

Highlights of India

Delhi & Agra



Introduction

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Delhi and Agra are the former capitals of Islamic dynasties that controlled much of the Indian subcontinent from the 13th-19th centuries. Together, the cities hold an unrivaled collection of art and architecture: mosques with towering minarets that call the faithful to prayer; gardens with designs that recreate Quranic paradise; and tombs with inlaid stone decoration that spark contemplation of the divine. Not to mention the culmination of it all: the Mughal dynasty's famed Taj Mahal, an "equal to it the eye of the Age has not seen under these nine vaults of the enamel-blue sky." It is yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **Art and architecture review.** We provide an overview of Indian Islamic art and architecture, isolating trademark features that you will see again and again while touring Delhi and Agra. To make things come alive, we have packed our review with high-resolution images.
- **Tour of the highlights.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we offer a tour of Delhi and Agra's greatest Islamic monuments (see itinerary below). For each, we reveal its most important architectural and decorative features and offer a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook supplies logistical advice, maps and links to online resources. Plus, we give 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 marked up with text that explains important features.

Tour itinerary

- **Delhi:** Humayun's Tomb, Jama Masjid, Quwwat-al-Islam Mosque (including Qutb Minar and Alai Darwaza Gateway), Safdarjung's Tomb and the Tomb of Ghiyath al-Din Tughluq.
- **Agra:** Akbar's Tomb, Taj Mahal and the Tomb of I'timad-ud-Daulah (Baby Taj).

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We hope this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into India's fantastic Islamic architecture and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

Enjoy your trip!



David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
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India Revealed: Delhi, Agra & the Taj Mahal

Version 1.2

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

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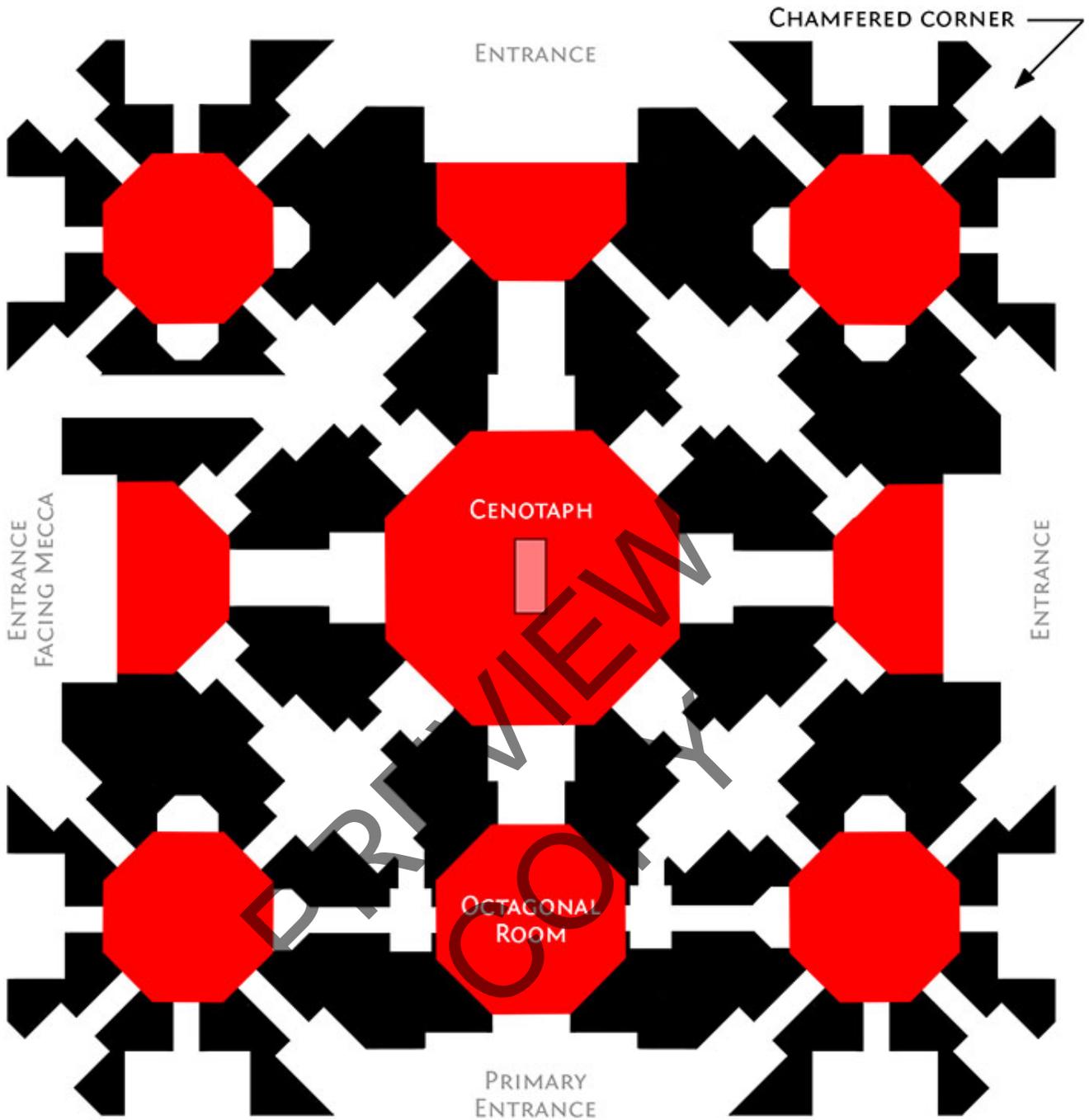
—

And a dome of high foundation and
a building of great magnificence was founded —
a similar and equal to it the eye of the Age has not seen
under these nine vaults of the enamel-blue sky,
and of anything resembling it
the ear of Time has not heard in any of the past ages ...
it will be the masterpiece of the days to come,
and that which adds to the astonishment of humanity at large.

—

Muhammad Amin Qazwini,
on the Taj Mahal during its construction.
Translation by Ebba Koch.
Qazwini wrote the first version of Mughal ruler Shah Jahan's history,
published in 1636 and called the *Padshahnama*,
that chronicles the first ten years of his reign.
Get a [free copy of the Padshahnama](#).

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EIGHT ROOMS SURROUND A CENTRAL ONE, WHICH HOLDS A CENOTAPH.
THE OVERALL PLAN IS SQUARE AND THE ROOMS ARE OCTAGONAL

Fig. 1. Ninefold plan of mausoleum [Humayun's Tomb, Delhi].

Ninefold Plan

The ninefold plan is the quintessential layout for Mughal mausoleums, the apex of those built under India's Islamic dynasties.

