

# A family-

# friendly Greek odyssey

Even children will shrug off the torrid heat for the ancient wonders of Athens, says Clive Aslet

**A**THERNS, IN July, is generally pretty hot. But this year, temperatures hovered in the mid-40 degrees centigrade – that's around 110 degrees in old money. As we crawled over the Acropolis at midday, our guide, from beneath the collapsible umbrella that served as a parasol, heard some other visitors asking where they could buy water. You can't on the Acropolis. 'To come here without water,' she observed crisply, 'insane.'

But with factor 50, sunhats and the obligatory bottled water, it is surprising what children will stand. Ours are 12, 10 and six. The older two,

William and Johnny, have started classics and the trip to Athens was held out as a reward for doing well in their exams. As I remembered it, Athens was not an ideal city for children but the place has reinvented itself since I was last there, as a student in the '70s.

What I recall as being grey buildings have been cleaned to reveal the delicate, polychrome architecture that lay underneath.

Public spaces have been improved. There are fewer cars. The legacy of the 2004 Olympics is everywhere – new airport, clean and extended subway, loads of hotels.

From the new, imaginatively designed Akropoli subway station – the walls incorporate the archaeological finds discovered while making it – we walked to the Acropolis. The approach, once lined with tacky souvenir stands, was remade some years ago under Melina Mercouri, actress turned minister of culture. It is now a kind of processional way, completely deserted (except for us) under this scorching sun.

The new Acropolis Museum overlooks it; expect loud clamours for the return of the Elgin Marbles, currently in the British Museum, when it is opened in two months' time. ('Don't mention the marbles,' my wife and I would say to each other later. Our guide had strong feelings on the subject.)

I had expected the Acropolis itself to be heaving with tourist groups – it wasn't. The boys were awed by the scale of it, excited by

the explosion which blew off the roof of the Parthenon while it was being used as a gunpowder store

in 1687, and particularly struck by the temple of Athena Nike, Nike being the goddess of victory who, in a later age, would have wings codified as the tick on the side of their trainers (the Athena Nike didn't have wings; the Athenians didn't want victory to fly away).

'Has this been here since Ancient Greece?' asked six-year-old Charlie, pointing to the scaffolding poles. No, they are part of a painstaking restoration designed to correct the errors of previous campaigns (replacing 19th century iron cramps, which have rusted, with titanium, for example).

There is a crane on rails beside

the Parthenon. Only the Erechtheion in the Acropolis has been completed, and it looks sublime.

We returned, weary but rather proud of ourselves, to the Classical Baby Grand. The hotel overlooks the revamped Kotzia Square, with its grand neo-classical banks and City Hall; a modern building at the corner of the square hovers over some remains of the ancient city wall. As temperatures began to cool around 9pm, the square proved an excellent arena for skipping.

**C**LOSE YOUR eyes to the crumbling '60s building which has Sex Shop written in large letters on one of the

windows (despite improvements and a Marks and Spencer store, this remains a gritty area) and walk down to the Agora. It is only half a mile away and you pass the Byzantine Museum en route.

Or, as we did, join the Happy Train, which trundles for an hour, through sometimes terrifying traffic, around the centre of Athens, past cafés, parks, musicians and fake Rolex sellers – oh yes, and the monument which Lysicrates raised to celebrate his chorus's victory in a drama contest in 335BC.

You don't have to be a child to stay at the Classical Baby Grand but it helps.

The inspiration is Pop Art at its most kitsch. Plastic vines and creepers line the entrance hall; the reception desks on the first floor have been made from two cut-down Mini Coopers (genuine cars, with flat leather tops and

cupboards where the engine should be); bedrooms and corridors are decorated with Tintin, Spiderman and Smurfs. There is all the stuff you would expect in a modern hotel

– internet, fancy audio system; only the lamp on the otherwise sensible desk is a toadstool. It is all rather endearing and the boys loved it.

The second most important monument in Greece is the Temple of Poseidon, constructed a little earlier than the Parthenon on the

southernmost tip of Attica, part of the Greek mainland. Whereas the Parthenon looks down on what is now a densely packed modern city, the crag from which the Temple of Poseidon surveys the sea is unchanged since the fifth century BC. We could enjoy it, even before the air-conditioned Mercedes taxi had taken us there, from the five-star Cape Sounio Hotel, on the point of the next bay.

Although also owned by the Gre-

cotel group, this is in a different style altogether from the Baby Grand – coolly chic. The Temple of Poseidon is the backdrop to every view. They have excellent activities for children devised by Jean-Michel Cousteau (son of Jacques). Called Ambassadors of the Environment, it introduces children to the natural world by means of kayaking, snorkelling and exploring tide

