

Hajj Chronicles

An in-depth account of Hajj 1432 (2011)



by Yacoob Manjoo

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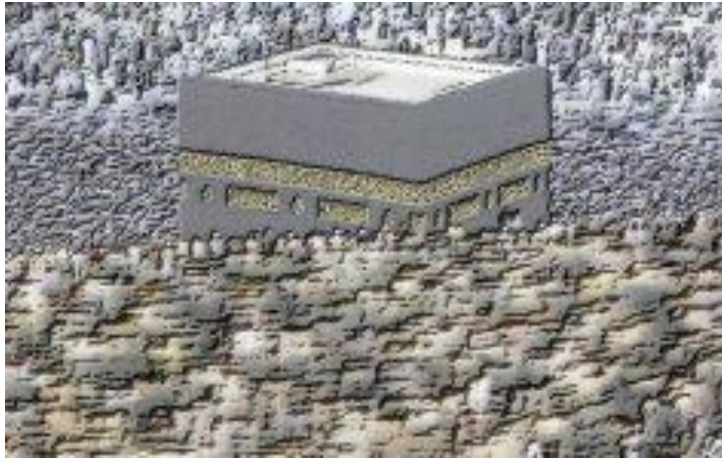
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Cover picture: *Mina on the final morning of Hajj 1432/ 2011 (taken by Yacoob Manjoo)*

Table of contents

FOREWORD	4
NOTES.....	5
PART 1: EARLY DAYS AND MADINAH	6
CHAPTER 1: WHY?	7
CHAPTER 2: BEGINNINGS	9
CHAPTER 3: TWELVE BAGS OF SABR	14
CHAPTER 4: WELCOME TO MADINAH	19
CHAPTER 5: A LITTLE PIECE OF HEAVEN.....	22
CHAPTER 6: MADINAH ATTRACTIONS (PART 1)	25
CHAPTER 7: MADINAH ATTRACTIONS (PART 2)	30
CHAPTER 8: EVERY SOUL SHALL TASTE IT	37
CHAPTER 9: LOOSE ENDS	42
CHAPTER 10: HIJRA	45
PART 2: MAKKAH AND AZIZIAH	51
CHAPTER 11: THE BIG MOMENT.....	52
CHAPTER 12: UMRAH	56
CHAPTER 13: LIFT OFF.....	61
CHAPTER 14: MELTING POT	67
CHAPTER 15: THINGS TO SEE	71
CHAPTER 16: SMILES AND FROWNS	77
CHAPTER 17: MEMORIES FOR THE HEART	79
CHAPTER 18: JOKE’S ON YOU.....	82
CHAPTER 19: ASCENSION.....	86
CHAPTER 20: REFLECTIONS BEFORE THE BIG DAY	94
PART 3: THE DAYS OF HAJJ.....	97
CHAPTER 21: DAY 1: MINA	98
CHAPTER 22: DAY 2: ARAFAH (PART 1).....	104
CHAPTER PART 23: ARAFAH (PART 2) – WUQOOF.....	107
CHAPTER 24: ADVENTURES IN THE DESERT	110
CHAPTER 25: NOT YOUR AVERAGE SATURDAY NIGHT.....	113
CHAPTER 26: DAY 3 – EUPHORIA.....	118
CHAPTER 27: RETURN TO MINA.....	122
CHAPTER 28: BOOM!.....	125
CHAPTER 29: BACK TO THE KABAH	128
CHAPTER 30: FAREWELL	132
FINAL WORDS	136
APPENDIX A: SELECTED LINKED PAGES	137
APPENDIX B: HAJJ TIP SHEET.....	150

Foreword



The e-book that follows is a series of blog posts I wrote after returning from my first (and thus far only) Hajj, in November 2011. It's based on my personal Hajj journal, which I wrote over the weeks I was away.

The journey was, without doubt, the greatest and most important experience of my life – filled with amazing locations and experiences, and abundant lessons and insights. And because of this, I wanted to share it with my blog's readers – in the hope of not only passing on what I've learnt, but also hopefully inspiring them to make this journey themselves – if they hadn't already been.

Hajj truly is the 'journey of a lifetime' – one that liberates you from your lifetime of sins and bad qualities. One that gives you a clean slate – a chance to start life again, in the spiritual sense, as if you're a new-born baby. It's one that teaches you how to re-orient your focus to what's really important in life. It's one that forces you to grow – because it takes you out of your comfort zones; teaching you qualities of character that you know are virtuous – yet you find difficult to practice in everyday life, in the absence of challenges. And most importantly, it's one that draws you closer and closer to your Creator – nurturing the relationship that is *most* important in life, and putting your existence, your purpose, and your responsibilities, into the proper perspective.

As you read the now-complete set of posts contained herein, I pray that these chapters will be of tremendous benefit to you.

But beyond that, I hope it will also benefit *me* as well – refreshing the lessons I learned on Hajj, and reminding me of how I need to live. Because – as the clichés go – Hajj doesn't end when you leave Makkah and come home. It really *begins* at that point. Hajj itself is not the main challenge. The main challenge – and life's mission – is to *live* that Hajj: to take forward what you've learnt; be that better person you were inspired to be; and always be progressing further and further on the path of living the best way you can in this world, so that you're successful here and in the eternal realm of the Hereafter.

Please enjoy the book, and feel free to share it with those you think may be interested (bearing the [copyright notice](#) in mind, of course).

JazakAllah for reading

Yacoob Manjoo
Ramadan 1434 / July 2013

Notes

1. **Primary audience:**

This series was originally posted on my [personal blog](#), and was written for a Muslim audience – hence I’ve assumed the reader is familiar with certain Islamic / Arabic terms and background knowledge.

I had started an alternate version – free of such assumptions – for a multi-faith audience, which I hoped would capture the experience in a way that could be understood by someone with no prior knowledge of Islam or Arabic. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to keep up with that project, and it eventually came to an end after a year. You can find all posts in that series at: <http://beyondhaji.wordpress.com/>.

2. **Hyperlinks:**

- a. Because this series was posted on a blog, I’ve included a lot of hyperlinks to other sites. Some of those links jump to other places in this book (hence you can read them offline), but for others, you’ll need to be online to access the page. Hover over the link and if a website address is displayed, you’ll need to be online. Otherwise, clicking on the link should take you directly to the relevant section of this book (offline).
- b. For each chapter (or article in Appendix A), clicking the chapter title should take you to the online post (if you’re connected to the Internet). Similarly, clicking each picture should take you to the online version – which is bigger.

3. **For publishing companies:**

While there are plenty of books that deal with the rituals and fiqh of Hajj, I’ve found that there aren’t that many detailed English-language accounts of the Hajj – written from an entirely personal, non-textbook perspective. I hope that this effort will contribute to the collection that’s already in existence, and that many more English speakers will publish their detailed accounts in years to come. That said, I am open to the idea of rewriting this series as a more comprehensive book – complete with new pictures and experiences were left out of this series. If you’re a publisher and you’re interested in the project, please [email me](#) to discuss it further.

Part 1: Early days and Madinah

Chapter 1: Why?



Inside of a tent on Mina – the main camp site for Hajj

Why?

“Why would a person go for Hajj?”

It’s a simple question, and if you didn’t know enough about Hajj – or have a deep emotional attachment to it – you may struggle to find the answer.

Why would someone leave behind the security of their home, their family, their enjoyment – to go halfway across the world and spend days and nights in a simple, unflattering tent – where the only physical comforts are a mattress, blanket, and pillow (if they’re fortunate enough to get that).

Why would they leave behind the ease of riding in their car for a journey where they’ll be walking for miles and miles on dirty, congested roads, in huge crowds that they’d run away from?

Why would they leave behind the beauty of their clothing to wear nothing but two white, unstitched pieces of cloth – wherein they’ll look exactly the same as everyone else, with no physical adornments to separate them from the others?

Why would they go to a flat, empty plain – in the middle of a desert – to stand in the scorching sun for a few hours, reciting a few words, making a few requests, and crying their hearts out?

It comes down to motivation, and intention.

Intention

Everything starts with the intention, and the journey of Hajj is no different. Hajj starts long before you get to Makkah; and long before you leave your home.

In Islam, we know that the intention is absolutely critical. As the very famous hadith goes, actions are judged by intentions – and you will be rewarded according to what you intended. It's a beautiful teaching that empowers one to know – without doubt – *that every single (halaal) thing* you do in life – if done with the right intention – can be considered an act of worship, which you will be rewarded for.

So when it comes to Hajj, it makes sense that the intention *must* be good – or else you're wasting your time, energy, and money.

For me, my intentions were threefold:

1. to fulfil the obligation of Hajj placed upon me by Allah, thereby pleasing Him
2. to be completely forgiven for my lifetime of sins and mistakes, and
3. to be spiritually purified and strengthened to such a degree that I could make the important life changes and improvements that I wanted to make – thereby living a better life until my time on Earth expires

Danger

We also learn that intention is one of the most difficult things to maintain. The heart is unstable – always turning in different directions, so it can be hard to remain consistent in your motivations when you intend something.

But on top of that, the sworn enemy of mankind (shaytaan) is constantly trying to attack us – knowing that corrupting the intention would spoil the entire deed.

And the latter is most dangerous. Shaytaan works in the most subtle ways – slowly introducing thoughts, feelings, and temptations into our hearts and minds. And if we allow them in, they act like a slow poison, gradually infecting that intention and polluting it to the point that it's no longer sincere or pure.

When it comes to Hajj, several things could spoil intentions, including:

- the promise of a 'holiday' from the rigours and responsibilities of everyday life and work
- the luxury and enjoyment of fancy hotels and good food which await in the hotels and restaurants (which you'll frequent before the days of Hajj begin)
- the opportunity to shop, shop, and shop some more – finding Islamic clothing, books, and other items that you wouldn't normally have the opportunity (or money) to get
- the esteemed status that many people in the Muslim community ascribe to you via the title Hajji (though I'm not sure if this is universal – it may just be a Cape Town thing)

As you can see, it's a potential minefield to navigate.

So once you make your intention, your work really begins. For Hajj – like many things in life – we're advised to regularly examine our intention and renew it; over and over – because if we preserve and protect the foundation / heart of the deed – then we preserve the deed itself.

Related lessons:

- Actions are judged according to intentions – so it's important to always try to make the right intentions
- Intentions can be easily corrupted, so it's important to stay on guard against all that which would pollute your intentions – both internal forces and external
- It's important to consistently purify and renew your intentions

Chapter 2: Beginnings

How it started

I'd wanted to go for Hajj for a long time – but had only planned to go two years ago, in 2009. Generally, that's the wrong approach to take. You're supposed to go as soon as you're capable (physically, financially, etc.) – because it's an obligation, and you may not live long enough to go when *you* think it's your time. But I was immature and selfish, thinking that I knew best. I didn't want to go until I was married – believing that I wasn't ready until that time.

Once marriage came, that self-imposed barrier dissolved. But another one came up soon after. The year my wife and I had intended to go was the year that our daughter arrived – meaning we had to wait at least a few more years. In terms of timing, this taught me that Allah controls the schedules – not me. And that I need to submit to what Allah wants, and not what *I* think is best.

As new parents, life obviously became very hectic, and Hajj seemed something on the distant horizon – a hazy, faraway dream that would *maybe* come true... someday.

But the end of Ramadan 2010 brought it back into focus for me. The months of Hajj start immediately after Ramadan – and it was then that this immensely strong pull came over me; this deep desire to go – for all of the reasons mentioned in the [previous post](#). And this feeling only intensified as the Hajj of 2010 got underway.

We took the first necessary step that November – [SAHUC registration](#) – and actually ended up registering just a few days after SAHUC opened up applications for the year 2011. That was my first sign that Hajj may become a reality for us – because the earlier you register, the better your chances of getting accreditation.

Being prepared

With most things in life, it's important to be prepared. Hajj is no different. In fact, it's even *more* important – because this is the most important journey of a Muslim's life. We study so hard for exams, and prepare so much for job interviews and other things – yet when we compare those worldly events to Hajj, there's almost no comparison in terms of what deserves our best preparations.

After registering, we faced at least a four month wait until accreditation would be announced. So we busied ourselves trying to learn about Hajj. There are plenty of books, articles, lectures, and videos you can use to prepare – but one of the most effective learning methods, for me at least, is attending classes. And that's where the first test came for us.

The new year (2011) soon arrived, and things got extremely busy at home. The feelings for Hajj, which were once so strong, soon got buried under the burdens of day to day life. But still, I tried to keep up – eventually failing, and resigning myself to the fact that Hajj class would probably be the biggest motivator to keep going.

It was quite a struggle trying to find a Hajj class that suited us (both in terms of schedule and our being comfortable with the scholar who taught it) – one that I realise was one of our early tests on this journey. But – alhamdulillah – that part of the process fell into place eventually, and we got an awesome teacher; one who was a real character – animated, passionate, and very unique in his style of delivery.

In Cape Town, it seems we go overboard when it comes to Hajj preparation. I'm not a native Capetonian (though I've been here 12 years) – so I can't speak from much experience, other than my own. But I use that term – 'overboard' (and not in a negative way here) – because we have Hajj classes for *months* before people actually leave for Hajj. In other parts of the country – like Durban and Joburg – all they get is a one day seminar, or a few classes on Hajj not long before it's time to leave.

Part of the reason for this is that Hajj classes of this type teach you your religion again – the important aspects – so that you can assess your current state of Islam, make your changes on Hajj, and when you come back, be in a position to improve as well as make up for the things that you neglected in the past – such as salaahs or fasts you'd missed, lack of concentration in salaah, etc.

So we had six months of classes – which comprehensively covered more than just Hajj alone.

On the individual level, I'd made a plan of all the things I'd wanted to do personally to prepare. That preparation included an analysis of my current state of religious practice, life, and character; the ideal states I'd want those aspects to be in; and how I would improve myself to those levels.

It also included writing down a detailed dua list; that being the most important aspect, because as the hadith goes, dua is the essence of worship. It's the heart of your connection to Allah – because it's your speaking to Him, in your own words, asking for what you want and need...the most intimate of matters that involves no one other than you and your Maker. By communicating with Allah – through dua and otherwise – you strengthen that bond. And, as the hadith goes, when you take one step towards Allah, Allah takes ten steps towards you. The importance of dua cannot be overstated. And it's not confined to [Laylatul Qadr](#), or Ramadan, or Hajj only. That communication line is *always* there. And you don't need to pay high cellphone costs either, because it's absolutely free 😊

As it turned out, procrastination and time wasted on other things meant I ended up *not doing* most of the things I'd planned to do. And as time ran out, I feared I'd be boarding that plane unprepared. But Allah had mercy on me, and gave me a bout of sickness a few weeks before we left. The time off work was just what I needed. I did get some rest (as per doctor's orders), but I didn't have time to waste resting half the day. So I took the time I had alone to write and write and write – my duas for myself and my life, for other people, and just about everything I could think of.

Also, preparing a will is one of the things that we traditionally do before Hajj. Actually, Islam teaches us that it's something we need to do regardless of whether we're going for Hajj. Seeing the tragedies of family disputes over the estate of the deceased, it should become very clear why a will is essential (and a proper Shariah-compliant will at that). Anyway, so in thinking about my own death, I realised there was a lot that I wanted to tell the people closest to me – yet now in life, I didn't have the courage. And if I died, I would want them to know those things. So I wrote letters to them, which I kept with my will. I adopted the mindset that if I die on Hajj, these would be my last words to them – the messages I want to leave them with. It was liberating to write those letters, because from my side, it helped me express all that I'd otherwise left unsaid, and tie up loose ends that were otherwise not dealt with.

Madhouse

In Cape Town, Hajj is treated with all the fervour of a wedding, or Eid. For the week before the Hajji leaves, the house is pretty much open to visitors at most times of the day (and late into the night too – even if you have young kids at home!). Family, friends, neighbours, and others all come to 'greet' you, wishing you well for your Hajj, asking you to make dua for

them and convey greetings to the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. in Madinah. They also give you some money (called a *slavat*) to help with the trip, and those who have been before share their Hajj stories with you and give advice.

The ‘greeting’ thing is a cultural custom – it’s not a sunnah or religious injunction. Culture often pollutes religion, and many cultural practices actually violate the laws and purposes of the Shariah (just look at the way many Muslim wedding receptions are conducted). Cultural practices are fine, as long as they don’t contradict Islam. And this particular custom is one that does have a lot of good in it – for the sense of community it builds, and the way it reminds people of the Hajj and Islam (which, unfortunately, is sometimes forgotten in the secular lives we sometimes live). Some people think that this greeting business is for show – to put on this event to show off that such and such a person is going for Hajj. I disagree with that. I would like to believe that this is just a misperception – and that no Hajji (or their organisers / family) actually has this intention in mind. Sincerity of intention is not something for us to judge – Allah alone judges.

Anyway, so while I see the good in this custom, sometimes it’s just overboard (and this time I use that term in a negative way). Some people pitch marquees in their yards to cater for all the expected visitors; and the amount of food, preparation, and spending that goes into this event in some cases is just excessive. It’s possible to cater for people without going so overboard, but for some (or many?), no expense is spared – which I think is very wrong, *especially* if the Hajji (who already spent so much to pay for Hajj) is the one that has to pay for all of this.

You’re supposed to be preparing for the most spiritual journey of life – one where you’ll learn sabr, forge close ties to Allah, and learn restraint. One where your personal preparation requires time alone to reflect and build spirituality and get your heart ready for this immense event.

Yet the preparations that go into the departure back home are ones of lavish spending on all kinds of foods, chaos and stress about logistics and catering, and just generally a period of time that is not peaceful at all. And even though you need to pack and get your travel logistics sorted out, you can forget about leaving all that to the last few days before you leave. When the people come, you need to be there with them – regardless of how much travel-related stuff you still need to do. (Which is why it’s best to get your packing and arrangements done early, if possible.)

For me, I didn’t want any of that. I was content to just get a few visitors here and there, and handle things in a more relaxed way – without all the markings of a wedding. Being a very private person, I didn’t want a lot of people in my house at one time; and being conscious of financial responsibility, I didn’t want money wasted unnecessarily.

I hated the fact that we were expected to follow this big local custom, having to focus on these things which diverted attention from where our real focus should have been. But, when you live in a place, you can’t dictate the cultural practice of its inhabitants – when the people will come to visit you, and what they’ll expect.

My wife’s family took control of the situation, and although I was upset at times, my frustration was not at them as individuals – but at our having to go through this custom in the first place. I think my wife also didn’t want it to be a big thing, but like me, she didn’t have much say. Indian families – particularly Indian mothers – are big on traditions, and as the mere ‘children’ in this situation, we weren’t strong enough to fight for the simplicity we wanted. And causing a fight at that time would have just turned things ugly – which is not something you want on the eve of your Hajj.

Still, we appreciate all their efforts, even if we didn't agree with certain aspects of how things happened. And to be fair, we actually didn't have it so bad – alhamdulillah. We didn't need a marquee or caterers, and it was really only the weekend we left that was busy – not the entire week.

That said, it was a whirlwind few days, with little sleep and little food (the latter being ironic, given the amount of food catered). We left on a Sunday morning, and the craziest time was the night before we left. After maghrib, I came home to a jam-packed house full of people, and felt overwhelmed by it all. There wasn't much space to even walk, and I don't even know what the neighbours thought about all the noise (one of the neighbours was pregnant, and also had a toddler at home). It was exactly the kind of thing I didn't want – and here it was, being presented before me – almost mockingly.

But then came Allah's mercy. Almost simultaneously, my parents, uncle and auntie, and granny all arrived – and I was able to escape the madness for a little while and go out to the car with my parents, granny (who stayed in the car), and my (now two-year old) daughter. Taking her was the most important part for me, because in all this chaos, I hardly got any time alone with her. I felt like this whole time she was being kept away from me – by all these people and activity, and I just needed to escape it all and go to my comfort zone; which was away from the crowd.

In those precious moments, things became calm for me again, and perhaps the most touching moment was my grandmother's request – a specific dua she wanted me to make for her.

To me, that was really an important part of the whole greeting thing – when people ask you to make specific duas for them. It's not that they can't make those duas themselves, but – like Ramadan – you're going to be in a very special state, and it's very likely that your duas will be accepted. So to find out what things are so dear to them, and then have the opportunity to pray for them in the most sacred places, in the most sacred times, is something that really is a blessing of the process of going for Hajj.

Also very helpful was the spiritual experiences shared by those who had been before; as well as their advice – advice which was immensely important, such as how to make wudu and salaah on a plane when necessary. (Yes – you do have to do that. You can't just skip salaah using the flight as an excuse.)

Anyway, so I only got about 3 or 4 hours of sleep that night, and the next morning was again hectic – but hardly any people this time (thankfully!).

Leaving the house, and at the airport, the goodbyes were very emotional, and our daughter sensed it – because she was quite passive for a while (which is very rare indeed), and seemed a bit sad. I got a lot of hugs and kisses in – without her fighting me – which I appreciate a lot 😊.

And so off we set. The two of us alone – finally away from everyone and everything else. The journey truly began. As we walked, my wife commented on how she felt it (ie. the drama of the preceding days) fading away – which I felt too.

Next up, insha-Allah: The beginning of the travels, and the tests faced early on.

Lessons:

- Don't delay Hajj. When you're capable, go – because you never know whether you'll live to see the day when you're "ready", or whether some calamity will strike to prevent you from going when you feel it's your time.
- As soon as you think it's possible – whether you're financially set or not – register to go with your local Hajj authority ([SAHUC](#) in our case). The earlier you register, the better your chance of being accredited – if you're a first timer.
- Don't underestimate the importance of writing down duas and things that are important to you. For Hajj especially, your dua list – which includes not only your own duas, but also those that others ask you to make for them, is extremely important. You probably can't store everything in your head, and when the times come to make those duas, you don't want to be so overwhelmed by emotion, tiredness, or other factors, that you forget all the duas you intended to make.
- If you don't already have a will (an Islamic one), get it done immediately. You never know when your time to die will come, so don't assume there's always next month, or next year to do it. Be responsible now, so that you can avoid or minimise the hardship and strife for your family members.
- If it's in your control, try to be moderate about the pre-departure customs or rituals in your locality. There's a difference between legitimate celebration and being excessive, and Islam teaches us moderation over extremity.
- If you are expecting visitors before you leave, try to get your packing and arrangements done early, if possible. You should honour your guests by spending time with them – and you don't want a list of 100 things to do on your mind while you're with them.
- For Hajj, but also for travel in general, learn about salaah of the traveller; including how to make wudu and salaah on a plane. Where possible, combine salaahs while you're on the ground (before or after the flight), but recognise that this won't always be possible – especially for Fajr. Find out about timings (e.g. fajr is about an hour before sunrise – wherever you are) and qibla direction, and do your best. You can't skip salaah, or make it late, just because of travel. You *have* to try to make salaah on the plane.

Chapter 3: Twelve bags of sabr



The Arabic term *sabr* is often translated as ‘patience’, ‘perseverance’, or ‘steadfastness’, and we all know its tremendous importance in Islam. When it comes to Hajj, many people tell you that you’ll need a lot of it – because you’ll inevitably face difficulties and trials, such as waiting in queues, waiting for transport, delays in administrative procedures, food being late, and people pushing and shoving you in the sometimes-insane crowds.

On our stopover in Johannesburg, before leaving for Cairo, my uncle there joined the list of people giving that same advice. The common joke is to pack one bag of your clothes and necessary items, and another bag of sabr. His advice was to take *twelve* bags of sabr.

In the old days, travelling *to* Hajj was a big trial – given the fact that people would go by ship, car, or (stinky!) camel, on the way facing extended discomfort and sometimes robbers. Nowadays, transport is much easier, and our challenge is going through all the administrative processes in place for the modern-day Hajj (and the Saudis do an admirable job, given the immense influx of people they have to administer). What’s common between now and then, though, is the attitude we should adopt – which is to assume that we may never return, because death could find us at any moment on the journey (or indeed, at any moment in life).

Having gone through the whole experience, I can confirm that the advice about sabr is absolutely true. Things won’t always go according to the plan; so it’s best to just be patient, relax, not panic, and enjoy the experience – which is a very unusual experience at that. Every time we endure a trial with patience, we help build our own character and spirituality – which will serve us long after the difficulty has passed.

First trials and first stop

Our first trials came even before we boarded our first plane, from Cape Town to Johannesburg: inefficient queues for check-in, followed by the breaking of some hand-luggage (which would make the travels more difficult). Those were relatively minor trials, but it was still disappointing to fail those early tests via complaining.

Of course, saying goodbye to our families – and especially our toddler – was also a trial. She was a little calmer though, and I think she sensed what was going on. I got some extra hugs from her, though, which made it easier 😊.

Trials can also be positive in nature, and one of these was a chance to help someone else. There was an older lady who was travelling alone, and that was a perfect opportunity for my wife to help out and gather some good deeds early on in the trip. One of the important advices we received by one visitor was to ‘help the old people’. With all the paperwork, luggage, and getting to the right places on time, travelling can be difficult enough even for the young. But imagine how difficult it is for an older person – and a single old lady at that. This lady was with us on the whole trip, and alhamdulillah, at various points, we got to help her. Islam places such value on helping others, and caring for the elderly. Opportunities like these are not only a mercy to them, but a means of earning their gratitude and duas for you; and, more importantly, Allah’s pleasure and reward.

The Joburg stopover was about seven hours, and because I had family there, we’d arranged to spend some time with them until our next flight. It was good to meet new additions to the family (cousins’ spouses and kids, who we hadn’t met before), and have the hospitality of family before leaving – without the chaos of *all* our family (which was the case back home). Also, my aunty and uncle were amazingly helpful at the airport especially – waiting with us, helping with the check-in, and basically being substitute parents.

The flight to Cairo included one amazing moment, in the middle of the night, where we looked outside and saw an abundance of stars. It was really beautiful – being up so high, in this canopy we call a sky, engulfed in all these stars we could see up close. My wife even saw a shooting star.

Also on that flight was a reminder of the importance of being vigilant against shaytaan. The night movie, which plays on all the screens, contained some rather pornographic scenes – nakedness which, by today’s standards, are probably considered ‘normal’ – but for people heading to Hajj, rather shocking. (I didn’t watch...but it’s kind of hard not to notice because it’s right there in your face.)

The waiting game

When you travel with a Hajj group, you usually get a very identifiable symbol to carry with you at all times. In our case, we had green backpacks – so we knew who our travel companions were by that sign. Anyway, so we arrived at Cairo airport early in the morning, and began the first of our waits on this trip. We all congregated and waited for our group leader, who – up till then – hadn’t formally introduced himself, nor told us about the procedures we’d need to follow.

Then began the first of many episodes where we, like sheep, stood around aimlessly – not knowing what was going on (and not being told by the authority figure either), sticking with each other and waiting to do whatever it was we were supposed to do.

Eventually, our passports were processed and we went down to the exit of the airport – where we waited some more. Then onto a bus and to a nearby hotel, where we were to have a few hours to ‘freshen up’ before our afternoon flight to Madinah.

In the hotel, information still wasn’t being communicated too clearly. But we were told to settle in the lobby – which we did. Comfy sofas and air-conditioning were very welcome after the confinement of a long distance flight and the airport. Then we were invited to have

some breakfast at the restaurant – but nobody indicated who'd be paying (and most didn't have Egyptian currency at that point).

I didn't eat – instead staying instead in the lobby, relaxing, and watching the others. Most were trying to stay calm, but some had already lost patience by then – given the long travel thus far, and the communication issues we were having with our group leader.

Another South African man who'd travelled with us seemed to be taking charge of the situation. He was at reception handing out room keys for people to go and rest in the rooms. We thought he was a group leader (if not for our group, then the other South African Hajj group with us at the time) – but we later found out he was just an ordinary traveller like us.

Again, our actual group leader wasn't taking charge or communicating the situation to us, so we all went to get our keys from this brother. It turns out that we were booked to stay in this hotel for a few hours, and breakfast – I think – was included in the package. But no one had told us that. So we'd spent probably more than an hour waiting in the lobby and missing out on precious beds that many were desperately in need of.

For whatever reason (unknown to us), our group leader really wasn't helping the situation much. Maybe he was stressed out (which would be understandable), or maybe he was confused – but whatever the case, he portrayed a distinct lack of communication which many found unprofessional, and it showed in the reactions from some of our travel companions. But I knew this was a test – I knew this was when I'd need to use some of that sabr; so it wasn't so bad. I had come knowing we'd face trials – and this seemed like the first major test in the journey.

