

Spain Revealed

Córdoba's

Mezquita



Introduction

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Travel guidebooks for the ultra curious, Approach Guides reveal a destination's essence by exploring a compelling aspect of its cultural heritage: art, architecture, history, food, or wine.

The Mezquita — the great mosque built from 785-988 by the Umayyads in the city of Córdoba — stands as one of the earliest and greatest monuments of Islamic Spain, or Al-Andalus. Still remarkably well preserved, the mosque's art and architecture tells the story of early Al-Andalus: how the Umayyads, the Arabs who first rose to power, legitimized their regime and established the ruler as the rightful heir to leadership of the Islamic world from their new western outpost. Even after the Umayyads had fallen, the Mezquita survived to shape the consciousness of subsequent Islamic empires for another 700 years. It is yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **A mosque in six stages.** The Mezquita was built in six stages, the final stage of which involved its conversion to a Christian cathedral. We trace this evolution stage by stage, so you can appreciate how the layout and appearance of the mosque changed over time.
- **Comprehensive look at the Mezquita's art and architecture.** We examine the defining characteristics of the Spanish Umayyad style, isolating key features and concepts that you will see again and again as you make your way through the Mezquita. Along the way, we consider the contribution of Middle Eastern prototypes.
- **A tour that goes deeper on the most important sites.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we provide a unique, detailed tour of the Mezquita. The tour walks you through the highlights, aided by high-resolution images and a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook offers logistical advice and provides links to online resources. Plus, we provide our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are mocked up with text that explains important features.

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We hope that this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Spain's Islamic art and architec-

ture and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

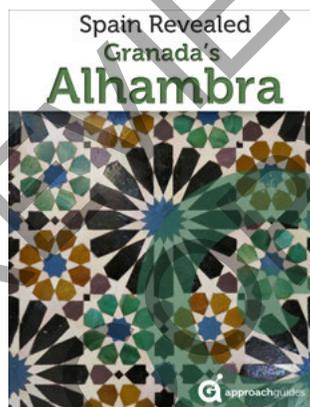
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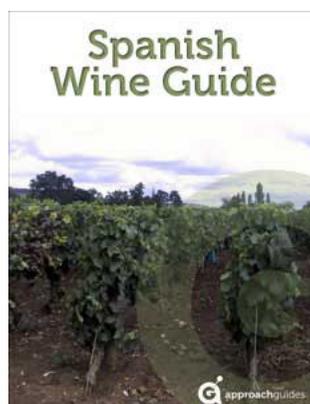
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Spain Revealed: Córdoba's Mezquita

Version 1.1

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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Contents

Introduction

Watch Before You Go

UNDERSTANDING THE MOSQUE

Meet the Builders: The Umayyads

Mosque as a Symbol

 Early Umayyad Islamic Influences

 Visigothic Christian Influences

Evolution of the Layout

 Stage 1 (785-786)

 Stage 2 (832-848)

 Stage 3 (951-958)

 Stage 4 (961-965)

 Stage 5 (987-988)

 Stage 6 (1523-1607)

VISITING THE MOSQUE

Tour Itinerary

1. Patio de los Naranjos

 1a. Belltower-Minaret

 1b. Garden

 1c. Entrance to Prayer Hall

2. The Oldest Portion

 2a. Ceiling

 2b. Arcades

 2c. Saint Vincent Remains

3. Spiritual Center

 3a. Entrance to Center Aisle

3b. Maqsura Arcade

3c. Maqsura Domes

3d. Mihrab

4. The Last Extension

5. Cathedral

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Al-Andalus: The History of Islamic Spain

Spanish Umayyad Dynasty Timeline

Islam and the Mosque

Going to Granada?

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Free Updates and Enhancements

More from Approach Guides

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**“You have built here what might have been built anywhere else,
but you have destroyed what was unique in the world.”**

—

Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor,
upon seeing the completed 16th century Christian cathedral
built into the center of Córdoba’s Mezquita.
The cathedral’s construction required the destruction of parts of the earlier mosque.

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Watch Before You Go

Watch the Mezquita episodes of Insights, an online travel show from the creators of Approach Guides. To see all episodes in the series, visit [approachguides.com/video](https://www.approachguides.com/video) or subscribe to our [YouTube channel](#).

The Forest of Columns

Take a [virtual walk through the Mezquita's mesmerizing arcades](#), its trademark architectural feature.



Fig. 1. [Video](#), a virtual walk through the forest of columns.

A Walk to the Mihrab

Take a [virtual walk down the mosque's center aisle to the mihrab](#), its decorative highlight



Fig. 2. Video, a virtual walk down the center aisle to the mihrab.

UNDERSTANDING THE MOSQUE

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Fig. 3. Islamic held territories under the Umayyads.

Córdoba as Capital

From the very start, the Umayyads knew that Córdoba would serve as the capital of their vast empire (Fig. 3). A Phoenician foundation, Córdoba was the former capital of the Roman provinces of Hispania Ulterior (197-27 BCE) and Hispania Baetica (27 BCE-476 CE). As it had been by previous settlers, the city was selected by the Umayyads as its capital for its strategic position on the northern bank of the Guadalquivir river.

Mosque as a Symbol

As with all empires, the Spanish Umayyads sought to legitimize their reign and expand their power. However, these natural inclinations were afforded particular poignancy given their unique history: the rulers of Umayyad Spain were **Arabs who had been displaced from their homeland in Damascus**. They were **nostalgic exiles**, descendants of a historically great, yet now overthrown and extinct, empire in the Middle East. Spain was a new frontier, a place to regain what had been lost.

