

Sunny paradise

The Hellenic Republic is experienced in crises and will overcome the current global one, too. Especially its potential in new technologies and tourism will help to bring the country back on track.

Text: Stephan Burianek



Greece par excellence: The picturesque Oia village on Santorini island is characterised by white-washed houses on rocky cliffs.



On their way to the legendary Musikverein concert hall in Vienna, people often walk through a street called Dumbagasse, which turns in from the Ringstraße. Only very few concert-goers are aware of the fact that this street is named after Nikolaus Dumba, who was one of the financiers of this landmark building. And hardly anyone knows that the Dumba family was part of an influential Greek community that substantially took part in Austria's economy and politics, as well as in the Viennese social life. The Greeks started in Vienna in the 18th century as merchants for oriental goods, opened the first coffee houses, and later gained a reputation in the banking sector. They even paved the way for the Greek revolution of 1821: Greek proponents of the Enlightenment that had fled from the Ottoman Empire to Vienna published newspapers and magazines in Greek language which became an important source for like-minded people back home. Hence, it seems legitimate to claim that the Greek fight for independence against the Ottoman initiated by Greek intellectuals in Vienna. The Greek revolution was the first liberal-national movement in Europe, and it set an example for subsequent national uprisings in Europe that finally led to new nation-states in the 20th century. The legacy of the Greeks in Vienna lives on, as many of them nowadays also have the Austrian ci-

PHOTOS: ADOBE STOCK

Popular among tourists: The Changing of the Guards in front of the Hellenic Parliament on Syntagma Square in Athens (right).





The Acropolis in Athens is an eyecatcher that can be seen from most of the city's rooftop bars and restaurants.



World-famous beach with a shipwreck on Zakynthos island (above), the Greek salad with feta cheese on top is often chosen as an appetiser (below).

tizenship. The most famous descendant of a Greek dynasty in recent decades was probably the conductor Herbert von Karajan.

Today, both countries are mainly connected by tourism: Around 600,000 Austrians travelled to Greece in 2019, the year before the pandemic, and vice versa Austria is a popular destination for many Greeks. Most Austrians come for the sun and the beaches, and they enjoy the relaxed atmosphere especially on the islands and the delicious cuisine, with its many grilled specialties. As generally known, Greece is also a primary destination for people interested in culture: First the Romans copied Greek architecture and sculpture. Later, the art of Ancient Greece was rediscovered, and became an object of study for the founders of the Renaissance, Classicism and Historicism. And there's more: it was at the Dionysus Theatre in Athens, beneath the Acropolis, that the first plays in history celebrated their premieres. And the Agora, where philosophers such as Socrates enunciated their theses, is widely viewed as the birthplace of democracy. No doubt about it: western cultural history would have been far poorer if it were not for the ancient Greeks.