Hakuna matata

It's interesting to see how different people react when they have to wait. At the airport, some made Fajr (because they hadn't made it on the plane), others chatted to each other, a few read Quran, and some sat – exhausted – just waiting. A large group from Thailand was at the airport, and my wife noted how we South Africans complain – yet the Thais just sit on the floor and make themselves comfortable – no worries.

Later, while waiting for the bus, I was struck very sharply by how well our travel companions used their time while waiting. Only a few sat talking, sleeping, or doing nothing. The others kept busy reading Quran, reading their dua books or Hajj books, making dhikr, and making dua. They understood the value of time, and *especially* the value of time on this trip. There was no time to waste – because they were on the most spiritual of journeys, and were just weeks from the spiritual peaks of their lives; with the need to build spirituality in the time leading up to Hajj. If ever there was a time to shun vain talk and time-wasting in favour of spiritually-productive actions, this was that time.

And it was truly amazing to be with such people, in such circumstances. Alhamdulillah, I'd travelled to quite a few places in my life, but it had never, ever been like this – with people who were so committed to their deen and so conscious of the way they use their time.

We're often *told* about the value of time, and how we should use 'every moment' wisely. But to actually see people *living* that advice was really incredible for me, and it served as a very relevant reminder for life in general, and this journey in particular.

Later that day, we again waited at the airport – this time for our flight to Madinah. It was there that we first experienced the madness of the Hajj crowds. As we were going through the final metal detectors to the departure lounge, there was a huge group of East Asians with us.

Many were old, and maybe they were from rural areas – because it seems they weren't used to how things worked at an airport: many didn't understand (or rejected) the concept of a queue; they pushed their way through, and at the metal detector – where you put your bag to go through the scanner – they piled on their bags, trying to cram as much as they could onto the conveyor belt. It was amusing, but could also have been very frustrating if we let it get to us.

In South Africa – and many other Westernised countries – we'd call that kind of behaviour just plain 'rude.' But – as we were to experience later in the trip as well – this is something that's probably normal in other parts of the world. For people from some other countries, it seems their way of life is different – and what we perceive as being 'civilised' (i.e. waiting your turn and being patient) is different to the way they operate. It doesn't mean that they *intend* to be rude – but it's just that that's their reality back home, so it comes naturally even away from home.

While waiting to leave, hunger struck – and the departure lounge was ill-equipped to deal with the needs of the masses, because there was only a small kiosk selling snacks. But when it comes to food, we South African Indians always come prepared (which you can attribute to the Indian mothers' obsession with keeping their families well-fed 😊). Many had their 'padkos' packed from home – pies, samosas, and home-cooked meals. The spirit of sharing spread, as people walked around offering what food they had to others. I hesitantly took some of a Nando's burger – thinking it would be a welcome mini-meal. But the burger was cold and half-eaten, and it really didn't do much to satisfy my appetite. It was kind of gross, actually, but I appreciated the generosity of this brother – who let me pick whatever I wanted from the food he had.

We then boarded the plane – our last for the next six weeks – and prepared ourselves to enter the Illuminated City; Madinah – the home of our Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Everything up to that point had just been the starters, and now the real trip was to begin...

Next up, insha-Allah: First days in Madinah.

Opening image source is [here](#).

Lessons:

- You'll need a lot of sabr for this journey. Things will go wrong, so be mentally prepared for that and make the decision to be patient, relax, not panic, and enjoy the experience – taking positives from it.
- When things do go wrong, stop and think before you complain. Complaints come easily, but if you took a few moments to think before speaking, you'd see that they aren't always necessary – and the more patient you are, the better it is for you.
- Look for positive opportunities to gain reward by helping others – old people especially. If you're experienced and capable in handling paperwork and luggage, and getting to the right places, try to help those who find it difficult.
- Try NOT to watch the movies and TV shows on the plane. Whether the content is 'decent' or not, you're going for Hajj and leaving behind all these forms of distraction – so reduce or cut your reliance on them immediately, so that it'll be easier to shun them once you get to Madinah or Makkah (where TV is available in your hotel room).
- If your leader(s) seem to be making things worse, keep your cool and encourage others to do the same. Try to act with firmness, but in a constructive manner, to ensure that things get sorted out – without being insulting to those who are not fulfilling your expectations. Be patient, make dua for them, and focus on making the trip as smooth as possible.
- While waiting, use your time wisely. Avoid useless chatting and doing things that have no spiritual benefit. If you want to sleep, make an intention that you're doing it as a form of worship (i.e. to gain strength for the travel that's still to come). And if not, engage in other acts of worship, or even spiritually beneficial conversations with your travel companions. You may never travel with people like this again, so use the opportunity to derive maximum benefit from the situation.

- When foreigners push and shove, consider the idea that it may just be normal behaviour for them back home – and that they're not trying to be rude. Be compassionate yet firm with them, and be patient.
- Share your food with others. If your family (mother, especially) packs you food that you don't think you'll want to eat – take it anyway, and look for opportunities to share it with others later. In that way, you can feed the hungry, and also gain reward for yourself and those who prepared the food for you.

Chapter 4: Welcome to Madinah



Masjid an-Nabawi at sunset

First impressions

Mention the name ‘Madinah’, and the first descriptions many Muslims will use involve words like ‘peaceful’, ‘calm’, ‘tranquil’, etc. Our arrival there was anything but that – but such is to be expected when we had to deal with the chaos of Madinah’s airport at Hajj time: thousands of pilgrims arriving, long immigration queues, and a luggage collection area that was hectic, to say the least.

When we finally got out of there, we felt the air of the Holy Lands for the first time. It wasn’t suffocating, but was very hot – especially since it was after 9PM already.

If I didn’t yet feel the sanctity of the place yet, the wait on the bus would make it clear that this was no ordinary place. The radio was on, but this wasn’t the kind of radio station we get back home. In our Westernised societies (and even some Eastern), music is everywhere – from shops to waiting rooms, elevators to outdoor events, cars driving by, and even in the masjid – when people forget to turn their phones off. And of course, let’s not forget the people who blast their favourite tunes in public spaces via their cellular phones – as if they’re doing a public service by sharing their musical taste with those around them.

But this was Madinah, and what played on that radio station brought sharply into focus that we were now ‘safe’ from the perils of Western popular culture. No music, but Quran recitation instead. That, and narration after narration of hadiths. It was all in Arabic (not English), of course, but that didn’t matter. What counted was that in this sacred place, the pollution of violent, vulgar, and sexually-suggestive lyrics would no longer reach our ears. This was especially significant for me – as a former music addict; knowing that there *is* a place on Earth where I wouldn’t be subjected to such things anymore.

The drive to the hotel was especially emotional for much of the group, with salwaat being recited, and many tearing as we approached Masjid an-Nabawi – the main attraction of the city, and resting place of the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. But for us, it would only be the next morning that we actually went to the masjid – being exhausted from the last two days’ travel, plus a tiring week at home before that.

Early lessons



Approaching the masjid

Making my way to the masjid the next morning – with the group – I spoke with some of the other guys in the group, with topics centering around travel and worldly things. I soon realised that I needed to politely break away from such talk – otherwise the brothers would probably remain engaged in conversation with me, wasting precious time here. You see, I wasn't totally *opposed* to socialising, and I didn't want to be rude. But on this journey – and in this place – I didn't want conversation to take up a lot of time, especially if the topics weren't spiritually beneficial. So if I started – on Day 1 – setting a personal standard of letting such conversations happen often, it would mean missing out on the peace, solitude, and atmosphere of this place – which, I believe, is best enjoyed alone.

For me personally, spirituality and feeling closeness to Allah is something that doesn't come often when there are others around. And so on this first trip to the masjid, because I was in a group, I felt a bit emotionally disconnected from the experience. I did still feel that acclaimed peace that many speak of – but I couldn't enjoy it much with the others around, having to stick with the group members and move as they moved. I suppose I knew that it would only be when I came alone that I'd get to fully immerse myself in the experience; and there would be plenty of time for that in the coming days.

Another lesson – which I think reinforced the previous one – was a piece of advice I received about the time in Madinah: from that early stage, try to imagine the time when you'll be leaving the city. Thinking of that should help you appreciate how precious the time here is, which will help motivate you to use the time wisely. And I think that's a general advice that can be applied to *any* special experience one goes through: early on, and throughout, allow yourself to think of the time when the experience will end; and this, insha-Allah, will help you to make the most of it.

After the relative disappointment of the morning visit, I went back later for my first fardh salaah in the masjid – Thuhr. Starting out, it was very special – and I felt a kind of 'magic' in that first rakaat. But the experience was cut short when a cellphone went off, snatching the moment away. As I was to find out, in both Madinah and Makkah, this happens a lot – so don't be under the illusion that the sanctity of these places causes people to be extra careful about putting their phones off.

Later, I reflected on what happened and remembered great advice by a scholar who spoke of this exact thing – where your worship in these places will be interrupted by cellphones and other distractions. But if your heart is really with Allah – you’re really into your worship, and your connection is strong – it won’t bother you. So it’s important to make dua to achieve that state, and try to achieve it via sabr.

After that salaah, my turning point of the day came. With time on my side, I stayed after salaah to make dua. And it was during that dua that something in me finally clicked. The floodgates opened, and my connection to Allah suddenly emerged as strong as ever. It was this experience – even if it was just a few minutes – that changed my mood completely from the morning’s disappointment.

And I realised the importance of that very act of dua: this was actually a *journey of dua*. As a traveller, duas are accepted. And in this blessed place, as someone on the way to Hajj, the feeling is intensified because you’re there for Allah alone – and not on holiday or business. I had already made a [comprehensive dua list](#) before leaving home, and this was the time to start using it – taking it with me wherever I went, so that I could make all those duas while in these precious moments. And while I would usually be self-conscious about consulting a physical list like this with others around, that fear was allayed here – because the reality was that most people in Madinah (and later Makkah) didn’t speak English; so there was little chance of them reading it.

Next up, insha-Allah: Reflections on the first 24 hours in Madinah.

Lessons:

- When you’re in a special situation – such as visiting Madinah – use your time wisely and beware of non-beneficial activities that can waste your precious moments.
- In these situations, early on and throughout, imagine how it’ll be when the experience ends; and use this feeling to help you appreciate it and make the most of it.
- Distractions will often be present while you’re trying to engage in worship. Instead of complaining about them (when you can’t change them), accept the reality and try to focus your heart on Allah instead – building a strong connection that won’t let these minor things disturb you. Make dua to achieve that state, and try to achieve it via sabr.
- Hajj is a journey of dua and constant connection to Allah; so use your time to make all the duas you want, and strengthen your bond with Allah via acts of worship pleasing to Him. After all, back home, you’ll probably never get this kind of chance to focus 100% on such activities – so embrace and use the chances while you have them on this trip.
- If you didn’t already make a written dua list (both for yourself and other people), do so – even while you’re travelling, or in Madinah or Makkah. That list is critical for this journey, because you probably can’t store everything in your head – so when the times come to make those duas, you don’t want to be so overwhelmed by emotion, tiredness, or other factors, that you forget all the duas you intended to make.

Image sources: *First picture – unknown; second picture – taken by me.*

Chapter 5: A little piece of Heaven



The Rawda-tul Jannah in Masjid-an Nabawi

The first 24 hours in Madinah made a huge impression on me and helped me realise why people love the place so much: it felt like the Prophet s.a.w.'s masjid was a piece of Jannah. Of course, quite literally, there *is* a piece of Jannah in there – the Rawda-tul Jannah (the piece of land which will be in Jannah, as stated in hadith).

But beyond that, many other things made it feel like an other-worldly experience.

The main thing difference between this place and elsewhere was the atmosphere. There was a calmness and tranquillity which I don't think you'll find anywhere else in the world – and this was despite the fact that there were so many people present. And the serenity wasn't just external – it was also internal. It was like this feeling of contentment and inner peace – like this was the place my heart belonged.

The other major point was that this masjid was such a beautiful *environment* of Islam. It seemed like *everyone* there was geared towards worship – both the visiting pilgrims and the locals. In the first evening – between Maghrib and Esha – I observed Quran classes going on for kids, with teachers and students sitting together – the kids taking notes as the teacher spoke. Other people were reading Quran; some were in groups having halaqahs (study circles); others were making tasbeeh and dhikr; and some made dua.

It felt like the ultimate environment – absolutely perfect; the kind of place the heart naturally yearns for.

The people were young and old, and of many different nationalities – like the whole Ummah was there: people from Turkey, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Ghana, Thailand, and us South Africans. And these were just the early arrivals. In the days that followed, people from many more countries would come. It was interesting to see how the different nationalities identified themselves: the Turks all wore khakis; the Malaysian women (at least I *think* they were Malaysian) wore bright pink hijabs; some Indonesians had bright markings on their clothing; and Africans wore what seemed to be their traditional cultural clothing, which was very colourful.

This was really the ultimate advertisement for Muslim unity. I already knew that there are Muslims all over the world, but being in Madinah at that time – where I saw such variety in

front of my very eyes – was really incredible. Though everyone identified themselves differently, we all went to the same masjid, read the same salaah, recited the same Quran in the same Arabic language, and we all prayed to the same God. We're so used to hearing about Muslims having sectarian differences, religious infighting, and racial and ideological clashes – but in Madinah, there was a mix of so many different kinds of Muslims, and none of those dividing factors mattered. It was truly amazing.

And I imagined Jannah is something like this: all different types of people in one place, all united by Islam, all worshipping Allah in the various ways available. Alhamdulillah.



Inside Masjid-an Nabawi

Another striking feature was how zam-zam water was abundant. Anytime I wanted some, I could just go and get it from the many coolers in the aisles. Zam-zam is not only a thirst quencher, but also like a 'magic water' – it's a cure for every sickness, and it is what you intend it to be (as per hadith), which is why it's good to make specific intentions and duas each time you drink it.

Also amazing was the benefit of spending abundant time in the masjid. Because of the crowds, if we wanted to get a good spot in the masjid, we had to go early for salaah. And this was literally filled with blessings, because every moment you spend in the masjid – while waiting for athaan – is an act of worship; even if you do nothing at all. (And this applies to *any* masjid in the world.) In this time, you can make extra salaah, read Quran, make thikr, make dua, or just quiet your mind and take time to reflect. On this point, it's also useful to plan your activities for this time and go to the masjid with the stuff you need – such as your Quran, books, pen and paper, and even your computer (if it's small enough – like a Netbook or iPad).

For the fardh salaahs, the imams took their time to read – no rushing; which also helps the quality of salaah. And after salaah, the imam doesn't make a congregational dua. You're free to make your own duas and dhikrs – whatever you want to. It's not like many places, where the imam makes his dhikr and dua over the speaker system, which means that you either follow along, or you go and do your own thing while still hearing him (which isn't so easy if you need to concentrate).

Added to that was the fact that after almost every fardh salaah there was a Janazah salaah – so there were opportunities to participate in these tremendous acts of worship just by staying put for a few minutes.

Next up, insha-Allah: More experiences from Madinah.

Lessons:

- When you experience the serenity of Madinah, remember the peace of Jannah and make dua that you and your loved ones will spend eternity there.
- When considering Muslims of other nationalities, races, and cultures, always focus on the common link – Islam – and use that to boost your perception of the unity within the ummah. While the media (and our experience in our communities) often paint a picture of division, places like Madinah show the reality of the unity we have DESPITE our diversity.
- Drink plenty of zam-zam, and make intentions each time, and duas with it. And believe with certainty that it has the benefits mentioned in the hadiths. And if you can get zam zam water at home (for those not going in person), do so, and use it as mentioned.
- Since you'll probably be spending a lot of time in the masjid between salaahs, plan your time beforehand and take the stuff you'll need (e.g. your Quran, books, pen and paper, and even your Netbook / iPad / compact computer).
- Learn how to pray the Janazah salaah so that you can participate in it each day (since you'll probably get the chance every single day).

Image sources: Unknown

Chapter 6: Madinah attractions (Part 1)



An aerial shot of a model of Madinah

While Masjid an-Nabawi is the main attraction in Madinah, for now, I'd like to cover some of the other attractions in the city. There seems to be a standard 'tour circuit' in Madinah – places of historical and religious significance (called 'ziyarahs'). Many of these sites are marked by masjids, and on our third morning in the city, we covered the main sites.

Masjid Quba



Masjid Quba

Quba – on the outskirts of Madinah – was the place where the Prophet s.a.w. and his travelling companion, Abu Bakr r.a., arrived and first stayed after emigrating from Makkah. The Prophet s.a.w. established the first masjid ever here – Masjid Quba – and there are several religious virtues to the place (which you can read about [here](#)).

It was a bit weird ‘touring’ a masjid. While it *is* a tourist attraction, it’s also a place of worship, and something doesn’t feel right about hordes of people inside snapping photos and walking around like it’s a museum. But given the rarity of the visit for many of us, I can understand the desire to want to capture the moment – especially for those that would be taking pictures and videos home to show their loved ones; though proper etiquette should be adhered to at all times.



Inside Masjid Quba

One of the most important tips to consider *before* you visit such a place is to do your research – to know your history. Our teacher back in Cape Town had advised us of this: your stay in each place is short, so try to learn about the place *before* you go so that when you’re there, your experience is not primarily one of learning about the place (which you could gather by reading from a book at home) – but one of feeling the history and spirit of the place. Do your preparation so that you can make best use of your time.

What I liked best about this masjid was the courtyard in the middle: a beautiful open space that radiated peace and light. Ironically, it reminded me of a masjid back home – the one next door to the location of our Hajj operator’s pre-Hajj seminars.



The courtyard inside Masjid Quba

We interrupt your ziyarahs for this commercial break

Madinah is famous for dates, and our next stop was a date farm. But we didn't actually get to go in to see much of the 'farm' area – most of the time was spent in the date shop that was filled with visitors like us, everyone clamouring to buy those famous Madinah dates for the people back home. Being a non-fruit eater, the place didn't hold much appeal for me – but it was interesting to see so many products made with dates. I almost got fooled into wanting a chocolate bar – until I saw it was a *date* chocolate bar.



A date market in Madinah

The site of the Battle of Uhud



The site of the Battle of Uhud, including the graveyard of the martyrs

Next up was the site of the [Battle of Uhud](#) – which was an event packed with lessons for Muslims. The site contains a masjid (which we didn't go into), the graveyard of the [martyrs of Uhud](#) (which includes Hamza r.a. – the Prophet s.a.w.'s uncle), and the infamous hill – the strategic point that the archers left in the battle, thereby turning the tide and causing the Muslims to lose the battle.



The graveyard itself was an emotional site. If you know the commitment and bravery of those Muslims that died for the sake of Allah, you can't help but make dua for them, and wish to have the same valour and strength that they did.

The major lessons I took from the place are the importance of obeying the leader (assuming it's a good leader, of course) and the requirement of being brave in the battlefield – never turning your back (which is a major sin), like the 300 or so soldiers that abandoned the Muslim army before the battle.

In today's times, we may not face physical warfare, but our religion is constantly under attack from Islamophobes, atheists, Christian fundamentalists, and others – so we need to know how to defend our deen, and we shouldn't be afraid to stand up for what we believe in, even if we're the 'strangers' in the society (which, by the way, is a good sign, as the hadith says: 'glad tidings to the strangers').

Also at the site is a flea market where ladies sell herbs of Madinah, umbrellas, and other trinkets. Good business for them, but it's sad to see this great historical site including a makeshift commercial hub, which distracts many people from fully appreciating the significance of the land they're standing on.

Tourist spots generally do include this kind of setup, though, so be prepared for it. And if shopping isn't what you came for, try not to get sucked into the many 'bargains' and rare items that can lure you. Keep your shopping short and focus more on the significance of the place you're at.

Next up, insha-Allah: The cave of Uhud, Masjid Qiblatain, and Saqeefah garden.

Related lessons:

- When going on ziyarahs, take cold water for drinking and staying cool. Also take a snack if you think you'll need it, and be sure to take an umbrella / something to cover your head and neck (in addition to sunblock – which should be on already).
- For ziyarahs, try to leave your hotel in a state of wudhu, because when visiting masjids, it's sunnah to pray 2 rakaats to greet the masjid – and with a limited period in each place, you don't want to lose precious time having to make wudhu.
- Whether you read a book /article, listen to a lecture, or talk to others – do your research about the places you'll visit *before* you actually go. Time at the actual place is limited, so get the knowledge first so that when you're there, you can make it a spiritual experience and a reflection on the historical significance – and not just a history lesson (which you can get any place else, any other time).

- When visiting masjids and other sacred sites, respect the people there and maintain the proper etiquettes of the place. If there are rules posted on a notice (e.g. no photography), follow the rules – and don't disturb people by raising your voice.
- If you buy dates to take home, make sure you seal them properly, or you may have trouble bringing them into the country. Your Hajj operator should be able to advise you on this.
- When learning about historical events, try to extract lessons that you can apply in today's times – and your own personal life. For example, the Battle of Uhud teaches us the importance of obeying the (good) leader and not giving into your own desires. It also teaches us the importance of being brave and not turning your back when faced with attack. In today's times, if we aren't facing physical war, we are facing ideological attacks from a range of sources – so educate yourself about your deen and don't be afraid to stand up for what you believe in, albeit using wisdom and the best of speech.
- Try not to get diverted by the shopping opportunities at historical sites. Focus on the spiritual and historical significance of the places, and minimise your purchases – or go back on your own (i.e. without the whole group) if you want to indulge in that.

Image sources: *All pictures taken by me, except the first shot of Masjid Quba and the shot of the Archer's Hill (sources unknown).*

Chapter 7: Madinah attractions (Part 2)

Continuing from [last time](#), we now look at a few other attractions in the city of Madinah.

The Cave of Uhud



The Cave of Uhud from the base of the mountain

Related to the Battle of Uhud is the Cave of Uhud, which is quite far from the battle site. The cave – which sits on the side of Mount Uhud – is where the Prophet s.a.w. took refuge after being wounded in the battle. We visited the cave on a separate, unofficial ziyarah (meaning that the Saudi government doesn't encourage visiting this site). While most of us climbed up and tried to get in, not many could, because a small group of visitors from another country were just staying put inside – not letting others have a turn.

While that level of selfishness and disregard for others angered our group, we realized that we should just take advantage of whatever we *could* get – which was climbing on the very same path that the Prophet s.a.w. climbed, and having a rare view of another part of Madinah – far from the hotels and shops that dominate the Masjid area.

I got quite close to the cave itself – almost into the entrance, but could go no further. I did pick up a sweet scent, though. Some say it's the smell of the Prophet s.a.w. still lingering, while sceptics would say that maybe people just perfume the area as a sign of respect for the place. Without having any credible evidence for the former, I'm inclined towards the sceptical opinion.



A close-up of the cave of Uhud

The neighbourhood at the foot of the cave was also a unique experience. Unlike the well-developed commercial and tourist area around Masjid an-Nabawi, this was a taste of the 'ordinary' society of Madinah. It seemed a poor neighbourhood – fairly run down, and with little kids asking for money / selling water to the tourists that come to their area for the cave.



The neighbourhood at the base of Mount Uhud



A building near the base of Mount Uhud

Masjid Qiblatain



Masjid Qiblatain

Masjid al Qiblatain – meaning ‘Mosque with Two Qiblas’, is one of the oldest mosques in the world and is unique because it contains two mihrabs – one in the direction of Jerusalem and the other facing Ka’aba. This was the final stop on the official ziyarah circuit, and is famous because it’s where the qibla of the Muslims was changed from Jerusalem (our original qibla) to the Kabah in Makkah ([more details here](#)).

But for me, the visit wasn’t very spiritual. And I hardly spent any time in the actual masjid.

This being the end of the tour, we would have to rush to make it back to Masjid an-Nabawi for Thuhr salaah. On top of that, I needed the bathroom, and with the group having limited time, I didn’t want to get left behind. So off I went – rushing in to the toilets outside.

Now, when it comes to Hajj, one of the big considerations – for me, and many others – is what the toilet situation will be like. The [Eastern toilet](#) is a daunting prospect for us Westerners – and it’s made even scarier when we worry about how clean it’ll be (and believe me, it can get pretty awful). While the hotels have Western toilets, the places of Hajj itself, as well as other public places – including masjids – have the Eastern ones. I tried *not* to think of this – as my coping mechanism – but once I got into the toilet at Qiblatain, my ‘ignorance is bliss’ strategy became a thing of the past.

When you gotta go, you gotta go. I had to go, and the Eastern toilet was all that there was. I’ll spare you the details, except to say it wasn’t as dirty as I’d feared – this was actually one of the cleanest Eastern toilets I encountered on the whole trip.

The lesson I took from the experience – other than the actual procedure to do my business in the cleanest possible way (without touching things I could avoid touching) – was that fears are easily conquered by necessity. When the pressure is on and you have no choice, you have to throw your concerns aside and do what you need to do. And in doing so, you often find out that what you *feared* actually wasn't real at all. More than half the battle is in your head – so if you can condition your mind to be fearless, you can spare yourself a lot of unnecessary anxiety.

Saqeefah garden (Garden of Banu Sa'edah)

After the death of the Prophet s.a.w., the companions (may Allah be pleased with them) needed to choose a successor to assume leadership of the Muslim community. There's a long and sometimes-contentious story about this event – which I won't get into ([some details are here](#)), except to say that the actual location they held the meeting was in this garden – which belonged to the tribe of Banu Sa'edah.

The garden is 200 metres west of Masjid an-Nabawi, and is beautifully maintained. When we were there, it was open to the public during the daytime. Aside from its historical significance, it's a lovely, peaceful place – perfect for a picnic, or just relaxing away from the crowds.



The Garden of Banu Sa'edah



Another shot of the Garden of Banu Sa'edah

Other places

As part of the unofficial ziyarah, we also visited a few other places, such as the [Al-Ghars well](#) and the site of the [house of Salman Al-Farsi \(r.a.\)](#) – the latter of which was brief but highly significant, given the tremendous story of how his quest for truth led him to Madinah and Islam. For us born Muslims, we shouldn't take Islam for granted. We should look at examples like Salman's and even some of today's reverts – and we should appreciate how valuable this deen is, and reflect on whether we give it its due rights or not.



The site of the house of Salman Al-Farsi r.a.

Another highlight was the Madinah Multimedia museum – which contained great photographic and model exhibits of the city's history, and is definitely worth a visit.



A model of the Battle of Uhud



A model of the Rawdah-tul Jannah inside Masjid-an Nabawi



A historical model of Masjid an-Nabawi



An old, hand-written copy of the Quran

Related lessons:

- When touring – and in other situations in life – you’ll get people that make things difficult for others. If the situation is out of your control, don’t complain and whine about it. Rather appreciate the fact that you got to be at the site itself, and make the most of it. And make dua that you’ll get another chance to FULLY experience it in future.
- Don’t believe everything you hear about the historical sites in Islam. Many people narrate stories and things they’ve heard – folklore – which may have no real basis. Be sure that you’re getting authentic information.
- Although the Saudi government discourages visits to historical sites other than the main, famous ones, try to understand the reasoning behind this. And if you want to visit those sites for legitimate reasons (i.e. you’re NOT going to do bi’dah there), visit. It helps you make more of your trip, and also gives you a taste of other areas that aren’t so shiny and impressive.
- Fear and anxiety are all in your mind – and the reality is usually not as bad as you imagined. Necessity conquers fear – so try to save yourself the trouble beforehand by remembering this.
- Don’t take Islam for granted. Remember the struggles that many of the past – such as Salman Al-Farsi r.a. – went through to come to this deen, and reflect on whether you really appreciate it and give it its due rights or not.
- Try to visit the Madinah Multimedia museum if possible. We visit museums at home and in other places in the world – so why would you pass up that kind of learning experience in the city of Allah’s beloved Prophet s.a.w?

Image sources: *All pictures taken by me, except the close-up of the Cave of Uhud and Masjid Qiblatain (sources unknown).*

Chapter 8: Every soul shall taste it



Janatul Baqi – the graveyard of Madinah

The certainty

The Prophet s.a.w. reportedly* advised us to “*Remember frequently the destroyer of pleasures*” – referring to death. It’s the only certainty we have in life – the fact that we *will* die; and it’s a fact that everyone accepts – even the atheists. Personally, I would love to live by this hadith – but, sadly, I do not. Once in a while reminders (like [this one](#)) move me, but those feelings soon fade, and it’s back to ‘normal’ life again.