Legitimacy and Power

The Mezquita, the city's centerpiece, was the primary vehicle through which the Spanish Umayyads communicated their public message. It became a symbol of great significance, identifying who they were and what they wanted to become.

Symbol of legitimacy

Spanish Umayyad rulers wanted the mosque in Córdoba to conjure associations with the distinguished history of the Umayyad caliphate in Damascus, particularly in the wake of proclaiming their own independent caliphate. This revitalized connection offered legitimacy and a mandate to rule as restorers of divine order, an order that had been upset by the Abbasids' overthrow of their ancestors.

Symbol of power

The mosque was further designed to communicate that the Umayyad empire had risen from the ashes of Damascus and been reborn as a powerhouse in its new western home. This projection of strength was aimed at two audiences:

- **Islamic rivals on the world stage.** The Umayyads had two primary Islamic rivals: (a) the usurpers, the Abbasids, who had overthrown the Umayyads in Damascus; and (b) the heretics, the Shiite Fatimids, who had established a caliphate in Cairo that advanced a competing sect of Islam.
- **The indigenous Christian community of Spain.** While it represented less of a threat to the Umayyads than it would to subsequent regimes in Spain, the Christian community was the group from whom the Umayyads had won their new empire. They Umayyads sought to establish that they were in Spain to stay and project such formidable strength that the Christians would not challenge their leadership.

Borrowing to Convey the Message

To establish the Mezquita as such a symbol, the Umayyad leadership incorporated artistic and

architectural features from two principal types of religious monuments: (a) early Umayyad Islamic mosques and (b) Visigothic Christian churches. We explore both in the sections that follow.

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Early Umayyad Islamic Influences

By borrowing distinctive artistic and architectural features from world-famous Umayyad religious structures, the Spanish Umayyads used the Mezquita to evoke memories of exile and establish a connection with their Damascus legacy.

Author Tip: *In our review of the Mezquita's influences that follows, we use some mosque-specific architectural terminology. While we make every effort to make such terms clear in context, we also provide a quick review of Islamic architecture at the end of this guidebook in the section entitled "Islam and the Mosque."*

Two Reference Points

Two structures built by the earlier Damascus-based Umayyads exerted particularly strong influence on the Mezquita: the Great Mosque of Damascus and the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.

Primary Prototype: Great Mosque of Damascus

Background

The sixth Umayyad caliph, Al-Walid I (ruled 705–715), commissioned the construction of the mosque on the site of a former Byzantine cathedral in 706. Prior to this, the cathedral was still in use by the local Christians, but a prayer room (*musalla*) for Muslims had been constructed on the southeastern part of the building. Al-Walid, who personally supervised the project, had most of the cathedral, including the *musalla*, demolished. The mosque was completed in 715, shortly after Al-Walid's death, by his successor, Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik (ruled 715–717).

