

EXPERIENCE REAL LIFE

GOING NATIVE

The Greek capital is one of the most exciting cities in the world to live in right now, as any member of its growing expat community can confirm.

BY ALEX KING / PHOTOS THALIA GALANOPOULOU

Disbelief, bemusement and outright perplexity are typical Athenian responses to learning that a foreigner has chosen to live in Greece. “You mean you left a good job in your country to move to Athens? Don’t you know we’re in crisis?”

Indeed, since the onset of the economic downturn, thousands of Greeks have left for better career opportunities elsewhere and the country was recently ranked the worst place to live by the InterNations Expat Insider survey – in large part because of the tough financial conditions.

Yet speak with anyone in the city’s lively expat community and you’ll hear not only a hundred reasons why the survey’s gloomy assessment is totally wrong but a hundred more on why Athens is one of the most exciting cities in the world right now.

Athens is increasingly seen as a city of possibilities, and foreigners, particularly young creatives, are moving here to enjoy

the remarkable quality of life.

“Athens is the new Berlin” has become a tired phrase, but it does celebrate real parallels between the cultural renaissance we’re witnessing today and the creative boom that transformed the German capital’s identity in the 1990s and early 2000s, catalyzed by a wealth of affordable space.

But Athens blazes its own path, and cheap rent is a relatively minor factor in its powerful resurgence. While the low cost of living provides financial breathing space for start-ups and passion projects (now next to impossible in cities like Paris, London and New York), it is the vibrant multicultural climate and globally connected buzz that keep the fires of inspiration lit.

Each of our interviewees found something in Athens they couldn’t find anywhere else, but the ultimate endorsement for the Greek capital comes from their proud assertions that they have no plans to leave; their futures are firmly invested in Athens.



MICHAEL DOOLAN

DANCER FROM BIRMINGHAM, UK

If you've had the privilege of watching the spectacular Greek National Opera Ballet perform, you've probably seen its former demi-soloist, who hails from Birmingham, Britain's second city. When dancer Michael Doolan graduated as a classically trained dancer from Ballet West in Scotland, he had no desire to follow his classmates to London. "That kind of terrified me, because London is really big," Michael says. "Instead, I was looking for cities in eastern Europe when Athens came up on my radar."

Michael was intrigued by Athens' technicolor mix of East and West. So he auditioned for the National Opera, was hired as a member of the corps de ballet in September 2012, and promoted to demi-soloist in 2014. Over the last five years, Michael has toured Greece with the company in acclaimed productions such as "Topia" and "Zorba the Greek" and has evolved immensely as a dancer. But the experience of living and working in such a cultural melting pot inspired him to take the next step: in July 2017, he quit to go freelance, setting out in a new direction that integrates his classical schooling and contemporary inspirations.

"Living in Greece, I have to accept that I'm always going to be a foreigner and I'm always going to be different, as much as I try to blend in," he reflects. "If I had stayed in the UK, I would have been much more pressured to fit into a group; the people I spent time with, the clothes I wore and even my dancing would have all been subject to certain limitations. Athens has taught me to be very versatile, both personally and professionally. I don't think I could have done that in many other European cities, because I feel like there are so many different influences here."



THE BEST PLACE TO WATCH DANCE IS... the breakdance crew in the square opposite Thiseio metro station. I always watch them and I have a lot of respect for what they do.

THE BEST PLACE TO EAT... Avli, which has great food and is super cheap. I love places in Athens that don't feel like Athens and at Avli you feel like you could be on one of the islands.

MY HIDDEN GEM... I love climbing to the top of the Panathenaic Stadium from the park behind it, so I can sit and admire the spectacular view of the Kallimarmaro and the city.

BEFORE I MOVED HERE I WISH I'D KNOWN... that the Greeks are not European, they're closer to the eastern folk. It took me a while to work out that they're not like us Northern Europeans.

YOU'RE AN ATHENIAN WHEN YOU... understand the appropriate amount of time your body needs to digest a frappé, so you drink it slowly and not like a complete amateur.

INFO
• Avli, 12 Aghiou Dimitriou, Psyrri



ILSE MEULENDIJKS

DESIGNER FROM TILBURG, THE NETHERLANDS

"Athens was this huge surprise of colors," says Dutch designer Ilse Meulendijks. "It reminded me of the little alleyway behind my house as a child, where I used to play and everything felt possible."

Ilse is lounging on the balcony of her palatial studio space in Exarchia, which overlooks the Athens Polytechnic and Strefi Hill. She explains how, when she first came to Athens in 2015 for a class project on Greek tourism while studying at Design Academy Eindhoven, she was fascinated by the city's old bookshops and printworks. In one of these she met the bookbinder Yiannis Evangelidis, who inspired her to create a bridge between Greek craft-people and the Dutch design community.

