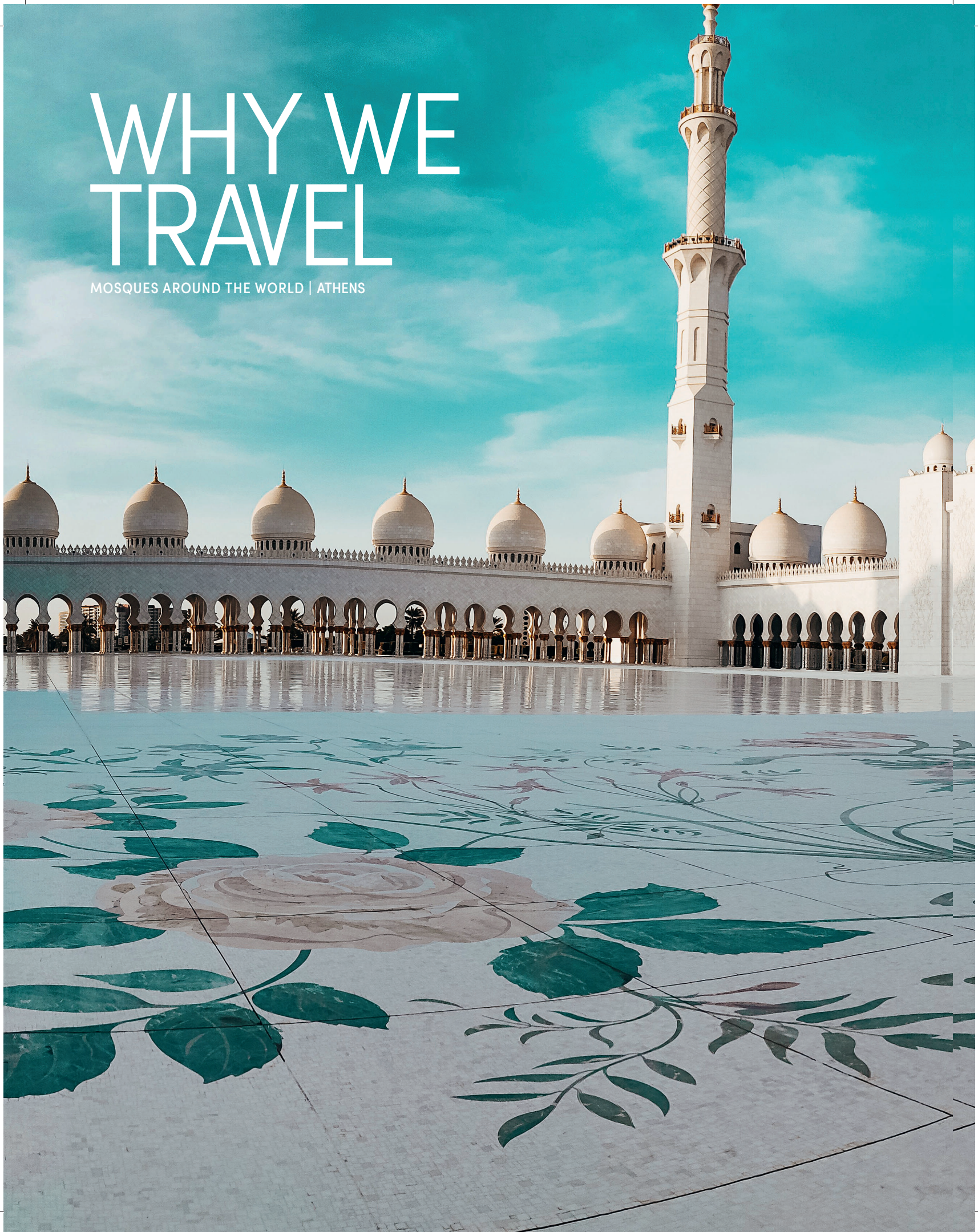


# WHY WE TRAVEL

MOSQUES AROUND THE WORLD | ATHENS







From left:  
Abu Dhabi's Sheikh  
Zayed Grand  
Mosque; the  
domes of the Blue  
Mosque in Istanbul



## In Pursuit of Peace

When **Sarah Khan** is far from home, mosques become much more than just a place to pray

On my first trip to Rome, I did as the tourists do: paid my respects at the Colosseum, Trevi Fountain, Spanish Steps, Vatican and no fewer than a dozen gelato shops. But the memory that lingers strongest a decade later is of boarding a nondescript commuter train to Parioli with my friends to visit the Moschea di Roma, the largest mosque in Europe. Built in 1994 with the blessing of Pope John Paul II, it is a tranquil escape from the eternal frenzy of the Eternal City. We prayed, took pictures and marvelled at walls clad in traditional mosaics juxtaposed with striking contemporary pillars, the result of a collaboration between Iraqi and Italian architects. Later, we took the train back to the city in time for dinner in Trastevere.