- **Overall square plan.** The overall plan is square. The corners are typically chamfered to form an irregular octagon; this affords the structure the appearance of three-dimensional depth when viewed straight on (Fig. 1).
- **Nine rooms.** Consistent with its name, the square plan is sub-divided into nine discrete, but interconnected, rooms: eight rooms surround a central domed chamber (red highlights in Fig. 1). The layout is known in Persian as *hasht bihisht*, meaning “eight paradises,” likely in reference to the eight rooms around the center one.
- **Octagon is core design unit.** With few exceptions, the rooms are octagonal in plan. The octagon’s symbolic associations — critical for understanding why this shape was chosen — are explored later in this section.
- **Elaborate connecting passageways.** Rooms are connected via a complex network of passageways (Fig. 1).
- **Cenotaph at center.** A cenotaph occupies the largest octagonal chamber at the absolute center of the structure (Fig. 1); the actual tomb lies in a crypt directly underneath. Consistent with the crypt tomb below, the cenotaph is aligned along the north-south axis, allowing the deceased’s head to be turned toward Mecca (Fig. 2).

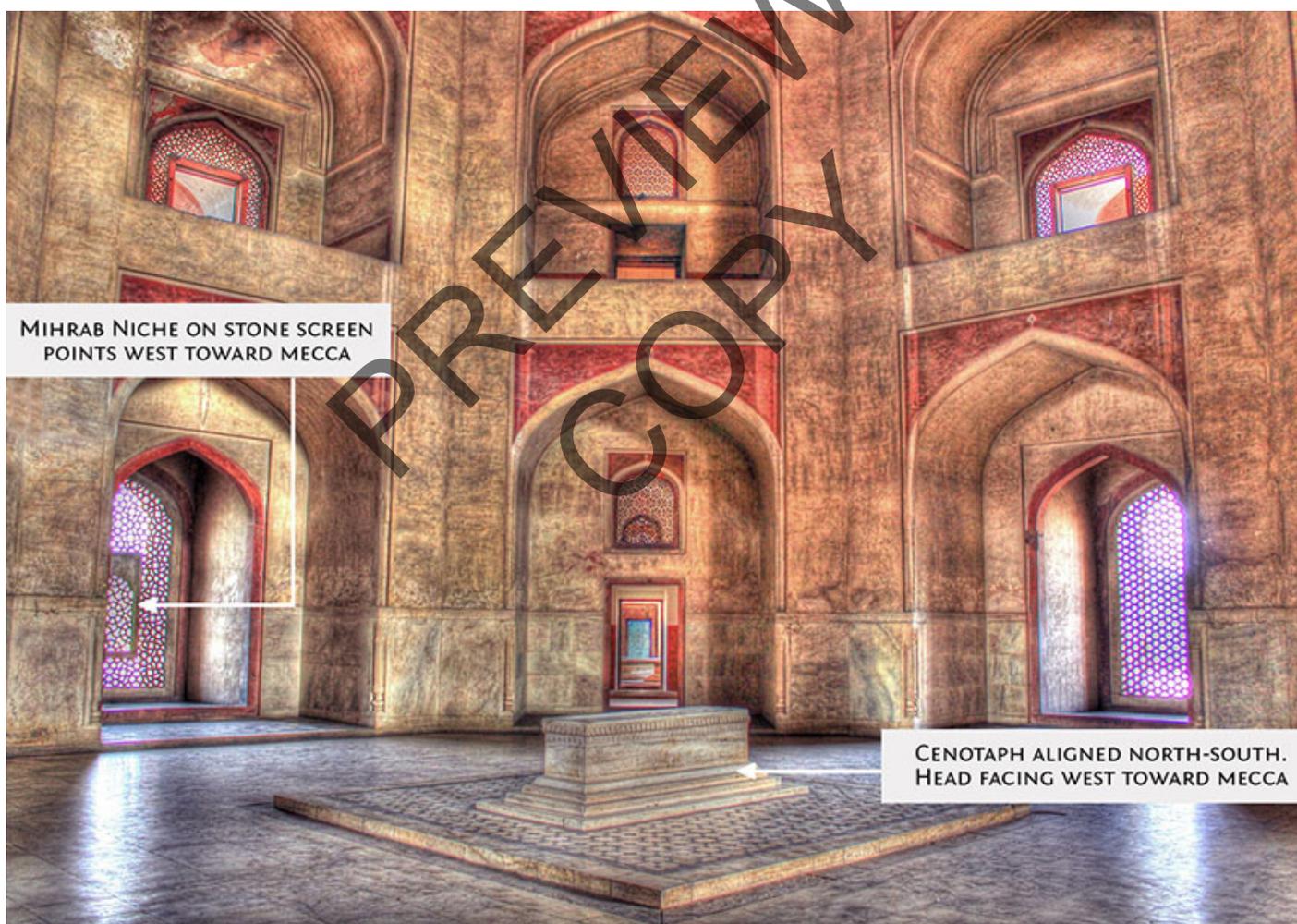


Fig. 2. Cenotaph at center of tomb structure [Humayun’s Tomb, Delhi].
Photo by: Ani nair12589. Highlights added.

Confusion to Inspire Divine Contemplation

The interior space of a tomb — as you will find on location — is a bit tricky to navigate: the vast network of connecting passageways often do not move linearly from room to room and sightlines are broken, often resulting in disorientation. This was likely the design's objective: the sacred interior space of the tomb — the meeting point between divine and human — was supposed to hint at the incomprehensible, that which is beyond earth-bound understanding.

