Athens is chock-full of must-see sights, but it's also wonderfully unpredictable. So if you hate going by the book, venture beyond the usual tourist attractions and selfie spots and you'll find unusual museums, avant-garde galleries, offbeat neighbourhoods and underground clubs. Follow our two-day guide to uncover Athens at its most authentic and unexpected.
Start the day in Mets, one of the least touristy but prettiest neighbourhhoods in downtown Athens. Tree-lined Markou Mousourou is the drowsy main street and local life gravitates around Odeon, an old-fashioned café that distils the area’s village vibe. Wander up the wooded trails of Ardittos Hill for unexpected Acropolis views—it also overlooks the Panathenaic Stadium, which is ringed by one of the world’s most photogenic running tracks. The steep streets surrounding Ardittos are a patchwork of century-old cottages with hidden courtyards, neoclassical mansions brimming with bougainvillea, and Bauhaus apartment buildings.
The living and the dead coexist on Anapafseos Street (literally, the street of eternal rest). Hidden among the flower shops and funeral parlours that service the First Cemetery of Athens is Olympion, a slap-up canteen where undertakers, taxi drivers, students and pensioners all come for one of the best-value lunches in town. You can pick your dishes from the trays on display in the kitchen—comforting beef stew, stuffed tomatoes, and giant baked beans might be on the daily-changing menu.
Anapafseos Street ends at the First Cemetery, one of the city's most intriguing off-radar sights. There's no queue and no admission fee to explore this open-air museum, with its marble tombstones and ornate sculptures dedicated to the good and the great. Wander the paths and see whether you can find the resting place of actress Melina Mercouri, architect Ernst Ziller and English author T.H. White. (Half Note, one of the oldest jazz clubs in Athens, is right beside the cemetery, if you want to get your groove on after your graveyard shift).
Evening

When Athenians want to eat well, they head to Petralona, a low-key, residential neighbourhood in the foothills of Philopappou Hill. You’ll find old-time tavernas (like Economou), new-style tsipouradika (like Rendez-vous), and all-day cafes (like Babours) all along Troon and Kydathinon Streets, and around Mercouri Square. Join the actors gossiping over Cretan cheese pies at Aster, a modern Greek bistro. Or go into the kitchen to inspect the catch of the day at Therapeftirio, where the freshest seafood is served with huge salads and piles of irresistible chips.

How about a late show after dinner? Cinemas in Athens have screenings at 10.30 or 11pm and foreign language films are subtitled. If you’re here during the summer, Zefyros is an atmospheric open-air cinema in Petralona where stray cats wander among the aisles. In winter, catch a cult flick at Midnight Express, an after-hours cinema club that takes place most weekends at Aavora cinema in Exarchia.
Checked off the ancient classics? Athens has plenty of unusual museums that explore aspects of Greek culture you may not know about. Seminal Greek painter Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghika’s own home—a stunning 1930s building in Kolonaki—is now a museum (the Ghika Gallery) devoted to his life and work. His studio is exactly as he left it.

The nearby Katakouzenos Museum is another museum in a private home. Angelos Katakouzenos and his wife Leto ran literary salons at this magnificent apartment filled with rare antiques, books, photographs and art—gifts from friends such as Picasso and Chagall. Visits are by appointment only, so call ahead.

Billed as the oldest house in Athens, the Benizelos Mansion is a rare example of Ottoman architecture smack in the heart of Plaka’s souvenir strip. Entering the cloistered courtyard, complete with a wine and olive press, takes you back centuries.
The Commercial Triangle, the tangle of mostly pedestrian streets between Syntagma, Monastiraki and Omonia Square, is full of old-fashioned haberdasheries, hardware and fabric shops. Many of the streets are linked by arcades full of quirky shops so it’s well worth poking around. Better yet, take a guided walkthrough of these arcades with graphic designer and urban cartographer Natassa Pappa—she’ll show you places that even most locals overlook.

As well as all manner of street food joints—from sushi to falafel, noodles to empanadas—this area also has plenty of traditional lunch spots. They’re where local shopkeepers and office workers go for a quick bite so you can rely on the food to always be good.
Once upper-class, now working class, Kypseli, is an intriguing hybrid of old-time Athenians, immigrants and young artists. This up-and-coming neighbourhood is full of wonderful mid-war architecture and alternative art galleries. Dip into the local art scene at Victoria Square Project and Hot Wheels gallery, or wander along pedestrian Fokionos Negri Street to the Kypseli Municipal Market for pop-up shops by social entrepreneurs.
Day 2

Evening

Stop for an aperitif at the oldest bar in Athens, **Au Revoir**, a tiny, 1950s time capsule designed by a famous Greek architect, Aristomenis Provelegios. Their dry martinis are legendary. Or hang with the hipsters, Afro-Athenians, and kids tearing around on bicycles on **Agios Georgios Square**, the hub of Kypseli’s regeneration. After a few drinks in one of the cafes and bars lining the square (**It’s a Village** is the hottest table), you’ll be grateful for the homecooked dishes at **Nostimes tis Mairis**, a late-night neighbourhood institution where actors from the theatres nearby go to refuel and wind down after the show.