

Greece

A 4-page special report in association with the Greek National Tourist Organisation



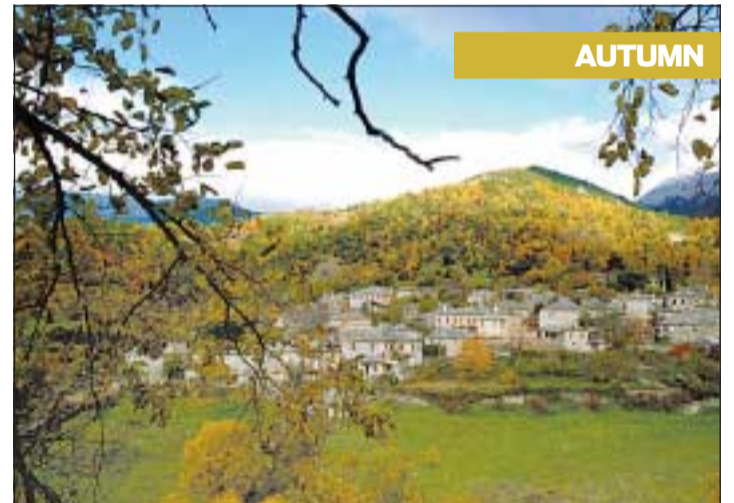
Just the ticket for year-round trips



SUMMER



SPRING



AUTUMN



WINTER

If you thought Greece was all about summer sun and Ouzo, think again – skiing, golf and hiking are just a few of the ‘off-season’ activities on offer. By **Heather Stewart**

Greece has long been a package holiday favourite and many of the 13 million tourists who visit each year come in the summer to catch the best of the sunshine; but Greece’s mild climate and varied landscape, and a plethora of outdoor activities, make it an ideal destination all year round.

DECEMBER TO FEBRUARY

Skiing is certainly not a sport many people would associate with a Mediterranean suntrap, but Greece has more than 300 mountains, stretching from the north west of the country, right down the spine of the mainland and into the Peloponnese, and on to Crete. Forty of them are over 2000m high, and in fact there are 18 designated ski resorts throughout the country, with spectacular, wild scenery and a more laid-back atmosphere than the better-known ski-spots in the Alps. One of the most popular is at Parnassos, within reach of Athens.

Many of Greece’s most impressive ruins, which can be crowded in high season, are open all year round, and perhaps more atmospheric in winter. The temple at Delphi, for example, the site of the famous oracle, is still a dramatic sight set among the crags of Parnassos.

The evocative ruins at Olympia, the site of the original Olympic Games, are set in a valley of olive and plane trees. Visitors can walk through an archway into the ancient stadium and stroll among fallen temple columns, half-buried in foliage. The 14,000-seat theatre

at Epidaurus, a World Heritage Site, is another must-see attraction.

The government is keen to develop Greece as a golfing destination. So far it only has five 18-hole courses, but several more are planned, and the mild Greek winter is an ideal time to try them out. ‘Afantou in Rhodes is a beautiful site for golfing,’ says Greece’s Tourism Minister, Fani Palli Petralia. ‘Now we wish to develop a new golf course there. We have to develop golf courses in a way that they form a network.’

Another winter option is visiting the many picturesque monasteries and churches scattered around Greece’s most remote and beautiful countryside, from the tiny white churches of the Greek islands to the grand Byzantine cathedrals of the mainland. The awe-inspiring monastery on Mount Athos (holy mountain), and the island of Patmos, ‘the Jerusalem of the Aegean’, with more than 300 churches, are world-renowned religious sites.

MARCH TO JUNE

In the spring and early summer, as the snow melts, skiing in the mountains gives way to walking or cycling along its many ‘eco-routes’, through spectacular scenery, passing flower-meadows on paths that wind through national parks, along cliff-tops, or down to the sea, with the chance of bumping into wild boar, wolves and even bears. ‘We are very serious in preserving the natural beauty of our country,’ says Palli Petralia.

For the Greek Orthodox Church,

Easter is the most important festival in the calendar. Famous celebrations take place in Corfu, at Olympus on the island of Karpathos, and at St John’s monastery on Patmos. But across Greece there are majestic masses on Easter Saturday night, from which the congregations process home with burning candles, fireworks exploding around them.