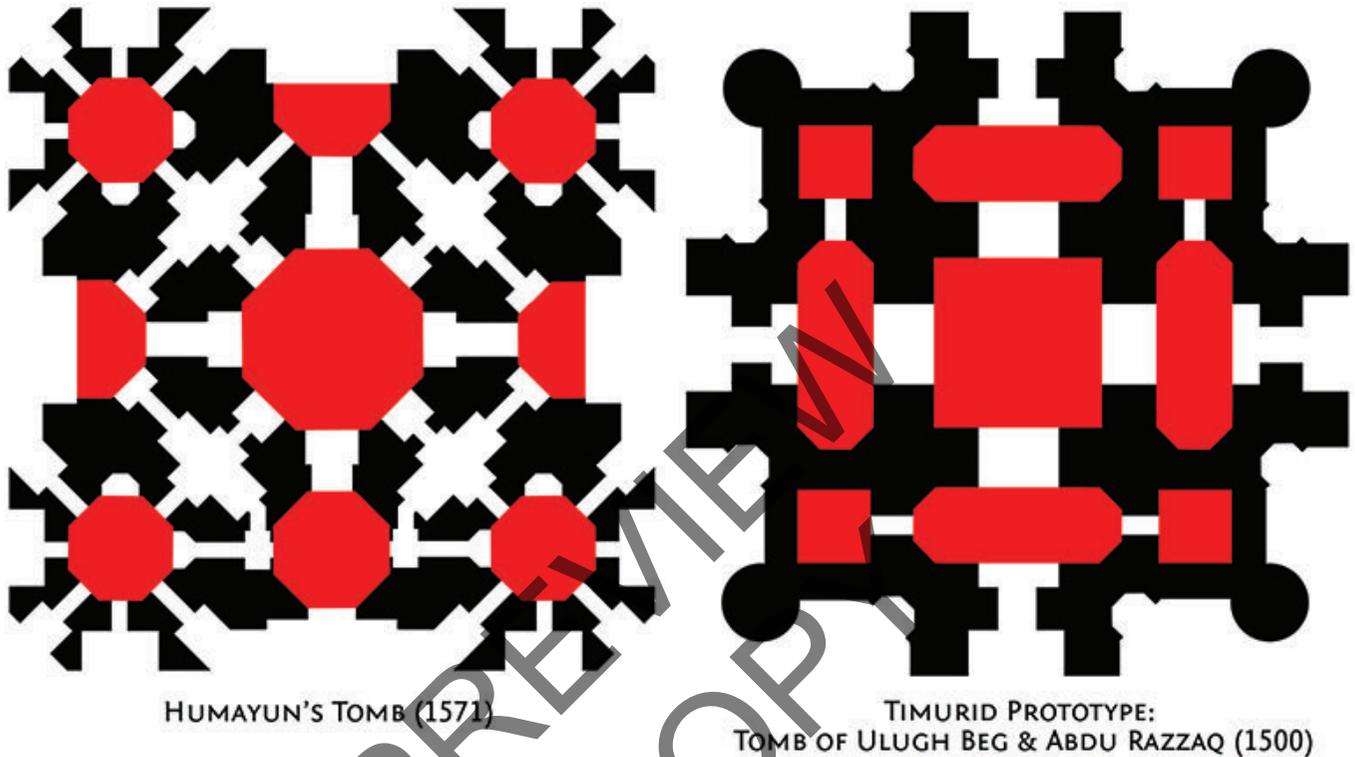


Fig. 3. Ninefold plan comparison: Mughal versus Timurid prototype.

Timurid Prototype

While the ninefold plan reaches its highest expression in India, it has clear precedent in Timurid funerary architecture (Fig. 3). To show the degree of borrowing, we compare the plan of the Mughal Humayun's Tomb (built 1571 in Delhi) with that of the earlier Timurid Tomb of Ulugh Beg and Abdu Razzaq (built around 1500 in Ghazni, Afghanistan). While, for the most, the designs are the same, there are a few differences worth noting.

- **Square as basic unit.** The Timurid prototype uses a square as the fundamental unit for rooms, as opposed to the more elaborate Mughal octagon. We have marked the room shapes with red highlights in Fig. 3.
- **Less room-to-room connectivity.** Unlike the Mughal tomb, the Timurid prototype — which has fewer passageways connecting rooms — does not allow direct movement from the central chamber to the corner rooms.

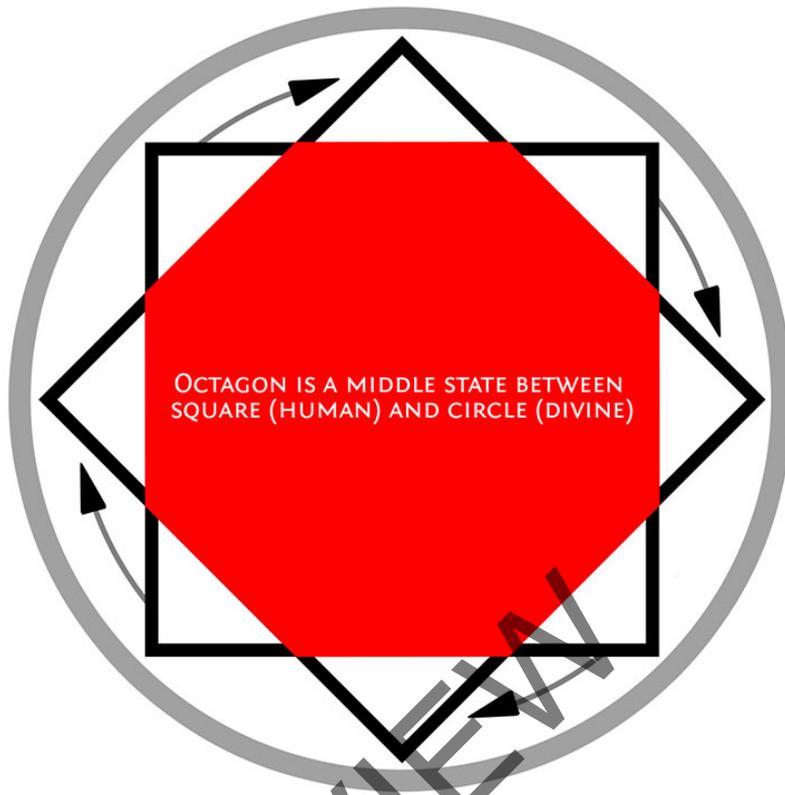


Fig. 4. An octagon, made from a rotated square.

The Importance of the Octagon

The octagon's symbolic associations made it an ideal choice for the shape of tomb chambers.

- **Rotation of a square.** An octagon — or eight-pointed star — is constructed by rotating a square 45 degrees about its axis (red highlights in **Fig. 4**).
- **Fusion of the human and divine.** This simple rotation has symbolic significance, since the square was associated with the human world and the circle with that of the divine. The 45 degree rotation creates a blend — a middle state, equally between square and circle — that is symbolic of earthly existence that basks in divine spirit. Accordingly, it was used to designate sacred areas where such a profound encounter was to transpire.

DELHI MAP AND TOUR ITINERARY



Fig. 23. Delhi map and tour itinerary. See in [Google Maps](#).

Our tour includes the premier Islamic monuments in Delhi (Fig. 23). We have marked the absolute must-see sites with asterisks (*).

1. Jama Masjid *
2. Humayun's Tomb *
3. Safdarjung's Tomb
4. Quwwat-al-Islam Mosque (includes Qutb Minar and Alai Darwaza Gateway) *
5. Ghiyath al-Din Tughluq's Tomb

PREVIEW
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1. Jama Masjid *

Overview

- **Built:** 1650-1656.
- **Ruler:** Mughal ruler Shah Jahan (ruled 1628-1658).
- **Location:** Chandni Chowk neighborhood in New Delhi, near the Red Fort. See in [Google Maps](#).
- **Visiting hours:** Open daily 7:00am - 12:00pm and 1:30pm - 6:30pm. For more information, see the [official website](#).

The mosque served as the primary congregational Friday mosque for Shah Jahan's royal city, Shahjahanabad, the seventh Islamic city built in Delhi.

- In 1638, Shah Jahan shifted the capital from Agra to Delhi and laid out his new city, Shahjahanabad, along the western bank of the Yamuna river. The Red Fort anchored the northeastern edge of the city; Jama Masjid sat just inside the walls, five hundred meters to its west.

