

## 20 Hajj Pilgrimage

Usually Muslims and others call the Hajj pilgrimage the fifth Pillar of Islam. Each Muslim should make this pilgrimage to Mecca and its environs when and if they can afford it.

Hajj rarely proves itself an easy practice even now with transportation and modern lodgings readily available. In the past it must have been much more difficult. During the modern Hajj millions of people from all over the world come together in one small area of Saudi Arabia to worship God and fulfill their religious obligations.

To make Hajj one must obtain a special Hajj visa from the Saudi government. Unmarried women must travel with an authorized Hajj group. Women married to a Muslim may be able to make their own arrangements. However they must stay with their husbands at all times since husbands or male relatives must always accompany women when in Saudi except for those women traveling with a government authorized group.

When I first published this book, the cost for an American often exceeded two thousand dollars to make Hajj. Now the cost is much higher—Quora's website lists it as ranging from four thousand to twenty thousand dollars, depending on the group and other factors.

Performing Hajj becomes quite strenuous. In a few days hundreds of thousands of people pour into Mecca for the Hajj. They come from all corners of the world and many Saudi's regularly join them. Many years people die in the crush of the crowd. Making Hajj while you are still physically strong makes it much easier.

Although this is a once in a lifetime experience for most Muslims and the culmination of a great deal of preparation, inequity plagues the performance of Hajj for many women.

When I made Hajj I went with a group from New York. My group included several young women and at least two of them ended up getting their menstrual periods while in Mecca. They believed they could not visit the Sacred Mosque surrounding the *Ka'aba* in their condition because they had been told they were impure. (The *Ka'aba* is the shrine Abraham and Ismail built as God's Sacred House and the Saudis later surrounded it with a large mosque.) The publications I received when I made Hajj forbade the required circling of the *Ka'aba* seven times, called circumambulation, for women who began menstruating after starting the Hajj. However nothing in the Quran puts this restriction on women.

These young women sat in their hotel rooms, just minutes away from the *Ka'aba*. They came half way around the world to visit this ancient shrine built by Abraham, which Muslims do as part of the Hajj ritual. They spent a great deal of money and expended enormous effort, and were finally at the focal point of their religion, the place all Muslims turn towards during their Contact Prayers. But they believed they could not even approach it.

And why? Because of the same misunderstood verse. Because their understanding of 2:222 made them feel impure and therefore forbidden from doing their religious practices while on their periods. As a result they may have lost their only chance to completely fulfill this obligation of the religion.

To me this situation borders on criminal. If the Saudis allowed the practice of Hajj as the Quran indicates, so Muslims could do it any time during the four Arabic months known as the Sacred Months, things would not end up as bad for such women. Then the Hajj would not be forced into the few days of the year when the Saudis now allow it.

*Hajj shall be observed in the specified months. Whoever sets out to observe Hajj shall refrain from sexual intercourse, misconduct, and arguments throughout Hajj....*  
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:197)

If the Saudi government followed the Quranic timing, none of the current hardship would fall on women. If a woman got her periods and felt impure she could simply wait until it finished and then go on to complete the rites of Hajj. But when the whole practice becomes squeezed into a short period of time and one has booked tickets, taken time from work, etc., it often becomes impossible. Since part of the Hajj requires circling the Ka'aba if you cannot do this circumambulation you cannot complete your Hajj.

Now women often go to their doctors and get medications to stop their periods for the Hajj. However this medication does not work for everyone, as one of the young women I came to know fairly well on my Hajj could attest. She came as a young Middle Eastern student studying in the United States. I am sure making Hajj proved a rather difficult thing for her to do.

Her periods were unusually long and in spite of the medication she began bleeding after going into the ritual state of purity for Hajj, called *Ihram*. (It is at that time when the female pilgrim bathes, puts on simple modest clothes and traditionally repeats the intention to make Hajj.) According to the Saudi understanding a woman in *Ihram* who begins her period must wait until the bleeding stops before she can do the circumambulation of the Ka'aba. Fortunately for my friend her body finally cooperated and she completed her practices. However I am sure she spent all of that time in an agony of uncertainty, not knowing if she would have the chance to complete her Hajj before she had to leave.