Skiing isn’t a sport associated with Greece but in winter there are 18 designated resorts

For those who prefer gastronomic experiences to religious ones, spring is a good time to visit the countryside and sample local specialities. Potential wine buffs can tour the many vineyards scattered throughout the country, tasting wines from local producers, ranging from the fruity white assyrtiko, from the island of Santorini to sweet muscat made in Rhodes or Cephalonia.

Another spring option is a short city-break in Athens or the surrounding area. With many of its hotels upgraded in preparation for the Olympic Games two years ago, and with the pollution problems of the Eighties now behind it, the capital has found its way onto the

map as a weekend destination for visitors from across Europe. It has a large number of cultural sites, including the famous Benaki Museum, chronicling life in Greece from ancient times. For the evenings, there are many friendly restaurants and bars to choose from.

JULY TO SEPTEMBER

Now, in high season, Greece comes into its own, and tourists flock to its many islands and varied coastline – which is so convoluted that it is as long as the entire coast of Africa. Tiny deserted bays, isolated islands with harbour-front bars, and, on the mainland, lush mountains descending to the sea, provide a large variety of places to relax and enjoy the sunshine.

One way to explore is by yacht, sailing from one of Greece’s 6,000 islands and islets to another, putting in at quiet coves for a peaceful swim, or anchoring at throbbing harbour hotspots in the evening to sample the night-life. Greece has 51 marinas, and many more smaller harbours, offering 14,661 mooring places, with atmospheres ranging from the tranquillity of Ithaca to the trendy club-culture of Mykonos.

On the mainland, too, resorts offer everything from basic beach-front bed and breakfasts serving freshly-caught fish on the grill to swanky five-star boutique hotels with spa facilities and infinity pools.

Another increasingly popular pastime during these warm summer months is to dive down and view some of the ruins of

Islands like Serifos are stunning in summer, but there’s also the autumn countryside, skiing in the winter – and the bright spring colours of Easter. Main photograph by Clairi Moustafellou

Greece’s ancient civilisations scattered on the seabed just off the coast.

OCTOBER TO DECEMBER

Autumn – when many of the high-season visitors have left but the climate is still warm – is one of the most beautiful times of year, and walking in the countryside is particularly pleasant now.

On the peninsula of Pilion, for example, where the mountains run down to the shore, there are quiet villages with shady squares and cosy restaurants serving grilled squid to locals. The spectacular Vikos gorge, in Zagori, near the border with Albania, is another challenging but popular hike, with plenty of accommodation available in the nearby villages.

The once-Turkish region of Macedonia, in northern Greece, is another beautiful place to visit at this time of year, dotted as it is with lakes and overshadowed by the mighty Mount Olympus.

The growing agrotourism sector (see page 3) is one way to experience some of the more rural areas, offering opportunities to stay in small bed and breakfasts, tasting local food and living amid a calm landscape. The owners of these small hotels will be able to direct their guests to local walks, sites of interest and activities in the surrounding area.

Athens - the new hotspot of Europe

The capital has lost the smog and calmed its hectic roads, and now it looks poised to take the quick city-break market by storm. **Justine Vergeld** takes a look round

Athens was named after Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, who, according to mythology, won the city as a prize following a duel against Poseidon. Today, it's the canny tourist who picks Athens for their city break.

This is, in part, a tribute to the huge investment that has gone into the city over the past 10 years. For Athens, the cradle of ancient civilisation, has not been the most popular of destinations for the modern city-break seeker. For years, traffic and pollution put visitors off. But the Olympic Games prompted a clean-up and facelift for the city, which has made visiting its ancient sights a much more attractive prospect.

There is, however, much more to the capital than mythology, architecture and artefacts. The smog is lifting to reveal an abundance of outdoor cafes, parks, gardens and urban curiosities to tempt the tourists. Street markets and vine-covered tavernas serving some of Europe's finest cuisine jostle with buildings old and new in a city that is home to one in four Greeks.

