

April 8, 2007  
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## Greek Youth Remake 'Seattle of the Balkans'

By JOANNA KAKISSIS

NEAR the seventh-century Church of Aghia Sophia in the northern Greek city of Salonika, prides of revelers are filling [art-grunge](#) bars like Urban and Pastaflora Darling! on lively Zefxidos Street. It's a weeknight — a Monday going on Tuesday, in fact — but it feels like a Saturday. The tsipouro is flowing, the New Pornographers are blaring, and the people, a blend of wispy artists bobbing to the [music](#), balding academics recalling their anarchist years and caffeinated students now living theirs, are energized.

Stop any of them and they might turn grim and tell you that this majestic city is the ignored, unloved and lonesome little sister of [Athens](#). But don't buy it. Although Salonika, called Thessaloniki in [Greece](#), often loses tourist-brochure headlines to Athens, its growing appeal as a youthful city with an intriguing multiethnic history and an arty counterculture is turning it into something of a [Seattle](#) of the Balkans.

Already a southeastern European center for cinema because of its film festivals, Salonika is enjoying a resurgence in its eclectic visual arts and music scenes, evident at contemporary art museums and galleries and clubs like Xylourgeio at [Mylos](#), a flour mill turned entertainment complex. As the suburbs spread and sprout resort hotels, downtown standbys like the Plaza Art Hotel and the City Hotel have been remodeled to accommodate the increasing number of cinephiles for the festivals.

“Salonika has always been an alternative city, moving to its own rhythm,” said Nikodemos Triaridis, 34, who two years ago founded a small record label, Run Devil Run. “After so much lamenting of the chronic loss of the spotlight to Athens,” he said, “we are finally starting to embrace our offbeat sense of self again.”

Salonika, with a metropolitan area of about a million people, was founded around 300 B.C. by Cassander, king of Macedon, who named it for his wife, Thessalonica, half-sister of Alexander the Great. A walk around the city reveals a mosaic of cultural influences: Roman ruins; Byzantine churches like Aghios Dimitrios, the basilica dedicated to the patron Saint of Salonika; Ottoman-era hammams and mosques; the pink house where Atatürk, founder of the Turkish republic, was born in 1881; and the 19th-century brick houses in the Ladadika district, the old Jewish quarter.

Much of the action is concentrated in the historic center, which is anchored by Aristotelous Square. This is where one finds a wonderful view from the Thermaic Gulf to the swell of the historic Ano Poli (Upper City). An international group of architects

designed the square and much of Salonika's center in 1917, just after the city was nearly destroyed by fire. Once home to five open-air cinemas, the square today has the Olympion, a theater built in 1948 and now the headquarters for the Salonika International Film Festival, which draws thousands every November. Other annual film events include the Documentary Film Festival in March; the Crashfest, devoted to short films by emerging young filmmakers, in April; and the Videodance Festival in May.

Walking around downtown, you soon notice that young ramblers are everywhere: on the seafront promenade, near the 14th-century [White Tower](#) and the statue of Alexander the Great, at the crowded cafes of Aristotelous Square and at the bars built into the old fabric markets in the Bezesteni neighborhood. Most are among the 95,000 students at Aristotle University, the largest in Greece. Many others are young professionals and artists.

Chrissie Tsiota, 35, an artist who specializes in offbeat photo-based narratives, often passes cafes filled with young crooners singing songs by the contemporary Greek composer Manos Hadjidakis as she walks home to her loft in a remodeled former market building in Bezesteni, which she shares with her husband, Nikos Yannopoulos, a 55-year-old filmmaker. They are part of a recent influx of artists and professionals to the once rundown Ottoman-era neighborhood, where chic bistros have arrived — like Ideal at Grigoriou Palama and Tsimiski Streets. It serves boutique [wines](#), tender beef on roasted eggplant purée, and arugula salads dotted with pomegranate seeds and a soft goat cheese called katiki to the accompaniment of live jazz. But the traditional culinary fare — spicy whipped feta, pork stewed with chestnuts and wild-greens pies — offered at the city's ouzeries should not be ignored.

Not far from Bezesteni are the Modiano, Kapani and Louloudadika marketplaces. A stroll through them is a kaleidoscopic journey into scent, sound and color: cumin and sage, broad spreads of fresh meat and fish, Pontic cheeses, even the odd village potion for menstrual cramps, all wrapped in an aural force field of greengrocers promoting their eggplant in booming rhymes.

Founded in the early 1920s by the architect Eli Modiano, a member of a Sephardic merchant family, the [Modiano Market](#) was once a hub for Salonika's Jews, many who trace themselves from the Sephardim expelled from [Spain](#) in 1492. They thrived in Salonika, at one point a majority, but occupying Nazis in World War II virtually eliminated them. Some 45,000 to 50,000 of the city's Jews — about 96 percent — died during the war, many at Auschwitz. Only about 2,000 Jews live in the city today. Their history is recounted at the [Jewish Museum](#), which follows the narrative from A.D. 200 to the beginning of the war.