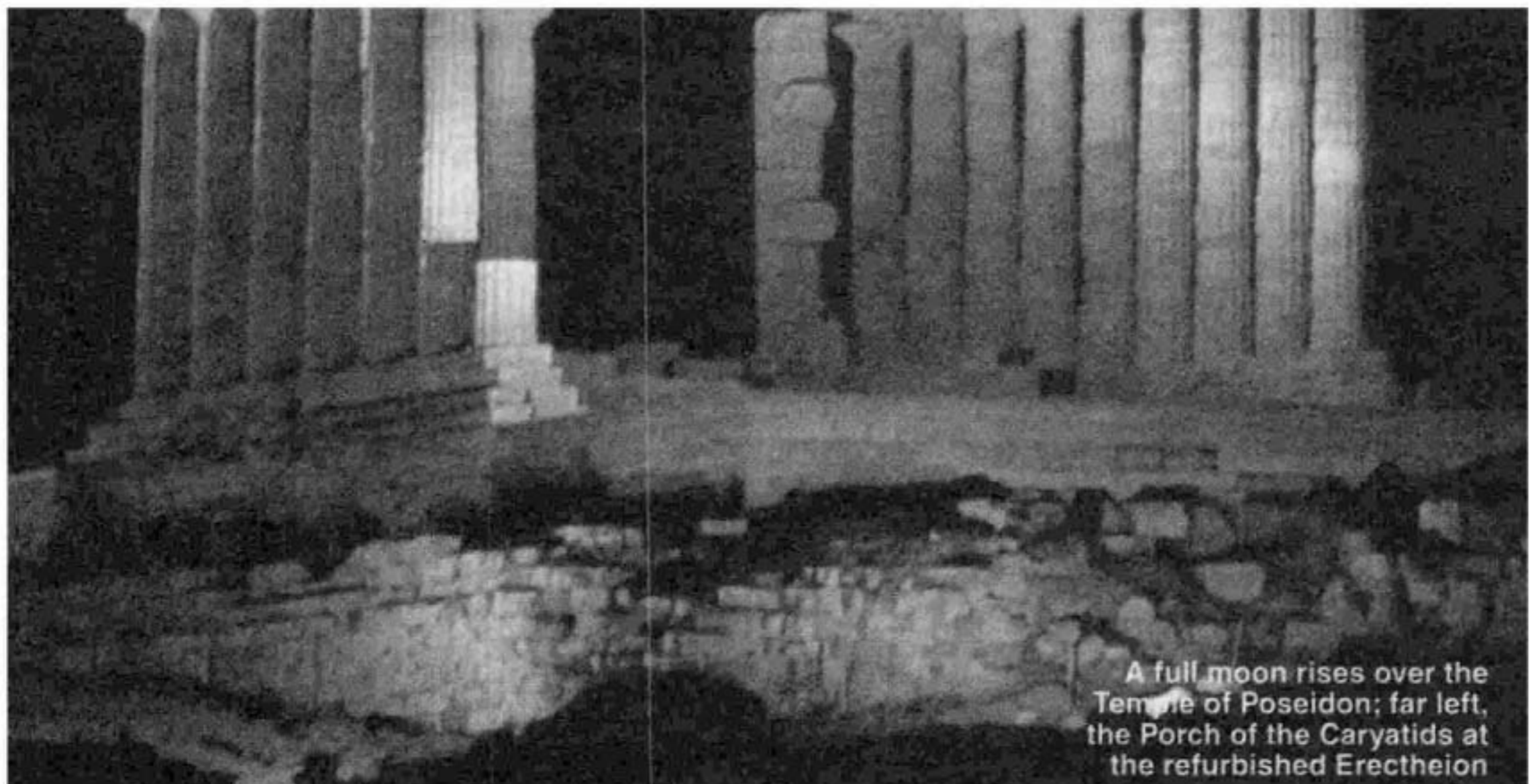
pools. So they pick up a bit of science while enjoying themselves.

There are tennis courts and five-a-side football pitches, as well as swimming pools, beach and spa.

But history is so deep in the rocky soil you can't help absorbing something through the soles of your feet. I had thought a few circles of old stones were part of a previous hotel which they had forgotten to clear away. But son William told me they were the remains of a third century BC village.

On the last evening, my wife and I

ate a Cretan meal – the owners of Grecotel have a big organic farm on Crete – while gazing at the now floodlit Temple of Poseidon. The boys joined the audience for 2001 A Space Odyssey (an odd choice, if it wasn't for the classical allusion). The courses – eight of them – got heavier and heavier. Our hearts, though, grew lighter and lighter. Sightseeing with children is not a recipe for happiness but this holiday, despite the heat, was bliss.



A full moon rises over the Temple of Poseidon; far left, the Porch of the Caryatids at the refurbished Erectheion

## ATHENS THE LOWDOWN

**GO:** Aer Lingus offers direct flights to Athens from €215 return, incl. taxes, see [aerlingus.com](http://aerlingus.com). Hungarian carrier Malév also fly there via Budapest, from €236, call 0818 555 577.



Lively taverna-filled street in Athens

**STAY:** Classical Baby Grand Hotel double rooms from €150 B&B, see [www.classicalhotels.com](http://www.classicalhotels.com). Grecotel Cape Sounio, Attica has bungalows from €410. Cousteau's Ambassadors of the Environment (Aote) programme costs from €65 for a three-hour session, see [www.grecotel.com](http://www.grecotel.com).

**SEE:** The Acropolis, with the New Acropolis Museum opening shortly; the Erechtheion, the most sacred ground in Athens; the Parthenon, which houses surviving friezes and marble metopes (decorated panels). Open daily. In the historic centre, the Byzantine Museum has mosaics, sculptures and art. See [www.culture.gr](http://www.culture.gr) for further details.

