

World's Coolest Ceilings

Look out above! The world's coolest ceilings crop up in some unexpected places.

From [July 2011](#) By [Kristin Conard](#)

Enter the Royal Palace's Mirror Room in **Brussels** and your gaze sweeps past the gilded walls right up to its emerald-green ceiling. And while the iridescent shimmer may look like it's emanating from precious gems, you're actually staring at more than one million Thai jewel-beetle shells. Belgian artist Jan Fabre oversaw a team of 29 who hand-glued each shell to the ceiling over three months in 2002.

As their painstaking handiwork illustrates, art isn't confined to museum or palace walls, and ceilings are a blank canvas for more than religious frescoes; the world's coolest ceilings will defy your expectations. They can turn up in the unholy of places, such as **Las Vegas**, where the 18-foot ceiling above the lobby check-in counters at the Bellagio blooms with more than 2,000 flowers in a rainbow of colors thanks to glass sculptor Dale Chihuly.

"Decorations establish the ceiling as a 'fifth wall,' something detached from our earthly realm," says Amanda Scotese, who worked as a tour guide in **Italy** with Rick Steves for nearly a decade and now runs Chicago Detours, a tour company. "The effect of the act of craning your neck back is that as we contort our bodies into that uncomfortable position, we know that we are experiencing something out of the ordinary."

That was the intention of artists who have historically used ceilings as an inspirational, instructional representation of the heavens. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel in **Rome** is the most famous example. Yet nearby, within the Church of St. Ignazio, the Baroque painter Andrea Pozzo created the illusion of a dome with his trompe l'oeil fresco. It's a cool, 3-D-like effect that you can appreciate without being elbowed by hordes of other onlookers—a welcome benefit that you won't always find when viewing the world's coolest ceilings.

"Putting an elaborate ceiling in a room is a bit like lining the inside of a jewelry box or wallpapering a closet," says Kelsey Keith, editor-in-chief of *Architizer* magazine. "It's unexpected, inventive, and slightly secretive."

So keep your eyes peeled for the world's coolest ceilings—with this much beauty, you won't even notice if your neck hurts.

Mirror Room, Royal Palace, **Belgium**

In a room with plenty of dazzle, the Brussels ceiling captures your attention with an iridescent emerald-green glow that comes from the shells of more than one million Thai jewel beetles. Belgian contemporary artist Jan Fabre oversaw a team of 29 who spent

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

three months hand-gluing each shell into place. He entitled it “Heaven of Delight,” perhaps a throwback to the traditional notion of the ceiling as representing the heavens.

Gran Hotel Ciudad de México, Mexico City

Overlooking the Zócalo in Mexico City’s heart, the Gran Hotel is decorated in Art Nouveau style with a Louis XV–style chandelier in the lobby and gilded elevators. But its crown jewel is the Tiffany stained-glass ceiling in the lobby, installed in 1908 with 150 lights. It continues to make a big impression on viewers. “They say, ‘Wow’ because it’s so beautiful. People will just stay in the lobby; they have an emotional response to it,” says concierge Jose Luis Valadez. “Everybody who visits Mexico wants to visit this place.”

Dharma Hall in Kennin-ji, Kyoto, Japan

The oldest Zen temple in Kyoto was founded in 1202, and for its 800th anniversary, Japanese artist Koizumi Junsaku created a dramatic display of clouds and twin dragons rampaging across the ceiling. It took nearly two years to ink-paint the detailed scene on traditional Japanese paper, and the only space he found large enough for the task was the gym of a Hokkaido elementary school. His work is the size of 108 tatami mats (approximately 37’ x 51.5’ for those not used to measuring size via tatami mat).

La Compañía de Jesús, Ecuador

Building began on this Jesuit church in Quito in 1605 and didn’t finish for another 160 years. But the glorious result features a sun on the dome of the ceiling—an attempt by the Spanish to entice the indigenous population to come to church by using an Incan symbol. Natural sunlight plays off the (literally) tons of gold leaf that cover the symmetrical Moorish geometric carvings on the vaulted ceiling and the paintings of saints and holy figures on the dome.

Thomas Jefferson Building, Washington, D.C.

It’s the Great Hall and Reading Room of this Library of Congress building that boasts the cool ceiling. Six stained-glass skylights, Italian-style paintings, paneled carvings, and aluminum leaf detailing adorn the Great Hall’s ceiling (aluminum was more valuable than silver in the 1890s when the building was constructed). In the Reading Room, look up to spot 12 figures representing the 12 countries that artist Edwin Howland Blashfield felt contributed most to American civilization. These ceilings were intended to make a big impression and cement America’s arrival on the world scene.

