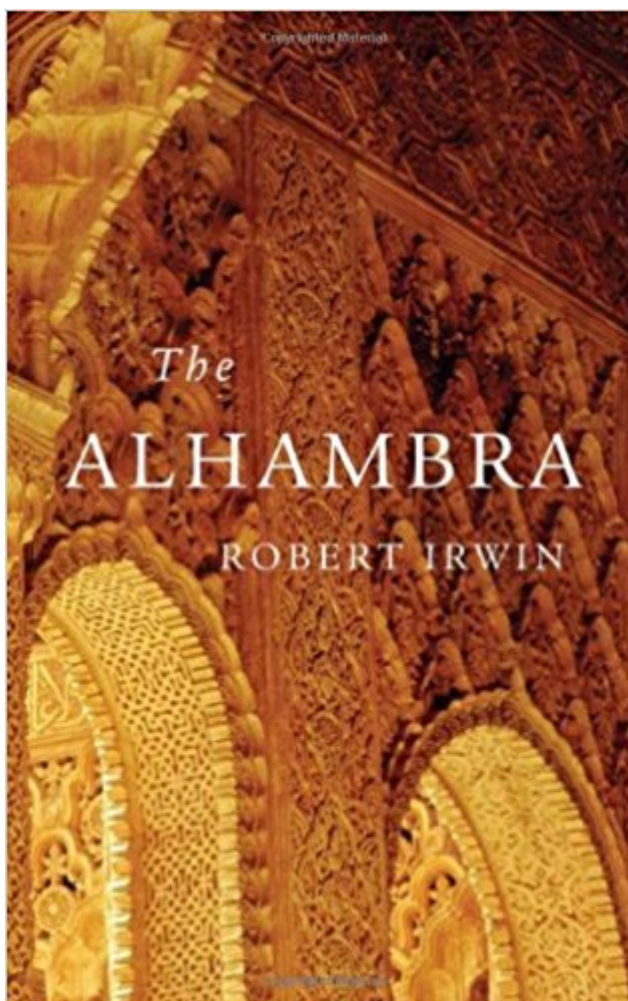


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# The Alhambra (Wonders Of The World)



## Synopsis

Read the Bldg Blog interview with Mary Beard about the Wonders of the World series (Part I and Part II) The Alhambra has long been a byword for exotic and melancholy beauty. In his absorbing new book, Robert Irwin, Arabist and novelist, examines its history and allure. The Alhambra is the only Muslim palace to have survived since the Middle Ages. Built by a threatened dynasty of Muslim Spain, it was preserved as a monument to the triumph of Christianity. Every day thousands of tourists enter this magnificent site to be awestruck by its towers and courts, its fountained gardens, its honeycombed ceilings and intricate tile work. It is a complex full of mysteries--even its purpose is unclear. Its sophisticated ornamentation is not indiscriminate but full of hidden meaning. Its most impressive buildings were designed not by architects, but by philosophers and poets. The Alhambra, which resembles a fairy-tale palace, was constructed by slave labor in an era of economic decline, plague, and political violence. Its sumptuously appointed halls have lain witness to murder and mayhem. Yet its influence on art and on literature--including Orientalist painting and the architecture of cinemas, Washington Irving and Jorge Luis Borges--has been lasting and significant. As our guide to this architectural masterpiece, Robert Irwin allows us to fully understand the impact of the Alhambra.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Built mostly in the mid- to late fourteenth century atop a hill overlooking Granada, Spain, the

Alhambra stands as a stunning example of Moorish architecture, the only Muslim palace to have survived since the Middle Ages. Its inordinate artistic detailing and disorderly layout--"underpinned," Irwin suggests, "by a geometry that [has] mystical resonance"--attract thousands of tourists every day. But the Alhambra has a complicated and often unclear history; it has served as a jail for debtors, invalid soldiers, and gypsies, and in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was "a monument to murder, slavery, poverty, and fear." In addition, as the site of the Moors' last stand before being driven from Spain by the Christian Reconquista in 1492, it has come to symbolize, for many Arabs and Muslims, everything they have lost in recent centuries. An able writer and noted Arabist, Irwin has clearly done his homework--though the academic-leaning material lacks a certain passion and purpose--and his detailed prose is complemented by a striking array of photos and illustrations. Andy Boynton Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Robert Irwin writes beautifully and is dauntingly clever but the stunning thing about him is his originality. (Ruth Rendell) Irwin's book is a learned but entertaining companion for any visitor. (Oleg Grabar) [Irwin] brings the majestic ruins to life. (Newsweek) This book captures and conveys the mysterious attractions of the Alhambra. (Doris Lessing The Spectator 2004-01-17) [A] fascinating book. (Malise Ruthven Sunday Times 2004-01-04) Irwin's book is both a perfect introduction to the place and a first-rate account of its history. (Mark Cocker The Guardian 2004-01-10) Edward Said pointed out that in writing about the Arab world, authors always have an agenda. Perhaps Irwin has replaced a Romantic illusion about the Alhambra with one more attractive to the New Age. Irwin is, however, modest about the possibility of ever knowing what the Alhambra was for. And his agenda seems to be nothing more sinister than to get us to look once more and to marvel once again at something we only thought we knew. (Robin Banerji The Prospect 2004-01-22) [A] delicious, tart monograph. (Vera Rule The Independent on Sunday 2004-01-11) In this rich, concise contribution to the literature, Robert Irwin uses his vast knowledge of medieval Islam to illumine both myth and reality, history and imagination, without disenchanting the romantic reader... Having been to the Alhambra many times, after reading this wonderful book I wished to go back--and see it for the first time. (Shusha Guppy The Independent 2004-02-13) A fascinating and very manageable guide. Irwin takes in the history of the Alhambra's inhabitants, its cultural importance to Westerners and to a new generation of Islamic writers. (Mirand France Daily Telegraph 2004-01-17) It is...greatly to Robert Irwin's credit that he has written a book on the subject that is sensible, scholarly, astringent and witty. It is a fine addition to what promises to be an outstanding series on the world's great