"In Holland, the publishing industry is

completely shut to outsiders – the process is hidden and blocked off," Ilse says. "Here, I'm able to work on really nice, creative books with incredibly skilled craftspeople, who are totally open and let me be part of everything. That's heaven for me."

It's been a busy year for Ilse. Two weeks after her graduation, she moved to Athens, and co-founded Publikators publishing agency with Dutch writer Anna van den Berg. She also designed the graphic identity for Syntagma's new restaurant 3.33 and is creating an atelier space with French designer Roxanne Brennen, due to open shortly. But Ilse is most proud of Book for Sale, a print publication and online platform that connects Athens-based artisans to the global marketplace.

EXPERIENCE REAL LIFE

MY FAVORITE PLACE TO SEE ART IS... on the streets, where the pure freedom is.

YOU KNOW YOU'RE AN ATHENIAN WHEN YOU... fit 10,000 things into one day: coffee with friends, walking the dog and making some art, too, and still wonder how you manage to do it.

TAKE A CLIENT TO... Little Tree Books and Coffee. It's a beautiful bookshop near the Acropolis Museum and a great place to just sit and talk over a cup of fine coffee.

TAKE A DATE TO... Drupes & Drips, which is cozy inside and has lovely wines. It's in a great area to go for a walk after your cheese and drinks.

MY BEST-KEPT SECRET IS... the restaurant Saligaros in Exarchia, where locals with really intense lives gather to have fun and share really, really good food.

TO GET INSPIRED... go up Strefi Hill with a book or some drawing materials. As you climb, the street noise slowly disappears and you literally gain a new perspective on the city. When your world feels small, here is a place you can go to make it big again.

INFO

- ilsemeulendijks.com
- Little Tree Books and Coffee, 2 Kavalloti, Koukaki, tel (+30) 210.924.3762
- Drupes & Drips, 20 Zitrou, Koukaki, tel (+30) 210.923.0052
- Saligaros, 37 Solomou, Exarchia, tel (+30) 213.022.6262

GASTRO NOUVEAU

EXPERIENCE

ctc
URBAN GASTRONOMY

14, Oumplianis Str. & Diocharous 27, Athens // T: +30 21072 28 812 // www.ctc-restaurant.com

MATTHIEU PRAT

DESIGNER FROM PARIS, FRANCE

Matthieu Prat doesn't feel like an expat. To be an expat, he argues, you have to have powerful bonds tying you to your mother culture and a strong sense of where "home" is. But Matthieu has no simple answer to the question, "Where are you from?" He was born in Paris and has barely stopped moving ever since. Growing up, he lived first in a number of French cities before going on to stay in Monaco, London, Geneva and Casablanca; he spent most of his formative teenage years in Morocco.

So after working in Istanbul and Paris, why here? It's simple: "You can do better work from Athens." Matthieu relocated his experimental art/architecture studio Diplomates to Athens in 2015 after feeling stifled in France. Today, he works from an unfinished concrete shell of a building in Votanikos, where he launched Kassandras, an "urban and social laboratory" that explores the intersection between architecture and activism.

Unlike other cities that have exported all of their heavy industries and transformed their production spaces into art galleries and coffee shops, Athens still has workshops, factories and artisans, many in the vicinity of Matthieu's studio. "The easy access to local craftspeople, spaces and skills, combined with Athenian generosity and hospitality, make the city a unique place to live and produce work," he explains. "Athens is a place that is still massively transforming itself, with an ever-burning energy to move forward."



MY FAVORITE PLACE TO DISCOVER ART IS...

Locus Athens, which curates exhibitions without running a gallery, yet each of their projects reveals a new space and great art.

BACK IN FRANCE I WOULD NEVER BE ABLE TO...

experiment and innovate within cultural, social and urban fields.

I GO TO UNWIND IN...

Tritsis Park. It's a little-known paradise, full of a variety of landscapes and where Organization Earth runs an experimental farm.

WHAT FRUSTRATES ME MOST ABOUT ATHENS IS...

the excessive bureaucracy and its resistance to facilitating development initiatives.

WHAT INSPIRES ME MOST ABOUT ATHENS IS...

its abnormality. It's still a territory for individual and collective possibilities, where questions about the cities of tomorrow can be investigated.