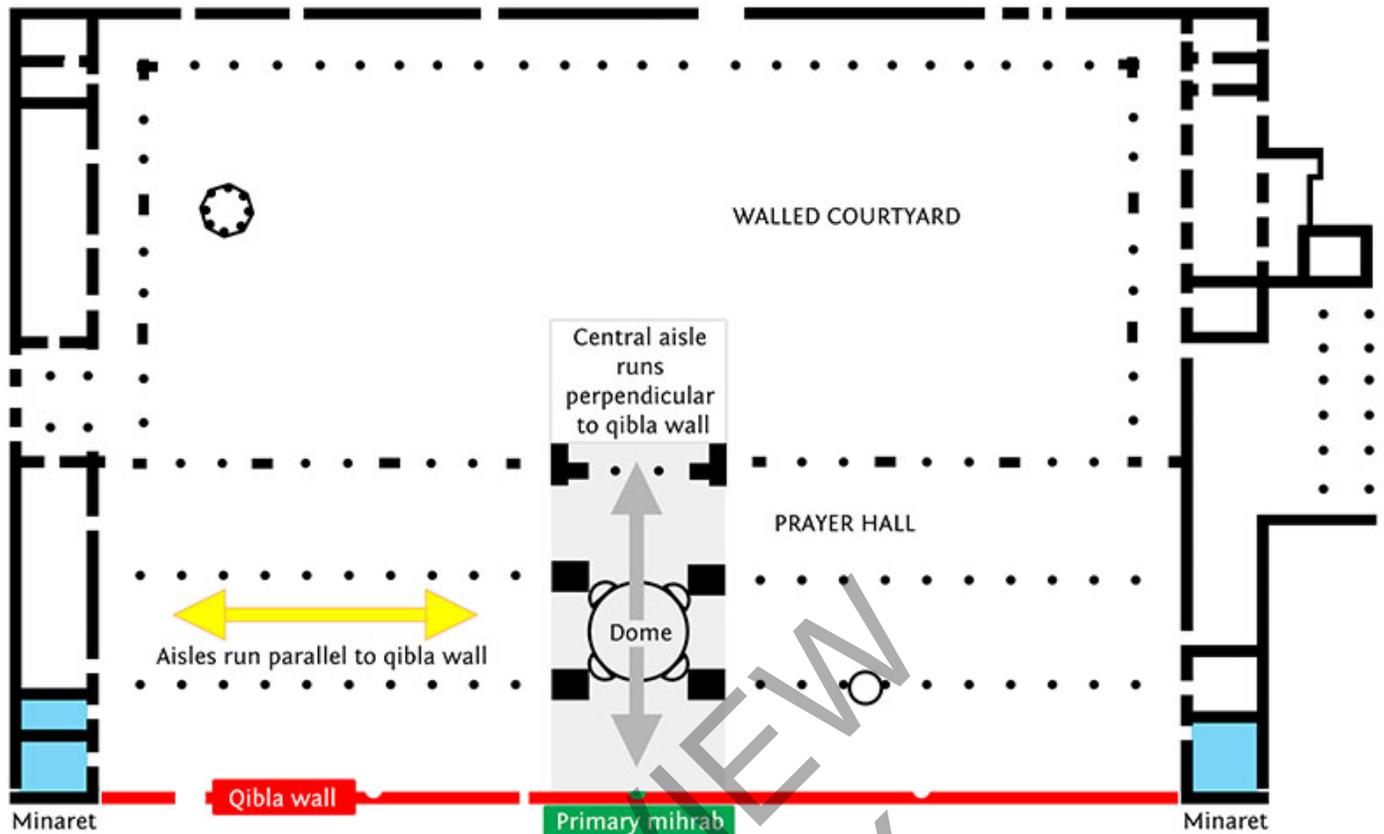


Fig. 4. Layout, Great Mosque of Damascus. Distinctive features carry highlights.

Distinctive features

The Great Mosque of Damascus exhibits a number of distinctive features, **nearly all of which are replicated in Córdoba's Mezquita.**

- **Courtyard style design.** The design consists of a **walled courtyard** on the north side that opens onto a **hypostyle prayer hall** to the south (Fig. 4). The Mezquita adopts this arrangement.
- **Square minaret tower.** Two tower-style square minarets (blue highlights in Fig. 4) mark the ends of the qibla wall, which faces Mecca and determines the direction of prayer. The Mezquita similarly has a square tower-style minaret.
- **Aisles run parallel to qibla wall.** The mosque's three aisles run east-west, parallel to the qibla wall (yellow highlights in Fig. 4), revealing the mosque's origins. In Syria, Christian churches — longitudinal structures with aisles that ran east-west — were converted to mosques by blocking up the west entrance door, breaking through the north wall to create a new entrance, and converting the south wall to the qibla; since Mecca was 164 degrees from true north in Damascus, this worked rather well. This appears to have been what occurred at the Great Mosque, as it would explain the east-west orientation of the aisles as a legacy of the earlier Byzantine church.
- **Central aisle runs perpendicular to the qibla.** The central aisle, however, runs north-south, perpendicular to the qibla wall (grey highlights in Fig. 4), leading directly to the pri-

Evolution of the Layout

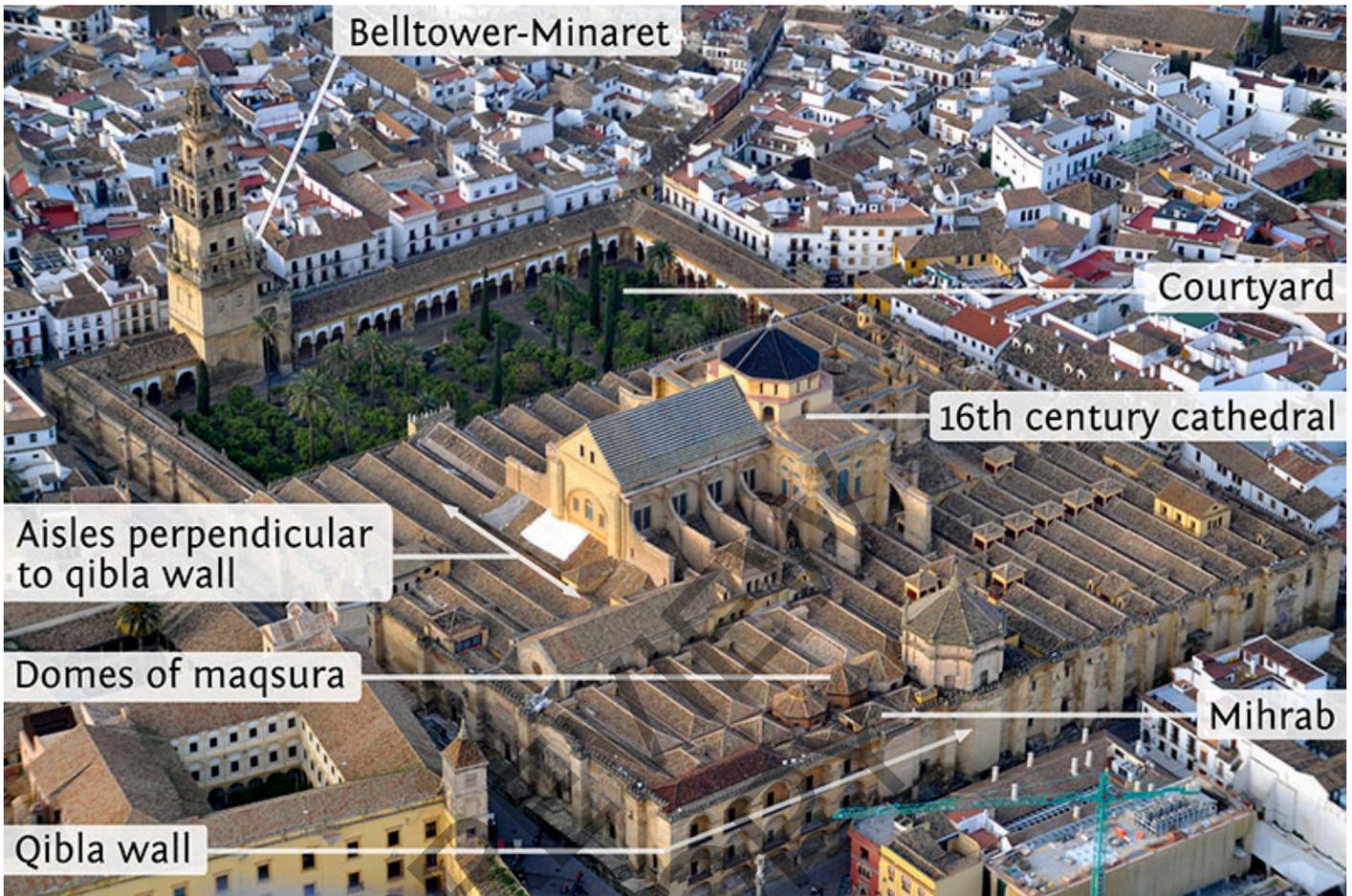


Fig. 10. Aerial view, Mezquita. Photo by: Toni Castillo Quero. Highlights added.