When [preparing for Hajj](#), you’re forced to consider the fact that you may die on this journey. It’s common to prepare your final will and testament (if you haven’t already), and when you leave your loved ones at the airport upon your departure, you know that it may be the last time you ever see them.

In both Madinah and Makkah, reminders of death come very often – so often that you may become immune to them. You see, after almost every fard salaah in the masjid, there’s a janazah salaah (which is also why it’s important to learn how to pray the janazah before you get there). And if you’re with a Hajj group, someone in the group may end up being one of those janazahs.

The greatest resting place

In a hadith, the Prophet s.a.w. reportedly** said: “*Whosoever is able to die in Madinah, then let him die there, for indeed, I will intercede for the one who dies there.*”



Those who die in Madinah are buried in its famous graveyard: Jannatul Baqi (translated as ‘The Garden of Heaven’). The virtues of the place are great ([read more here](#)), and being buried there means you’ll be buried with many members of the Prophet’s (s.a.w.) close family, around ten thousand of the Sahabah r.a., and many prominent, pious personalities. Additionally, the people of Baqi are said to be among the first to be resurrected on Qiyamah, and they’ll accompany the Prophet s.a.w. (full hadith on [this page](#)).



A list of some of the people buried in Jannatul Baqi

Making it real

During our tour of the Madinah Multimedia Museum (mentioned [last time](#)), our tour leader – who’s extremely knowledgeable and passionate about Madinah – spoke a bit about Baqi, suggesting that we make dua asking Allah to let Madinah be our place of death – so that we could be buried in Baqi. Or, for those of us (like me) who wanted to go home – to be raised with the people of Baqi.

He also told us when the graveyard was open (after Fajr and Asr). And with Asr coming up soon at that time, a relative of my wife (who was with us) and I decided to go in if we could. But we would have to be quick if we wanted to follow the body into the graveyard, because there’s very little time from the time the janazah salaah ends to the time the body goes into the graveyard and is buried – they really do make sure the body is buried as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, this meant that we had to pray outside the masjid – quite close to Baqi – and we didn't pray the janazah, as we didn't want to risk missing the opportunity. Alhamdulillah – we got our chance.



Going in there, I got tingles when I looked around the first time. Like other graveyards, it was calm and serene – a peace prevailed in the air. But unlike other graveyards, some of the greatest people to walk the earth – of the 'normal' people (i.e. non Prophets or Messengers) were buried here. The style of burial was simple – as simple as can be – in the Saudi, Salafi/Wahabi style: just a mound of earth, with 2 stones – one on each side of the mound (or in some cases, just one) – to mark the position of the grave.

We followed the body – and we both got the chance to carry a part of the coffin for a while. Alhamdulillah – it was a good experience, and one that every Muslim (male) should try to do. Carrying another person's body should remind you that one day *you'll* be the one being carried.

The body was then lowered into the grave – down a bit, then into a little chamber, then covering it with stones (cement blocks – the space in these graves is enough for the body to sit up at the time of questioning – which it does); then putting sand in to close it. Alhamdulillah – again, we both got to throw some sand in.



An empty grave in Janatul Baqi

Though I had no idea who the person was, I made dua for him/her – as was fitting for the event. I don't remember it in detail, but I think I felt a kind of closeness to that person; a desperation for him/her – that he/she was – at that moment – going through a tremendous,

tremendous experience, and any duas the still-living could make would, insha-Allah, be helpful. And – of course – it was an immense reminder that I too will be in that position one day (whether sooner or later).

After everything was done and the people moved away, I made more duas – for both myself and my loved ones, including one asking Allah to make this the moment that the remembrance of death finally sinks in permanently. As stated in the intro, I struggle to live by that advice.

Because having knowledge in your brain is one thing, but it's only superficial if it's not practiced. For example, a male can *know* that he should 'lower his gaze' when in the company of non-mahram females. But it's only when that knowledge – that lesson – actually sinks into his *heart* – that it makes the real impact. So much so that he then *lives by* that knowledge.

For me, things like this only seem to truly sink into my heart when I experience things that *personally* teach me the lesson in my own life. So this experience in Baqi was really a perfect opportunity to let the concept of remembering death really permeate my consciousness and heart. I was on the greatest journey I'd ever take in life, in such a blessed place (Madinah, and Baqi) – with the Prophet s.a.w.'s site of burial visible to me from where I stood (under the green dome of Masjid an-Nabawi). If there was any place for the reality to hit me and stick with me, this was it. So I asked Allah for that.

To further try to reinforce the feeling, I later went to look at an open grave – to give myself a visual of what my final resting place will look like. When I was small, I had a dream in which I was being buried – but I was still alive. I could see the people at my grave, and I think I tried to call out to them – but to no avail. Now – all these years later – I know that a scene like that will quite likely become a reality. I will be buried – but my soul will be conscious and awake. And though my body will be lifeless for a period, it will come alive again – and my questioning by the two angels will begin.

I made dua that I will answer those questions correctly in those moments; and that my soul's journey after death would be the better of the [two options](#); and that things would be easy for me in my grave.

Another amazing image that struck me was when I saw people in the distance – walking along the pathways in Baqi. What I saw brought to mind what our group leader had described earlier that day: how – at the time of resurrection – the people of Baqi would get up and all walk towards the place of accounting. I saw these people – the people of this current world – walking on those pathways in the distance, and I imagined that this very same scene will occur on that Day.

And again, I made dua to be among them – to be among these people of Baqi, with the Prophet s.a.w.

May Allah grant that to all of us.



*Hadith reported in Tirmidhi, Nasaa'i, and Ibn Maajah

** Hadith reported in Ahmad, Musnad; Tirmidhi, and Sunan

Related lessons:

- Remember death often. Not to be morbid – but as a means of putting this life into the proper perspective, and to help motivate you to live in a way that'll see you meet Allah in the best possible condition.
- Learn to pray the janazah salaah. You'll get plenty of opportunities to pray it in Madinah and Makkah – and you should take those chances. It's a really virtuous act of worship that will benefit you in both this life and the next, insha-Allah.
- Make dua to either die in Madinah, or to be raised with the people of Jannatul Baqi.
- If you can, visit Jannatul Baqi while you're in Madinah. (And while you're there, DO NOT carry out any acts of shirk or bidah. Never, ever pray **TO** the dead – only pray **FOR** them!)
- If you can participate in a janazah, do so – and make it a means of benefit by remembering that you will be in this position one day.
- Knowledge is best when it is internalised and practiced upon. If you can find experiences that will help you internalise beneficial lessons in your own, personal life, use those opportunities to improve yourself.

Image sources: The Baqi burial list was taken by me, but all others are from various Internet sources.

Chapter 9: Loose ends



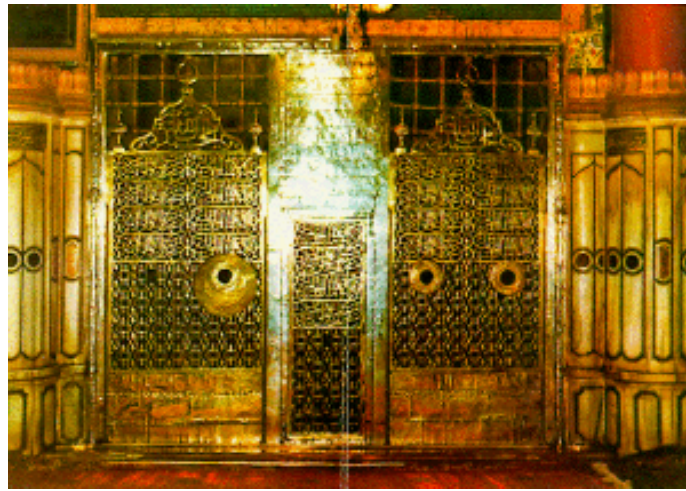
Masjid an-Nabawi in Madinah

To wrap up the Madinah leg of the trip, I'd like to highlight some points which haven't been covered elsewhere. Unlike previous posts, this one won't follow a narrative, but will just take a point form approach. As such, there are no 'Related lessons' this time – as each point is its own lesson.

Masjid Nabawi

You can find actual information about the masjid in other places – such as [this article](#) and this talk. Here, I'd just like to advise on a few things:

- Go early for all salaahs – even when it's not so busy. The place fills up fast as the days go by, and if you want to sit comfortably inside, you need to be there long before the adhaan. For Jumuaah, try to go 2 hours early. And in all cases, take stuff to do in that waiting period (reading, dua list, etc).
- For the men (since I don't think women are allowed), try to go up to the roof if possible. Not only is it beautiful, peaceful, and simply amazing – it's also much quieter and less busy up there. So if you're looking for solitude away from the crowds, chances are you can find it up there.
- If you're keen on being in the *original* area of the masjid, go towards the front on the right hand side of the Rawda. Find a row of pillars with green markings at the top (the tops of these stand out as compared to the other pillars). This line marks the original masjid's area – before the extensions.
- In the Rawda, don't push others and don't be rude – even though others may do it to you. Be patient, and remember that as soon as you're on the green / cream carpet, you're in the Rawda. So even if you can't make salaah yet due to crowding, still make dua – because you're in a piece of Jannah. And when you get your chance, don't hog the space – give others a fair chance. If you want to make your duas in peace at that time, make them in sujood – as people are less likely to push or distract you (as compared to making duas while standing or walking, or sitting after salaah). Also remember – beforehand – to make dua for your chance in the rawdah, and insha-Allah Allah will open up your spot for you – even if it looks impossible.
- When greeting the Prophet s.a.w. at his grave, there's a very fine line between actually speaking to him and *asking* from him. Be very aware of this, and do your best to not ask from him – because to ask is dua, and you cannot make dua to him. He may be able to hear you and return your greeting (in a way we can't perceive), but when it comes to asking for things related to him – such as seeking his intercession on Qiyamah – make dua to Allah for those things. Never, ever ask him. The same applies in Jannatul Baqi, other graveyards, and at the kabrs of the martyrs and pious predecessors...we *never, ever* make dua to a person in a grave.



The burial chamber of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)

Other considerations

- **Expectations:** When it comes to ziyarahs / touring and spiritual programs you're expecting from your group, don't expect too much – or rather, don't rely on others. For us, I expected a lot but was disappointed, and it took a while for me to realize this lesson: the journey you're on is NOT about other people, and it's not about being a tourist. It's a personal journey, so consider it as your own intense time to be with Allah and to develop spiritually. Anything else you get from your group (e.g. talks and tours) is a bonus. Don't focus on what you paid your operator for and what they should be delivering, etc – because people will ultimately fall short. Instead, focus on the positive: you're in a place where 100s of millions of Muslims would love to be but can't be at this time. So make the most of it. And if you really want to explore, do so on your own – taking the necessary precautions, of course.
- **Shopping:** Shopping is bound to be part of your plans, and beyond actually buying stuff, it can be a great experience because it gives you a chance to interact with the locals – who are very friendly and trusting. But it can also bring you down from a spiritual high because of its very nature and the fact that you're in the marketplace – which isn't a spiritual environment. Before you shop, make the right niyah for shopping, and while there, try not to overindulge – because that can poison your soul quickly, and can be very distracting mentally. Yes – you want to get gifts for people, but that should be an aside. Your main purpose on this trip is personal – your own relationship with Allah. Don't taint the trip by letting shopping go beyond reasonable limits of time and attention.



A shop in Madinah

- **Sleep:** Chances are, your normal sleep schedule will be thrown out on this trip. Don't fight it, but rather use it as an opportunity to try to follow the sunnah – the Prophet s.a.w.'s sleep pattern. This included sleeping early after Esha, getting up for tahajjud in the night, staying up after Fajr (which, by the way, is a most blessed and productive time for the ummah – as per the Prophet s.a.w.'s dua in this regard), and – importantly – having a nap after Thuhr.

- **Fasting:** Aim to fast on Mondays and Thursdays – as per the sunnah. It may seem daunting – given the extreme heat – but insha-Allah with practice it'll become easy. And if your Hajj package only covers breakfast and supper, it'll also save you the time and money you would've spent on lunch. However, if your health isn't up to it, don't over-exert yourself. If you're off to Makkah next, it's more physically demanding there; and beyond that, your top priority is to be in good health for the 5 days of Hajj.
- **Washing:** Be warned that laundry prices can be insane. They're charged by the article, so it can be very costly to get things washed. Unless you're super-rich, rather do handwashing yourself – in your hotel bath/sink. By doing a little each day (or every few days), it isn't overwhelming. And the heat is such that the clothes dry very quickly – just hang your clothes near an open window in the daytime and see how fast they'll be dry again.
- **TV:** The TV in your room can be a distraction, so try to minimize use of it. Or even unplug it completely if you fear you won't be able to control yourself (especially if – at home – you have a habit of watching a lot). If you do watch, though, there are a few beneficial things on: the Madinah and Makah haram channels – which are great for seeing how busy the masjid and rawdah are; and Al Huda TV (an English-language Islamic channel.)
- **Internet and online distractions:** With the advent of smartphones and tablet computers, it's easy to stay connected to your online life – such as email, Facebook, Twitter, news, etc) – even in Madinah. Be very careful of this, because just as these online habits can eat away at your time back home, the same can happen here – and this isn't the place for wasting time. Assess your habits and come up with a plan to be self-disciplined so that you don't lose precious time on unnecessary activities.
- **Being a tourist / pictures and videos:** When you're at the masjids and other sacred places, try not to be a menace with your camera. Don't disturb those engaged in worship – because you wouldn't want others to do that to you. And for yourself in any case, do you really want to be so obsessed with taking pictures and videos that you miss out on the full living experience? LIVE the experience with your own eyes and senses – rather than wanting to record everything. You can get other people's recordings and pictures later – but actually being there and fully taking in the sights and sounds with your own eyes and ears is something you won't get to do back home. So don't go over the top with the camera.
- **Personal reflections:** If you're one of those people that knows the value of keeping a journal – or at least documenting your experiences from time to time – make sure that you keep a journal for this trip. It's best to write when things are still fresh in your mind – so that you can capture the important details and feelings in words. It's better not to procrastinate and leave it for later – because your memory will fade, and with the amount of experiences still to come, your memories may just be pushed out by later experiences. A journal is also important for writing down the personal reflections and lessons you're gaining – which will be very insightful and valuable when you're back home and in later years.

Image sources: Masjid an-Nabawi – Al Anwar Hajj & Umrah group (South Africa), Grave of the Prophet s.a.w. – unknown, Shop in Madinah – virtualtourist.com

Chapter 10: Hijra



Mountains between Madinah and Makkah

Goodbye

While I fell in love with Madinah, the truth is I eventually became too comfortable there. And because there seemed to be too few outings / tours, it actually felt a bit boring at times (to be totally honest). Nonetheless, Madinah was an awesome experience, and amazing preparation for what was to follow. Our sheikh had told us about Madinah being like a furnace – it either purifies the people that go there, or it kicks out those who are not pure.

I felt like it was the former for me: the time there helped disconnect me from the world, reconnect me to my Creator, and purify me (to some degree at least) from the spiritual diseases that resided in me. The final night in Madinah also brought tremendous inspiration for me. In previous years, intense emotional experiences used to manifest themselves in poetry that I wrote. I spent part of my last night in Madinah on the masjid's rooftop, and it was there that the entire experience of being in this blessed city was encapsulated in the poem that came out (posted [here](#) that same night).

But now it felt like the right time to move on to Makkah – where the Kabah and the days of Hajj awaited.

Moving on

That Thursday morning – in preparation for our journey to Makkah (and umrah) – we put on our [ihrams](#) at the hotel. Note that 'ihram' is not just the clothing you wear for Hajj or Umrah – it's actually a *state of being* that you enter by pronouncing your niyyah at the relevant place. So at the hotel, we merely put the ihram *clothing* on – but would only enter the *state of ihram* later.

Admittedly, I hadn't practiced wearing my ihram much, and so my first few hours wearing it was really frustrating. The bottom piece was fine – largely because I could wear a belt to hold it up (in addition to the money belt). But the top – I couldn't get right. Different people will tell you different ways to tie it, and it can be frustrating trying to get it to work their way. But alhamdulillah – I eventually figured out a way that worked for me. That's the key, I think: you need to find a way that *you're comfortable with*, and a way that *you can tie without*

anyone else's help. (This applies to males, obviously – as the women's ihram isn't so complicated.)

We then headed to Bir Ali – which is the meeqat (the place you enter a state of ihram) for those leaving from Madinah. After making our salaah for ihram, on the bus we collectively pronounced our niyah for umrah – thereby entering the state of ihram.



The meeqat outside Madinah – Bir Ali

The state itself includes the prohibition of cutting your hair and nails, covering your head (for males), using perfume or scented soap, and engaging in anything – whether by word or action – that could stir romantic or sexual desires. You're also to avoid any vain / nonsense talk – instead reciting the talbiyyah (“Labbayk...”) and focusing completely on Allah. So special is that state that – according to hadith: “When any Muslim utters talbiyah, everything – every stone or every tree or every pebble – on his right side and on his left side responds with a (similar) talbiyah, until the whole earth resounds with it.” (*Reported by Ibn Majah, Al-Baihaqi, Tirmidhi, Al-Hakim, who considers it a sound hadith.*)

When we entered the state of ihram, the mental shift kicked in for me. I realised the state I was in, and how I needed to try to have clean thoughts, say only what was good / beneficial (or say nothing at all), and just generally conduct myself as a guest of Allah – i.e. be on my best behaviour.

The wheels on the bus

On the bus to Makkah, what struck me most about the environment was the mountains. It was absolutely incredible: mountain after mountain after mountain – as far as the eye could see – with the silhouettes creating a beautiful sight.



The silhouette of Mountains between Madinah and Makkah

With the ride being long, it was filled with recitation of the talbiyyah, reading our books / Quran, listening to audio lectures, and of course, sleep. If you're not a fan of long road trips, make sure that you've planned stuff to do on the way – to take your mind off the travel.

We had one of the quieter group leaders – so we didn't hear much about the places we were passing, such as the history and other inspirational advice. That was somewhat disappointing – because I know our other group leader (who was our teacher back home) would've been much more informative. But again, it highlighted the attitude that we had to take: this journey was *not* about other people or group activities; it was about our personal relationships with Allah – so that's what we needed to focus on. Another lesson here – which surfaced later – was to be grateful that it wasn't worse. We had to be grateful for even having the quiet guy as leader, because another bus didn't have any group leader at all.

Alhamdulillah – our bus had no problems or breakdowns (as many other people have experienced), so the only real discomfort was the fact that we were in this confined space for so long. That, and the toilets at the rest stop.

Ewww!!!

If you've heard Hajj stories, you know that the toilets are always mentioned 😊 As noted before in this series, the toilets on that side of the world are of the [Eastern](#) kind – which means squatting over a tiny hole and hoping you don't miss the target. If you do miss, you either clean up your mess – or just leave it for the next person. (It happens!).

After you're done, you wash yourself using the small rubber pipe in the stall – similar to a little hosepipe. Another point of fear for those worried about these toilets is that people sometimes leave the pipe lying not on the side of the toilet, but in the actual area where the mess would be – so if you want to wash yourself, you'll need to touch some gross stuff to get the pipe.



An Eastern toilet

We were advised to put together our own little ‘toilet kit’ – which included rubber gloves, elastic (to tie your clothing and hold it up while you’re squatting), separate slippers for the toilet, and unscented soap (since there’s a good chance you won’t find any in these places).

I managed to hold my bladder for most of the journey, and went to the toilet on our second stop at a rest stop. I checked a few stalls to try to find the cleanest one, but soon realised that there would be nothing ‘clean’ (by my standards) – given the fact that so many people pass through there and use the facilities – so I had to go for the stall that was the least dirty of all. Let’s just say that my worst fears were *not* realised – but it was still pretty disgusting in there.

Experiences like these build character. Back home, you’d point blank refuse to go to a toilet that was in that state. You’d wait till you got home, or search far and wide for something a bit more decent. Here, you have no choice, and you see everyone else going – so you just have to be brave, recognise that you’re human like everyone else, and do your thing as quickly as possible – hoping that you make it out of there without getting anything nasty on you (either your own stuff – or worse, someone else’s).

Using these kinds of facilities, you get used to it after a while. And when you get back home again, chances are you won’t have much issue using dirty public toilets – because you’ve used much worse on Hajj.

If you’re a clean freak or have OCD about things like this, the toilets are going to be a major point of anxiety for you. But by no means should the issue discourage you from going for Hajj. Rather, you should consider this a means of helping you overcome a point of weakness in your life.

Of course, the Saudis could probably do a lot to improve the situation, but perhaps it’s part of Allah’s wisdom that they don’t – because having to debase yourself like this helps bring you down from any illusion you had that you were somehow better than others.

Sabr, and a warning

As mentioned before, one of the consistent qualities needed for this journey is sabr (patience). Once we got close to Makkah, it would've been easy to assume we'd get to our hotel quite quickly and be able to freshen up, eat, then prepare for our umrah (which we did the same night).

But because this is a trip that involves a lot of administration (both from our group's side and from the Saudi government), there were several hold-ups where we were just waiting on the bus while those in authority went through the standard procedures (checking documentation, counting the number on the bus, etc).

We did get some snacks though: a package containing zam zam water and some kind of roll / bread thing to eat. The notice on the packaging of one item read: "Dear Pilgrim. For your safety, avoid the crowd and beware of stampede."

This was amusing at the time, but I never thought it'd come back to me later – when I needed the reminder most. (More on that later, insha-Allah.)

Related lessons:

- As beautiful as a place and experience may be, remaining in it too long can sometimes lead to negative consequences. If you're going to be in Madinah for a relatively long time, recognise that this may happen to you, so be on guard against it, and mentally prepare yourself for the psychological or emotional dips that may arise in your later days there.
- From the outset, consider Madinah as a critical part of your preparation for Hajj. Make an intention that your time there will be spent in activities that help purify you and bring you closer to Allah, so that when you get to Makkah (and beyond that, Mina and Hajj), you're in a far better state than you were when you left home.
- Recognise that ihram is more than just outward clothing and a set of strict physical rules. It's an immense psychological state – so take it very seriously, and strive to be on your best behaviour both internally (within your thoughts, actions, and reactions to circumstances) and externally (with the way you interact with others).
- For men, you'll probably already have a money belt to keep important things, but aside from that, you *may also* wear a normal belt to help hold up your bottom piece of ihram. It certainly helps give you peace of mind – because the worry of that part coming off is a very real and scary fear.
- Again for men, in tying the top part, find a way that works for you – something you can do without anyone else's help. Be open to other people's advice, but if their ways don't work, don't be afraid to try your own thing. The most important factors are that you're comfortable with it and you can do it yourself.
- The state of ihram is intensely sacred, and the mental purity it inspires should in fact be something we strive for in everyday life. Because we might only experience the state of ihram a few times in our lives, we should use it as a means of practicing the inner taqwa and purity that will serve us so well in all other realms of life.
- If you're fortunate enough to do the Madinah-Makkah road trip in the day time, take a few moments to savour the incredible mountain scenery on the way. Also let these visuals remind you of the temporary nature of life – that nothing in this world is permanent: these mountains appear to be so firm and strong, yet when this Earth expires, they'll be destroyed and floating around like cotton wool. So we should never become so attached to the dunya that we give it priority over our akhira.
- Plan spiritually-uplifting activities to keep you busy on the bus. This will not only take your mind off the discomfort, but it'll also keep you occupied in good – thereby reducing your chances of complaining about the difficulties. And when you do feel like complaining, remember that the Prophet s.a.w. made this same journey (Madinah to Makkah) for his Hajj by camel (i.e. in the open heat, without any air-conditioned bus) – so be grateful for what you have, rather than complaining about what you don't like.
- If you're prone to getting sick on long road trips, take a few plastic / paper bags in case you need to vomit. (It's a good idea to collect them from your plane flights then keep them in your hand luggage for times like this.) Even if you're NOT likely to get car sick, take some anyway.

You never know what can happen, and even if you yourself don't get sick, someone else on your bus might – in which case you can assist with your sick bag.

- On this part of your journey, you're probably going to experience some rather undesirable toilet facilities. Try not to let the anxiety scare you beforehand, and remember that you're human – just like everyone else – so embrace the experience as a means of humbling yourself. Take it as a sign that Allah is putting you through a difficulty in order to build your character and teach you valuable lessons for your upcoming Hajj and life to follow.
- If it makes you feel better, put together some items that will make the toilet experience a little cleaner. Unscented soap is a must, but other items could include rubber gloves, elastic (to tie your clothing and hold it up while you're squatting), and separate slippers.
- Remember to exercise sabr – especially when you get close to Makkah and feel like you're almost at your hotel. You may experience a lot of waiting time on the bus while admin is carried out, and at the end of a long journey, the last thing you want to do is be sitting helplessly while paperwork is being done. But remember that the best tests of character come in times of difficulty, so dig deep and try to endure the wait without complaining (either in your words or in your body language). Rather, stretch your body (similar to exercises you'd do on a long flight) and do something beneficial to pass the time.

Image sources: [Opening image](#), [Bir Ali](#), [Silhouette of mountains](#), [Eastern toilet](#) (source unknown).

Part 2: Makkah and Aziziah

Chapter 11: The big moment



A night shot of Masjid al-Haram in Makkah

Not quite “three wishes”

After arriving in Makkah, we settled into our hotel and had less than an hour to prepare for umrah – at 9.30PM on that Thursday night. Not only would it be our first umrah, but also our first ever sighting of the Kabah in person – a moment in which duas are very readily accepted by Allah.

With that in mind, we were advised beforehand to plan the dua we would make at that moment. It’s truly a once in a lifetime experience, so you really need to think ahead and have your dua planned. I’d already done that, including in my list a recommendation I’d heard: ask Allah to accept *all* your duas for the rest of your life to come.

That recommendation reminded me of a childhood idea that I’d often wondered about: in the story of [Aladdin](#), Aladdin has only 3 wishes from the genie. I always wondered why he couldn’t outsmart the limit by using one of them to ask for *more* wishes. But Aladdin was just a fairytale – and a haraam one at that too (because the ‘genie’ is actually a jinn – and we can’t ever be asking jinn for things; we only ask Allah). So this first sighting of the Kabah was kind of like Aladdin’s experience – only real (and halaal 😊).

I had a lot of anxiety about the experience – because I feared that the moment would be ‘hijacked’ by the group. On a trip like this, many of the acts of worship are done in the group – with the group leader doing something and everyone else following. I would be very angry if my precious moment of first seeing the Kabah was one of those scenarios – because it’s an intensely personal moment.

In cases where the pilgrim doesn’t have knowledge of this moment, or where the group ethos strongly overpowers the individual focus, it’s easy to fall into this trap. So I’d strongly advise that you always remember that this is *your* moment – *your accepted* dua to Allah. **Do not** simply read a dua from a book, and don’t just recite something you memorised in Arabic (if you don’t understand what it means). This dua is about *you* and *your needs*/ what *you* want to make dua for – so don’t blindly follow someone else (either a group leader in person, or reading from a book), because that robs you of a very special opportunity.

Before we left, I sought reassurance about it by asking our group leader about it. Alhamdullilah – this first dua would NOT be a group thing.

The big moment



The walk from our hotel to the masjid – down Ajyad Street

We made our way down to Masjid-ul Haram – taking the 5 minute walk which we would later become so familiar with. It was a chaotic and nerve-racking few minutes, and – being such a large group – we couldn't hear most of what our group leader was saying.

Once we got into the masjid, we tried to keep our eyes down so that we wouldn't see the Kabah. This is highly recommended because you should first find a good spot – out of the way where you can make your dua in peace – before looking and having your special moment.

In all the chaos of trying to follow the group without looking up, I did actually get a glimpse for a split second – but I didn't count that as being my moment. It *couldn't* have been. My wife and I stuck together, and in our confusion about what was going on, we ended up looking at the Kabah before the rest of the group. We stopped right there and made our duas on the spot – those incredibly special duas which we'd planned for so long. To this day, I still remember my duas and look back on them with fondness, knowing they were accepted – some having been fulfilled already, and others still waiting to be answered as per Allah's wisdom.

Once we realised that the rest of the group was only *then* making their duas (they'd walked a little further in before stopping), I was a little annoyed. I was already tense because of how crazy the experience was so far, and I'd rushed through my dua – thinking I had very limited time (2.5 minutes, to be exact).

But this was the way it was to be for us, and I couldn't be upset. Things didn't go exactly as I imagined or hoped they would, but it doesn't mean that all was ruined. That's another lesson in life: don't judge things in a negative light when reality doesn't meet your preconceived expectations. We plan, but Allah is the best of planners – and whatever Allah wills for us is what is best for us. So we have to remind ourselves to be satisfied with His will.



