

Morocco

Fez, Marrakech, Meknes & Rabat



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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.

Four imperial cities — Fez, Marrakech, Meknes and Rabat — hold a magnificent collection of Islamic art and architecture, the legacy of seven dynasties that have controlled Morocco for over 1,200 years. With towering minarets that call the faithful to prayer, multi-colored glazed ceramic tiles that recreate the flora of Quranic paradise and stucco decoration that affords the impression of infinity, Morocco offers visitors an experience like no other. It is yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **Comprehensive look at Morocco's art and architecture.** We provide an overview of Moroccan art and architecture, isolating trademark features that you will see again and again as you make your way through the country's highlights. To make things come alive, we have packed our review with high-resolution images.
- **A tour that goes deeper on the most important sites.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we offer a detailed tour of the premier sites in each imperial city, from fantastically-decorated city gates, to grand mosques, to jewel box madrasas. For each site, we present information on its history, a detailed plan that highlights its most important architectural and artistic features, 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 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.

Itinerary

In total, this guidebook profiles twenty-three of Morocco's top sites for art and architecture. To help you prioritize your touring itinerary, we mark the absolute must-see sites with asterisks (*). The tour follows a clockwise rotation through the country's four imperial cities, beginning in Rabat and Salé.

- **In Rabat and Salé:** Abu al-Hasan madrasa*, Bab Mrisa, Bab Oudaia*, Bab Rouah, Chellah necropolis and Hassan mosque*.
- **In Meknes:** Bab Mansour* and Bou Inania madrasa.

- **In Fez:** Al-Attarine madrasa*, Al-Sahrij madrasa*, Andalous mosque, Bou Inania madrasa*, Cherratine madrasa, Kairaouine mosque* and Nejjarine fondouk.
- **In Marrakech:** Bab Agnaou, Badi palace, Ben Youssef madrasa*, Koubba Ba'adiyn*, Koutoubia mosque*, Saadian tombs and Tin Mal mosque (daytrip)*.
- **In Casablanca:** Hassan II mosque*.

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

Have a great trip!



David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
www.approachguides.com

PREVIEW
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Morocco Revealed: Fez, Marrakech, Meknes & Rabat

Version 1.0

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

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Approach Guides
New York, NY
www.approachguides.com

ISBN: 978-1-936614-47-9

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1. Bou Inania Madrasa *

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Call to Prayer

Moroccan Dynasties

Idrisid Dynasty

Almoravid Dynasty

Almohad Dynasty

Marinid Dynasty

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Al-Andalus Provides a Foundation

The Seeds are Sewn

The seeds for Morocco's unique forms of art and architecture were sewn in Islamic Spain under its first powerful dynasty, the Umayyads. So, before taking on Morocco specifically, we offer you a brief account of the Umayyads — who they were and what motivated them — and how their greatest architectural achievement, the Mezquita mosque in Córdoba, came to influence the Moroccan aesthetic.

The Umayyads in Spain

- **Islam's entry into Spain.** Islamic forces — North African Berbers with Arab commanders — first entered Spain from North Africa in 711. In only three years, they had gained control of nearly all of the Iberian peninsula. The newly-won territories were named Al-Andalus.
- **Umayyad caliphate falls in Damascus.** In 750, an event occurred that transformed the Islamic world: the Umayyad caliphate — which had ruled since 661 from its capital in Damascus, Syria — was overthrown by Abbasid rivals. The Abbasids massacred all (but one) of the Umayyad leadership, assumed control, and promptly established their new capital in Baghdad.
- **Sole Umayyad survivor seeks refuge in Spain.** The only survivor from the Umayyad royal family lineage — the grandson of the last presiding caliph — escaped to Spain for safety and soon established a new Umayyad stronghold in Córdoba.
- **First an emirate.** Early Umayyad rulers elected to use the title of emir (meaning prince or commander), as opposed to caliph, the title of supreme leader of the Islamic world, to avoid antagonizing the Abbasids at such an early stage and risk their intervention in Spain. The emirate persisted from 756-929.
- **Then a caliphate.** In 929, Spanish Umayyad ruler Abd al-Rahman III (ruled 912-961) took a major step, establishing an independent caliphate in opposition to that of the Abbasids and re-asserting exclusive claim to leadership of the Islamic world. The Umayyad caliphate survived until 1031, presiding over the culturally richest period in the 800-year history of Al-Andalus.

Mezquita as a Symbol

As with all dynasties, 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.

The Mezquita, aka the Great Mosque of Córdoba, was the primary architectural work sponsored by the Spanish Umayyads. The city's centerpiece, it was the primary vehicle through which they communicated their public message. It became a symbol of great significance, identifying who they were

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Mosques

The mosque serves as the Islamic faith's primary place of worship. After a brief discussion of the religion, we explore the basic architectural features common to mosques throughout the Islamic world and then highlight the unique characteristics of those in Morocco.

Islam Basics

Islam — meaning submission or surrender, alluding the faithful's complete acceptance of the will of God — is the third and last of the great Abrahamic monotheistic faiths, to which Judaism and Christianity are also members.

- **The Prophet.** The Prophet Muhammad lived from 570-632 in the religious and trading center of Mecca, located in modern-day Saudi Arabia. The year 610 marks the birth of Islam, as it was the year in which Muhammad was visited by the Archangel Gabriel and the word of God began to be revealed to him. For protection, Muhammad moved to Medina in 622 (known as the journey or *hijra*), where he was recognized as a prophet; this marks the beginning (year 0) of the Muslim calendar.
- **The Quran.** The core Islamic religious text, the Quran, represents the word of God, as revealed in Arabic to the Prophet from 610-632; the verses, initially recounted verbally, were written down soon after his death. It is divided into 114 chapters (*suras*), ordered from longest to shortest.
- **Five pillars.** Five pillars or observances ground the faith: (1) acceptance of the *shahada*, the belief that “There is no God but the God and Muhammad is his Prophet.” (2) prayer (*namaz*) toward Mecca five times per day (the call to prayer is used to summon the faithful); (3) giving alms (*zakat*) to the poor or disadvantaged; (4) fasting from sunrise to sunset for the month of Ramadan; and (5) pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca at least once in a believer's lifetime.
- **Direct communion with God.** There is no intervention of clergy or other religious intermediary. The faithful pray directly to God, forging a close and personal relationship. Friday is the most important prayer day, when all assemble at the city's primary mosque.

