

Did You Know?

- The first Olympics were held in Olympia in 776 BC.
- Marathons (26.2 miles, or 42.2 kilometers) take their name from a Greek legend in which a messenger ran to Athens from a battlefield on the plain of Marathon. The messenger reported that the Athenian army had defeated the Persians.
- At age 18, Greek men are required to serve in the military unless they are attending college, in which case they serve after graduation.
- Unlike Roman Catholic priests, who must remain single, Greek Orthodox priests can marry if they do so before becoming a priest.
- Greeks smile not only when they are happy but also sometimes when they are angry or upset.
- In the 1990s, workers digging the tunnels for the Athens Metro (the city's subway) found many interesting historical objects, including an ancient dog collar.
- Around 16 million tourists come to visit Greece every year, more than the country's entire population!
- Since ancient times, Greece has been one of the world's leading olive producers. Some olive trees planted more than one thousand years ago are still producing olives today.
- One of the oldest cities in Europe, Athens has been continuously inhabited for over seven thousand years.
- Many doors, windowsills, and church domes in Greece are painted a bright turquoise blue called *kyanos*. Some Greeks also hang jewelry with little blue eyes around their necks and wrists. These traditions date back to the ancient belief that the color kept away evil spirits.
- The city of Rhodes is famous for being the home of the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The giant 98-foot (303 m) statue of the god Helios, whose legs straddled the harbor, was destroyed by an earthquake in 226 BC.

Flag

The blue on the flag is said to represent the sea, and the white to symbolize sea foam on top of the waves. Blue and white also represent blue skies and white clouds. The Greek cross, a symbol of the Greek Orthodox Church, shows the people's strong faith. The exact shade of blue has never been set by law and has changed over time from light to dark blue.



National Image

The Parthenon, an ancient Greek temple built in the fifth century BC, stands on top of a hill in Athens called the Acropolis. The Parthenon is considered a masterpiece of Greek architecture and is dedicated to the Greek goddess Athena, whom the people of Athens consider their *patron* (special guardian or supporter). The Parthenon was originally used as a treasury.



People and Places

Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.)
50,949
Area (sq. km.)
131,957



Greece is in southeastern Europe. It is slightly larger than Nicaragua and slightly smaller than the state of Alabama. Mountains cover much of the country. Mount Olympus, the legendary home of the Greek gods, is the highest point in the country, at an elevation of 9,570 feet (2,917 m). The Pindos Mountains run from north to south through the mainland, but not many people live in the mountains. Most of the population lives in the valleys, plains, and coastal areas. Earthquakes are common and sometimes severe. Greece has more than two thousand islands, the largest of which is Crete. Greece has about 9,000 miles (14,484 km) of coastline, and no point in the country is farther than 85 miles (137 km) from the sea.

Southern Greece has a warm climate, while the north is wet and cool. In general, winters are mild but wet; summers are hot and dry. Heavy snow falls on the mountains.

Population

Population
10,775,643



Most of the population is ethnic Greek, but many immigrants have moved to Greece from nearby nations, especially from countries to the north. Greece's minority groups include Turks, Albanians, and Roma (or Gypsies). More than half of Greeks live in cities. Athens is the capital and the largest city, with more than three million residents. Thessaloniki is the second largest city, with over one million people.

Language

Greek, the country's official language, has been spoken for more than three thousand years! Today, many Greeks speak English and French in addition to Greek. Some minorities speak Turkish, Albanian, or Romany. The letters of the Greek alphabet are different from those of the Latin alphabet, which is used for English. There are 24 letters in the Greek alphabet. Some of the letter names may be familiar, such as *alpha*, *beta*, or *gamma*. English words such as *bicycle*, *geometry*, *telescope*, and *biology* are based on Greek words.

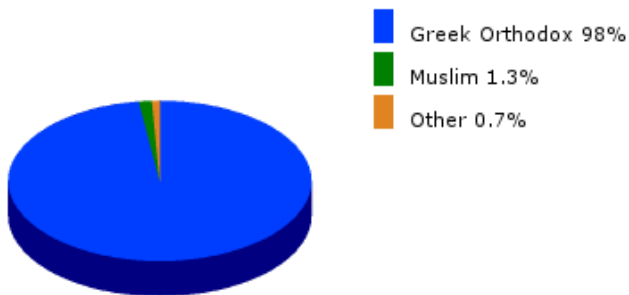
ΙΛΙΑΣ

Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεᾶ, Πηλεΐ
ούλομένην, ἣ μυρὶ Ἄχι
πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυ
ῆρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἑλώ
οἰωνοῖσιν τε πάσι· Διὸς
ἔξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα δια
Ἰτρεΐδης τε ἄναξ ἄνδρ

Can You Say It in Greek?