The mosque-cathedral, as it stands today (**Fig. 10**), is the product of a six-stage development (**Fig. 11**).

- **Stage 1:** 785-786 under Abd al-Rahman I.
- **Stage 2:** 832-848 under Abd al-Rahman II.
- **Stage 3:** 951-958 under Abd al-Rahman III.
- **Stage 4:** 961-965 under Al-Hakam II.
- **Stage 5:** 987-988 under Al-Mansur, Hisham II's vizier.
- **Stage 6:** 1523-1607, when it was converted into a basilica under the Christian leadership.

In the sections that follow, we walk through each of these stages in detail, focusing on its most salient features.

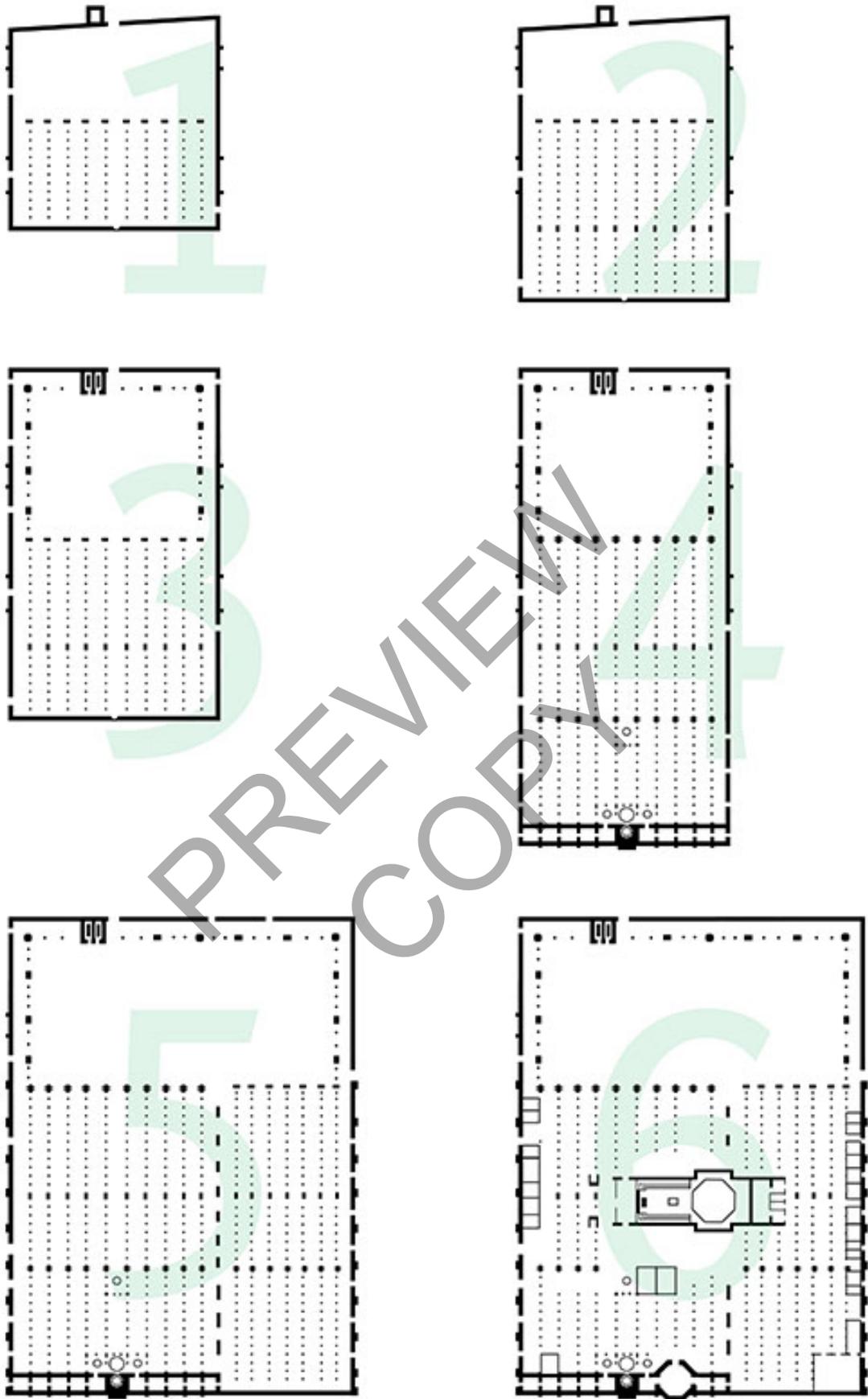


Fig. 11. Six-stage development, Mezquita.

VISITING THE MOSQUE

Location

The Mezquita anchors the old city of Córdoba, facing southeast and bordering the 1st century Roman bridge (Puente Romano) that straddles the Guadalquivir river (Fig. 18).