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Layout

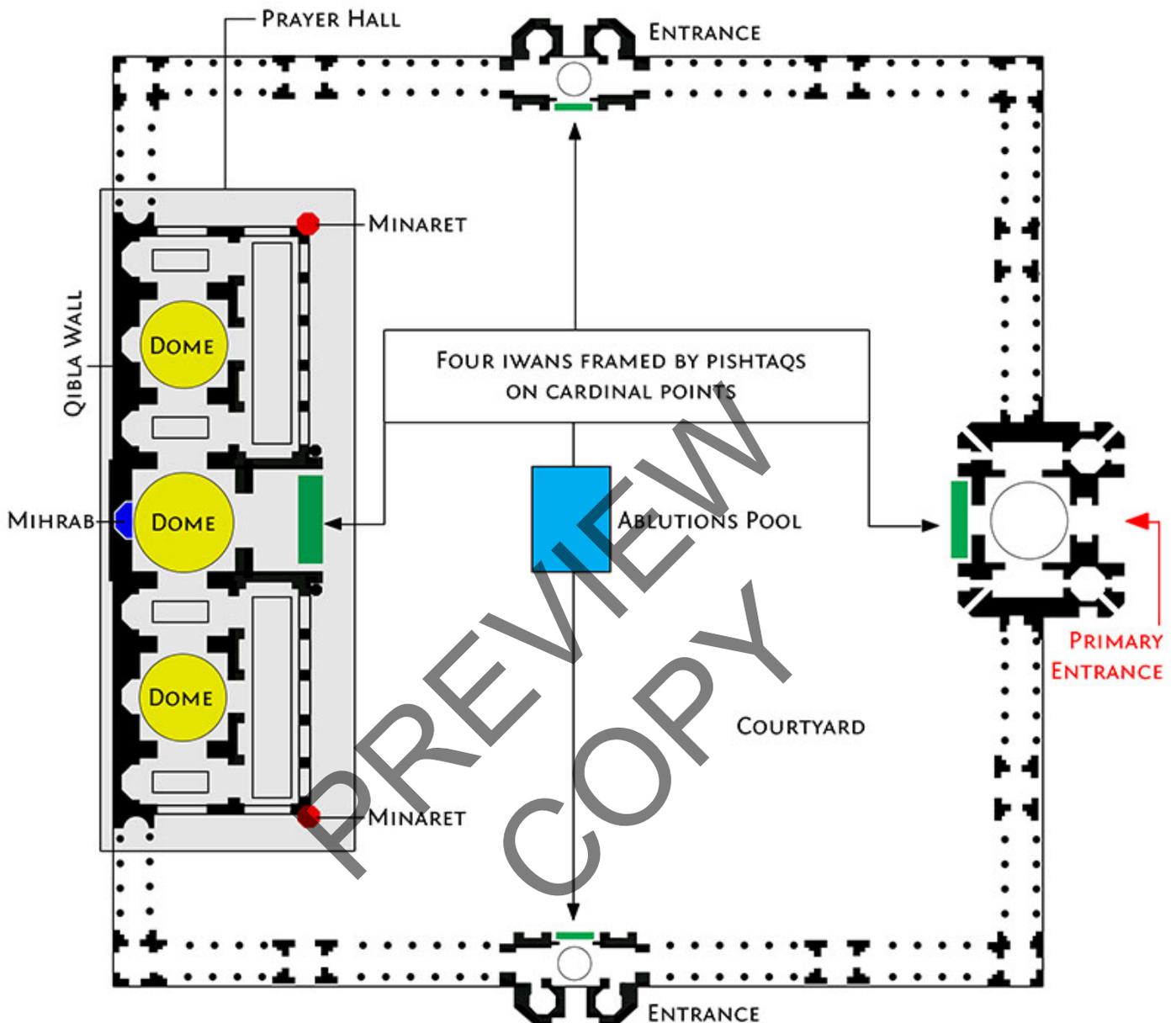


Fig. 24. Layout, Jama Masjid.

Four-Iwan Courtyard Design

- **An elevated platform.** Consistent with standard design for Mughal mosques, Jama Masjid sits on a massive elevated platform. Its three entrances are reached from the street by steep three-sided stairways.
- **Courtyard style design.** It adheres to a courtyard style design: an open walled courtyard opens onto a covered prayer hall on the west side. The courtyard's perimeter walls are lined

