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Travel Stories > Greece > Northern Greece > Thessaloniki

You've probably never been to Thessaloniki, Greece. Here's why you should go



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Feb 1, 2024 • 7 min read



Many travelers to Greece never make it to charming Thessaloniki. We advise against that © Aivita Arika / Shutterstock



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Often eclipsed by [Athens](#), [Thessaloniki](#) – Greece's second-largest city – shouldn't be overlooked.



This student metropolis has a relaxed vibe and great nightlife, ancient sites, fabulous food and nearby wineries that will give anyone plenty to explore for a weekend break or longer, all year round. Is Thessaloniki good for tourists? Resoundingly, yes.

Here are some top travel tips for Thessaloniki, the city by the sea.



Sample Thessaloniki's culinary riches at the historic Kapani Market © Heracles Kritikós / Shutterstock

A culinary crossroads

Gastronomy lovers won't be disappointed in Thessaloniki, which was awarded prestigious City of Gastronomy status by UNESCO in 2021 in recognition of the many cultures that have influenced the dishes of the region over the years. This fusion of Ottoman, Balkan and

Mediterranean traditions results in such specialities as *bougatsa*, a popular cream pastry first brought to the city by refugees from Asia Minor in the 1920s.

Be sure to sample Greek coffee and local street food such as *koulouri*, a sesame bread ring popular all over [Greece](#) that supposedly originated with refugees in Thessaloniki. As you sample traditional handmade foods – pumpkin-and-leek pies, cheeses made from sheep and goats milk, cured meats, olives and extra-virgin olive oil, and traditional delicacies such as small fish mezes – you’ll understand the region’s diversity through its food. Centrally located Kapani Market, the city’s oldest, is a one-stop shop for tasting a range of fish and meat, fruit and vegetables, sweets, nuts, spices and more. A gastronomy tour offered by local outfit [Chef Stories](#) is a great way to combine top flavors while learning more about the historical center of the city.





Ancient fortifications enclose the hilltop neighborhood of Ano Poli (Upper Town) © ColorMaker / Shutterstock

A compact city for strolling

Compact Thessaloniki is a pleasure to walk around, its waterfront never more than a 15-minute stroll from the city center. This scale makes it easy to delve into the city's history and architectural wonders. The city's landmark 34m (111ft)-high [White Tower](#) served as a prison and place of execution during Ottoman times. Today, it's the anchor of the [New Waterfront](#), a modern promenade that offers views across the bay to Mt Olympus.

There's no shortage of archaeological wonders here, either. The 7th-century [Church of Agios Dimitrios](#) honors Thessaloniki's patron saint (his remains are interred in the crypt underneath the church).



Taking after the famous [Hagia Sophia](#) in Istanbul, the even earlier (6th-century) [Agia Sofia](#) blends Roman and Byzantine architectural traditions, and is covered with stunning gold leaf that glows in the candlelight.

Have a coffee break in Aristotelous Sq, where the statue of the ancient philosopher stands proud. Then head up to the historic neighborhood of Ano Poli (Upper Town), with its narrow cobbled alleyways protected by the remaining walls of the Byzantine and Ottoman fortress. While it's a long walk up, phenomenal views down to the main lower city and sea are the reward. (We recommend taking a taxi up, then walking down.)

Back in the new city, learn even more about Thessaloniki's past. The [Archaeological Museum](#) documents Macedonia's prehistory, as well as the Hellenistic and Roman periods, while the [Museum of Byzantine Culture](#) showcases more than 3000 Byzantine objects. [Guru Walk](#) offers free walking tours with local guides.





Winemaking is a tradition that goes back millennia in the region around Thessaloniki © Ververidis Vasilis / Shutterstock

Go wine tasting at family-run wineries

A few kilometers outside the city lies [Ktima Gerovassiliou](#), a family-owned winery spread over 118 acres, that has produced wine since 1981. Visitors love sampling the whites, reds and rosés here, and taking in the small on-site museum, with its displays of viticulture, wine-making and bottling tools from around the world, collected by the family since 1976.

For a taste of single-grape spirits made from hand-harvested, organic grapes, head to the [Abelon Distillery](#), a half-hour's drive from Ktima Gerovassiliou. Both family-run businesses continue regional traditions, in a beautiful area with



views of both the sea and snow-capped Mt Olympus.