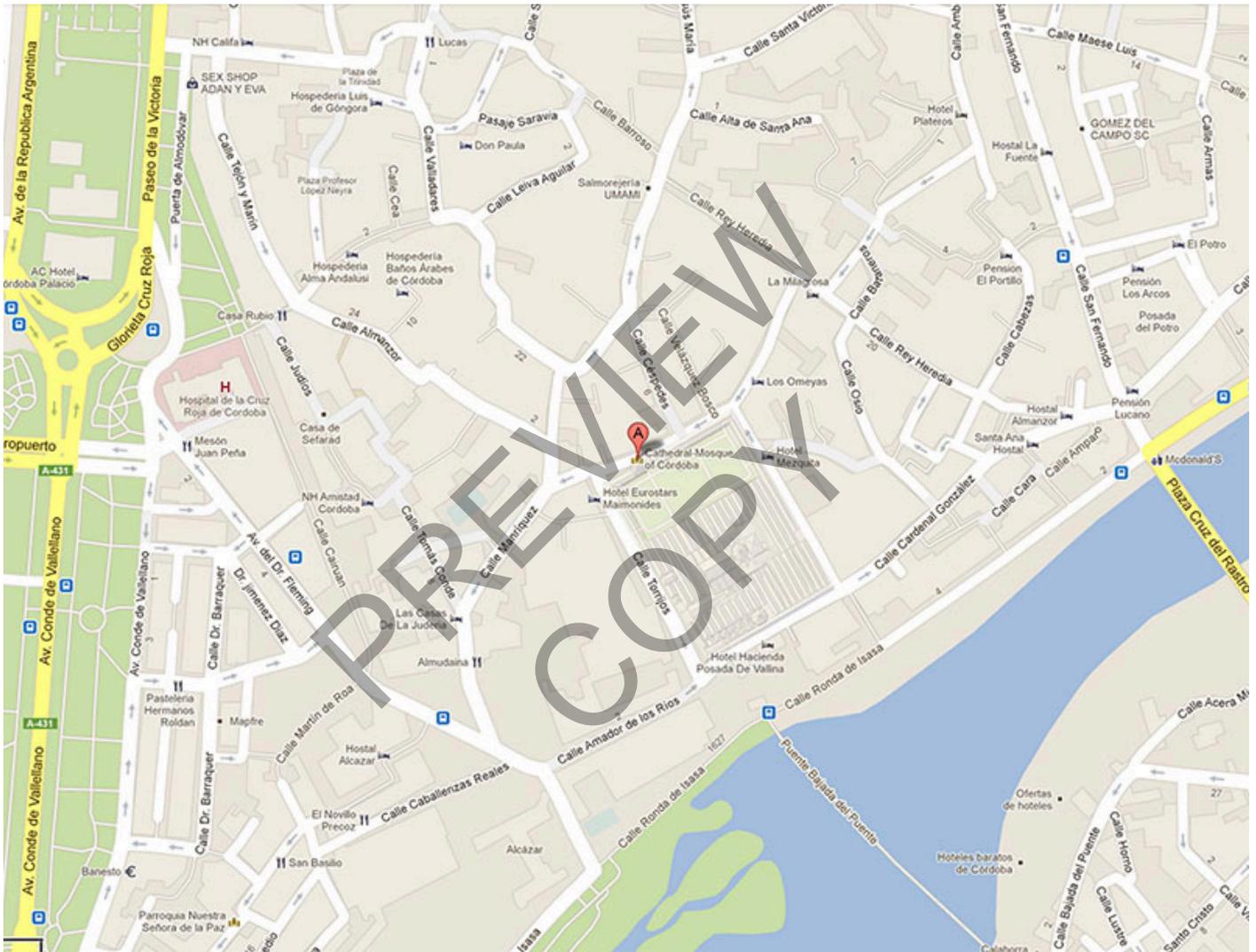


Fig. 18. Map of Córdoba, with location of Mezquita marked. See in [Google Maps](#).

Visiting Hours

- **March - October:** Monday-Saturday from 10:00 am - 7:00 pm; Sunday from 8:30 am - 11:30 pm and 3:00 pm - 7:00 pm.
- **November - February:** Monday-Saturday from 10.00 am - 6.00 pm; Sunday from 8:30 am - 11:30 pm and 3:00 pm - 6:00 pm.

We recommend confirming these visiting times on [the official website](#).

Author Tip: *Entrance is free Monday-Saturday from 8:30-9:30 am; further, there are no group tours admitted during this time, so it makes for a more peaceful visiting experience.*

