



Located in Abu Dhabi, the capital of United Arab Emirates is the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. Gloriously grandiose in its pristine white and gold, this mosque has come to be one of the most iconic structures in the region. It was recently ranked as the world's second favourite landmark on Trip Advisor

The central courtyard with the floral motif of semi precious stones

The grandest of them all

NEEHARIKA SATYAVADA

Did you know that the sand changes colour for every emirate in UAE? As we left the city behind us, speeding ahead on Sheikh Zayed Road, the sand gradually turned darker. From light golden beige to a darker blackish brown, like it was steadily getting dirty and busy thinking, apprehensive yet curious. About Abu Dhabi, this capital of the Emirates, where every other Bollywood and Hollywood movie seems to be shot these days. How would it be? It can't be as cosmopolitan as Dubai for sure, should I keep my eyes down as a woman travelling to a conservative Islamic city? Should I keep my head covered, I wondered. This would, after all, be the first time that I am stepping into a mosque.

Turns out, I was to be pleasantly surprised. The mosque is very tourist-friendly with a

cafe on the ground, free Wi-Fi and complimentary guided tours. From being home to the world's largest hand-knotted carpet to the world's largest crystal chandelier in a mosque, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi is probably one of the most photographed and iconic landmarks in the Middle East.

The Grand Mosque as it is commonly known opened its doors to the public in 2007, after 11 years of construction. An hour-and-a-half's drive from Dubai, the mosque strikes a splendid welcome. Undoubtedly one of the grandest mosques today, it is visible from all the three bridges that connect the Abu Dhabi Island city to the mainland. A total of 82 domes of Macedonian marble greet you from afar, and you know you have arrived at your destination.

From the sprawling car park, you go through a security building where one is then

directed to screened-off rooms to put on the "abaya" in case your outfit is deemed unsuitable. Once you pass through security, you are out in the open and the glint of the sun reflecting off the glossy white surfaces gilded in gold is sure to catch you off guard. Go closer and you see the sprawling complex of arches mirrored in the pools that surround the mosque. You are free to enter, wander around and take pictures to your heart's content as long as you maintain the decorum that one would accord a place of worship.

On the inside, you are treated to a visual spectacle. Unending rows of crowned columns, a thousand to be precise. Ceilings into which Moroccan artwork is etched alongside verses from the Holy Quran. A courtyard, whose minarets stretch out to touch the sky and semi-precious stones of hues ranging from the stunning blue of lapis lazuli to the blood red of agate come together with mother-of-pearl, in a floral motif on the floor. And the prayer hall brings it all to a stoic still, with shafts of natural light streaming in through the windows, onto hand-woven carpets and massive Swarovski chandeliers that gleam with the 40 kg of 24-carat galvanised gold in them. As night falls, the mosque continues to be mirrored in its pools but with light that has been designed to shift with the changing phases of the moon, as it progresses from a crescent to a whole.

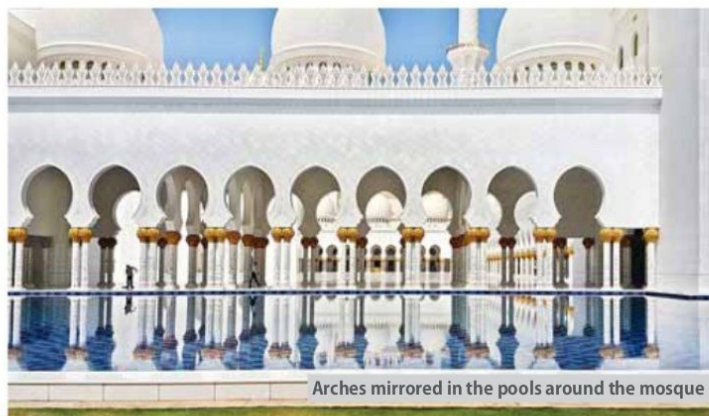
While the experience of taking in its beauty can only be described as overwhelming, it is the vision of its founding father that makes the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque truly grand. It was for him, the first president of UAE, the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, an expression of Islam's true religious values. One of the few mosques, that is open to people of all faiths alike it is surely worth a visit.



Through the crowned columns

FACT FILE

The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque is open to visitors all through the week from 9 am to 10 pm, except on Friday mornings, when it is open to worshippers alone. It is recommended for both men and women to dress modestly though. If they find it inappropriate you may be asked to wear an abaya (for women) / kandura (for men) over your clothes. During the Holy Month of Ramadan, the mosque is open only in the mornings, Saturday through Thursday.



Arches mirrored in the pools around the mosque