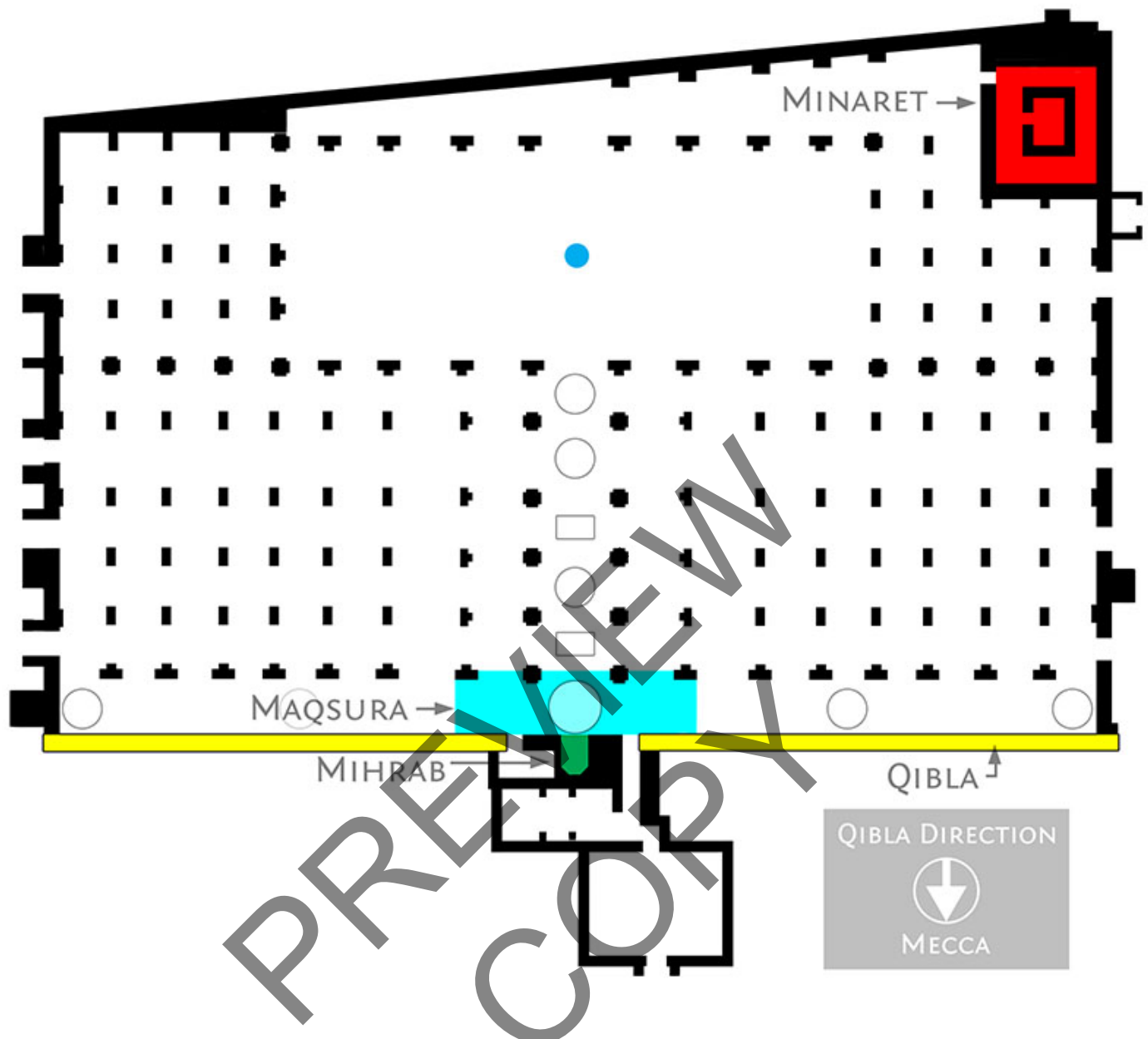


Fig. 2. Standard features of a mosque [Koutoubia mosque, Marrakech]. Highlights added.

Standard Features of a Mosque

- **A covered space.** A mosque's most basic function is to provide a covered space in which large numbers of the faithful can assemble for prayers.
- **Qibla and mihrab.** The qibla wall is the most important feature in the mosque (yellow highlights in Fig. 2). It faces Mecca in Saudi Arabia — specifically the Kaaba shrine in the Great Mosque (al-Masjid al-Haram) — and highlights the prayer direction for the faithful; this is known as the qibla direction. In the center of the wall is the mihrab niche, which helps the faithful identify the qibla and reinforces its direction (green highlights in Fig 2). The faithful kneel on prayer rugs, aligned in rows facing the qibla. This practice is consistent with the Quran's chapter 2, verse 144: "So turn your face toward al-Masjid al-Haram. And wherever you [believers] are, turn your faces toward it [in prayer]."

- **Maqsura.** The *maqsura* is a private area located just before the mihrab that was reserved for the ruler; it provided protection and afforded him a premier position at the front of the prayer hall (light blue highlights in Fig. 2).
- **Minaret.** The mosque's principal vertical feature, the tower-shaped minaret provides an elevated platform from which the call to prayer is recited (red highlights in Fig 2). To hear the call to prayer and get an English translation, [read our post on the subject](#).
- **Prayer and recitation features.** A number of other features support prayer and the recitation of the Quran: *minbar* (a staircase that functions as a pulpit for the imam who leads a sermon at Friday prayers); *dikka* (a platform on which respondents lead the congregation in assuming postures and recitation); and *kursi* (a lectern that holds the Quran).

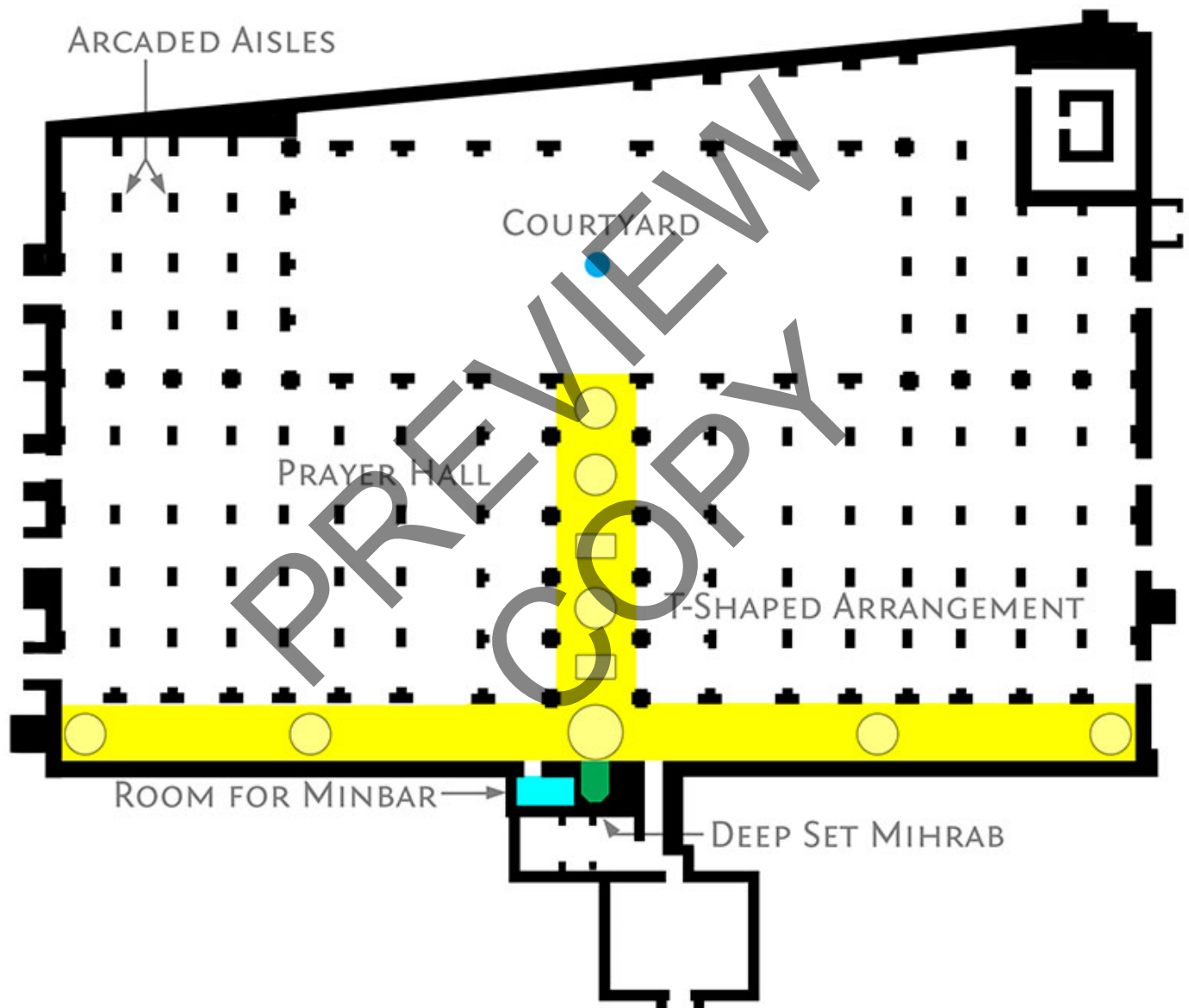


Fig. 3. Distinctive features of Moroccan mosques [Koutoubia mosque, Marrakech]. Highlights added.

