

Arabian Days In Paris

By Stephanie Levin-Gervasi

American Way - Sojourns

Less than a block from Notre Dame stands a cultural bridge that links the mysteries of the Islamic civilization to the West - Paris' Institut du Monde Arabe. Designed by French architect Jean Nouvel, the 27,000-square-meter institute is shaped like a prism, illuminating the cityscape and innovatively wedding Moorish antecedents to twenty-first-century technology.

A collaboration between France and twenty-two Arab countries, the institute fosters cultural and political links between two distinct and different worlds. The sole museum of its type, the nine-story structure houses a spiraling white tower that evokes the Samarra mosque minaret. There are also a library of 50,000 works; an art museum displaying Islamic influence from Spain to India; a media center; and an auditorium for concerts, theater, and conferences.

A multilingual audiovisual program introduces the institute. There are temporary art exhibits - currently the Moroccan works of Delacroix - as well as tomes of cherished literature and treasures from the ninth to the nineteenth centuries in the permanent collection. On the sixth floor there are handcrafted carpets that typify regions; on the fifth, a rare collection of astrolabes, which were used by ancient Arabic astronomers to determine the altitude of celestial bodies.

Foremost a cultural center, the institute serves the general public. In the art studio, the contagious sound of children rings as they participate in dance and calligraphy classes. The media center attracts music buffs, who plug into individual soundproof booths. The restaurant-tearoom serves sumptuous Middle Eastern cuisine and showcases a panoramic view of the City of Light.

But the most intriguing aspect of the center is perhaps the building itself. On the front facade, 240 electronically controlled diaphragms, made up of 1,600 high tech metal screens, regulate daylight. Each screen contains twenty-one irises that open and close according to the amount of sunlight available. The diaphragms, called *moucharabiyahs*, are patterned after the latticed, wooden blinds used to keep rooms cool throughout Arab countries. The screens' geometric patterns recall the Alhambra in Granada, Spain.

But you're not in that citadel of Moorish kings, and you're not in a palace on the Nile. You're poised on a fascinating bridge to the Arab world - past, present, and future - right on the banks of the Seine.

Located at 1 rue des Fossees-St. Bernard, Paris 75005, at metro Jussieu or Cardinal-Lemoine, the Institut du Monde Arabe is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Library hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 1 p.m. to 8 p.m. Admission is free. Call 011-33-1-4051-3838.