

Islamic Architecture

by Sophia

WHAT'S COVERED

Civilizations that Islam has touched as well as some Islamic religious beliefs have both had influence on Islamic architecture. This lesson covers:

1. Time Period and Location: Islamic Architecture
2. Basic Features of Islamic Architecture
3. Dome of the Rock
4. Great Mosque, Qayrawan
5. Great Mosque at Córdoba
6. Mosque at Isfahan

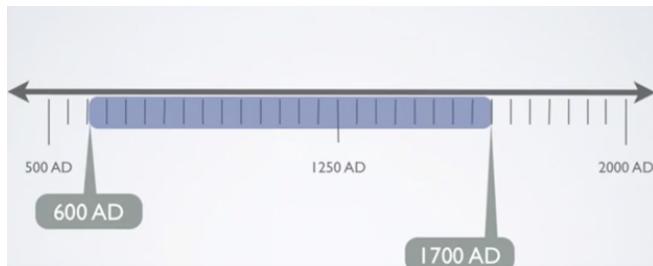
BIG IDEA

The design elements of Islamic architecture are a blend of styles from the civilizations that Islam has touched and reflective of some Islamic religious beliefs.

1. Time Period and Location: Islamic Architecture

This lesson covers architecture ranging from the 7th century CE to the 17th century CE.

The timeline below highlights this period. Notice that 600 CE, the beginning of the 7th century, and 1700 CE, the end of the 17th century, are labeled as end points.



2. Basic Features of Islamic Architecture

The first area of focus for this lesson is the elements found in Islamic buildings, including:

- The minbar
- The mihrab
- The qibla wall
- The hypostyle prayer hall

Styles of architecture vary, but there are some common design features that distinguish Islamic architecture from other styles. The **minbar**, the **mihrab**, and **qibla wall** are common within all **mosques**. One of the most unique elements of Islamic architecture is the use of geometric or vegetal patterns. These are patterns that can be repeated and continued indefinitely in any direction. They can adorn the exterior and interior of buildings and are just as common within smaller works of art.

The dome is a borrowed element from earlier forms of architecture, such as the Christian design of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. **Minarets** are the (usually) thin towers that rise around, or are attached to, Islamic mosques. They are used as places to call people to prayer. The **hypostyle prayer hall** is a space separated by columns for privacy. Finally, the **horseshoe or keyhole arch** is another characteristic element of Islamic architecture, an example of which is shown here:



Horseshoe arch



TERMS TO KNOW

Minbar

In Islam, the pulpit from which the sermon is delivered.

Mihrab

In a mosque, a niche or decorative panel showing the direction of Mecca.

Qibla Wall

Also kiblah; in Islam, the wall that indicates the direction of Mecca and the Kaaba, for prayer.

Mosque

A Muslim temple or place of worship.

Minaret

A tower attached to a mosque and used for calling people to prayer.

Hypostyle Prayer Hall

In a mosque, a personal space separated by columns for privacy.

Horseshoe Arch

Also called a keyhole arch; semicircular and characteristic of Islamic architecture.

3. Dome of the Rock

Within the holy city of Jerusalem, Israel, the Dome of the Rock can be found. This building is a shrine that was constructed by Muslims in the late 7th century after the city had been taken from the Byzantines in 638 CE. The Dome of the Rock shares certain characteristics with Byzantine architecture, which was an influence on the architects of the dome. The octagonal-shaped, centrally planned church, such as Santa Costanza, was just one of these influences.

The Dome of the Rock, of the late 7th century, is pictured below:



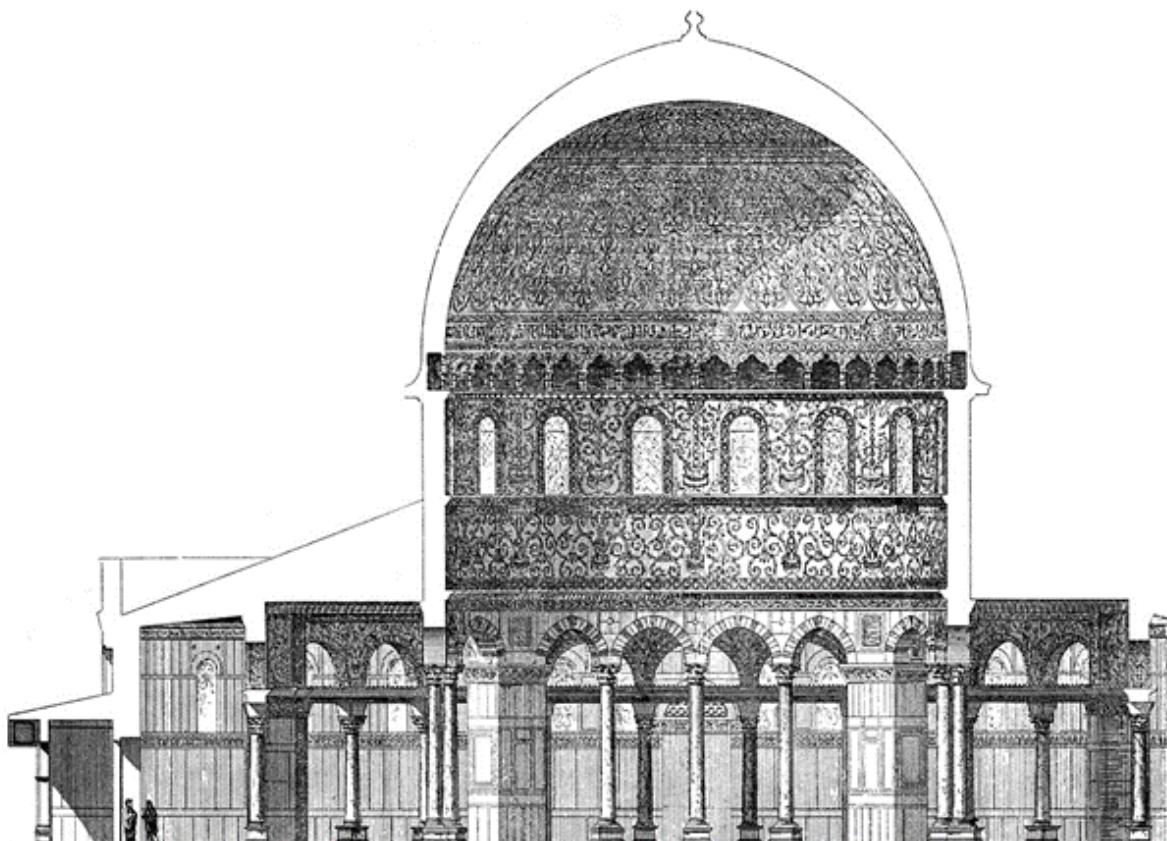
Dome of the Rock shrine

Jerusalem, Israel

Late 7th century

Architecturally, the building is dominated by the huge, golden dome. It is covered in beautiful, colorful, vegetal and geometric patterns, which continue inside. This building is a shrine built over the Foundation Stone, which is the holiest location in all of Judaism. The stone was originally covered by the Jewish Temple of Solomon that once stood in the same spot. For Muslims, this is also the location where Muhammad ascended into heaven. This event, known as the Miraj, occurred when the angel Gabriel took Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem and from there into the heavens, where he met other prophets, like Jesus and Moses.