To me it makes no sense that God would make things so difficult for women. Especially since He says He does not wish to make the religion difficult in the verse on the ritual ablution:

*.... God does not wish to make the religion difficult for you;*  
*He wishes to cleanse you and to perfect His blessing upon you, that you may be appreciative.*  
(Quran: The Final Testament 5:6, emphasis added)

Though this verse does not refer directly to Hajj it shows ritual ablution is just that, a ritual cleansing. In truth we never become totally physically clean. No human being, male or female, becomes totally pure, for our bodies constantly process food and create waste as a by-product. Whether or not we excrete some of the waste, some always

remains within us. Other types of waste are constantly excreted whenever we perspire or even breathe.

So whether male or female we become only *ritually* pure after any ablution, including a total bath. Why then should a woman have such difficulty around her menstrual cycle? Especially during Hajj when a woman may only have one chance in her lifetime to perform this religious duty, it needs to become easier to do.

Performing Hajj never is easy or inexpensive. It requires preparation and a certain maturity of faith. I will not try to describe the details of the practices here. You will find many websites where you can read about them by doing an Internet search on “Hajj” or check any of the .com booksellers for books on Hajj. Instead, I think the following impressions will be more valuable to you in really understanding what Hajj can mean for someone.

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*Each person’s experience of Hajj becomes as unique as they are. I found this narration by a fellow American especially valuable.*

## **Hajj**

“Oh, you’ve been on Hajj! Tell me all about it!!” Everyone wanted to hear details, but as I spoke of my experience, I noticed that people seemed disappointed. I think they were looking for a miracle, some mystical transformation, some cosmic revelation. And while in a way all of that happened, it’s an intensely personal experience and it doesn’t lend itself to the telling. That said, I will tell of the things on my Hajj that were important to me.

As a white American female, I was in for quite a culture shock. I knew a little of what to expect but I wasn’t prepared for the level of disregard for women and the subtle oppression. I steeled myself to covering my head, but it was an ordeal and I disliked it. I endured it because Hajj is a commandment and in order to perform it, I had to abide by the cultural requirements of Saudi Arabia. One day while shopping, an old woman covered from head to toe in black pointed a gnarled finger at me and said in an ugly voice, “*Haram! Haram! Haram!*” With my very limited Arabic I knew the word meant “forbidden” and I realized several hairs in my bangs were showing under my head covering. How awful! What a disgrace! After that, I was always self-conscious about my scarf.

But I didn’t let the silly restrictions of humans interfere with the spiritual experience I had come to find. I asked God for His help and clearly He gave it to me. Otherwise I could never have put up with the huge and pushy crowds, the cumbersome garb or the attitude of suspicion and repression. Because God gave me strength, I was able to tolerate all those things. I turned myself totally over to God, which is what we should do every day of our lives; I recognized and accepted the fact that God is in full control of everything; I spent all my waking moments remembering Him, commemorating Him and worshipping Him. And in my opinion that’s what Hajj should be

about. It's not the practices of walking around the Kaaba or jogging between the knolls of Safa and Marwah or tossing pebbles at stone columns. All of those things are symbolic gestures meant to put God foremost in our minds, and that's the importance of Hajj.

For me the most spiritual and moving time was the day spent at Arafat. Arafat is a desert area just outside of Mecca. During Hajj, thousands upon thousands of tents dot the barren landscape, and the pilgrims spend the entire day—sunrise to sunset—in quiet contemplation and reflection. I used the time well to celebrate God and thank Him for the many blessings in my life. The Quranic verses 2:198-9 tell you to commemorate Him for guiding you and to ask Him for forgiveness. At sunset, everyone leaves Arafat at the same time. It's a huge traffic jam of people and cars, and ours was one of the last buses to leave the parking lot. As we came over a hill I was struck by a most amazing sight. Literally millions of people were walking all together—a sea of humanity, as far as the eye could see. Almost all of them were wearing white and all of them were there for one purpose—to worship God. Differences, such as skin color, national identity, wealth and poverty, were no longer visible. All that was left was the underlying desire to please God, to complete the pilgrimage that He had decreed, and in doing so, God willing, to grow closer to the ideal of a righteous person.

