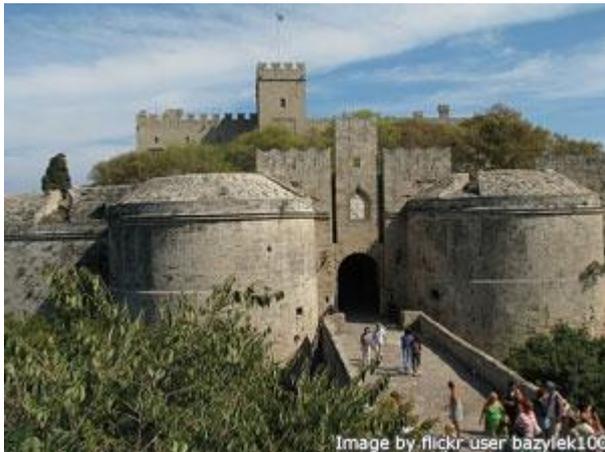


Rhodes Old Town - Medieval Rhodes Town



The Old Town, surrounded by strong imposing walls and with its magnificent fortress built in the 14th century by the Knights of St. John, is today among the largest and most well-preserved medieval settlements in Europe and designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. The city was founded in 408 BC when the inhabitants of Ialysos, Lindos and Kamiros decided to build a powerful new city as the capital of the island. Laid out according to the Hippodameian urban system it was considered one of the most beautiful cities of that period. It quickly

evolved into an important economic and cultural center but under the rule of the Romans and later Byzantines dwindled in significance and lost its ancient glory. In 1309 the Knights of St. John took possession of the Byzantine city, extended it and surrounded it with very strong fortifications, transforming it into a thriving multinational medieval city. In 1523 it fell into the hands of the Ottoman Turks and the Greeks who did not leave Rhodes with the Knights were forced to settle outside the old city and its protective walls, creating new neighborhoods in the south called 'Marasia'. They were later joined by people who came from other islands and countries and settled in the northern coast of the island. That is how Rhodes New Town sprang up.

Rhodes Old Town is an exquisite museum of the medieval era, home to a number of sights you shouldn't miss during your visit. The oldest inhabited medieval town in Europe, it is remarkable with its castles, houses and a warren of cobbled squares and alleyways. There are approximately 200 streets and lanes in the Old Town that simply have no name so finding your bearings here is quite a challenge but getting lost may actually be a great opportunity to explore. When in trouble finding your way ask for Sokratous, which is the closest the Old Town of Rhodes comes to having a main street. Sokratous leads to Hippocrates Square (Plateia Ippokratous), the commercial center of Old Town, lined with lots of cafes, bars, restaurants and nightclubs. Strolling around the cobble-paved streets with the majestic buildings of the Knights, the huge walls of the Old Town and the moat, the Byzantine churches and the Ottoman mosques, squares, gardens and courtyards one can get the impression that time came to a halt here.

Encircled by a high defensive wall, the architecture of the Old Town is both daunting and awe-inspiring. There are six main gates leading to the medieval town and a series of smaller ones. You might of course enter through the gate that's closest to where you approach the walls of the Old Town of Rhodes from, we recommend however that you first enter through **Eleftheria (Liberty) Gate** off Mandraki and