AGRA MAP AND TOUR ITINERARY

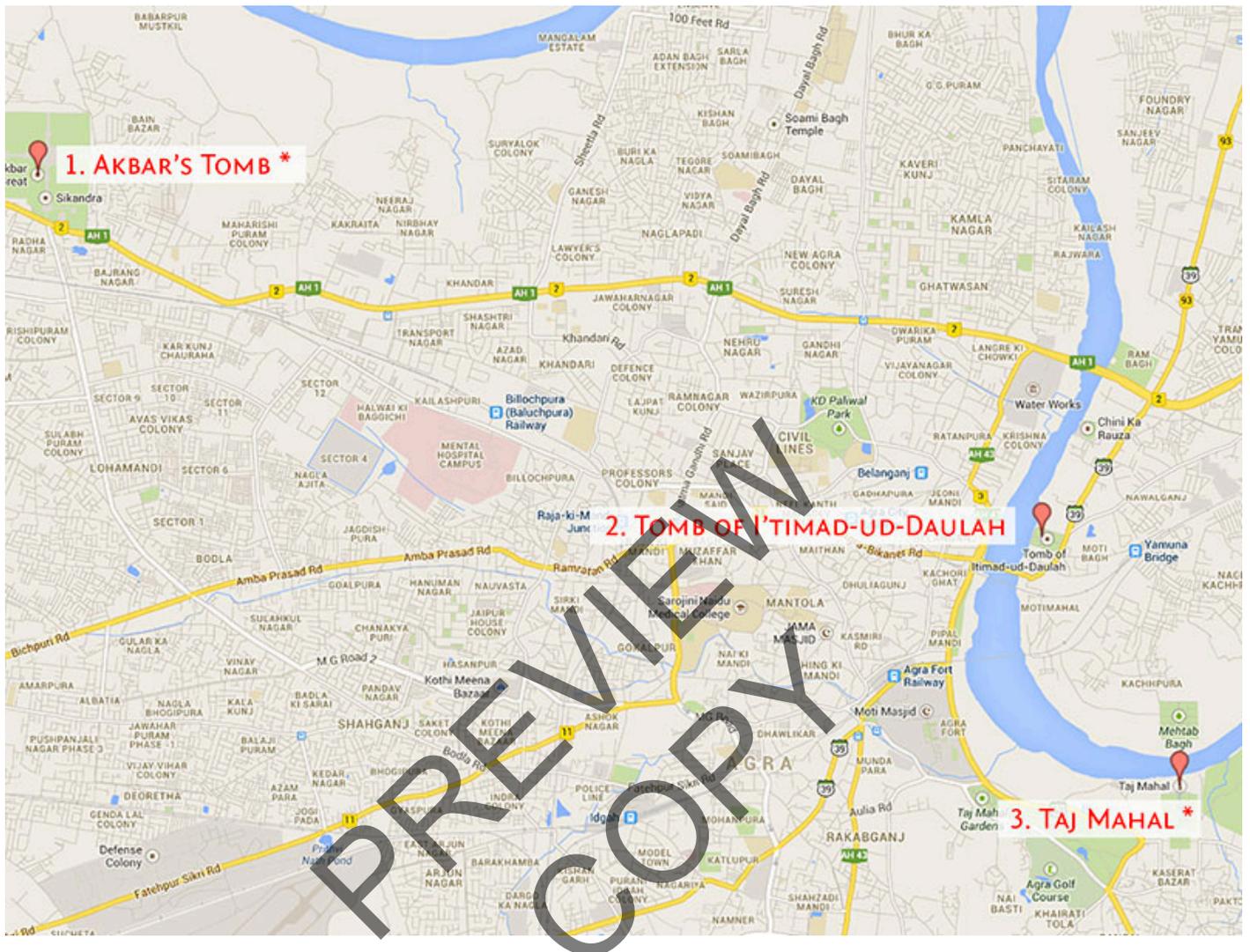


Fig. 57. Agra map and tour itinerary. See in [Google Maps](#).

Our tour includes the premier Islamic monuments in Agra (Fig. 57). We have marked the absolute must-see sites with asterisks (*).

1. Akbar's Tomb *
2. Tomb of I'timad-ud-Daulah (Baby Taj)
3. Taj Mahal *

1. Akbar's Tomb *

Overview

- **Built:** 1605-1613. Chronologically, it is the second built of the five Mughal tombs profiled in this Approach Guide.
- **Ruler:** Mughal ruler Jahangir (ruled 1605-1627), Akbar's son and successor.
- **Location:** Sikandra, approximately 12 kilometers outside of Agra, on the route to/from Delhi. See in [Google Maps](#).
- **Visiting hours:** Open daily sunrise to sunset (6am - 6pm). For more information, see the [official website](#).

***Author Tip:** Due to its location outside of the city, Akbar's Tomb gets less visitors than the other two tombs on our Agra tour. We encourage you to try to make a visit, though, because this idiosyncratic tomb plays a critical role in the development of the Mughal tomb complex, bridging the gap between Humayun's Tomb and the Taj Mahal. The magnificent entrance gateway alone merits the short trip.*

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Entrance Gate

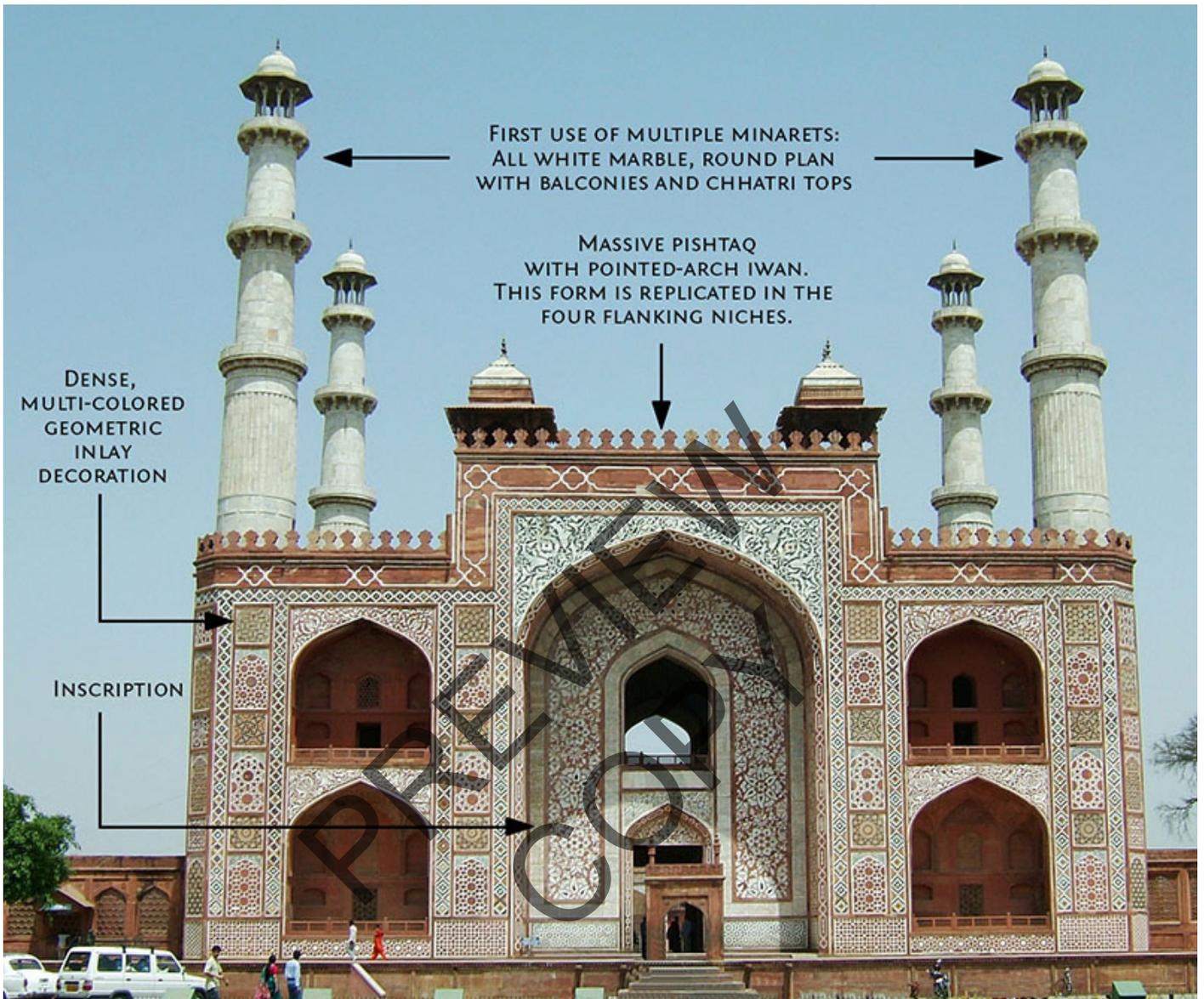


Fig. 58. Distinctive features, south entrance gate, Akbar's Tomb.
Photo by: Matthew Laird Acred. Highlights added.

Distinctive Features

The primary entrance gate on the tomb's south side is one of the most impressive built by the Mughals.