INFO

- Kassandras, kassandras.org
- Locus Athens, locusathens.com/lcu
- Organization Earth, organizationearth.org/en/

ANASTASIA ANAGNOSTAKOS

FINANCIAL ANALYST FROM MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

Some of Anastasia Anagnostakos' friends back in Melbourne will tell you she had everything and then threw it all away. After studying for her master's degree in finance, she climbed the ladder to become a highly paid and prestigious investment analyst for a large hedge fund on the Australian Stock Exchange. Her career was soaring, but she began to ask herself questions. "Is this it? In Melbourne, you're expected to work, buy a car, get married and buy a house in the suburbs," Anastasia explains. "It's a politically correct, cookie-cutter life: the more money I made, the less happy I became."

With Greek-Australian parents, Anastasia had been visiting Athens since her childhood, and the contrast with life in Melbourne grew more apparent each time. "What struck me was how people in Athens live life to the fullest, despite being broke," she says. "As long as people have enough money to meet their friends and have a coffee, life is sweet."

Things had to change, so Anastasia moved to Athens in December 2016. She now works in the non-performing loans team at a corporate advisory services company – and yes, she's drowning in work. Her Athens salary doesn't compare to what she was earning in Melbourne, but no amount of zeros could lure her back to that superficial life. "Melbourne is all about what you're wearing, which restaurant you're eating at and who you're seen with," she explains. "People here don't care about that; what matters about you in Greece is how you stack up as a person. If I have children of my own, I'd like them to be brought up here, surrounded by those values."



THE BEST WAY TO DISCOVER MUSIC IS...

browsing for vinyl at the weekend flea market and in the thrift shops near Thiseio metro station. You can find funk, house and lots of old disco tunes so cheap that it's almost theft.

MY FAVORITE GREEK WORD IS... *ennoeite*, which means "of course."

MY FAVORITE PLACE FOR A DRINK IS...

The Clumsies, which is a world-renowned and really original cocktail bar near Klafthmonos Square.

GO FOR A RUN...

from Paleo Faliro towards Elliniko along the Athens Riviera. It's a real experience of Greek life and great for your lateral skills as you weave between the families and street vendors.

TAKE A CLIENT...

for a drink at the Galaxy Bar on top of the Hilton. It has amazing views of Athens and of Lycabettus Hill.

ON A RAINY DAY...

drive up to the car park on Lycabettus Hill and you can admire the view while staying dry.

FOR A FEAST...

head to Moorings in Vouliagmeni. It's a lovely, peaceful setting there, and you can look out over the water.

THE FIRST GREEK FOOD I COOKED WAS...

koulourakia, with my grandma. They're simple, orange-rind biscuits that are an Easter specialty, but my grandfather loved them, so we ate them all year round.

INFO

• The Clumsies, 30 Praxitelous, tel (+30) 210.323.2682 • Galaxy Restaurant & Bar at the Hilton, 46 Vasilissis Sofias, tel (+30) 210.728.1000 • Moorings, Vouliagmeni Marina, Vouliagmeni, tel (+30) 210.967.0659