The nightlife is vibrant, with clubs and bars. The chic central district of Kolonaki, at the base of the Lycabettus Hill, is full of designer boutiques, not to mention world-famous museums. Shoppers can also give their credit cards an airing in the northern suburb of Kifissia, and Glyfada along the southern coast.

For tourists, the greatest advantage is that they can reach most attractions in the centre, around the Acropolis, on foot. Walking is always the best way to soak up the atmosphere and culture of any city and Athens is now much more pedestrian-friendly than it was 10 years ago, thanks to the traffic-calming measures that have been implemented. It boasts one of the best metro systems in the world, trams, large pedestrianised areas, superb airport links and a new suburban railway - but traffic can still sometimes reach nightmare proportions.



On a clear day - and Athens's air is much clearer these days - you can see forever. Photographs by GNT0 and Agrotouristiki SA

The Olympics provided the incentive for mass hotel renovations, so Athens is now awash with spruced-up hotels along with mid-range and budget hotels that offer superb value for money.

The great thing about Athens is that its sunny climate makes it a true year-round destination. For the 10 days leading up to Orthodox Lent, Athens's streets become a technicolour wonder of fancy-dress parades that force traffic off the road. Boisterous parties are the order of the night as the city cuts loose for the last time until Easter. On the eve of Lent, families get together for a spot of kite-flying amid the ancient ruins on Filopappou Hill.

Easter is the most significant festival in the Greek Orthodox calendar and the

candlelit procession climbing Lycabettus Hill to the Chapel of Agios Georgios is a truly impressive spectacle.

For culture lovers, the Benaki Museum, the oldest private museum in Greece, is a must. It houses one of the largest and most famous collections of Greek artefacts in the world. In 2008, the Benaki's new building will exhibit pre-Columbian American, Chinese, Indian and African art, and in 2009 it will put on an exhibition of Byzantine art in association with the Royal Academy.

The Megaro Mousikis - Athens's concert hall - hosts a full programme of Greek and international operas and symphonic chamber music from October to June.

For the environmentally conscious

traveller, a visit to the Goulandris Museum and the Gaia Centre will prove worthwhile. Founded by Dr Niki A Goulandris and her late husband, it is not merely a museum of natural history but, as it says, it aims 'to show the dangers and the responsibilities we have to undertake in order to create a new society. Society is a more or less universal model that is spreading across the world, unifying and eliminating the local traditions and character. This museum was developed based on two main Greek principles: human rights and responsibilities.'

The Gaia Centre is proof that Greece's cultural and intellectual clout remains strong. And we haven't even mentioned the Acropolis yet.

THE MINISTER'S POST-OLYMPIC PLAN

FANI PALLI PETRALIA (pictured), the Minister of Tourism, hopes to build on the legacy of the successful Olympic Games two years ago to bring millions more visitors to Greece.

'The Games repositioned the country on the world map, especially on the world tourism map,' she explains. 'More than 4 billion people watched the games and saw that Greece is a modern and safe country.' Promising that Greece can offer 'culture, and not just "sea and sun"', her goal is to build on the legacy of the Olympics to increase visitors by 50 per cent over the next decade.

'The games left Greece a valuable material heritage, in the form of infrastructure. It is our duty to preserve it and develop it as an important asset.'

Britain already sends the largest number of visitors to Greece, but Palli Petralia hopes to attract even more of them. 'We are going to work hard on the British market, in order to sustain our influence there,' she says. And in persuading international tourists to come back year after year, she believes she will always receive a helping hand from the locals.

'If you ask people why they want to come back to Greece, they will certainly point out the hospitality of the country and its friendly people,' she says. 'For us Greeks, hospitality - or *philoxenia*, as we say - is an ancient concept; a vital part of our culture.'

Meet in Greece: in the city, on the islands ... or even at sea

Conference organisers are starting to think Hellenic, lured by venues offering top facilities in attractive - and unusual - locations, says **Justine Vergeld**

LAST MONTH a cruise set off round the Greek islands. The people on the boat may have had some explaining to do to their partners - after all, a cruise does not sound much like hard work. And yet that is exactly what was taking place: the ship was full of health professionals involved in vital information-sharing at the Breakthrough in Preventive Medicine Conference.