- **Rectangular framing grid.** Consistent with standard Mughal practice, the large central entrance — a rectangular pishtaq framing a pointed-arch iwan niche — serves as the basic unit for the organization of the two-level facade: it is replicated in smaller scale by the niches that flank it (Fig. 58).
- **First use of multiple minaret-shaped towers.** The impressive entranceway is the first

3. Taj Mahal *

Overview

- **Built:** 1632-1652. Chronologically, it is the fourth built of the five Mughal tombs profiled in this Approach Guide. It represents the apex of the Mughal style.
- **Ruler:** Mughal ruler Shah Jahan (ruled 1628-1658). It holds the distinction of being the only tomb for which the construction was overseen by the ruler interned within.
- **Location:** West bank of the Yamuna river, on the southern edge of the city. See in [Google Maps](#).
- **Visiting hours:** Open Saturday-Thursday, sunrise to sunset (6am - 7:30pm); closed on Fridays. For more information, see the [official website](#).

The Taj Mahal was built as a tomb complex for Shah Jahan's favorite wife — Arjumand Banu Begam, aka Mumtaz Mahal, from which was derived its popular name, Taj Mahal — soon after she died giving birth to their fourteenth child in 1631. Although it was not likely designed as such, it also serves as Shah Jahan's mausoleum.

As always, however, the Taj's construction also carried political motivations and in many respects was designed to commemorate the greatness of Shah Jahan.

Times to See It

- **Sunrise and sunset.** Both are ideal times to visit, as the rising-falling sun casts dynamic hues on Taj's white marble exterior.
- **Moonlight.** The Taj Mahal is also opened late in the evenings (8:30pm - 12am) for five days around the full moon — two days before and two days after. You have to reserve and purchase tickets for this on location and in advance at the Archaeological Survey of India's office; tickets are available for 30-minute slots. See the [official website](#).

Author Tip: *While a moonlight visit is a special experience, do not go for the photo opportunity, as we found it a bit too dark (and too far away) to get any really great shots.*

Entrance Gate

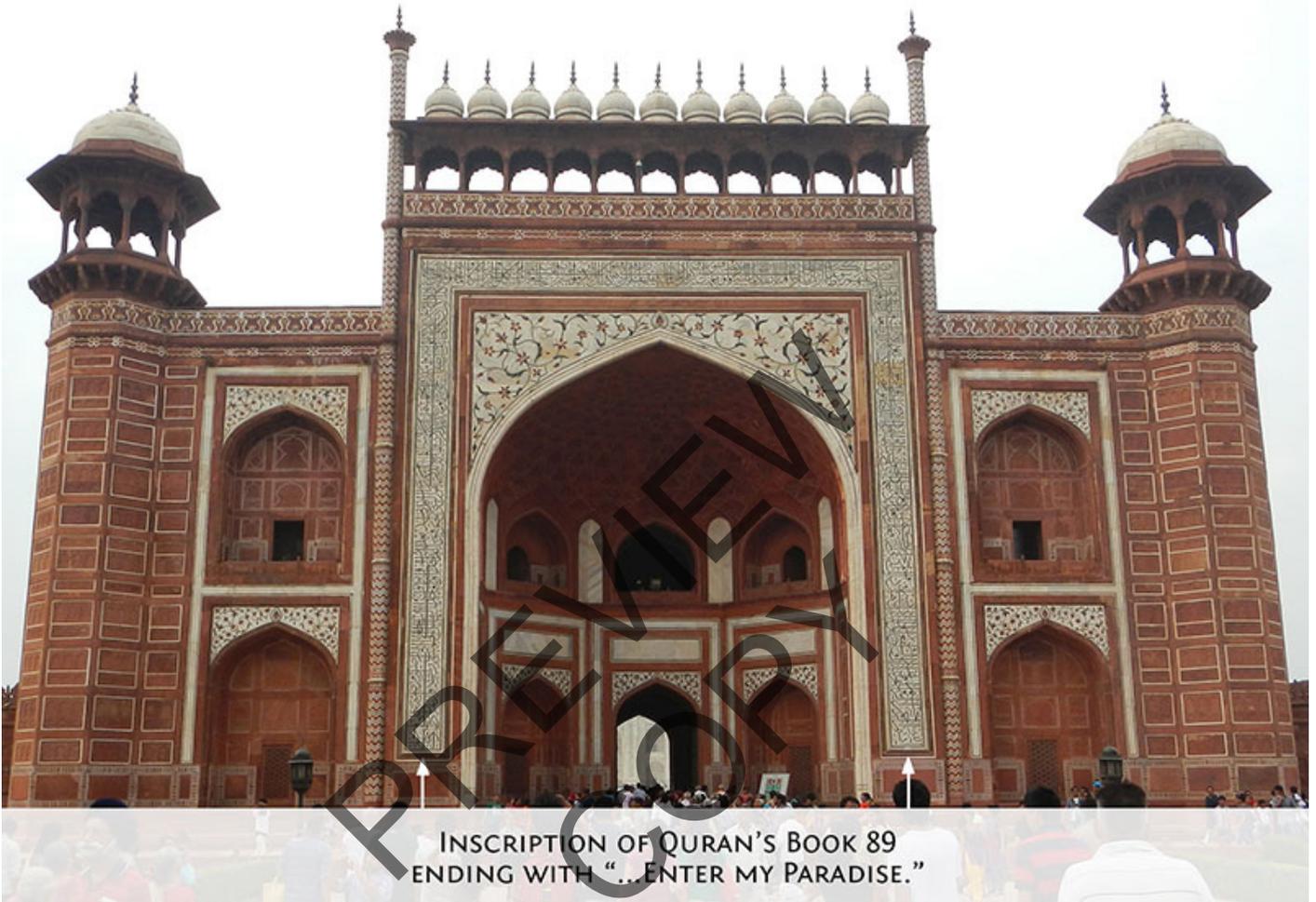


Fig. 72. South entrance gate, view from forecourt, Taj Mahal. Photo by: Shantanulale.

An Invitation to Enter

The inscription on the pishtaq of the south entrance gate (Fig. 72) — visible from the forecourt (*jilawkhana*), the position of which is shown in Fig. 73 — is drawn from the Quran's book 89, "The Daybreak," that concludes with:

... So on that Day, none will punish [as severely] as His punishment,
And none will bind [as severely] as His binding [of the evildoers].
[To the righteous it will be said], "O reassured soul,
Return to your Lord, well-pleased and pleasing [to Him],
And enter among My [righteous] servants
And enter My Paradise."

