
Hajj Pilgrimage

The fifth Pillar of Islam is the Hajj pilgrimage. Each Muslim should make this pilgrimage to Mecca and its environs, when and if they can afford it.

This is not an easy practice, even now when transportation and modern lodgings are readily available. During the Hajj, literally 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. If you are an unmarried woman from the West (or anywhere else, for that matter) you must travel with an authorized Hajj group. If you are married to a Muslim, the two of you may be able to make your own arrangements. However, you must stay with your husband at all times, since as a woman you must always be accompanied by your husband or a male relative when in Saudi.

Of course, this trip is expensive. Most Americans spend more than two thousand dollars to make Hajj, and some spend a great deal more.

Performing Hajj is quite strenuous. In a very few days, thousands of people pour into Mecca for the Hajj. They come from all corners of the world, and many Saudi's regularly join them. Almost every year people are killed in the crush of the crowd. It is recommended that you make Hajj while you are still physically strong.

Sadly, although this is a once in a lifetime experience for most Muslims and the culmination of a great deal of preparation, the "bulls of inequity" plague Hajj.

When I made Hajj, I went with a group from New York. There were several young women in the group, and at least two of them ended up getting their menstrual periods while in Mecca. It was their understanding that they could not visit the Sacred Mosque that surrounds the *Kaaba* in their condition because they were impure. (The *Kaaba* is the shrine Abraham built.) Indeed, the publications I was given when I made Hajj said that the required circling of the *Kaaba* seven times, called circumambulation, was forbidden for women who began menstruating after starting the Hajj. However, there certainly is nothing in the Quran that places this restriction on women.

There these young women sat in their hotel rooms, just minutes away from the *Kaaba*. They had come half way around the world to visit that ancient shrine built by Abraham. (To do so is part of the Hajj ritual.) They had 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 were unable to even approach it!!!

And why? Again, because of that same misunderstood verse! Because they had been told that Chapter 2 Verse 222 of the Quran meant they were 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 last obligation of the religion.

To me this situation is criminal. If the Saudis allowed Hajj to be done as the Quran indicates, it would not be quite as bad, because the Hajj would then not need to be limited to the few days in the year when the Saudis allow it to be done. The Quran indicates that Hajj can be done any time during the four Arabic months known as the Sacred Months.

*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)*

So, if the Quranic timing were followed, it would not be such a hardship on women. If they got their period and felt they were impure, they could simply wait until it was over, then go on to complete the rites of Hajj. But when it all must be 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 *Kaaba*, if you cannot do this circumambulation, then you cannot truly complete your Hajj.

Nowadays, women will 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 the Hajj can attest. She was a young Middle Eastern student studying in the United States. I am sure that Hajj was not an easy 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 that the pilgrim bathes, puts on special clothes and repeats the intention to make Hajj.) According to the Saudi understanding, a woman in *Ihram* who begins her period must wait until the bleeding has stopped before she can do the circumambulation of the *Kaaba*. Fortunately for my friend, her body finally cooperated and she was able to complete her practices. However, I am sure she spent all of that time in an agony of uncertainty, not knowing if she would be able 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 that He does not wish to make the religion difficult in the following verse on the ritual ablution.

O you who believe, when you observe the Contact Prayers (Salat), you shall: (1) wash your faces, (2) wash your arms to the elbows, (3) wipe your heads, and (4) wash your feet to the ankles....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 apply directly to Hajj, it makes it clear that ritual ablution is just that, a ritual cleansing. In truth, we are never totally physically clean, at any time. This is true for all human beings, male or female, for our bodies are constantly processing food and creating waste as a by-product. Whether or not we excrete that waste, it is within us. And other waste is constantly excreted, whenever we perspire or even breathe.

So whether we are male or female, we are only ritually pure after any ablution, including a total bath. Why then should a woman have such difficulty around her menstrual cycle? This is especially true for Hajj where a woman may only have one chance in her lifetime to perform this religious duty.

Performing Hajj is not an easy or inexpensive matter. It requires preparation and a certain maturity of faith. I will not try to describe the details of the practices here. There are many places you can read about them. (Just search on "Hajj" on any of the .com booksellers, and you will come up with hundreds of references.) Rather, I think the following impressions will be more valuable to you in really understanding what Hajj is all about.



Each person's experience of Hajj is as unique as they themselves are. Here is that of a wonderful fellow American whose narration I find 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 worshiping 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 Arafaat. Arafaat 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 Arafaat 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.*