Distinctive Features of Moroccan Mosques

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City Gates

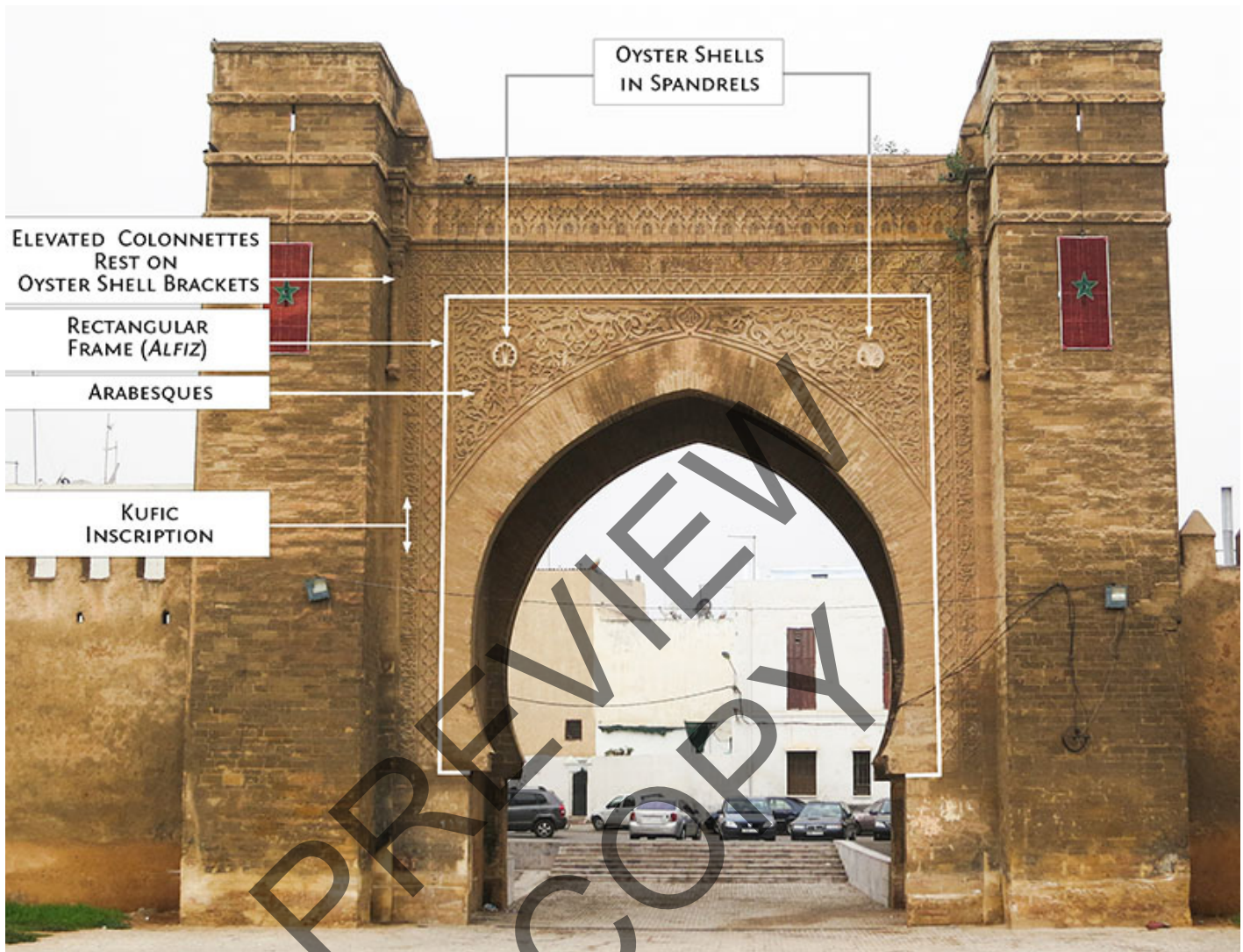


Fig. 10. Basic features of a city gate [Bab Mrisa, Salé]. Highlights added.

The city gate is another rich source of some of Morocco's greatest art and architecture. In addition to the critical defensive role it played in securing citizens against invaders, the gate performed an equally important communicative function: the decorative details on the gate's facade revealed who sponsored its construction and offered insights into the worldview of the community whose safety it guaranteed.

Basic Forms Established by Almohads

The basic model for the Moroccan city gate was set in place by the Almohads and remained generally consistent under subsequent dynasties — we will repeatedly encounter the same features on the touring itinerary that follows.

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- **Internal ramp.** An internal ramp — rather than stairs — leads to the top, allowing the muezzin to ascend on horseback.
- **Gallery with merlons.** The ramp gives way to an outdoor gallery ringed by merlons (Fig. 12 and green highlights in Fig. 14).
- **Tower-like main shaft.** The tower-like main shaft, consisting of multiple levels, often carries a network of repeating fleur de lys (*darj w ktaf*) or multi-foil arch designs (Fig. 14).
- **Upper shaft.** Rising from the gallery is a smaller square shaft, topped by a domed lantern and metal *yamur* finial with three orbs (Fig. 12 and yellow highlights in Fig. 14).

