

HOW TO EAT LIKE A LOCAL IN GREECE

Kirsten Raccuia

I just spent a month slow traveling around Greece. I was completely enchanted.

From the people, to the architecture, to the landscape, it won me over at the very first ferry crossing. But my stomach was the ultimate champion in Greece. The food there is undeniably delectable.

Every island has its local specialty, which you should seek out and devour on your first day. Never leave it to the last day, or worse yet, until you are boarding the ferry. I'll always remember the taste of the first and last fennel pie I ate in Syros. And the realization that I'll never eat it again unless I return.

Hunt out the specialties, but don't neglect to save room for the traditional dishes that you cannot miss.

Here is my list of five dishes that will win over your heart and stomach.

Gyros

If you're not already familiar with a *gyros*, you've been missing out. This hearty pita sandwich filled with rotisserie meat is a staple in Greece. The meat is lamb, chicken, or pork that is delicately spiced and roasted for hours on a large vertical spit. It is sliced off and layered into a toasted pita with plump tomatoes, onions, and creamy *tzatziki* sauce.

Vendors usually stuff the pitas with fries to make it even more filling. Wash it down

with an ice-cold beer and still only spend about \$5. You can find *gyros* everywhere; in late-night stands, laidback cafés, and local restaurants, but there is rarely any difference between them. So, don't go for an expensive one, there is no point.

Greek Salad

Yes, they are still called Greek salads, even though you are in Greece. It's the same with Greek coffee.

It's a basic salad, nothing fancy. The locals eat it every day, and it is on every menu. What you get is a generous helping of tomatoes, with a few red onions, chopped cucumber, and salty Kalamata olives scattered on top. Sometimes they throw in a few green peppers for extra crunch. The *pièce de résistance* is an entire slab of local feta, drenched in grassy olive oil and sprinkled with some oregano.

The ingredients aren't hard to find outside of Greece but try to replicate this drool-worthy salad anywhere else, and it just doesn't taste the same.

Moussaka

This is a traditional dish that is a favorite in the tavernas. It is hearty, and filling, and served in generous portions. There are only three main ingredients: ground beef or lamb,

eggplant, and bechamel sauce. However, each taverna adds its own spin on the theme. Some add thinly sliced potato; or tomatoes to thicken the sauce; others add cinnamon or nutmeg.

The ingredients are layered like lasagna and baked in a hot oven until the whole thing is dark brown on top with crispy edges. I tried it on every island we visited. My favorite was at Kastri, a café on Syros. It had a ton of caramelized eggplant and just the perfect hint of cinnamon.

Grilled Octopus

On many islands, you'll see rows of octopus hanging out to dry. If you're a lover of the eight-legged sea creature, you've undoubtedly eaten some that gave your jaw a severe workout, like a rubbery hockey puck. But not in Greece, where they have the technique down.

In olden days, the Greek mamas would head down to the boats to buy their octopus and, while at the shore, beat them against the rocks to tenderize them. Nowadays, I'm not sure how they do it. But no matter where you eat it, it will be the most tender, succulent octopus you'll ever taste.

Order it grilled, and it will come with a drizzle of island olive oil and a few wedges of lemon. It doesn't need anything else. Don't order it unless you see it hanging to dry or in a fish display over ice.

Stifado

This dish was brought to Greece by the Venetians; then the Turks added their touch, and the Greeks made it their own. It's a hearty stew that is slow-cooked for hours using whatever meat they had on hand. Often, you'll see it with rabbit, but lamb and beef are also typical.

It's Greek comfort food at its best—hearty, warm, and satisfying. The key ingredients are meat, pearl onions, tomatoes, wine or vinegar, and usually cinnamon and clove. Just like the moussaka, every chef has their version, so try it at a few tavernas to find your favorite.

“Every island has its own specialty to seek out.”



Enjoy classic Mediterranean cuisine, and search out local favorites like Greek salad.

Teaching English in Penang With a Laptop and a Smile

Kirsten Raccuia

California native, Sharon Troutman, 64, discovered Penang, Malaysia over 15 years ago. She came for a vacation while touring through Southeast Asia and fell in love with the vibrant island.

“The blending of all the cultures here made it unlike any other place in the region. Actually, it’s different from every other place I’ve ever been,” says Sharon. “At a time when it seems like the world is so full of hatred, Penang is this little island that appears to break all the norms. Of course, no place is perfect, but the seamless blend here really is a melting pot.”

