BACKGROUND

Land and Climate
Covering 50,949 square miles (131,957 square kilometers), Greece is just smaller than Alabama. Although it lies farther east than most of Western Europe, Greece is generally considered part of the West because of its heritage and its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). It is situated south of Albania, Bulgaria, and Macedonia. The latter became an independent nation in 1991, but its name has been an issue of contention because Greece’s northern province is also called Macedonia, and Greece feared territorial disputes.

Sparsely populated mountain areas cover much of Greece. The Pindos Mountains run from north to south through the mainland. Mount Olympus is the highest point in the country, at an elevation of 9,570 feet (2,917 meters). Earthquakes are common and sometimes severe. The fertile valleys, plains, and coastal areas are densely populated. Nearly 20 percent of Greece is arable. The country includes an archipelago of more than two thousand islands, the largest of which is Crete. These islands comprise about one-fifth of Greece’s total land area, but only 166 islands are suitable for habitation. A warm, temperate Mediterranean climate prevails in southern Greece, while the north is wet and cool. In general, winters are mild but wet; summers are hot and dry.

History
Although the history of ancient Greece stretches back to 3000 BC, Athens had its beginnings in 1300 BC, and city-states began forming around 1000 BC. From this point, Greek culture began to thrive. The first Olympics were held in 776 BC, and literature, philosophy, and art began to flourish. Ancient Greek civilization reached its peak by 400 BC. During that period, Athens was the center of a vast overseas empire. The country’s rich heritage of government, art, science, and drama played an important role in the establishment of Western civilization.

Philip of Macedonia conquered Greece in 338 BC and was assassinated just two years later. His son, Alexander the Great, led the Greeks to conquer an empire that covered much of what is now the Middle East. After Alexander’s death in 323 BC, the empire declined, and by 146 BC it had become part of the Roman Empire.

Centuries later, along with Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), Greece was the center of the Byzantine Empire, which fell in AD 1453. In 1460, most of Greece became a Turkish province. After four centuries of Turkish rule (the Ottoman Empire), the Greeks began a war of independence, supported by Britain, France, and Russia. In 1832, Prince Otto of Bavaria was selected as king of Greece. In World War II, Greece was occupied by German and Italian forces and lost one-eighth of its population to fighting and starvation. After liberation in 1944, a civil war between the government and communist guerrillas cost another 120,000 lives. The government, with aid from the United States, was victorious in 1949.

In 1965, a political crisis developed between Prime Minister George Papandreou and King Constantine II, which resulted in Papandreou’s dismissal. A group of army colonels staged a coup in 1967, and the royal family fled. From 1967
to 1974, the colonels ruled as a repressive dictatorship. Their fall in 1974 allowed for general elections, through which a republic was established when voters rejected a return to monarchy. In 1981, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK)—led by Andreas Papandreou, the former prime minister’s son—won a majority in Parliament. Papandreou led the country as prime minister until 1989.

In 1990, Constantine Mitsotakis and his New Democracy Party (ND) gained power in the government. Mitsotakis worked to privatize state enterprises, cut government spending, and prepare Greece for greater economic integration within the EU. But the austerity measures he used to accomplish those goals led to voter discontent. So, in the 1993 elections, PASOK regained parliamentary leadership and Andreas Papandreou was returned to office as prime minister. He immediately began to reverse various privatization efforts and other economic policies.

Papandreou resigned as prime minister in 1996 because of poor health; he was replaced by Costas Simitis. Simitis became PASOK’s party leader when Papandreou died later that same year. Soon after, Simitis called for legislative elections. PASOK enjoyed a solid victory, enabling Simitis to remain prime minister and pursue policies to reduce inflation and unemployment, promote private sector investment, curb government spending, and improve Greece's infrastructure. In 2004, after Simitis announced he would not seek reelection, the ND won general elections and was narrowly reelected in 2007. The government has worked on lowering the national deficit, which grew substantially when Greece hosted the 2004 Summer Olympics. Since 2004, public sector employees—including teachers—have repeatedly gone on strike in protest of the government's privatization strategies.

Today, Greece seeks to develop closer ties with its Balkan neighbors, including its traditional foe, Turkey. Signaling a thaw in relations, Greece announced its support of Turkey’s application for EU membership in December 1999. Despite a recent series of negotiations aimed at resolving the problem, disputes over control of the island of Cyprus continue to strain relations with Turkey. Severe financial trouble in 2009 and 2010 has pushed Greece to impose strict spending cuts and to increase taxes, both of which have led to widespread protests and strikes. A multibillion dollar bailout package was recently approved for Greece by the European Union, but concerns remain about Greece’s ability to regain financial stability.