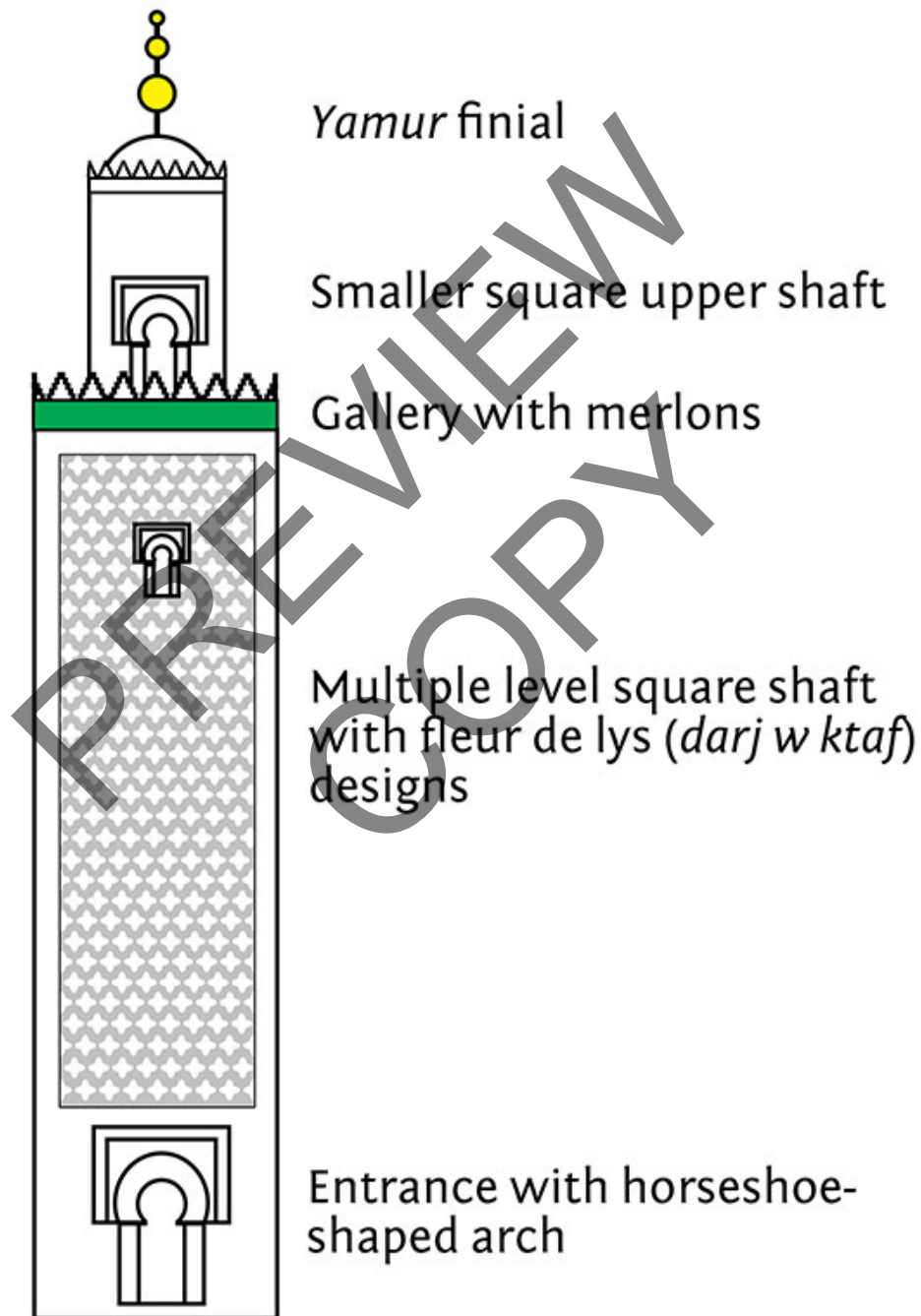


Fig. 14. Typical Moroccan minaret. Highlights added.

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Tile, Stucco and Wood

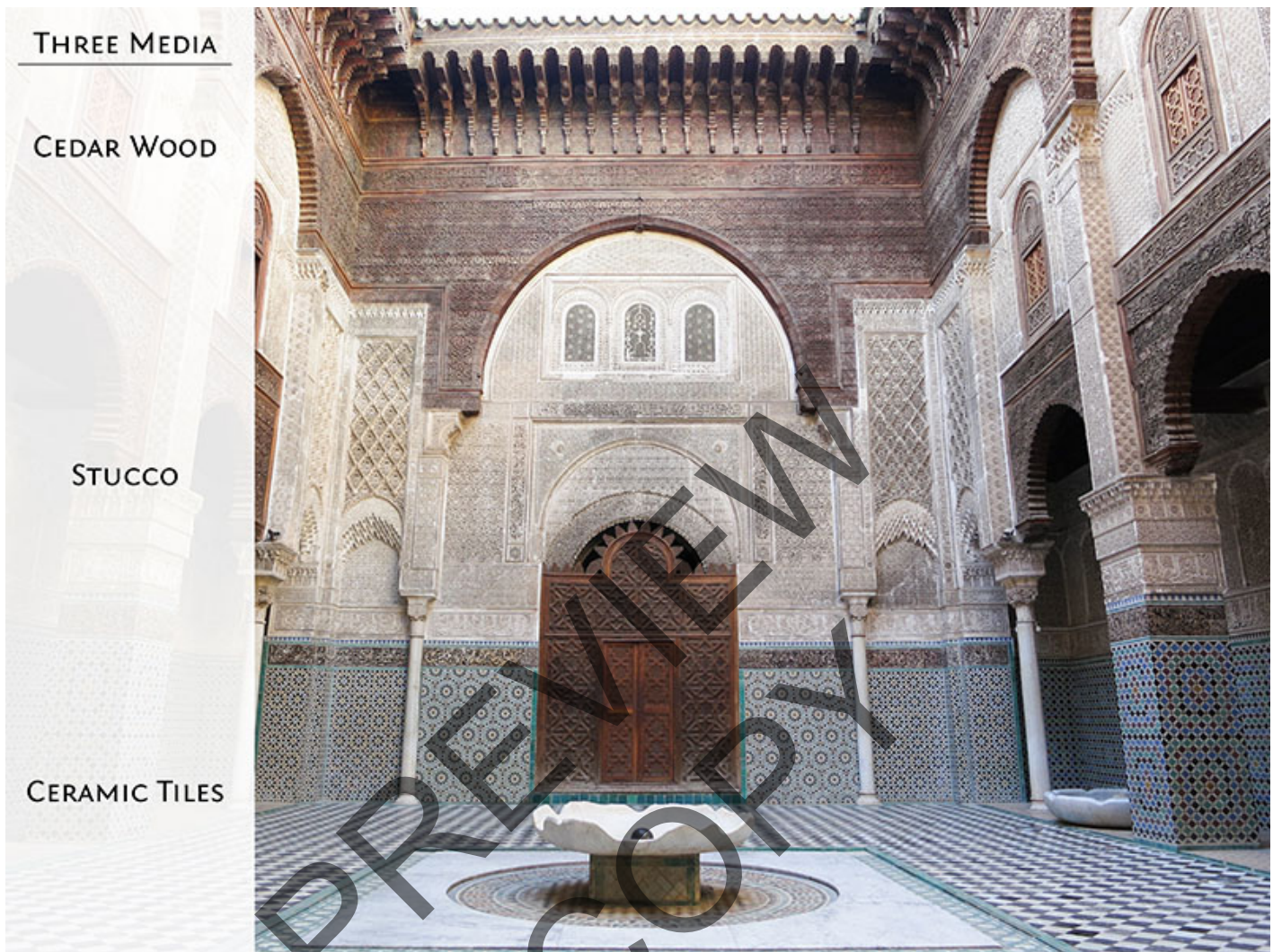


Fig. 19. Three primary media [Al-Attarine madrasa, Fez]. Highlights added.

In Morocco, as in Spain's Al-Andalus, decorative details are executed in three primary media: glazed ceramic tiles, stucco and wood (**Fig. 19**).

Glazed Ceramic Tiles

- **Zellige.** *Zellige* — derived from the Arabic word meaning polished stone — are glazed ceramic tiles.
- **Location.** They are chiefly used as decoration for floors, the base of walls and the interior of niches.
- **Technique.** Moroccan *zellige* employ the same technique known as *alicatado* in Spain. It is a labor-intensive process in which clay tiles are glazed with a specific color, fired in a kiln and cut by hand into precise shapes; they are then set tightly together in a plaster base to form a polychrome design, as if they were pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. The technique reached its highest

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Common Motifs

Over the course of visiting Morocco's leading monuments, you will encounter a number of recurring decorative motifs.

- Eight-pointed star
- Multi-foil arch
- *Darj w ktaf*
- Arabesque
- Stepped merlon
- Oyster shell

Author Tip: When visiting madrasas, you'll find the most impressive decorative details — often featuring these motifs — concentrated on or around the portal that grants access from the central courtyard to the prayer hall.

