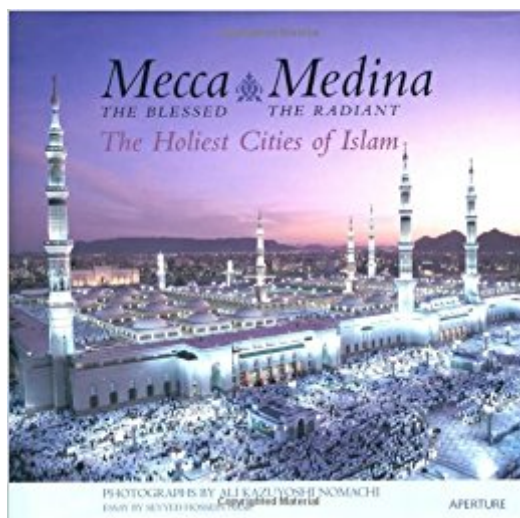


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Mecca, The Blessed, Medina, The Radiant: The Holiest Cities Of Islam



Synopsis

Nearly impossible for an outsider to gain access to, these two holy places have never before been as fully documented. Nomachi enters this world and returns with beautiful photographs, as thoughtful as they are revealing. “The photographs of these two cities are spectacular. What makes the book and the photographs even more compelling is that these cities are closed to non-Muslims and thus the book provides a rare glimpse at a culture and its artifacts, such as its architecture, that is little known. A fascinating look at one of the world’s largest and least known living traditions.”—Kirk Robertson, Neon

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Customer Reviews

These photographs of the Muslim holy cities Mecca and Medina, taken by a Japanese convert, Ali Kazuyoshi Nomachi, are something new for most Westerners, and perhaps even for many Muslims. Non-Muslims are never allowed into Mecca, and it is almost unheard-of for religious and government leaders to allow such pictures to be taken. Most of these images were shot during the holy month of Ramadan, when many faithful are in Mecca and Medina on pilgrimage. Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University, has contributed an essay explaining the history and significance of the two cities. "Mecca and its twin city Medina flourish as the heart and sacred Center of the Islamic universe and will continue to do so as long as there are men and women who accept the truth of Lailaha illa'Llah and Muhammadun rasul Allah," he writes. Nomachi has worked for National Geographic and Life, and his pictures have the information-packed clarity one might expect. There are fascinating images: literally hundreds of

thousands of white-robed believers circling the Ka'bah, Mecca's sacred center; men ritually shaving one another's heads; tired families fasting; small children praying. Nomachi's pictures are oddly cool, but they convey the all-encompassing nature of the faith. Mecca the Blessed, Medina the Radiant will be especially thrilling to those Muslims still planning their pilgrimage.

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... revealed. Ali Kazuyoshi Nomachi is an outstanding Japanese photographer who converted to Islam. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is Iranian-born, and a Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University when this book was first published in 1997. They had "access," which should probably be written in capital letters. You have to have ACCESS to take aerial photographs in Saudi Arabia, and they are most impressive. The "access" came from the Saudi Royal family, in the personages of the governors of Mecca and Medina. The other essential piece of this collaborative effort is the publisher, "Aperture," perhaps THE publisher of photographic books, with my copies of their books on W. Eugene Smith, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paul Strand, et al., readily coming to mind. The result of this collaboration is a very high quality, and in many ways unique book, that can be appreciated by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Dr. Nasr commences with a historical explanation of the relevance of the region, starting with Adam and Eve, through Abraham, and then the origins of Islam, with the Prophet Mohammed. I have an overall familiarity with the story, and found the summary useful. The heart of the book, of course, is the photographs. Nomachi has a keen eye, and brings out the sheer diversity of those who consider themselves Muslims, and live over that vast swath of earth from Mauritania to Indonesia. For example, there are some colorfully dressed African women, probably from Nigeria, and other more uniformly dressed women from Indonesia. In another picture, Nomachi brings out the fact that the Muslim men and women from South Africa pray in a single straight line, which is not the norm. Although somewhat understated, some of the problems of the pilgrimage are indicated, including heat stroke and public health problems related to contagious diseases. And the ritual of stoning the pillars (Jumarat) that represent the devil is historically dangerous, due to crowding and stampeding. The only issue I found confusing is when Nomachi was actually there: during the "Haj," or during Ramadan, which is roughly two and a half months earlier, or both? The photographer grants "equal time" to Medina, the second holiest city. I have