The Kabah a few weeks before Hajj 1432 (2011)

Upon seeing the Kabah for the first time, so many people break down in tears – this being the fulfilment of a life-long desire and a pinnacle moment in life. This building has been the centre point of many millions of worshippers through the ages. It was the very first house of worship built on Earth, on a sacred piece of land that the Prophets have come to, and where major events in human history have occurred.

Knowing what it is, it should be a grand sight, able to inspire tidal waves of emotion and religious fervour.

But my initial impression was rather different. It didn't look real to me. It looked very plain, and kind of like a model, or a toy. At Hajj time, the authorities roll up the bottom part of the Kabah's black covering (the *kiswah*) – leaving the bottom bricks exposed. My first sight was the Kabah in that state: those giant, Lego-like bricks sharply contrasting against the black cover and white inner section of the *kiswah* – making it look almost cartoon-like.

It also seemed so much smaller than I imagined. The masjid itself is massive, and seeing the Kabah on TV makes you think that the structure is huge. But my first impression was quite the opposite. It was so small to me, and so plain – not at all the awesome sight I'd anticipated.

My wife's reaction was the same, and we later realised that there was nothing at all wrong with our perspective: the beauty of the Kabah is in its simplicity and plain-ness. It's not the stone structure that is holy, nor is it the *kiswah*, the Black Stone, or any other part of the building that has special power to grant us miracles. The Kabah is not an idol that we worship. It's merely a symbol; a representation of unity, history, and the omnipresence of Allah.

So the simplicity is very fitting: it doesn't dazzle the eye or heart with outward beauty, but instead it reminds us that Allah alone is the only One worthy of our devotions.

Related lessons:

- The first time you ever sight the Kabah in person (i.e. not on TV or in pictures) is a special, once-in-a-lifetime moment in which duas are very readily accepted by Allah. Prepare well for this moment by planning the dua you'd like to make. Among the many personal requests you could make, you could also ask Allah to accept all your duas for the rest of your life to come, and ask Allah to grant you Jannah without taking you to account on Qiyamah. There is no set dua to make, so know that this is all yours – and treat it as a personal treasure. Do not simply parrot what a group leader recites at that moment, and don't just read a dua from a book if you don't understand that dua or you have other requests that you'd rather make at the time.
- When you get into Masjid-ul Haram, keep your eyes down so that you don't see the Kabah until an opportune moment. First find a good spot – out of the way where you can make your dua in peace – and only then look and have your special moment.
- When special experiences in life – such as these – don't go according to the way you'd imagined or hoped, don't judge things in a negative light. Allah is the best of planners, and whatever Allah wills for you is best for you. So remind yourself to be satisfied with His will and look for the wisdom in the way things played out.
- If you don't break into tears when first seeing the Kabah, don't worry – you're not weird. Its beauty is in its simplicity. The structure itself is not holy and it has no special powers. It's not an idol that we worship, but it's merely a symbol; a representation of unity, history, and the omnipresence of Allah –the only One worthy of our devotions.

Image sources: Opening shot and Ajyad Street – unknown; final image of the Kabah – me.

Chapter 12: Umrah



Tawaaf at the Kabah

Round and round

After our [first sight of the Kabah](#), it was time for our very first umrah. We followed our group leader and approached the Kabah – starting the first of the seven rounds we’d need to make walking around the building. These rounds – called *tawaaf* – brought us so close to the Kabah that we could touch it; and the experience brought moments of awe to my heart.

But those were exceptions, because much of my focus at this stage was on not getting separated from the group (which can happen very easily in the crowd).

The other focus – which was to be a constant for subsequent tawaafs – was trying to shield my wife from getting pushed and shoved in the sea of humanity that surrounded us. With so many people doing the same thing in that limited space, and men and women (plus hazardous, heel-smacking wheelchair-riders) all mixed together, I would go so far as to say that it’s the duty of every husband to *try* to protect his wife from being pushed up against other men – a feat which is difficult, but not totally impossible.

According to the sunnah, there are 2 corners of the Kabah that you should touch if possible during tawaaf: the Black Stone (which is the starting point – but pretty much impossible to get to), and the Yemeni corner.

If you can’t touch the Black Stone, you make *istilam* to it – which is a sort of gesture from afar, which substitutes for touching it. Our group leader that night was showing us what to do by his own example, and he was also making istilam to the Yemeni corner. By extension, we followed him – since this was our first umrah and we weren’t really sure of what to do.

I felt uneasy about this latter istilam, so after the first few rounds, I refrained – remembering another teacher’s great general advice: ‘If you doubt, leave it out’. It was only later that I learned my doubt was correct – if you can’t get to the Yemeni corner, you’re not supposed to make istilam to it.

Correctness aside, it exposed flaws in my preparation: because I didn’t study the rituals properly before I got there, I didn’t know what was right and what was wrong, so it was easy to just follow someone else that was making a mistake.



The Maqam Ibrahim (Station of Abraham)

Close to the Kabah is the [Maqam Ibrahim](#) – an area of land that now contains a golden case in which lies the actual footprints of Prophet Ibrahim a.s. In the tawaaf, we got so close to it that we could nearly touch it and look in. But the group was moving, so we moved with it. We could probably have gotten to touch the Kabah too – since the crowd wasn't *that* heavy on this night. But again, we stuck with the group – as directed by the leader.

This was a direct lesson from the [Battle of Uhud](#): follow the ameer (leader); don't disobey – even though you feel it would be better for you personally. Alhamdulillah – that sacrifice, I think, was one that Allah recognised, because the next night when we went alone, we got to experience these places up close and personal.

Beyond that, my honest feeling for this first tawaaf was disappointment – huge disappointment. When you tawaaf with a group, the leader recites duas and dhikrs and everyone repeats after him. And because the leader's recitations are all in Arabic, if you don't speak the language, whatever you don't already recognise of what he's saying, you simply repeat without understanding.

This was fine for some, but personally I hated it – because again, this was a personal act to me, not a group one. I wanted this umrah to be about my personal act of worship – my relationship with my Creator; and not a group exercise. This was especially so because I knew that during tawaaf, there are *no* prescribed duas or dhikrs to recite (except for one dua on the fourth side of the Kabah).

I followed some of the leader's duas and dhikrs, but I tried to do my own. It was frustrating, though, because on the one hand, I needed to stay with my group so that I wouldn't get lost – but on the other, they were so loud with the collective recitations that I couldn't focus on my own. Other groups – doing the same thing – were also loud, so our group wasn't unique in that.

So history repeated itself for me: just like my first time in Masjid an-Nabawi in Madinah, it was the 'group' aspect that hampered the experience for me.

Saved!

I was saddened by the fact that my very first tawaaf wasn't a spiritual experience, but I made dua asking Allah to give me a connection to Him later on – that element which I so craved. I asked for this initial part of the umrah to not ruin the rest for me.

After we finished 7 rounds in the group, we moved to the next action – making 2 rakaats of salaah behind the Maqam Ibrahim. Our group leader encouraged us to make deep, personal duas – especially in sujood (which is the time when you’re closest to Allah) – and *that’s* when things finally fell into place for me. *That’s* when I felt the connection – my spiritual bond with Allah; being alone with Him, being able to speak to Him in dua without anyone or anything else distracting me. Alhamdulillah.

Either before or after those 2 rakaats, our group leader made a collective dua with us – and it was only *then* that his efforts actually made a profound impact on me. His dua really touched me, probably because part of it was in English (so I actually understood it), but also because of its major focus on parents.

The home stretch



Sa’ee in Makkah

The umrah concluded with *sa’ee* - which is the act of walking between Mounts Safa and Marwah in imitation of Hajar a.s., who frantically ran between these two hills searching for food and water for her baby son Isma’il a.s. In total, she walked seven times between these mounts before Allah finally opened up the well of Zam Zam – at the feet of Isma’il a.s. You probably already know the story, and the essential lesson that’s drawn from it is that when you want or need something, Allah is the One that will provide for you – but you should make your own efforts too, and not just expect things to happen while you sit around waiting.

In the past, maybe Safa and Marwah *used to be* mountains or hills, but they aren’t anymore. There still is a bit of a slope on each side, but it isn’t that steep, and the area is inside the masjid nowadays. It’s a long, straight strip divided into two sides – one for people walking in either direction. The original strip of land where this historical event occurred is on the ground floor of the masjid, but you can also do the sa’ee in the upstairs areas – directly above.

The ground floor section wasn’t that busy when we arrived, so we did ours there. It was much less crowded than tawwaf, but it took longer and was more disjointed. Like tawwaf, there isn’t much prescribed in terms of recitations or dhikrs, but because there’s not much chance of getting lost in this area, my wife and I could break away from the group a lot – thereby escaping the collective recitations that so hampered the tawwaf for me.

Many times, though, we did also with an older couple who was with us for our entire Hajj journey. They were full of character and would later entertain us with their charisma and ‘heroic’ (or just crazy) actions. What struck me was that the uncle – who must’ve been past 60 years old – was just so enthusiastic and happy about everything. To see such passion at

that age highlights the special nature of this journey, and should remind us that you're never too old to find joy in life.

After completing sa'ee, the umrah was complete. To be released from the state of ihram, the men had small pieces of their hair cut, while the women would do that later at the hotel (though some did it in the haram).

There was a sense of euphoria in the group, with people embracing each other – sharing a feeling of achievement and wishing that Allah accept this great act of worship from us. It was a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood which you often witness in Cape Town (for example on Eid days), and it opened my eyes to how all these people felt it collectively – like this was a group achievement. People thoroughly enjoyed it, and it was an emotional high to finally be done after all the hours of anxiety on the way there and during the umrah. May Allah accept that umrah from us all – despite our mistakes and shortcomings.

By now, it was already well past midnight, but the night wasn't over yet. Though you could officially be released from ihram by cutting just 3 hairs, one of our group leaders – a very nice Arab man that would accompany us throughout the rest of the trip – insisted we do it the proper sunnah way, which was to shave the hair. I agreed with him, but I wasn't keen on going *totally* bald at that point, so I took a number 3 cut – keeping some hair for future umrahs and of course the Hajj (in which I'd again have to get my hair cut or shaved).

There are numerous barber shops outside the haram in Makkah, and I went with a number of the guys from my group. With so many of us there, it was a rather long wait – but again it reinforced the need for sabr on the journey. It also gave me an opportunity to talk to a relatively newly-married brother who told me of his stressful job back home – reminding me of the nature of the working world (in case I'd forgotten it in this seemingly different universe we'd been in for these few weeks so far).

I finally got back to the hotel room – probably past 2AM – and showered.

With Madinah now firmly in the past, and our first umrah complete, it was now time to see what Makkah held for us. But first, it was time for a well-deserved rest – though it would be relatively short. We had only a few hours before Fajr, and after Fajr, we'd again have only a little time to rest – as we'd need to get to the haram early for that day's Jumuah – our first at the Kabah.

Related lessons:

- In the tawaaf, if you're a male with your wife, try to shield her from getting pushed and shoved in the crowd. Ask others for advice on how to do that, and find a way that works for you. Also, beware of people in wheelchairs – who can easily smack your heels and hurt you. If it happens, bear patience and try not to react angrily or violently.
- Study the rituals properly before you get there – because without knowledge, it's easy to just follow practices that might actually be incorrect.
- When it comes to acts of worship, if you favour being alone rather than with the group, bear patience during your first tawaaf. There aren't many prescribed duas and dhikrs for tawaaf, but you may be subjected to group recitations. If so, bear patience with this, ask Allah to grant you the best from the situation, and remember that insha-Allah you'll get your own private times to do tawaaf in future – so try not to view this experience in a negative light.
- Sujood is one of the best times to make dua, because – as per hadith – it's when you're closest to Allah. There are differences of opinion regarding dua in sujood, so find out from your ulama about the rulings related to sujood in dua (e.g. must it be in Arabic only? Is it in any salaah?). Personally, the option which I'm comfortable with is to make my own personal duas in English *only* in nafl salaahs – not the fardh.
- When doing sa'ee, try to remember the history behind the act. Also try to remember the essential lesson: when you want or need something, Allah is the One that will provide for you

– but you should make your own efforts too, and not just expect things to happen while you sit around waiting.

- For cutting of the hair when you complete umrah, men should aim for the sunnah of shaving the head (either completely bald or cutting it very short) – rather than just the minimum cutting of 3 hairs. You've just completed a great act of worship, and vanity about your hair should no longer be a concern. For women, if you want to cut your hair while still inside / outside the masjid (i.e. rather than waiting to get back to the hotel), please ensure that you do it in a setting where no men can see your hair. Seems like obvious advice, but in the moment, you may forget.

Image sources: Opening shot of Kabah – unknown; [Maqam Ibrahim](#); [Sa'ee](#).

Chapter 13: Lift off



The door of the Kabah

Strength

One of the blessings of the journey of Hajj – both in Madinah and Makkah – is that the crowds are so big that you *have* to go very early if you want to get a good spot in the masjid. And with our first morning in Makkah being a Friday, we planned to go even earlier for Jumuah – 2 or 3 hours before the time.

The preparation brought about an opportunity to apply one of the positive changes I'd hoped to make from this trip: holding my tongue in the face of extreme irritation.

You see, my wife – like other women (I would guess) – tends to get very tense and dramatic when the pressure's on. What makes things worse is that I'm a natural 'dawdler' – I tend to be slow / waste time unnecessarily (though I do try NOT to be that way). So in our rush to get ready and go down the haram before it got too busy, we had some pretty tense moments.

My planned change was to be very restrained in the face of such attacks: to *RESPOND* wisely instead of *REACTING* emotionally.

Alhamdulillah – I held back and said nothing bad in retaliation. That quality of restraint is one I believe can be so beneficial to close relationships – *especially* in times of anger. As the Prophet s.a.w. reportedly told us: "The strong man is not one who wrestles well but the strong man is one who controls his anger when he is in a fit of rage." (Bukhari) So if we can just learn to apply such strength in challenging moments, insha-Allah it can save us from a lot of unnecessary strife in our relationships.

Solitude



The ground floor of the Haram

We went down to the masjid 2 hours early and I got a decent spot. I could see the Kabah – which was awesome for me, given the amount of time I’d be waiting until Jum’ah commenced. Unfortunately for my wife, the space limitations for women – which was so bad in Madinah – was again repeated here in Makkah, so her spot wasn’t so good.

It’s ironic how women are supposed to be honoured in Islam, yet the Saudi authorities seem to make things so difficult for women in the masjids of Madinah and Makkah that – a lot of times – women end up having to sit and pray outside the masjid. It should be the opposite. Women should be the ones *inside* the masjid – protected from the heat, discomfort, and gazes of the many men that pass by.

Anyway, so with almost 2 hours to spare before proceedings start, I had a lot of time on my hands. As usual for this trip, I’d come to the masjid equipped with things to do – including my mini-Quran and my dua list. It took a while for my mind to settle down, but once that happened, I had some awesome moments. Using that critically-important dua list as my base, I spent close to an hour just making dua, and feeling so connected to my Creator – here, in plain sight of His most sacred house of worship on Earth. It was a beautiful, beautiful experience, and one that reinforced the tremendous gratitude I had for being given the chance to make this journey.

Insanity

As if the preceding days weren’t enough, the following night was to boost me in a way I’d never imagined. In Makkah, my wife and I adopted a habit of doing one tawaaf daily – usually at night sometime after Esha.

On our third night, we set out at 10PM. Again, the tawaaf wasn’t emotional for me – as my primary concern was protecting her from the crowds. But the special moments would soon come.

Since it still wasn’t *too* busy, we got really close to the spots we’d missed out on during [our first umrah](#). We got to stand and look right into Maqam Ibrahim – seeing the huge, round footprints of this amazing Prophet.



The footprints of Ibrahim a.s.

We also got to touch the Kabah several times – but it wasn't a case of idolising the building, or even claiming this to be a sunnah. It was simply because we wanted to touch the structure. As mentioned [before](#), the Kabah is merely a symbol – to be honoured and respected as the Prophet s.a.w. and the believers of past times have, but not to be worshipped or grabbed emotionally as if it has any special powers of its own. The theme is perfectly summarised by the statement of Umar r.a.: when kissing the Black Stone, he reportedly said: *“I know that you are a stone, you do not cause benefit or harm; and if it were not that I had seen Allâh’s Messenger – peace and blessings of Allâh be upon him – kiss you, I would never have kissed you.”*

While our emotional attachment to the Kabah wasn't strong in those early days, the spiritual attachment was slowly growing.

During the tawaaf, my wife suggested I try to get to the Black Stone – since it looked a decent chance that night. I set out to do that – confident that I'd succeed – but after a long time trying and waiting, I realised it wouldn't happen. There seems to be no fair system for getting to that corner of the Kabah: I – like others – waited in a sort of queue, but people came from the other side, and I got moved around and squashed. Many people push and shove and act insane to get to the Stone, but I knew there's no honour in that – and it's not worth touching the Stone if you trample the rights (and bodies) of others to get there.



Madness at the Black Stone

So I just tried to stand firm in my place, without pushing others. But it got too heavy at times. I was being crushed, and I thought maybe just putting my arm up to get near the Stone may work – since I just wanted a touch. But no. I tried, but my body was being pulled away, so it felt like my arm might have been ripped off if I continued that route. I tried once more, and got so close that my fingers were just centimetres from the silver casing that protects the Stone. But I couldn't go all the way. I just couldn't get there, despite my best efforts.

It was at that point that the [warning sticker I mentioned before](#) came to mind: “*Dear Pilgrim: For your safety, avoid the crowd and beware of stampede.*”

So I took that as a reminder, then gave up and left – accepting the fact that it wasn't worth being crushed or stampeded in this mass hysteria. But, since actions are judged by intentions, I pray that Allah grant me the reward of having done it.

The other corner that we should touch – as per sunnah – is the Yemeni corner. On my last round, almost magically, the space around it just opened up for me. It was like Allah was giving me the chance despite the crowd, so I took it. Alhamdullilah.

Commitment

While that partially made up for the Black Stone disappointment, next came the night's crowning moment. When I finished my 7 rounds, my wife suggested I make my 2 rakaats sunnah in the *hateem* area (also known as the *Hijr Ismail*) – the small semi-circle next to the Kabah, which is considered part of the Kabah (since the physical space used to be inside the building before its reconstruction).

It looked a decent opportunity, so I went for it. Alhamdullilah – once more, Allah just opened up the space for me – making it easy for me to get in and make my salaah despite the congestion in that small space.



The hateem area at Kabah

Though I wasn't literally inside the Kabah building, I was technically inside the Kabah's space – and this was probably the best chance I'd ever get to make salaah so close to it. It was an honour to be there, so I treated those moments similarly to the honour of being in the Rhoda-tul Jannah in Madinah: with limited time, I reserved my duas for the sujoods in the salaah – pushing myself and making some of the most sincere and immense duas I've ever made. Words can't describe the feeling of being connected to your Creator – let alone in so sacred a place, let alone in the most honoured position of a human (sujood – when a servant is closest to Allah)...it was incredible.

Not only that, but it was the fulfilment of a dua I'd made long before. Prior to Hajj, I'd worried about whether [my heart would be ready](#) to truly make the intentions and efforts I'd need in order to really change myself in the ways I wanted to. I didn't know *if* it would happen, or *how* it would happen – but I knew it *needed* to happen.

Later that night, as I gazed at the Kabah, I realised that this night – this series of events – was my answer. This night had changed my heart. It was the night in which my heart made the commitment – when I made my sincere intentions to change; to try to do my part so that I could become who I wanted to be, working towards pleasing my Creator as best I can. The intention was immense. Really immense. And in these precious moments, in this most blessed place, my heart spoke to Allah and made those commitments.

So from that point on, I set out to do that – to effect those permanent changes to my life. It started right there, right then – on that blessed night.

Related lessons:

- Learn to restrain yourself in times of anger and you can reap tremendous benefits – both in your relationship with Allah and in your relationships with other people.
- Like Madinah, ensure that you get to the Masjid early in Makkah – *especially* if you're female. If you go too late, you might not make it into one of the cooler / shaded areas – which understandably fill up much faster than the roof and outside areas which are exposed to the scorching heat.
- If you plan to touch the Kabah, please try not to treat it like an idol. It's simply a building – a symbol to be honoured and respected, not to be grabbed emotionally as if it has special powers.
- When it comes to touching the Black Stone or Yemeni corner, getting to the Kabah door / multazam, or getting close to Maqam Ibrahim, remember that despite the crowds, Allah can open up a way for you. Make dua for those opportunities.
- That said, unless if it's busy, it's quite possible that you won't get to touch the Black Stone. If you do want to try, though, remember that you will face great physical challenges. In this case, remember that there's no honour in fighting with others, pushing others, or otherwise getting aggressive – either as a proactive approach or as a reaction to others wronging you. Simply be firm by standing your ground – rather than pushing – and if you can't make it, let it

go in the interests of your own safety. If you do make it, remember Umar r.a.'s statement about it, and – like the Kabah – do NOT treat it like an idol.

- Like the Prophet s.a.w.'s times, today, the common people don't get to go inside the Kabah. But as per hadith, the hateem area ('Hijr Ismail') is technically inside the Kabah – as least a section of it. So if you get the chance to pray in there, do so (again, as long as you're not harming others in the process).
- Just like the Rawda in Madinah, if you get the chance to pray very close to the Kabah, you may face a barrage of people pushing or trying to get into your space. If possible, make your duas in sujood – rather than making them while you're sitting after your salaah. People are much less likely to disturb you in sujood as compared to after salaah.
- When you get time near the Kabah, don't waste it. As the days pass and the crowds grow, you may get fewer chances to even see it – even though you're in the masjid (since viewing space is limited and fills up fast).

Image sources: [Kabah door](#), [footprints of Ibrahim a.s.](#), [Black Stone crowd](#), [hateem area](#)

Chapter 14: Melting pot



A crowded street in Makkah

Changes

The contrast between Madinah and Makkah is instantly noticeable: whereas Madinah is calm, peaceful, and a place for solitude – even despite large crowds, Makkah is quite the opposite. It's very urban – very much a big city: fast-paced, always busy, dirty, taxis hooting, and some really crazy driving (I didn't see any traffic lights, but did see people relying heavily on their brakes 😊)

The days are busy, but so are the nights. In such tremendous daytime heat, people seem to rest in in the day and then come out at night when they have more energy. It's incredible to see so many people out late at night. Even babies and toddlers are out beyond midnight. Given the crime we have in South Africa, such a practice can never be normal back home. But here – in this different world of Makkah – it's absolutely normal.

Also different is the attitude of the people (both the locals and the visitors). Some people seem more aggressive and stressed out. It's not uncommon to see people becoming angry – even inside the masjid. One of our teachers back home had warned us that 'shaytaan is strong in Makkah', and many of our experiences there bear testimony to this.

The shops are another story too. In Madinah, we got used to most shopkeepers being very warm, welcoming, and friendly. In Makkah, many of them just ignored us – as if they didn't need our business, and their own conversations and activities were more important than the potential customers.

And when it comes to queues, I was really caught off guard by what I initially perceived to be tremendous rudeness. In South Africa (and other parts of the world), we value fairness – waiting in line for your turn. But in Makkah, some people just didn't seem to understand that concept. At the till, they impatiently pushed their way forward and held their item over your shoulder – presenting it to the teller, who they'd expect to instantly ring it up on the till.

Naturally, we'd find such behaviour very rude – but I realised that maybe it wasn't intentional. Maybe, in the places where these people come from, it's normal – it's just the way they operate back home – due to poverty or circumstances they face. Maybe they *have* to be that way to survive – or else others will just walk over them.

But then they leave home and come here – to this melting pot of cultures – and they bring that mentality with them. It's easy for us to be quick to judge them – without understanding the situations they're coming from. We just expect that our standards of etiquette are universal, and everyone that doesn't follow is just rude or uncultured. Yet that's not the case for those whose everyday lives follow different norms and rules.

So my lesson was to never judge others based on my own cultural expectations, because *their* own norms may be very different.

Variety



A street in Makkah

On this journey, it's a given that you'll meet people from many different countries. We – in the Western world – regard English as the most universal language in the world. Perhaps it's the most *geographically widespread*, but on Hajj, you see that it's by no means the most *popular*. On this journey, most people **do not** speak English – or if they do, not very comfortably at all.

Many times, communication occurs through broken English and whatever bits of Arabic each of you know. It's a reminder that – despite our differences – Arabic is the language of Islam, and is the unifying language between all Muslims – regardless of their nation or culture. Yet many (myself included) just don't prioritise learning it.

But despite the language barrier, it's amazing to interact with such diverse people. I don't consider myself naturally social, but in both Madinah and Makkah I ended up speaking to quite a number of people from different countries. Common themes included logistical issues (how long you'd been there, when you'd be leaving, etc) and basic family info, but in some cases – where the other person was fluent in English – deeper conversations were possible.

It was also good to speak to elderly people and those with very different life experiences. For example, twice in one day, I sat next to a Pakistani man who'd lived in London since the 1970s. He was a postal worker, and his son worked in IT in the local government.

One thing he did – which was a common theme – is to ask me to make dua for him. It’s something that happened a lot from seemingly-random people – especially from those of Indian sub-continental background. It must be an Indian thing, because it happens with Indians back in South Africa too...

In terms of nationalities, like Madinah, there was a wide variety present: Malaysians, Indonesians, Thailanders, Chinese, Turks, Africans (both North and other parts), and even people from Kyrgyzstan. Interestingly, North Americans and Europeans were very rare.

But unlike Madinah, in Makkah it seemed that one particular group dominated the numbers. Personally, it felt like 90% of the people I saw were from the Indian sub-continent (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan). Because of my own ancestral background, a lot of the times people assumed I was Pakistani – though one time an Arab thought I was Arab, and seemed very pleased at that 😊.

Adjustment



Packed tawaaf

In all honesty, I really didn’t take to Makkah at first. It was too full, too noisy, and physically, more demanding than Madinah. And it was sometimes difficult to remember the sacredness of the place when *so* many people would just openly spit on the road – complete with the build-up noise. (If you’re looking for a game on the Makkan streets, try avoiding those spit-puddles 😊).

The external environment is bound to affect the internal state of being, and I found the environment just wasn’t conducive to inner peace. In Madinah, I immediately felt at ease, but Makkah was quite the opposite.

Both are tremendously holy cities, but it took me a while to realise that I just couldn’t treat them the same in terms of my expectations and efforts. If I wanted to feel spirituality in Makkah, I needed to adapt to the situation and put in the effort to make it happen. I needed to make internal changes to my thinking, attitude, schedule, and actions – or I’d just stay in this cycle of frustration and disappointment.

In Makkah, you have to adjust to people pushing or knocking you even when there’s no need. You have to rise above the natural reaction of wanting to fight back. You have to ignore the many irritating things people will do in tawaaf – such as making group duas loudly, talking

on mobile phones, walking in human chains that demolish everything in their path, and pushing their stinky, sweaty bodies against you.

It's *so* easy to complain and focus on the negative. It's so easy to be disappointed that you're here at the Kabah, yet you're not *feeling* the spiritual ecstasy you thought you'd find. But such feelings – though natural – are a trap of shaytaan. And as a wise Muslim, you have to make an effort to not only be conscious of these pitfalls, but also rise above them.

You'll always get external distractions and disturbances. Such things cannot be avoided – especially in such a densely-populated circumstance. But you have to stay focused on yourself and your relationship with Allah. If you can focus your heart on Allah and your own purpose there, insha-Allah you can block out the environmental challenges and other people's shortcomings, and end up with the greatest of spiritual experiences.

Once again, you'll need to draw on that sabr everyone says is so important for Hajj. Once again, you'll need to make sacrifices and do things your nafs won't like. But therein lies the benefit and reward. The build-up to Hajj can act as a classroom and a means of internal purification, so consider these experiences – and the way you handle them – as the best preparation you can get for Hajj.

