

STAVROS NIARCHOS  
FOUNDATION CULTURAL CENTER

# *Between the Sea & the Acropolis*

**A cultural hub  
and a leisure destination**

The Stavros Niarchos Hall, home of the Greek National Opera's major productions, has incomparable acoustics and unique technological features.



IN FIVE SHORT YEARS, THE STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION CULTURAL CENTER HAS BECOME A FAVORITE DESTINATION FOR ATHENIANS: A CULTURAL PARK OPEN TO ALL, NEAR THE SHORE, WITH UNINTERRUPTED VIEWS THAT STRETCH FROM THE SARONIC GULF TO THE SACRED ROCK OF THE ACROPOLIS.

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At play in the "Clearing," one of the most popular spaces in the Stavros Niarchos Park and the venue for several major outdoor events, including the summertime Nostos Festival.

IF YOU LOOK out the airplane window when landing in Athens, your first thought might be – “How nice! I’m arriving at a city on the sea!” However, while the Greek capital is surrounded by islands, islets, bays and beaches, its connection with its own coastline is a very recent development.

For Greeks, and for Athenians, what you’ve just seen from an altitude of a few thousand feet would have been, until recently, a kind of illusion. Remarkably, Athens only realized that it’s a coastal city at the start of the 21st century, even though it’s only 5.5 km from the city center to the Gulf of Faliro. What’s more, the man who first spotted this and laid the foundation for a new, refreshing viewpoint wasn’t even a Greek.

On one of his first visits, architect Renzo Piano, the man who was undertaking the task of building the Stavros Niarchos Cultural Foundation Center, found that, despite the overall derelict nature of the coastal area where he would be situating his new structure, links between the sea and the city were still faintly visible. It only took climbing to the roof of a nearby building for him to discover a magnificent view of Faliro Bay and the Acropolis. From that point onward, the architect aimed, above all, to restore the natural and conceptual connection between the land and the sea.

One of the main obstacles was a main road that hid the sea from the site

chosen for the center; Renzo Piano’s solution was topographical: to “lift” a piece of land and design a sloping park: a hill that sheltered the center’s structures, from the top of which visitors would regain the lost views of the sea and the Acropolis.

### A cultural landmark in record time

In record time, the seafront acquired a new focal point, capable of drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors from the residential heartland of the city. The last such attraction built in the area was the old Athens airport, today the site of the biggest urban redevelopment project in Europe.

The SNFCC, an undertaking funded entirely by a private entity - the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, with a grant of €608 million – is now self-sustaining, despite being the property of the Greek state, and has, in fact, evolved into the city’s top destination. Renzo Piano’s impressive construction is a public space spread over 21 hectares, open to the public from 06:00 to 02:00 (summer opening times) that’s also home to the largest public Mediterranean garden in the world. It hosts a dizzying number of cultural, educational, sporting,

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The unique Tower of Books at the entrance to the National Library of Greece. Measuring 18 meters in height, this four-story structure with balconies, houses part of the NLG collection.

environmental and entertainment events and activities. Home to the facilities of the National Library of Greece and the Greek National Opera, the SNFCC is a very Athenian counterpart to New York’s Lincoln Center or the Barbican Center in London.

The sporting activities include wellness programs that take place daily in the open air. You can join yoga, pilates or tai chi classes, run on the running track, use the outdoor exercise equipment, or rent a bike from the Visitor Center. The best way to get to know the park is to follow one of the guided hour-long tours in English, which are offered daily at 10:00 and 16:30 and involve approximately a kilometer’s walk.

No matter what your reason is for visiting – whether to watch an opera performance, enjoy a dance piece on the Canal, or just watch the sunset with an ice cream in hand – you’ll notice that the vast majority of people are here for the most mundane reason of all: to stroll. Many cross the pedestrian bridge (the Esplanade) to the seafront, while others lose themselves in the park. The Stavros Niarchos Park is home to a rich variety of flora, including olive trees, evergreen shrubs, carob trees, laurels, cypress trees, as well as an extensive selection of indigenous Greek aromatic plants.

In the summer, visitor numbers skyrocket, not just because of the weather but also because of the SNFCC events which have become institutions: the SNF Nostos Festival (June 23 and 24); the outdoor cinema series Park your Cinema and Park your Cinema Kids; and rotating outdoor exhibitions. This summer, visitors can see the iconic work Maman (1999) by French-American sculptor Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), a giant spider that awaits you on the Esplanade.



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**THE HIGHLIGHTS**

**THE AGORA** In ancient city-states, the Agora was the heart of public life in all its aspects – political, spiritual, cultural and commercial. Aiming to recreate a sense of this, Renzo Piano designed a meeting place where everyone can feel a sense of belonging to a community. Flanked by the buildings housing the National Library of Greece and the Greek National Opera, the Center's main square is full of people most hours of the day, and remains the most popular meeting and gathering place on the grounds.

**THE LIGHTHOUSE** If the Agora is a meeting place at ground level, the Lighthouse is a public square 30 meters above that. The Lighthouse stands atop the Greek National Opera building, shaded by an energy-producing canopy of photovoltaic panels spanning 2.5 acres. (The

SNFCC is the first large-scale cultural venue to have achieved LEED Platinum certification in Europe.) The Lighthouse is far and away the best spot to enjoy what the architect had in mind, the visual connection between the sea and the Acropolis. It offers a 360° panoramic view over Athens, Piraeus and the Saronic Gulf, and provides one of the best views of the Sacred Rock. The elevator takes you up to the glass bridge of the Lighthouse, where you'll feel as if you're hovering over the park. Note, too, that every Wednesday between July 13 and September 7, the Sunset DJ sets play out on the Lighthouse terrace just as the sun sets.

**THE CANAL** Another architectural nod to the relationship between the city and the sea, the Canal is 400 meters long, 30 meters wide and up to 150 cm deep. It runs the length of the building complex parallel to the Esplanade, acting as both a

metaphorical and literal extension of the sea, bringing the Gulf of Faliro to the SNFCC. (It is, in fact, filled with water from the sea, to which it returns in a continuous flow after passing through filters.) The Canal isn't just decorative; it hosts sailing and kayaking classes for children and adults. It's also home to the Dancing Fountains: dazzling water shows set to different music every day.

**DELTA RESTAURANT** For just over a year, one of the most privileged spaces in the building complex has been home to Delta, a trailblazer on the Athens gastronomic scene. Small-scale producers from every corner of the country supply ingredients to enliven three menus (Omnivore, Vegetarian and Vegan) of either 13 or 17 inventive dishes bearing the signatures of two of Greece's most accomplished chefs, creative cooks from Michelin-starred Scandinavian kitchens who are busy highlighting the importance of sustainability in haute gastronomy. •



A spider for summer: Maman, the famous work by French-American sculptor Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) is a big draw for young and old alike (until November 6th).



Exceptional Greek gastronomy with a view: the restaurant Delta is one of the more ambitious arrivals in Athens in recent years.

*The figures so far*

**20,000,000** visits  
**16,488** events, **267** of which were fully digital  
**110,000** participants in guided tours  
**€608** million spent by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation in the form of grants, from the initial inspiration for the creation of the SNFCC to the present day  
 The SNFCC has received major international recognition for its architecture, including the Award for International Excellence from the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in 2018.

More information: [snfcc.org](http://snfcc.org), [deltarestaurant.gr](http://deltarestaurant.gr)  
 Paid private tours can be arranged via [tours@snfcc.gr](mailto:tours@snfcc.gr)

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