The innovative setting is a sign of how Greece is becoming an important conference destination for Europe and beyond. For the country's conference and convention industry, the hope is that the good times are about to roll. The Olympics were the catalyst for a significant upgrade in the nation's infrastructure. Public transport, airports, road links and facilities are the

legacy of the games, which took place two years ago.

Although the event went wildly over budget, it was very successful. Safety issues were at the forefront of concerns in the run-up to the games but nothing untoward happened - and today Greece is seen as one of the most secure countries in the world. Post-Olympics, the country has become an ideal

destination for conventions, business conferences and meetings. Excellent facilities are combined with unique museums, archaeological sites, shopping and nightlife.

Currently, there are 13 conference centres in the country and more than 100 hotels offer a full range of conference services. Among the best is the Faliro Sports Pavilion, located right beside the Flisvos Marina. It has become the new metropolitan convention centre for Athens, has already successfully hosted conferences of more than 10,000 attendees and is currently being expanded.

Greece is well situated to take advantage of growing business opportunities in the Balkans now that stability has returned to that region. For European conference businesses eager to break into that market, choosing Greece as a venue makes sense.

The president of the Greek National Tourism Organisation, Dimitrios Lampadariou, says: 'We have 13 facilities for conferences. There are facilities on the islands. This is very important for people who are able to extend their stay.'

Lampadariou points out there has been an 81 per cent increase in conference delegate numbers since the Olympics, but he believes there is room for further significant increases. He adds that, on Rhodes, some 10,000 der-



The Faliro Sports Pavilion in Athens.

matologists gathered for a conference - proving that major events can be held outside the capital, with the backdrop of beautiful beaches as a tempting lure. The option of extending a stay and turning it into a small break is something that could differentiate Greece from many other potential venues.

One group taking advantage of this trend is Capis Convention Centres and Resort Hotels, which pioneered the convention sector in Greece 20 years ago. It has two major centres, in Crete and in Rhodes (see box) - and The Rhodes centre has just hosted the International Congress and Convention Association's own conference.

Head for the hills to find rural gems

If an authentic Greek experience is what you're after, get off the beaten track and stay in a small family-run hotel in the country, says **Heather Stewart**

Away from the bustling resorts of the coast, much of Greece is still rural, undeveloped and unspoilt. Over the past few years hundreds of small hotels, run by local people, have sprung up to open these lesser-known parts of the country up to visitors.

'It's the other side of Greece, that not so many people are acquainted with,' says Brigitta Papastavrou, president of Agrotouristiki, the offshoot of the Ministry of Tourism that supports and promotes the small hoteliers in this sector.

'We combine beaches, mountains - all different types of landscape,' agrees Fani Palli Petralia, Greece's Tourism Minister. 'The ideal climate of our country and its geography provide us with an advantage.'

Papastavrou explains that 'agrotourism' in Greece is not the same as in France or Ireland, where visitors often stay on a working farm. 'It's different, because we have no farms like that: in reality, it's tourism in rural areas, in small hotels and individual houses that have been converted.'

The properties range from village cottages and traditional stone-built farmhouses to grander complexes of rooms in schools and castles - and Agrotouristiki's website offers details of special events and activities in the local area, from the celebrations of the Feast of Saint Nicholas, on the island of Oinousses, to the strange polyphonic singing of villagers in remote corners of Epirus.

On the island of Naxos, visitors are advised to sample the local lemon-flavoured liqueur, while in the Pindos Mountains around Grevena in western Macedonia, they can trek among wild boar, lynxes and golden eagles.

And that's part of the point of agrotourism: by staying somewhere far away from the beaten track, often in the home of their hosts, tourists are able to experience authentic village life in a way that's impossible in anodyne resorts.

Participating in outdoor activities is another reason guests seek out rural accommodation. Staying in the Greek countryside provides opportunities for rafting, abseiling, diving and cycling, as well as trekking.

Together with the opportunity to experience rural life, Papastavrou says it's the personal attention of the hospitable owners that makes agrotourism a special way to experience what Greece has to offer, away from the seaside crowds: 'The owner guides the tourists to the sights - where to hike, whatever there is to be done in the area, or points of interest to see.'

