Greece

Greece, or the Hellenic Republic, is a country made up mostly of mountains, with ranges extending into the sea as peninsulas or chains of islands. It is bounded by Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Turkey, and by the Mediterranean, Ionian and Aegean Seas. It includes many islands, some very close to Turkey, and the Greek island of Crete is quite close to Egypt.

The population in July 2008 was estimated at 10,722,816, of which 93% were Greek citizens and 7% were foreign citizens (mostly guest workers, who make up nearly one-fifth of the work force, mainly in agricultural and unskilled jobs). Greece does not collect data on ethnicity, so the question of how many resident citizens of Greece are not of Greek ethnicity is not known — but there are significant populations of Turks living in Western Thrace and people who identify as Macedonians in northern and north-eastern Greece. Voting is universal and compulsory for all citizens after 18 years of age.

Greece is a member of the European Union (EU), and between 2000-06 received approximately €4 billion annually in economic aid from the EU. Major items in the national economy include agriculture and tourism, tourism alone providing 15% of GDP. The Greek economy grew by nearly 4% per year between 2003 and 2007, due partly to infrastructural spending related to the 2004 Athens Olympic Games.

The literacy rate, defined as the proportion of people aged 15 and over who can read and write, is 96% (2008 est.). Greece had over 2 million internet users in 2006.

Agricultural products include wheat, corn, barley, sugar beets, olives, tomatoes, wine, tobacco, potatoes, beef, and dairy products. Major industries include tourism, food and tobacco processing, textiles, chemicals, metal products, mining, and petroleum.
History

From the 8th century BC onwards, the civilisation of the Greek city states expanded through the Mediterranean and the Black Sea regions. During the Byzantine Empire, centred in Constantinople (now Istanbul), the Greek civilisation lived on for a thousand years, managing to combine Hellenic culture with the Roman imperial tradition and Christianity.

In the 15th century, Constantinople was captured by the Ottoman Turks. During the centuries of occupation that followed under the Ottoman Empire the Greeks continued to enjoy relative freedom of religion, trade and education. Because of this benign authority over them, plus their own fierce retention of cultural identity, they were able to sustain their language and culture. Greece gradually resumed its nationality identity with the decline of the Ottoman Empire, and in 1823 the monarchy of Greece was established.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, Greece was involved in differences with Turkey over territories, and, following World War II (1939-45), there was a time of varied political unrest. The monarchy was overthrown in 1967 by a military dictatorship. However, events led to Greece adopting a republican constitution in 1973 with a democratically elected parliament. Greeks have a strong sense of national identity, pride in their heritage and belief in democracy.

The Greek community in Australia

An early wave of Greek migration took place during the Australian Gold Rush in the mid 19th century. It was kept going during the latter part of the 19th and the early half of the 20th century, as the former miners and sailors settled down, often became owners of small businesses, and characteristically sponsored relatives and friends from their home regions in Greece.
Further waves of Greek migration to Australia took place during times of unrest in Greece between the end of World War II and the mid 1970s. Some Greeks also came from Egypt and Cyprus. A small number of families of Greek Cypriots came to Australia as refugees in the mid to late 1970s, due to the Turkish invasion of the northern part of the island.

Many other Greeks have come to Australia mainly for economic rather than political reasons, most from rural Greece or the Greek islands. Their migration has been characterised by a strength of family groupings and a desire to maintain family ties across the world, with return visits to Greece.

First generation settlers from Greece, particularly women and girls, often found themselves isolated, not only by distance and language but by the loss of wider family supports. Today, however, many Greek Australian women have built up new networks of friends and institutional support during their years of living in Australia.

**Languages**

Officially 99% of Greeks in Greece spoke Greek in 2008. Other languages used included English and French.

**Religion**

Almost the entire population of Greece (estimated at 98% in 2008) belongs to the Orthodox Church which, in accordance with the constitution, holds a position of privilege within the Greek state. Religious instruction is given in all elementary and middle schools.

The Muslim population accounts for about 1.3% of the population.
Nowadays many young Greeks in Australia, as in Greece, attend church only during special religious celebrations. There may be some resurgence of religious observance among younger Greek Australians. This may include observing the tradition of fasting during Lent. There appear to be greater attendances at church in some areas, and more programs for the younger age groups are being offered. Church services tend to be a little more contemporary and are often conducted half in Greek and half in English.