It was not an earth-shattering moment, but for me it was very deep and personal. Perhaps no one else even noticed. That's why Hajj is an individual experience. You can learn all about how to perform the various rituals and talk to dozens of people who have been on Hajj, but the moment in time will be yours alone; between you and God.

—Lydia, U.S.A.

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*Everyone has a different and unique experience doing Hajj. I have shared a bit of my experience. Here as sister Iman, I share more.*

### **My Hajj: the Answer to a Long-Held Question**

I am an American convert who kept hearing about Hajj long before I even thought about doing it. A few Muslims I knew took the journey and some came back all starry-eyed from the experience and others were not so enthusiastic. What is this I wondered? Why do some find Hajj to be so wonderful and some are so blasé about it?

Several years later I was to find out when friends of mine were planning on making Hajj and they asked me to join them. Fortunately, I was between jobs and had the funds to be able to do so. So I went. Though I could not travel with my friends because I was coming from the U.S. and they were coming from India, I was able to spend almost all of my time with them once I got to Mecca. Instead I traveled with a group of Muslims from the Washington, D.C. area and New York who were all very kind to me.

I will never forget landing in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, amid crowds of people. Coming from what was then a pretty small town, I was really overwhelmed by the large

mass of mankind. They came from all over the world. Being essentially shy, I had a hard time coping with it all.

But Jeddah was nothing compared to Mecca itself. Talk about wall-to-wall people! I was flabbergasted at first but slowly grew more accustomed to the crowds. And the Kaaba and the mosque around it proved so very beautiful that I found my soul soaring when visiting them. It was as if I were at the foot of the Throne of the Most Gracious Himself!!

Actually, for me, the day on Arafat was somewhat of a letdown after the wonderful hours spent at the Kaaba. It was a hot day and my Hajj group and I had to economize so our tents were without electric fans or the air conditioning that many people who paid more were able to enjoy. So we sweated, read our Qurans, and tried not to roast.

Still, the experience on Arafat and the rest of that amazing trip is a memory I will never forget, God willing. And as uncomfortable as I was at times with the crowds, the heat on Arafat, and the sometimes crushing throngs of people in Mina, I would not change a minute of that trip for all the world. Before Hajj I had hardly traveled out of my home state, much less the country. Hajj gave me a new perspective on Islam and on humanity. I guess for me it was one of those priceless experiences and I'm sure I now sound starry-eyed to others.

—*Iman, U.S.A.*

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I have already shared quite a lot about my Hajj but I am not sure I have conveyed the overwhelming impact it had on me just to stand on the same earth, breathe the same dust, and view the same sites of so many millions of pilgrims before me. My emotional response to the actual Kaaba floored me at first. My eyes filled when I first saw it, as did my heart.

God blessed me to have several days in Mecca with my friends from Bombay (now known as Mumbai), so we spent more time at the Kaaba than many other pilgrims are able to.

One day as we were doing our *tawaafs* (the circumambulations around the Kaaba) I got separated from my friends and the crowd pushed me inward to the Kaaba itself. Though I did not intend to touch the prayer house that Abraham and Ismail originally built, I suddenly found myself right next to it. I reached out and touched the cloth covering and felt the rough surface beneath it.

Later I learned that floods destroyed the original building in 1630. Even so, I treasure the memory of that day when God blessed me to feel the building that provides the focal point for all Muslims during their Contact Prayers (Salat). That experience gave me a new sense of focus for the prayer and a personal tie to it.