



ATHENS: MORE AFFLUENT AND SPREADING OUT

FAST FACTS		Similar To
Metropolitan Area Population	3,900,000	
Urban Area Population*	3,685,000	Houston, Berlin, Sydney, Atlanta, Milan
Urban Land Area: Square Miles	270	Antwerp, Sarasota, Mumbai, Calgary, Brussels
Urban Land Area: Square Kilometers	700	
Population per Square Mile	13,600	Barcelona, Madrid, Warsaw, Fukuoka
Population per Square Kilometer	5,300	

*Continuously built up area

4 June 2005

Lonely Planet's *Greece* (March 2004, page 74) states the issue quite nicely:

Although Athens is a huge, sprawling city, nearly everything of interest to travelers is located within a small area surrounding Plateia Syntagmatos.

Only the revision of the sentence as follows could have made it more accurate.

Although Athens is a huge, sprawling city, nearly everything of interest to travelers *and American urban planners* is located within a small area surrounding Plateia Syntagmatos.

For here in Athens, the same phenomenon is to be found as in every other high-income world urban area outside Hong Kong --- a core that is more or less dense, fringed by comparatively sparsely developed suburbs of residential and commercial uses. In fact, while all high-income world urban areas sprawl (that is, they are automobile oriented), Athens is one of the best examples.

The Urban Core

The city of Athens itself has the highest density of any core municipal jurisdiction in the high-income world (Hong Kong doesn't have municipal jurisdictions). The city covers only 15 square miles (34 square kilometers) and has a population of approximately 790,000, down from its peak of nearly 900,000. This calculates to a density of 52,500 persons per square mile (20,300 per square kilometer), which is slightly more dense than the ville de Paris (including the peripheral parks). A large part of the central city's (Athens) area is occupied by historical sites and parks and government and business uses. As a result, the net residential density is far higher. Like the

ville de Paris, the city itself accounts for between one-quarter and one-fifth of the urban area's population.

But, unlike Paris, the high densities continue well outside the city. Athens is ringed by high density suburbs, that, with the city contain more than 2,500,000 residents. Inside the city, most residential buildings appear to be in the six to 10 story range, and averaging closer to the high end. In the surrounding suburbs, residential buildings are not quite as tall, but even in the upscale suburb of Glyfada, nearly 10 miles away, there is an abundant supply of residential buildings of five or more stories.

But the high density of the core is not at all attractive. The high rise residential buildings are drab and reflect the worst of the international style of architecture that predominated after World War II, visited upon us by an architectural fraternity still trying to pretend they don't know where it came from.

Indeed, the residential districts of central Athens have all of the charm of central Tokyo residential districts --- not an ounce. Neither Tokyo nor Athens had the luxury of an urban planning regime that produced, in a comparatively short period of time, the attractive 19th century buildings that line the Paris boulevards. There are, of course, two principal reasons for this. The first is that Paris was built when architectural styles were more pleasing (a value judgment, to be sure). The second is that both modern Athens and Tokyo were built rapidly long before those two cities reached their present level of affluence --- this was all they could afford.

Suburban Athens

But outside the comparatively intense development of the core will be found low-density development to match much in US, Canadian, Australian or French suburbs. The new Athens international airport, located across Mount Ymittos from the city has spurred considerable development, both commercial and residential.

To the southeast of the airport are many single family dwellings, many new, on large lots. More lots are undeveloped than not, but there is no mistaking that this is Athens related urbanization. Similar areas of low density, new single family dwellings will also be found on the north side of the urban area and, to a lesser degree, on the west side, across Mount Egaleo. But the western sector is dominated by commercial development, a major airport, port facilities and petroleum production. A large area to the south of the northern freeway is occupied by logistics and warehouse facilities, generally around the municipality of Aspropyrgos.

The northeast contains a particularly interesting development (Drafi), with most residences being comparatively new and many still under construction.