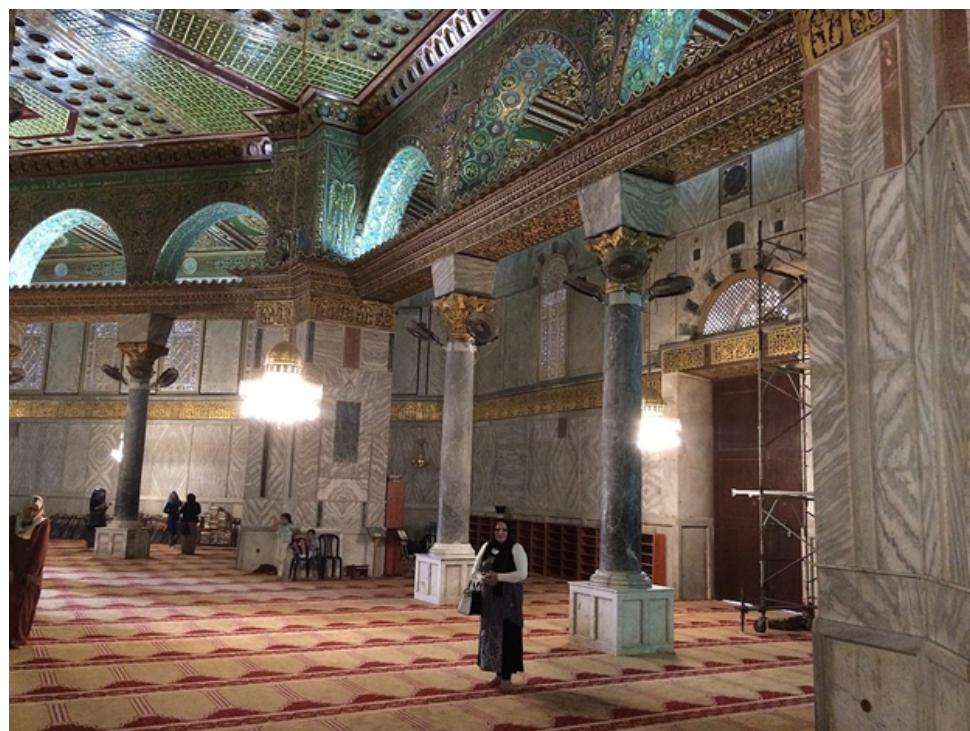
Byzantine architecture like Hagia Sophia inspired the form of the dome. However, it also goes beyond its precedents, with a double shell that extends upward and outward beyond the hemispheric dome. The outer shell is made of wood that has been gilded. In 1994, the countries of Jordan and Saudi Arabia donated gold to add to the dome's exterior. The dome is set on a drum atop an octagonal base, similar to a central-style church.



3. JERUSALEM: DER FELSENDOM.

Frederick Catherwood, cross section of the Dome of the Rock, 1887

The interior space of the dome is full of Byzantine-style mosaics that depict vegetal forms, but no people and animals. The exterior mosaics used to be the same but were replaced by blue and yellow Turkish faience tiles in the 15th century. In the 1960s, replicas of these tiles were used to redecorate the exterior.



Interior of the Dome of the Rock

4. Great Mosque, Qayrawan

The mosque, or masjid in Arabic, is the main form of Muslim architecture and the place where Muslims gather for prayer. Most of the time, the five daily Muslim prayers can take place anywhere; however, at noon on Fridays, Muslim men are required to gather at the mosque for noon prayer. For this reason, many mosques are referred to as Friday, or congregational, mosques. The source of inspiration for the design of the mosque was the home of the Prophet Muhammad, which is often considered the first mosque. It basically consisted of a large, enclosed courtyard. The rooms surrounding the courtyard had columns, influencing the tendency for a mosque to be a hypostyle hall, or a hall filled with many columns.

Mosques can have a lot of stylistic variation from region to region. At the same time, they tend to have the same identifying structures that include the following:

- Courtyard: Essentially, mosques are large, enclosed areas that are capable of holding the entire male population of a given area for Friday prayer.
- Mihrab: In a mosque, a niche or decorative panel showing the direction of Mecca.
- Minaret: A tower attached to a mosque used for calling people to prayer. The style of minarets can vary a great deal, from the tall, thin minarets found at many mosques in Turkey, to the spiraling tower of the mosque at Samarra, in Iraq.
- Minbar: In Islam, the pulpit from which the sermon is delivered.
- Qibla wall: Or kiblah; in Islam, the wall that indicates the direction of Mecca and the Kaaba, for prayer. It is often the most decorated and ornate area of the mosque. The placement of the qibla wall varies depending on the location of Mecca in relation to the mosque's location.
- Qubba: Domes are referred to as qubba in Arabic, and while they are not required as part of mosque architecture, they often hold special significance, suggesting the dome of the heavens.