Garden

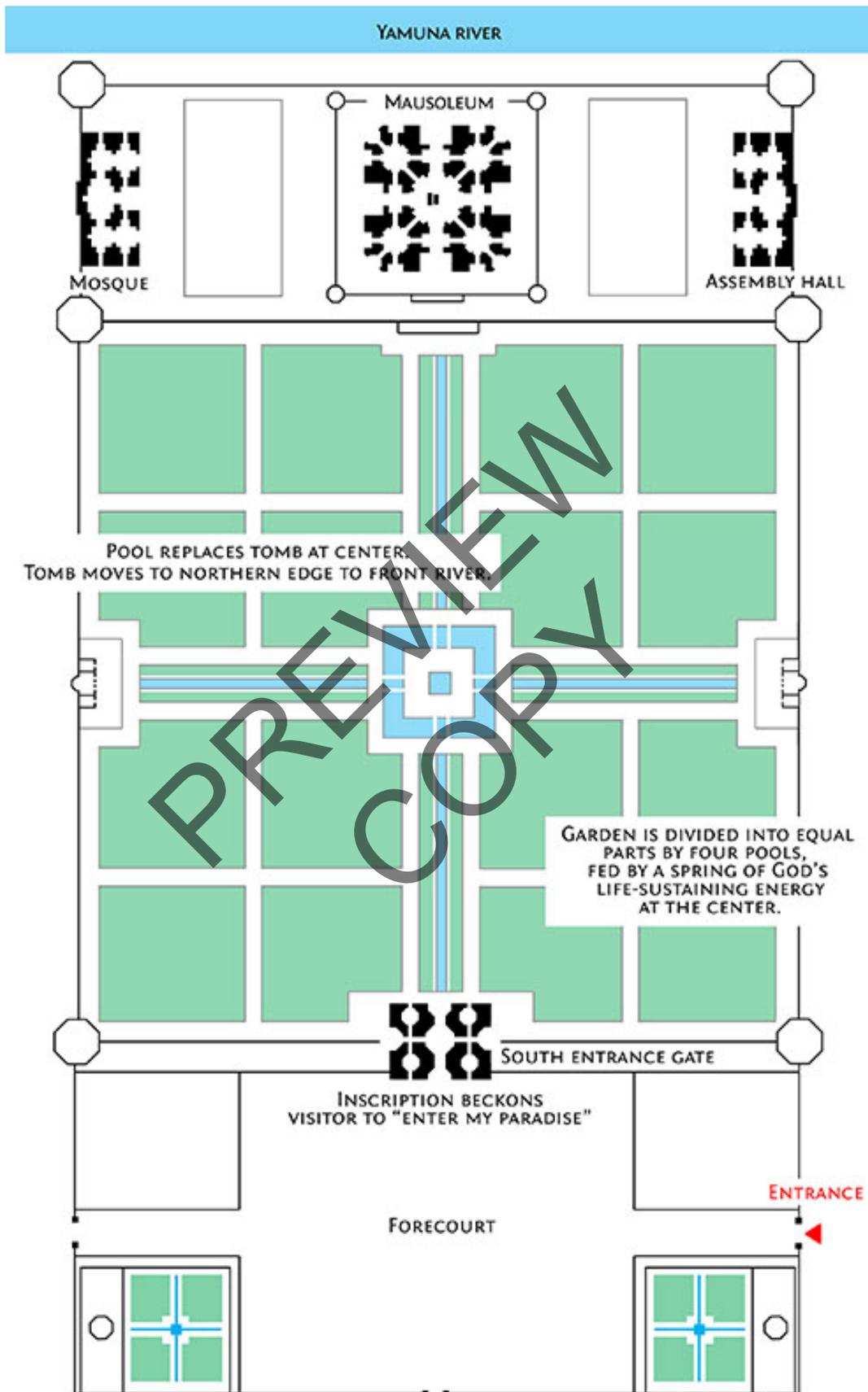


Fig. 73. Layout, garden, Taj Mahal.