Hello	<i>Kaliméra</i>	(Kah-lee-MEH-ra)
Good-bye	<i>Yássu</i>	(Yah-SOO)
Please	<i>Se Parakalo</i>	(SEH pah-rah-kah-LOW)
Thank you	<i>Etharistó</i>	(eff-hah-rees-TOH)
Yes	<i>Ne</i>	(neh)
No	<i>Ochi</i>	(OH-kee)

Religion



Source: *The World Factbook 2016. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2016.*

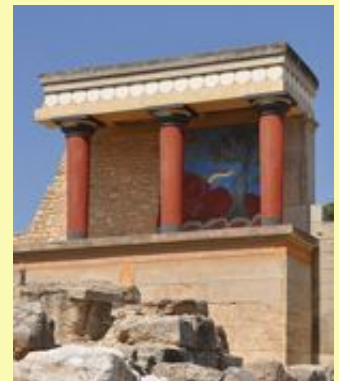
The Greek Orthodox Church, a Christian church independent of the Roman Catholic Church, is the official church in Greece. The constitution guarantees the people's right to belong to any religion, but the government supports the Orthodox Church with tax money. Though the majority of the population is believed to be Greek Orthodox, most people do not attend church regularly, except on holidays or other special occasions. Older people tend to go to church more often than young people, and women tend to go more than men. A small percentage of the population (mostly those of Turkish origin) is Muslim. There are also small groups of other Christians, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, *pagans* (followers of the Greek gods), and *atheists* (people who believe there is no God).




History

Time Line

3000 BC

ca. 3000 BC The Minoan civilization develops on the island of Crete



ca. 1900	The Mycenaean culture develops on the Greek mainland	
ca. 1625	The Aegean civilization is destroyed by the eruption of the Thera volcano, an event that inspired the legend of the lost island of Atlantis	
700s	The Greeks adopt the Phoenician alphabet	
776	According to tradition, the first Olympic Games are held in Olympia	
ca. 750	Homer writes the epic poems <i>The Iliad</i> and <i>The Odyssey</i>	
500s	The Greeks adopt the use of coins from the Lydians (a kingdom located in what is now Turkey)	
509	<i>Democracy</i> (government by the people) is established in Athens	
500		
490	The Persians invade southern Greece but are defeated at Marathon	
480–404	The Athenian Golden Age, a period of cultural and economic growth, takes place	
432	The Parthenon is completed; the ancient Greek civilization reaches its peak	
431–404	Athens and Sparta battle each other in the Peloponnesian War	
338	King Philip of Macedonia conquers Greece	
336–323	Alexander the Great defeats the Persian Empire, which includes most of the Middle East	
323	Following Alexander's death, the empire is divided; the Ptolemies govern Egypt and the Seleucids rule the Middle East	
146	Rome conquers Greece; Greece becomes part of the Roman Empire	

AD 300

AD 330	Roman emperor Constantine I dedicates the ancient Greek city of Byzantium as the empire's new capital and renames it Constantinople
395	The Roman Empire divides into east and west; Greece becomes part of the Byzantine Empire (also called the Eastern Roman Empire); the Olympic Games are discontinued
ca. 530	The Byzantine Empire reaches its peak under Justinian I; the cathedral of Hagia Sophia, the largest in Christendom at the time, is dedicated
ca. 1045	The <i>Pandidakterion</i> , a school established in Constantinople in 425 and reformed during the ninth century, becomes Europe's first university
1054	<i>Schism</i> (separation) occurs between Western (Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity
1200	
1204	Crusaders invade Greece
1453	Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire, falls to the Ottoman Turks; Greek scholars escape to Italy and help lay the foundations of the Renaissance
1460	Most of Greece becomes a Turkish <i>province</i> (similar to a state)
1687	The Parthenon is severely damaged during the siege of the Turkish garrison of Athens by Venetian troops
1800	
1821–30	The Ottoman Turks are defeated in the Greek War of Independence; the nation of Greece is formed
1832	Prince Otto of Bavaria is crowned the first king of Greece; the <i>drachma</i> is introduced as the official currency
	