THE PEOPLE

Population
The population of 10.7 million is growing at 0.11 percent annually. About 93 percent of the population is ethnic Greek. Immigrants seeking employment and opportunities are flowing into Greece from neighboring countries. About 400,000 Albanians, 76,000 Turks, and many other groups are now living in Greece. Between 120,000 and 350,000 Roma (or Gypsies) are also in the country, although their presence is not recognized by the government. More than half of Greeks live in urban areas. Athens, the capital and the largest city and industrial center, has a population of more than three million.

Language
Greek is the official language. The language has maintained significant continuity since the days of Homer (ninth–eighth century BC). With its long scholarly tradition, Greek has lent terms to the world’s modern languages, especially in disciplines such as medicine, physics, philosophy, and theology. It has also borrowed numerous terms from Italian, Turkish, and French. Many of Greece’s ethnic minorities speak Turkish and Albanian. English and French are widely understood, and English is a mandatory subject in schools.

Religion
About 98 percent of the Greek people belong to the Eastern (Greek) Orthodox Church, which is the official state religion and is quite powerful. Although freedom of religion is guaranteed in Greece, the state supports the Eastern Orthodox Church through taxes, and other religions are not allowed to proselytize. The Orthodox Church is a Christian church that is independent of the Roman Catholic Church. It is directed by a patriarch in Turkey, an archbishop in Greece, and a religious council called the Holy Synod. The Christian Orthodox patriarch based in Turkey visited Greece in 1999 to improve ties with the Greek Orthodox archbishop. Eastern Orthodox principles are taught in the schools. Religion is an inseparable part of the Greek way of life; however, most people do not attend church regularly, except on holidays or other special occasions. Older people tend to go to church more frequently than young people, and women tend to go more than men.

More than 1 percent of the people (mostly those of Turkish origin) are Muslim; there are also small groups of other Christians and Jews. Jewish communities are located in Thessaloniki and Athens.

General Attitudes
Greeks see themselves as individualistic, brave, and hardworking. While Greece's older generations value family, religion, tradition, and education, the younger generation tends to view status and friends as also very important. Greeks are very proud of their cultural heritage, which they view as being central to Western civilization. They are eager to import trends and technology but may also be wary of outside powers such as the EU or powerful foreign countries.

Greek society traditionally has been dominated by males. Men consider it a matter of personal honor to fulfill obligations to their families and others. A man may praise the food served in his home as especially good or he may be the hero of his own tales. However, in recent generations, women (especially in urban areas) have gained greater prominence and rights. They have leadership roles in business, civil service, and other professions.

Personal Appearance
Greeks generally wear clothing influenced by European fashions. Fashionable clothing is popular among the younger generation and has become essential for working professionals. Rural and older people generally prefer to dress more conservatively. Greek women wear dresses more often
than do North American women. Traditional costumes are worn at folk festivals and on special occasions. Older women in rural areas often wrap scarves around their heads.

**CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES**

**Greetings**

Greeks are often expressive in their greetings. Friends and relatives hug and kiss upon meeting, while others shake hands. Men often slap each other's back or arm at shoulder level instead of shaking hands. People use a variety of verbal greetings; the situation dictates the greeting they choose. One term meaning “Good morning” is *Kaliméra*. “Good evening” is *Kalispéra*. Close friends and family members call each other by first name, but acquaintances and strangers are generally addressed by their title (“Doctor,” “Professor,” “Mrs.,” etc.) followed by the surname. In urban areas, people do not greet strangers they pass on the street. Villagers briefly greet passing strangers in rural areas. When getting on an elevator, one usually nods at the others present and might give a short, general greeting.

**Gestures**

Gestures frequently are used among Greeks of a similar social status; using some gestures with superiors or elders may be improper. To indicate “no,” one tilts the head backward; nodding the head slightly forward means “yes.” Pointing a finger at someone is impolite; it often indicates a threat or contempt. A Greek may smile not only when happy but also sometimes when he or she is angry or upset. People use the hands a great deal in conversation, both to accompany and to replace verbal expressions. A person may release a puff of breath through pursed lips to ward off the jealousy of the “evil eye” after he or she has given or received a compliment. People may also try to ward off the evil eye by repeating a short saying or performing a small ritual and prayer at home.

**Visiting**

Ancient Greeks believed a stranger might be a god in disguise and were therefore kind to all strangers. This tradition of hospitality continues today. In small towns, friends and relatives commonly drop by unannounced. However, in urban areas it is polite to inform friends and family before visiting them. Greeks enjoy inviting friends to their homes for dinner or for special occasions—such as New Year's Day, Christmas and Easter present opportunities for family gatherings. Home visits are most popular during the holiday season; on other nights it is more common for friends to meet at local taverns.

Invited guests usually take a gift to the hosts, including flowers, a bottle of wine, or pastries. All guests, invited or unannounced, are offered refreshments. A cup of coffee is most common, but other drinks, a homemade fruit preserve, or pastries are also popular. If Greek hosts insist several times about anything (that a guest stay longer or eat more, for example), they usually mean it, and guests try to accommodate them so as not to hurt their feelings.