The Great Mosque at Kairouan in Tunisia was built in the 9th century and is one of the oldest mosques still in existence today. From the outside, it looks like a fortress, and the view from the courtyard suggests that it consists of a pretty basic hypostyle hall, but the interior space tells another story. Here is a view from the exterior. You can see that the outer walls are buttressed, that there are three domes, and that the minaret consists of a tower with three tiers, which resembles ancient Roman lighthouses.



Below is a view of the courtyard. It encloses a vast amount of space, around 9000 square meters. This view also shows the horseshoe arches that puff upward and outward slightly more than a semicircular arch.



Great Mosque at Qayrawan

Qayrawan, Tunisia

836–875 CE

The interior space of this mosque is particularly interesting for its use of spolia. You can see here that most of the columns do not match; they are made from different types of stone and have different heights and capitals. This is because these columns originally came from different sources. The builders devised a clever way to make all of the columns the same height by making the bases irregular. You also have a closeup view of the horseshoe arches and of the use of furnishings in this space—in particular, the prayer rugs that cover the entire floor, and the lamps. In the days before electricity, these lamps would have been lit with oil, filling the interior with flickering light at night.



Interior space of the Great Mosque at Qayrawan, showing the use of Byzantine spolia in the hypostyle hall

Since this is one of the oldest mosques still in existence, it became a prototype both for mosques located in north Africa and for mosques in general.

5. Great Mosque at Córdoba

When people think of Islam, they tend to think of the Middle East, but the Iberian Peninsula, which is home to modern-day Portugal and Spain, has a rich history associated with Islam. For a period of almost 800 years, this region was known as al-Andalus and was under Islamic rule. During this time, the city of Córdoba became a cultural center, both in Spain and the Mediterranean. Christians and Jews lived in Muslim-controlled areas; however, there is some debate regarding whether they had equal rights or were segregated and discriminated against. Areas of Muslim rule made significant achievements in math, literature, architecture, schools, and libraries.

The caliph Abd al Rahman fled to Spain from Syria when almost all of the members of his family were killed. He then ruled the Umayyad Caliphate from Córdoba and ordered a mosque to be built at this location. The mosque was expanded by the rulers that followed, over a period of several hundred years. In 1236, King Ferdinand III conquered Córdoba and ordered that the mosque be converted into a Christian church. By this time, it had fallen into a state of disrepair.

The Great Mosque at Córdoba, shown below, is another fantastic example of a hypostyle prayer hall that makes use of the horseshoe shape in the lower arches. It was completed in the late 10th century. It takes the idea of a hypostyle hall almost as far as it can go. The original space of the mosque used 110 columns that had been salvaged from Roman ruins. They were not quite tall enough to reach all the way to the roof, so they were topped with two rows of red and white striped arches. The first row of arches was shaped like a horseshoe, a shape that became associated with Islamic architecture. The upper rows of arches were semicircular. They appeared to billow upward like sails, making the whole space appear light, instead of weighty and ponderous. The columns resembled a forest that completely obscured the beginning or end of the mosque walls.