The archaeological site and museum at Aigai bring you close to the legacy of Alexander the Great and his family
© Arnaoutis Christos / Shutterstock

Delve into the area’s “great” past

If you’re interested in ancient Greek history and archaeology, head for a small village about an hour from Thessaloniki. Vergina is where you’ll find the UNESCO-protected archaeological site of the [Royal Tombs of Aigai](#), its main tomb the burial chamber of Philip II, father of Alexander the Great. It’s one of the most important historical sites in [Northern Greece](#).

Descend through the tunnel under the burial mound to see the tomb door. On display in the surrounding



museum are silver chalices, an ivory-and-gold shield, a gold-plated quiver, a full suit of gilded armor and countless other treasures found buried with the king.

A short distance away lies the larger [Polycentric Museum of Aigai](#), which exhibits objects from Alexander the Great's period. It's the main highlight of the restored part of Macedon's [Royal Palace](#) – which, in its day, was three times bigger than the [Parthenon](#). You won't find this Alexander the Great-related history anywhere else in Greece.

To visit Vergina (as well as the wineries), it's best to rent your own car if you prefer to tour on your own. But consider a [guided tour](#) to fully understand the majesty of what you're experiencing. [Discover Greece](#) can help with both.

Enjoy art on the waterfront

Back in Thessaloniki, head to Pier A along the port to the [Thessaloniki Museum of Photography](#) and the Experimental Center for the Arts, both atmospheric locations for looking at art. Both mount photography exhibits on social and political themes, with works by



international artists that change every three months or so. The two are part of the Metropolitan Organisation of Museums of Visual Arts ([MOMus](#)) network – as is the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#), a nine-minute walk from the White Tower.

Back at the pier's entrance, treat yourself to a coffee at the Maritime Cafe and Cocktail Bar. Whether you're sitting inside or out, you can soak in the lively waterfront ambiance and look out to Mt Olympus in the distance.



Ladadika is Thessaloniki's vibrant nightlife district, and the place to grab dinner while people watching
© Besttravelvideo / Shutterstock

Where to eat in Thessaloniki

You'll be spoiled for choice with restaurants and tavernas here.



Ladadika, the old district to the west of the port filled with cobbled streets and neoclassical buildings, is Thessaloniki's nightlife area. You'll find coffee shops and bars galore frequented by the students, plus several restaurants to choose from.

In the heart of Ladadika, [Kazaviti](#) is a good local choice, with staples such as moussaka and wine served in jugs to a soundtrack of live music. The more upmarket [Mamalouka](#) serves dishes that suit meat lovers, vegetarians and vegans alike.

(The *tarama* fish roe dip is to die for.)

In the heart of the city, [Poster](#) is popular with the business crowd; don't leave without trying the delicious focaccia bread dripping with chili butter and hot honey.

[Olympos Naoussa Restaurant](#) at the On Residence Hotel combines deluxe gastronomy with down-to-earth, "passed down from grandma"-style recipes. The award-winning Greek chef here serves up dishes such as moussaka with béchamel sauce on the side. We recommend being adventurous and leaving the choice of dish to your server, for a pleasant surprise.





There are numerous lodging options along Thessaloniki's bustling New Waterfront © AlexeLA / Shutterstock

Where to stay in Thessaloniki

Wherever you stay in central Thessaloniki, you won't be far from the promenade or main sights. Hotel choices range from five-stars such as the renovated, historic [On Residence](#) along the promenade, which has Mt Olympus views and is perfect for a romantic break. More down to earth but still central, the [Teight Hotel](#) is close to shopping streets and the main sights.

If you're planning on staying longer, [Thess Residences](#) occupies a former factory that once produced traditional pots and the famous *briki* used to brew Greek coffee; today, the building houses 25 self-catering apartments in a local neighborhood. This is a great choice for independent travelers looking to be



in the thick of local life, yet only a 15-minute walk to the seafront.



When in Thessaloniki, try a koulouria roll, a local delicacy © INTREEGUE Photography / Shutterstock

How to get to Thessaloniki

Flights from Athens take around 35 minutes, and the airport lies just 13km (eight miles) from the city center. A taxi will take about 30 minutes, with prices ranging from €24 (day rate) to €32 (midnight to 5am). The 40-minute airport bus costs €1.80 at all times; tickets can be bought on board, but only with cash.

Direct [buses](#) from Athens depart every couple of hours and take about five hours (€40 one way). Driving on your own is marginally faster, though the cost of tolls and gas can run upward of €100 one way.

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