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**Greek Culture and Traditions**

Contemporary **Greek culture** and traditions are very rich and diverse, reflecting Greece’s location at the crossing point where the West meets the East and the country’s great and turbulent history.

The culture of Greece has evolved over thousands of years - dating from the Paleolithic era and the birth of the great Minoan, (2600-1500 BC), Mycenaean (1500-1150 BC) and Cycladic civilizations through the Classical Period (6th - 4th centuries BC) - the Golden Age, reaching great levels of prosperity that resulted in an unprecedented cultural boom, expressed in architecture, drama, science and philosophy, and nurtured in Athens under a democratic environment, through the sequence of invasions and domination: by the Macedonians, the Romans, the Byzantine Empire and the 400 years of Ottoman rule.

During the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, Greece saw monarchies and ousting of royalty, fierce political fights, assassinations, and dictatorships, wars that added neighboring territories and new population, but also brought economic devastation and poverty. After the defeat of Germany and the end of World War II, Greece joined NATO in 1952 and experienced a bitter civil war between communist and anticommunist forces.

In 1967, a group of military officers seized power, establishing a military dictatorship that suspended many political liberties and forced the king to flee the country. In 1974, democratic elections and a referendum created a parliamentary republic and abolished the monarchy. In August 1974 Greek forces withdrew from the integrated military structure of NATO in protest against the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus. Greece rejoined NATO in 1980. In 1981, Greece joined the EC (now the EU) and became the 12th member of the Eurozone in 2001. It successfully hosted the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens.

This rich and tumultuous past greatly influences contemporary lifestyle, the Greek perspective on the world, **Greek music**, food, customs and traditions, even the way Greeks do business. Greeks as a whole are extremely proud of their history, their cultural heritage and their contribution to literature, art, philosophy and politics. They speak with intense passion of their country as the cradle of European civilization.

A recent study found that Greeks' pride in being Greek surpassed the ethnic satisfaction of every other European nation. Greeks define their natural and ethnic belonging through their culture and tradition. Anyone who has seen the movie “My Big, Fat, Greek Wedding” knows this. Traditions, religion, music, language, food and drinks are the pillars of contemporary **Greek culture** and lifestyle, making the country an attraction point for visitors from all over the world.

**The Greek Orthodox Church**

The **Greek Orthodox Church** is an integral part of life in Greece where the most important holidays are religious in nature and the national religion is practiced by the majority of the population. Greece and Orthodoxy are closely connected due to the country’s historical past. During several occupations, and especially during the 400 years of Ottoman rule, the Orthodox religion played a vital role in maintaining the Greek ethnic and cultural identity. Today the Church is more important in political, civic, and governmental affairs than in many other secular countries.

Officially, and like all over Europe, the Greek State and the Orthodox Church are separated, but this separation is not written or regulated by the Constitution and the **Greek Orthodox Church** has a great influence in Greek society. Religion is present in the education sector, both in private and public schools, where children have compulsory religious courses and pray collectively in the morning before the start of classes. The Orthodox Church is also much integrated into the politic matters of the country.

Even the Greek Constitution guarantees freedom of faith, but defines the "prevailing religion" of Greece as the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ. Most Greeks, whether deeply religious or not, revere and respect the Orthodox Christian faith, attend church, observe major religious holiday and are emotionally attached to Orthodox Christianity as their "national" religion.

Younger people are not as devout church-goers as their parents and grandparents, yet most will still turn to the church for holidays or for important rituals such as weddings and funerals. Despite the fast moving processes of Europeanization and globalization, Greece remains a profoundly religious country. As the Greek say, Orthodoxy is less an institution than a sentiment, expressed by the population and by the public powers. Muslims, Jewish and Roman Catholic are the other religious groups of Greece.

**The Greek Family**

The Greek society consists of close-knit families where important social organizations have gradually evolved from the idea of family. The institution of marriage also plays an important role in society. The word family in Greece refers to a particular social group whose members are related by blood or marriage at different levels or in different forms or combinations.

The conjugal family includes the husband and wife and their children. The extended family includes the conjugal family as well as ascendants of the husband and/or wife. Interestingly, the National Statistical Service of Greece considers all people who live under the same roof to be members of the family, regardless of whether they are related.

Although family life has changed considerably with the transition from the traditional rural-agricultural life into an urban industrial-modern system, to these days women and particularly mothers in Greece play the most important family roles.

The man is the family's outside representative, enjoying the social prestige and esteem, but the woman traditionally was and is the organizer of the household, the mediator in family disputes, and the guardian of the family's unity. The family's prestige often rests on the woman's ability to carry out her household duties properly.

