

The Great Mosque of Cordoba



Great Mosque of Cordoba from the Air, photo: [Ulamm](#), (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Known locally as Mezquita-Catedral, the Great **Mosque** of Cordoba is one of the oldest structures still standing from the time **Muslims ruled** Al-Andalus (Muslim Iberia including most of Spain, Portugal, and a small section of Southern France) in the late 8th century. Cordoba is a two hour train ride south of Madrid, and draws visitors from all over the world.

Temple/Church/Mosque/Church

The **buildings** on this site are as complex as the extraordinarily rich history they illustrate. Historians **believe** that there had first been a **temple** to the Roman **god**, Janus, on this site. The temple was converted into a **church** by invading Visigoths who **seized** Cordoba in 572. Next, the church was converted into a mosque and then completely rebuilt by the descendants of the exiled Umayyads—the

first Islamic dynasty who had originally ruled from their capital Damascus (in present-day Syria) from 661 until 750.

A New Capital

Following the **overthrow** of his family (the Umayyads) in Damascus by the incoming Abbasids, Prince Abd al-Rahman I **escaped** to southern Spain. Once there, he **established control over almost** all of the Iberian Peninsula and attempted to recreate the grandeur of Damascus in his new capital, Cordoba. He **sponsored** elaborate building programs, promoted agriculture, and even imported fruit trees and other plants from his former home. Orange trees still stand in the **courtyard** of the Mosque of Cordoba, a beautiful, if bittersweet **reminder** of the Umayyad **exile**.



Hypostyle Hall, Great Mosque at Cordoba, Spain, begun 786 and enlarged during the 9th and 10th centuries

The Hypostyle Hall

The building itself was expanded over two hundred years. It is comprised of a large hypostyle **prayer hall** (hypostyle means, filled with columns), a courtyard with a **fountain** in the middle, an orange

grove, a covered walkway circling the courtyard, and a **minaret** (a **tower** used to call the faithful to **prayer**) that is now encased in a **squared**, tapered **bell tower**. The expansive prayer hall seems magnified by its repeated geometry. It is built with recycled ancient Roman columns from which sprout a striking combination of two-tiered, symmetrical **arches**, formed of **stone** and red **brick**.



Mihrab, Great Mosque at Cordoba, photo: jamesdale10 (CC BY 2.0)

The Mihrab

The focal point in the prayer hall is the famous horseshoe arched mihrab or prayer niche. A mihrab is used in a mosque to identify the **wall** that faces Mecca—the birth place of Islam in what is now Saudi Arabia. This is practical as Muslims face toward Mecca during their daily prayers. The mihrab in the Great Mosque of Cordoba is framed by an exquisitely **decorated** arch behind which is an unusually large space, the size of a small room. Gold tesserae (small pieces of **glass** with **gold** and color backing) create a dazzling combination of dark

blues, reddish browns, yellows and golds that form intricate calligraphic bands and vegetal motifs that adorn the arch.

The Horseshoe Arch

The horseshoe-style arch was common in the architecture of the Visigoths, the people that ruled this area after the Roman empire collapsed and before the Umayyads arrived. The horseshoe arch eventually **spread** across North Africa from Morocco to Egypt and is an easily identified characteristic of Western Islamic architecture (though there are some early examples in the East as well).

The Dome



Mihrab dome, Great Mosque at Cordoba, photo: [bongo vongo](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Above the mihrab, is an equally **dazzling dome**. It is built of crisscrossing ribs that create pointed arches all lavishly **covered with gold mosaic** in a radial pattern. This **astonishing** building technique anticipates later Gothic rib **vaulting**, though on a more modest scale.

The Great Mosque of Cordoba is a prime example of the Muslim world's ability to brilliantly develop architectural styles based on pre-

existing regional traditions. Here is an extraordinary combination of the familiar and the innovative, a formal stylistic vocabulary that can be **recognized** as “Islamic” even today.

(Text by Shadie Mirmobiny)

VOCABULARY

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Known as...: conocido como... • Mosque: mezquita. • Muslim: musulmán. • Rule: gobernar. • Building: edificio. • Temple: templo. • God: dios. • Church: iglesia. • Courtyard: patio. • Prayer hall: sala de oración. • Fountain: fuente. • Grove: arboleda. • Minaret: minarete. • Bell tower: campanario. • Arch: arco. • Wall: muro, pared. • Dome: cúpula. • Mosaic: mosaico. • Recognize: reconocer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believe: creer. • Overthrow: derrocar. • Escape: escapar. • Establish control over: establecer control sobre... • Almost: casi. • Sponsor: patrocinador. • Reminder: recordatorio. • Exile: exilio. • Decorated: decorado. • Stone: piedra. • Brick: ladrillo. • Glass: cristal; vaso. • Gold: oro. • Spread: extender. • Dazzling: deslumbrante. • Cover with...: cubrir con... • Astonishing: asombroso. • Vaulting: bóveda.
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READING

Read the text above and look for the following information:

A/ Are the following statements true or false? Explain why:

- The building has always been a mosque. **T/F** _____
- The Abbasids ruled Cordoba after the Umayyads were overthrown by them. **T/F** _____
- The original minaret has been turned into a bell tower by the christians. **T/F** _____
- The columns have got Roman elements. **T/F** _____
- You can see horse-shoe style arch in Visigoths architecture. **T/F** _____

B/ Answer and explain:

- How did Cordoba become the new capital after Damascus?
- What is a hypostyle hall?
- What is a minaret and where can you see it in the mosque?
- What is a Mihrab? What makes the Mihrab special in the mosque?
- Where is the Dome and what is it made of?