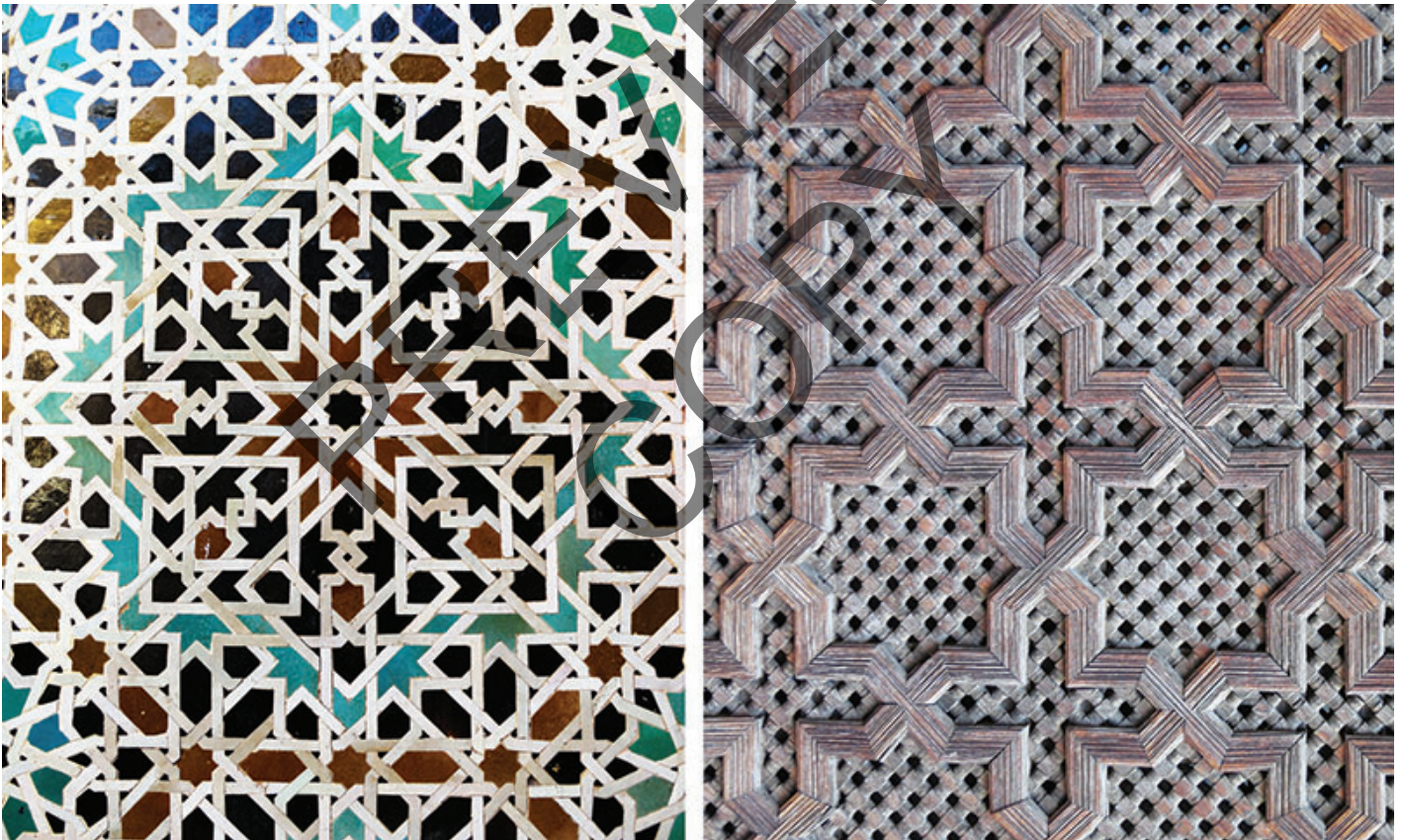


Fig. 20. Eight-pointed stars, made from rotated squares.

Eight-Pointed Star

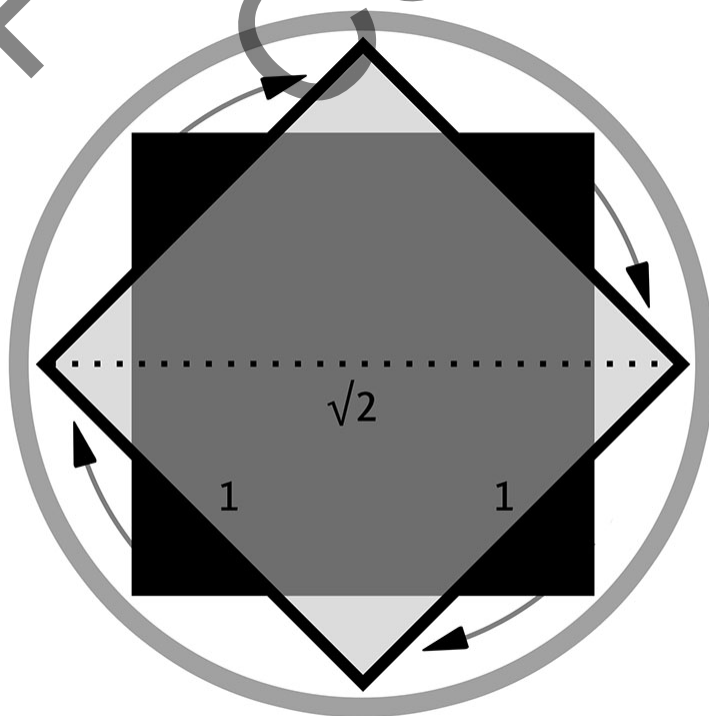
The eight-pointed star (**Fig. 20**) is perhaps the most frequently encountered geometric pattern in

the Moroccan repertoire, as it was in Al-Andalus.

- **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
lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree,
neither of the east nor of the west,
whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire.
Light upon light.
Allah guides to His light whom He wills.
And Allah presents examples for the people,
and Allah is Knowing of all things.

- **Eight-pointed star as symbol.** An eight-pointed star is constructed by rotating a square 45 degrees about its axis ([Fig. 21](#)). This 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, when an eight-pointed star is placed on the walls of a structure or in its dome, it is as if the human space has been infused with a divine quality.
- **The square root of 2.** The spinning of a square about its axis creates a circle with a diameter of an irrational number, that is, a real number that cannot be represented as a terminating or repeating decimal. For example, for a square with sides of length 1, the diameter of the circle is an irrational number, $\sqrt{2}$ ([Fig. 21](#)). The use of geometric designs with irrational number dimensions was yet another way Islamic artists conveyed the unknowable or the infinite, proxies for the divine.