**Family life and society**

Birth, baptism, marriage, name days and deaths constitute the traditional focus of Greek life. The Greek Orthodox Church is seen as integral to the Greek way of life, a promoter of traditional values. Traditionally, Greeks do not see society as an aggregate of individuals, but rather as an aggregate of families who recognise obligations to assist relatives when necessary. Co-operation within the immediate and extended family is vital, and family interests traditionally take precedence over those of individuals. The traditional Greek family is family-centred rather than child-orientated. Children have an accorded place within the family structure and learn to accept this. Contacts with the outside world are made through the family and its extensions. The wishes of the older members come before those of the child. Relationships within the family often appear authoritarian, women traditionally being more submissive. It is expected that when a father dies, his eldest son immediately becomes head of the household. However, a woman has a lot of power in the decision making and management in regard to household affairs, the children, and sometimes even the husband.

Honour and self-respect are fundamental concepts in traditional Greek society. Family values, duties of hospitality and clearly delineated roles of family members are stressed. Traditionally, the husband and father was expected to be a sober, hard-working provider for his wife and children and protector of his wife’s and daughter’s honour. The wife was expected to be supportive of her husband, maintaining religious instruction, looking after the management of the household,
and instilling virtue in her children. The son had an obligation to care for and protect his mother and his sisters, uphold his family honour and utilise educational opportunities. The daughter’s role was to be a capable help to her mother and avoid any action that could bring shame on the family.

Today there have been many changes, both in Greece and in Australia. Both women and men are now encouraged to pursue educational opportunities. Women have much more independence and choice in all aspects of their life. The old village way of life is disappearing. Many men in Greece as well as in Australia expect that their wife will work to help support the family and improve its standard of living.

The strength of Greek culture is that an individual need rarely feel lonely, without support or without loyalty. No matter at what stage one is in life, there is the knowledge that a father or brother, a sister or kinsman, cares. It is a sense of security particularly important for the old and the dying. However, although traditionally it has been the responsibility of the family to care for the elderly, more families in Australia are choosing paid care for their frail elderly members.

**Marriage**
Traditionally, marriages were arranged by parents, and dowries of land were customary. Dowries now, however, where they exist at all, tend to be in the form of household items rather than land. Young people are now choosing their own partners, with some couples electing to live together before marriage. Mixed marriages (across ethnic barriers) are becoming more acceptable for Greek Australians. Traditionally, husbands and wives had a clear differentiation of tasks and leisure activities.
Childbirth and child rearing

In today’s society these are less differentiated by gender and men and women in Australian society share decisions, tasks and responsibilities — for example, in the care of children. The age of marriage is much higher than in previous years. Marrying in one’s mid-30s is common, so families are also started later.

In the modern Greek family, both in Greece and in Australia, the father as well as the mother is expected to care for the children and take responsibility for child rearing, but there are still differences: the father is more likely to combine paid work outside the home, although the mother will also often work and contribute financially. The mother will more often be the one to attend parents’ groups and visit the Maternal and Child Health Nurse with the child, and she will often pass on to the father information about the child’s development. Mothers tend to be with the newborn baby more because of breastfeeding.

Younger pregnant women are more concerned these days with keeping fit and with healthy eating. Nutrition is important to them, as is retaining their body shape after birth, whereas women of the older generation feel it is important to listen to cravings. Childbearing women these days are far more widely read and are familiar with information networks such as the internet.

When a baby is born, all members of the family make a fuss of mother and baby, especially if it is the first, and more especially if it is a boy. Traditionally, the mother is confined for forty days after the birth. There is often pressure from the family to maintain this custom in Australia, because it is seen as important for the health of both the mother and the baby. Grandparents usually offer practical support to the family at this time, such as cooking and cleaning, and they provide handy advice about bringing up children. Other extended family members also support the family during key events such as the birth of a new baby. Aunts, for example, will come and cook and enjoy the new baby. There has, however, been a shift in emphasis, from the importance of the new mother’s
mother to that of her husband. It is common now to find that the husband becomes the key support person for the mother in the early weeks after the birth. He may seek paternity leave.

At forty days after the birth the new baby is taken to the priest to be blessed.