The government is keen to help



resorts is that it provides destinations all year round, for walkers, cyclists, and gourmets keen to experience Greek delicacies in authentic surroundings. 'This is tourism that can be done 12 months a year: Greece is very mild in winter,' Papastavrou says.

Staying in rural areas also puts many of Greece's famous vineyards within reach - Karipidis in Thessaly, Tsantalis in Macedonia and Terovassiliou in Halkidiki, for example.

And it's not only sporty types or nature buffs who seek out a place to stay in the countryside: Papastavrou says even those tourists seeking sun, sea and sand may also appreciate spending time away from the coast.

'People who come with big groups and go to the sea in the mass tourist areas are very interested in seeing something else as well, so it's becoming a point of interest that hoteliers show people - to sample local products and local cuisine, see the architecture, arts and crafts in the area.'

In June this year, Greece hosted the first pan-European Agrotourism Forum in Ioannina, a picturesque lakeside city in the north eastern region of Epirus, where guests can stay in a medieval castle, a 19th century mansion, or one of a series of smaller town houses. While visiting the region, tourists can hike along the spectacular Vikos Gorge, the highest in Europe.

Hosted by Palli Petralia, the forum was aimed at demonstrating to travel firms how well agrotourism can work in Greece, and what the local area has to offer.

'People were very enthusiastic. They never imagined this existed in Greece: it was like a revelation,' says Papastavrou. Since then, many of the local hotels featured during the conference have reported a significant upturn in occupancy, though she says it's too soon to calculate watertight statistics.

'Business has certainly picked up in the area. We are moving in the right direction,' she says. And many of the hotels in other regions advertised on Agrotouristiki's website have also said occupancy is on the up.

As agrotourism expands, so do the opportunities to venture beyond the beach and head for the hills. Papastavrou is keen to encourage them.

'Greece should not be seen only as a summer holiday destination, and even if one comes in summer, one should visit other areas as well as beaches,' she says. 'It has so much to offer.'

Details of rural holidays in Greece can be found at www.agrotravel.gr



Rural Greece offers snug accommodation, above, and stunning sights like the rock monasteries of Meteora, top.

FOUR OF THE BEST CENTRES

FALIRO SPORTS PAVILLION The biggest convention centre in Greece: ultra-modern and with good transport links. The whole area, including the marina and the esplanade, is part of a major urban redevelopment project of the coastal zone. The Peace and Friendship Stadium, known as 'SEF' after its Greek name (Stadio Erinis & Filias), located in Faliro, hosted the indoor volleyball at the 2004 Olympics in Athens.

POLIS CONVENTION CENTRE in Thessaloniki covers an area of 6,000 sq m. Its main rooms, foyers and office spaces are modern and flexible, the design maximises natural light and the centre boasts panoramic views of the city. Polis is surrounded by 30 acres of gardens, has an outdoor pool and a 550 car parking spaces. The Polis Convention Centre can host a gala event for up to 2,000 people.

SOFITEL CAPSIS HOTEL RHODES is a five-star deluxe resort hotel located at Ixia Bay, five minutes from the medieval city of Rhodes. In an idyllic setting, this hotel boasts the one of the largest convention centres in Greece, with capacity for 8,000 delegates. Its main conference hall has capacity for 3,400. There are 100 meeting rooms, an exhibition area covering 5,990 sq m, a fully equipped business centre and state-of-the-art telecommunication services. The hotel has 691 executive guest rooms, including a private VIP floor, presidential suite, royal suite and VIP lounge.

SOFITEL CAPSIS HOTEL CRETE is 20 minutes from the international airport on a private peninsula. It is a five-star luxury hotel and convention centre with 110 meeting rooms and conference capacity for 4,800 people. The largest meeting room holds 1,200 people and the exhibition centre is 1,140 sq m.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

All in Athens unless stated otherwise

November 2006
24 EMEC 23 - Mathematics as Culture in the Modern World (Patras)

December 2006
14 21st Century Robotics and Artificial Intelligence Conference

March 2007
28 Sixth International Glaucoma Symposium

April 2007
25 Third International Conference on Traditional Mediterranean Diet

May 2007
14 International Conference on Sociology
21 International Conference on Communication and Mass Media
28 Ninth International Conference on Education
29 Applied Stochastic Models and Data Analysis (ASMDA) Conference 2007 (Crete)

