia all had elaborate designs depending on the celebration, such as leaves, birds, flowers, or seeds, all made with simple tools like small sticks and combs. Luckily, a local woman has studied the art of embroidered bread and interviewed the local elders who remember how to make it in order to keep the tradition alive. There is even the unique opportunity to see this embroidered bread made with a chance to make your own design. It's a perfect gift to take home to your loved ones.



A variety of traditional Greek cheeses

PHOTO CREDIT: ALEXANDROS MICHALIDIS / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

5. Family-Run Dairies

Not only does Mesogaia have vineyards, olive groves, and fig groves, the land has a rich farming tradition, producing sheep and goat milk for cheese and related dairy products. There are two family-run dairies in the region where there's the opportunity to relax and have brunch at their shops. Definitely try the *tirópita* ("cheese pie"), made with buttered phyllo pastry and cheese, and the rice pudding with cinnamon sprinkled on top. One thing's for sure: Although it's dairy, it's "healthy" dairy.

6. Frankish Towers, Churches, And *The Beast* Steam Train

A cultural and natural exploration continues with a look at the Frankish towers dotted around the region. The Franks ruled Greece from 1204–1500 and built several towers across the country, either to live in or as a defense lookout for invading pirates.



Frankish Tower of Vravra
PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

Tower Of Vravra

One such tower is the Tower of Vravra in the countryside of the Mesogaia region, near the town of Markopoulo. It was built in the 13th century by the Burgundian Family De La Roche. Research shows that messages used to be transmitted by fire to other tower networks across the region, from Asia Minor to Athens in only a few hours. It makes for impressive viewing as you drive around the countryside and then suddenly happen upon this tower, looming on a hill amongst the vineyards.



Church of the Virgin Mary of Varabas

PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

Virgin Mary Of Varabas Church

Another hidden gem, as you navigate the countryside, is the small church of the Virgin Mary of Varabas. It's an odd place to have a church as it's literally in the middle of nowhere surrounded by the vineyards of the aforementioned Savatiano grape. But it comes alive annually on its name day, September 8th, the Birth of the Virgin Mary. Take time to sit outside this lovely building in the countryside. The peace is only occasionally interrupted by an approaching airplane coming to land at the nearby airport, proof that the airport is nestled within an eclectic agricultural region.



"The Beast"

PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALLE

***The Beast* Steam Train**

No trip to Mesogaia is complete without meeting *The Beast*. This was a steam train on the first suburban rail system used to transport mining goods from the town of Lavrion up to Athens and the port of Piraeus in 1885. As the railway crossed several intermediary villages along the way, it subsequently became a passenger railway. In 1957, it closed for passenger traffic, then in 1962 for commercial use.

It is nicknamed *The Beast* due to its size and how it would labor slowly along the stations, now closed and abandoned. The station in the town of Kouropi has a beautiful mural decorated on it, depicting and honoring the everyday life of the railway.

As you've seen, there are some amazing lesser-known attractions to explore in Athens, mostly around the region of the airport. Be sure to allow enough time, either on your last day in the capital or a few good hours before your flight, to enjoy a different side of the city, not rush to the airport, and sit around for a few hours.

[Vouryia](#) — a tour specialist in the region who can arrange to collect you from your hotel and also include lunch — hosts tours tailor-made for individuals, small groups, or families.

Enjoy your time exploring an alternative side of Athens, Greece.

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