Leap frog residential development starts within just a few kilometers of the urban area's northern fringe, just beyond the first toll booth on the freeway that leads toward Thessalonika. And, as if there were not enough logistics and warehouse facilities in the valley to the west of Mount Egaleo, they begin again and continue, somewhat discontinuously to at least the 75 kilometer (45 mile) post. The pattern here is much different than to the west, where the facilities occupy a large area stretching a kilometer or two beyond the freeway. Here, like to for kilometers east of Madrid or kilometers east of Milan, the facilities hug the highway, though the intensity of development in the Athens area is less.

In addition, there is considerable commercial development between the airport and Vari, and somewhat less continuous commercial development along the Lavrio road.

As throughout most of Europe, most new suburban housing is built individually, on lots already purchased by the owners. There is little tract home development of the variety that exists in the United States, Canada or Australia. This denies new house buyers the economies of scale that would occur from larger developments. One way that the market has responded in Greece is the development of a strong prefabricated housing market, with houses built in concrete sections at a central factory and then shipped to their final location.

Like most of Europe, the people of Athens rely heavily on large commercial markets for their shopping. Hypermarkets, such as Carrefour and Champion (or Walmart supercenters in the United States and elsewhere) will be found around the Athens area. In addition there are many large grocery stores, which is somewhat unlike the normal European pattern that houses the large grocery stores in hypermarkets.

All of this suburban development is to be expected. Greece is a rather new entrant to high-income world status, the result of the economic advances that have occurred since it entered the European Union. Greeks have become affluent enough to afford the new, more automobile oriented development that has long ago become the rule throughout countries that became high income earlier.

As a result, the population profile of the Athens area is somewhat unusual. There is a very broad and high peak of high density, representing Athens and its pre-1980 suburbs (many of which have lost population). Then, the profile would drop precipitously to densities not unlike those of US suburbs, to the east, north and west. While the United States and Western Europe were building somewhat higher density first ring suburbs before 1970, Greece built first ring suburbs that were far more dense because that's all they could afford. But recent development patterns indicate that times have changed. In a sense, like Lisbon and Porto, Athens went directly to the far less dense suburbs typical of third, rather than second rings.

While the residential buildings of central Athens are far from architectural treasures, the commercial buildings are somewhat better. Athens has been spared the desecration of the inspirationless high-rise international style commercial skyscrapers that desecrate the cores of so many high income world urban areas. Perhaps this is due to Greece's later ascension to affluence.

Transport

Long before Greece's relatively new affluence, however, the automobile had become very important. As a result, the intensity of traffic in Athens is legendary. The traffic in the core of Athens may be among the worst in the world. Traffic is often at a standstill on weekdays and early evenings along the system of express boulevards and freeways. The road to Glyfada (Posidinos Avenue), for example, can experience stop and start conditions at virtually any time on weekdays. Unlike Los Angeles or Houston (but like Atlanta or Sydney), there are no good alternate routes.

In fact, it is probably not possible to adequately provide for the automobile demand that a core of more than 50,000 per square mile density produces. With core densities being well above the levels that can be efficiently handled by even a well designed roadway system, traffic generally moves very slowly and has much stopping and starting. As a result, even modern air pollution technology is unable to keep the core from experiencing severe air pollution. This can be seen in illustrations #33 and #34, below, which compare air pollution on a Sunday to a weekday.

The privately owned and developed toll northern freeway (motorway),¹ the Attiki Odos, starts near the airport and arcs across the northern suburbs toward Elefsina. Near the airport terminus, two four lane limited access highways continue, one headed south to Vari and Glyfada and the other southeasterly toward Lavrio on the eastern coast of Attica.

In addition to the northern freeway, the Attiki Odos includes an eastern spur, extending southward along the western slopes of Mount Ymittos, on the Athens rather than airport side. There is also a spur on the west, the Egaleo Ring (western side of Mount Egaleo), part of which is completed, and which will eventually extend to the Elefsina Gulf.

There is a central freeway (with no tolls), operating from near the port city of Piraeus, eventually becoming the Thessalonika freeway. In addition, the core urban area (Athens and the inner suburbs) have high capacity surface streets on which traffic moves quickly, when capacity is not exceeded.