Frequent communication and assistance between the two adult generations and children and youth are also very common for Greek families. The family offers both financial and emotional support to its members and family relationships carry over into business with nepotism largely seen as something acceptable. It is very common for relatives to work for the same company because Greeks prefer to do business with those they know and trust. Companies are also hierarchical over the traditional respect for age and position.

**Celebrations, Customs and Traditions**

Most customs and traditions in Greece and the Greek Islands are of a religious nature, but some stem from paganism.

Easter

Easter is by far the most important celebration for the Greeks, even Christmas comes second. The celebrations for Easter truly begin two months before, but Holy Week is the peak of these activities.

According to the Orthodox tradition, the symbolic red Easter eggs are dyed on Holy Thursday. Greeks believe that the Virgin Mother, Mary, dyed eggs this color (the color of blood) to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ and life. On Holy Thursday women are also busy baking kouloúria - dough cookies and tsouréki – the traditional Easter sweet bread. Godparents buy news shoes, clothes and a candle to the kids and, in villages, the exterior of the houses and the streets are whitewashed.

On Good Friday or Great Friday, flags at homes and government buildings are set at half mast to mark the sorrowful day. The Procession of the Epitáphios of Christ, the Epitaphio mourns the death of Christ on the Cross with the symbolic coffin, decorated with thousands of flowers, taken out of the church and carried through the streets by the faithful. At the cemetery everyone lights a candle for the dead; then the Epitaphio with its procession returns to the church where the believers kiss the image of the Christ.

During the night of the Holy Saturday (Megalo Savato), people, dressed in their formal attire, begin to gather in the churches by 11 p.m. for the Easter services, carrying large white candles, lampáda. Just before midnight, all of the churches’ lights are turned off, symbolizing the darkness and the silence of the tomb.

At midnight, the priest lights a candle from the Eternal Flame, sings “Christos Anesti” (Christ Arose) and offers the flame to light the candle to the people that are the closest to him. Everyone passes the flame one to another while the clergy sings the Byzantine Chant Christos Anesti. Then, everyone goes out of the church to the streets. The church’s bells ring continuously and people say one to another “Christos Anesti”, to which the reply is “Alithos Anesti” (Indeed He Has Risen).

Then the faithful go home or to the homes of relatives and friends to share the Resurrection Meal. The candles they carry are placed in each house and burn through the night to symbolize the Light’s return to the world. The cracking of eggs is a traditional game where challengers attempt to crack each others' eggs. The breaking of the eggs is meant to symbolize Christ breaking from the Tomb. The person whose egg lasts the longest is assured good luck for the rest of the year.

The following day, Easter Sunday, is spent again with family and friends. The Easter meal is truly a feast with loads of salads, vegetable and rice dishes, breads, cakes, cookies, and plenty of wines and ouzo.

The main dish at the Easter table, however, is roasted lamb, (often turned over open pits), and served in honor of the Lamb of God who was sacrificed and rose again on Easter.

Clean Monday (Kathari Deutera) is part of the Easter celebration and marks the first day of the season of Lent (Saracosti) during which families go for a picnic, fly kites, and feast at local taverns. For Greeks, Clean Monday is one of the most festive holidays of the year.

Name Day Celebration

Most of the Greeks owe their names to a religious saint and in Greece name days are more important than birthdays. Everyone named after a saint honored by the church celebrates his name on a given day of the year. When someone has a “name day” his friends and family visit him without invitation and offer good wishes and small presents. The host greets the guests with pastries, sweets and appetizers.

Engagement

Engagements is a Greek tradition that tends to disappear in Athens and other big cities, but remains customary for smaller towns and villages. Before a couple gets married they must become engaged and the man has to ask the hand of the woman from her father.

When all wedding details are agreed on and ironed, the priest is invited to bless the engagement rings and place them on the left ring-fingers of the couple. The guests wish “Kala Stephana” (Good Crowns meaning “Have a Good Marriage”) and “I ora I kali” (that the good hour of the marriage comes) to the fiancés.

Marriage

Marriage is another big celebration in Greece. In some parts, outside Athens and other big cities, the bride still has a dowry made by her mother, grandmothers and aunts, consisting of sheets, towels and hand made embroideries, while the father of the bride traditionally offers a furnished home to his daughter and son-in-law as a wedding gift. On the day of the wedding, the bride gets dressed with the help of girlfriends and women from her family, and is kept hidden, for it is bad luck for the groom to see her before the ceremony.