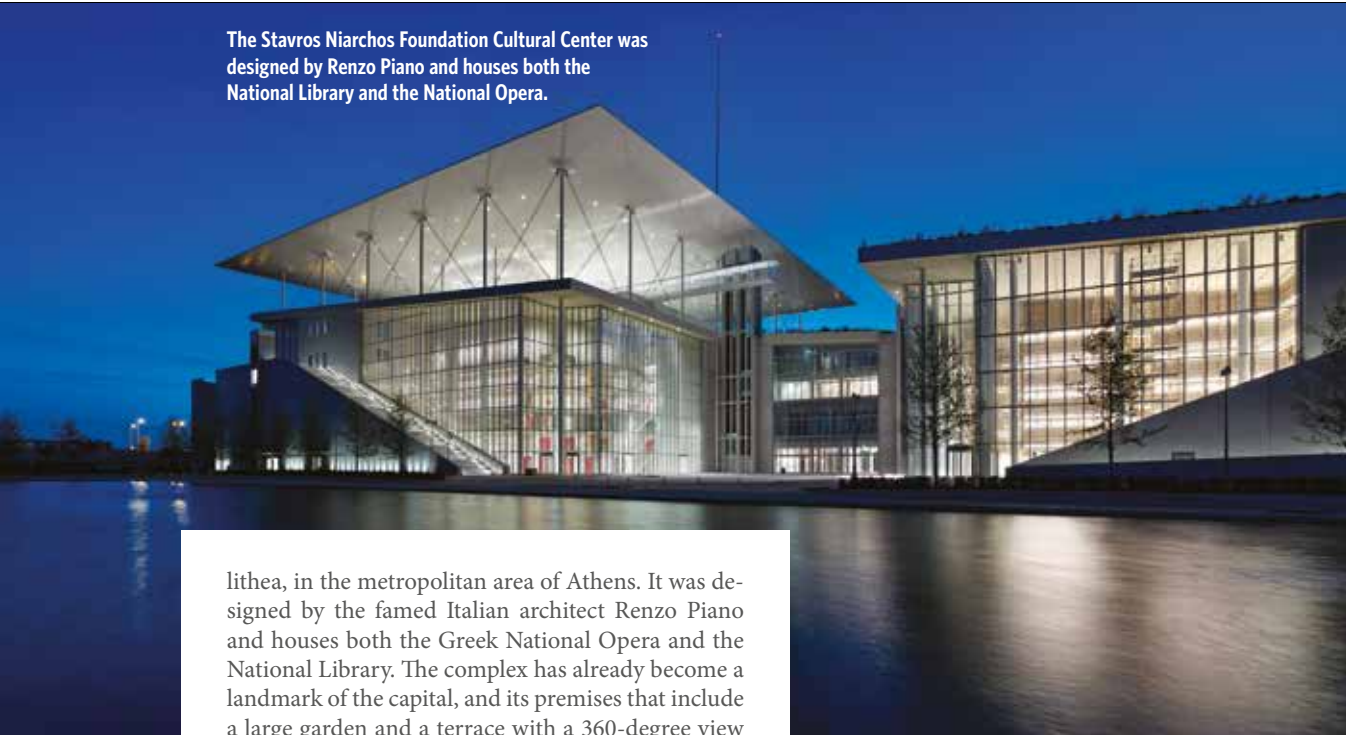
In fact, the ancient world is ever-present in the life

of the Greeks. Take the subway station on Monastiraki Square in Athens, for example. In the run-up to the 2004 Olympic Games, construction workers stumbled across a subterranean stream, Eridanos, in the race to build a new subway line. The stream was banished underground in ancient times, for reasons of town planning. Today, its quiet rippling can be heard once again at Monastiraki Station. Rushing to work and life elsewhere, passers-by seem oblivious to the museum-like character of the large info boards and exposed finds. The ancient world is part of everyday Athenian life.

It would not be fair, however, to reduce Greece to its historic testimonies. The country has a vivid art scene (see also the interview with the Greek Ambassador to Austria, H.E. Catherine Koika), and is regularly underlining its contemporary orientation with new state-of-the-art buildings. The Acropolis Museum, for example, which presents objects that were found on the former sacred hill, was inaugurated in 2009 and with its vast use of glass it is a masterpiece of transparent and space efficient architecture. More recently, in 2016, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center (SNFCC) was completed on the area of a former horse riding track next to the sea in Kal-



The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center was designed by Renzo Piano and houses both the National Library and the National Opera.



lithea, in the metropolitan area of Athens. It was designed by the famed Italian architect Renzo Piano and houses both the Greek National Opera and the National Library. The complex has already become a landmark of the capital, and its premises that include a large garden and a terrace with a 360-degree view of the city and the sea, very soon became a popular place for exercise and meetings among locals.

The cultural centre also is a symbol of solidarity: Financed by a foundation that was created by a meanwhile deceased ship-owner, it was presented to the state as a gift to all Greeks. It was the right moment: Since the outbreak of the Greek debt crisis in 2010, the Greek government had to implement a strict austerity policy that has been demanding cutbacks from its citizens. Hence, the SNFCC shows the Greek potential even in difficult times.

As if the debt crisis was not enough, the Covid-19 pandemic brought an additional challenge to the Hellenic Republic, as the tourism sector provides some respectable 20 percent of the GDP. The global lockdowns came right after a year of new records: After 31.3 million people had visited Greece in 2019, the number of incoming tourists was reduced to only 7.4 million in the pandemic year of 2020. At the beginning of this August, the signs for a recovery were positive – as the Greek government was one of the first to act in the beginning of the pandemic. The case numbers were kept relatively low, which allowed the tourism industry to invite foreign tourists again.

Even though some people might consider the Greeks as a homogenous nation, the country is very

diverse in cultural traditions. This is not a surprise if one considers the geographical characteristics of the Hellenic Republic that is surrounded by three seas – the Aegean, the Ionian, and the Myrtoan – and measures a distance of 750 kilometres from the mainland in the north to the southernmost islands in the Aegean Sea.

