

A Drive around Attica

Taking in the best of Attica's attractions, this route begins in central Athens and winds along the coast, finishing at Halkida, the gateway to the island of Evia, the second largest in Greece after Crete. If you don't want to do the full drive, you could head back for the center of Athens when you've finished visiting Marathon.

The full route is about 120 miles (190 kms) and should take about three hours without allowing for stops.

From the center of Athens follow Leoforos Syngrou which heads southwest out of the centre and becomes Highway 91. This eventually swings left to take you southeast along the coast, the Athens Riviera, with the Aegean Sea on your right. It's a welcome relief after the bustle of the city.

After driving for about 15 minutes along the coast you come to the Athens seaside suburb of Vouliagmeni. This is a popular beach resort and a welcome escape, especially in the summer, for those who live right in the city. Here you could take a break to stroll along the sandy beaches, do some windsurfing, paragliding, sailing, or scuba diving, or simply relax in an outdoor cafe.

Continue south along the coastal road and after about 45 minutes the impressive ruined Temple of Poseidon comes into view, sitting on top of the headland of Akra Sounion, Cape Sounion, and visible from miles away. It's a popular spot at sunset, when Athenians drive out for a meal at one of the tavernas here.

After visiting the temple return to Highway 91 and turn right. Almost immediately this becomes highway 89 and takes you north up the eastern coast of Attica. It veers inland through the fertile interior to the small but busy market town of Markopoulon, which is about 40 minutes from Cape Sounion. Here you can stock up on provisions, fill up with petrol, or have a walk round and stretch your legs.

Vineyards spread out around the town, and several tavernas will provide you with an authentic Greek lunch - no tourist menus here. Look out for a bakery and try some of the local bread for which Markopoulon is known. There are also some small chapels you can visit. Look for a bell to ring to gain admission, or ask the first person you see where the key-holder can be found.

When you've finished in Markopoulon retrace your route back to Highway 89 and turn left. Almost immediately you should turn right onto Highway 85, which brings you to Rafina, after about 30 minutes of pleasant coastal driving. Rafina is a port and a resort, and if you want to stop just follow the signs for 'Ferries' and you should be able to find somewhere to park.

Lots of ferries to via, the Dodecanese, the Cyclades, and the North-East Aegean Islands go from here. If you haven't yet eaten it also makes a good spot for lunch in one of the many waterfront restaurants.

From Rafina head west out of town to reach highway 83 and continue north. In about 10 minutes, passing vacation homes and villas on the way, you reach the smaller resort of Nea Makri. Five minutes or so beyond here you reach the town and ancient site of Marathon.

This is where the Battle of Marathon took place in 490BC, when the Athenians defeated the much larger Persian army. The route that was taken by the messenger who was sent to relay the news to Athens covers 26 miles 385 yards (42.195 kms), the length of the marathon race. The messenger died after delivering his news.

The Athenian dead were buried under a simple but large burial mound. Watch for the sign before you reach the town of Marathon itself. After visiting the site continue north on Highway 83 and you'll soon reach the small but very informative Archaeological Museum.

Continue on the winding Highway 83 until you reach the village of Agios Stefanos, where you have a choice. Just beyond the village is the main Athens-Thessaloniki highway. This is Highway 1 but in places is confusingly also the E75. If you want to return to Athens, turn left on Highway 1.

To continue the drive turn right onto the highway and after about 45 minutes watch for a right turn marked for Evia and Chalkida, its capital. Alternatively, continuing north on highway 1 would get you to Volos and the Pelion Peninsula in about three hours. Another 2-3 hours beyond Volos and you would reach Thessaloniki.