

Reviewing the Development of Tourism in Greece After WWII and Its Connection to Culture

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This study examines the development of tourism in Greece after WWII and its progressive integration with cultural heritage management. Post-war reconstruction, shaped by Cold War geopolitics and the Marshall Plan, positioned tourism as a strategic economic sector. Key state initiatives—including the establishment of the National Tourism Organization, the Athens Festival, the Xenia hotel program, and the designation of traditional settlements—linked tourism with architectural preservation and cultural policy. From the mid-20th century onward, cinema, traveling exhibitions, photography, UNESCO World Heritage inscriptions, and EU-funded restoration projects contributed to the international visibility of Greek cultural heritage. During the economic crisis of 2010-2018, archaeological sites provided significant state revenue, underscoring their enduring importance. Recent approaches expand the notion of heritage beyond antiquity to include medieval, modern, and intangible cultural expressions. As tourism remains Greece's primary industry, the central challenge is shifting from quantitative growth to the pursuit of high-quality cultural tourism.

Keywords: Greek ancient culture, tourism, development of tourism, history

Tourism is closely linked to the economy and to the policies adopted in each country at any given time. Today, the idea of tourism is analyzed, and the discussion includes what J. Urry (Urry & Larsen, 2024, p. 21) calls the “tourist gaze”, in the sense of what the tourist wants to see when he/she travels, and what it is a “constructed image” (Thimm, 2013) for the visitors to see.

At the same time, the social characteristics (positive and negative) of the civilized world and the economic framework are quite the same, since we are all parts of globalized societies. Therefore, interconnectivity, urban gentrification, social media, “Instagrammable” (Spend It Like Stanford, 2025) places, globalization, mobility, word-of-mouth promotion and the economic status of travelers are some of the many factors that have to do with tourism. In the discussion there is a major factor that changes favorite destinations all over the world and proves the delicacy of balances that tourism is connected to, and these are: terrorism, war zones, natural phenomena related to climate change, like wildfires, or tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, etc. Finally, we all know now the consequences of tourism the pandemia of COVID-19 had, when people did not travel due to fear of illness. Each chronological period, starting from the early 20th century, experiences different forms of tourism, since tourism reflects the society to which it belongs.

It is beyond doubt that tourism requires peace and a stable economy to flourish. We repeat the importance of economy in this study, to show that stable economies can host tourism as a state investment so the

expectations of bringing back income after the successful attempts of a country to become tourist destination. At the same time, these conditions are part of historical evolution, and tourism itself becomes part of a country's core identity. Connecting tourism with cultural heritage is therefore a central aim of national policy and cultural diplomacy (Mark, 2009).

WWII and the Civil War that followed in Greece lasted almost a decade and significantly delayed the country's reconstruction compared to the rest of Europe. Both conflicts left Greece in ruins—economically, institutionally, and socially—and the civil struggle created a deep wound that remains sensitive even today. After WWII and the Declaration of Yalta in 1945, the three major powers (the USA, Soviet Union, and Great Britain) (Office of the Historian, US Department of State, 1945) decided that Greece would join the Western bloc under British and American patronage.

The United States supported Greece not only out of humanitarian concern for a war-ravaged country, but primarily out of fear that Greece might fall under communist influence. In the context of the emerging Cold War, Greece was considered a strategically critical state whose destabilization could trigger a domino effect across the Balkans.

The reinforce of the Greek economy was made real first through an economic help of 400 million in 1947 with the Truman Doctrine and in the same year, through the European Recovery Program, better known as the Marshall Plan after the Secretary George S. Marshall who suggested it to the American Congress (Office of the Historian, US Department of State, n.d.). One part of this project was the promotion of tourism development through helping Greece in the making of the essential infrastructures (the Corinth canal reopening, roads, airports, etc.) (YouTube, n.d.), and in 1950 the Greek state founded the National Tourism Organization (GNTO, n.d.) to increase foreign arrivals.

The establishment of the Athens-Epidauros Festival in 1955 (Athens-Epidauros Festival. (n.d.) (Figure 1) was a major step toward the increase of domestic tourism and the promotion of cultural education in music and ancient drama for the Greeks in the post-war period. During the process of the festival making, the restoration of the ancient monuments like the Odeon of Herodes Atticus in Athens (Figure 2) and the Ancient Theatre of Epidauros (Figure 3) on the other was essential, so they both became the focal point of the enactment of the ancient drama and the performance of important music orchestras. Therefore, through the Athens Epidauros Festival domestic tourism was linked directly with the management of archaeological heritage.