1843	After a revolution, Greece becomes a <i>constitutional monarchy</i> , meaning there is a king and an elected government and constitution
1863	Prince George of Denmark is crowned king
1875	Greece becomes a <i>parliamentary democracy</i> , meaning the king shares control with a prime minister
1896	Athens hosts the first modern Summer Olympic Games
1900	
1924	Greeks vote to end the monarchy; the country becomes a <i>republic</i> (government whose leaders are elected)
1935	The monarchy is restored

1941–44	Greece is occupied by Nazi German and Italian forces during World War II; King George II and his government flee to Egypt and then London	
1944	Greece is freed from German and Italian occupation	
1946–49	Civil war erupts between the government and communist <i>partisans</i> (political party members)	
1967	A group of army colonels take over the government; the royal family flees the country	
1974	Turkey invades Cyprus, and the dictatorship collapses	
1975	Greece becomes a <i>republic</i> once again	
1981	Greece joins the European Community, now called the European Union (EU)	
2000		
2002	The <i>euro</i> replaces the Greek <i>drachma</i>	
2004	Athens hosts the 28th Summer Olympics	
2007	Huge forest fires cause widespread damage in Greece and result in the deaths of dozens of people	
2010	The EU approves a large bailout deal to keep Greece from failing to pay back its huge debts	
2011	Tens of thousands of workers march on Parliament protesting the government raising taxes to pay off its debts	
2014	Greek unemployment reaches a record high of 28 percent	
2015	The EU agrees to another bailout loan for Greek banks in order to help the nation avoid going bankrupt; Greek authorities struggle to handle the massive numbers of <i>migrants</i> (people moving from one area to another) fleeing wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan	
PRESENT		

Early Civilizations

The Minoan civilization—one of the earliest in the region—developed around 3000 BC. The Minoans were a peaceful people who lived on the island of Crete. They were skillful builders, artists, and scientists. They developed a large navy, not for war but to trade with neighboring countries. The Minoans made jewelry, developed indoor plumbing, and even invented a written language. Another early culture, the Mycenaeans, lived in the southern part of what we now call Greece. The Mycenaeans were powerful. They spent much of their time in wars against their neighbors. They controlled Greece from 1600 to 1200 BC.



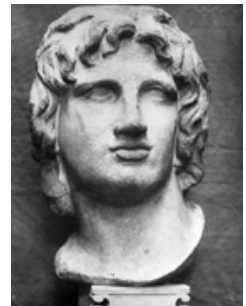
The Golden Age

Ancient Greek civilization reached its peak around the fifth century BC. During this *Golden Age*, Athens was the center of a huge empire. Art, literature, and science blossomed during the Golden Age. Beautiful temples—such as the Parthenon—and other buildings were built. The Greeks also developed *democracy*, a form of government in which the people vote for their leaders. Greek achievements in architecture, drama, sculpture, science, philosophy, poetry, and government provided a foundation for many of the countries of North America and western Europe.



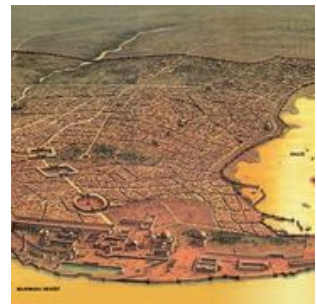
Alexander the Great

Several years after he invaded Greece, King Philip II of Macedonia was murdered. Alexander, the king's son, became the new king of Macedonia and Greece at age 20. Though young, Alexander was one of the greatest military leaders of all time. He led his troops to victory after victory. Alexander and his army created a huge empire that stretched from Egypt to India. He died of fever in 323 BC, at the age of 33.



Foreign Rule

After Alexander died, his empire began to break apart. For the next two thousand years, Greece was controlled by different empires. First came the Romans, starting in 146 BC. Athens was later surrounded, conquered, and destroyed by Sulla in 86 BC. The Romans ruled Greece for about five hundred years. After the Roman Empire fell, Greece became part of the Byzantine Empire, which was centered in Constantinople, known as *Vassilévousa*, or Queen of Cities (what is now Istanbul, in Turkey). In 1453, the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople and gained control over the whole empire, including Greece. After four centuries of Turkish rule, the Greeks began a war of independence. Greece became an independent country in 1830.