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3. TOUR OF FEZ

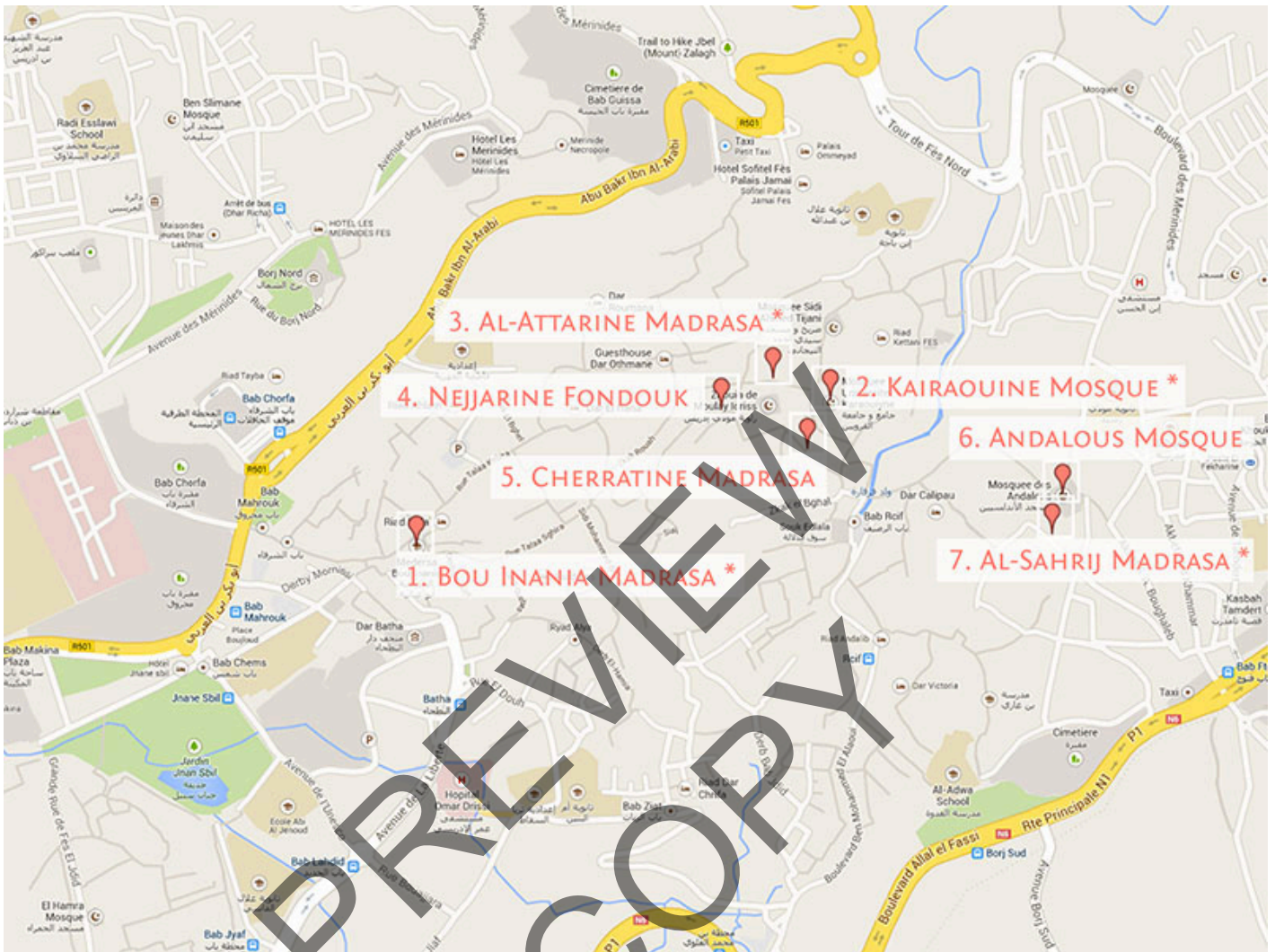


Fig. 56. Tour, Fez. See details in [Google Maps](#).

Tour

Our tour includes Fez's premier monuments (Fig. 56).

1. Bou Inania madrasa *
2. Kairaouine mosque *
3. Al-Attarine madrasa *
4. Nejjarine fondouk
5. Cherratine madrasa
6. Andalous mosque
7. Al-Sahrij madrasa *

Background on the City

- **A tale of two early cities.** Although initially settled in the late 8th century by Idris I, the creator of the first Islamic dynasty in Morocco, Fez was formally founded by Idris II in the early 9th century on the Oued Fez, a tributary of the Sebou river. To free himself from the control of his Awraba Berber sponsors, Idris II encouraged Arab immigration, establishing two separate cities on opposing banks of the river: the city on the east bank — known as Madinat Fas — was inhabited by Arabs from Córdoba, Spain, who came in 818; the city on the west bank — known as Al Aliya — was inhabited by Arabs from Kairouan, Tunisia, who arrived in 824. The mosque centerpieces for each city — Andalous in the east and Kairaouine in the west — were named for the locations from which the new immigrant populations originated. To appreciate this layout, [watch this Approach Guides On Location series video](#) that points out both early mosques in relation to the river ([Fig. 57](#)).



Fig. 57. On Location series video, Fez city view. [Watch the video.](#)

- **Hydraulic city.** While all Islamic cities are laid out to facilitate the efficient movement of water, rather than along a rigid grid aligned with the cardinal directions, nowhere is this design more evident than in Fez. The city's roads wind from high elevation (on the mountain periphery) to low elevation (near the river), following the gravity-driven flow of water over the natural course of the land.
- **Expansion under Almoravids.** The two walled cities developed separately until they were unified under the Almoravids and a single wall was built around the periphery. The area enclosed by this wall is known as **Fez el Bali**, which constitutes the old city.
- **Almohad city.** The Almoravid walls were largely destroyed by the conquering Almohads upon taking the city in 1145; the 13th century walls constructed by the Almohads stand today.

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1. Bou Inania Madrasa *

Overview

- **Built:** 1350-1355. This was the last built of the Marinid madrasas profiled in this guidebook; it represents the mature Marinid style.
- **Ruler:** Marinid ruler Abu Inan Faris aka Abu Inan al-Mutawakkil (ruled 1348-1358).
- **Location:** [Google Map](#). At high elevation on the west bank of the old city, not far from Bab Boujeloud.
- **Visiting hours:** Open Saturday-Thursday from 9am - 12:30pm and 2:30pm - 6pm; open Friday from 9am - 11:30am.

What Makes It Unique

- **Dual functions: school and mosque.** Perhaps the most highly-regarded Marinid madrasa, Bou Inania is unique in that it simultaneously served as a mosque, attested to by its prominent minaret.
- **Unique architectural features, never replicated.** To accommodate its dual school-mosque functions, the madrasa employs two features seen nowhere else: a pair of square prayer rooms; and a water channel that separates the courtyard from the prayer hall.
- **Large size.** Bou Inania is one of the larger madrasas profiled in this guidebook, second only in size to Marrakech's Ben Youssef, built subsequently under the Saadi dynasty.