MONTOFOLI
WINE ESTATE

Karystos, Greece

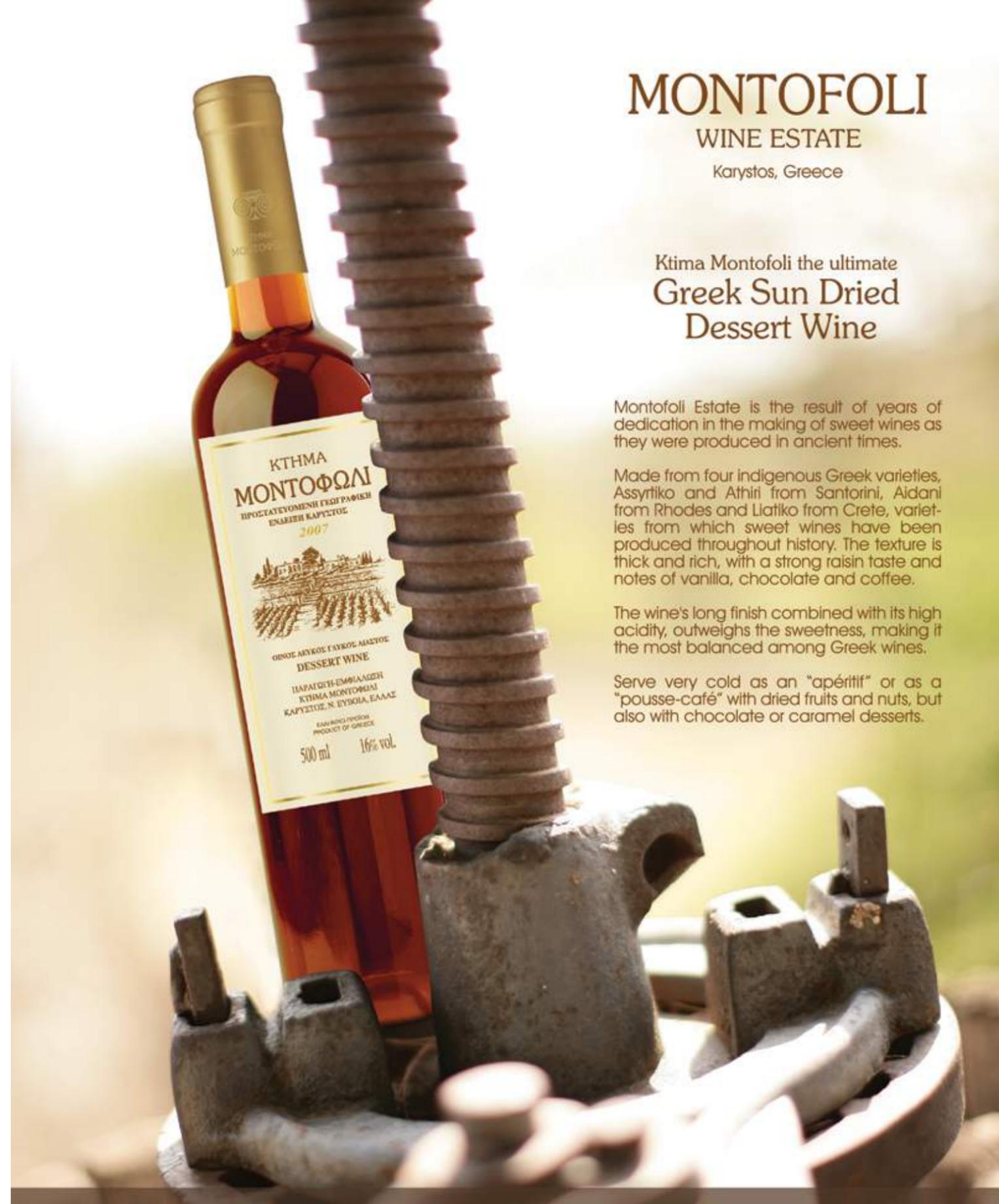
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The wine's long finish combined with its high acidity, outweighs the sweetness, making it the most balanced among Greek wines.

Serve very cold as an "apéritif" or as a "pousse-café" with dried fruits and nuts, but also with chocolate or caramel desserts.



www.cellier.gr

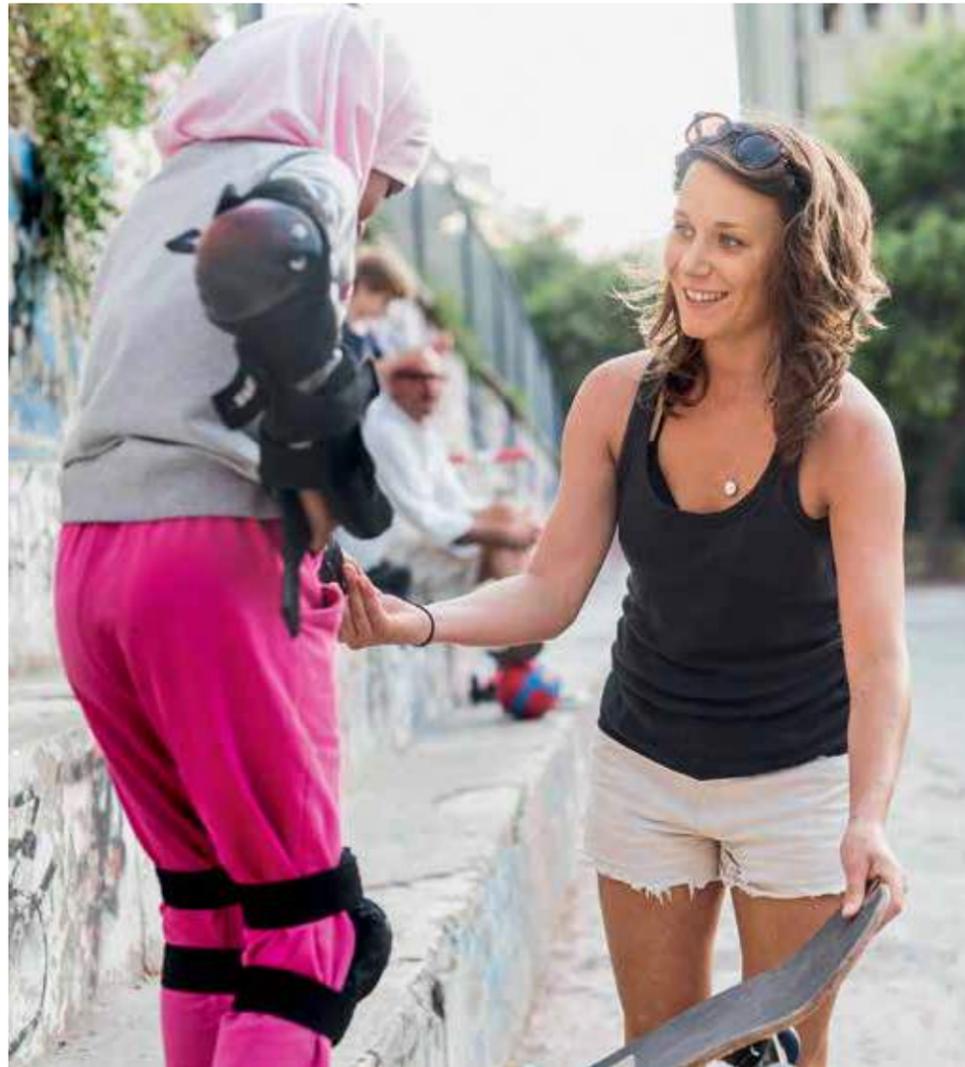
Cellier Syntagma
1, Kriezotou Str.
GR-106 71 ATHENS
T. : +30 210 361 00 40
syntagma@cellier.gr

