

January 21, 2007
Next Stop | Athens

Take One Forlorn Ancient District, Add Chic and Stir

By JOANNA KAKISSIS

IT'S midnight in central Athens, and the crowd that has just finished watching the Metaxourgeio Theater's production of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" is filling Anna's, the homey restaurant run by the theater's owner and main star, the actress Anna Vagena.

A you-should-be-here kind of buzz hums here and everywhere along this raucous, sooty and industrial Pireos Street stretch of neighborhoods loosely anchored by Gazi, the district that was once home to the Athens gasworks factory and its workers.

People in their 20s walk past abandoned houses slicked with absurdist graffiti ("Free Your Breasts!") to catch the latest electronica show at Bios, a flourishing new-media arts center. Over plates of crayfish dolmas wrapped in sorrel leaves at the Michelin-starred Varoulko seafood restaurant, couples chat about a photography exhibition at the Benaki Museum's new Pireos Street building. Miniskirted women and worry-bead-clicking men pack the popular bar at Mamacas, a hip Greek taverna.

"Ten years ago, when my husband and I sold our suburban house with the swimming pool to buy this ruined building here and turn it into a theater, studio and our home, people thought we were crazy," Ms. Vagena, 59, said as she ate fried sardines under the illuminated Edward Hopper prints collected by her husband, the singer-songwriter Loukianos Kilaidonis. "It was harsh then. There were drug addicts, prostitutes, buildings literally falling apart. But there was also history, so much of it, and humanity. It seemed like a perfect place for expression and exploring ourselves as Athenians and as citizens of a changing and multicultural city. And I thought, 'This place could be like our Greenwich Village.' "

Indeed, these once-bedraggled central Athens neighborhoods -- including the districts of Gazi, Metaxourgeio, Kerameikos and Rouf -- have become an incubator of progressive arts and night life in Athens, especially as downtown entertainment hangouts like Plaka and Psyrri have grown saturated, overpriced and touristy. The greater Gazi stretch is also more diverse than most Athenian neighborhoods; many residents hail from China, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Poland, Syria and Albania, among other countries.

While patches of these neighborhoods are shuttered and crumbling, as if the party has passed them by, elsewhere the sense of arrival is clear. Developers are building

luxury loft apartments, planning new shopping districts and refurbishing abandoned houses to become chic ethnic restaurants. An arty hotel called the Eridanus opened in a refurbished neo-Classical-style house just before the 2004 Olympics.

Two major stages -- the Metaxourgeio Theater and the experimental stage of Greece's national theater -- are across the street from each other, regularly attracting cultured older Athenians. Bios, the new-media arts center housed in a Bauhaus building, is often packed with young Athenians who love its innovative international programming.

"We filled our niche in Athens by providing an open studio for experimental art, something that you can't find easily in the formal venues here, but this neighborhood also suited us, since it was affordable, central and at the crossroads of new and old in Athens," said Vassilis Charalambidis, the 30-year-old artistic manager of the five-year-old Bios, who also lives in the Kerameikos area.

Kerameikos got its name from the potters who worked along the banks of the Eridanus River, which once ran through Athens but has since been almost entirely built over. Themistocles ordered the construction of the city's walls in the fifth century B.C., dividing the area into two gated sections fronting two roads: the Panathenaic Way, leading to the Acropolis, and the Sacred Way (or Iera Odos), which leads to the enchanted city of Eleusis, where worshipers of Demeter and Persephone held secret initiation rites.

Today, Iera Odos is packed with dance-until-dawn live-music clubs devoted to skyladika -- the Greek bouzouki-backed music, both reviled and beloved, that, because of its singers' tendency to howl agony-filled lyrics of set-me-on-fire love, literally translates as "the place of dogs."

Kerameikou Street runs through the Chinatown of Athens. Scores of Chinese-owned businesses, red paper lanterns swaying above their entrances, line the street, selling clothes, shoes and accessories at the lowest prices around. The Wangfuchinese Market, a well-stocked Chinese grocery store, has special gunpowder green tea, barrels of fresh ginger and an adjoining no-frills but excellent restaurant.

Menelaos Charalambidis, a 36-year-old historian (and no relation to Vassilis), sometimes strolls through Kerameikos after he finishes work at a nearby government office at around midday. A bespectacled former rock musician who lives in the lush suburb of Ilioupolis, he passes Chinatown and weaves through the former silk factory neighborhood of Metaxourgio, where many of the city's Muslims lived for decades and the place immigrants from around the world now call home. Their small houses dot the pebbly lanes where one is just as likely to see a statuesque transvestite buying cigarettes from a kiosk as a haunted-looking grandmother carrying bags of oranges from the central market.