Independence

In 1830, Greece became an independent country, a monarchy whose throne went first to a Bavarian and then to a Danish prince. The Greeks gained a constitution in 1843 and *parliamentary democracy* (form of government in which the king shares control with a prime minister) in 1875. Greece became a member of the Latin Monetary Union, a currency union of France, Belgium, Italy, and Switzerland in 1868. The Latin Monetary Union was dissolved after World War I. During the first hundred years of the country's existence, its area more than doubled following a number of wars.

World War II

During World War II, Greece was invaded first by Italy and then by Germany. Italy attacked in 1940, but Greek soldiers were able to defeat them. However, when Nazi Germany invaded in 1941, its army was too powerful, and Germany took control of Greece. Many Greek citizens bravely continued to fight in secret against the German control of their country. Conditions during this time were so terrible that Greece lost one-eighth of its population to fighting and starvation. Around 86 percent of the Jewish population at the time (about 78,000 people) was killed. After Greece was freed in 1944, a bitter civil war between the government and communist *partisans* (political party members) cost at least another 120,000 lives.



Part of Europe

After the end of the civil war in 1949, Greece, with help from America, went through a period of fast reconstruction. It began working toward joining post-war European institutions by becoming an associate member of the European Community (today the European Union, or EU) in 1961 and a full member in 1981. In 2001, Greece joined the *eurozone* (the economic union of European countries that have adopted the *euro* as their form of currency). In 2004, the nation organized the 28th Summer Olympic Games in Athens.

After a decade of expansion and growth, Greece faced a large debt crisis. The EU and the International Monetary Fund bailed out Greece in 2010 and again 2012 because the country had built up a debt almost one and a half times its *gross domestic product* (GDP), or the total value of all goods and services produced in the country that year. In exchange for being bailed out, the government promised to make large public spending cuts and to raise taxes. Tens of thousands of workers protested in response to these measures, and the financial crisis continues as Greeks struggle to maintain their way of life.

Lifestyle

Games and Sports

Greeks love sports, especially soccer, which is called *podosphero*. *Podi* is the Greek word for “foot” and *sphera* is the word for “ball.” Despite never having won a game in an international soccer tournament, Greece surprised soccer fans around the world by winning the European Championship in 2004. Basketball is also a very popular sport. With its many beaches and mild weather, Greece is ideal for swimming, windsurfing, and sailing. Beach volleyball and tennis are favorite activities, especially in the summertime. On weekends, people in the city like to go to the beach or go fishing. Some favorite games for kids include tag, hopscotch, and hide-and-seek. Children in big cities love to ride their bicycles and go skateboarding.



Holidays

Easter is one of the most important holidays in Greece. It is celebrated with special church services, feasts, and a parade. On 1 January, Greeks celebrate St. Basil's Day to mark the New Year. St. Basil is similar to Santa Claus. At midnight on New Year's Eve, a special cake (*vasilopitta*) with a coin in it is cut into pieces and shared. Whoever gets the coin is supposed to have good luck during the coming year.

Other holidays include Independence Day (25 Mar.) and *Ochi Day* (28 Oct.). *Ochi Day* celebrates the day in 1940 that the country's leader said *Ochi* (No) to Mussolini, the Italian *dictator* (absolute ruler), when he wanted to put Italian soldiers in Greece. It is considered a brave decision because the German and Italian armies greatly outnumbered the Greek army.



Food

The foods people eat in Greece depend somewhat on where they live, but most Greeks eat lamb, fish, olives, and cheese. Olive oil, lemon juice, and tomatoes are also common ingredients in Greek cooking. *Ladherà* (dishes cooked with olive oil) are especially popular. Whenever possible, Greeks use fresh ingredients. Some popular dishes that Greeks share with the Turks are *souvlaki* (a meat shish kebab), *moussaka* (a baked dish made with layers of eggplant and ground meat), and *gyros* (pita bread stuffed with meat, onions, and a yogurt sauce). Feta is a traditional Greek cheese made from goat's milk. Crumbly and soft, it is used in everything from salads to pastries. Salads are often eaten with the main meal.



For Easter, Greeks enjoy roast lamb and *kokoretsi* (lamb liver, lungs, and spleen wrapped in intestines and roasted on a spit). *Baklava*, a Greek dessert, is a thin, flaky pastry filled with honey and nuts. Kids eat chocolate, candy, potato chips, and other snacks, which are sold at stands on nearly every city street corner. Hamburgers and other fast foods are especially popular with kids.

