

Best Islamic Tourist attractions around the world: The top 25 site

By Brian Johnston, Apr 19 2017

<http://www.traveller.com.au/the-islamic-world-and-why-you-should-visit-gvm21g>



Sheikh Zayed mosque is the largest in the United Arab Emirates.

My first encounter with the Islamic world was a corker: Istanbul, that seductive, worn-out city poised between east and west, whose skyline is punctuated with the exclamation marks of elegant minarets. Its Ottoman pleasure palaces glow with stained glass; porcelain-painted tulips erupt in mosque interiors; hubble-bubbles burp and backgammon pieces click in coffeehouses. I was a university student and beyond Europe (or almost) for the first time. I was smitten.

Istanbul is one of the world's great Islamic cities, and even its individual sights could jump-start a love affair. The Topkapi Palace is an Arabian Nights of pavilions, splashing fountains and harem quarters. The Grand Bazaar introduces bazaars with a bang: 65 covered streets, 4000-odd shops, the smell of wool, spices and apple tea. The city also has some of the world's greatest mosques: Sultan Ahmed Blue Mosque in aquarium-like beauty; the gloomy, ancient magnificence of Aya Sofya; Suleymaniye Mosque, whose mausoleum to sultan Suleyman the Magnificent has a fabulous dome studded with glittering diamonds.

Since that first supersized, fantastical foray into the Islamic world, I've travelled to many Muslim countries, among them places that rarely get good press in the Western media, such as Iran, Lebanon and pre-war Syria. None has disappointed. The Islamic leitmotifs that wowed me in Istanbul were repeated again and again: glorious mosques and palaces, wander-worthy bazaars, the sonorous beauty of sunset calls to prayer, eateries tempting with skewered lamb or honey-oozing pastries. Most of all, I encountered a spontaneous friendliness and hospitality to strangers that is virtually defunct in the Western world.



The famous Grand Mosque or Sheikh Zayed Mosque is a highlight of Abu Dhabi, UAE. *Photo: iStock*

It's puzzling, therefore, that so many travellers write off the entire Islamic world as a no-go zone of hostile inhabitants and uncertain politics. To do so is to ignore a fifth of the world's population and about 50 Muslim-majority countries. (Other nations such as China, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, Philippines and Russia have Muslim minorities numbered in millions.) Nor is Islam confined to the Middle East and North Africa. In fact, more than 60 per cent of Muslims hail from our Asia-Pacific region. Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population.

You can hardly overlook Islamic history either. Powerful dynasties such as Fatimids, Seljuks, Mughals and Ottomans profoundly influenced world affairs, and during the medieval golden age the Islamic world was an intellectual centre of science and medicine, architecture, philosophy, literature and education. Islamic scholars assimilated knowledge from China, India, Persia and ancient Greece and Rome, transmitting much of it to Europe. The Islamic world has always had myriad religious practices, cultures and languages. That makes it a diverting and diverse place to explore. Here is just a taster of its highlights.

IMAM SQUARE, ESFAHAN, IRAN

WHAT: One of the world's largest public squares, laid out in the early 17th century when Esfahan rivalled Constantinople as a centre for trade and theology. It's surrounded by perhaps the greatest Islamic architectural ensemble anywhere.

WHY VISIT: Imam Mosque is a stunning creation in blue and yellow patterned tiles. Compact Sheikh Lotfallah Mosque has a quiet intimacy and is exquisite. Other remarkable buildings are Ali Qapu Palace and labyrinthine, covered Bazaar-e Bozorg. The square is a sociable evening hub for carriage rides and ice-creams.

CAGALOGLU HAMAM, ISTANBUL, TURKEY

WHAT: Turkish hamams were once ubiquitous, sociable neighbourhood bathhouses centred on a domed, octagonal steam room. Today many cater to tourists. Patrons are massaged and vigorously exfoliated with a coarse mitten that sets the skin tingling.

WHY VISIT: Built in 1741, this hamam was designed by the Ottoman court architect and is one of Istanbul's largest. It incorporates baroque European influences not often seen in Ottoman architecture, and features splashing fountains and light-filtering domes.

NEED TO KNOW: Men and women use separate halves. Men wear a loincloth, women underwear. BYO soap and towel for self-service visits, and stay as long as you like.

MUSLIM QUARTER, XIAN, CHINA

WHAT: Several old-town blocks centred along Beiyuanmen Street, home to some of Xian's 70,000 Hui, a Muslim ethnic minority. Islam arrived along the Silk Road, and the Hui are among the world's oldest Muslim communities.

WHY VISIT: This is a delightful neighbourhood on a more human scale than the rest of the city, thanks to wandering alleys and jammed bazaars. Its Grand Mosque, founded in AD742 (current architecture dates to the 18th century) is striking for its disconcerting Chinese architecture.

NEED TO KNOW: The Muslim Quarter is popular for street food and restaurants, many dishing up skewered meats (but no pork), mutton and beef soups, and endless varieties of noodles.

JANTAR MANTAR, JAIPUR, INDIA

WHAT: The most impressive of five 1730s astronomical observatories built across northern India by maharaja and scholar Jai Singh II, who brought an Islamic scientific sensibility to the Hindu study of astrology. In its day, it was world famous.

WHY VISIT: Instruments determine the latitude and longitude of the sun, the planet's positions in relation to Earth, and the time to within two seconds. Beautiful sundials banded with white marble look like contemporary sculptures.