The public transport system of Athens has strong and weak points. Perhaps the most impressive thing is the comparative lack of graffiti. The Metro is as clean as Washington's Metro, which says that it is far better maintained, visually, than most Western European metros. The newer core stations are bright and clean, rather like BART stations in the city of San Francisco. Athens, perhaps due to budgetary limitations, built core metro stations with a transport function in mind, avoiding the gold plating that produced Washington's cathedralesque stations. The model cleanliness of the Athens metro is shown on illustration #35, which shows the Piraeus station of Metro line #1, by far the oldest line in the system. The cleanliness of the system extends to the Trams and the buses. Athens authorities are to be commended for what they have accomplished with respect to the visual maintenance of their public transport system. There seems no reason to believe that their challenges are any less than in other major urban areas.

But Athens has what may one of the most poorly designed public transport transfer connections in the world. The connection between Metro line #1, and Tram (street car or light rail) lines #3 and #4 at Peace and Friendship Stadium in Piraeus, requires a long walk on an overpass across a wide freeway and its frontage roads. Another station on the Tram lines is actually closer, but to reach it requires a rather unsafe, non-protected crossing of frontage roads. An examination of the site suggests that there were much better alternatives.

In recent years, partially in preparation for the 2004 Olympiad, a second and third metro line has been added and the tram lines. But it is clear that, despite all of the recent investment, the automobile has long since taken over Athens. According to information in the UITP (International Union of Public Transport) Millennium Cities database, more than 85 percent of Athens area travel was by car in 1995. That figure has likely increased in the intervening years.

¹ In this series, the terms freeway and motorway denote roadways with full grade separation and with at least two lanes in each direction. Such roads may or may not require payment of tolls.

The utility of the car to Athenians is demonstrated by driving between Glyfada and Athens along Posidonos Avenue on a busy morning. The traffic starts and stops as frustratingly as anywhere in the world. Progress is slow. Adjacent to the road is the new Tram route, on which both lines #3 and #5 operate. The trams breeze by with virtually no obstruction (except, of course, the numerous stops). Yet the trams are, at most, one-quarter full. Why don't the people in the cars switch to the tram? Observing from a stopped car, it seems a reasonable question. The answer, of course, is that the tram is not going where the people are going. Wherever most of the drivers would leave the tram would generally be far from their destinations. This, of course, is the principal difficulty of public transport in the modern high-income urban area --- for most trips it simply cannot compete with the car. This is so even with the intense traffic congestion of Athens.

Most people would either not be able to complete their trip on the tram, or it would take even longer.

Around Athens

There is much to see within just a few hours drive of Athens, which is, of course, not surprising given the historical importance of this area. Such sites include ancient Corinth, Delphi, the temple of Apollo at Sounion, Mycenae and others. One of the world's great transport engineering accomplishments is the Corinth Canal (illustration #36), just 50 miles from Athens.

URBAN TOURS BY RENTAL CAR: DESCRIPTION

Urban Tours by Rental Car offers perspectives on urban development obtained by automobile tours through urban areas. Rental cars are not the favored method for visiting cities, especially those outside one's own country. Instead, tourists and urban planners favor packaged tours or local public transport systems. Both are splendid ways for seeing the city as it used to be --- the very reason for most tourist visits. The historical core areas contain monuments, prime government and religious edifices and quaint neighborhoods that are often centuries old. This is particularly important to tourists from the newer urban areas of the American, Canadian or Australian West, where history extends not far before World War II. It is further understandable that few tourists travel thousands of miles to see the newer suburban areas that look very much like home. But most tourists do not profess to be students of the urban area.

For the urban planner interested in understanding the whole urban area, it is not enough to study the core alone, regardless of its architectural attractiveness, romanticism, history or affirmation of an individually preferred life style. No one, regardless of the depth of their education can develop reliable conceptions from an unrepresentative sample, and urban cores are the very essence of unrepresentative samples. Both public transport and packaged tours miss the larger part --- the expanse of sprawling residential and business development that rings virtually all major urban areas. They may be of little interest to many urban planners, but they should be.