Related lessons:

- Shaytaan is strong in Makkah, so beware of increased irritation and aggression – in other people and yourself. Control your anger and beware of your speech at all times.
- Never impose your own ways – be it social etiquettes, language, or other – on other people, even if they look similar to you, or share common attributes such as religion. The Earth is a vast, extremely varied place, and it's rather self-centred to hold an attitude that your way is the "right" way – whether you consciously adopt that attitude, or it just comes in because you've always been surrounded by people like yourself.
- If you don't know Arabic, make an effort to learn some – aside from a long-term intention to learn the full language. Arabic is the common language between Muslims from all parts of the world, so in the worldly sense, it's very beneficial on this journey. (Of course, the spiritual benefits are even greater – since you'll understand the language of the Quran.)
- Hajj is by far the largest gathering of people from all different walks of life. At no other time, and in no other place, will you see and be among such a wide variety of people, so use the opportunity to broaden your horizons. Speak to people (of your own gender, of course!) from far-away lands and different age groups, and try to learn about their lives and draw from their wisdom, while also passing on your own positive messages to them. Despite our differences, we're all brothers and sisters in Islam, and this is by far the greatest opportunity to feel that unity and experience the variety within the ummah.
- As a general rule, change demands change: Every external change you face requires individual, internal change – to adapt to the situation. If you fail to do that, you can end up being frustrated and having a negative perception of what could otherwise be a wonderful experience.
- The above is especially true about the adjustment between Madinah and Makkah. If you want to feel spirituality and really enjoy Makkah, you'll need tremendous sabr (both in action and in holding your tongue) and the ability to mentally detach yourself from circumstances that would otherwise get you worked up. Focus on your own purpose there, and your own relationship with Allah; and take all the challenges as means of self-purification – seeking Allah's help and reward through the difficulties.

Image sources: [Crowded street](#), [Street in Makkah](#), [Packed tawaaf](#).

Chapter 15: Things to see



Old houses in Makkah – on the outskirts of the haram area

Early sights

Like Madinah, there are many historical sites to see in Makkah. We covered a number of these in two trips – the first being a bus ziyarah to the [Cave of Thowr](#) and [Mount Arafah](#), among others. The cave, of course, is where the Prophet s.a.w. and Abu Bakr r.a. hid for a few days during their hijrah to Madinah. It was mid-morning, so we didn't actually go up (it would be crazy to do so in that heat) – but some people did go on their own at a later date.

The other major stop of that trip was Mount Arafah, which is the exact spot that many of us wish to be at on the day of Arafah – since it was where the Prophet s.a.w. spent his wuqoof on his Hajj. But like the [battlesite of Uhud](#), the place has a rather touristy type feel to it – which again distracts one from the historical and religious significance of it.



Mount Arafah



Mount Thowr – which houses the cave of Thowr

Quite shocking, though, was the number of beggars at the site. There were so many kids that were dismembered and begging – and you can't help but feel sorry for them. Some of these injuries may have occurred naturally, but I suspect that in other cases, it was deliberate – where somebody has maimed the child to increase their 'earning potential'. I shudder to think that parents could do this to their own kids (and I *hope* it's not the case). I've heard of gangs in Saudi (especially in Makkah and Madinah) that send women and children out to beg, and it's quite possible that the gang leaders – in their greed and ruthlessness – would do this to the innocent children.

It's sad that this kind of thing happens – even in the holiest of lands – but I suppose it's just another clear indication of how corrupted this world has become in our times.

On the way back, we drove through Azizia (the suburb we'd stay in just before Hajj) and [Mina](#) – getting our first glimpses of those famous, endless rows of tents that fill the entire valley.

Inspiration for life



The birthplace of the Prophet s.a.w.

To be honest, I didn't really enjoy that first ziyarah. Unfortunately, our guides weren't ideal and I didn't really get much inspiration from their explanations. It confirmed the fact that – unless you've *really* prepared well on your own for visiting these sites – the quality of your experience will largely depend on the quality of your tour guide that day.

The difference was made abundantly clear later in Makkah, when we did the walking ziyarat in the areas surrounding the haram. Our guide that day was a young man who was bursting with passion and enthusiasm. He combined history with practical lessons for our individual situations, and was utterly inspiring. For example, as an engineer himself, he pointed out the engineering advances made by Muslims in the past, and how we – in our specific fields of work today – should also strive to excel and make great contributions to this world.

Anyone can tell you the history of a place, but it takes a special person to bring it to life and tie it to your current reality. In Islam, our history is absolutely full of inspirational events and lessons for all times – yet when we read about these things, or hear them in ‘boring’ lectures, we don’t absorb much. To find a teacher that can buck this trend is a great blessing, and this is even more enhanced when you can experience this type of learning at the actual sites where these events happened.

Part of the inspiration stemming from this experience was the reminder that Allah knows best what’s good for us. One of my favourite alims from home was supposed to be with us, but due to visa troubles, he didn’t make it. This young man, however, seemed to be the answer to my duas, and I suspect that his impact was more effective than the other alim’s would have been. Allah knows, and we do not know.



Masjid al-Jinn

Anyway, so in this walking ziyarah, a number of sites were covered, including the [birthplace of the Prophet s.a.w.](#) (which is now a library) and [Masjid al-Jinn](#) – which has a somewhat scary story behind it (which is why it’s better that we visited in the daytime 😊). Unfortunately, we didn’t have the time to tour inside the haram or see Makkah’s famous graveyard – Jannatul Ma’la – and I really regret the fact that I didn’t join one of this brother’s later tours so that I could get those areas as well.

Blessing or curse?

In our Hajj classes back home, not much was made of the way the Saudi rulers have destroyed many of the sacred / heritage sites in Makkah and Madinah. It was mentioned, of course, but not with the kind of outrage and extensive debate that some people indulge in.

The Saudis justify these demolitions under the assumption that it’s better to destroy these sites – rather than have Muslims engage in unlawful innovations (bi’dah). But those who engage in these so-called bi’dahs believe that they’re doing nothing wrong.

I agree that the Saudi rulers have done some terrible things – such as blowing away part of Jabal Abu Qubays (the mountain where the Black Stone was housed) to build the king’s

palace on top. But at the same time, the actions of some visitors to the historical sites can make it seem like just destroying things is justified.



Jabal Abu Qubays – now the site of the King’s palace

The whole issue of religious relics and believing that specific places have special powers is really – to me – a branch of idolatry. In Christianity, people venerate physical relics and seem to worship the graves of saints. As Muslims co-exist with people of other religions (including Christians and those whose religions include idols – such as Hindus), some of these idolatrous beliefs and practices have crept into their own understanding of Islam – which is ironic because the pure doctrines of Islam are the absolute antithesis of such polytheism (*shirk*).

For example, don’t we have Muslims in India and other places that go and worship the pious people laying in their graves – seeking their ‘intercession’?

Even in majority Muslim countries it can happen. For example, in Cairo, at the grave of one of the righteous predecessors (Imam Shafi, I think), we saw the grave sit littered with money, clothing, and letters or notes – presumably placed by Muslims that believe such things will help them...as if these offerings to the dead person will act on their behalf. Such things are the very height of *shirk* – and *shirk* is the very WORST sin a person can commit. There’s no room for tolerating such practice in Islam.

So when some Muslims bring these ideas and practices to Makkah and Madinah, you can understand that the ultra-strict Saudi authorities find it repulsive and react strongly against any hint of such activity.

But because of the actions of these few, it seems the Saudi authorities suspect that *everyone* can be there for the same reasons – so they either destroy or discourage visiting many of the sites. They seem to ONLY look at the bi’dah perspective, but don’t see that some of us actually want to visit for HISTORICAL purposes.

That in itself is wrong- because these sites are important for their historical value. As Muslims, this is our heritage, and as such, we should visit the sites to remember our past and draw lessons from our history. Just like when you tour another country, the tour guides take you to historical places – it should be the same here.

But the intention needs to be correct. There’s no problem visiting a place for the right reasons, but when people go there with the intention of engaging in practices that have no authentic basis in Islam, the problem creeps in.

There's a balanced approach to everything, and I think us as individuals – and them as the current authorities – should strive to find that balance.

The Saudis seem to have adopted a somewhat rational approach in some places. For example, in Madinah's graveyard (Jannatul Baqi), there's prominent signage explaining the correct etiquettes of visiting the graves and the prohibition of making dua TO the dwellers of the graves.

But that isn't the case everywhere, and their approach in other cases is to simply destroy the place, make it visually inconspicuous, or clamp down on large groups visiting those areas.

Some sites – such as the house where the Prophet s.a.w. was born, and the cave of Hira (where the Prophet s.a.w. first received revelation) have prominent signage discouraging people from performing any religious acts there. At the foot of Mount Hira, they even have an information centre with leaflets explaining that the Prophet s.a.w. and sahabah r.a. did NOT visit this cave after revelation first came, and we shouldn't visit it – but only visit the few places the authorities deem to be religiously and historically significant. (Our tour guide called this 'Saudi propaganda' 😊)



A sign discourages worship at the birthplace of the Prophet s.a.w.



A sign at the foot of mount Hira discourages people from visiting the cave, as well as other sites around Makkah.

So the whole thing is a very contentious issue, and it's not likely to be resolved anytime soon.

As I said, the best solution would be a balance, and I pray that both the authorities and the visitors can strive for this – so that we can appreciate and honour our heritage, without making it a bitter ideological war that causes more fitnah and disunity in the ummah.

Related lessons:

- Don't expect your tour guides to teach you about or inspire you when visiting historical sites. Always do your own research and homework beforehand so that you can fully appreciate the places you visit.
- If you do have a choice of tour guides, and you know one is particularly inspiring, opt for that person. The benefit of having an outstanding tour guide is really, really tremendous.
- Take lessons from our heritage – both the historical events and great people of the past – and let them serve as an inspiration for you to make great contributions in your own capacity today.
- Take the time and effort to educate yourself about what is bi'dah and what is not – particularly when it comes to visiting ziyarah places. Do not rely on cultural practices or 'what people have always done' – because many spiritually-harmful (and even haraam) practices have become commonplace among the ummah. Don't go to the ziyarah places with such things – because you harm yourself and you also reinforce the suspicions that the authorities already have about why people are visiting these sites.
- In line with the above, know Islam's aqeedah (belief) very well, and be very well-versed about tawheed. This knowledge will serve you well in avoiding unlawful practices on your trip – particularly at historical sites.
- All talk and no action is an utter waste of time – so don't waste your time in heated debates about what the Saudi authorities are doing to the historical sites. Rather, use your energy to appreciate the fact that you can still visit them and take as much benefit from your time there. If you feel strongly about the issue, make dua for a balanced solution, then make efforts in that path – whether you do so through writing / speaking, or by taking action.

Image sources: All pictures taken by me, except Masjid al-Jinn (from [this website](#)).

Chapter 16: Smiles and frowns

Regrets

My biggest regret from my Hajj journey was the time I wasted in Makkah. Both my wife and I got extremely lazy (me more than her, I believe). We'd go late to the masjid – and sometimes didn't even bother trying to get in since we knew it'd be hard to find a spot inside (thus opting for the marble area outside). This was especially foolish, given that Makkah was even busier than Madinah had been – so in fact we should have been extra disciplined in getting there early. The result was that in our 2 weeks there, for most waqts, we almost never got to see the Kabah. The ground floor was always full, and on the higher floors, the balconies were usually covered by people standing at the rails watching the Kabah and the tawaaf. So if you didn't go early, your best hope of seeing the Kabah was to sit in your hotel room watching it on TV!

Feeding into this lethargy were the distractions of the Internet and TV. There is *some* good in them, and we did have those things in Madinah too – but my level of unnecessary usage skyrocketed in Makkah, and I wasted far too much time on them. Plus, such activity also hindered my spirituality – since the time-wasting was compounded by the relative lack of beneficial information I was getting from them. Shaytaan laid these time-wasting traps out for me, and I fell for them too often – despite KNOWING it was a trap. And if that was Makkah – which should be relatively free from such distractions – what about back home?

Another regret is wasting so many opportunities for dua while in Makkah. There were so many moments – while walking, waiting, or otherwise – when I could have been making dua, or making dhikr – yet I just didn't. Maybe that was another ploy of shaytaan – distracting me from using every moment beneficially – and I recognised it.

While I was disappointed by all these things, another first-time Hajji pointed out to me later on that this was destiny. We all have regrets, and we all think we could have done more – but this was the way it was to be. Perhaps these lessons from our first time are meant to inspire us to push ourselves to get there again – so that we don't make the same mistakes again.

The strangest things...



Spotted in Makkah

But Makkah isn't limited to just spirituality and stress. There's a lot to laugh at too, and in our time there, we witnessed many quirky or unusual events. Among these:

- It was strangely common to find old Indian men with *Spongebob Squarepants* shoebags.
- Some women would sit and speak during the fard salaah, then get up and make salaah once the imam was finished.
- Some men prayed next to their wives in the midst of all the women, and vice versa.
- Some people refused to pray on the red carpet of the masjid, insisting that you *must* pray on a mussalah.
- The youngsters sometimes pushed wheelchair-bound people for their tawwafs. One time, I watched as these elderly and dignified pilgrims were engaged in dhikr and dua – while the boys pushing them had a game between themselves: racing each other and having fun.
- For every circuit of the tawaaf, you need to make a gesture (istilam) towards the Black Stone (on the Kabah). On the roof level, there's a green light indicating where one should do this. I once saw an old man forget his istilam, and when he remembered, he turned around and made it – not to the stone, but to the green light. It was amusing, but it highlighted the fact that we shouldn't just do tawwaf ritualistically – because we'd then misunderstand the significance of what we're doing, and hence make a mistake like that.
- We once saw an old man reading a Quran that had small notes in the side margins. The notes were so small that he read them with a magnifying glass!
- Many times, you can undergo a name change: when the men want to the attention of other men, they'll call you by the name 'Muhammad' (with tajweed). (Which reminded me of the default Capetonian way of getting a person's attention: "Hallo!".)
- When arguments occur, the Arabs have an amazing way of resolving it quickly: a simple "khalas!" is often enough to just stop things.

Related lessons:

- It's fine to get your rest when you need to, but be careful not to become lazy to the point where you end up being late for salaahs in the masjid.
- Be aware of the time-wasting traps shaytaan lays out for you. Whether it's TV, the Internet (including email and social networking on your mobile phone), newspapers, or something else – if it's not benefitting you spiritually, be very careful of it and try to minimise your usage.
- Don't waste the small moments – for example, while you're walking or waiting in line. Use these moments in beneficial activities, such as good conversations, dhikr, dua, etc.
- Keep your eyes open for the many quirky things you'll see in the masjid, shops, and other areas. The incredible mix of different cultures, ages, and backgrounds is sure to provide warm memories of things you'd never see anywhere else.
- Educate yourself about the reasons behind the acts of worship you're doing. This will help you avoid mistakes that could otherwise creep in when you just do things ritualistically without understanding.

Chapter 17: Memories for the heart



View through a grill at the haram in Makkah

The crowning moment

I've heard that everyone gets a 'moment' in Makkah – some special experience where they receive inspiration, or some kind of epiphany. On one of our last mornings there, mine came.

For fajr that morning, I'd managed to get to my usual 4th floor spot of the masjid. After fajr, while waiting to make Ishraq salaah (just after sunrise), I made a conscious effort to observe my surroundings: the birds above, the many people sitting, sleeping, taking pictures, making dua, or just looking at the Kabah. The most heart-warming sight was an Indonesian couple laying nearby, asleep – facing each other. It was awesome to see the love and mercy of marriage manifested right there – on this blessed rooftop where couples and families often spent time together.

After sunrise, I made my ishraq salaah, and before leaving, decided to take a look at the Kabah. The mataf area was full of people doing tawwaf; the entire floor covered in this wheel of humanity, revolving around Allah's House. I looked up a level, and it was the same on the next floor. Again, I looked up another level, and the same sight on the roof.

I'd seen it before, but this time, it struck me in a new way. For some reason, this moment was incredibly awe-inspiring, and the whole experience just brought tears to my eyes. Allah was enabling me to witness His sign – right there.

The 'sign' was hope and a positive perspective. You see, back home – and in much of the world today – it seems we're in a *hopeless* situation. My perception is that society is going backwards – corrupted and in tremendous moral decline; given to hedonism, materialism, competition, ungratefulness, cruelty, and rising atheism and hostility towards people of faith.

But here, in front of my eyes, Allah was showing me otherwise. Despite those perceptions I had, there was still so much good. Here in front of me were tens of thousands of people – walking so slowly in this physically-uncomfortable ritual, so dedicated and in such recognition of Allah's love and mercy. And this was only a small fraction of the ummah. Given the chance, I'm sure that hundreds of millions of Muslims – if not every single one – would jump at the chance to be down there, in that tawwaf.

And despite the sectarian, ideological, and racial differences, everyone was united. Everyone was unified by this one act of walking around one structure – one building, which is a symbol of One Allah. One Creator. One religion. One humanity. One.

Our world today is so overcome by negativity, and so flooded by troubling news of suffering and corruption – yet these few moments took me away from all of that and showed me the good that still exists. And because people like this – this ummah – still exists today, this world isn't in *such* a bad state. It isn't *totally* hopeless. And it never will be, because we, the people of Allah's ultimate truth – Islam – will always be here, even in the worst of times, when Dajjal rules over the planet.



Jam-packed tawaaf during Hajj season 2011

It didn't stop there, though – the moment took me further. I remembered the 'arsh of Allah being directly above the Kabah, so I looked up to that area. SubhanAllah...circling above the Kabah was a group of birds. And despite the freedom and space they had, they didn't spread out wide. They flew *only* above the Kabah.

This was their fitrah. They had to *know* the greatness of that spot. The animals, trees, and all of nature – they all know Allah and glorify Him (see Surah 17, verse 44). And we humans also know. It's in *our* natural fitrah. Despite what we learn from our societies and what directions we take in life – even atheism – our innate nature *knows* Allah...just like those birds know.

If only we could stop, occasionally, to observe these creatures and be reminded of the fitrah which still lays buried within us – under the layers and layers of spiritual dirt we accumulate in our lives.

Speaking to the heart

During our final tawwaf before leaving for Aziziah, we walked by a man in sujood. He was sobbing uncontrollably, and his sincerity and emotion reminded me of similar scenes I'd witnessed in Madinah. I thought of how he, and others like him, are so humbled by being here. Perhaps they'd done such tremendous wrongs in their lives, and now they come here, begging their Maker for forgiveness and a fresh start.

His level of intensity spoke to my heart because of the common bond I have with him and others like him: we are all just powerless, error-prone humans that live our lives heedless of Allah. We transgress, make mistakes, and *try* to correct ourselves – but we fail and fall back into error, again and again and again. Yet Allah is so merciful that He gives us chance after chance to come back. He awakens regret in our hearts and allows us to repent and return to Him – even though He knows we'll *again* falter after this.

Unless you live in extreme circumstances, it's rare to witness such emotion: to see the tears and pleading of grown men – perfectly humbled and fully aware that *no one and nothing* can help them except their Maker.

Seeing this is an incredible reminder of the reality we so often forget. In truth, no matter how comfortable or trouble-free our lives seem to be, we are all in the same position as that man. We all have this tremendously-deep need of Allah. And while the veils of this worldly life may distort our perception of that, on the Last Day, we will see it as clear as the sun. So while we have the chance in this life, we should discard all attributes of arrogance, ward off all illusions of being self-sufficient, and beg our Creator to help us see things as they really are – see the reality of who we are, and how much we need Him.

Related lessons:

- In the haram – particularly on the roof levels – remember to take in your surroundings. Observe the people and what's going on, and look for beautiful sights that your heart will remember for a lifetime after you leave Makkah.
- If you ever need a reminder that this ummah is strong, and that there are still so many people in this world that take their deen and connection to Allah seriously, remember the packed tawaafs you witnessed in Makkah.
- And if the sects and divisions of the ummah get you down, again remember those tawaafs – which prove the unity that's still possible despite our differences.
- Every single human has a natural recognition of the truth of Allah – whether they choose to accept it or not, even if they've buried it under years of heedlessness and sin. Be aware of this fitrah, and remember that we can all return to it if we try, insha-Allah.
- When you see grown men crying and witness the desperate duas of fellow pilgrims, take it as a reminder of your own insignificance, your own complete helplessness, and your own complete need of Allah for every single thing in your life – whether big or small. Remember that even if you don't feel the same right now, a Day will come when you will feel that way. So use your life on Earth wisely so that, when you reach that Day, you'll be in the best possible position before your Lord.

Image sources: Opening picture taken by me; tawaaf picture by Dr Z. Parker.

Chapter 18: Joke's on you



Our welcome gift in Aziziah

It's not about the feelings

During our stay in Makkah, our last tawaaf right near the Kabah came a few nights before we left. I hated it. It was so full and uncomfortable that my focus was not on dua, dhikr, or spiritual thoughts – but on the difficulty and unpleasantness of the experience. But it reminded me of a crucial lesson in Islam: we don't worship feelings.

You see, in ibadah, it's amazing to have the beautiful feelings of peace, contentment, and an emotional connection to Allah. But such things are not pre-requisites for acceptance of the deeds, and even though they *feel* good, our feelings shouldn't be our motivator for those acts of worship.

In Islam, we don't worship our feelings. We worship Allah. And this applies in *all* conditions and states of mind and heart – even when we're distracted and spiritually weak. So I took this experience as a reminder I need to always live by.

Leaving Makkah

On the 1st of Dhul Hijjah, rocketing hotel prices prompt many hujjaaj to leave Makkah and spend the last week before Hajj in Aziziah – which is a nearby suburb. And on our last night before leaving, we got up at 12.30AM for the final tawwaf of our stay there. With Jumuaah just hours away, and the prospect of chaos since we'd be leaving that afternoon, it felt crazy, but we had to do it. Logic said to just rest and sleep. But this was our last chance, so logic lost the argument.

The mataaf was too full, so we went to the roof for tawaaf. It took much longer, but it was much more peaceful and gave me the time and space to enjoy and take benefit from the experience.

Then came a few hours of sleep, followed by the morning rush in which we left 3 hours early for Jumuaah. We spent that long waiting time in the masjid – making dua, reading, and doing other beneficial activities. (Tip: If you really can't stand the heat, get a spot in the airconditioned basement. You don't see much, but at least you keep cool.) The sheer length

of waiting time again reminded me of how – back home – I need to make more effort to be early in the masjid (for *all* salaahs – not just Jumuah), and not let laziness and distractions deprive me of the blessings of being early.

We were to leave the hotel after Jumuah, but, predictably, there were some delays – so we had time to get some lunch (which was amazingly cheap yet still tasty J). Finally, we got onto our bus and made the journey to our new home: Aziziah.

Back to reality

At different points of the journey, our group leaders joked about the systematic decline in the standard of accommodation for the trip. Five star in Madinah, four star in Makkah, no star in Aziziah, then all the stars in Muzdalifah.

Seeing our room in Aziziah confirmed that it was no joke. The place was kind of like a hostel, and actually reminded me of a prison in some ways: the bright lights inside, the confined space, and an incredibly small bathroom (though if you live in London, you may have used something similarly small).

We got these very thin slippers, saying “Warmly welcome” – courtesy of China Tourism. China Tourism also provided other material, like the soaps. And we’d been warned that the toilet pipes were small – which meant this sign wasn’t too much of a surprise:



An ominous warning

Since we couldn’t stomach the thought (or smell) of throwing used toilet paper into the bin, frequent flushing was a better alternative.

The bathroom space was...well, “economical”. If you sat on the toilet, your legs would be in the shower. And with a largely ineffective shower curtain, you’d be sure to wet the floor with every shower. But, sensibly, the hosts provided a mop, and there was a drain outlet on the bathroom floor.

The geyser was above the toilet (and it was secure enough to not fall on our heads 😊), and the sink was unusually big – almost the same area as the shower cubicle’s floor space. Additionally, we got one (unclean) towel, which ended up being our floor towel (and we used my spare ihraam as bath towels).

The room, and more

The room itself was decently-sized. It housed an old airconditioner, one window, a large table, no cupboards, 2 single beds, and a mirror. Outside, we shared a small, communal kitchen with our neighbours.

All in all, it kind of reminded me of a dingy hotel room in New York. But we were in no position to be picky. We weren't here for luxury, and we sure weren't getting any in this place 😊.

Downstairs, the eating hall was also comical – with ceilings so low you'd have to bend to avoid hitting your head in some places (as one unfortunate person soon learned).

Meal times further reinforced the prison-like atmosphere: our Indian hosts would lay out the food (almost always curry or another Indian dish), each person dished out in a plastic carton, took their bottle of (warm) water, then sat at a table and ate.

After my first meal, I went to wash my hands at the nearby sink. The dispensers on the wall said “Shampoo” and “Conditioner” – but both were empty, so I used the Nivea tube on the sink – thinking it was at least *some* kind of cleaning liquid.

It wasn't. It turned out to be coconut oil – and I only realised it when I was already washing my hands. And so, my first dining experience in Aziziah ended with a full stomach, and coconut-smelling hands.

With first impressions like these, you'd think I'd want a refund from the Hajj operator – given the high price of this accommodation. But that wasn't the case at all. Despite the shortcomings, this place had a simplicity that perfectly fitted our purpose for that period.

In the lead-up to Hajj, we needed to divorce ourselves from luxury, cleanse ourselves of worldly attachments, and prepare – wholeheartedly – for the coming 5 days. And our Aziziah accommodation – free of the comfort and distractions of Makkah and Madinah – seemed to be an ideal setting for that.

Related lessons:

- In acts of worship, when things aren't going your way and you're not feeling “into it” – remember that you're not doing it for the feelings. You're doing it for the sake of Allah. So persevere and make dua for an improvement in the situation, but remember that we don't worship feelings – we worship Allah.
- For any salaah –but especially Jum'ah –if you can't stand the heat, go early and try to get a spot in the airconditioned basement. But, because there's not much to see, make sure you take your Quran, dua list, or other things to do.
- In Makkah and Madinah, it becomes necessary to be at the masjid early for each salaah. Take advantage of that waiting time, and make it a long-term reminder too: that back home, you should also try to be early to the masjid.
- These days, the comforts of shopping malls and luxury hotels can really distract you from your purpose on this journey – which isn't ideal preparation for Hajj. If you're able to, right before the 5 days, try to get some simple accommodation that'll be conducive to Hajj preparation.
- If you manage to get such lodging, look past the faults and focus on cleansing yourself of worldly attachments, and preparing your heart, mind, and body for the upcoming days.
- On a practical note, if your lodging has small toilets, be economical with the toilet paper, and flush frequently – rather than throwing used toilet paper in the bin. It may seem like a waste of water, but hygiene comes before convenience.

- Also on the practical side, when you're not sure what's in a soap dispenser or cosmetic tube, always pour a little out first. Don't be deceived by labels – lest you end up with oily, coconut-smelling hands 😊

Image sources: Both pictures taken by me

Chapter 19: Ascension

Education

As stated [last time](#), Aziziah was a place where we hoped to disconnect from comforts and prepare ourselves for the biggest 5 days of our lives. It was also the place where our tour group *finally* kicked in with Islamic programmes. Up to that point, I'd been highly disappointed by the relative lack of lectures, classes, and other spiritually-uplifting activities offered.

We'd specifically chosen our Hajj group because of the top-notch ulama they take with them, and I had expected a journey like this to be full of inspirational lectures and activities that would help get our hearts and minds into the states they'd need to be in for Hajj. But it wasn't to be. My favourite alim didn't even make it there (due to visa issues), and such events were minimal in our Madinah and Makkah stays. It was only now, with a week to go, that everything went into full swing – with 3 activities per day, including a choice of different Hajj classes (one for Hanafis and one for Shafis).