monuments. (Martin Gayford Sunday Telegraph 2004-02-01)The only Muslim palace to survive in the West, the Alhambra, a beautiful collection of buildings and gardens set against the mountain backdrop of Granada, has been fixed in travelers' imaginations since the 19th century works of American novelist Washington Irving made the site famous. Unfortunately, much of what we know and think about it remains more romanticized fiction than fact. Here, Irwin (a novelist and noted Islamicist) helps set the record straight. As he explains, the Alhambra has been highly--and often inaccurately--reconstructed over the centuries, changing and expanding with the shifting notion of how this collection of buildings had been originally used. No matter how beautiful, he asserts, today the Alhambra is a mere shadow of its former glory, when it dripped with beautiful tapestries and exquisite carpets. Irwin's direct and witty style makes this slim volume a joy to read, and his chapter on the depiction of the Alhambra in Western literature is especially useful. (Olga B. Wise Library Journal 2004-07-15)In his remarkably concise, original and readable study, *The Alhambra*, Irwin deploys impressive scholarship to skewer many of the myths that have grown up around the beautiful palace complex of Nasrid Granada: 'legends, lies and honest mistakes are as much a part of the story of the Alhambra as is the factual record,' he writes. 'So are vandalism, inadequately researched and botched restoration work and distortions caused by the demands of the tourist trade.' It is these myths and distortions that Irwin sets about dismantling, a task he clearly enjoys...Irwin shows that the Alhambra has meant many different things to many different people. If the Victorians liked to see it as a symbol of Oriental luxury and debauchery, then many modern Arabs have seen it as a symbol of defeat, 'an icon of exile and loss.' (William Dalrymple Times Literary Supplement 2004-07-16)The Alhambra is a succinct, witty, often acerbic compendium of facts, legends, and outright delusions about this Nasrid architectural masterpiece. He also manages, with style and flair, to convey a surprisingly rich store of detail on medieval Andalusian culture and life...He is the ideal companion: amusing, learned, curious, often eloquent...The Alhambra contains much precious detail drawn from the Arabic sources, historical as well as literary. (Eric Ormsby New York Sun 2004-09-13)Robert Irwin has written a compact companion to the history, architectural features, and enduring attraction of the Alhambra. Although this book is in a small guidebook format, the text corrects many of the romantic myths about the Alhambra that most tourists encounter. This book is recommended as excellent reading for someone planning a visit to the Alhambra or for the armchair traveler. His thesis about the geometrical foundations of the design and the use of the Alhambra as 'a palace to think in' is persuasively argued. (Karen Gould)

"In Xanadu once did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure dome decree  
Where Alph, the sacred river