**Eating**

Traditionally, lunch was the main meal of the day and was served in the early afternoon (between noon and 2 p.m.). However, because of changing work schedules, gathering for a meal at midday is no longer possible for many families. Dinner is frequently the main meal and is often eaten as late as 8 or 9 p.m. Leaving the table before everyone has finished eating is considered impolite. Greeks are careful to finish all the food on the plate so as not to insult the cook. Taking second helpings is the best way to show appreciation for the meal and to compliment the hostess. At restaurants, a group will often order many different dishes to share. It is not unusual for guests to enter the restaurant kitchen and choose their dinner by looking into various pots of food. Service is often included in the bill, so tipping is not standard in most restaurants. People may round up the price of the meal and leave the change as a tip, or they may leave a more substantial tip in a formal restaurant.

**LIFESTYLE**

**Family**

The family unit is a high priority in Greece; it is vital that no member bring shame or dishonor to the family. If parents die, the oldest child usually helps younger siblings finish their education and get out on their own. The elderly are respected; they are addressed by courteous titles and served first at meals. Greeks care for their elderly parents at home when possible. If the parents must live in a home for the elderly, their children take care of all arrangements and make frequent visits. Adults traditionally have disciplined their children firmly, but the practice is changing. Parents usually spend a large portion of their income on clothing, feeding, and educating their children. Parents believe it is their duty to provide for a good education, and they will always help their children if they can. Children may live with their parents well into their 30s or until they marry. Some newlywed couples live with their parents or in-laws until they can afford a home of their own. An increasing number of women are pursuing careers outside the home; grandparents may care for their children.

**Housing**

Most urban residents live in multi-storey concrete apartment buildings with balconies on every floor. Most of these buildings were built in the 1960s and 1970s after owners of single-family homes sold them to developers. Urban dwellers commonly own small plots of land and homes in their native villages as well. In rural areas, there are many modest, stone houses. In a lot of Greek homes, the dining room is highly decorated, and oriental rugs are laid over marble, terrazzo, or ceramic tile floors. It is common for Greeks to display collections of icons in the corner of a room. Exterior styles vary according to region. On the Cycladic islands, for example, arched-roof houses are often built into steep slopes.

**Dating and Marriage**

Traditionally, the man asked the woman's parents for permission to marry her. If the parents approved, the two
would date and become better acquainted during a formal engagement. Such formalities are now quite rare, except among rural people. Young people socialize as they do throughout Europe, and it is common for a couple to live together before or instead of marrying. On Sunday afternoons in rural areas, groups often gather in the village square to socialize. The average age for women to marry is 26; men usually marry at age 30. Civil marriage and divorce were only legalized in 1982. Divorce rates remain quite low.

Life Cycle
Traditionally, women and newborn babies have stayed in their homes for 40 days, at which point the baby is blessed in church. Today, few mothers observe the 40-day confinement, but most still bring the babies to church 40 days after the birth. A baby is normally christened, or baptized, between three months and a year old. When a person dies, burial, usually with a church service, tends to happen promptly. In some regions, women sing special funeral songs and conduct ritualized displays of mourning. Throughout most of the country, women wear black clothes and men black armbands for several months. Older widows may wear black for the rest of their lives. Families in mourning often cover the mirrors throughout their houses and attend memorial services three months, six months, and a year after a loved one dies.

Diet
While tastes vary between urban and rural populations, certain foods are common to all Greeks. These include lamb, seafood, olives, and cheese. People also eat potatoes, rice, beans, breads, chicken, fruits, and vegetables. Olive oil is used in cooking. Garlic, onions, and spices are also popular. Salads are often eaten with the main meal. Souvlaki is a shish kebab with cubes of meat (pork or lamb), sometimes served with mushrooms and vegetables. Eggplant, zucchini, stuffed tomatoes, and pasta are all favorites. Bean soup is popular in the winter. For Easter, Greeks enjoy roast lamb and kokoretsi (lamb liver, lungs, and spleen wrapped in intestines and roasted on a spit).

Recreation
Neighborhood coffeehouses are a traditional place of leisure for men. While there, men play backgammon, watch television, and discuss politics. However, people of all ages and both genders may go out for coffee. Rural women are more likely to stay at home with other women to do crafts and converse. Movies (both Greek and foreign) and theater are also popular. Greeks enjoy festivals throughout the year that highlight ancient Greek theater and literature. With an Olympic tradition, the Greeks love sports, especially soccer, basketball, swimming, windsurfing, and sailing. Skiing is also popular; Greece has more than 20 ski resorts. On weekends, city dwellers like to leave the city to visit a family-owned country home, go to the beach, or go skiing or fishing.