During the wedding ceremony, the best men and best woman (koumbaro and koumbara) give the wedding rings to the priest, cross the crowns (stephana) three times and then place them on the couple’s head. Once the priest has declared them married, the guests throw rice and almond candy wrapped with white sugar (ta koufeta) to the new couple.

After the ceremony, the bridal couple stays in the church and all the guests kiss them and wish them “na zisete” (Long Life to You). Then everybody goes to the wedding reception, which is usually a restaurant rented for the night, where people dance, eat and drink all night long.

After the reception the new couple leaves for its honeymoon.

Baptism

Baptismal day is one of the most important days in the life of a Greek Orthodox. It usually takes place the first year after the baby is born. Until the baby is baptized it is often called baby and doesn’t have a name.

On Baptism Day, the baby is undressed and wrapped in a white towel. The priest blesses the water and adds olive oil brought by the godparents. He then immerses the baby three times, saying the chosen name. (Children in Greece are traditionally named after their grandmother or the grandfather.) The priest also blesses the baby and the baby clothes with “myrrh” (olive oil blessed by the Patriarch). The child is then dressed in white clothes. The priest puts a gold chain with a cross on his or her neck and gives the baby its first Holy Communion.

At the end of the ceremony, the parents kiss the godparent’s hands and receive guests’ wishes: “na sas zisei” (Long Life to Your Baby).

The ceremony is followed by a celebration at the family’s house or a restaurant.

Carnival

Another big Greek celebration is “Apokries” or Carnival. The Carnival is two weeks long, beginning from the Sunday of Meat Fare and ending with the start of Lent, (Clean Monday). People wear carnival costumes and party in the streets and bars, throwing colored confetti to each other. The most famous Carnival parade takes place in the city of Patra. It is believed that this custom has pagan roots, and originates from the old festivities worshiping Dionysus, the God of Wine.

Greek Independence Day

The Greek Independence Day celebrates Greece's liberation from the Ottoman domination on March 25, 1821.

October 28: The "NO"

On October 28, the Greeks celebrate the day when Metaxas (a Greek General, appointed Prime Minister of Greece between April-August 1936 and dictator during the 4th of August Regime, from 1936 until his death in 1941), said no to the Italians who wanted to invade the country. It is the celebration of the heroic OXI (NO) many Greeks put a Greek flag on their windows while marches with students wearing a blue and white uniform and holding Greek flags are organized by schools.

**Superstitions**

In addition to being deeply religious, Greeks are very superstitious people and believe in the supernatural or the paranormal, but superstitions vary from region to region.

Bread

In Greece, especially in villages, bread is considered a gift of God. Because of that women bless the bread and make the sign of the cross with a knife before slicing it.

Evil Eye

Some Greeks believe that someone can catch the evil eye, or “matiasma”, from jealous or envious people. Those, who have caught the evil eye, usually feel bad physically and mentally. To avoid the matiasma one must wear a charm: a little blue marble glass with an eye painted on it or a blue bracelet. Blue is believed to be the color that protects against the evil eye but it is also believed that people with blue eyes can give matiasma. Garlic is another way to guard against the evil eye, and people often hang it in their houses.

Knives

Greeks never hand a knife to someone because they believe it will bring a fight with the person. Therefore they set it down on the table and let the other person take it.

Priests

Orthodox priests are revered and in villages the custom is to kiss their hand in respect when meeting them. But it is believed that seeing a black cat and a priest during the same day is bad luck.

Spitting

Some Greeks believe that spitting chases the devil away. That is why when someone talks about bad news (deaths, accidents, etc…) or compliments babies, children and even adults, the others slightly spit three times saying “ftou, ftou, ftou”.

Tuesday the 13th

Unlike the Western belief, in Greece the unlucky day is Tuesday the 13th and not Friday the 13th. Tuesday is considered to be the unluckiest day of the week because on Tuesday, May 29th, 1453 the city of Constantinople was besieged and taken by the Ottoman Turks. Greeks also consider the number 13 to be good luck and the main theory is the belief that having 12 apostles of Christ made Christ the 13th of the group. However, the combination of Tuesday and 13 as Tuesday the 13th of the month is considered a very unlucky day in Greek culture.

"Piase kokkino" (Touch Red)

Greeks believe that saying the same thing at the same time is an omen and the two people will get into a fight or an argument. Because of this, when people say the same thing together they must immediately follow by telling one another "piase kokkino" and both have to touch any red item they can find around them.