ranDown caverns measureless to man...."Coleridge did not, as far as I know, see the Alhambra, this amazing city on top of a cliff above the rivers in lovely Granada. And as it was in his time, writes historian Robert Irwin in "The Alhambra," a mighty imagination would have been needed to see a pleasure dome in the ruins. Yet it is Coleridge whose poem may sing to those wandering in the gardens of the now-restored palace. Irwin's fine, scholarly study of the Alhambra lacks such wings of imagination, yet gives much depth for readers fascinated by the Alhambra & the palace of the Nasrids. The book is mostly about the palace, the complex of buildings which include the Lion Fountain, the Court of the Ambassadors, and interwoven, green treasures of water gardens. The Alhambra is itself much larger, a city only partly restored, covering the mountain top with fortresses, prisons, baths, chapels, residences, shops, two hotels, and the splendid garden called Generalife. To many however, "Alhambra" means the Nasrid Palace so the title is not misleading. The book begins, as a good travel book should, with an excellent schematic laying out the palace from the entrance (today) at the First Court, through the Court of Machuca, the Court of the Myrtles, to the Gardens and Hall of the Kings, 22 major areas. The four chapters tell the architectural history of this palace, not only who built, who tore down, who replaced, who restored the place, almost wall by wall, but also the political & social history of each of the changes. It is a story as intricate as the beautiful calligraphy and tilework adorning almost every inch of space, but often sadder and darker. Irwin's theme is clear: "Though the Alhambra is easy to enjoy, it is difficult to understand. The more closely one studies the functions and iconography of its various parts and tries to establish how the place was inhabited, the more mysterious the buildings and their inhabitants seem. There are limits to what the historian and archeologist can retrieve." Undaunted, Irwin plunges into history and archeology, vigorously whacking away at currently unproven but popular assertions, diving into the tile designs & what they tell us of construction sequences, and giving the detailed architectural genealogy of each major space. The style is scholarly, the text rather a wall-of-words with here and there black & white photos & drawings, with enough information to nourish even a quite hungry reader. The book physically is small & light enough to carry. Reader Alert: The gardens of the Alhambra, admittedly mostly reconstructed as to plantings, are part of its glory & were probably integral to the palace itself. They are mentioned only briefly, and little is said about the views from the many windows & arcades that are integral to the experience of this magnificent place. This would not be the best book for readers interested in the gardens internal or external to the Palace of the Nasrids. Also, this is in no way Bryson's sees the Alhambra. Irwin has a thoughtful rather than a spritely pen. Washington Irving's classic book on the Alhambra would be a good companion here, even after more than a 100 years. Irwin's "The Alhambra" is a wonderful

book on its own terms but it is not all things to all readers. Recommended highly to read before, during, and particularly after immersion in the Alhambra itself or for those interested in the history & architectural treasures of the Moors in Spain. PS Really really really if possible, as Irwin and most guidebooks emphasize, reserve tickets well in advance for the earliest entry to the Palace!

Visiting the Alhambra is a once in a lifetime, must do event. See it first from the plaza adjacent to the little church of St. Nicholas across the valley. And when you do finally go in to the Alhambra, bring this guide. It's the sort of guide one might have had when visiting this place two hundred years ago--more Baedeker than Lonely Planet. It emphasizes the wonder of the place rather than entrance prices and opening times. Written in a narrative style that plays up the history of this magnificent palace, it is a joy to read both before and during one's visit. In fact, a careful reading of the book prior to visiting the Alhambra is bound to enhance the visit tremendously (as, after all, the Alhambra is so popular you'll be limited to a 15 to 30-minute window to make your entrance into the most stunning part of the complex, the Nasrid palace.) For that reason you'll want to know ahead of time what you'll be looking at, because once you're inside the rooms and courtyards go by in a blur--a gorgeous procession of delicate columns and sparkling fountains. If you're trying to read your guidebook for the first time in the midst of it all, you'll miss most of it. Once you are inside, you're much better off just using the book for a quick consultation as you enter each new room, gallery, or alcove. Irwin's 'Alhambra' tells you what you really need to know about this place (one of Europe's most magnificent palaces) including the unfortunate fact that much of what you will see (or are seeing) has been recreated; the presumed use of each area of the palace is at best an educated guess (and at worst, a shot in the dark). Even some of the carved inscriptions are misleading (assuming you can read medieval Arabic). As Irwin notes: "...Contreras, who knew no Arabic, rearranged them [the inscriptions] in such a way that it is no longer possible to make sense of them" (p. 47, hardbound). Regardless, there is beauty in this truth, and this book has it in spades. Your standard tourist guidebook will not confront you with such sincerity (although you'll need it for the basics mentioned above: entrance prices, opening times, etc., as Irwin is not concerned with those). The hardbound version of Irwin's 'The Alhambra' makes a great keepsake to remind you of your visit, and you can put it on your shelf next to the copy of Washington Irving's 'Tales of the Alhambra' you picked up in the gift shop. Bottom line--if you are going to visit the Alhambra, do it right: bring this book, and read it ahead of time.

Un escritor magnífico ! Estuve en la Alhambra hace un par de meses y este libro fue

recomendado por mi guía. El libro es ameno e informativo. Esta versión está bien traducida al Español. Lo único negativo que puedo decir es que el prólogo es demasiado largo, así que recomiendo que se lo brinquen y vayan directamente al libro, las descripciones del lugar como lo encontró Irving en su época son magníficas y los cuentos llevan al lector a un mundo como el de las mil y una noches.

This is a great book to read prior to going to the Alhambra. However, don't get turned off by the first chapter in which it seems nothing in the Alhambra is original -- he later goes on to describe the original parts. It has a great history of the Alhambra and provides a great overview of it and provides context.

I liked this book for the wonderful historical background in the first few chapters. The long accounts of the Alhambra in literature were a drag, but it was interesting to learn of Washington Irving's time spent there. After reading the book, we visited the Alhambra; the maps and descriptions of this magnificent place in the book really do not do it justice. You must go see it!

It is a classic book. Great history of a gone era but with an actual palpable visible fortification...!

Love this book. Beautiful pictures and interesting text.

Great history and description.

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