While the Peloponnese peninsula is highly appreciated by visitors for the fact that on this part of the mainland they allegedly find everything Greece is standing for, most tourists come for a holiday on the islands. Especially popular are the Cyclades, an island group in the Aegean Sea. While everyone might have heard of Mykonos as a meeting place for the jet set, of Santorini as a volcanic island, and of Naxos as the largest island of the Cyclades, there are many other unique islands that, in contrast, keep a low profile. Folegandros, for example, offers crystal clear water, stepped roads to picturesque churches, and well-kept white houses in narrow streets, and is an ideal place for stressed people seeking for relaxation, but also an insider's tip for snorkelers. The volcanic island of Milos is characterised by a fascinating "moonscape", with thermal springs, ancient catacombs, and colourful sea-level houses next to white

Right: Magnificent Melissani Lake on Kefalonia island.



FACTS & FIGURES

Greece

Official name:
Hellenic Republic

Form of government:
Parliamentary Republic

President:
Katerina Sakellaropoulou

Prime Minister:
Kyriakos Mitsotakis

Population: 10.8 million
(2020 estimate)

Religion: 93% Christianity
(90% Greek Orthodoxy, 3% other Christian),
4% no religion, 2% Islam,
1% other religions

GDP per capita (in current prices): 17,670 USD (2020)

Capital: Athens

Area: 131,957 km² (mainland: ca. 107,000 km², islands: ca. 25,000 km²)

Official language: Greek

Currency: Euro





The Varlaam Monastery in Meteora was founded in the 14th century and is still active.



Mythological creatures on a vase painting (above), the Academy of Athens was designed by Theophil Hansen (below).

beaches. From there, pottery lovers might take a ship to Sifnos, and take the opportunity to try the olive oils and wines there. On the other hand, Tinos is famous for its marble and artistic tradition, but its many churches furthermore make the island a place for pilgrimage.

While there is a legitimate hope for the tourism to recover, it is interesting to note that the GDP has declined less dramatic during the pandemic than generally expected – instead of a predicted minus of 10.5 percent in 2020, the economy diminished by only 8.2 percent. Greece will receive about 70 billion euro as a financial support from the EU within the next seven years, 32 billion of which will come from the “Next Generation EU” recovery programme. The government plans to use this money mainly for energy transition efforts and investments in digital transformation and innovation.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the dynamic IT sector that turned out to grow even in pandemic times. Several Greek tech solutions have reached international fame, such as the taxi mobile app Beat, the personnel recruiting software Workable, or the online delivery mobile app efood. The Tesla company opened a research and development division near Athens, and Microsoft announced to establish three

new data centres. Hence, for Austrian companies that desperately need skilled IT workers, Greece could be an interesting country to search for.

In the difficult year of 2020, the exports to Austria climbed according to Statistik Austria by 23.5 percent to 337.6 million euro, with pharmaceutical products in the lead (plus 33.8 percent to 77.2 million euro), followed by dairy products (mainly feta cheese and yoghurt), fruits and aluminium. In contrary, the Austrian exports to Greece suffered a decline by 7.8 percent, after reaching a ten-year-high of 534.5 million euro in the year before. Austrian companies mainly deliver electronic goods and machines, followed by dairy and pharmaceutical goods.

The strong Austrian-Hellenic connection can be found even in the Athenian architecture: On Panepistimiou Street, three neoclassical buildings – the University of Athens, the Academy, and the former National Library – very much remind of the building of Austria's Parliament. This is no co-incidence, of course, as they were all designed by Theophil Hansen, who was also the architect of the Musikverein. With the help of a number of art projects, the Ambassador of the Hellenic Republic to Austria, Catherine Koika, plans to make these historic connections more visible in the future. We promise to stick to it. ●

PHOTOS: ADOBE STOCK



Not the only cat you will see on Santorini island.



H.E. Catherine Koika

“We cooperated closely with Austria in order to manage the pandemic.”

The Ambassador of the Hellenic Republic, an art enthusiast, is keen to promote bilateral relations via cultural initiatives.

Interview: Stephan Burianek

CD: You have been Ambassador of Greece to Austria since April 2019. Did you assume office having certain goals?

CATHERINE KOIKA: This appointment was an honour and a challenge: not only was it my first time as an Ambassador, but I too, found myself in a city that I already loved. I feel very close to Austrians and Austrian history. I am fortunate enough to be here under very propitious circumstances of excellent bilateral relations and I intend to promote political, economic and cultural cooperation. I hope that any deceleration brought about by the pandemic belongs to the past, and we are fully prepared to make up for the lost ground, especially in the economic sector. This said, my soft spot for culture persists. I believe that there is significant room for the further development of cultural interaction between our two countries, especially in all forms of contemporary art that have great potential in both Austria and Greece.