DATE	TIME	PLAZA 2	PLAZA 3
Sat 28 Oct	7:00	Welcome Meeting	Welcome Meeting
Sun 29 Oct	09:00	Naseeha: Sh. Alexander	Naseeha: Ah. Fath
Sun 29 Oct	10:30	Hajj Class (Sh. K. Darson)	Hajj Class (Y. Pate)
Sun 29 Oct	22:00	Naseeha: Imam Farah	Naseeha: MI Lady
Mon 30 Oct	09:00	Tarbiyah Sabah	Charity Event
Mon 30 Oct	10:30	Hajj Class (Sh. K. Darson)	Hajj Class (Y. Pate)
Mon 30 Oct	22:00	Naseeha: MI Lady	Naseeha: SE. Alimuday
Tue 31 Oct	09:00	Naseeha: MI Lady	Naseeha: Sh. K. Darson
Tue 31 Oct	10:30	Hajj Class (Sh. K. Darson)	Hajj Class (Y. Pate)
Tue 31 Oct	22:00	Naseeha: Sh. Alexander	Naseeha: Imam Farah
Wed 01 Nov	09:00	Naseeha: Imam Farah	Naseeha: Sh. Alexander
Wed 01 Nov	10:30	Hajj Class (Sh. K. Darson)	Hajj Class (Y. Pate)
Wed 01 Nov	14:00	Walk to Mina	Walk to Mina
Thu 02 Nov	22:00	Naseeha: MI Lady	Naseeha: Sh. K. Darson
Wed 02 Nov	09:00	Naseeha: Sh. Alexander	Naseeha: MI Lady
Wed 02 Nov	10:30	Hajj Class (Sh. K. Darson)	Hajj Class (Y. Pate)
Wed 02 Nov	22:00	Naseeha: Sh. K. Darson	Naseeha: Sh. Alexander
Thu 03 Nov	09:00	Naseeha: Sh. K. Darson	Naseeha: Imam Farah
Thu 03 Nov	10:30	Hajj Class (Sh. K. Darson)	Hajj Class (Y. Pate)
Thu 03 Nov	22:00	Tarbiyah Sabah	Tarbiyah Sabah

Our schedule in Aziziah

The only small inconvenience was that none of the activities were in our building – they were in the other two that our group occupied. But that was a small price to pay for the knowledge and benefit on offer. (And it also gave me an unusual adventure in trying to find one of the buildings one night.)

Iqra

Before receiving prophethood, Muhammad (s.a.w.) used to often spend his time in seclusion – in a cave at the top of Jabal Nur (the mountain of light – also known as Mount Hira). It was here that everything began – Angel Jibreel (a.s.) coming to him with the first words of Quran to be revealed to humanity:

*“Read! in the name of your Lord who created.
He created man from a clot.*

*Read, and your Lord is the Most Honorable
who taught with the pen,
taught man what he did not know.”*

(Translation of the meaning – Surah Al-Alaq, verses 1-5)

Those visiting Makkah have an opportunity to literally follow the footsteps of the Messenger (s.a.w.) – by climbing that same mountain, and spending some time in that same cave of Hira (despite the discouragement of the Saudi authorities – [as mentioned previously](#)).



Jabbal Nur from the base

Because of the heat, our tour group did the climb in the early morning – before Fajr. I didn't have the best preparation for the climb – attending a lecture the night before and only sleeping after 12PM. But I wasn't going to miss this chance, and I knew that the benefit of sleep lies *not* in sleeping a certain number of hours – but in the *barakah* Allah puts in your sleep. So I made dua for barakah in that sleep, and Alhamdulillah – I was fine and able to function for that morning, when I needed the physical strength for the hike.

We gathered downstairs at 3AM, walked to meeting point, then waited a long while for everyone to arrive and everything to be sorted out. In such group situations, there'll always be people delaying the group – so prepare for this and remember not to complain about them, but to have sabr and use the waiting time beneficially.

Then came the bus drive to the foot of the mountain, and we started our ascent just before 4AM. It was incredibly steep at first, but manageable – even with the heavy backpack I had to carry. Just like our Arafah visit earlier, we again encountered many beggars with deformed limbs. They'd recite basic things – like “Allah; Jannah” and make duas for us to have an accepted Hajj.

Another prominent feature of the climb was the sheer amount of rubbish we saw strewn on and off the path. Humans are such dirty creatures – leaving garbage at tourist spots – even in these holy sites. It's so sad that Muslims, who are supposed to maintain cleanliness as ‘half of faith’ – can be so, so dirty, and so cruel to the environment.

But we should have expected that: Makkah was dirty, and we were warned that the days of Hajj would be dirty too.



The state of this sign tells you what many visitors think of its message.



Lots of space in this bin



A sure sign that humans have been here

Reaching the summit

The climb got easier as we got higher, and we encountered vendors selling refreshments, tourist souvenirs, and even one selling these:



Connecting people

At the top, it was confusing knowing what was what. There was a confined space to climb through, and we thought *that* was the cave – but it was only a passageway to it. We got through that, then stood at the mouth of the cave, where a small crowd had already gathered.

It was here that the adhaan went off from the many masjids down below. I'd been told of how beautiful it was to hear it from up there – but I couldn't fully enjoy the moment because my attention was focussed on getting into the cave, which only held 2 people at a time. There were foreigners up there with our group, and I feared the now-common 'ignore-the-queue-and-push-to-the-front' attitude from them.

We waited a long time, and made wudu there using our spray bottles (discreetly – I don't think anyone even noticed). But with so many people waiting to go in, and more coming, I wanted to just give up and leave. After all, we might have ended up missing Fajr if we kept waiting – and this cave, despite its significance, did not take priority over a fardh salaah.

We came all the way up, yet it seemed we wouldn't make it to the main attraction. But one of our group members changed all that for me. He was adamant that he'd go in. He didn't come all this way from Cape Town, and climb this far, to give up. If we had to wait, we would. I was inspired by his persistence and decided to stick it out; while still making dua that we wouldn't miss Fajr.

So we waited in a queue – us South Africans plus a few foreigners. Tempers flared when one of them fell out of line, and a fight almost broke out. Alhamdulillah – calm heads prevailed, and he backed down, eventually leaving without even going into the cave. But it again highlighted the aggression that seems to be more prominent in Makkah – where even the sacredness of the place doesn't subdue such negative raw human emotion. (If you're ever in such a situation, learn the 'sabr' hand sign...it's something that we all can understand, regardless of home language ☺.)

As for this cave, it seems many people think it's sunnah to make 2 rakaats of non-obligatory salaah inside. This is obviously not the case, since – apparently – after he became a Prophet, Muhammad s.a.w. didn't go back to this cave. There's no sunnah salaah of the cave – as the

Saudi authorities would readily tell you – it’s bi’dah. One of the foreigners waiting with us said the same. Regardless, everyone was making salaah in there.

When our turn came, my wife’s wisdom shone through. I was uneasy about the type of salaah to make in there, but my wife eliminated the problem by saying we should make our Fajr in there, and do nothing else since others were waiting to get in.

One of the apparent miracles of the cave is that it directly faces the Kabah – so it’s easy to make salaah there (though it is cramped). We went in and made our Fajr – but bearing the other people in mind, I couldn’t truly enjoy it as I had to be quick. Still though, it was the experience of a lifetime: to be in that same confined space where my Prophet s.a.w. – and the arch angel Jibreel a.s. were....it was amazing.

Taking in the scene

The cherry on top came afterwards, when we got away from the crowd and were able to sit on top of the cave for a while. If you’ve experienced the solitude of a mountain top before, or a sunrise without any distractions of day-to-day life, you may be able to imagine the experience. This was a combination of the two: high above Makkah, with a view of the city, the haram (and the infamous clock tower), and the early morning silhouettes of those incredible mountains all around.

It was exceptionally serene. Just calm, peaceful, and a moment to savour for the rest of my life. Experiences like that make me yearn for Jannah – the desire to have a place like that all to myself, without anybody else to disturb the mood, and no time limits or logistical considerations to prematurely end the beauty of the moment.

But all good things must end, and we soon had to make our way down the mountain. In the early light, we saw wildlife that we hadn’t seen on the way up – including a family of monkeys, and this little kitty:



He seemed to be sleeping, yet he sat up

But the highlight of the descent was undoubtedly the sunrise. No matter how many times I watch this [tremendous miracle of Allah](#), I’m always amazed at how quickly the sun moves from below the horizon to high up in the sky – from infancy to towering strength, spreading its light and warmth across the vastness of the Earth. It’s a sight I see far too rarely, so having the experience on this most-important journey made it all the more special.



Sunrise as we descended Mount Hira

Back at the foot of the mountain, my fatigue finally caught up with me, and after enjoying the last few moments there, we headed back to the bus – then our room – where I collapsed in exhaustion.



The neighbourhood at the base of the mountain



This giant tasbeeh was on sale at the foot of the mountain

Related lessons:

- When it comes to sleep, scientists and commentators may insist we need between 6 and 8 hours per night. But Allah is in control of everything – sleep included. So if you don't get that many hours, it won't matter – as long as you have barakah in that sleep. Make it a habit to ask Allah for barakah in your sleep – whether you get a full night's rest or not.
- In tour groups, there'll always be some people that delay the group. Expect this, and remember not to complain about them, but to have sabr and use the waiting time beneficially.
- In general – and especially when you're in nature – respect the environment and don't litter. Cleanliness is half of faith, so make a conscious effort to be clean – even if others around you are not.
- If you can make it to the top at the time of Fajr adhaan, try to savour the experience of hearing the many adhaans from down below.

- Whenever you're touring, always take a spray bottle and enough water for wudu. You may not always have a tap around (such as at the top of the mountain), and in any case, using a spray bottle is tremendously water-efficient.
- Don't ever miss your fardh salaah for a ziyarah place / tourist attraction. In worldly terms, you may feel regret at missing out – but in the Hereafter, your regret will be much greater. If you're in a jam, make dua and do your best – always remembering that salaah comes first.
- If tempers flare, don't get caught up in the emotion of one / a group's wrongdoing. If you must be involved, try to be a peace-maker. There's no benefit in fighting with others. (And learn the 'sabr' hand sign.)
- There's no sunnah salaah for the cave. Make your fardh salaah if it's time, or make dua instead. Or maybe just make an extra salaah – but being very clear in your mind that you're NOT doing it under the impression that it's a sunnah.
- When you get in, do what you need to, and savour the moment. But don't take too long if there are others waiting. We'd all love to spend a long time in there, but it's inconsiderate to deprive or delay others unnecessarily – so give others a chance too. (The same concept applies in any place that's in high demand – such as the Rawda in Madinah.)
- When you're done, don't be in a rush to get back down again. Spend as much time as you can above the cave / near the top – taking in the scenery and the experience. You can't get this anywhere else in the world, and you may never get this chance again, so enjoy it while you can.

Image sources: All pictures taken by me.

Note: Title for this chapter borrowed from [here](#).

Chapter 20: Reflections before the big day



Entrance to the haram in Makkah

Going home

The same day we climbed to the cave of Hira, we spontaneously decided to go back to the haram in Makkah for Maghrib and Esha. Just the travel there and back was an adventure on its own – including 2 busses each way, being stranded at our former Makkah hotel, a Turkish lady taking my seat on the bus, and waiting in a deserted, dusty parking lot for our shuttle – which seemed to magically appear when we needed it.

It was also challenge for me physically, because I was operating that whole day on 3 hours of sleep. I was tired even *before* Maghrib, but held on to make the salaah before drifting off into a beautiful, relaxing, and merciful sleep.

Being back in Makkah was nostalgic. I hadn't fully appreciated it while we were staying there, but now that it was no longer home, I missed it. The familiar sights and sounds of the haram, Ajyad Street, and the crowds all drew me in – making me long to return to what was once home, but would never again be mine. It was a valuable life lesson: appreciate your comforts and surroundings while you have them, because life will move on sooner or later, and you will lose them.

Reflections

The week in Aziziah wasn't too eventful, but it did provide much-needed time for seclusion, self-reflection, and rest. One of my realisations revolved around how different, and beautiful, this Arabian society was. I'm not saying that all the people were perfect in character, nor that the politics or social trends of Saudi Arabia are admirable. Those are issues for a different discussion. What I mean is, my weeks in the country up to then culminated in the realisation that – despite the flaws – this was an environment and society based on Islam – and I loved it, because it was so natural, and such a huge change from the Western society I'd spent my whole life in.

Here, there was no ideological warfare with blind atheists, arrogant secularists, or misguided worshippers of idols and humans. Everyone knew and believed in the truth of Islam, and we all had the same ultimate ambitions for Jannah. To not be surrounded by such kufr gives you space to focus more intensely on your own soul and relationship with Allah.

In terms of action, people would take time in their ibadah, and would turn everyday situations – like waiting in line at the shop – into opportunities for dhikr. Salaah was central to life – with the day’s schedule revolving around salaah times, and people making the effort to pray – rather than making excuses to miss it. They’d take their musallahs with them and when it was salaah time, they’d pray – out in the open, without self-consciousness. Common folks – like drivers and shopkeepers – would carry their Qurans with them and recite in their shops. If customers couldn’t pay for an item, shopkeepers would let them take it anyway – trusting they’d come back and pay later. Women would dress modestly and cover properly – eliminating the nakedness we’re so used to in Western societies. And on an unprecedented scale (for me at least), men were respectful towards women.

It got me thinking about da’wah on a wider level. Da’wah is primarily important because it invites to Islam – which is what will save each and every individual from eternal failure. But on a wider level, da’wah also benefits the society and the environment – because Islam naturally brings honour and beauty to the communities it dwells within (or at least, it does when it’s practiced correctly). So, while the people in Madinah, Makkah, and Aziziah weren’t all perfect in terms of Islamic character and conduct, being in their society felt so much more natural than our Western societies back home – because the very *foundation* of that environment was the deen of Islam.

The challenge of tomorrow

Another reflection stemmed from the timing of this trip. At that point, I was 30 years old, and the elders had often remarked about how good it is to go when you’re young. But I didn’t feel “young”. [Like I’ve said before](#), life hasn’t been “too short” for me – because I feel old beyond my years. So now, at this milestone age of 30, I was about to embark on the experience I hoped would define the rest of my life – however much longer that would be.

In addition to that, it was also 10 years since my [life changed](#) – meaning that the catalyst had come a decade earlier, and then Allah had used the next 10 years to mould me, refine me, and prepare me for this – the most important journey and event of my life.

And on this journey, perhaps it would be easy to wish for death after the main event – Arafah – was complete. To die right after Arafah means you leave this world in a state of absolute purity – with all sins having been forgiven, thereby making your journey to the Hereafter easier, and your Eternity one free of the consequences of the sins and mistakes you’d accumulated in life.

I wasn’t too attached to the material things of this world, so an ending like that would seem tempting. But I didn’t want it.

Why? Mostly, for my daughter. My parents and others in my life would cope without me. But if my daughter lost me at the age of two, it would have had a huge impact on her. I had missed her tremendously on this trip, and I wanted to go back to her after Hajj – to be her father: to spend time with her; to help her grow up, to teach her and help mould her to the awesome person I pray she’ll become.

And for myself, I viewed the rest of my life as a challenge and an opportunity: the challenge to *live* this Hajj for the rest of my life, and the opportunity to improve my own life and make an impact on others and this world. If I died, I wouldn’t get the chance to take on that challenge, and my impact on the world wouldn’t go beyond whatever I’d already achieved in my life up to that point.

Final preparation

The last days before Hajj weren't as spiritual as I hoped, but it gave us the chance to speak to our loved ones. It also gave me the chance to send one last email to a very special group of people back home; people who I respect and admire very much. Physically, I was so far away from them, but throughout this trip, they'd been in my thoughts and in my duas, and this was my last chance to convey a special message to them before I embarked on the biggest five days of my life.

The final Hajj class also left me with one enduring and most critical piece of advice – which was a reminder I'd written at the top of my Hajj preparation list:

“...The best of provisions is taqwa...” (Surah al-Baqarah verse 197)

For everything I would be facing, I had to remember it was all for Allah. Everything difficult, every sacrifice, every challenge that required patience...the thought I had to CONSTANTLY keep in mind was: “this is for Allah”.

That was it.

Related lessons

- Appreciate your comforts and surroundings while you have them, because life will move on sooner or later, and you will lose them.
- Despite the flaws in the society, it's refreshing to be in an environment that has Islam at its base. We don't experience that in Western countries, so appreciate it when you're over there, and make dua that one day, the beauty of Islam will come to be at the very core of the society you live in back home.
- Going back home after Hajj presents you with a challenge and an opportunity – both of which must be embraced. The challenge is to live your Hajj until you die, and the opportunity is to make a greater impact on the world.
- In your final moments before leaving for Mina, reach out to your loved ones. Take advantage of the strong emotions in your heart and convey to them the beauty of what you feel, inspiring them to make this trip, and asking them to make special duas for you in the coming days.
- One of the most important thoughts to bear in mind on the 5 days is to remain conscious of Allah at all times. Taqwa is your best provision, and all that you'll face is for Allah.

Image source: [Opening picture](#).

Part 3: The days of Hajj

Chapter 21: Day 1: Mina



The tunnel leading to Mina

Friday, 4th November, 2011. The day that my wife and I embarked on our Hajj. We'd made all our preparations, entered into ihraam, and we were about to make our way up to our camp on Mina – where hujjaaj spend most of the five days of Hajj. It had been a long wait – from the point where the call had come to me [a year earlier](#), then the [months of preparation](#), then [departing for the journey](#), and finally the five weeks in Saudi leading up to this point. And now it was here.

Tent city welcomes you

We arrived late to meet our group – with everyone already waiting for the latecomers, and the group having collectively pronounced their niyah for Hajj. It wasn't the ideal way to start, but we hurriedly made our niyah, and then set off with the group – taking that 20 minute walk up the hill, through the tunnel, and onto the vast plain of Mina, all the while reciting the talbiyyah:

Labbayk Allahumma labbayk (Here I am at Your service, O Lord, here I am!)

Labbayka la sharika laka labbayk (Here I am at Your service! You have no partners, here I am!)

Innal-hamda, wan-ni`mata, laka wal-mulk (Yours alone is all praise and all bounty, and Yours alone is sovereignty.)

La sharika lak (You have no partners.)



Tents line the valley of Mina

My feelings were similar to that of the [first time I was in ihraam](#) – before our first umrah, yet this time the magnitude of the event was far greater. There was little space for thoughts of the outside world or distractions. Everything needed to be focussed on what awaited in the coming days – *especially* Arafah the next day.

On Mina, our group leaders took us to our camp, where men and women were separated into male and female tents. Good companionship is important on this journey (and in life, generally) – so I was fortunate to get a spot next to one of my wife’s relatives, who wasn’t the kind to waste time with gossip or anything negative.



Inside a tent on Mina

As expected, there wasn’t much in the way of comfort. We each got one smallish mattress, one pillow, and one blanket. We were in a ‘special services’ camp – meaning that we were close to the Jamaraat, had our meals provided for us, and had 24 hour access to snacks. Others on Mina weren’t so fortunate, with the worst off being those who had to pitch small tents on the dirty pavements beside the roads. (I’ve been told those were illegal hujjaaj – i.e. they don’t have permits to perform Hajj.)

The toilet situation wasn't too pleasant, but I'd expected that. There were cubicles of Eastern toilets that doubled as showers, plus two Western toilets. In all honesty, it was cleaner to use the Eastern versions – since your skin wouldn't have to touch anything as you squatted).



An Eastern toilet on Mina

Shockingly, the toilet areas also included urinals. I couldn't believe that the Saudis – being so strictly religious (and therefore, presumably, aware of the hygiene issues) – would put these disgusting fixtures here on this holy ground, for the holiest journey of a Muslim's life. To make things worse, the sinks for washing up included scented soap – which is obviously not allowed in ihraam. I had come prepared – bringing my own unscented soap – so it wasn't a problem for me, but I feel sorry for those who had to do a number 2 and then find out that they weren't allowed to use the only soap available.

Wandering on Mina

Despite it being a Friday, there was no Jumuah for us (it isn't required for those on Hajj). So, aside from the fardh salaahs, there wasn't much else to do. The top priority for everyone was to rest so that we'd have strength for Arafah the next day. Some recited Quran, others made dua (or wrote their dua lists – at this late stage), some slept, and others socialized or munched on snacks.



Inside a tent on on the first day of Hajj

Though I'm a junk food addict, I managed to restrain myself for much of the day. I found that keeping busy in beneficial activities helped keep my mind off the temptations, and it was only when I allowed myself to get bored that my will was broken. It may seem trivial, but for me, it was a simple but important lesson that I hoped to take forward.

Our group had a few talks that day, but – as had been the habit in Aziziah – they also included a musical session, wherein some of the naat singers in the group did their thing. I'm not into music, so I hated it. (Sidenote: for a superb discussion of music in Islam, read [“Slippery Stone” by Khalid Baig.](#)) I understand that this kind of thing is big in Cape Town and in the Indian community, but to me, this was purely cultural, and was definitely NOT a spiritual activity. I literally fled – not wanting this mockery to put a damper on what should have been a day of personal reflection.



Inside a camp at Mina

I wandered around the camp, trying to find a quiet spot away from the noise to engage in personal ibadah. Yet I found no place of solitude. So I drifted from tent to tent, listening in on lectures that the other Hajj groups were having.

While my group's choice of activity was frustrating, it drove me to a good experience in witnessing the variety in the camp.

Death's dress rehearsal

While I'd spent some time in ibadah that day, I'd also used some of my time to take in the experience – and found it was a poignant reminder of death. The tent was quite cramped, with everyone lined up in rows – space just sufficient for each person. That's exactly how a graveyard is laid out. Additionally, we were all wrapped in our ihraams – similar to the white cloths we'll be wrapped in when we die.

The nakedness in the tent also struck me: men – myself included – slept, lay, or sat – topless. Although I'm self-conscious about that kind of thing, it reminded me of Qiyamah – when we'll ALL be naked. *Totally* naked – with no separation between men and women. Yet we won't care about it at that point, because we'll have much greater concerns. Can you imagine the states we'll be in on that day? How terrifying it will be, how anxious we'll be about our destinations, and how immense the events of that day will be.

The bareness in that tent reminded me of the bareness on Qiyammah – highlighting the point that it's not the external appearance that counts in this life. It's what's inside. It's the state of the heart that'll determine our condition that Day.

I prayed that the day on Mina, and the Hajj itself, would put me and all the other hujjaaj on the road to a clean and pure heart (*Qalb-us saleem*) – which would, insha-Allah, secure us the best possible condition when we stand waiting for our Books of Judgement.

We're often forgetful about death, the grave, the resurrection, and final judgement. But that tent on Mina gave me a glimpse into that future, and a reminder that – while we're still alive – we have abundant chances to change our ways and secure our future, before our personal Hereafter begins at the moment of death.

Related lessons:

- Try not to be late when your group leaves for Mina. Psychologically, you don't want to feel flustered at the very start of such an immense experience.
- If possible, try to get good companionship in your tent – especially your immediate neighbours. Try to be with those that will encourage you to do beneficial things, and avoid those that have a habit of being overly-social, too joking, and inclined towards wasting time.
- Make sure you bring your own unscented soap (and other unscented toiletries you may need). Always take it with you to the toilets, and share it with others if they need it. (Which is why you may want to take extra soap.)
- The toilets may not feel clean, but that doesn't give you an excuse to be dirty. Always try to be clean, and if you accidentally mess an area you shouldn't, clean it up – as a courtesy to the next person that'll use that stall.
- Keep yourself occupied with beneficial activities on that day – even if it's just sleeping, or having spiritual discussions with your neighbours. Don't allow boredom to overcome you.
- In your tent, let the constriction of your personal space remind you of the grave that awaits you.
- Let the simplicity of ihram clothing remind you of the only material items you'll take to that grave. What counts most in this life is NOT the external, but what's inside, and the state of your heart. Strive for a clean and pure heart – which is your ticket to an easier journey to Jannah.

- Allow these thoughts and experiences on Mina to sink deep into your psyche so that they'll be a lifelong reminder of the Hereafter that awaits you. While you're alive, you have abundant chances to improve your position with your Lord. Use these opportunities while you can.
- Walk around your camp and enjoy the experience of being among other Hajj groups and people of different nationalities.

Image sources: All pictures taken by me, except “MAIShareef_8thDH” (by Muhammad Al-Shareef), “MinaTents_z” and “MinaToilet_z” (sources unknown).

Chapter 22: Day 2: Arafah (part 1)



Morning on the plain of Arafah

The biggest appointment of my life

On the first night of Hajj, we slept a few hours on Mina – getting some rest for the day of Arafah that would follow. We had no idea what time our busses would leave the next morning, and because the queue for the toilet was always long, I got up early so that I could be ready to go on short notice. At 3.30AM, we were still waiting – but I wasn't letting the time go to waste. I made tahajjud salaah, read Quran, prepared my bag, did some writing, made dua, and reflected on the momentous few hours that would await us later that day. It was the most important day of my life, because the upcoming wuqoof period – from Thuhr to sunset – would be the biggest appointment of my life, where my sole mission would be to make all the duas I needed and wanted to make...pour out my heart to my Lord, and beg for His complete forgiveness, and the acceptance of all my requests.

As mentioned earlier, I had written an extensive dua list back home – long before we left for Hajj. In the weeks leading up to Hajj, I'd made a few additions – but for the most part, everything I needed to ask for was already down on paper. So that morning on Mina, I waited: my duas pre-written, well-rehearsed, and ready to be made.

I wasn't nervous, or excited, or anxious. I was just waiting, hoping, and making dua that I would be in top physical, mental, and spiritual condition, and able to make all the duas I needed to make.

Getting there

The busses came just before Fajr, and many in our group waited in the line and boarded – despite the fact that they'd miss Fajr (unless they read on the bus, or somehow made it to Arafah before sunrise – which was unlikely). My wife and I thought there'd be enough time to make our Fajr, though, so we did that – enabling us to follow the Prophet s.a.w.'s example of making Fajr on Mina before leaving. We followed the sunnah, but it came at a cost: we got no seats on the bus and had to stand.

My wife soon squashed in with her cousin, but I was stuck standing. It was a horrible ride for me because I was highly nauseous for most of the drive. I alternated between squatting, sitting and standing – while keeping a vomit bag with me in case I needed it. In some ways, it reminded me of childhood – where I'd often get carsick. One of the tips I'd learnt back then was to face backwards, and I followed that advice to good effect on this ride.

We eventually got to Arafah, and were directed to our camp. The layout was somewhat similar to Mina, with tents all around and pathways between them. However, these tents had no mattresses and no airconditioning – just empty red carpets where each of us found a spot to settle down (again).

An eventful morning

After a little while, I settled down for a nap and managed to sleep for about 90 minutes – which would be a priceless rest considering what would follow that day and night. One of my biggest fears for the Hajj, and Arafah especially, was that I'd have a 'personal disaster' that would force me to use the not-very-appealing showers (I'm trying to be discreet here). Alhamdulillah, my nap went off without a hitch – unlike [this brother](#), who wasn't so fortunate.

I didn't totally escape misfortune, though. At one point that morning, I went off to the toilet and after I was done, the door wouldn't open. It was jammed quite hard, and despite my best efforts, I couldn't pull it open. So there I was, on the greatest day of my life, stuck inside a stinky toilet cubicle just hours away from wuqoof time. But Allah put calmness in my heart, so I didn't panic. I made dua for a solution, and I knew someone would save me. Soon after, I was freed (and also made a mental note to avoid that stall for the rest of the day 😊).

Later, as I sat in the tent, my fellow hujaaj were engaged in ibadah all around me: salaah, Quran recitation, dhikr, and reading beneficial books. I, on the other hand, just didn't have the inclination to pack in any more of those activities. I was ready for wuqoof, and felt I needed a mental break – to just stop, relax, and observe what was going on. Generally, I spend my life either being busy or trying to fill the time – fearing I'll waste it otherwise. But there's so much benefit in just being still, and I decided this was a practice I wanted to inculcate more from that point on.



Awaiting wuqoof on the morning of Arafah

Another highlight that morning was the experience of equality. In both my tent and the one next door, there were numerous people who were prominent in the community back home (and some internationally too) – 'celebrities', if you can call them that. And although they're held in such high esteem, they were all dressed exactly like me: no special clothing, no special treatment. All in their bare, basic ihraams. It drove home the realisation that 'celebrity' is really just a construction of the mind. Strip away all the awe and reverence, titles and acclaim, and we're all the same: human beings – all equal before Allah. The only ranking is taqwa; and nobody knows the true taqwa of each person, other than Allah.

Related lessons:

- There will be times when you're waiting for transport, your group, etc. Don't waste this time in idle chit chat or other non-beneficial activities. Use it for dua, Quran recitation, or anything else productive.
- If you haven't already prepared your dua list by the time you get to Mina, make sure you do it in that first day on Mina (while still getting enough rest that night).
- Logistical issues can be a nightmare on Hajj, to the point where some travel times may even deprive you of making fardh salaah on time. Try your best NOT to miss a salaah, even if it means you'll be a little inconvenienced.
- If you get carsick during the bus rides, try facing backwards. Also, always keep a sick bag with you in case you need to vomit. (Keep the ones from your plane rides.)
- Get your rest in the morning when you're waiting for wuqoof to begin. Aside from physical rest, also get some mental rest: don't force yourself to make constant ibadah and don't keep your mind constantly occupied; but rather give your mind a break to simply 'breathe' and relax.
- Before wuqoof (and even during it), enjoy the atmosphere on Arafah and savour all the beautiful thoughts and realisations that come to you. Keep pen and paper handy (or electronic versions if you prefer) and don't be afraid to write down your thoughts and feelings.