Although the Athens and Epidauros Festival is today attended by a growing number of international visitors, it was not originally conceived as a tourism-oriented institution. For decades its audience consisted primarily of domestic cultural travelers, and even today the festival is not formally integrated into organized tourist packages. Nevertheless, the introduction of English surtitles and the festival's international programming have significantly expanded its global reach.

During the early 1950s, the Greek state employed the architects Charalambos Sfaellos (Georgiadou, Frangou, & Marnellos, 2015) first and Aris Konstantinides later (Georgiadou et al., 2015) and began constructing a series of hotels across Greece, the Xenia Project (Figure 4). These hotels were located near archaeological sites or areas of natural beauty. It is interesting to mention here, that the meaning of the word "Xenia" is known after the epithet of the ancient God *Zeus*, as the God of Hospitality (*Xenios Zeus*), playing on the idea of Greek "philoxenia".

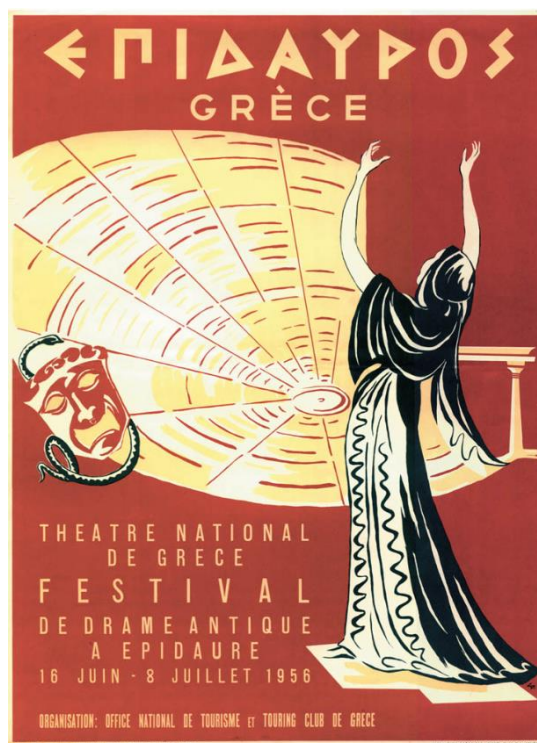


Figure 1. Epidauros Festival 1956, Poster (the picture was taken from the Greek National Tourist Organization archive and published in *Imagining Greece 1945-1989*, Discover, Culture, Festival, available at <https://imagininggreece.com/artefacts/epidauros-festival-1956>) (last access on 14/09/2026).

ΟΔΥΣΣΕΥΣ

Ωδείο Ηρώδου Αττικού



Αποψη του κοίλου και της σκηνής του Ωδείου του Ηρώδου Αττικού

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Figure 2. Odeon of Herodes Atticus as it is restored today, ODYSSEUS, Ministry of Culture, Greece, available at http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/2/gh2562.jsp?obj_id=6622&mm_id=18407 (last access on 14/09/2026).