seen numerous quality pictures related to Mecca and the Haj; far less so for Medina. The aerial photograph of the Prophet's Mosque at sunset, with the mountains of the Hijaz is most impressive. All religions have their charlatans and "believers" who are only going through the motions. Nomachi had a knack for capturing those individuals whose belief seems most genuine. For many, this would be the highlight of their life. The last 10% of the book is composed of pictures from other areas of Saudi Arabia. I found the sunset pictures around the oasis of al-Ula stunning. I lived in Saudi Arabia for 20 years, and traveled extensively throughout the country. As a non-Muslim I was not permitted to go to these cities. That issue is the source for a couple one-star reviews of this book. One even charged that the cities are "racist," which is irrefutably belied by these pictures. The exclusion is based on one's professed faith. If anyone really felt a visit was essential, they could always become Muslim, as the photographer did. Though I would have liked to have seen these cities in person, I ultimately decided that the exclusion is OK, since most religions have rules regulating those outside the in-group, including the Indian pueblos of New Mexico. As a final point, this was a wonderful "impulse" purchase. , in their "wisdom," offered me the book based on my other purchases, for four bucks, and some change. As I post this, it is no longer available at that price. The luck of the draw... or, hum is moving towards omniscient status? Anyhow, I am quite pleased with my 5-star purchase.

Several readers have reviewed MECCA THE BLESSED, MEDINA THE RADIANT based on their negative political views of Saudi Arabia as well as the religious prohibition preventing non-Muslims from entering Mecca and Medina. Although I share these views (see my review of HATRED'S KINGDOM by Dore Gold), this is not a political book but one of photography and my review is on that basis. And on that basis, the book is very good. The photos are exceptional. Nomachi, a Japanese convert to Islam, is well known for his pictures of obscure locales and the reason for his reputation is evident here. The pictures are lush and colorful and take the reader inside these forbidden cities as well as a photographer could. The reader is first taken to Mecca via the gateway in the form of a Koran held towards the sky that separates Jeddah from Mecca. In Mecca, we see several shots of the Grand Mosque as well as its centerpiece, the Kabah. Most of the other photographs are of the pilgrimage to Mecca, the hajj, required of all Muslims at least once in their lives and include other points of religious interest. These include shots of Mina, where pilgrims throw stones at pillars which symbolize the devil, and also the Mount of Mercy, where much of the Koran is alleged to have been revealed to Mohammed. The section on Medina includes numerous shots of the Mosque of the Prophet. This was the first mosque in the world and, although I am no expert on the subject, gives the Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque in Istanbul serious competition for being the

most beautiful. Some of the fascinating photos include those of the prayer-niche where Mohammed first prayed and, most interesting of all, the tomb of Mohammed himself. Although Nomachi's pictures are extremely compelling and, of course, very professional, I do have one complaint. It would have been nice to see more pictures of the day-to-day life within these cities. Putting aside their religious significance to Muslims, Mecca is still a city of about a million people with Medina not far behind with both cities being quite old. Photos of the general architecture as well as people living their daily lives would have provided an even more intimate picture of these cities than the ones provided. The accompanying essays by Seyyed Hossein Nasr are instructive though unfortunately not as good as the photographs. Nasr provides a solid history of Arabia, the rise of Islam and details about the hajj. However, his being a Muslim himself is a double edged sword. On the one hand, he is quite knowledgeable about his subject matter. Given the prohibition on non-Muslims in Mecca and Medina, being a Muslim is likely beneficial in this respect. But on the other, he is not simply deferential but obsequious in his essays to the point of distraction. This also makes him overly vague and elliptical in his writings of Mohammed and the alleged revelation of the Koran to him. Finally, although I cannot fault a Muslim for not doing so, it would have been nice for some tips as to how a non-Muslim can sneak into the cities. Alas, I guess I am on my own on that one.

This is a stunning picture book plus description of the two most sacred sites in the Muslim world, at least in Saudi Arabia. The pictures are sumptuous and tell a great story on their own, but the accompanying text is very informative, so for anyone that wants to understand better this world that seems so foreign to most of us Westerners, this book is welcome and reveals a lot of splendid architecture of faith that you would see nowhere else and if you are not a Muslim, you simply cannot go there!

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