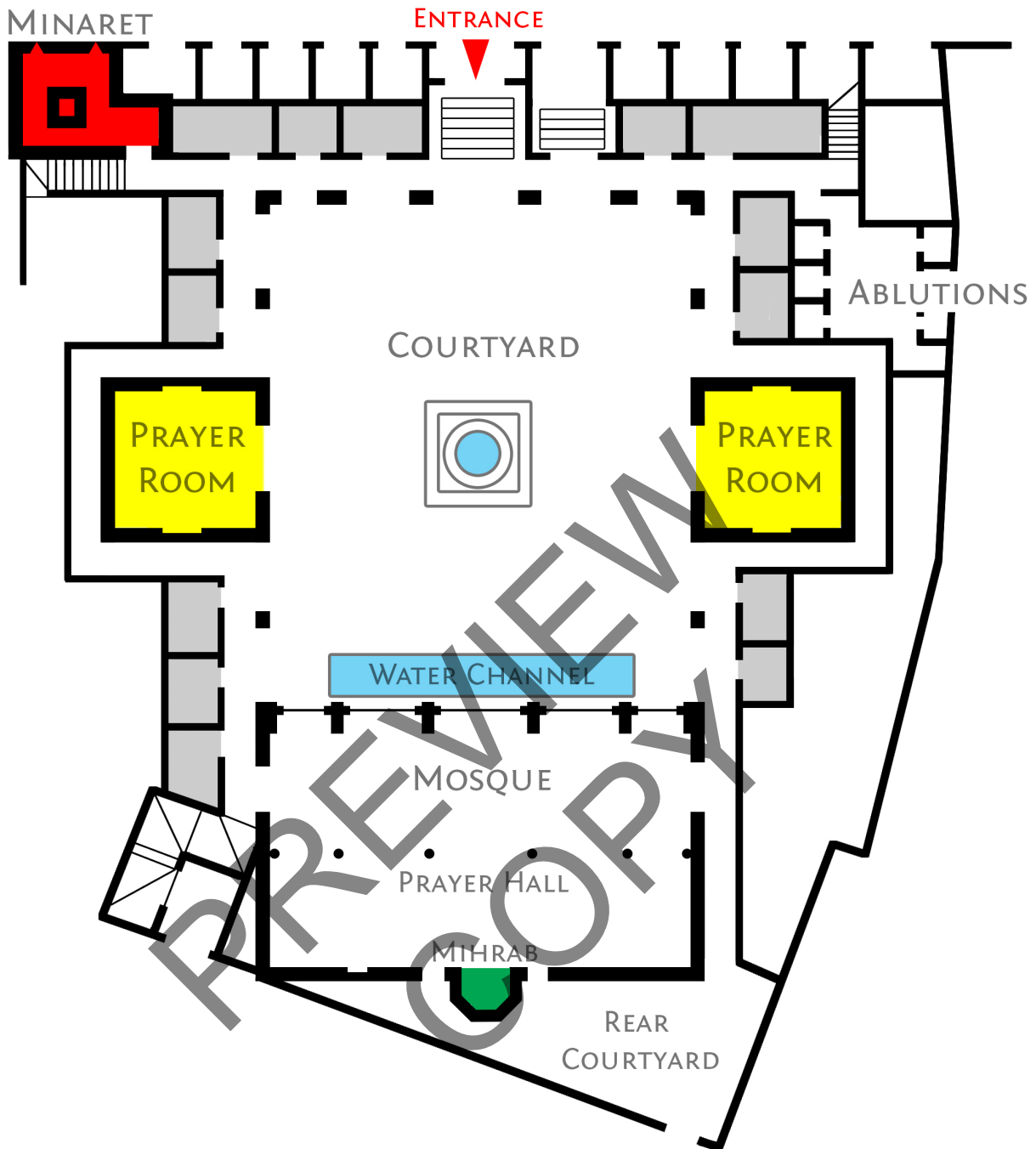


Fig. 58. Layout, Bou Inania madrasa. Highlights added.

Layout

- **Entrance.** Visitors enter on the north side of the structure, ascending a double staircase and crossing under an impressive *muqarnas* ceiling.
- **Central courtyard with fountain.** An open-air rectangular courtyard — with a round ablutions fountain (blue highlights in Fig. 58) — occupies the center of the madrasa, surrounded on all four sides by an arcade. It is rather wide, consisting of five bays, rather than

the typical three.

- **Student cells.** Thirty-five small rooms used to house students hang off the courtyard on the ground and upper floors (grey highlights in Fig. 58).
- **Prayer rooms.** Square prayer rooms join the east and west sides of the central courtyard (yellow highlights in Fig. 58); each is topped with a ribbed wooden dome. The existence of prayer rooms separate from the formal prayer hall of the mosque is a distinctive feature of this madrasa; they likely served as private prayer space for women during mosque services.
- **Minaret.** Consistent with its role as a mosque, a square plan minaret sits on the madrasa's northwest corner (red highlights in Fig. 58 and Fig. 59). Bou Inania is the only madrasa in Fez with a minaret.
- **Mosque.** Opening onto the south side of the courtyard, the mosque has a mihrab at the center of its southern wall (green highlights in Fig. 58). The qibla direction is 136 degrees, versus the geographically accurate 96 degrees required to be facing Mecca. The prayer area consists of two aisles that run parallel to the qibla.
- **Water channel.** A water channel runs between the courtyard and the mosque, offering the faithful a symbolic cleansing before their entry into the prayer hall (light blue highlights in Fig. 58).
- **Ablutions room.** A room with toilets and an ablutions fountain occupies the northeast corner.

Before Entering the Madrasa

Just across the street from the madrasa's entrance are the remains of a **water clock** (*magana*). It consists of thirteen niches which originally held bronze bowls that counted the hours by the regulated flow of water from one to the next. The water clock was a particularly valuable asset in medieval Morocco, as it allowed for precise calculation of prayer times.

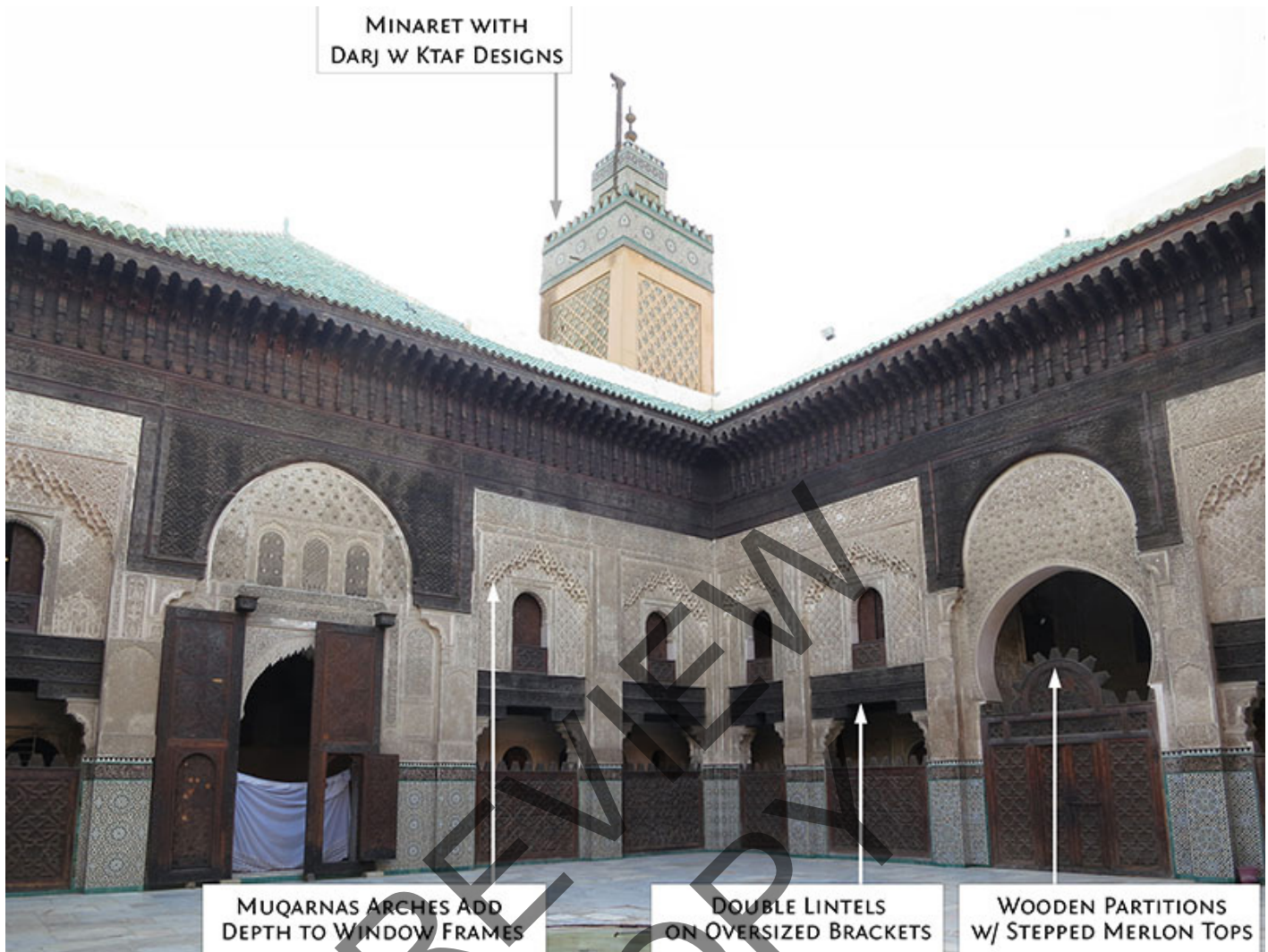


Fig. 59. Courtyard arcade, looking northwest, Bou Inania madrasa. Highlights added.