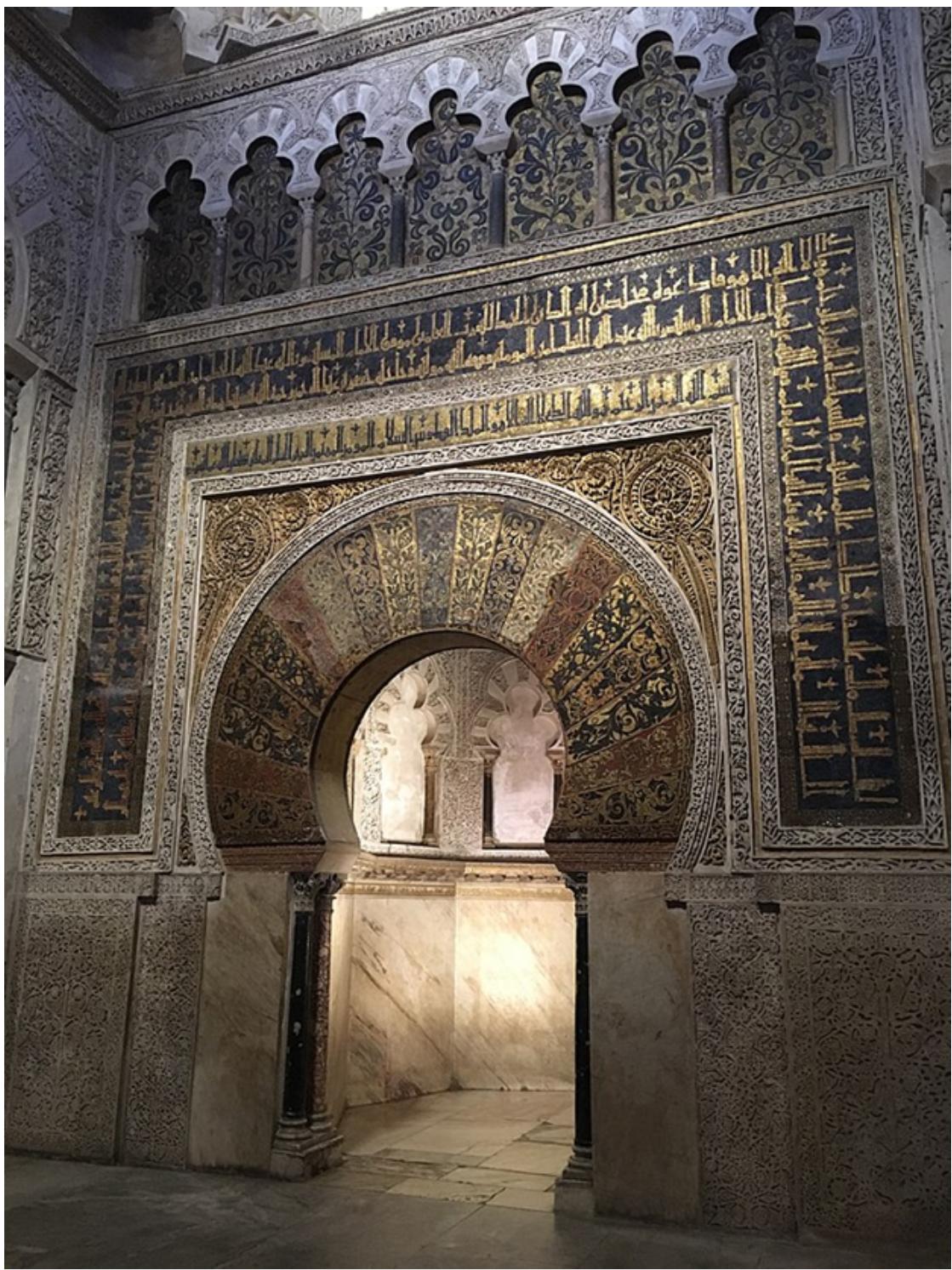


Prayer hall in Great Mosque at Córdoba

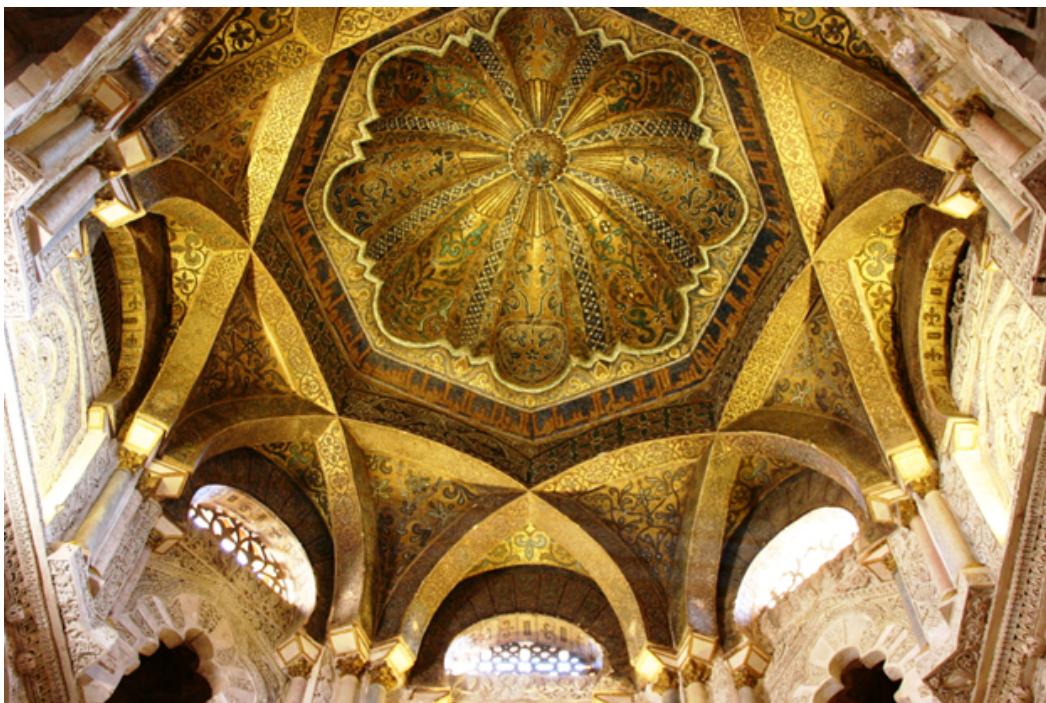
Córdoba, Spain

Late 10th century

The mihrab of the Great Mosque at Córdoba is unusual in that it does not indicate the direction of Mecca but rather is located on the southern wall of the mosque. Instead of a niche, it opens onto a small, octagonal room. It has a horseshoe arch decorated with Byzantine mosaics in gold and other colors. Above the mihrab is a dome, the interior of which is decorated with crisscrossing ribs that create the appearance of pointed arches.



The mihrab of the Great Mosque at Córdoba, c. 960



The dome of the Great Mosque at Córdoba

6. Mosque at Isfahan

Our last example of Islamic architecture is located within the city of Isfahan, Iran, and was constructed over many centuries. Construction on this mosque began in the 8th century, with additions and renovations taking place over a period of more than 1,000 years. The dome was built in 1086–1087 and was the largest masonry dome in the world at the time of its construction.



Mosque at Isfahan

Isfahan, Iran

8th through 20th century CE

One of the main formal innovations of this mosque is the iwan, which is a vaulted space indicated by a pointed arch. There are four iwans at this mosque, pointing to the four cardinal directions. Inside each iwan is muqarnas vaulting, which looks almost like stalactites inside a cave. The entire mosque is covered in beautiful multicolored ceramic