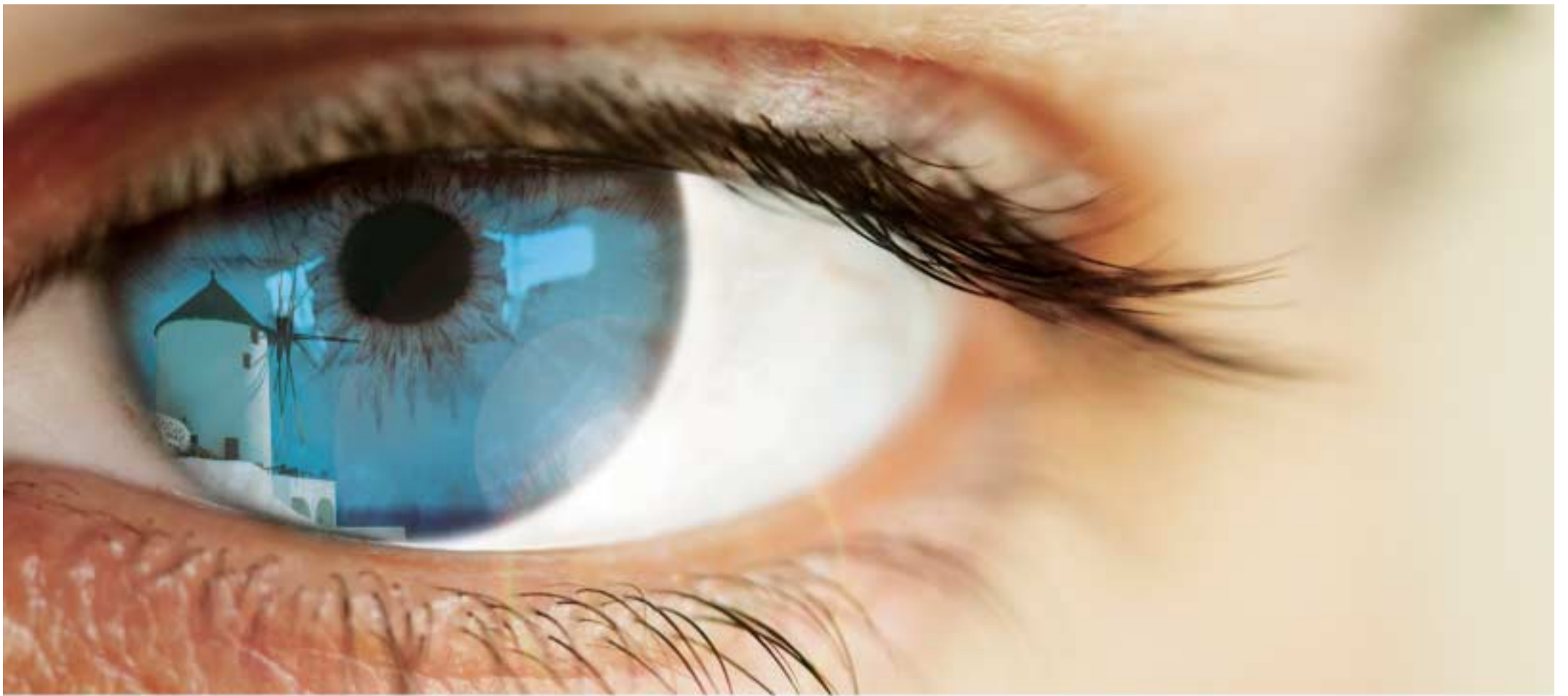
June 2007
04 Second International Conference on Philosophy

July 2007
09 International Psychology Conference
16 Fourth International Conference on Law

August 2007
29 10th International Conference on Engineering Applications of Neural Networks (Thessaloniki)

September 2007
10 11th Underground Urban Space International Conference
15 Greek Legal and Medical Conference (Kos)

October 2007
26 Fourth International Symposium on Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders in the Middle East



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