Which are your favourite spots in Vienna?

The museums! I enjoy following modern art trends in Vienna and spending time in the Albertina Modern, in the Künstlerhaus, the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK) or the sections dedicated to modern art in the MuseumsQuartier. It would be interesting to expose our Austrian friends to the work of the Greek 20th century artists.

Do you have any cooperation projects with art museums here in Vienna?

Yes, indeed. Both countries have a rich cultural legacy that plays an important role in international relations.

On the other hand, I also intend to initiate a film festival exchange between Greece and Austria. Our tradition in short films

would flourish through collaboration and synergies between the “Vienna Shorts Festival” and the “Drama short-film festival” in Greece.

In which fields could Greece and Austria further their cooperation and mutual benefits?

We have a high level of mutual understanding in many topics and we really appreciate the Austrian support in certain issues of high priority for Greece.

In the economic sector, tourism is an excellent field for cooperation: In 2019, we had almost 600,000 Austrians visiting Greece and a large number of Greeks visiting Austria. We seek to promote agro-tourism or support our wineries and wines from indigenous wine varieties. Furthermore, we are striving for the digitalisation of our economies. I also believe that there is a mutual interest in the green economy for both countries. Austria has a legacy in the fight against climate change, so I think we have a lot in common. Furthermore, both countries are very active as far as start-up companies are concerned.

How did Greece handle the pandemic? It seems that the country did well, considering the comparatively low case numbers throughout the crisis.

In March 2020, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis was in Vienna and met Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, right before the lockdowns in Austria and Greece. It was a challenging time, but measures were quickly adopted and the Greek society reacted in a very disciplined way. We cooperated closely with Austria and other countries in order to manage the crisis. Greece was the first to introduce the online registration form for tourists (Passenger Locator Form - PLF) last summer. At the beginning of 2021, our Prime Minister was the first one to propose the introduction of the green pass and the vaccination certificate in Europe and the majority of our EU partners, Austria included, supported the idea. Now we can welcome guests that are either vaccinated or tested. In Greece anti-Covid measures are strictly kept and well respected. We are aware that we have to prevent the spreading of the variants and vaccination runs on the fast lane. Vaccination is now mandatory for all Greek healthcare workers, according to a recent announcement by the Greek government.

The pandemic killed a lot of progress, also in the diplomatic field. However, the problems remain. One constant pre-pandemic concern was

migration. With its many islands, Greece is very much exposed to illegal immigration. What efforts will be necessary in the future to improve the situation?

As an EU frontier state Greece has indeed been very exposed to migration flows and in the past, we have been through some very difficult times. Recently, however, the situation improved, especially due to the better protection of our borders, which are, needless to remind, EU external borders. I seize this opportunity to mention our deep appreciation for the strong support we received from the Austrian government in March 2020, when Greece and the EU, as a whole, were faced with an unprecedented situation, orchestrated by Turkey, where persons were encouraged to try and illegally cross the Greek-Turkish borders. It is recalled in this regard that the EU Foreign Ministers strongly rejected Turkey’s use of migratory pressure for political purposes.

Two hundred years after the successful Greek revolution against the Ottoman Empire, Greece’s relations with Turkey are still delicate. How could this situation improve?

From our part, we have always strived for good relations, dialogue and cooperation with all countries in our region and beyond, including obviously with our immediate neighbours, like Turkey. But no such relations, dialogue and cooperation can take place under threat or in a climate of violations of international law. Furthermore, dialogue alone is not the decisive step that could be a game changer in Greek-Turkish relations; Ankara’s full, unequivocal compliance to international law, including UNCLOS, which is EU acquis, could be such a step.



PHOTOS: RALPH MANFRED

H.E. CATHERINE KOIKA

Before starting her diplomatic career in 1986, Catherine Koika (born in Athens, Greece) studied Law at the Kapodistrian University of Athens and the Institute for International and European Studies of the University of Strasbourg. She has served as a diplomat in Rome, Budapest, and Paris and in various positions within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Athens. She was appointed Ambassador of the Hellenic Republic to Austria in April 2019. Besides her mother tongue, the Ambassador, mother of two children, speaks English, French, Italian and German.