On weekend nights, he sometimes returns to the area with his wife, Stevi Moshogianni, a 36-year-old writer. They usually head for Gazi, which has its roots in the 1857 opening of a French gas firm's Athenian factory. A thriving restaurant and bar district that has some of the city's liveliest gay clubs, Gazi also borders the neighborhood of Rouf, where the Benaki Museum has converted an old factory into its beautiful new annex.

"Gazi may be the closest thing to a modern, progressive neighborhood that Athens has," said Ms. Moshogianni. "It's open-hearted, and yet it makes you feel like you're right in the middle of everything."

Gazi began to bloom in 1998, when Mamacas (the Mommies), a taverna offering fresh twists on traditional Greek food, opened in a small neo-Classical-style building on Persefonis Street. Using clever public relations and their mothers' finesse in the kitchen, two Greek textile designers -- Costas Iliopoulos and Vassilis Tsekouras -- turned their taverna into an institution and expanded into the next building.

Since then, fine restaurants like Sardelles, which offers simply prepared seafood, have also opened in the area, along with lanes of eclectic cafes and bars. One of the best spaces is gazArte, a bar-restaurant with a rooftop terrace that offers a glittery nighttime view of Gazi, a folksy clientele and live performances of world music.

Around the time Mamacas opened and more than 14 years after the gasworks closed, the old factory reopened its doors as a cultural center called the Technopolis. Partly financed by the city and dedicated to the Greek composer Manos Hadjidakis, the Technopolis is an attractive piece of urban architecture, with its inactive smokestacks glowing neon red in the twilight, but its programming is often overshadowed by the pulsing fare at Bios or the elegant exhibits at the Benaki.

Gazi and its neighborhood cousins may not be Greenwich Village, at least not yet, but Anna Vagena, her 29-year-old daughter, Jasmine Kilaidonis, and her husband, Mr. Kilaidonis, do not regret leaving their leafy suburb for the gritty heart of Athens. Mr. Kilaidonis has transformed at least part of the complex into a tribute to Hopper, even designing an upstairs bar to resemble the 1942 painting "Nighthawks."

Jasmine Kilaidonis, an actress who had just performed "Virginia Woolf" with her mother at the Metaxaourgeio, likes the sentiment. She has seen the proverbial starving artists flourish here, where the rent for studios or apartments isn't yet at trendy prices. She has also noticed that in this regenerating urban core, an ancient city may be discovering its modern soul.

"I wanted to be in the place where you could sense Athens was a metropolis instead of more provincial, isolated quarters," Ms. Kilaidonis said. "And here it is. It's young, it's curious, and it's more than just Greek. It's Athens."

GREEK REVIVAL BY THE GASWORKS

IN THE NEWS

The rocket that hit the American Embassy on Vasilisis Sophias Avenue in Athens on Jan. 12 caused no injuries and minimal damage. It was the first attack on the compound in more than a decade. The embassy is more than an hour's walk from Gazi.

GETTING THERE

Flights to Athens from New York include Olympic Airlines, which had round-trip flights for \$744 for early February. A cab from the airport should cost no more than 25 to 30 euros (about \$27 to \$40 at \$1.33 to the euro); beware of scammers.

WHERE TO STAY

At the Eridanus (Pireos Street 78; 30-210-520-5360; www.eridanus.gr), rooms for two start at about 115 euros with breakfast, October to May; May through September, rates can be higher.

WHERE TO EAT

At the outstanding seafood restaurant Varoulko (Pireos 80; 30-210-522-8400), dinner for two could cost 60 euros. For less expensive fish fare, try Sardelles (Persefonis 15; 30-210-347-8050); 18 to 22 euros for two. Another option is Mamacas (Persefonis 41; 30-210-346-4984; www.mamacas.gr), which offers traditional fare like beef grilled with tomato, parsley and onions, for around 40 euros.

WHERE TO LINGER

The Benaki Museum's new annex at Pireos 138 (30-210-345-3111; www.benaki.gr) is a light-filled space that displays modern Greek and international art. Admission for exhibitions is 2, 4 or 5 euros, depending on the show, or 8 euros for admission to all.

For avant-garde music, film and art, go to Bios (Pireos 84; 30-210-342-5335; www.bios.gr). For folksy elegance, go to gazArte (Voutadon 32-34; 30-210-345-2277; www.gazarte.gr). Tickets for shows are 10 to 20 euros.