Image sources: Opening picture from [here](#); tent picture by Dr Z. Parker (both taken on Hajj 2011)

Chapter Part 23: Arafah (part 2) – Wuqoof



Wuqoof on Arafah (Hajj 2011)

Hajj is Arafah

Zawaal time soon came, and minutes later, we made our Thuhr and Asr salaah combined – as is sunnah (though some disagree on that). Right after that, lunch was announced. For me, it was a really ridiculous time for food to be served. We had entered wuqoof time, but if we didn't get our food early, we risked missing out completely in case it was all gone (which wasn't wise, considering there was no food provided until the next day). But we didn't control the schedule, so we had to accept that time and make the best of it.

To avoid the risk, as well as longer queues later, I took my food early. I was careful to take only a little, since we were advised to not overdo it as we wouldn't want to be bloated and tired in these priceless few hours (not to mention needing the toilet).

After lunch, I settled down in the tent and started on my own efforts for the afternoon. Any thoughts of talking to others vanished, because now was not the time to talk to any human being. It was my private, most special time with Allah. When I first became more committed to the deen, dua was my first love in terms of ibadah. It was through dua that I took my initial steps deeper into Islam. Dua was what drove me closer to Allah, and Allah used that as the gateway to changing my life so completely – from one of aimlessness and ignorance to one of purpose and knowledge. Now, in these few hours, I had *the* ultimate chance to make dua. And so I began.

However, as it often happens in life, things don't always go according to plan. My wife and I had agreed that we'd spend some time together on Arafah making dua. Much sooner than I expected, she phoned to ask that we go and do that – since she wasn't finding much privacy or dua-conducive conditions in her tent. It's important to note that doing this was a completely non-romantic thing – since romance is totally prohibited in ihraam. The entire focus was spiritual, but there was still a special, non-physical intimacy to the moment. As a married couple, it was an incredibly beautiful experience, and one that we weren't alone in (we saw other couples doing the same). For me, it also re-emphasized the sacredness of the bond of marriage. How beautiful it is to base your marriage on the foundation of deen, and how amazing it is to be united in ibadah.

Alone time

After making our duas in a quiet spot, we separated and went off to continue our wuqoof alone. I sought out a private spot – where nobody would interrupt me and the sounds of

conversations and loudspeakers would be minimal. After some searching, I found a very distant yet secluded area – in the corner of our section, behind an African camp.

I continued with my own duas, running through an enormous paper list that was already physically worn out from the previous weeks of folding and unfolding. Some of those duas felt very sincere and emotional, but my enduring feeling for most of that time was one of frustration. I figured that my group would be leaving Arafah early – 2 hours before sunset – so I had a very limited amount of time to make my duas. We were told that when we left, for much of our walk we'd still be on Arafah, so we could still make our duas as we walked. But I was hesitant about that, because I'd made many duas on the move in the past and I knew how difficult it is to concentrate under those conditions.

So I felt like it was now or never. I only had about an hour on my own, and in that time I had to rush through as much of my list as I could so that I would accomplish my goal of making all my duas. Instead of relaxing and giving my duas the time and attention they deserved, I felt pressured and insincere. So instead of savouring the fact that I was on Arafah, able to at least make *some* duas, I felt short-changed – partially deprived of what was the most precious period of time I'd ever had.

If I had to do it again, I wouldn't have left early. I *did* have the option to spend the entire wuqoof period in the camp – until sunset – and head off with the last group to leave. But my wife wouldn't have wanted that because of the logistical complications. We'd planned to stick with our sheikh, and this was the way he managed his group.

But I couldn't let the negativity ruin the experience. I had to believe that Allah would fulfil all that I'd asked for, and that which I didn't get the chance to ask for too – even though I'd made my duas so hurriedly and insincerely. Allah knows best why it turned out the way it did, but I just had to appreciate the experience and have faith that it was the best thing for me.

The split

Knowing time was almost up, I made my way back to the camp, where the group had just finished its collective program. Everyone was very emotional – hugging and wishing each other an accepted Hajj. It would've been nice to experience that – because it's a momentous occasion for us all, and it's nice to share it with others. But because the group program cut through most of the very scarce personal time available, there was no way I would attend it. As I've said before, for me, ibadah is personal, and if it's a choice between being in a group and being on my own, I choose the latter every time.

At the camp, I wandered around, trying to find out if they'd announced exactly what time they'd be leaving. For most of the day before that, they'd been very non-committal – so we had no idea what time things would happen until they announced it. Every person I asked gave the same answer: no; they'd let us know. So I used that time to hurriedly continue with my dua list – which I finally accepted I'd never finish in this wuqoof.

No announcement came, and I wouldn't have known the time of departure had I not overheard one of the sheikhs tell someone that we needed to start moving. Of course, with a long walk ahead (roughly 14 kilometres in total for the group's planned route), it was a prerequisite that you needed to use the toilet before leaving – especially since there were no facilities on the road.

But as was customary on Hajj, the toilets had queues, so I had to wait a while. After doing my business, as I walked back to the camp, I passed my wife's cousin – who told me that they

were preparing to leave. I just needed a few minutes to get my stuff and would then meet them, so I thought they'd wait for me. But when I came back, they were gone.

I spoke to my wife on the phone, and assumed they were still standing and waiting for people – as was the case for most group activities on this trip. She'd failed to tell me that they were already on their way. The group had left, and she hadn't waited for me.

But I figured I was only a few minutes behind them, so I would catch up. Everyone was walking in one direction, so there wasn't much chance of getting lost. With a feeling of anxiety mixed with bravery, I made dua for the journey and ventured off alone – among the not-too-many people leaving at that time.

Little did I know, an immense adventure awaited me...

Related lessons:

- You probably won't get to choose what time lunch is served, but when it is, make a smart decision as to when to eat – so that you can maximise your dua time while not missing out on the precious food you'll need to sustain you for the period ahead.
- Try to eat only as much as you need. Over-eating may make you bloated, tired, and in need of the toilet – which would ruin your chances of making the most of your wuqoof.
- I probably don't need to remind you, but **DO NOT WASTE EVEN ONE MINUTE** of your wuqoof time. Spend it in dua (or whatever other ibadah you plan to do), and steer clear of people that gossip and waste your time.
- If you're with your spouse, make some time during wuqoof to make a special dua alone with him/her. It's an incredibly beautiful experience that will, insha-Allah, bring your hearts closer together and benefit your marriage and family life.
- As for personal duas, you may have trouble finding a secluded spot to be alone. Don't spend *too* much time looking – just get away from the crowds and find a spot where that's good enough (i.e. minimal interruptions / distractions from others).
- Your group may start walking to Muzdalifah early, so if you have the choice to stay until the very end of wuqoof (i.e. sunset), do so if you need to (and if it's logistically possible). It really is an absolutely unique experience that you shouldn't compromise. You can go anywhere in the world, spend time right next to the Kabah and in the Rawda, experience tremendous highs in Ramadan – but **NOTHING** is like this wuqoof. And with the quota systems in place, it may be the only wuqoof you ever get to make.
- If your wuqoof doesn't live up to your expectations, don't lose hope and don't let negativity overwhelm you. Just be grateful for the experience you did have, ask Allah to accept and fulfil all your duas, and be confident that He will do so – regardless of the shortcomings.
- Before leaving Arafah, make sure you use the toilet (since there are none on the road to Muzdalifah) and pack enough provisions (water and a few snacks).

Image source: [Here](#)

Chapter 24: Adventures in the desert



The road leaving Arafah

Catch us if you can

After leaving Arafah alone, I had some hope because – via mobile phone – I was in constant contact with my wife and the sheikh, who were trying to figure out how far behind I was. And as I walked, I remembered the verse in the Quran about how we “flow” from Arafah ([Surah Al-Baqara, verse 198](#)), imagining that we were supposed to be feeling all pure and liberated. But such sentiments were far from my heart and mind.

My focus was on catching up to my group – who were nowhere in sight. My hope was fading as I realised I was totally alone: in the middle of this desert, unfamiliar with the surroundings, knowing no one and not speaking Arabic (or any other language that most of the hujjaaj spoke – since fluent English-speakers are rare on Hajj). And while the common perception is that it’s impossible to get lost – because there’s just one road and everyone goes in the same direction (to Muzdalifah) – the reality was different. Early into the walk, there were quite few side roads, and people going off in different directions for their busses. I didn’t know who to follow and ended up taking numerous wrong turns – which set me further back from my group.

In that first hour of walking, the reality of the situation hit me, and I grew very angry at my wife for ‘abandoning’ me. I knew she hated waiting for me, so I blamed her impatience. I felt betrayed. She knew that for the Hajj walks, couples are advised to stick together – yet she couldn’t wait a few minutes. But I knew that shaytaan was trying to get to me – as he does on that road from Arafah. So I made dua asking Allah to take away such angry thoughts. Blame wouldn’t be constructive, so I needed to focus on correcting the situation by finding them.

Wandering soul

My feelings oscillated between adventurous curiosity, fear, and anxiety. How could this be happening? And why? Why me?

One possible answer popped into my head: our sheikh’s advice that unexpected events on Hajj are Allah’s way of trying to teach you lessons. So my mind settled a bit, confident that I’d catch up to my group, and I focused on enjoying the adventure.

On that walk, I spotted a multitude of very cute babies and toddlers – some in ihraam. But I also witnessed the not-so-cute garbage along the road – which many people complain about. It was totally understandable, though – because in my entire walk, I saw absolutely no bins. I saw just 2 garbage *bags* in that whole walk. For a route covered by something like 4 million hujjaaj, it was shocking that there were no bins. So if you want to know why Hajj is so dirty, look at the waste management situation. (Then again, there may be reasons. I’ve heard that there *used to be* bins but people didn’t use them – so the Saudis gave up and now just bulldoze the dirt afterwards.)

Most of my walk was along the side of the road, which gave me plenty of exposure to insane bus driving. One driver would be stuck, with no room to move forward, yet the driver behind him would hoot like a maniac. The front driver would then hoot back, so maybe this was actually a conversation between busses 😊.

It was incredible to see and be among the millions heading to Muzdalifah – both by bus and walking. The busses held passengers inside, on the roofs, and in the luggage compartments underneath. Those busses sometimes ran so close together that it was hard for us pedestrians to cross the road at the off-ramps (as one lady in a wheelchair narrowly found out). And with traffic being so incredibly slow, it really was quicker to walk.

But the sidewalks weren’t that safe either. Men on bikes regularly drove on the pavement – giving people lifts (presumably for a large fee) and not seeming to care who they may knock over.

By this time, it was already dark and I’d given up hope of catching my group on the road – so I figured I’d meet them at Muzdalifah. My wife, who’d been panicking for several hours, eventually realised that she had to stop worrying and put her trust in Allah. As for me, I was physically uncomfortable as I had to carry a heavy backpack (with limited food and water). But that wasn’t as bad as the chafing that had begun on this walk.

(Ladies: please forgive me for the bit that follows. I’ve tried to word it subtly.)

Men: when people advise you to put Vaseline / lubricant on the insides of your thighs while you’re in ihraam, *listen to them!* If you start chafing, it’s not fun walking a long distance in ihraam with that kind of ‘disturbance’ down under. Putting aside how strange you’ll look trying to manoeuvre and hold your bits when in that state, just the physical pain of that experience will teach you the value of underwear!

As I approached Muzdalifah, I chose to follow a small group of hujjaaj walking on the side of the road – thinking it was a more adventurous route. The detour took me into open desert – which I’m sure no one in my group experienced on that walk. In a way, it was closer to the Prophet s.a.w.’s Hajj, because I got to walk on the sand of this Makkan desert, and experienced the night sky from that viewpoint.

At one point, I started smelling animals. And then I saw them: a group of sheep in a pen, with no humans around. They were probably waiting for the morning’s Eid sacrifices. “*B-a-a-a*”, I said, greeting one of them. “*B-a-a-a*”, came a reply. Nice to know the sheep weren’t ignoring me 😊.

Strange as it sounds, the whole period of being lost was actually an enjoyable experience. Being a person who’s quite comfortable on his own, I didn’t really mind being away from everyone. It gave me time to think, feel, and just experience something that was completely out of the ordinary. It felt like Allah’s gift to me – initially seeming like a disaster, but turning out to be the highlight of my Hajj up to that point.

Related lessons:

- A mobile phone is essential for the 5 days of Hajj. If possible, get a very basic model that has a long battery life, a torch, and minimal distractions (such as email and Internet access). You'll appreciate that extended battery life once you leave Mina (on Day 2).
- As far as possible, stick with your group when you leave Arafah. Don't assume that you can't get lost, because it can easily happen – especially if you're leaving with large crowds around you. Husbands and wives should stick together, even if they get separated from the rest of the group.
- Shaytaan is at his lowest, most embarrassed point after Arafah – because all his work of trying to mislead for so many years is undone when Allah completely forgives you during wuqoof. Shaytaan will, therefore, be waiting for you on that road from Arafah – so be aware of this enemy, and try to keep your thoughts clean and fill your heart, mind, and tongue with remembrance of Allah.
- If things go wrong, try not to panic, and don't let hopelessness or desperation overcome you. Stay calm, turn to Allah for help, and recognise that this might be His way of trying to teach you important lessons.
- If you're walking, keep your garbage with you (in your bag or in a dirt packet). Don't just throw it on the road, like so many other people. Just because the masses are doing it, doesn't make it acceptable. You've just completed the highlight of Hajj, so don't start your 'new life' being dirty.
- Take in the sights and sounds (and smells!) of that journey to Muzdalifah. Unless you go on Hajj again, it's not likely you'll ever be in such a large and diverse gathering of people headed in a single direction. (But do be careful of those crazy men on bikes. You don't want to get knocked or injured on the walk.)
- **Men:** *especially* if you'll be doing the walking Hajj, put (unscented) Vaseline / lubricant on the insides of your thighs while you're in ihraam. Don't just assume that you won't chafe in that area, because if it happens, you're in for a painful few hours.

Image source: [Opening picture](#)

Chapter 25: Not your average Saturday night



Hujjaaj spend the night at Muzdalifah

Marathon man

For most of the walk from Arafah, I drank minimal water – since there were no toilets on the road (and my water was warm anyway). As I neared Muzdalifah, I started to feel a bit like a marathon runner. At the side of the road, people were popping up handing out cool, refreshing water. I gratefully took some and continued – now sure that it was only a matter of time before I reached my group.

When I got into Muzdalifah, I was still lost. As was the case throughout the walk, I spent quite a bit of time and energy on the phone, trying to find my group. And, just like all the other times, my conversations with both my wife and our sheikh served only to confuse and frustrate me more. When I told them I was in a park, and could see some hujjaaj walking with shopping bags (presumably from a nearby supermarket), the sheikh thought I had become delirious!

But I was just fine, and was experiencing a side of Muzdalifah that my Hajj group never got close to. Realising it may still be a while until I'd be reunited with the group, I decided to give the search a break and settled down in that small park to make my Maghrib and Esha salaahs (which are combined and made on Muzdalifah – as per sunnah).

Wandering soul (part 2)

After a brief rest, my search for familiar faces resumed. I regularly spoke to my wife and our sheikh on the phone, and at several points, the sheikh asked to speak to the Arabic-speaking locals near me – hoping they'd have more success trying to direct me to the group.

I walked up and down trying to find the landmarks my wife and the sheikh described. I must have walked from one end of Muzdalifah to the other several times, but to no avail. Whether I asked policemen, military personnel, or taxi drivers – nobody seemed able to help. They either waved me off in a vague direction, or called others to escort me. But every single time, the end result was failure.

The entire search was both tragic and comical, especially the point where I saw a bus from my cousin's Hajj group approaching. South Africans at last! But, as was the theme that night, it was hopeless. They were too far away for me to go and seek their help.



Night-time at Muzdalifah

In all of this, I still took the time to observe the scenes around me. Muzdalifah is basically a massive space of just tarmac and gravel, with a few hills around. Aside from toilets, there wasn't much infrastructure at all. The hujjaaj settled down in just about every space available; many sleeping on mats under the stars, in tents, or in the luggage compartments of busses, while others made salaah or walked around. Vendors also covered the area, selling torches, drinks, fruit, and food (*Al Baik* being a popular choice).

Breakdown

In all that time, I didn't let tiredness get to me much. I was running on adrenaline, with my priority being to find my group – rather than worry about the strain being put on my body. Psychologically, I didn't panic for a long time, but the fear eventually overcame me. What if I never found my group? The next day – Eid – would be a hectic one, with pelting and other activities. I couldn't go into that day alone.

My feelings of desperation intensified. I felt like crying, and actually did cry a little. I felt hopeless – like I wanted to give up. I just wanted to go home and forget all this. So what if it was Hajj? At that point, I hated the experience of being lost. I didn't care if my Hajj would be ruined – I just wanted to get out of there, to a familiar and comfortable place again...even if I didn't fulfil the remaining rituals I needed to do.

I felt like my wife and group had abandoned me, and this Hajj – this particular part – was a horrible, horrible experience. Why would I ever want to come for Hajj again?

And what if I fainted or had some medical emergency? Being totally alone, I'd become some anonymous statistic on the side of the road – possibly never found by my wife or Hajj group.

These were all bad thoughts, Desperate, anxious thoughts.

While still seeking help from others, I turned to Allah time and time again in dua. And time and time again it seemed like I was going in proverbial circles – like a hamster on a wheel. Doing nothing but walking and walking and walking, but making zero progress.

By that time, since leaving Arafah, I'd been alone for more than 7 hours. And still I had no idea where I was and where my group was. My wife and others sensed my desperation and were encouraging on the phone, but it wasn't too comforting at that point – because they weren't with me in the moment. I was utterly alone – with all these foreigners who didn't speak English around me. I had no one. No one but Allah.

It ends

When I reached my breaking point, Allah finally saved me: it was nearly midnight – which was the time when my group and many others would be leaving Muzdalifah to head for Mina and the Jamarat. The Hajj group brother who I was in contact with on the phone advised me to head for Mina and meet them there. It was a logical order, but given the various roads out of Muzdalifah, and the night's predictable pattern of everything going wrong, I didn't have much hope in that plan.

But I had nothing to lose, so I started walking in what I thought was the right direction. I figured I was on track because I was walking under the monorail – which went back to Mina.

It was a relatively quiet walk, with not many people or Hajj officials around at all. I later found out that my walk to Mina was a stark contrast to my group's experience, where they had crowds as well as crazy Hajj officials that ripped bags off people (which is what they do if you have too much luggage with you). Turns out I was on a different route to them.

Alhamdulillah, I ended up back on Mina, but then took a while to find my group's camp (which I wouldn't have done if I didn't memorise the camp number beforehand). I eventually made it to the camp at 1.30AM – a full 9 hours after I'd started walking from Arafah. Our sheikh was happy to finally see me, and apparently everyone knew my story by then.

My wife was ecstatic, and despite being in ihraam, we shared a beautiful reunion (without violating the romance prohibition, of course!). Gone were the negative feelings I'd held against her earlier on; all was forgiven. The 9 hours of almost non-stop walking and wandering wore down any anger and blame I was keeping inside, and I was just relieved to finally be 'home' – with my wife and in familiar surroundings again.

In case you're wondering, I never made it to my group because I was on a completely different route to them. On the Arafah-Muzdalifah stretch, there's a bus route and a pedestrian route. My group took the pedestrian route, but I completely missed that turnoff – hence I was with the busses (which didn't seem wrong because there were so many people walking on that route with me.) As for Muzdalifah, I still have no idea where my group had camped – despite the fact that I probably walked the length and breadth of Muzdalifah that night.

Regarding the time of leaving Arafah, one year after our Hajj, I found out that the group leaders *had in fact* announced the departure time during the collective programme. But, of course, I'd skipped that programme as I needed to be alone during wuqoof. And it just so happened that when I asked everyone, they all neglected to mention this. Not on purpose, I believe, but perhaps just because that was Allah's plan to ensure that I wouldn't end up making the walk with them (and hence have this whole adventure).

Additionally, I was blessed to leave when I did. Apparently, some time after I left, there was a stampede in the crowds leaving Arafah, and some hujjaaj lost their lives. So despite the initial perception that my timing was bad, it was actually perfect – because it would have been worse had I been in that crowd.

Reliance

There's a hadith that goes:

*“...Be mindful of Allah and Allah will protect you. Be mindful of Allah and you will find Him in front of you. **If you ask, then ask Allah [alone]; and if you seek help, then seek help from Allah [alone]. And know that if the nation were to gather together to benefit you with anything, they would not benefit you except with what Allah had already prescribed for you. And if they were to gather together to harm you with anything, they would not harm you except with what Allah had already prescribed against you. The pens have been lifted and the pages have dried.**” (Related in Tirmidhi)*

The Prophet s.a.w.'s words came to life that night. They came true in *my* life. I had sought help from so many different people that night – my wife, our sheikh, the policemen, military, taxi drivers, and others – yet absolutely no one could help. All their efforts came to nothing. Allah had not intended for them to help me, so despite their efforts, they couldn't make a difference to my plight. And it was only when I turned so utterly and desperately to Allah alone that He opened the way for me and guided me out of my misery.

That was my lesson in this whole ordeal. That was what Allah wanted to teach me:

Tawakkul. Reliance on Allah alone.

On Arafah, I had made a strong dua for exactly that: for stronger iman and true tawakkul on Allah. And immediately after that, Allah put me through this trial – which brought that dua to life.

Personally, the whole experience was incredibly trying. But it was the highlight of my Hajj. I prayed that – because of that experience – Allah would elevate my Hajj and grant me more reward than what I would have otherwise gotten.

And in terms of other people, it was also valuable because it gave me a more interesting story to tell, whereas without it, I wouldn't have had much to say, other than talking about how I was stuck in the toilet that morning, or complaining about being rushed during wuqoof.

So my final thought to wrap up this segment is: if Allah brings you to it, He will bring you through it. Put your complete trust and reliance in Allah, and watch the miracles that occur before your very eyes.

Related lessons:

- While you'll want to get some rest on Muzdalifah, do take some time to walk around and observe what's going on, how people are spending their time, etc. Unless you perform Hajj again, you'll never experience an open-air camp this big – so take it all in and appreciate the moments you have there.
- Long before, if you end up walking from Arafah to Muzdalifah alone, know that there's a pedestrian route and a bus route. Keep an eye out for a turnoff (or ask others where it is), since this is probably the route your group will take if they're walking.
- Whatever seemingly-unfortunate experience befalls you, know that it's Allah's plan for you. So go forward with confidence that this is not a disaster, but something you're meant to benefit from – even if you can't see the lessons immediately.
- Also remember that no matter how 'bad' your misfortune may seem, it could be worse. So be thankful that it is what it is, and not even more difficult. (This is also a good general principle for life: look at those less fortunate than you, as it'll help you to appreciate what you have – rather than envying those that have more / seem to be better off.)
- Be mindful of Allah, and He will be with you. Always.

- Turn to Allah alone, having complete and utter reliance (*tawakkul*) on Him. Put your complete trust and reliance in Allah, and watch the miracles that occur before your very eyes.

Image sources: [Opening image](#), [second image](#).

Chapter 26: Day 3 – Euphoria



One of the jamarat walls

Rounding off one crazy night

The 10th of Dhul Hijjah is the day of Eid al-Adha. But for those on Hajj, it's nothing like the Eid we experience back home. There's no Eid salaah, no special clothes, no feasting, and no visiting friends and family. Instead, it's very hectic as the hujjaaj carry out three important rituals of Hajj:

- pelting the jamarat
- getting their hair cut / shaved, and
- performing a tawaaf and sa'ee at the haram in Makkah

(The rituals can be performed in any order, and the latter two may be delayed to the following days.)

When I had just gotten back to Mina after my ordeal of being lost, my group was already outside, about to go pelt the jamarat (which was close to our camp). I needed a break (as well as the toilet – which I hadn't used for those last 9 hours), so my wife and I didn't go with them.

The pelting used to be a major source of fear for hujjaaj because of the stampedes and craziness that would occur there. But with expansion of the jamarat and improved crowd-control measures, it's much safer nowadays – hence we didn't worry too much about going on our own a little while later. I didn't pick up my stones on Muzdalifah (since I had bigger concerns at the time), but my wife's relative had kindly collected them for me – so off we went.



Hujjaajj pelt the jamaraat using small, pea-sized stones

The pelting itself was relatively easy since the jamaraat wasn't too busy at that early hour of the morning. We made it to the front, close to the jamaraat wall, but on trying to exit, I got hit with stones that were intended for the wall – so I had to use the top piece of my ihraam as a shield.

Next up was shaving of my hair, and there were ample barbers further down the road to do the honours. Predictably, though, they were jam packed, so I to wait a long time to get my turn. It was my first time being completely shaved, so it looked and felt rather strange, while bringing an increased sense of freshness (not to mention a cold head).

Having now completed my 'minor release' from ihraam (or, as they call it in Cape Town, "die klein verlossing"), I didn't have the energy or courage to head for the haram to do the tawaaf ifadah and sa'ee – so we decided to do that the following night. So we set off for our room in Aziziah – where we'd spend a few hours resting before we had to get back to the camp on Mina. But my wife and I are a geographically-challenged pair, so we ended up getting lost and walking for close to an hour (whereas the walk should have taken less than half that time).

We finally made it back (grabbing some KFC for breakfast on the way), and I made Fajr in the nearly-empty masjid near our building (it being empty since it was Eid morning, so most locals were probably heading for the haram in Makkah). I was still in my ihraam, and after salaah, one of the brothers greeted me as "Hajj" (i.e. Hajji). It felt good – but not because that title was a superior status (I don't believe a Hajji is any better than another Muslim). But it was special because I felt genuine love from him in that greeting, similar to the love I felt on the road near Muzdalifah – when bystanders were handing out water to the hujjaaj as sadaqah. Everybody recognises the value of this journey, and for those who can't make Hajj (even though they live in Makkah), whatever little they can do to help the hujjaaj is their contribution to an incredible event. So, I pray that Allah accept their efforts and reward them abundantly.

After Fajr, I stayed up a little to do some writing – since I needed to record everything while it was fresh in my mind. And then – a little after 8AM – after the most momentous (and sleep-deprived) 24 hours of my life – I collapsed in bed for some well-earned rest.

Rebirth

Later that day, I awoke to the greatest feeling I've ever experienced: one of tremendous inner purity, which I can only describe as a 'lightness of the soul'. I already knew that Arafah serves as a complete forgiveness for all sins, but now I was literally *feeling* it. Purity, cleanliness, and like the weight of my life's worth of sin was now totally gone.

My wife and I both experienced these incredible feelings. In my mind, these were moments to savour and take advantage of, because we would probably never be that pure again in our lives – since we were bound to sin and make mistakes again in future (as all humans do).

I also felt empowered, because I knew that – in terms of sin – I was starting from a clean slate, and for the time being, it would be easy to keep that slate clean: every wudu, every salaah, every istighfaar – all of that wipes away sins.

In normal circumstances, although we know of these cleansing effects, it's hard to actually *feel* those sins falling away. But now, because there was no longer a huge backlog of sin, those actions felt so much more effective, because every repentance needed to cover only a short period of possible transgressions – the time from the last salaah to the current one (rather than years and years). To use an analogy, it's like comparing our hearts to dirty dishes: whereas before, it would be a case of dealing with heavily greased dishes that sat in the sink for days, now it was like washing lightly-soiled dishes immediately. It's so much easier to clean a few marks quickly, rather than dealing with deeply-ingrained stains.

And if repentance alone wasn't enough, by following up a bad deed with a good one, you totally wipe out the bad deed. That concept – which is actually a hadith – was another example of how the Prophet s.a.w.'s words were being practically manifested in my life (like the hadith that characterised my main lesson from the previous night).

Mountain of deeds

By this time, we were halfway through Hajj – with 2.5 days left (actually, a little more than that for us, since our group would stay the extra night on Mina). I wanted to make the most of that time, having made abundant dua and planning to do so much. In my mind, the importance of the coming days was perfectly crystallised in the analogy of building a mountain:

At this point, we were completely pure – forgiven of all sins, and starting from a clean slate. My ideal, for the rest of my life to follow, was that I wanted to live a life of dua, connection to Allah, reliance on Him alone, reciting Quran, making frequent and abundant istighfar and dhikrs, living with taqwa, remembering death often, being careful in my speech, and many other good deeds and aspects of good character. At this point, such things were so easy to do, and they felt so natural, beautiful, and amazing – probably because we were back to our fitrah (our pure state of birth), wherein our souls take true delight and are well-nourished by these actions. (For an explanation of this nourishment, read [this post](#).)