I religiously cross major monuments off my tourist checklists, but whether I'm in Buenos Aires or rural Mozambique, Paris or Cape Town, a recurring feature of my travels is tracking down each destination's major mosque. I may struggle to navigate through storms of rapid-fire French, Italian, Kimwani, or Malayalam, but whenever the echoes of a muezzin calling, "Hayya →



## WHY WE TRAVEL



as-salah, hayya al-falah” (“Come to prayer, come to success”) descend over me, instantly recognisable despite varying accents and levels of melodiousness, there, too, is a sense of peace.

My earliest road trip memories are from my childhood in Jeddah: almost every month, my parents loaded the car with snacks and drove us to Makkah or Madinah. It was a privilege I came to take for granted as a child; only after I moved away and didn’t return for a quarter century did I appreciate how fortunate I’d been to have had the Kaaba as a fixture of my upbringing, while others save and struggle to have just one glimpse in their lifetimes during Hajj.

I travelled the world with my family growing up, but, despite being practicing Muslims, I don’t recall mosques often being on the itinerary. The beauty of the Islamic prayer is that it can be done anywhere on the go; all you need is a few square feet of clean floor and the intention. Hotel rooms, airport meditation rooms, mall changing rooms: as any Muslim can attest, they’ve all become makeshift prayer spaces at some point.

It’s as I got older and ventured out into the world on my own that I started seeking out different ways to make the foreign feel familiar. Now, my travel plans

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always seamlessly weave together local art, cuisine, history and Islam. I followed up a visit to the Latin American Art Museum in Buenos Aires with a stop at the King Fahd Islamic Cultural Centre; I settled in for a five-course meal on a rooftop in Zanzibar to the soundtrack of dozens of calls to prayer reverberating all around me.

Visiting mosques is about something more than religious devotion for me; it’s a way for me to connect with Muslims throughout the world. My Arabic skills may be next to nonexistent, but I still manage to find common ground with other women in the ladies’ section through basic words related to prayers. I ask someone which direction the qibla is to face the Kaaba, or where to perform wudu, the ablution required before prayer: Islam 101 becomes an ice breaker.

Seeking out mosques is also a way

for me to sightsee and unearth chapters in history across the diaspora that don’t make it into the rote scripts of cookie-cutter city tours. In Paris, I learned that the Grand Mosquée was a refuge for hundreds of Jews during World War II; in Cape Town’s rainbow-bright Bo-Kaap district, I discovered that the city’s historic Cape Malay Muslim community were the first to record the Afrikaans language in writing – and they did it using Arabic script. In Nashville’s hipster 12 South enclave I found a mosque established with the help of Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens); the whitewashed Meeran Mosque in Sri Lanka’s Galle Fort has Dutch influences and colourful Italian tiles; on Mozambique’s Ibo Island, not far from decaying buildings from the Portuguese colonial era, I prayed in a village mosque dating back to the 1300s.

And in places where mosques seemingly anchor every corner, I search for the most distinctive: the 17th-century coral-stone Hukuru Miskiy in the Maldivian capital of Malé; a tiny emerald mosque in the labyrinthine lanes of Harar, Ethiopia; the serene expanse of Abu Dhabi’s Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque; a 16th-century mosque clinging to the mountainside in the Bosnian town of Pocitelj; or the futuristic spaceship-like Sakirin Mosque in Istanbul, designed by female architect Zeynep Fadillioglu.

In India, I never have to look far to find a masjid. But on a visit to the southern state of Kerala, when I discovered that the country’s first mosque – built in 629 during the lifetime of the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) – was not far from Kochi, I hired a car to make the 90-minute drive to see it. The Cheraman Juma Mosque in Kodungallur is a charming blue building that marries traditional South Indian architecture – bright colours and a sloping red tiled roof – with a classical Islamic-style dome and minarets; while it might be out of the way for most travellers, for me its origin story was well worth the trip.

I’ve lived in five countries on three continents and, as a travel journalist, so much of my life is spent in transit that my comfort zone is not any one destination but somewhere at 10,000 metres. Even if I’m not quite sure where home is, I know I’ll find it in some form whenever I hear the adhaan. In the unpredictable madness of travel, a mosque is my sanctuary. It’s the one place I know I’m guaranteed history, smiles, art and a moment of peace. And then it’s back to the next hotel, the next train, the next airport – and the next mosque. ☪



Masjid an-Nabawi, the Prophet's Mosque, in Madinah, Saudi Arabia.  
**Opposite:** The Meeran Jummah Masjid in Galle Fort, Sri Lanka