Usually women choose breastfeeding, and people have become used to feeding in public. Traditionally babies are not weaned until 18-24 months. Newborns generally sleep in the same room as the parents, and then are moved into their own room. Lots of people now use baby monitors. Children generally sleep in their own beds, but on the odd occasion, such as after a bad dream, they may come into the parents’ bed. Toys such as mobiles for babies are provided as in Anglo-Australian culture. A sign that Greek Australian families have integrated into Australian culture is that food bought or prepared for growing babies will often be whatever the Maternal and Child Health Nurse suggests: rice cereals and unsweetened stewed apple at about 4-6 months, for example. Children may be spoon fed up to 3 or 4 years of age, but people are now less concerned with mess than previously, and so will hold relaxed attitudes towards learning to eat with implements. Children are, however, expected to eat well. Modern Greek parents encourage children to be independent eaters when they are ready; however, grandparents may still ‘molly-coddle’ children and feed them by hand. The routine of the family is not allowed to be disrupted by children: for example, meal times adhere to the needs of the adults.

Toilet training is not rigid and children are encouraged to develop at their own pace. Parents tend to wait for some sign from the child that they are aware and interested in the toilet/potty. The child then gets lots of encouragement from the parents, and often modelling.

Children are encouraged to nap when tired, but may not have a set sleep time at night. Some families do not adhere to a strict daily routine as followed in the Western system of child care.
Greek children are loved and physically well cared for. Having the children well dressed is important, and traditionally children were more formally attired for play situations than is expected by Australian care givers and teachers. Many second generation mothers are more comfortable about dressing their children in play clothes.

Both parents demonstrate freely their affection for their children and create an atmosphere of security. While they may appear more permissive with small children than some Anglo-Australian parents, they exert firm control over their children and may use physical punishment. Children are also disciplined through scoldings and appeals to family honour. A ‘good’ child is rewarded by praise, sweets or toys.

It is said that in the past the Greek child could do no wrong in the eyes of its grandparents, but today’s grandparents are often more willing to follow the lead set by the child’s parents – that is, grandparents now more often treat a grandchild as the child’s parents would like.

Play is definitely considered important for the child. Lots of songs and stories are provided, especially from grandparents. Some more traditional Greek games are learnt and enjoyed at Greek school.

Older members of the community are respected and may assume some of the responsibility for child minding. The family may prefer to entrust the care of their children to a member of the family or a fellow countryman rather than to an outsider.

Traditionally, the roles of boys and girls were clearly differentiated from an early age. Parents may still not like boys to dress up or play in the home corner in kindergarten. Girls may lead a more restricted life. Traditionally, girls were more protected and were expected to go out only when accompanied by a brother or male relative. Some second and third generation girls, however, tend to go out with a group of friends – a group which does not necessarily include a male relative. As in today’s Greece, girls now sometimes go out unaccompanied by a male relative.
Children spend much of their time with adults and may accompany parents to dances and celebrations, for example. Children attend with their parents all the social occasions centred on the lives of their family and friends. If grandparents are available, they will care for the children when parents need to be elsewhere without their children, but family members in general spend much time together.

The family members all work hard for the education of the children, because the successful life of these children brings honour and respect to the family name.

**Forms of name**
Children take the father’s family name, and given names often come from the parents or grandparents of the father, or from one of the saints. These days, however, names on the mother’s side can also be used, and names from outside the family are very much accepted, depending on the wishes of the parents. Middle names are also often given now, whereas such a practice used to be rare.

As has always been the case in Greek tradition, women retain their own surname if they are working professional women. Now there is a choice for all women: to keep their maiden name or take their husband’s name.

Greek tradition included many special titles used for the showing of respect or formality, but these are often no longer used. Honorifics such as ‘aunty’ are occasionally still used, but children will rarely be rebuked if these are forgotten. Even the titles for addressing the grandparents, ‘nono’ or ‘nona’, are now more relaxed. In-laws have special names which the older generation still use, but generally Christian names can be used.
Education

Greek parents value education and may have very high aspirations for their children at school. The Greek education system is subject-orientated. Learning in schools is still largely by rote and lessons are more rigidly structured than in Australian schools. The concept of community responsibility for education is mostly an alien one, as parents give the teacher full responsibility for the education of their children.

Since 1976 there has been an official program in Greece for the development of kindergartens, and children can attend from 3½ or 4½ years of age until they start school at 5½ years of age. Most parents these days make use of the local kindergarten and see it as a valuable start. Some parents in cities may also use child care if they do not have family members nearby to care for children. Children are expected to learn to read and write at kindergarten or at least in the first year of school.

In Greece, the nine years of compulsory education is free for all. The school week has six days. School starts at approximately 8.30 am and finishes at about 1.00 pm. In the cities the second shift may start at about 2.00 pm. Some children also attend private tuition classes, particularly language classes, in the evening.