Cellier Kifissia
369, Kifissias Ave.
GR-145 64 KIFISSIA
T. : +30 210 801 87 56
kifissia@cellier.gr

Cellier Syngrou
320, Syngrou Ave.
GR-176 73 KALLITHEA
T. : +30 210 453 35 51
syngrou@cellier.gr

Cellier Myconos
Ag. Ioannou-Fabrika
GR-846 00 MYCONOS
T. : +30 22890 22 449
myconos@cellier.gr





RUBY MATEJA
SKATEBOARDER AND NGO FOUNDER
FROM BRIGHTON, UK

A perfect day for Ruby Mateja starts with a coffee on her balcony in Exarchia and a walk around the local area to check out its many eclectic bookstores and record shops. On Wednesday afternoons, you'll find her in the nearby Aghiou Nikolaou Park teaching skateboarding against a typically Athenian backdrop of crumbling concrete and graffiti. Ruby's students are young refugees from the nearby Khora community center, and this is one of the daily skate lessons her Free Movement Skateboarding project offers to 150 marginalized young people – about half of whom are girls – around Athens each week.

"Skateboarding opened up a whole world to me," Ruby explains. "Traveling to Palestine in October 2016 to volunteer with the skate-for-development charity SkatePal was just everything I wanted to be doing. Free Move-

ment Skateboarding co-founder Will Ascott and I saw the massive positive impact of the skatepark they had built, not just on the kids but on the whole community." Will suggested Athens would be the perfect place to launch a project of their own so, in March 2017, they began work on a mobile skatepark that fits into the back of a van, and the rest is history.

When Ruby isn't teaching, she explores Athens' plentiful skate spots, cruises the streets or hangs out at Latraac, a skate bowl, bar and experimental arts space in Kerameikos. According to Ruby, it's not about where you skate, but when: "I will never get tired of the light and colors in Athens; the golden hour before the sun sets is something I have never experienced anywhere else. Back home, I would never be able to enjoy such a beautiful mixture of cultures on a day-to-day basis. Or skate on all the roads and not get shouted at."



MEET STEPHANIE AND HIBAI

She's a teacher from Santiago, Chile, and he's a journalist from Barcelona, Spain. They both became Athenians and have their own stories to share.

BEST SPOT FOR A BITE

IS... the falafel man who sets up most nights in Exarchia Square. He blasts galactic techno music while making his delicious falafel wraps. What more could you want?

MY MOST "GREEK" HABIT

IS... drinking freddo espressos all day long and being late for everything.

MY FAVORITE GREEK

WORD IS... not fit to print, but I love shouting *opa!* when someone falls off their board.

THE BEST SKATE SPOT IS...

Galatsi Park. But I would recommend ripping around the roads late at night, stopping at different spots and meeting the locals.

CATCH THE SUNSET...

on Strefi Hill. Lycabettus gets all the tourists, but at Strefi you'll just be hanging out with locals.

INFO

• Latraac, 63-65 Leonidou, Kerameikos, tel (+30) 213.045.3377



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