

Nairobi Mosques by Anwar Khan

It goes without saying that the most important institution for a Muslim is a Masjid. Of the Indians that came over to build the railway a fair proportion, if not the majority were Punjabi Muslims. Mombasa was a Muslim town and had a few Masjid, but it was deemed necessary for the labourers to construct their own near the place of work., so a place of worship was built all along the line of the rail. If the camp was temporary, so was the mosque. In the main mosques were built of corrugated iron sheets and if the camp was of a more permanent nature, so was the mosque. In many cases the camps developed into towns and so the mosque was then suitably enlarged and made of stone.

The most famous Masjid built, literally a few feet away from the railway line was the Syed Bagh Ali Shah Masjid at MacKinnon Road, who died there in 1902. To date many Muslims visit the shrine of Syed Bagh Ali and if travelling by road will stop and pay their respects. Another famous mosque built was the one at Makindu. In 1899 the line reached Nairobi and the initial mosque at Kilindini, Mombasa was dismantled and railed up to Nairobi. The corrugated iron sheets were re-erected at Muthurwa in the Railway Landies to become Nairobi's first Jamia Masjid, but as Nairobi was expanding the Jamia Masjid in Central Nairobi was opened.

Jamia Masjid was founded in 1902 by Syed Maulana Abdullah Shah. The initial construction was of temporary iron sheets structure, but the construction in the shape as we see it now did not begin until 1925. This was because of the law at the time prohibited Indians and Arabs from owning land in Nairobi.



As Nairobi soon became the established capital of the colony, the congregation outgrew the original structure and plans were submitted for the new building modelled on the Mughal built Masajid of Shah Jahan in Delhi and Aurangzeb in Lahore. The municipal councils main objection at the time was that the minarets proposed were too high. These were accordingly lowered and permission granted.

A remarkable effort of collecting funds, spearheaded by the Punjabi Muslims, started and everyone pitched in. The committee published a booklet which lists every contributor - their tribe, profession and donation, even if it was a single shilling or (from women) a bangle. One finds not only Sunnis and Shias - the Aga Khan was a major contributor - but also Hindus, Sikhs and Parsees, amongst the contributors. A complete log of every contributor is listed in the book *Settling in a Strange Land* by Cynthia Salvadori.

The mosque was completed in 1933. Built in traditional Arabic Muslim architectural style, walls consist of smooth dressed stone interspersed with marble and ceramic tile cladding, while the roof

features three magnificent silver onion domes that gleam in the sun and three exquisitely adorned minarets supported by a series of vaulted arches and moulded round pillars.

The floors are finished in patterned ceramic tiles and marble while windows are glazed in clear and coloured glass held in arched frames. Main doors are of beautifully hand carved timber supported by embellished arched frames. There is an open courtyard situated at the rear of the compound.



An interesting feature is a row of shops, integral with the main building. The purpose is so that the shops can be rented out to tenants, providing the mosque with a ready source of income for its upkeep. No doubt the shops also provide an added level of security.

The mosque has been extended several times over the years to accommodate a growing congregation. There is a library, training centre, a men's prayer hall on the ground floor and a women's prayer hall on the first floor. It is the main Islamic centre in Nairobi with a capacity of 8,000 worshippers.

Many Masajid have since been built in Nairobi and of course many have been expanded, such as the Railway Landies. Other famous mosques are the Imtiaz Ali, Park Road, Pangani, Eastleigh and Parklands.