The school year starts in September and goes until June. Apart from the long summer vacation, there are breaks at Christmas and Easter, as well as many for religious and national holidays. Education is seen as an important contributor to the social, economic and cultural improvement of the Greek people. Recently there has been extensive educational reform aimed at making education up to date and freely available. The classroom teacher is the sole authority in the elementary school. There is a strong stress on discipline and parents expect the school to enforce this. Homework is very important in Greek schooling and parents actively assist children at home with their homework. Comparative lack of homework in some Australian schools is often seen by Greek families as a weakness of the system.
Some Greek Australians may be confused or anxious about the relatively permissive atmosphere in Australian child care centres, kindergartens and schools, so there may be an unwillingness to let their children participate in certain activities: for example, messy activities, outings or school camps. Every effort should therefore be made by staff to develop a relationship of trust and understanding with parents, making it clear that staff see the parents as prepared to do the best for their children. If there is an issue with a child’s behaviour at school or in preschool, either parent can be contacted — whoever the staff can catch first! Many Greek families send their children to Greek school on Saturday where children can become literate in Greek and gain an understanding of their Greek heritage.

Festivals and rituals

The Greek people observe a great number of religious feast days, and local communities place a lot of importance on these. In addition, every village holds its own festival and certain parts of Greece are noted for their feast days. The two major religious holidays are Easter and Christmas. Some families still eat fish rather than red meats on Wednesdays and Fridays. One taboo that definitely still applies is: no red meat at a wake!

Not all national holidays are religious. March 25 is Independence Day, which commemorates the start in 1821 of the long struggle for liberation from 400 years of Turkish occupation. October 28 is the anniversary of the rejection of Mussolini’s ultimatum to Greece in 1940, through which Greece entered World War II. Both are celebrated each year with conspicuous national feeling and military parades. These days are significant in that they reaffirm the Greeks’ traditional love of independence.

One little ritual is the cutting of the vasilopita, the New Year bread, at midnight on New Year’s Eve. A coin is inserted through a slit in the base and the person who finds the coin will have luck in the New Year. Paska (Easter) is more important than Christmas and is observed with great ritual. It does
not often coincide with the Easter of the western Christian churches and is usually later. Prior to Easter, eggs are dyed red and small sweet biscuits are baked, usually on Easter Thursday, to be eaten after Lent. The eggs are cracked between two people at each meal and the person whose egg does not crack is considered to be lucky.

Mayeritsa is the first meal eaten after the acknowledgment of the resurrection of Christ. This is a special soup which regions have their own way of making. It may be made from the entrails of a lamb, using egg, lemon and rice. The lamb itself is often barbecued on an open spit on Easter Sunday, when there is a gathering together of relatives and friends.

Another important celebration is the baptism of a child, which takes place when the child is between 6 and 12 months old. The ceremony takes place in a Greek Orthodox church. The godparents usually play an important role in the ceremony of baptism, but if they cannot be present, their roles may be undertaken by close relatives or friends. The godparents are regarded as second parents to the baby, taking the position seriously throughout the child’s life.

Children now celebrate birthdays as well as name days, and birthdays are regarded as more important than name days, which are losing significance. Often there are huge parties for birthdays, with family and friends attending. Starting school and coming of age are all celebrated very much as they are by other Australian families.

Food

Food styles and facilities in the country areas of Greece are simpler than in the larger towns, which have been influenced by the increasing tourist trade, availability of modern conveniences, and commercially packaged foods. Wood stoves, open fireplaces or coals in a brazier provide the cooking facilities in Greek country areas; however, modern electrical equipment such as electric stoves and refrigerators are also used now in villages and towns as well as in the cities.
Generally food styles and dishes vary little throughout Greece — although, for example, people from the Greek islands eat seafood to a greater extent than do people living inland. The Adriatic Sea is famously rich in sea foods, including octopus, squid, crab, shrimp, lobster, mullet and cod, and these make an important contribution to the diet. The Greek diet also includes many varieties of meat, fruit and vegetables, crusty bread, olives, olive oil, lemon, herbs and spices. These are the foundations of characteristic Greek foods. Wide varieties of seasonal fruits and vegetables are available. Freshness is the essence of Greek food preparation and cooking. Many people, particularly in the villages, grow their own fruit and vegetables.