Courtyard

- **Double-height arrangement.** A double-height arcade — with two levels of piers — frames the courtyard facade: on the ground floor, piers support double wooden lintels on oversized brackets; on the upper floor, they support pointed *muqarnas* arches that add depth and shadow to the elevation (**Fig. 59**).
- **Elaborate wooden arches and cornices.** Large cedar arches rise over the four primary entrances into the courtyard. They hold up a magnificent carved wooden cornice, the underside of which has thin brackets. These wooden decorative features are a trademark of the Marinid style, unrivaled anywhere else in the Islamic world.
- **Wooden partitions.** On the ground floor, wooden partitions occupy the spaces between the piers, separating the private space of the student cells from the public space of the courtyard. They hold geometric patterns and are topped with miniature stepped merlons (**Fig. 59**).
- **Horseshoe arches into mosque.** As is typical, the arcade's double-height arrangement differs on the side that affords access into the mosque: the flat double wooden lintels used on the other sides are exchanged for bold horseshoe-shaped stucco arches (**Fig. 60**). The open-

ing up of the arcade that results adds a north-to-south directionality to the courtyard space, suggesting visitors move from the entrance into the mosque's prayer hall.



Fig. 60. Courtyard, looking south toward the mosque, Bou Inania madrasa.

Mosque

Although the mosque portion of the madrasa is off-limits to non-Muslims, its distinctive features are visible from the courtyard (**Fig. 61**).

- **Windows.** The qibla wall is lined with a series of stained glass windows containing geometric designs.
- **Interior arcade.** The arcade that bisects the prayer hall consists of marble columns with square capitals; they support elegant horseshoe arches and star-patterned vaults.



Fig. 61. View down center aisle of mosque to mihrab, Bou Inania madrasa. Highlights added.

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Idrisid Dynasty

Background

- **Before the Idrisids: Islam comes to Morocco.** In 642, the Arab armies of the new religion of Islam — led by the short-lived Rashidun caliphate (the precursor to the Umayyads) based in Medina, Saudi Arabia — displaced the Byzantines and gained control of Egypt, which served as a base for expansion into the rest of North Africa. The takeover of North Africa, including Morocco, was completed from 704-714 under the Umayyads, resulting in widespread conversion of the local Berber populations to Islam. In 711, Umayyad-sponsored forces — North African Berbers with Arab commanders — crossed over into Spain and won control over most of the Iberian peninsula.
- **First Islamic dynasty ruling from 788-974.** The Idrisids founded the first dynasty in the history of Islamic Morocco.
- **Early days.** A recent arrival from Mecca, Idris I succeeded in winning over the recently-Islamicized Awraba Berbers inhabiting the area around Volubilis (northwest of Meknes). Leveraging Awraba military support, he succeeded in expanding his sphere of influence.
- **Shiite Arabs.** The Idrisids were Shiite Arabs — following the Zaidi school of Islamic jurisprudence — with claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad. In this respect, they are different from subsequent dynasties (Almoravids, Almohads, Marinids and Wattisids), who were Sunni Berbers.
- **Name origin.** The dynasty's name is derived from that of the founder, Idris I.
- **Fez founders.** The Idrisids are responsible for founding Fez, which served as the dynasty's capital. The city's Arab immigrant population allowed Idris II to establish a power base independent of Awraba Berber sponsorship.
- **No architectural remains.** Unfortunately, there is very little that remains from this period. Although Fez's Kairaouine and Andalous mosques were originally built under the Idrisids, they were substantially expanded and restored by subsequent dynasties; the only clearly identifiable elements from this early period are their minarets.

Ruler Timeline

- Idris I (788-791)
- Idris II (791-828)
- Muhammad ibn Idris (828-836)
- Ali ibn Muhammad, aka Ali I (836-848)
- Yahya ibn Muhammad, aka Yahya I (848-864)
- Yahya ibn Yahya, aka Yahya II (864-874)
- Ali ibn Umar, aka Ali II (874-883)
- Yahya ibn Al-Qassim, aka Yahya III (883-904)
- Yahya ibn Idris ibn Umar, aka Yahya IV (904-917)

Fatimid dynasty overlordship (917-925)

- Al-Hajjam al-Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn al-Qassim (925-927)
- Al Qasim Gannum (937-948)
- Abu l-Aish Ahmad (948-954)
- Al-Hasan ibn Guennoun, aka Hassan II (954-974)

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Morocco Reading List

We've re-imagined the travel reading list for those seeking more rewarding and fulfilling experiences around the world. [Explore our collection](#) of "Trip Reads" — expertly-curated print books, ebooks, magazine articles, papers from leading academics, online resources, music, podcasts, videos and more.

Here are just a few of our Morocco recommendations ([see the complete list](#)):

- **The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca** The story of the author's move away from the gray skies of London to the sun-drenched city of Casablanca. *By Tahrir Shah.*
- **"Marrakech Through the Eyes of an Artist"** A local artist's perspective on the city. *By Gisela Williams.*
- **Sounds of Morocco** Listen to a playlist containing a personal collection of Morocco tracks compiled by our founder Jennifer Raezer. The perfect pre-trip soundtrack.
- **The Butter Man** Just for kids! A warm family story of a father's upbringing in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, as told to his young daughter. *By Elizabeth Alalou, Ali Alalou and Julie Klear Essakalli.*

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Praise

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Los Angeles Times

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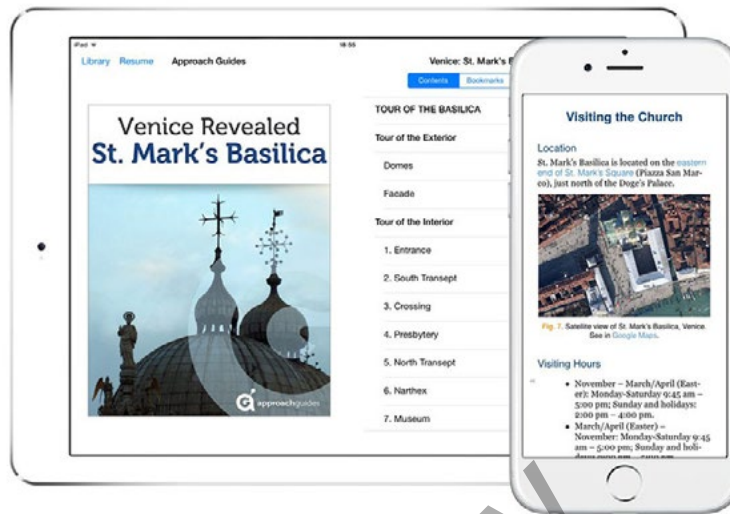
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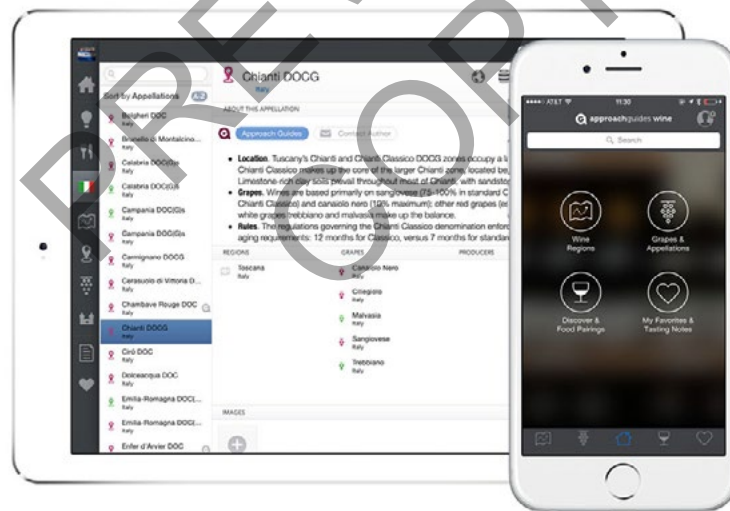
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