The Arts
Greek literature is centuries old but continues to be revered and studied globally. Western literature, drama, and philosophical thought are influenced by Greek traditions. Greek plays are still produced on the ancient stages where they were once performed. Beginning in the latter half of the 20th century, Greek writers, poets, and playwrights began to deal increasingly with contemporary problems and situations. Many Greeks participate in societies devoted to archaeology, history, or folklore. Modern Greek music combines Eastern and Western influences. Young people enjoy popular music from Europe and the United States. Rebetiko is a type of folk music with themes of poverty and suffering. Folk dancing is also common at special events. Traditional arts include embroidery, pottery, weaving, tapestry, and silver jewelry.

Holidays
Almost every city and village has a patron saint who is honored with a yearly festival. Easter is by far the most important holiday, celebrated with special feasts and processions. Greeks celebrate 1 January as St. Basil's Day and as a traditional day to give gifts, although many people now prefer to exchange gifts on Christmas (25 Dec.). For many holidays, a traditional greeting is Chronia polla (May you live for many years). At midnight on New Year's Eve, a special cake (vasilopitta) with a coin in it is cut into various pieces. Whoever gets the coin is supposed to have good luck during the new year. Other holidays include Independence Day (25 Mar.), St. Constantine and Helen Celebration (21 May), Assumption (15 Aug.), and Ochi Day (28 Oct.). Ochi Day commemorates the day in 1940 that Prime Minister Ioannis Metaxas said Ochi (No) to Hitler, and Greece entered into World War II on the side of the Allies. It is considered a heroic decision because of the size of the German and Italian armies.

SOCIETY

Government
Greece is a presidential parliamentary republic. The president (currently Karolos Papoulias) is head of state; his role is largely ceremonial. The prime minister (currently George Papandreou) is head of government. The president appoints the prime minister, but he or she must select the person who is chosen by the party with the most seats in Parliament. The unicameral Parliament (Vouli ton Ellinon, or informally, Vouli) has three hundred members. Elections are held at least every four years. All citizens are eligible and required to vote at age 18. The two main political parties are PASOK and the New Democracy. Smaller parties have legislative representation and sometimes can have a significant impact on political events. The Special Supreme Tribunal is the highest court and adjudicates issues of constitutionality. All judges are appointed by the president for life terms.

Economy
Greece has traditionally been an agrarian nation, but government services have grown significantly, accounting for about 40 percent of the gross domestic product. Agriculture now employs around 12 percent of the labor force, producing wine, wheat, corn, wool, cotton, olives, raisins, and tobacco. The industrial sector has made important advances. Food,
tobacco, textiles, chemicals, metal products, and petroleum comprise some of the country’s major industries. In addition to manufactured goods, exports include food, fuels, and raw materials. Greece has a strong trade partnership with other EU members and is developing ties with eastern European and Black Sea countries. Tourism is key to the economy. The euro replaced the drachma in 2002 as Greece's currency. Strict monetary policy has accelerated economic growth; however, public debt, inflation, and unemployment remain problems. The government faces strong opposition to further austerity measures. Tax evasion and black market deals are widespread, and unemployment is high. Greece responded to the 2008 global financial crisis by guaranteeing all personal bank deposits and developing a US$36 billion rescue package.

Transportation and Communications
Principal highways connect Athens with Thessaloníki and Pátrai. Roads may be poor in mountain areas, making travel to remote villages difficult. Buses and trains are the most common forms of public transportation. Greece has two international airports and many regional airports. In Athens, people commute by car, bus, and motorbike. The government began building the Athens subway in 1992. Construction on new sections of the subway may continue until 2010. Because traffic congestion is so bad in Athens, cars with license plates ending in an even number are allowed to drive in the center of town only on even days of the month (with odd numbers driving on odd-numbered days). There are more than 100 daily newspapers in Greece and at least 30 are published in Athens. The government used to own and administer the telephone, radio, and television systems, but these have largely been privatized.

Education
Education is free and mandatory. It emphasizes moral, intellectual, vocational, and physical instruction. Generally, the curriculum is the same for both public and private schools. Although some kids start kindergarten earlier at age five, all children begin elementary school at age six. Students are required to complete six years of elementary school and three years of gymnasio. Lyceums are available in three- or four-year courses that generally prepare a student for higher education. Universities, technical colleges, and schools of higher education are free to those who achieve enrollment through entrance exams.

Health
All workers are required to have health insurance from either private agents or state-supported healthcare systems, such as the Institute of Social Insurance (IKA). While the IKA provides all citizens with health benefits, it is not as efficient as people would like. Hospitals generally are understaffed and overcrowded. Doctors who work in public hospitals are not allowed to have private patients. A few private clinics do exist, but their services are not covered by state insurance. Many people feel they would obtain better care through a private system. Still, Greeks generally enjoy good health. Lung cancer, claiming around six thousand lives each year,