



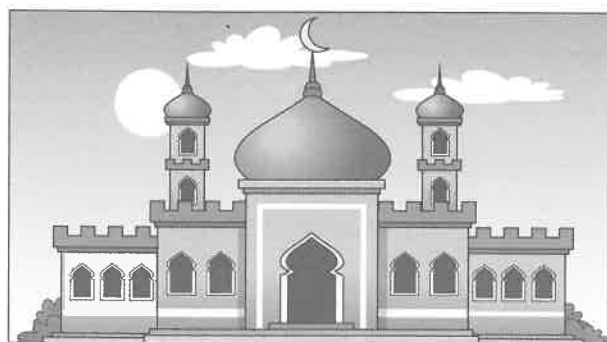
Mosques are Muslim places of worship. The Arabic word for mosque, masjid, means 'place of prostration' – a place for bowing down. Anywhere Muslims pray can be called a mosque, whether it's a building or in the open air.

Mosque buildings are sacred to Islam, and can be found all over the world. In the United Kingdom, there are around 3 million Muslims – around 5 per cent of the population – and there are around 1,750 mosques.

Mosques are places for Muslims to meet for prayers, to study and to respect festivals such as Ramadan and Eid. They are important for funerals and marriage ceremonies, and for making honourable business agreements. Some mosques are also used as homeless shelters, community centres and schools.

The first ever mosque was the Prophet Mohammed's home in Medina, Saudi Arabia, a 7th-century house with a large courtyard surrounded by long rooms. The biggest mosque in the world is the Al Haram Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Muslims attempt to journey to this holy place at least once in their lives. It can accommodate an astonishing 4 million people at once. The Al Haram surrounds the Ka'aba, a cuboid-shaped building that is the holiest place in Islam. This is home to the Black Stone, which was set into the Ka'aba's walls by the Prophet Mohammed before his first revelation. Regardless of where Muslims are in the world, when they pray, they pray towards Mecca.

Although some mosques are private places, others welcome thousands of visitors each year. Suitable clothing is required: it must not show too much skin. Long trousers and shirts or t-shirts are suitable for men, while women must also cover their arms, heads and necks.



One of the first things that a visitor to a mosque encounters is a shoe rack. Worshippers and visitors are expected to remove their shoes as they enter the mosque, to prevent dirt from entering the holy space. Before Muslims pray, they must also perform a ritual washing (wudu). This is done in the ablutions area. While some bigger mosques have fountains in their entrances and courtyards, worshippers may use bathrooms in smaller mosques. Washing before prayer symbolises spiritual cleansing and a spirit of purity before coming before the Muslim God, Allah Almighty.

The biggest spaces in mosques are their prayer halls, also known as musallas. They do not have seats: worshippers instead use prayer mats. These spaces were designed to allow the entire male population of a city or town to sit on the floor and pray. Women are allowed to attend the hall on Fridays, but traditionally are separated from men and pray in separate areas.

Another important part of the mosque is the mihrab. This semi-circular hollow in the wall indicates the direction of Mecca, allowing Muslims to pray in its direction. Next to the mihrab is the minbar, from where sermons are delivered.

Mosques can have symbolic traditional features. As it is disrespectful to create images and pictures of the Islamic God and prophets, they are decorated with patterns and stained glass. They also feature tall towers called 'minarets', which means 'lighthouses' in Arabic. Before the five daily prayers, a Muslim crier stands at the top of a minaret, calling worshippers to prayer. A dome, or qubba, is traditionally found on top of a mosque, above the large prayer hall. Although on early mosques the dome would take up only part of the roof, bigger domes can be the size of the entire roof of the prayer hall. The dome is a symbol of the sky and 'Jannah', the paradise Muslims believe awaits them after death.