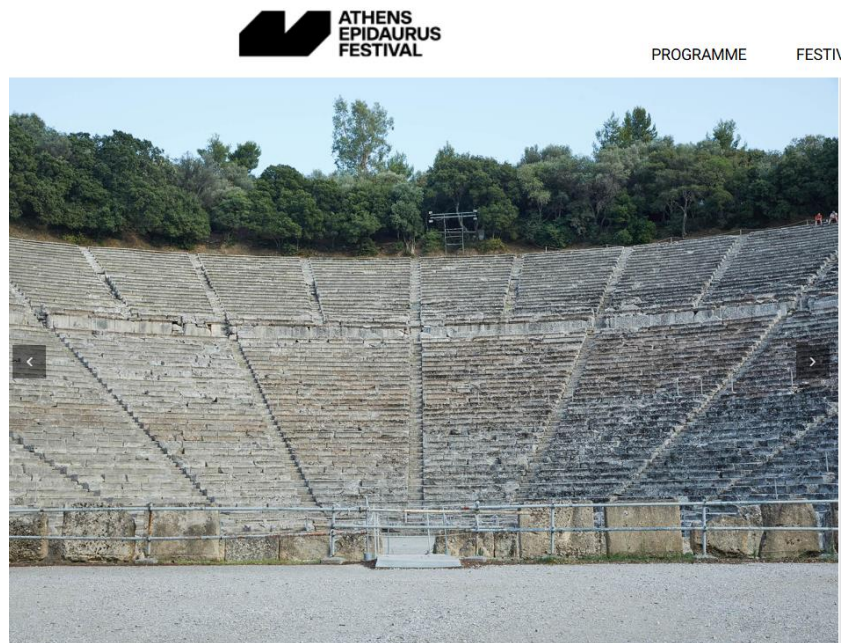


Figure 3. Ancient Theater of Epidauros, as it is restored today, Athens Epidauros Festival, Ancient Theater of Epidauros, available at <https://aefestival.gr/venues/ancient-theatre-of-epidauros/?lang=en> (last access on 14/09/2026).

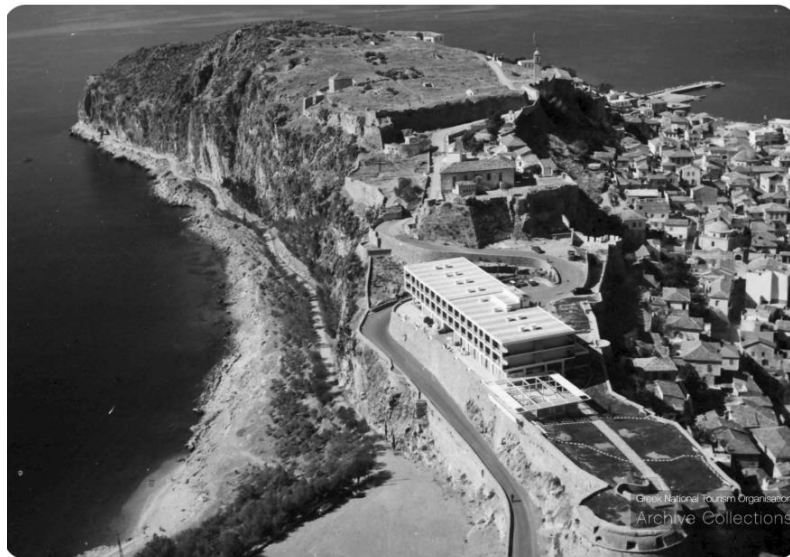


Figure 4. Xenia hotel in Nafplio, Argolis, Peloponnese, Greece, built in 1958 by the architect Ioannis Triantafyllidis (Photo from the National Tourism Organization Digital Archive, available at <https://archivecollections.visitgreece.gr/entities/photo/66c14b1a-ff90-4341-85a7-89cb974c07a5/full> (last access on 14/09/2026)).

The nation urgently needed tourist facilities, and the Xenia hotels were built to meet this demand. They soon became important examples of modern Greek architecture, distinguished by their inspiration, their dialogue with the surrounding landscape, and their refined aesthetic. Today the term “holistic” is used for them in bibliography by Zoe Georgiadou, Dionysia Frangou and Dimitris Marnellos article (2015). The Xenia hotels remain today brilliant examples of a style that combines elegance and minimalism, using materials that harmonize with the environment.

These hotels were relatively small, meaning they could not accommodate large numbers of guests. They also included spaces intended for gatherings of the local community, reinforcing their role as cultural and social hubs. Unfortunately, most of them today are either destroyed or abandoned.

Besides the Xenia program, the designation of traditional settlements was another important decision taken by the Greek state. By declaring certain settlements as “traditional” (Economou, 2019), Greece sought to preserve their architectural heritage and protect them from alterations that would destroy their original character. The main idea was to safeguard their historical form and to adapt some of their buildings into guest houses or small hotels for tourists.

A characteristic example is the settlement of Oia (Monioudi-Gavala, 2015) (Figure 5) in Santorini, which preserved its Cycladic identity through this policy. Its rock-cut dwellings and the mansions of 19th-century shipowners were protected, many of which survive even today. Through this ambitious plan, Greece managed to preserve local architectural traditions of the past—an approach that is now considered a successful case of cultural management.



Figure 5. Aspect of the settlement of Oia in Santorini (Thera) (1950–1955), photographer Voula Papaioannou (Benaki Museum Photo Archive).

The decade of the 60s and 70s the sexual liberation, music, and traveling worldwide with only the basics gave birth to the idea of the “hippies” and the hippies chose a coastal place in Central Crete, Matala, with caves with graves from the Early Byzantine Period and for a number of years Matala became a symbol of the “flower power” people, while on the other hand the place became widely known as a touristic destination.