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Tour Itinerary

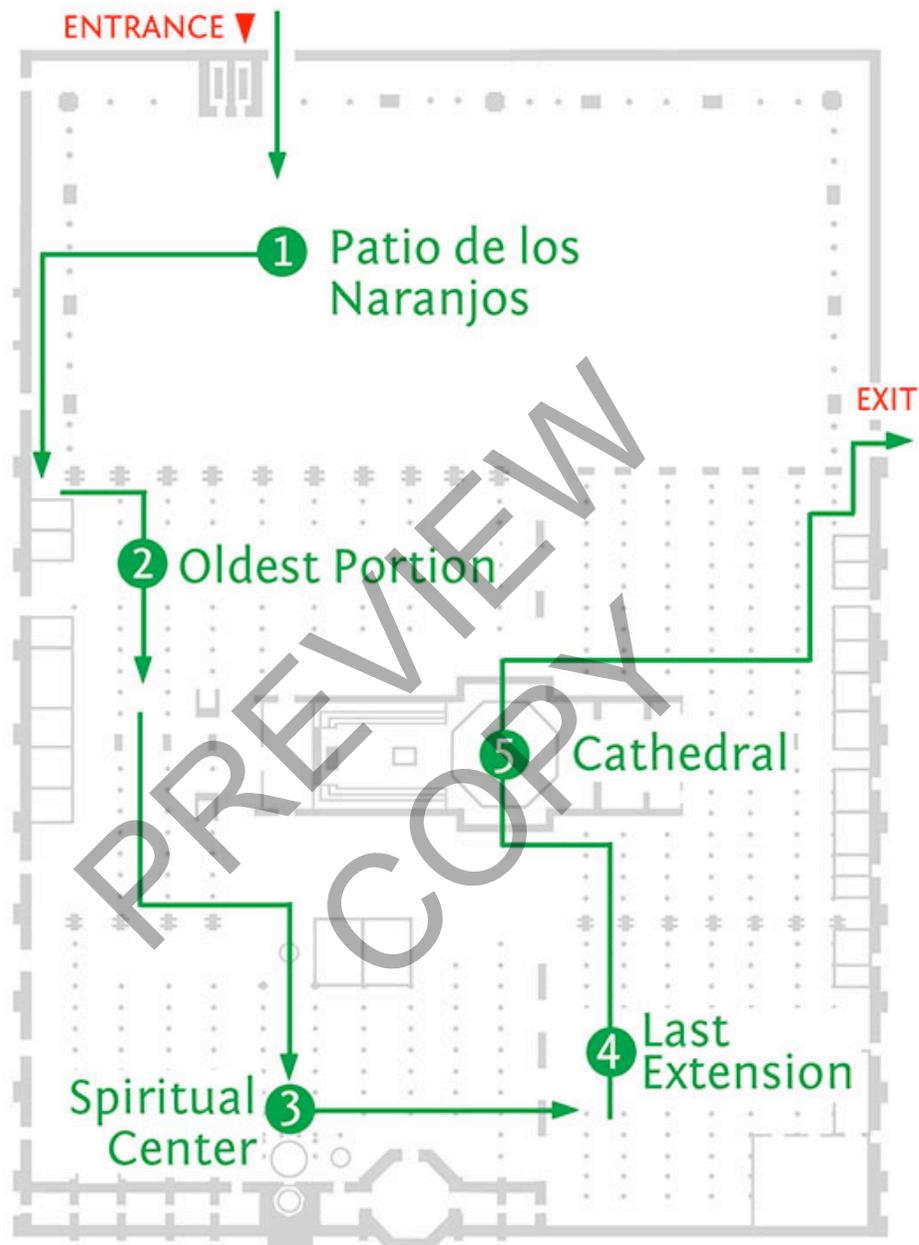


Fig. 19. Tour itinerary.

Five Steps on Our Tour

Our tour follows the historical development of the mosque, pointing out the highlights along the way. Here's a quick summary of our itinerary.

1. **Patio de los Naranjos.** The tour begins in the entrance courtyard, which features one of the oldest Islamic gardens in the world and an enormous Christian belltower, crafted from Abd al-Rahman III's former tower style minaret.
2. **Oldest Portion.** The oldest portion of the prayer hall dates from Abd al-Rahman I's Stage 1. It is here that the mosque's most distinctive feature — its double-level arcades — was first given form.
3. **Spiritual Center.** The mosque's spiritual center is the area around the mihrab on its southern end. Built under Al-Hakam II as part of Stage 4, it holds the most impressive decoration.
4. **Last Extension.** Dating from Al-Mansur's Stage 5, this was the mosque's largest extension. It was executed in a simpler, more austere style.
5. **Cathedral.** The 16th century cathedral fastened into the center of the mosque transforms the interior space.