NEED TO KNOW: Structures are still used by Hindu astrologers to plot auspicious dates for weddings and journeys. Displays in the palace museum showcase hand-held astronomical devices.

ALHAMBRA, GRANADA, SPAIN

WHAT: The greatest monument of Islamic Spain, this sprawling crag-topping palace and garden complex was begun in the 9th century and extended by Spain's monarchs for a millennium. The last Moorish ruler departed in 1492.

WHY VISIT: The Alhambra's medieval courtyards, reflected in pools, are the apogee of Islamic architecture. The Generalife summer palace is surrounded by glorious Islamic water gardens. Everywhere, views are splendid.

NEED TO KNOW: Granada isn't all about the Alhambra. The medieval Moorish Albaicin quarter is a huddle of cubist white buildings. Palacia de la Madraza (lamadraza.ugr.es) has sumptuous Islamic decoration.

ESSENTIALS: Visitor numbers are restricted by timed tickets which must be bought in advance.

ARAB STREET, SINGAPORE

WHAT: Designated a Muslim quarter from the colonial Singapore's early days, Arab Street is really an entire quarter whose other street names (Muscat, Ophir and Haji) reflect Muslim trading influences. It centres around Sultan Mosque (sultanmosque.sg), designed by an Irishman in British-Mughal style.

WHY VISIT: This remains one of Singapore's most atmospheric ethnic enclaves, with Middle Eastern restaurants and shops hawking Persian carpets and prayer rugs, leather and batik, sandalwood perfumes and marzipan-stuffed dates. The area's newfound hipster renewal provides chic boutiques and cafe hangouts.

NEED TO KNOW: During Ramadan, streets come alive after dark as vendors sell cakes, barbecued chicken and Indian food.

ESSENTIALS: Friday evenings after main prayers are lively. See yoursingapore.com

ARAB WORLD INSTITUTE, PARIS, FRANCE

WHAT: A Paris organisation jointly founded by France and 18 Arab countries to promote Arab culture and ideas to native Parisians and immigrants.

WHY VISIT: The museum traces Arab history and culture and runs changing exhibitions on everything from contemporary Arab art to African Islamic treasures. Arabic movie screenings and performances might include Syrian jazz players, Egyptian rock bands and Lebanese dance troupes.

NEED TO KNOW: Rooftop Le Zyriab restaurant has stunning views across the river to Notre Dame. If you speak French or Arabic, the institute hosts literary discussions, poetry recitals and current-affairs debates.

ESSENTIALS: Open daily. Weekend guided tours and family workshops in English or Arabic on request.

AGA KHAN PARK, TORONTO, CANADA

WHAT: A gift to Canada by billionaire philanthropist Aga Khan IV, hereditary leader of 25 million Ismaili Muslims. The cultural hub consists of a park based on traditional Moghul and Persian landscaping, the Ismaili Centre and Aga Khan Museum, all in striking contemporary style that updates traditional Islamic design.

WHY VISIT: The museum presents Indian miniatures, illuminated Korans, hand-woven rugs, stunning Persian ceramics and rare early manuscripts, including a page from the renowned 9th-century Blue Koran.

NEED TO KNOW: The museum hosts educational sessions, movie screenings and music programs highlighting the traditional and contemporary music of the Islamic world and Asia.

AUSTRALIAN MUSLIMS ON ISLAMIC WORLD MUST-SEES

WALEED ALY: OMAN

"Oman is a scandalously ignored gem. It's stunning: titanic desert cliffs meet the sea, freshwater wadis that look like something from a film set, the desert is serene yet forbidding, and strikingly clear water teems with dolphins. It has a wonderful, organic culture, something you don't always get in the Gulf. Oman is also home to something very rare in the Muslim world: an Islamic denomination that's neither Sunni nor Shia but of the Ibadi school, so it remained relatively isolated from the rest of the Muslim world, leaving it to develop a unique culture."

Waleed Aly: is a journalist, author, host of Network Ten's *The Project* and Monash University lecturer in politics.

TASNEEM CHOPRA: ZANZIBAR, TANZANIA

"My father was my family's fourth generation born in Zanzibar, a semi-autonomous island group off Tanzania. When I visited in 2012 I found it incredibly beautiful. Stone Town's heritage is especially interesting as you zigzag through narrow, cobbled and car-free streets, passing imposing wooden doors whose carvings indicate whether their former owners were merchants, bankers or slave owners. Zanzibar has a subtle and confronting colonial legacy and fusion of indigenous, Omani-Arab and Indian culture – my family originated in northern India – and so is unique in presenting a blend of Africa, Asia and the Middle East."

Tasneem Chopra: is a Melbourne-based cross-cultural consultant, author, activist and chair of the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights.

TAHMINA RASHID: LAHORE, PAKISTAN

"Lahore is a cultural hub, centre for Sufi Islam and one of Pakistan's oldest cities. Its shrines to Sufi saints are testament to the tolerant religious practices that flourished before more conservative practices became influential. Many locals believe that a visit to the Mausoleum of Daata Gunj Baksh, in particular, brings good material luck and spiritual rejuvenation. I like that it's both a spiritual place and a centre of community life. Lahore's notorious red light district is nearby, part of the paradoxes of the city's cultural coexistence over the centuries."

Tahmina Rashid is Associate Professor of International Studies at the University of Canberra, and an expert in foreign policy and global politics.