Mausoleum Appearance

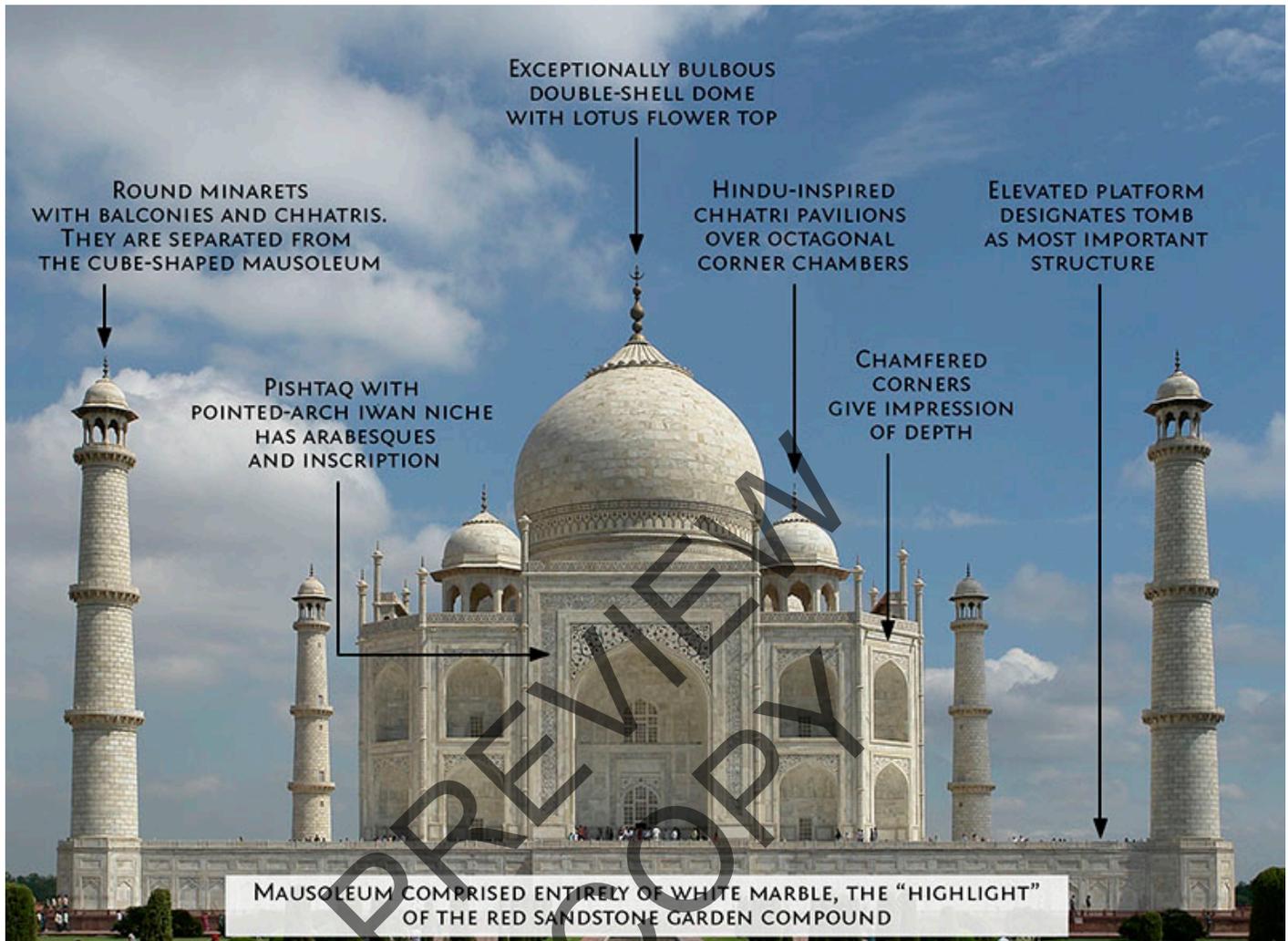


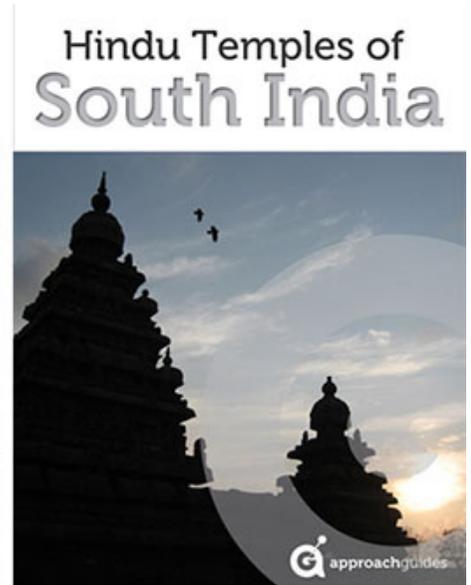
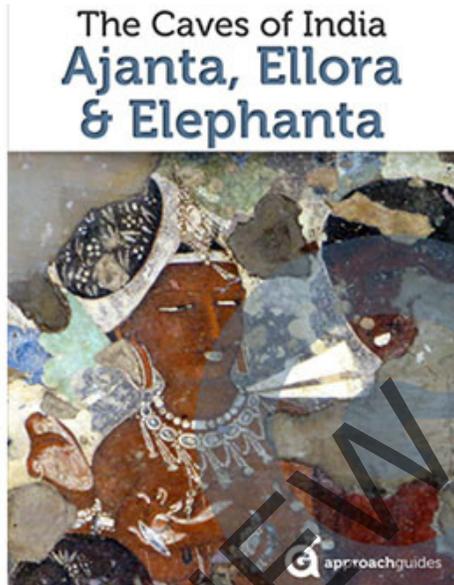
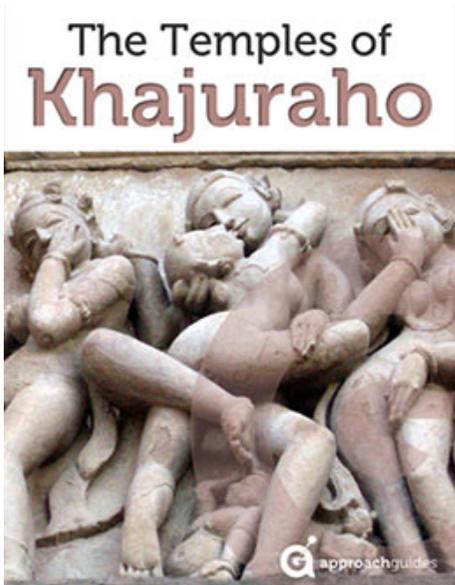
Fig. 74. Distinctive features, mausoleum, view from south, Taj Mahal. Photo by: Yann. Highlights added.

Distinctive Features

- **Elevated platform.** The mausoleum sits on a large square platform that elevates it above all other structures, marking it as the most important. Further, the platform holds blind arcades, vaguely reminiscent of the open arcades used at Humayun’s Tomb (Fig. 74).
- **Chamfered corners.** Chamfered corners, first introduced at Humayun’s Tomb, have returned (Fig. 74). By breaking the horizontal lines of the rest of the facade, they give the mausoleum the appearance of three-dimensional depth.
- **Pishtaq.** A large rectangular pishtaq circumscribes a pointed-arch iwan niche (Fig. 74 and Fig. 75). It holds two key decorative features: an inscription that runs along the rectangular frame (see discussion below); and swirling arabesques in the spandrels.
- **Chhatri pavilions.** Chhatri pavilions — serving as dome replacements — flank the large cen-

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- **"Citizens Jain"** Why India's newspaper industry is thriving. *By Ken Auletta.*
- **Sounds of India: Hindustani** Listen to a playlist containing a personal collection of tracks featuring North India's signature Hindustani music compiled by our founder Jennifer Raezer. The perfect pre-trip soundtrack.
- **The Little Book of Hindu Deities** Just for kids! Entertaining book that brings the gods, goddesses, and stories of Hindu mythology to life. *By Sanjay Patel.*

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Los Angeles Times

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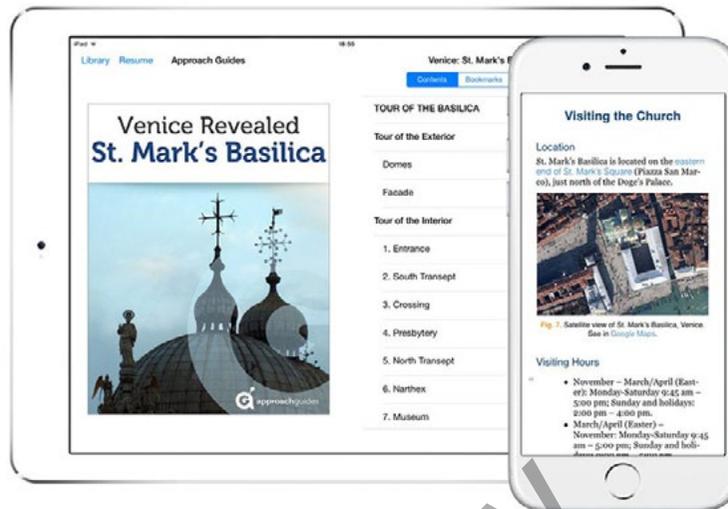
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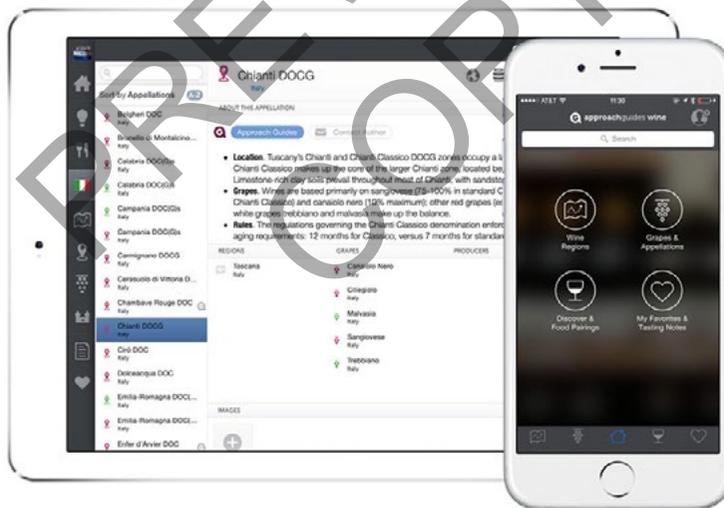
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