After her travels, Sharon went back home to continue her life as an accountant, but Penang was always in the back of her mind and a piece of it in her heart. She knew one day, she’d return. She got the chance when she needed some very extensive dental work and got a five-figure quote from her dentist. “I almost fell out of the chair when he told me how much it would all cost. So I put on my thinking cap and started researching dental work in Penang.

“I found two dentists that came highly recommended and reached out via email. I explained my story and asked for a quote. Within a day or two, they both had responded with temporary quotes. Both quotes were about a quarter of what my U.S. dentist told me. I was sold.”

Sharon booked her ticket that week. In the 15 years since she had first visited Penang, not much had changed, “There are a lot more skyscrapers, but the authenticity of the island is the same. That blend of people is the same. I was thrilled.”

Sharon met with both dentists, and in both cases, the final quote remained the same as the original one. “Both of their offices were so clean and modern; they were every bit as nice as the fancy dentist I went to in California. I could have gone with either dentist, but I decided to go with Dr. Yong at Smile Bay Dental. And

I’m happy I did; he did a fantastic job.”

Being back in Penang lit a fire under her. A few months after returning from the dental trip, Sharon retired and started getting ready for relocation. One year later she moved back to Penang for good.

After settling in and finding her ideal ocean-view home, she realized she wasn’t quite ready to be fully retired. “There is so much going on here, my social life is better than it has ever been. But I wanted to supplement my social life and pension with something more meaningful. As a native English speaker, I knew I had a ‘gift’ that many locals would pay for.”

Even though most people in Malaysia speak English to some degree, and many learn in school, there are loads of children that need private tutoring. “I went online and took a leisurely three months to get my TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) qualification certificate. It was a good course for me, but it had no practical experience, just

academic. So after I finished, I just had to get out there and let people know I was doing it.”

Sharon started telling people at her church, and before she knew it, she had a few students. Then a few more, and a few more. Now, one year later, she has about 15 students per week. All from word of mouth.

“I learned to apply my lessons to each child and to be flexible, but it took a little time and learning on my part. I wasn’t going to talk to a seven-year-old Japanese girl about driving a car in New York City. It has to be relevant to them, or they aren’t going to be interested in learning.”

Sharon teaches in her “home classroom” that she has created out of the second bedroom, so she has no overhead other than what she needs for each lesson.

Just like the multicultural backdrop that is Penang, her students are from all over Asia. She has Thai, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese kids whose ages range from seven to 16 years old. She charges \$22 per hour.

It’s not just about the students; Sharon also has to manage the expectations of the parents. Sometimes the parents will tell her what they believe their child needs. But in reality, it’s often something entirely different.

She had a father say that his daughter needed help to improve her speaking. “But she is one of the best speakers I have. Her English is fantastic, she is just incredibly timid. I get to help bring her out of her shell a bit; help her with her confidence. Watching her grow has been so rewarding for me.”

Sharon also teaches online with a company operating out of Beijing called SayABC. She instructs children from all over China via a Skype-like platform. Each class lasts 40 minutes and is taught live using a specific curriculum the company has developed.

Sharon had no idea that she would love teaching as much as she does. “It’s a constant challenge, it keeps me on my toes and really is enriching. An added bonus is that teaching these young students is keeping me youthful in my retirement.” ■

“Teaching young students keeps me youthful.”



Eclectic and steeped in history, George Town in Penang is a feast for the senses.

Chuburna—A Laidback Fishing Village

The small fishing village of Chuburna is located to the west of Progreso, about 20 minutes away. Like other Gulf of Mexico beach communities, it's on a narrow barrier island. It's a somewhat isolated community, with a few local restaurants, expat hangouts, and small shops. But many homes are located within a short walk of the beach, and those who live there enjoy the small-town feel, including a sizeable expat community of mostly Americans and Canadians. The "downtown" area by the water, with its main plaza and surrounding streets, is the perfect spot for a seafood lunch and then a stroll. A newly built three-bedroom home with private pool and fenced property is listed for \$143,000. Another three-bedroom house, two blocks from the beach, is on the market for \$74,200. See: Mayanworldrealestate.com.