Dome of the Imam Mosque, Iran

The blue-domed Imam Mosque in Esfahan is the larger of two mosques anchoring 20-plus-acre Iman Square and commissioned by Shah Abbas I in the early 1600s. Mosaics of mesmerizing geometric patterns spread across the inside of the 119-foot-high dome in seven shades of blue, green, and gold. The dome construction is double-layered, meaning that if you stand in the middle beneath the dome and stamp your foot, you’ll hear an echo.

Church of St. Ignazio, Rome

Andrea Pozzo's trompe l'oeil fresco of angels and saints cavorting in the clouds along with allegories of the four continents creates the illusion of a dome where there is none. A white stone in the nave marks the spot to best view this classically High Baroque scene. "The church wanted to dazzle churchgoers during the Counter Reformation so that membership wouldn't dwindle," says Amanda Scotese, who worked as a tour guide in Italy with Rick Steves for nearly a decade and now runs Chicago Detours, a guided cultural tour company.

Chaumukha Temple, India

Built in the 15th century, this 43,000-square-foot temple in Ranakpur looms large in the small north India town of Ranakpur and has four grand entryways. It's not just the 1,444 white marble pillars of the Chaumukha Temple that are intricately carved. Detailed relief carvings cover the ceilings of the 29 halls, domes, and spires. Some domes are three stories tall; each has its own exquisitely detailed, lacelike geometric patterns and depictions of Jain religious figures. The dome in the main hall, for instance, is decorated with sculptures of the 16 goddesses of wisdom.

Hall of Mirrors, Versailles, France

While the chandeliers and namesake mirrors can easily steal your attention, be sure to look up at the barrel-vaulted ceiling. Its 30 elaborate oil murals track the military and political victories of Louis XIV from his assumption through the Dutch wars of the 1660s and 1670s. It was the first display of the Sun King as a person (instead of a mythological creation) and places him among courtiers, angels, cherubs, and soldiers. These figures have overseen countless momentous occasions, among them the masked ball celebrating the wedding of Marie Antoinette and the Dauphin in May 1770 and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919.

Debre Berhan Selassie Church, Ethiopia

Legend has it that a swarm of bees and the Archangel Michael protected the Debre Berhan Selassie church in Gonder from attack in 1888. While that may be debatable, one point not up for discussion is the magnificence of the ceiling of this small, unassuming stone church. No matter where you are inside, an angel is watching you. Each of the 104 winged cherubs (go ahead, count them) painted on the ceiling beams has a different facial expression.

The Bellagio, Las Vegas

Vegas is synonymous with big bets and flashy nightlife, but we wager that even die-hard gamblers can't make it to the tables in the Bellagio hotel without pausing to admire the lobby's ceiling. The "Fiori di Como" is a 2,100-foot chandelier made up of 2,000 handblown, brightly colored glass blooms designed by sculptor Dale Chihuly. More than 100 people worked on the installation, and it required more than 40,000 pounds of glass.

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

Ambassador's Hall, [Spain](#)

As befits a palace, the grandest room in the Alcázar of Seville is the throne room, now known as the *Salón de Embajadores* (Ambassador's Hall). The cedarwood and gilded dome has Arabic inscriptions that recall the building's former days as a Moorish fort; interlocking geometric tears, circles, and ovals come together to form star patterns that can make you dizzy if you stare at them too long.

King's College Chapel, [England](#)

While the entire Cambridge chapel took more than a century to build, the nearly 2,000-ton stone fan vault ceiling was polished off in three years, finished by 1515. The ceiling is uniquely English; the first example of this Gothic ceiling style showed up in the 1350s in Gloucester Cathedral. And it was only in the 150 years following that it became technologically possible to create a ceiling with the size and grandeur of that at King's College Chapel. The 289-foot-long and 40-foot-wide ceiling is the largest of its type in the world, and it has been called "the noblest stone ceiling in existence."

Grand Central Terminal, [New York City](#)

Bleary-eyed commuters pass through Grand Central daily giving little thought to the twinkling stars overhead. Painted with gold leaf and cerulean blue oil paint, the ceiling mural in the Grand Concourse has 2,500 stars; the 60 largest that mark the constellations are lit up. Though don't expect the constellations to match up exactly—many are backward (can you spot which ones?). Paul Helleu, the French artist, painted from a medieval manuscript that depicted the stars over the Mediterranean and from a different angle. The ceiling was cleaned and restored starting in 1996, with a patch left to show the grit and grime that once hid this celestial masterpiece.