from there start your tour. It will lead you to **Plateia Symi (Symi square)**, containing ruins of the **Temple of Venus**, dating back to the 3rd century B.C., a reminder that a great Hellenistic city once stood here and encompassed the entire area now occupied by the city, including the old and new towns. The population of the Hellenistic city of Rhodes is thought to have equaled the current population of the whole island (approx. 100,000). At Simi square you will also find the **Municipal Art Gallery** of Rhodes, above the Museum Reproduction Shop, housing an impressive collection comprising mostly works by prominent modern Greek artists. A little further on is the **Museum of Decorative Arts** with its finely made objects and crafts from Rhodes as well as other islands (in particular from Symi), a glorious mishmash of ceramics and traditional costumes. Continue through the gate until you reach **Ippoton** street, also known as **the Street of the Knights**, one of the best preserved and most delightful medieval relics in the world and the most attractive area of the Old Town containing the most important public and private buildings of the Knights' rule. Walking down the street one nearly hears galloping of horses, while in the half-light of the iron lamp posts one can nearly discern flashing armor of the Knights. The 600m-long, cobbled street was constructed over an ancient pathway that led in a straight line from the Acropolis of Rhodes to the port. In the early 16th century it became the address for most of the inns of each nation (also known as 'tongues' because of languages that they spoke), which housed Knights who belonged to the Order of St. John. The inns were used as eating clubs and temporary residences for visiting dignitaries, and their facades reflect the various architectural details of their respective countries. Today, of all the inns on the Street of the Knights, only the Inn of France is open to the public. The other inns are now offices or private residences. Strolling along the street there is a lot to admire. Start at the lowest point on the hill, at **Spanish House**, now used by a bank. Right next door you will see the Inn of the **Order of the Tongue of Italy**, constructed in 1519, the **Palace of the Villiers of the Isle of Adam**, dating from 1521 and housing the Archaeological Service of the Dodecanese. Then comes the **Inn of France**, one of the most ornate inns built in 1492, now hosting the French Language Institute. Opposite the inns is one side of the **Hospital of the Knights** (the entrance is on Museum Square), a grand and fascinating structure, now housing the **Archaeological Museum**. Across the street there is the **Museum of Byzantine Art** housed in the 11th century **Church of Our Lady of the Castle** (the Roman-Catholic Cathedral of the Knights), hosting exhibits of Christian Art. Past the Arch that spans the street is the **Inn of the Tongue of Provence** and the **Inn of the Tongue of Spain**, traditionally Gothic with a lovely garden in the back. The culmination is the largest and finest building of the Old town: the **Palace of the Knights**, also known as the **Palace of the Great Masters** (Castello) built at the end of the 7th century by the Byzantines and later converted by the Knights of Rhodes in the 14th century, an imposing and truly incredible fortress with a large courtyard. It was destroyed in a catastrophic accidental explosion in 1856 during the Ottoman rule so what you see before your eyes is a grandiose palace reconstructed in the 1930s to accommodate Mussolini's visits and fantasies, today used primarily as an exhibition centre. Take a walk through its grand halls and chambers with their ancient mosaic floors (stolen from Kos by the Italian military), and antique furniture to feel the atmosphere of the place. From April to October the Palace hosts in its gardens the Municipality of Rhodes light and sound shows (Son et lumière), retelling the Knights' story. The lanes beyond the Knights' Quarter are lined with cafes, restaurants and shops if you care for a break in touring the site of the Old Town. If you walk a couple of blocks south from the Palace of the Great Masters you will reach The **Mosque of Suleiman** and the public baths, the reminders of the years of Turkish presence on the island of Rhodes. Be sure not to miss the mosque with its slender minaret and pink-striped Venetian exterior, erected by Suleiman the Magnificent, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire and rebuilt in the 19th century. If you are interested in the vestiges of Turkish culture and are up for some splashing, scrubbing and

massaging visit the **Municipal Baths**, also called by the locals ‘Turkish baths’ and ‘hamam’ (Turkish word for ‘bath’) that are housed in a 7th century Byzantine structure situated in Plateia Arionos between a large old mosque and the Folk Dance Theatre. The Old Town was also home to the Jewish community whose origins date to the days of the ancient Greeks. In the **Jewish Quarter**, situated in the northeast of Old Town there are still some houses with Hebrew inscriptions, the Jewish cemetery and the **Square of the Jewish Martyrs** (Plateia ton Martiron Evreon) also known as Sea Horse Square because of the sea horse fountain that is



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there. The square commemorates the 1,604 Jews who were rounded up here and sent to their deaths at Auschwitz. There is a lovely Synagogue in Dosiadou street, right off the square, with a tiny museum attached to it. The Synagogue was built in 1575 and is the oldest functioning synagogue in Greece. When already at the Square, don't miss the opportunity to visit the Hospice of St. Catherine built by the Order of the Knights of St. John in the 14th century to host and entertain esteemed guests. You will find inside exceptionally beautiful sea-pebble and mosaic floors, carved and intricately painted wooden ceilings, a grand hall and lavish bedchamber and engaging exhibits. There is a lot to excite the eyes and the imagination so be sure to call in there when already in the area.

When wandering around the Old Town you may also notice the remains of the inner fortifications that during the rule of the Knights Hospitaller separated the area of **Kollakio** (or Kollako), which was occupied by the Order, from the rest of the town, called the **Burgh** or **Hora**. The Kollakio spanned: the Street of Knights, the Palace of the Grand Masters, the churches of the Order, the Hospital and other edifices, while the Burgh included the old market (Sokratous Street) and Turkish bazaar around the Mosque of Suleiman and other sites. The Burgh was the area for the bourgeois and the Greeks as well as other nationalities residing in the Old Town: Jewish, Turkish and others, each living in their own district.

After touring the sights of the Old Town of Rhodes, you might want to walk around the 4km long **walls**, which is also a unique experience. The fortification has a series of magnificent gates and towers and is remarkable as an example of a fully intact medieval structure. Much of the structure can be viewed from just walking around the outside but to walk along the top of the huge walls requires admission fee. Also look for the mid-19th century clock tower, which affords a marvellous panoramic view of the Old Town.