Pack up and go...

Acropolis NOW

ANCIENT GREECE — The Temple of Zeus

As the sun sank lower in the Athens sky, the buildings were bathed in gold light, writes **YVONNE GORDON**.

The six statues of the female Caryatids on the side of the Erechtheion Temple stood in restful repose as dusk's dying rays filtered through the Parthenon's rows of pillars.

A handful of us watched as the sun started to set over the Acropolis and it was a very different experience to the first time I visited the Acropolis four years ago.

That was in mid-August, peak tourist season and it was 40°C. Thousands of cruise ship passengers endured a long wait to see the Acropolis. When we finally did, it was so hot and crowded that it was hard to take it in.

As these are some of the most important ancient buildings in the Western world, I vowed to return in low season.

Last winter I did so and it was perfect timing. The weather was nice and mild and another bonus was that low-season prices were cheaper — from flights (via London) to hotels.

We started the day at the Temple of Olympian Zeus. This was once the largest in Greece — twice as large as the Parthenon — and although construction started in the 6th century BC, it took 700 years to complete. It originally had 104 columns, but even the 14 that remain standing are impressive, each stretching 17m high.

Without any crowds, we had plenty of space to admire the temple and photograph the views of the Acropolis in the background.

Later, at the foot of the Acropolis hill, we saw the open-air Theatre of Dionysus, the first theatre in the world. "Socrates, Plato, Pericles — the who's-who of ancient Athenian history all stood here," said our guide Aristotle.

In ancient times, Athenians went to the theatre to honour the gods as well as for entertainment.

We also visited the nearby Acropolis Museum to see many of the treasures found on site.

But Athens isn't all about history. This is an urban, edgy city. The anti-austerity protests in 2010-11 had a big impact on tourism, but the city has bounced back stronger than ever, with visitor numbers up around 800,000 in 2014.

The old area of the city is home to Monastiraki, where market stalls, shops and outdoor restaurants keep it buzzing day and night. Nearby Plaka is a beautiful part of the old town, the cobbled pedestrianised streets at the foot of the Acropolis filled with antique shops and tavernas which become lively at night with traditional Greek music. The Psyri area also has lots of fun bars and restaurants.

One of the most striking features of contemporary Athens is the graffiti and street art everywhere, ranging from simple tags and political slogans, to colourful works of art covering the entire side of a building.

On a street art walking tour, our guide Manolis, an artist himself, told us that by using paint rather than spray cans, those who colour the walls are seen as artists, not vandals. "Graffiti is something positive now in Greece, even tags that seem aggressive express the positive energy of the new generation," he revealed.

Exarchia, once the centre of anarchic activity but now slowly becoming gentrified with cafes and restaurants, is one of the areas with the most striking graffiti and street art.

It is also home to Athens' best museum, the National Archaeological Museum. It is mesmerising to see gold jewellery and masks dating back to the 11th century BC.

Although the Greek capital has been inhabited for 7,000 years and is the birthplace for European civilisation, it is continually evolving with the times.

You can enjoy ancient architecture and artefacts, or take in the nightlife, shopping, dining and the sheer energy of a lively European city which is constantly changing and reinventing itself. Just make sure to see it without the crowds!

Travel facts

● Rooms at the central three-star Best Western Museum Hotel start from €45 (single) in low season, with family rooms starting from €55 (triple) and €80 (quadruple), plus free WIFI, outdoor pool and roof terrace; see www.museum-hotel.gr. Flights from Dublin to Athens (via London) with British Airways start from €287.26 return, including taxes and 23kg baggage allowance; see www.ba.com

PAINT THE TOWN... Street art in Athens