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2b. Arcades

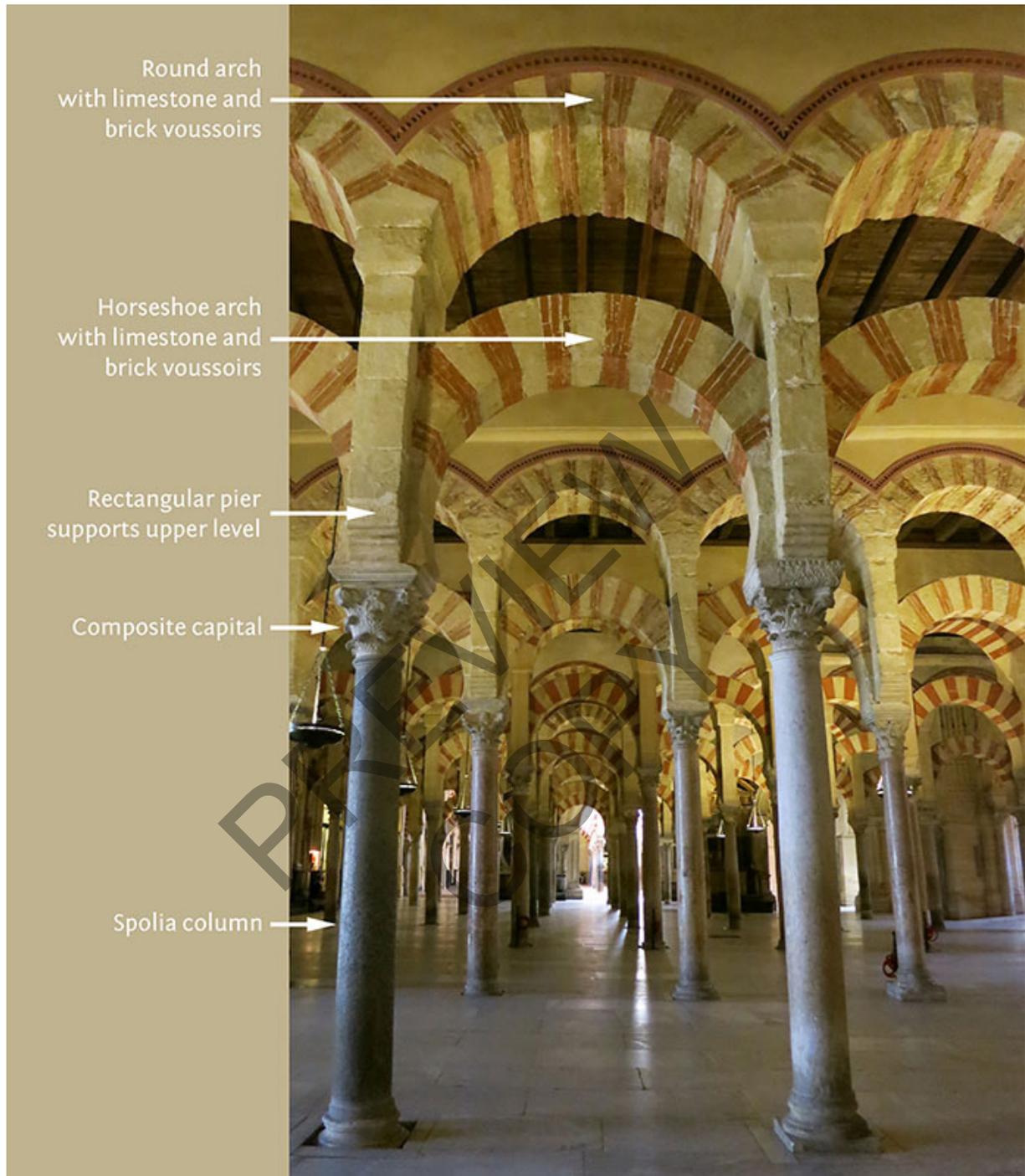


Fig. 27. Arcade.

Defining Features of the Arcades

This is the best spot to get a close up look at the columns of the arcade and visualize how the mosque might have originally looked.

er, their ribs chop up the interior surface of the dome, freeing the spaces between the ribs to take on a potentially more ethereal quality, serving as symbolic windows for rays of light from the heaven's above to penetrate the interior.

- **Eight-pointed star shape.** The prominent ribs — resting on miniature columns — support an eight-pointed star mini-dome at the apex. To make the rotated square designs easier to discern, we have marked them with green highlights in Fig. 36.
- **Windows.** The windows of the domes introduced more light into what had earlier been an especially dark interior space.

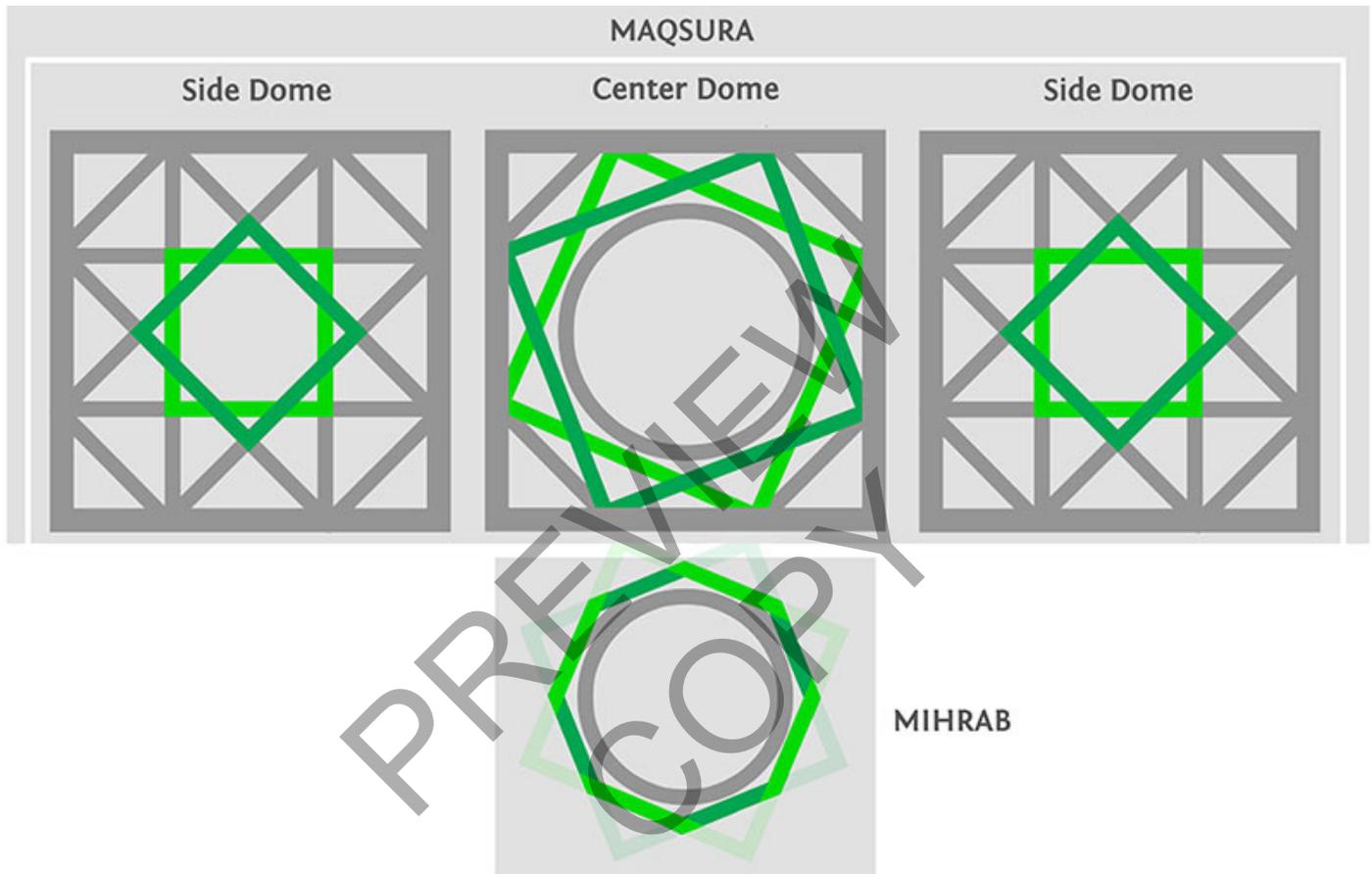


Fig. 36. Domes of *maqsura* and mihrab derived from rotated squares, stage 4.