tiles. The dry climate of Iran made it possible to achieve brilliant colors in tiles painted in shades of blue, green, yellow, brown, and white. These are used to full advantage at this mosque. The complexity of vegetal and geometric motifs in mosques evokes the complexity of God's creation. The idea is that these designs can extend infinitely in any direction.





One of the iwans at the Jameh Mosque at Isfahan, showing the muqarnas vaulting underneath



Closeup of tile decoration at the Jameh Mosque at Isfahan

SUMMARY

Islamic architecture has roots in several of the civilizations that Islam has touched as well as in some Islamic religious beliefs. This lesson started with a review of the **time period and location of Islamic architecture**, followed by an explanation of the **basic features of Islamic architecture**. Remember, many of the terms to know were covered in this section.

Continuing on, you looked at elements of architecture such as the minbar, mihrab, qibla, and the hypostyle prayer hall. These elements were explored further using examples of Islamic architecture, including:

- Dome of the Rock
- Great Mosque, Qayrawan
- Great Mosque at Córdoba
- Mosque at Isfahan

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TERMS TO KNOW

Horseshoe Arch

Also called a keyhole arch; semicircular and characteristic of Islamic architecture.

Hypostyle Prayer Hall

In a mosque, a personal space separated by columns for privacy.

Mihrab

In a mosque, a niche or decorative panel showing the direction of Mecca.

Minaret

A tower attached to a mosque and used for calling people to prayer.

Minbar

In Islam, the pulpit from which the sermon is delivered.

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