

FEATURE

Athens insiders

Local knowledge can go a long way when you're travelling

ZOE THOMAIDOU

The way most young Greeks see the economic crisis is equivalent to facing a dead end. Athens Insiders is a group of people who found an exit sign to escape the clutches of the crisis, by endeavouring to set up their own business.

Being nothing more or less than a promising company, it introduces a fresh insight in the tourism industry: visiting popular Greek destinations through the eyes of a local. Their themed tours are private and customised, according to the interests and preferences of each individual, whether catering to long-haul visitors, groups of friends, families, or even professionals on a business trip.

The inspiration for creating 'Athens Insiders' was prompted by the personal need of the four co-founders: Anthia Vlassopoulou, Daphne Tragaki, Natalie Kontou and Konstantino

Koukouli. As travellers, they have always wanted to see a country as it truly is, discover the beauty of each place, through authentic experiences and interaction with locals.

Finding themselves in the crisis-stricken Greece of 2012, they started giving tangible form to the concept of a product capable of offering the exact thing they are looking for when travelling: a "genuine, non-touristy" experience.

But building a business from scratch is not an easy thing. The very cost of setting up office premises, along with the tedious bureaucratic procedures and the burden of heavy taxation makes entrepreneurship in Greece a dream out of reach.

"You need to have a thick skin to start up this whole thing on your own. It is extremely difficult, especially for young people, with no budget, no initial capital to start such a thing", Natalie tells *Neos Kosmos*. Their business plan was

put into practice in 2013, when it was selected by a program that supports young enterprises, called EGG (Enter-Grow-Go). With hundreds of aspiring small and medium-sized business groups participating in the competitive process, Athens Insiders was among the 20 that got through it successfully.

EGG is one of the programs launched in the past few years in Greece, aiming to boost innovative entrepreneurship and foster new business ideas. What makes it different to similar programs so far is the fact that, instead of

subsidising, it focuses on providing a start-up company with support services, effective training and access to a network of distinguished professionals.

For Athens Insiders, this meant enjoying useful resources, such as fully equipped office premises for a year, educational seminars, mentoring services and networking opportunities with industry experts who offer the necessary 'know-how' to accelerate the growth of a business.

Their pipe dream was transformed into a marketable service ready to compete with its industry counterparts. Along the way, one of the co-founders, Konstantinos Koukoulis, stepped out of the project, and a new member came to join the team, Alexis Frydas.

Wine and tsipouro tasting walking tours, traditional dance

courses, photography seminars and an Athens treasure hunt are just some of the alternatives that give customers the opportunity to escape the tourist traps and boring, rigid itineraries. Away from the crowds, they can just enjoy the laid back atmosphere of Greek culture, meet the locals and even get invited to their homes. Cultural excursions may last from a couple of hours in the capital to a full day tour in nearby historic sites, such as Sounio, Delphi, Mikines.

As Natalie tells *Neos Kosmos*, their ultimate objective is to change the way travellers see Athens and Greece. The average stay of a visitor in Athens is 1.8 days.

"The problem stems from the restrictive view of Greece that travellers have. It has been an ongoing issue for many years now, because of the tourist market- meaning that Greek businesses have only focused on very specific 'products' so far," says Natalie.

"It is unbelievable, it has to do with what is promoted. This means that so far it has only been 'sea, sun, souvlaki and Acropolis'. Just this and nothing but this."

Nine out of ten itineraries that Athens Insiders offer its clients are tailor-made, in a sense that it takes into account the personal preferences and needs of each individual. The point of reference is that the visitor must not end up being "a mere spectator of tourist display cabinets".

For this purpose, clients are requested to fill in an interactive form with their personal interests and 'must-sees'. The information collected is then used by the team, in order to design the itinerary, find the perfect match of activities for each individual.

"Our philosophy is not to mix different people. Our groups can be up to 8 persons. Certainly you cannot create an itinerary that suits everyone. You cannot be demanding that everybody likes what (the itinerary) you create, when they are different to one another," Natalie explains.

They mostly address people who are already experienced travellers, people who "appreciate personal contact, friendly service, an approach far away from the concept of mass tourism and over worn ideas".

People of this target group usually opt for personalised and more expensive itineraries that involve less conventional activities, like skydiving or horse riding. However, the cost of the themed tours Athens Insiders offers starts from the affordable amount of 35 euros for a group of 8.

The same standards they use in their services apply on their partners' network, a list of professionals from all walks of life, including art, archaeology, gastronomy, photography - essentially any field that can be of interest to the visitors. They select their partners based not only on their knowledge but mainly on their interpersonal skills, making sure that the core philosophy of the Insiders remains intact.

One of their short-term plans is to expand to other regions of Greece, starting off this summer by launching their new branch in the island of Paros.

"We are aiming to develop a network of partners throughout Greece in the future, partners that will be sharing the same values and philosophy with us," says Natalie.

"They will be initiating and running programs which show the nature, culture and unique features of every place, while falling under our umbrella."

Feedback from clients who have explored Athens and Greece through the eyes of Insiders is very positive. They talk about a unique experience, an itinerary off the beaten track, where "the guides felt more like friends than guides".

"No more drudgery and tourist trails, instead, unique hand picked passage tailored to suit the individual needs," comments one of their customers.

But what comes as a real surprise for the members of Athens Insiders is the feedback they receive from strangers. People who have not met them, but hear about their endeavour and send them emails, congratulating them for the initiative and encouraging them to keep up with the good work.

"This is something that really matters to us. It gives us the fuel to keep moving forward, in an even more dynamic way," they say.

For more information on Athens Insiders and their projects visit their website www.athensinsiders.com

