

EXPLORE

Wahyuni Kamah discovers the architectural birthplace of modern Islam in Central Asia



My Spiritual Tour of Iran's Grand Mosque

Iran's Masjid-e-Jameh Isfahan, dates back to the eighth century.
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Wahyuni Kamah

It was my last day in Isfahan, the capital of the eponymous province in Iran and the third-largest city in the country. I had only a few hours left in the city and I didn't want to miss the Masjid-e-Jameh Isfahan, the main mosque.

"What's the architecture of the Masjid-e Jame like?" I asked my local friend Shirin.

"It's a mix of different architectures of Iran," she said.

"Oh, take me there please," I blurted out.

We arrived in the historic center of Isfahan, where the Grand Bazaar is located.

"This way, please," Shirin directed me. We entered into a typical Persian bazaar, an arched passageway with shops on either side. It was crowded. As we shuffled our way through the crowd, I wondered where the Masjid-e-Jameh was.

When we got to the end of passageway, I held my breath: We were entering the mosque complex.

The gate to the complex is decorated with a beautiful floral design and calligraphy, some of which was being restored on the day we visited.

In the corridor, we examined the map of the mosque then continued inside. We passed a beautiful, artistic mihrab, or niche, from the Ilkhanid Dynasty, a branch of the Mongol Dynasty that reigned in Persia from 1256 to 1353.

When we emerged into the mosque's courtyard, I was speechless. It was unbelievable that the busy bazaar passageway had led us into this vast complex. I looked around. The complex was huge and the four vaulted open rooms, or ayvan, on the four sides look so gigantic and stunning. It was clear why the Masjid-e-Jameh, one of the oldest mosques in Iran, was the most remarkable and important mosque in Isfahan.

Oldest mosque

The mosque was founded by the Taym Arabs in the eighth century and gradually built up as the city expanded, making it possibly the only mosque in the world that had continuously undergone renovations, reconstruction, additions and alterations for 12 centuries.

As Persia was conquered by different empires at different times, including the Abbasid, Buyid, Seljuq, Ilkhanid, Muzaffarid, Timurid and Safavid empires, these rulers and patrons left their imprints on the mosque. This makes Masjid-e-Jameh Isfahan architecturally rich and historically diverse and matchless.

It is the first example of Islamic archi-

“**Masjid-e-Jameh Isfahan became the prototype for architecture [and] layout... for other mosques**”

itecture that modified the four-ayvan courtyard plan of Sassanid palaces into religious architecture. During the Seljuq era the mosque was radically altered from an archaic Arab form of a mosque plan with four open rooms and courtyards. New engineering skills were also applied when the first double-shell ribbed dome was constructed.

Masjid-e-Jameh Isfahan became the prototype for architecture, layout and dome construction for other mosques in Central Asia. And despite all the alterations and reconstruction, the material, design and location of the mosque are authentic.

It is also one of the largest mosques in Iran, covering nearly 17,000 square meters. In the middle is a 2,500-square-meter rectangular courtyard, with a fountain at its very center for worshipers to carry out their ablutions.

Architectural wonders

It took me one and a half hours to explore this enormous complex, which wasn't nearly enough time. I first went to southern ayvan, which has a lovely facade.

The ayvan demonstrates the connection between the courtyard and the sanctuary. It features two flanking 35-meter minarets that were added during the

Safavid Dynasty (1501-1736).

The calligraphy, geometric designs and the decorative floral tilework on the wall are really magnificent. I was so stunned that I kept gazing the whole ayvan again and again. I was astounded by the designs that showed the excellent traditional craftsmanship from the Seljuq to the Safavid eras.

The South Dome was built during the Seljuq Dynasty (1037-1194) by Nelaym-al-Molk, while the North Dome was built by Taj-al-Molk. The northern ayvan has amazing ornaments different from other parts of the mosque, with the splendid stucco work hailing from the Safavid era.

Behind this ayvan is a hypostyle hall that gives a cooler effect. One of the entrances to the mosque is located on this side. There is a corner in northeast that probably used to be a theological college.

The western ayvan is possibly one of the remnants of the original mosque's design and holds the muqarnas, a type of corbel used as a decoration in traditional Islamic and Persian architecture. On the side wall, there are picturesque mirrored kufic panels.

I crossed the courtyard to the eastern ayvan. It has more complex muqarnas that have been added and restored during the Ilkhanid and Safavid eras.

Some parts of the mosque was destroyed during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, but have since been restored. In 2012, UNESCO declared the Masjid-e-Jameh Isfahan a World Heritage Site. Its location at the end of a busy bazaar is characteristic of other mosques I visited in Iran, reflecting the movement of the people between the hard work of the bazaar and spiritual life in the mosque.

I visited the mosque close to prayer time at noon. Men and women began streaming in, and the muezzin struck up his plaintive and melodious call to prayer. It was thrilling and sentimental at the same time.

I cried for the mystical and spiritual sensation, amid the beautiful architecture while hearing the musical azan.