Meat is expensive in Greece and is eaten only once or twice a week. Beef, pork and chicken are popular and are cooked in a wide variety of ways: baked, casseroled, boiled, braised, or minced with herbs and spices. Offal is frequently used. Legumes, chick peas, dried beans and lentils provide an important alternative to meats.

Bread is a staple food served at every meal. Wholemeal flour is available in Greece but is not as popular as white flour. Breads can be simple, crusty loaves or elaborately prepared and decorated loaves for festivals and celebrations, such as Easter Bread. Wheat flour is used to make filo pastry sheets for use in the making of baklava and other foods. Semolina is used in making halva and pasta.

Dairy products are widely used. Cow’s milk and sheep’s milk are popular. The characteristic fetta cheese is usually made from sheep’s milk and stored in brine. Yoghurt, also usually made from sheep’s milk, is very popular. Olive oil is used for all cooking and food preparation that requires oil.

Typically, breakfast consists of bread, cheese and olives, with milk for children and coffee for adults. Packaged cereals are now available in Greek supermarkets. Krema (custard) is commonly served for young children around 1 to 2 years of age. Adults may have only a Greek coffee for breakfast.
If all the family is present, the main meal is served at about 2:00 p.m. This is an important, enjoyable, informal occasion. An afternoon nap usually follows the main meal for some family members. Typically, only one vegetable is served with the meat. Salad, bread, olives, pickled vegetables and cheese may accompany the main dish. A bean stew of dried beans in tomato sauce or dried beans with potatoes are common dishes. Salads may include lettuce, cabbage, tomato, cucumber, peppers, feta cheese and olives. Meats may be grilled, roasted or casserole with the addition of one vegetable. Potatoes are often served with meat. Pasta and rice are popular. Spaghetti with a meat or cheese sauce, or pasta baked in layers with a meat sauce and white sauce topping (pasticcio), are common. A soup may be served, such as fasolada (a thick soup of dried beans, carrot, celery, herbs and tomato paste), fish soup or a chicken soup made from chicken stock and thickened with a beaten egg and lemon juice (augolemono).

A wide variety of herbs and spices are used in meal preparation, including garlic, oregano, mint, parsley, bay leaf and thyme. Cinnamon, vanilla, rosewater, honey, walnuts, sesame seeds and almonds are used to flavour confectionery and the characteristic rich, sweet cakes. Fresh fruit is taken after the main meal; desserts are rarely used. Similar foods are taken at the evening meal, which usually includes the leftovers from lunch accompanied by eggs, fried potato, bread, olives, cheese and salami. Snacks for children may include spinach and cheese pies, boiled eggs, bread, cheese and salami. Confectionery, chocolates and soft drinks are taken occasionally, but water and milk are the more common beverages for children.

Hospitality is very important to the Greeks and a strict etiquette is followed when formally entertaining visitors: for example, when first meeting the in-laws. First, the visitor is offered a small glass of liqueur or similar drink. Banana liqueur and creme de menthe are usually offered to women, with a stronger spirit such as ouzo offered to men. This is followed by a sweet: chocolate, or glacé fruit such as grapes, quince, cherries, figs or orange peel. These are served on small plates and eaten with a teaspoon or small fork. Only small quantities are served — one or two teaspoons. The sweet may be followed by a glass of water. In Australia, this ritual is not strictly followed.
Guests may be offered coffee and a sweet. Greek coffee may then be served with biscuits and cakes such as baklava (small pastry with walnuts and heavy syrup), galactobouriko (filo pastry with vanilla custard) or revani (orange flavoured semolina-based cake). It is expected that at the very least visitors accept some kind of drink from the host.

If visitors stay for dinner, they are served an elaborate meal. If dinner is not served, mezethes (hors d’oeuvres) are served. These may include salami, cheese cubes, cabana, cucumber, tomato, pickled vegetables, cauliflower, pumpkin seeds and nuts, or dips made from garlic, cucumber and yoghurt, with bread.

Restrictions are imposed for some religious occasions, such as the forty-day period of Lent, which is observed by observant Orthodox Christians through fasting. Meat, milk and other animal products may not be eaten during the fast. Strict followers fast for forty days, others for the last week of Lent or on Good Friday only; young children are not expected to fast. On St. Evangelo’s Day, or Palm Sunday, only fish is eaten. Meat and poultry are forbidden on that day.

**Bibliography**

*Child rearing patterns: background information*, FKA Children’s Services, Richmond, Victoria, 1990.


Return to country contents screen