Stripping away regional architectural facades, one might as well be in the suburbs of Phoenix, Portland, Perth or Paris. Here, the automobile is king, because no public transport system has been developed that can effectively serve destinations outside the core (at least at a price any society can afford). While public transport market shares are higher in European suburban areas than in the New World, much of the difference is attributable to lower incomes and less automobile access. Indeed, public transport's principal weakness, lack of automobile competitiveness, is itself a contributing factor to the rising motorization occurring from the suburbs of Copenhagen and Nagoya to the suburbs of Lagos and Mumbai. To oversimplify this phenomenon as being a "love affair with the automobile" is the equivalent of saying that Singaporeans or Brazilians have a love affair with air conditioning. Human beings prefer comfort to

discomfort and they prefer free time to time over which they have no control.

It is no wonder that tourists return to the United States thinking that all Paris looks like the second arrondissement (less than one percent does) and that urban planners think all of Milan looks like the architectural treasures that surround the Cathedral. In fact, the sprawling suburbs of Europe, Japan, Canada and Connecticut resemble one another in many ways. For any seeking to study the urban area in its entirety --- not just the favored haunts of core-dwelling elites --- there is no alternative to "getting behind the wheel." Thus, "urban tours by rental car."



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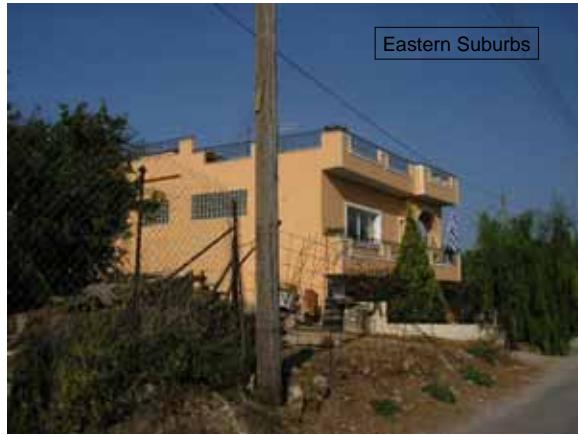
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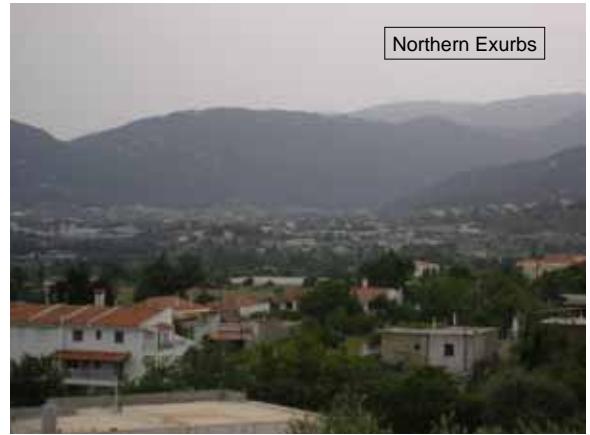
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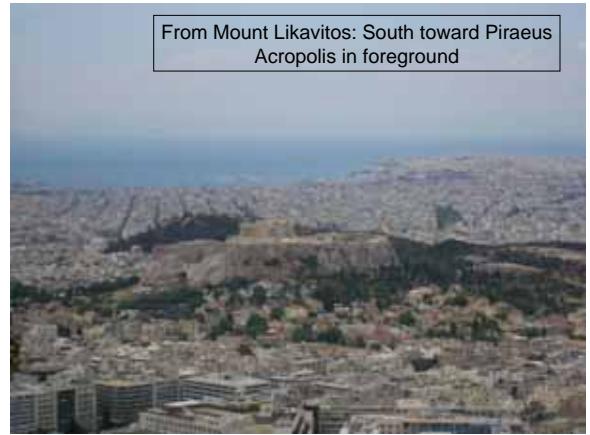


