



Patra

West gone wild

Greece's third-largest port is preparing for its annual Carnival - a month of traditional festivities and high spirits

BY HARIS ARGYROPOULOS

Patra, Greece's third-largest city and port, situated on the Peloponnesian side of the westernmost part of the Gulf of Corinth, has a character shaped by its long tradition as the peninsula's economic and administrative hub and one of the country's main gateways to the West. This character has no doubt helped give rise to its main claim to fame, the annual Carnival, which this year opens on Saturday, January 16, and ends with spectacular celebrations on February 14.

The roots of the "patrino karnavali" can be traced to the 19th century – when the custom was limited to much more contained gatherings – but it began to acquire its present form in the 1950s, when the locals' love of the highlife was revived with a vengeance

after the gloom of World War II and the Civil War.

Masque parties take place almost daily and events include a wide range of theater forms, films, the "chocolate war," the burning of King Carnival at the port, a treasure hunt and spectacular parades. The Carnival draws wide popular

participation, especially by children – a strong focus of events – and school teams participate in preparations for the parade prize early on during the festival.

To fully appreciate the city's character and its formative relationship with the sea, climb up to Dasyllio hill, a verdant area crowning the conurbation.

A little below, a medieval castle (Kastro) bears ample marks of history, while the restored Roman Odeon – once a most elegant theater which charmed Greek traveler and geographer Pausanias in the 2nd century AD – hosts events during the city's summer

cultural festival. The "upper town" (Ano Poli), dominated by well-preserved, two-story houses and the Church of Pantokrator, the style of which is reminiscent of Istanbul's Hagia Sophia, spreads around Kastro.

The built-up area descends smoothly

on Symmachon Square, with its clock tower in the center of the old harbor, is the imposing Church of Aghios Andreas – the city's patron saint – and

the lighthouse with a huge children's playground. Further on is an old industrial area, which is gradually changing appearance as old, disused buildings are repaired and put to new uses. The city center offers enjoyable walks. Riga Feraiou, Mezonos,

Korinthou and Kanakari streets, all running parallel to the harbor, have fine neoclassical buildings and wide sidewalks covered by characteristic arches.

Each of the three squares has its own character: Georgiou is marked by a fountain with winged lions and the Apollo theater – a work

to the sea, as parks and squares interrupt the flow of streets with arches and neoclassical mansions.

Patra underwent extensive revamping as Cultural Capital of Europe in 2006 and several old, restored venues now regularly host cultural events.

It seems a city permanently on the go, with a large student population and considerable growth in recent years.

A marina with attractive sidewalk cafes has been constructed next to the commercial harbor. West of Tri-

by German architect Ernst Ziller, Ethnikis Antistaseos is a small park for children in the center of the city, while at Trion Symmachon,

you can consult the info kiosk opposite the clock tower or stop at the railway station cafe to plan your next move. Eight kilometers southeast of town, on a hill, is the fine Achaia Clauss winery, built in 1861, which produces some of the country's best-known wines, including Mavrodaphne. Then ascend to the neighboring hill where the Oblou Monastery is located.