Chelem—The Ideal Beachfront Getaway

To the west of Progreso, the humble fishing village of Chelem has been on the radar of American and Canadian retirees for decades. The Thursday market just off the main square is a great place to get fresh fruits and veggies. But for bigger shopping trips, you'll have to go Progreso or even Mérida. In beach communities like this, taxis and *colectivos* (shared vans on set routes) are available and there are even shuttle services catering to expats. But it's much more convenient to own a car. For \$249,000 you can secure a three-story, four-bedroom villa with luxury finishes right on the beach, as well as a private pool. A two-bedroom home, two blocks from the beach, is being sold furnished and is listed at \$131,000. See: Mayanworldrealestate.com.

Chicxulub—A Prehistoric Past

Covering a sizeable circular swath of the Gulf of Mexico and Yucatán Peninsula is the 93-mile diameter impact crater of a massive asteroid that hit the earth about 66 million years ago. It's the one that is said to have caused the extinction of the dinosaurs. Smack dab in the middle is the beach town of Chicxulub, just east of the regional hub of Progreso. As with the other settlements on this stretch of coast, this is a popular weekend getaway for families from Mérida. A three-bedroom condo in a beachfront building, with Gulf views and a community pool, is listed at \$94,000. See: Realestateyucatan.com. ■

Real Estate Notes From Our Correspondents Around the World

■ **Eco-Friendly Townhomes on the Beach in Ecuador.** The quiet little beach village of Santa Marianita on the Pacific Coast of Ecuador is an unlikely place to find cutting-edge eco-friendly homes. But if you take the short 15-minute drive south from the bustling port city of Manta, that is exactly what you will find on this wide beach, best known as a top location for kitesurfers.

Pacific Breeze Marianita is a planned community of 26 townhomes, designed from the start to have a low carbon impact and make use of the latest building and recycling techniques.

The buildings rest on steel-reinforced concrete frames, with a vapor barrier under the floor to prevent moisture. A structural steel framework supports "Zip-Panels"—fiberboard sheeting with a Styrofoam core. This provides excellent insulation, soundproofing, and earthquake resistance.

It doesn't stop there; all grey water is recycled and reused for toilet flushing, and a triple tank septic system is used to process waste, reusing it in the form of organic compost and water for irrigation. Finally, LED lights come as standard in all townhouses and a solar water-heater is installed on every rooftop to help reduce energy usage.

By the way, the rooftops also double as a terrace and BBQ location for enjoying the sea breeze and sunsets.

Prices range from \$168,000 to \$280,000, depending on the number of bedrooms, location, and features. See: Ecuadordreamhome.com.—*IL contributor Jim Santos*.

■ **Preferential Mortgage Rates Added to Panama's Attractions.** Panama has long been known for the benefits it offers to potential investors and new residents. Since I moved to Panama City in 2005, I've seen easy-to-get residential property tax exemptions of up to 20 years, substantial discounts on closing costs and more for retirees, and preferential interest rates for mortgages. Things have changed since then, but mostly for the better.

The 20-year exemptions are now a thing of the past, with new properties

getting a maximum of three years. Happily, last January, Panama also dropped its property tax rates from a maximum of 2.1% to between 0.5% and 0.6% for most properties, saving homeowners thousands of dollars a year.

As for the preferential interest law, Panama's new president is proposing a change. At present, buying or building a new property in Panama—your first and primary residence—entitles you to a 2% reduction on mortgage interest rates, which currently range from 5-7%.

At time of writing this law applies to properties valued at \$120,000 and below, but a new proposal calls for an increase in the threshold, to include properties valued at \$180,000 or less.—*IL Panama Editor Jessica Ramesch*.

■ **Big Names Bring New Living Options to Penang, Malaysia.** What used to be desolate land on the mainland of Penang is getting a significant overhaul. A new mega-development project worth \$3.1 billion on 245 acres of freehold land is a joint venture partnership with Aspen Vision City and IKEA Southeast Asia.

This isn't just a housing project; the development will be a self-sustaining city with a mix of residential and commercial buildings. There will be an Aloft Hotel, an international school, serviced residences, luxury designer homes, a transport hub, a 25-acre green park, and a major medical center.

The project is poised to be the most advanced smart city in Malaysia. Collaboration with tech-giants Telekom Malaysia will ensure the smart city infrastructure is the best in the country.

Many companies like Bose, Boston Scientific, and Bosch manufacture in Penang island's southern zone, and their employees face long commutes. Residents of this development could cut their commute time by half, rather than living on the island itself. Although the development is technologically driven, the importance of green space is acknowledged. In the heart of the space is a 25-acre park with a skywalk and observation points offering a bird's eye view of the park.—*IL contributor Kirsten Raccaia*. ■