The Ladino songs of Salonika's Sephardic Jews enjoyed a resurgence in the 1990s, especially when the singer Savina Yannatou and the band Primavera en Salonica performed those songs on the 1995 recording "Spring in Salonica." At the time, the avenue of clubs at the Mylos complex, near the port, was thriving, fueling the rise of musicians like the jazz-folk fusion group Mode Plagal and the rock bands Trypes and Xylina Spathia. Mylos is far more mainstream now, but Xylourgeio (Carpenter's Shop) draws an intriguing lineup of offbeat artists like Daemonia Nympe, who make ambient folk music with reproductions of ancient Greek instruments. The music scene is also enriched by indie labels like Ano Kato (Upside Down), Run Devil Run and the electronica-loving Poeta Negra, whose acts perform at small downtown clubs like the

neon-blue neo-grunge Zenith.

A frequent listener is Areti Leopoulou, a 29-year-old art historian and music buff. “There's a lot of creative energy,” she said, “and it's bursting to get out.”

The same could be said for visual arts. The painter Vasilis Zografos, for instance, has worked in the city for 20 years and has noted the ingredients for an art renaissance — talent, exhibition space, endless sources of inspiration — but has only recently seen results. The 10-year-old [State Museum of Contemporary Art](#), housed in a former monastery in the suburb of Stavroupolis, has been a leader. In 2005, it opened the Center of Contemporary Art in an old warehouse at the port, part of a continuing push to revitalize the area. (Two other museums, one devoted to photography and the other to cinema, opened there in 1995). The center is devoted to emerging visual and performing arts. The museum is also organizing a citywide biennial, starting in late May.

“It's like the pulse of Salonika is quickening, at last,” said Eleni Athanasopoulou, a 28-year-old photography and video artist who works at the center.

After a long day at work, she was unwinding at Urban, a gallery turned colorful bar on Zefxidos Street. The crowd was mostly college students with struggling beards, though a few aging hipsters were hanging on, nursing glasses of vodka. The Scissor Sisters blared on the stereo, and a young woman, her dreds in a beehived updo, serenaded a framed poster of Bruce Lee.

As Monday officially became Tuesday, the party showed no sign of slowing.

## VISITOR INFORMATION

### HOW TO GET THERE

United, Lufthansa and Olympic are among the airlines that offer service from New York, starting at about \$1,200 round trip. A taxi from the Salonika airport to the city center is about 15 euros, or \$20.40 at \$1.36 to the euro. Plans for a subway system are moving forward.

### WHERE TO STAY

The Plaza Art Hotel (5 Paggeou Street, 30-2310-520-120; [www.hotelplaza.gr](http://www.hotelplaza.gr)) offers rooms for two starting at 82 euros, while the City Hotel (11 Komnion Street, 30-2310-269-421; [www.cityhotel.gr](http://www.cityhotel.gr)) is 120 euros. For more luxury, try the [Electra Palace](#) (9 Aristotelous Square, 30-2310-294-000), where rooms start from 165 euros to 185 euros.

### WHERE TO EAT

Dinner for two at the Ideal wine and jazz bistro (1 Grigoriou Palama 1 and 87 Tsimiski; 30-2310-288-844) is about 60 euros. Among Salonika's excellent ouzeris is Agora (5 Kapodistriou, 30-2310-532-428) and Aristotelous (8 Aristotelous, 30-2310-233-195), where a meal for two costs about 30 euros. And sample the buffalo milk-cream kasan dipi at Hatzis (50 Venizelou, 30-2310-279-058) or the chocolate-covered tsoureki at Terkenlis at the Byzantino cafe off Aghia Sophia Square (30-2310-244-876,

[www.terkenlis.gr](http://www.terkenlis.gr)).

## WHERE TO LINGER

The State Museum of Contemporary Art (21 Kolokotroni Street, Moni Lazariston; 30-2310-589-149; [www.greekstatemuseum.gr](http://www.greekstatemuseum.gr)) has a stirring collection of Russian avant-garde art. The museum's Center of Contemporary Art (Warehouse B1, Port of Salonika; 30-2310-546-683; [www.cact.gr](http://www.cact.gr)) has eclectic presentations of video and new-media art. Delve into history at the [Museum of Byzantine Culture](#) (2 Leoforos Stratou, 30-2310-868-570; [www.mbp.gr](http://www.mbp.gr)) or the Jewish Museum (13 Aghiou Mina Street, 30-2310-250-406; [www.jmth.gr](http://www.jmth.gr)). Admission to the Museum of Byzantine Culture is 4 euros; for the others, it is 3 euros.

## WHERE TO LET LOOSE

For a sampling of Greek and international [music](#), go to Mylos (56 Andreou Georgou Street, 30-2310-551-838; [www.mylos.gr](http://www.mylos.gr)), a former flour factory transformed in 1991 into an entertainment complex. One of the best spots is the Xylourgeio, which spotlights experimental and alternative music.