Schools

Adult Literacy
98%



All Greek children are required to attend school from ages six to fifteen. Most go to public school, though a few attend private schools. They study many of the same subjects you do, but they also take classes in ancient Greek and religion. Many Greek students have private tutors who help them after school. Sometimes students go to special schools to get this extra help, and other times the tutors work with the kids at home. Tutors help the students learn foreign languages and other subjects, as well as prepare for college entrance exams. Extra learning means extra work for the students and extra money for the parents, but parents want their children to get the best education possible.

Life as a Kid

Family life is very important in Greece. Not only do parents and children live in the same household in Greece, but grandparents often live with them as well. The grandparents help take care of the children while the parents work. Greek kids like to hang out in large groups. These groups often include their cousins as well as friends. After school, Greek children play computer games, watch television, and play sports. They also like American movies and TV series. Greek children often stay up late, especially in the summer and on weekends, when they eat dinner at around 10 p.m. and don't go to bed until midnight. American music is very popular; Greek pop singers and groups are extremely popular among children and young people. Traditional and Greek folk music are also widely listened to.



Society

Government

Capital

Athens

Head of State

President Prokopis Pavlopoulos

Head of Government

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras

Greece has a president who is elected every five years by Parliament, but the prime minister, who is appointed by the president, is the one who actually leads the government. Because Greece is a *parliamentary democracy*, the prime minister must have the support of the majority of members of Parliament. Parliamentary elections are held once every four years. Greece's parliament is called the *Vouli ton Ellinon* (the Chamber of Deputies). Most people refer to it simply as the *Vouli*. The *Vouli* has three hundred members. Voting is required in Greece starting at age 18. The country is divided into 13 regions, each run by an elected governor.

Money and Economy

Currency

Euro



The Greek economy used to rely on farming and fishing, but most Greeks today work in *service* jobs like tourism, education, government, and health care. Tourism is especially important. Around 16 million people a year travel to Greece to see its historical sites and enjoy its beaches and resorts. Wheat, corn, olives, grapes, and tobacco are valuable farming products. Shipping is a major business, and many Greeks work in the

merchant marine, as well as on cruise ships, ferries, and passenger ships. Mining is also important to the economy.

Getting Around

Getting around in Greece isn't always easy. Traffic, poor road conditions, and road construction can make travel a challenge. Buses and trains are the most common forms of public transportation in Greece. *Pedestrians* (walkers) have to be extra careful because drivers won't always slow down or stop for them. In Athens, people get to work by car, bus, subway, and motorbike. Because traffic is so bad in Athens, cars with license plates ending in an even number are allowed to be in the center of the city only on even days of the month, while cars with odd-numbered license plates are allowed in on odd-numbered days. To travel between the country's islands, Greeks usually ride on ferries or *hydrofoils* (boats that glide across the water at high speeds). The country also has a large network of regional airfields, as well as two international airports.



Culture Facts & Contacts

Greek Mythology

How would you like to learn about one-eyed ogres, giants, winged horses, birds with women's heads, powerful gods and goddesses, and human heroes with superhuman powers? You learn about all these things if you read Greek mythology. You can find out about Heracles (also known as Hercules), who was given 12 almost impossible *labors* (tasks) to perform because he killed his wife and children. You can read about Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans. You can learn the history of the Trojan War and the achievements of Achilles and the adventures of Odysseus (also known as Ulysses) on his way home. You can also follow Jason and the Argonauts in their voyage to exotic Colchis to retrieve the Golden Fleece.



But Greek myths aren't just interesting stories. They serve as *metaphors* (a Greek word for a figure of speech that makes a comparison between two unrelated things) for human thoughts and emotions. These myths help us understand how ancient Greeks saw the world and how they explained such things as diseases, storms, and earthquakes.

Learn More

Contact the Embassy of Greece, 2217 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 939-1300; web site www.mfa.gr/washington. Or contact the Greek National Tourist Organization, phone (212) 421-5777; web site www.visitgreece.gr.

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ProQuest
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106 USA
Toll Free: 1.800.521.3042
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Greece



Because Greece is mountainous and the soil is poor, only about one-fifth of the land is suitable for farming.



Mount Olympus is the highest point in the country, at an elevation of 9,570 feet (2,917 m). Ancient Greeks believed that Mount Olympus was the home of the gods.

Although Greece is a small country, its coastline is one of the longest in the world, totalling about 8,498 miles (13,676 km).

Islands make up about one-fifth of Greece's total land area, but only about 150 or more of the islands are suitable for people to live on.