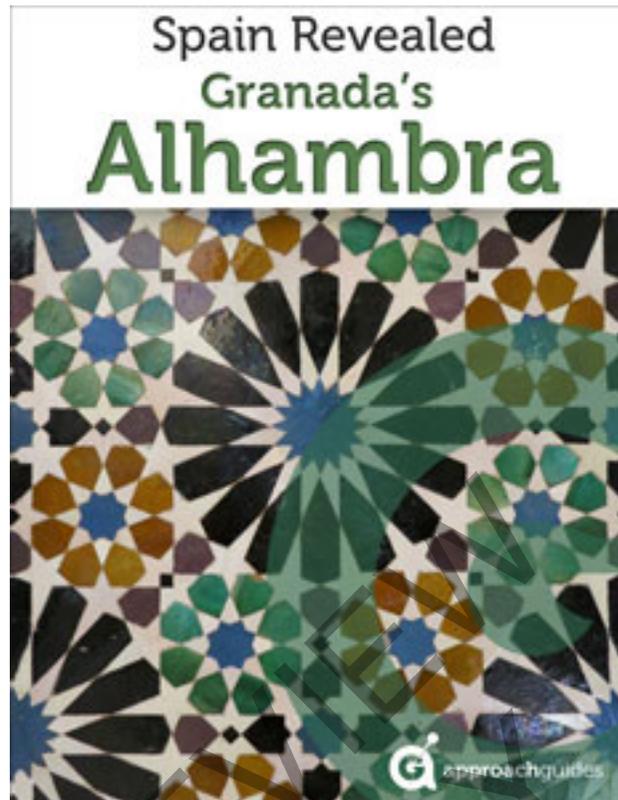
The significance of the eight-pointed star

The eight-pointed star is the most frequently encountered geometric pattern in the Mezquita's decorative arsenal.

- **Quranic reference.** The [Quran's chapter 24, verse 35](#) equates the light emanating from a star with God's calling to the faithful:

“Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth.
The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp,
the lamp is within glass,
the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star

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Start reading: [Spain Revealed: Granada's Alhambra](#)

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The palaces of the Alhambra are some of the most impressive surviving structures from the 700 years during which Islamic forces controlled the Iberian peninsula. Built largely during the 14th century when the Christian Reconquista was garnering momentum, it represents the final flowering of Islamic art and architecture in Spain.

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- **"Sharing a Sherry Treasured in Spain"** Visiting three bodegas in search of the mysterious, elusive palo cortado. *By Geoffrey Gray.*
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Los Angeles Times

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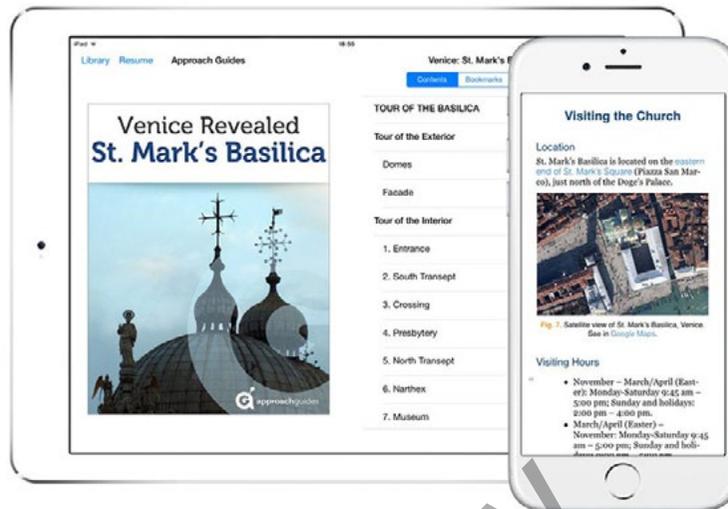
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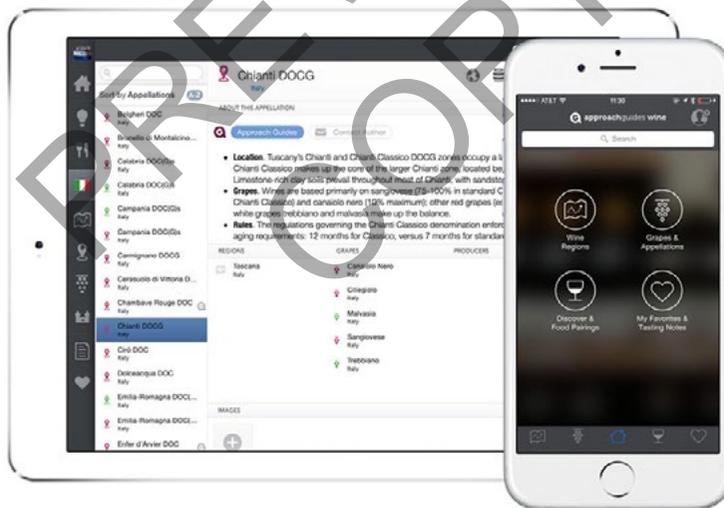
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