From that point onward, the connection between ancient monuments and tourism development became firmly established. Greece possessed a long history and a celebrated past that needed both preservation and promotion. Athens, with the Acropolis—a creation of ancient democratic institutions—and the Parthenon as a symbol of democracy worldwide, offered a timeless cultural anchor. This connection was further emphasized through European and American cinema on one hand, and Greek state initiatives on the other.

If we consider the long path from “Boy on a Dolphin” (IMDb, 1957) by Jean Negulescu to the “Odyssey” (IMDb, 2026) by Christopher Nolan, it becomes clear that films featuring Greek monuments or related stories

have gained global popularity and inspire future travelers to visit Greece and see these “amazing” monuments they encounter on screen.

Cinema also played an important role in shaping the image of Greece and the Greeks worldwide, like the famous dance of Zorbas, the author Nikos Kazantzakis’s (Kazantzakis Museum, n.d.) hero, that was played by Anthony Quinn (the movie *Zorba the Greek*) (IMDb, 1964) and the making of the dance “syrtaki” known all over the world, along with the hero who does not hesitate to lough out life’s turnabouts through dance and laughter.

Beyond cinema, many people are drawn to Greece through major traveling exhibitions hosted by museums worldwide. Exhibitions such as “The Greeks” (Pointe-à-Calli ère Museum, n.d.; Andreadaki-Vlazaki & Balaska, 2014, catalogue accompanying the itinerant exhibition held in Montréal, Gatineau, Chicago, and Washington, D.C.) or the one in Tokyo (“A Journey to the Land of the Immortals: Treasures of Ancient Greece”) (Tokyo National Museum, Exhibition, 2016),—where the Fisherman fresco from Akrotiri (Thera/Santorini) (Figure 6) (Ntoumas, 2016) became the centerpiece due to its theme of a naked youth holding fish, possibly because the image of a young fisherman with fish is an image familiar to Japanese audiences (Kevin Page Oriental Art, 2026)—attract visitors through cultural affinity. By using the soft power of cultural diplomacy (Hellenic Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.), Greece’s cultural heritage becomes more widely known, as we see in the web site of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic.



Figure 6. Fresco of a young fisherman from a two-story house at Akrotiri (poster of the Hellenic Culture Organization, Ministry of Culture, Greece).

In the same way, important photographers contributed to shaping Greece’s image as a desirable destination. Photographers such as Voula Papaioannou (Figure 7) (1898-1990) and Robert McCabe (n.d.) traveled throughout the country and immortalized its landscapes and the faces of local people, helping to construct the visual identity of Greek tourism.



Figure 7. View of the Santorini volcano, 1950-1955, photographer Voula Papaioannou (Benaki Museum Photo Archive).

The Greek state, through the National Tourism Organization (GNTTO), produced posters (n.d.b) featuring Greek landscapes and monuments, often commissioning well-known artists to design them. The promotion of Greek destinations became even more distinctive through collaborations with artists such as Yannis Moralis, who depicted the island of Hydra (1956) on a GNTTO poster (GNTTO, 1956; National Gallery, 2009).

From the 1980s onward, Greece engaged with UNESCO's World Heritage List (n.d.), beginning with the inscription of the Acropolis. Today, the country has more than 20 sites—archaeological, natural, and mixed—that are internationally recognized and attract visitors who choose destinations based on UNESCO listings. The interconnection between cultural heritage and tourism thus became even more evident.

Similarly, Greece's entry into the European Union supported cultural heritage and, indirectly, tourism. EU funding enabled restoration work on monuments, making them more accessible and attractive to visitors.

Economic crises have affected Greece frequently, but it is important to note that during the severe crisis of 2010-2018, revenue from archaeological sites played a crucial role. Tourism never stopped, and tourism means visiting monuments; thus, cultural heritage remained both a primary attraction and a major source of income for the state.

Only recently has the Greek state recognized that cultural heritage is not limited to the ancient past, but also includes medieval and modern achievements—theatre, poetry, music, literature, and even gastronomy and the Mediterranean diet.

Using every available means to attract tourism is expected from a country that acknowledged as early as 1947 that its main industry is tourism. The challenge today is not merely quantity, but the pursuit of quality in the visitors it attracts.

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