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From Mount Likavitos: Southeast

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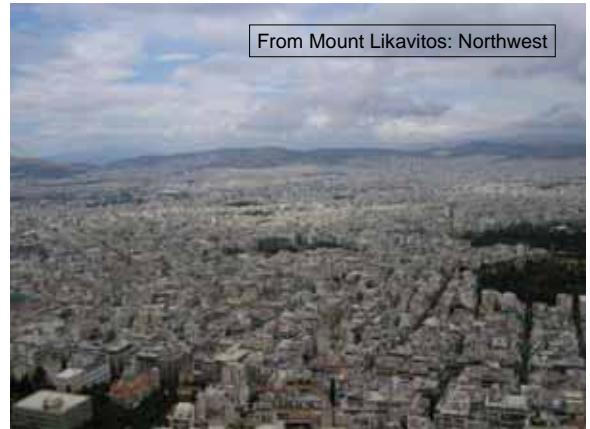
From Mount Likavitos: South toward Piraeus
Acropolis in foreground

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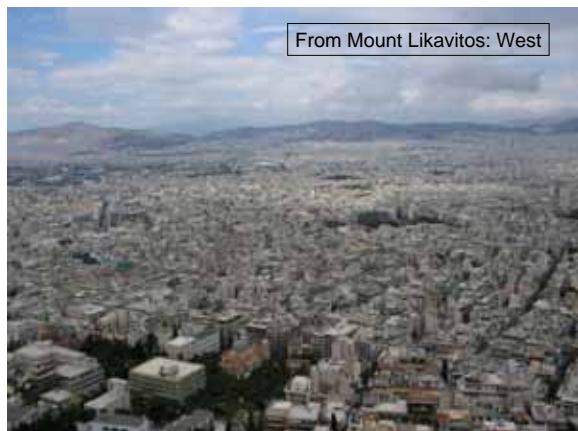
From Mount Likavitos: East

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From Mount Likavitos: Northwest

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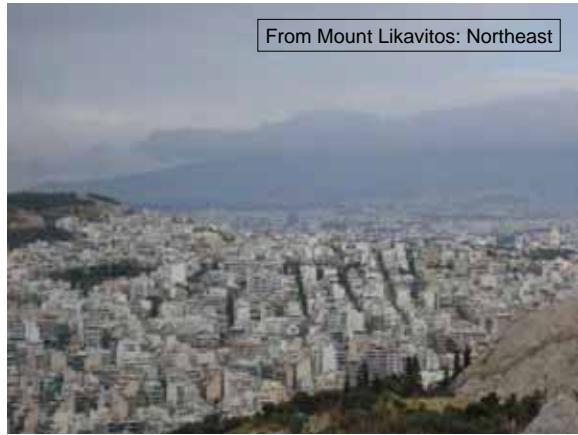
From Mount Likavitos: West

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Athens Density

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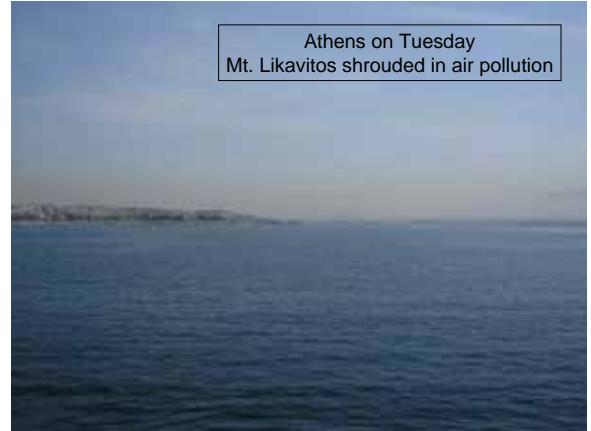
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Metro Line 1: Piraeus Station: Lack of Graffiti

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Corinth Canal: 50 Miles from Athens: Completed 1893

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