But I knew that in the time to come, especially once we left those blessed lands, we'd face challenges: hardships, the evils of the devils (both of mankind and jinn), and our own bad inclinations. Though we'd leave Hajj with clean souls, all of these things would dirty our souls again. So in the upcoming days, while we were still on that incredible, blessed journey of Hajj, it was time to build a mountain of good deeds – which would act as spiritual provisions for the rest of our lives.

By gathering these provisions, we'd build our own personal stockpiles – or mountains – which would serve as a stabilising force and a protection against the spiritual erosion that would occur once we got back to 'normal life' and lived the remaining years or decades of our lives. I hoped to use the remaining days of Hajj to build my mountain so that once I left Mina, I would never, ever get 'low' again in terms of spirituality and the purity of my soul.

I dreamed – perhaps foolishly, but still optimistically – of remaining at this spiritual peak for the rest of my life, and getting even higher, making slow and steady progress over the rest of my life to eventually reach my full potential in this world.

Coming up next, insha-Allah: Return to Mina

Related lessons:

- For men, if you start getting hit with stones at the jamaraat, the top piece of your ihraam makes an excellent shield.
- If you've got a room in Aziziah and are heading back there right after pelting, make sure you know the direction to go. After pelting, you won't be able to turn back and exit Mina through the same tunnel where you came in – you'll be walking quite far and then exiting through an unfamiliar place. So, make a special effort *before* Hajj to find out the route from that exit to your accommodation in Aziziah.
- Just because you've completed Hajj (Arafah being the main part of it), doesn't make you better than other Muslims. Don't ever let the title "Hajji" make you arrogant or delude you into thinking you're somehow superior to others. If anything, you should be even more humble and even more fearful of slipping up – because Allah has given you this incredible experience, so you now have the added responsibility of living up to the high standards your Hajj for the rest of your life – whereas those who haven't been aren't in that situation.
- Many people live in or near Makkah, yet they cannot make Hajj with you. Accept whatever help they try to give you, and make dua for them. You have this amazing opportunity to perform Hajj whereas they don't, so appreciate what you have and ask Allah to reward their contributions to the event.
- If you're keeping a journal of your Hajj, write your experiences and feelings as soon as you can – even if it means you'll miss a few more hours of sleep. Capture everything while it's fresh, because you never know if you'll get another chance, and with so much happening, the important memories may fade sooner than you think.
- Savour the feeling of purity and lack of sin after Arafah, but remember that you can't retain that feeling forever. You will slip up and sin / make mistakes, but now, it's so much easier to wipe them away – via wudu, salaah, istighfaar, and good deeds. Stay clean by performing these actions regularly and abundantly in these days, and make it a habit to repent immediately after you do something wrong, and beyond that, regularly – even when you can't explicitly recognise any wrongs you've committed.
- The soul *loves* to worship Allah, and is nourished by these acts of worship. While your soul is in its pure state of fitrah, feed it abundantly via these actions, and savour the beauty of worshipping Allah *without* the baggage of sin.
- You may feel like you can now relax, since Arafah is over. But don't fall into that trap. While you're on a high, and still on this sacred journey, use the remaining days and nights of Hajj to build up a mountain of good habits, good deeds, good character, and other spiritual provisions – which will serve as a much-needed protection for you once you get back to the challenges of normal life back home.

Image sources: Both pictures from Muslmmatters.org.

Chapter 27: Return to Mina



Just another face in the crowd

After getting some much-needed rest on Eid morning, we returned to Mina that afternoon. While I thought that [my experience of being lost](#) was unique, speaking to others about their experiences on that walk helped put it into proper perspective. I may have had an extreme case, but it was by no means the only ‘survivor story’ in our group. Everyone had their own special tests and trials. The chaos of that walk was so bad that many who were *with* the group even got lost – so I wasn’t alone in facing hardship. Alhamdulillah, I was grateful to learn these things, as they helped eliminate any element of pride that may have arisen from my experience.

United hearts

The spirit back on Mina was amazing. There was a special closeness between the hujjaaj, with everyone wishing the others well. I had some good conversations, sharing thoughts, experiences, and lessons – with reminders about gratitude, repentance, and the equality of humanity.

These were the kind of deep, spiritual talks that would be pretty much impossible in any other circumstance. Yet here – in the simplicity of this tent, after the incredible 24 hours we’d just experienced – such topics flowed so easily and without inhibition. We were pure hearts connecting with each other on a level that was most unique, and I still treasure those moments and long for that kind of God-conscious companionship now – in the environment and times where I need it so much more than that day on Mina.

I imagine that this kind of bond, and this level of purity, will be the state we experience in Jannah; thus I regard these few moments as a sneak peek into the bounties that Allah is keeping in store for us, if we pass His tests in this world.

Mercy

I’d [written earlier](#) about how dying on Hajj would be the ultimate way to go, yet it wasn’t what I wanted for myself at that point in time. For one of the old ladies in our group, it *was* time, and Allah granted her that tremendous gift of dying on Hajj. At 3AM that morning – which was the day after Arafah – she passed away. She was in a wheelchair, and had apparently been surprised to even get so far in Hajj – yet she did, and Allah granted her that amazing mercy of leaving this world completely pure. I later learnt more about her (via [this](#)

[news article](#)), and it just deepened the awe of the situation, proving again how merciful Allah is.

The Janazah salaah was held at the haram in Makkah that night, but on Mina, we held salat al-gha'ib (Janazah salaah in absentia) in our tent, and were reminded of the glad tidings for those who die on Hajj. They'll be raised in that state – still in ihraam, and still chanting the talbiyyah (drawn from a hadith about the one who dies on Hajj). May Allah grant the sister the highest place in Jannah, and help us all to live righteous lives which end in the most beautiful circumstances.

Acceptance

After a group programme of naseehah, dua, and collective dhikr (the latter being the classic Cape Town format – complete with bad tajweed 😊), I settled down for the night – with a trip to the toilet as my last action for the day. Little did I know that yet another valuable experience awaited me:

By this time, I was out of the state of ihraam and in normal clothing again – so I was wearing a kurta with pockets. For some reason, I decided to take my valuables with me to the toilet: my mobile phone was in my pocket, and my ID cards were in a pouch around my neck. I did my business in the stall (an [Eastern toilet](#)), and when I was finished, something slipped out of my pocket...my phone.

Now, to me, those toilets are so filthy that whatever falls on the floor there can *stay* on the floor there – I have no inclination to clean it up and keep it, even if it's a phone. Well, I didn't even need to ponder that option. One piece of the phone fell straight down that dreaded hole (from which there is no return). Then another piece fell next to the hole, before sliding into it. The phone battery fell next, but stayed put on the floor. I figured I wouldn't need that bit anymore, so I pushed it in too – to finish the job.

It was a strange feeling – realising what had just happened. Normally, losing a mobile phone would be a disaster. But I felt no anger or frustration. I felt this immediate acceptance of what had happened. It was Allah's will; and I accepted that.

The phone had served its purpose (especially for that long walk the previous night), and now it was time for me to part with it.

I quickly saw Allah's tremendous wisdom in the situation: 2 days before we left home, my mobile phone suddenly broke – meaning I couldn't take it on this journey. That phone held all my contacts, calendar information, and other valuable stuff on it – so if I'd had *that* phone with me on Mina, this story probably wouldn't have had a happy ending. But Allah knew what would happen, and made the circumstances such that I had to leave my phone at home and take a cheap, practical model without any valuable information on it.

The motto of 'it could have been worse' also repeated itself here: I had only lost a phone, which I wouldn't miss much anymore now that the main parts of Hajj were complete. But I had also taken 2 other very important items with me in the stall: my Hajj ID card (which is essential to direct you back to familiar faces if you get lost), and my camp admission card (which was my only way into the camp, and worth a staggering amount of money – given that this was a special services camp). If *those* items had fallen down that stinky black hole, I would've had major problems for the remaining few days of Hajj.

So, once more, what outwardly looked like a bad situation was actually a positive experience that Allah had put in my path to teach me important lessons.

Related lessons:

- Never let your own experiences fool you into thinking you're special. No matter how extreme your circumstances, others also have their own challenges. Learn from other people's stories and share your own story – but don't consider your trials as more worthy of attention.
- Unless you have deeply religious friends / companions, or attend some pretty special spiritual gatherings back home, you may not get another chance to discuss life, Islam, and other things in the way you can on Mina. Take advantage of the special conversations in this period, share your thoughts with others, and take lessons that you can apply with you in your 'normal' life back home.
- The ulama teach that the way you live is the way you'll die; and the way you die is the state you'll be resurrected in. Strive to live a righteous, God-conscious life and always make dua that your moment of death will come at a time when Allah is pleased with you.
- In Mina (and around *any* Eastern toilet), DO NOT take *anything* of value to the toilet. Leave it all behind in the tent. Your possessions are usually safe there.
- When unpleasant things happen, let your first (and instant) reaction be one of acceptance. It's Allah's will that's transpiring, so thank Him for it and be grateful – whether you initially see it as a calamity or not.

Chapter 28: Boom!



The main street in Aziziah

Why did the Hajji cross the road?

The morning after [losing my phone](#), we were back in Aziziah for a few hours. Despite the fact that the main segments of Hajj were over, communication was still important – thus I needed to get a new phone (even if it would be a cheap one). So I set out – alone – to find one, even though the chances were slim – since many shops were closed during those 3 days of Eid (which are public holidays in Saudi). I took my wife’s phone with me, since I may need it in case of emergency.

Crossing the road in Aziziah was always a risky endeavour. There aren’t many traffic lights, so you had to rely on your instincts and run – hoping that no vehicles would come out of the blue and hit you. This particular time, I was standing at a big intersection, waiting to cross the other side of Aziziah’s main road. Like the [walk from Arafah](#), there were again youngsters on motorbikes / scooters –whizzing up and down, giving hujjaaj (expensive) rides to the haram.

I saw a chance to cross the road and took it. What happened next, I don’t remember in detail. What I do remember is seeing a group of three bikers making a U-turn at this intersection. They weren’t riding one behind the other. They were next to each other – spread out – thus taking up a lot more space than they should have, performing this dangerous turn in unison. I think I froze as I saw them heading straight for me. Then I tried to get out of the way, but I ended up in the middle of them.

Boom!

I got hit hard – on my shin – by one of them. I fell to the ground, and was dazed and confused. I couldn’t believe what had just happened. I’d never been in any road accidents before, except someone bumping my car from behind. And here I was, run down thousands of miles from home, laying in the middle of the street.

Alhamdullilah – there was no other traffic on the road at that moment, so I didn’t get hit by cars (or the truck that came soon after that). Once again, the motto of ‘It could have been worse’ played out in front of me.

I was furious at the guy who hit me. I think he had helped me get up, but had then ridden off quickly with no further concern. When I could stand again, I scurried back to the sidewalk I was originally on, and waited to cross again. Witnesses on the other side of the road were concerned, and my one slipper (which I'd lost in the impact) was still in the middle of the road. I was about to go fetch it when one of them threw it back to me.

Next, I cautiously crossed the road – safely this time. The guy who hit me then came back to return my wife's phone – which had fallen out of my pocket. I didn't even realise it was gone, but the biker who hit me must have noticed it and taken it, because he came back to give it to me. Maybe his conscience got to him, or maybe he just realised it was a really crappy phone (it was worth 80 South African Rands – probably the cheapest kind you could get), so he had no use for it.

In any case, what came to mind was the words of the always-inspiring Mufti Ismail Menk: make dua for your enemies and those who hurt or wrong you. Hatred and anger against them is not productive, but making dua for their guidance and goodness turns a negative into a positive. So, despite my anger, I followed that advice and prayed for that biker. I'd probably never see him again, but I hope that my dua had an impact on his life; and in the akhirah, I'd like to find out what happened to him after that day our paths crossed.

I was still wearing the same kurta which I'd lost my phone in (so perhaps it was cursed 😊), but it now had tyre marks on it – which complemented the few bruises and cuts I had gained from this incident. I was in some pain, but alhamdulillah, nothing serious.

I managed to get a new phone eventually, and we headed back to Mina later that day – but fatigue overcame me, so the rest of the day was relatively unproductive. By that time – given the drama and exertions of the previous 2 days – I was feeling achy, battered, and bruised, but I was still loving it 😊.

It's up to you – alone

After Eid, each remaining day of Hajj included pelting all three jamarats. Later that evening, we did our pelting with the group – which was much safer than our [first time alone](#). On the short walk to the jamarat, I learned a valuable lesson about self-responsibility in the spiritual aspects of life. As we walked, many people were just relaxed and having social conversations.

At this time, we should've been at our *most* God-conscious – as we'd completed Arafah not long ago, and were on our way to another tremendous act of ibadah. Yet for so many people, heedlessness struck: they seemed to be unconscious of the taqwa that should've been coursing through their hearts and minds, and were thus spiritually unproductive and neglectful of the great significance of the act they were on the way to do.

I don't mean to be judgmental at all, because honestly, if I wasn't the relatively-unsociable person I am, I would've probably been doing the same as them. But since I'm quiet, I didn't speak to others much – and that gave me lots of time to observe them. And, alhamdulillah, seeing *their* forgetfulness reminded *me* that I should be engaged in dhikr, dua, and other acts of worship (that are possible while walking).

So my lesson was that people won't remind you to do good. You have to remember on your own. *You* have to be so conscious of Allah and of what you're doing – even if others are not.

It was actually like a microcosm of life: generally, unless you're around really God-conscious individuals, people will go on doing what they do, and won't remind you of Allah and the

deen. It's up to *you* as an individual slave of Allah to remember that consciousness and take action.

Pelting for the future



One of the jamarat walls

As for the pelting, I knew that it wasn't just a ritual of Hajj for that particular moment. Sure, we'd be symbolically pelting shaytaan – as Ibrahim a.s. had done at these very spots so long ago. But there were also personal, long-term benefits to take from it: in life, shaytaan will often whisper to you – tempting you to indulge in something you shouldn't overdo, or do some wrong – all of which feeds the deep (but wrong) inner desire you have to take that action.

So when pelting the jamarat, I knew that each throw would need to serve as a self-purification and a protection – an inner choice to cast away the evils within my own soul, and keep the devils away from me whenever those temptations arose in future. The intention was that in future, whenever I recognised that whispering, I would remember this pelting. And at that time, in my mind, I would 'pelt' shaytaan away – saying the same words as I chased away his evil suggestions: “Bismillah. Allahu akbar”.

Related lessons:

- Be very careful when crossing the road, and don't assume bikes (or other vehicles) will stop for you. There may be unwritten rules of the road, but just like when you're driving a car, it's safer to just assume that others will do something wrong – so you be safe, rather than sorry.
- Make dua for your enemies and those who hurt or wrong you. Hatred and anger against them is not productive, but making dua for their guidance and goodness turns a negative into a positive. You never know what kind of impact your dua can have on their lives.
- On the way to the jamarat, try to retain high taqwa – consciousness of Allah. Don't waste the time having social conversations or doing other spiritually-unproductive things. You're about to go perform a tremendous act of worship, with both immediate and long-term significance. So immerse yourself in dua, reflection, and dhikr so that you can make the most of the experience.
- In life, generally, people won't remind you to do good. You have to remember on your own. Always try to be be conscious of Allah and of what you're doing – i.e. whether it's pleasing to Him or not – even if others are heedless at the time.
- When pelting the jamarat, think of the immediate benefits – which include each throw being a self-purification for you. But also consider the long-term benefits: intending your pelting to be a protection for your future – so that in future, when shaytaan whispers to you, you can repel him with the same strength you did here at the jamarat.

Image sources: [Opening image](#), [jamarat](#).

Chapter 29: Back to the Kabah



Mina during Hajj 2011

An unfortunate pattern

From Eid day onwards, the atmosphere in the camp on Mina was far more relaxed. We'd passed the climax of Hajj (i.e. Arafah), and now had just a few more days on Mina until it was all over. In a way, it was similar to Ramadan after the 27th night: everyone seems to think that once Laylatul Qadr is over, it's time to relax. But that's an incredibly flawed perspective: nobody even knows that the 27th night is Laylatul Qadr; and even if it is, the magnitude of reward in Ramadan is such that we should be striving right till the very end.

Now on Hajj, a similar pattern had emerged. And although I'd wanted to do so much more in the final few days and nights of Hajj, the overall relaxed atmosphere in the camp influenced me, so I didn't strive as I should have.

Still though, it could have been worse. Others in the tent had their smartphones with them, so they'd spend plenty of time online – which can generally be a time-waster (and more-so on Hajj). My new phone did keep me quite occupied (as any new phone would), but I didn't have an Internet connection – thus I didn't waste as much time as I otherwise would have.

A fruitful delay

One of the most strenuous acts of Hajj is the return to the haram in Makkah, where hujjaaj need to do their *ifadah* – which is a tawaaf and sa'ee (just like Umrah). Many hujjaaj try to get this done on Eid day (right after Muzdalifah), but due to the fatigue we felt after our drama, we opted to delay our ifadah until the following night (i.e. the night between the 11th and 12th of Dhul Hijjah). Our sheikh – who would be taking the group – had advised us that this would be the best time to go, since it was usually quiet at that time. And, because my wife and I would be flying out immediately after Hajj, it would be our last time at the Kabah.

So we left Mina that night and headed back to the meeting point in Aziziah – where we were to catch our bus to the haram. Predictably, the bus took over an hour to arrive – but I used the time productively, reading Quran and trying to be positive. I did speak to others, though, and realised that, while telling my getting-lost-story to others, I need to always emphasise the LESSONS I learned from it. People love stories – especially Hajj stories; and while you have

their attention, you need to bring across key lessons so that you're not just 'entertaining' them, but also inspiring and educating them.

I also spoke quite a bit to one brother – who I nicknamed 'the joker' – since he took every opportunity to laugh at me and make jokes about my experience getting lost. It was all in good spirits, of course, and I didn't take offence. But after a while it started getting tiring.

Speaking to him – plus my observations during the waiting period that night – helped me to distinguish three groups of people:

1. **The jokers:** People that just look for fun and laughs in everything, and are extreme in that they don't know when to stop.
2. **The complainers:** People who find fault with everything, and are naturally inclined to complain about delays and other things which they should bear with patience.
3. **The people of dua and dhikr:** I've [written before](#) about this group – who I'd observed engaging in this kind of behaviour during earlier periods of waiting. They didn't indulge in chit chat and time-wasting, but instead used their time wisely in dhikr, dua, and reading beneficial material. These blessed souls inspired me throughout the trip, and showed me first-hand that such people do exist. And I long to be one of them.

One last time

When the busses eventually arrived, it was one crazy ride. One of the group leaders rode on the roof to direct the driver through the various detours, while our sheikh – along with the others in the bus – embodied the Capetonian spirit of joviality and light-heartedness.

At the haram, we split up and agreed to meet again outside when we were all done. Alhamdullilah – the crowd on the mataaf wasn't bad at all, so my wife and I were able to do our tawaaf right next to the Kabah.



The door of the Kabah

Knowing that it would be my last tawaaf on this trip (and possibly my last ever), the emotions really hit me. My heart opened up in ways I wish it would more often, the tears flowed, and I just can't describe the feelings – except to say that the way I felt was incredibly fitting for the occasion. As we made our rounds, I counted the number of times with the 7 bead tasbeeh in my hand. Back when we stayed in Makkah, I took tawaafs for granted, and was often lazy about performing them. Now, as those beads became fewer and fewer, I didn't want the tawaaf to end. I wished this experience could just go on and on...

Then came the 2 rakaats of salaah that's made after tawaaf. I put my all into this salaah, concentrating like never before, reciting slowly with immense reflection, and exerting myself in dua during sujood. It felt like the most important salaah of my life: my last so close to the Kabah...my last in this incredibly- special place – below the 'arsh of Allah. Never again would I return here – or at least, not for the foreseeable future.

But despite the sadness, I took hope from the experience. I remembered the verse in the Quran describing how Allah is closer than our jugular veins. I took comfort in knowing that once I went home – far away from this House – Allah would still be with me; He would *always* be so close. No matter where we are, we should always remember that.

The sa'ee that followed wasn't quite as touching, but it was still important in terms of duas. We made it on the second floor, and physically, my wife was finished by this time – so it was a real struggle for her to make all 7 circuits between Safa and Marwah. I was also tired, but the immensity of the occasion gave me new energy, and I made my circuits through the fatigue and aching legs and feet.



View of the Kabah from the 2nd floor

After it was done, just before we left, I went to take one last look at the Kabah, and make one last dua. It was an intense dua in which my emotions again overwhelmed me. I was tremendously grateful that Allah had brought me here and taken me through this Hajj successfully – finally fulfilling the dearly-held dream that I'd so longed for.

Alhamdulillah. Alhamdulillah. Alhamdulillah.

Related lessons:

- After Arafah and the rigours of Eid day, it's tempting to let up and relax your way through the rest of Hajj. Relax, but don't overdo it. You're still on an immensely spiritual journey, and you still have a few days and nights in which you can gather tremendous rewards and build your spirituality in ways that you wouldn't be able to any other time or place. Don't waste the time – even if those around you are doing just that.
- A mobile phone – while very useful – can also be a tremendous timewaster if you're not careful. On Hajj especially, be very mindful of how much time you spend using the phone (whether talking, chatting online, or using the Internet). The moments of Hajj are precious and extremely limited. Don't waste them on things you could do any other time back home.
- When you're telling other people your Hajj stories (back home or even still on Hajj), make it a point to emphasise the *lessons* you learned.

- At any time while you're waiting (for a bus or other people), use the time wisely – in spiritually-productive activities. Don't be a moaner, and don't turn the wait into a social activity full of idle chit-chat and over-the-top joking.
- Appreciate what you have before you lose it. Before Hajj, make the most of your tawaafs, because once you hit those 5 days, chances are you'll only have one or 2 more chances to do it again before you have to go back home.
- Allah is closer than your jugular vein – so remember that no matter how close you feel to Him in Makkah, He is *always* close to you – no matter where you are in the world.
- Before you leave the haram for the last time, take some time to make a last dua while looking at the Kabah. It's a memory you'll forever treasure, and insha-Allah the sheer gratitude of the experience will bring your heart forever closer to Allah.

Image sources: Opening picture courtesy of [Al-Anwar Hajj & Umrah](#), [Kabah door](#), [2nd floor shot of Kabah](#).

Chapter 30: Farewell



Tents line the valley of Mina

Ambassadors of Hajj

Hajj consists of 5 days, but those wanting to exert themselves even more can stay an extra night – taking the total to almost 6 days. Some of our group opted to go back to Aziziah after the 5 days, but my wife and I would not miss the chance to extend our Hajj – so we stayed.

On that final night, we did our pelting after Esha, and the walk back gave me food for thought. I spoke to an older uncle – probably 60-odd years old – who was on his first Hajj. He was wealthy and had been for umrah four times in the past – but, strangely, had never made this particularly journey before. His brother had been the year before, and only after that was he inspired to make the trip. The conversation just reinforced a theme that one of the alims had been drumming into our heads throughout the trip: when you go home, you don't just return as 'Hajji'; you go back as an *ambassador* of Hajj. After experiencing this yourself, your job is to now inspire others and encourage them to make the journey themselves – so that they may not only fulfil an obligation of the deen, but also experience the immense gifts that Allah gives to Muslims via Hajj.

The last night



Dhikr in Mina – Hajj 2011

We had a group dhikr on our last night in Mina. I wasn't really into it, but I attended anyway because I knew these were precious moments that I should spend with the larger group. As I sat there, I was moved by watching my fellow hujjaaj. I reflected on how we were all brought together for this trip: Allah had specifically picked each and every one of us to be His guests at these holy sites in this year. I thought about the bonds had grown between us, and how united we'd been. And soon, this would all end. We'd go back to our own lives at home and our Hajj would fade into history as fond memories – flashes of a past experience that we would so dearly love to hold onto, but wouldn't be able to, since life would move on, and time would erode the highs of our spiritual peak.

But, just as we were all together on that last night, I made dua that we would be re-united in the same way in Jannah. And, in that future bliss, we would remember this Hajj, and look back on these times and remember all we went through in the dunya – but at that time, being eternally safe in Allah's Mercy of the akhirah.

Together for the last time

The final morning's fajr was my last salaah on Hajj. My tears fell during that first rakaat, as I realised this was truly the end of the road. This journey that had taught me so much, and had been my life for nearly 2 months...it was ending. It was my last salaah with the group, and probably the last time I'd see most of my fellow hujjaaj.

We were still within the days of tashreeq, so there was the usual takbier after the salaah. This time, I reflected deeply on the meaning of it.

Allahu akbar

Allahu akbar

Allahu akbar

Laa illaaha ill-Allah

Allahu akbar

Allahu akbar wa illahil hamd

Allah is great. Greater than *anything and everything*. We – having experienced this Hajj – could attest to that. And there, in that Mina tent on our final morning, we proclaimed it loudly and proudly and with sincerity.

I imagined the Eid ul-Adhas to come in my future, when I'd again recite this same takbier. Only at that time, I hoped it would mean so much more to me – because I'd remember this particular gathering. I hoped it would bring back memories of this trip, this tent, this salaah, and this takbier.

Goodbye, Mina

Unlike many of the others, who could stay in Mina until the afternoon, my wife and I would be flying out that evening – so we needed to get back to Aziziah quickly to prepare for the travel. Straight after fajr, we went off alone to do our final pelting of the jamaraat.

Afterwards, we got lost coming back to the camp (though this was entirely *her* fault 😊), so our departure was delayed a little.

As we got our stuff and headed out for the last time, we didn't see too many people from the group – but I did catch [‘the joker’](#) again. He was much more sombre this time, and seemed to have forgotten about teasing me. Again, I bore no ill feeling towards him. But I'm glad he eventually got over his excessive joke-making mood.



Sunrise over Mina on the final morning of Hajj 2011

We left Mina as the sun was rising, and I wanted to savour the last few moments of this experience. However, it didn't happen as I'd hoped. My wife gets tense when we travel, and on the way back, she was super-stressed about time – especially since our Hajj group hadn't given us an official departure time from Aziziah (we'd been told 12.30PM might be the time, but nothing was confirmed).

She had valid concerns, but I felt she was overreacting. I was actually sad for her too – because she was so anxious and absorbed in worry that she didn't seem to take in what should have been beautiful, peaceful final moments on Mina.

I recognised that when she was in that emotional state, it was a test for me – a challenge Allah was putting in my path. So I just tried to stay calm, avoid confrontation, and absorb what I could of my last moments on Mina.

And so, as we crossed the bridge and headed into the tunnel that leads to Aziziah, a beautiful, eventful, and lesson-filled period of my life had just ended.

I'll be forever grateful to Allah for granting me the experience.

Alhamdulillah. Alhamdulillah. Alhamdulillah.



Mina on the final morning of Hajj 1432 (2011)

Related lessons:

- When you go home, you don't just return as 'Hajji'; you go back as an *ambassador* of Hajj. Your job is to now inspire others and encourage them to make the journey themselves.
- Even if you're not fond of group gatherings, spend some time with the group in your final days and nights of Hajj. Appreciate the fact that Allah has specifically chosen each of you to be companions on this journey.
- In the takbiers after salaah, reflect on the meaning of what you're reciting. Think through all the experiences you've had, and let them fuel the sincerity of what you're saying: you're testifying to Allah's greatness.
- Also during those takbiers, take mental snapshots of the scene. In later years, when you're home for Eid ul-Adha, replay those scenes in your mind, and let them remind you of this journey.
- When other people's bad moods / anxieties threaten your special moments, don't react instantly. Rather, see it as a test from Allah, keep calm, do what you can to avoid conflict, and savour whatever you can of the moment.
- When it's all over, thank Allah – again and again and again – for granting you this journey.
- In the journey of Hajj, and the journey of life, try to always be conscious of Allah. Taqwa is the very best provision.

Image sources: All pictures taken by me, except for the dhikr picture (courtesy of [Al-Anwar Hajj 2011 Facebook group](#)).

Final words

So, this brings to an end the *Hajj Chronicles* series. I began writing it just days after we returned from Hajj, and now – almost 2 years later – I wrap up. Through all 30 parts, I hope that my words, descriptions, and pictures have conveyed to you the experiences, struggles, lessons, and ecstasies of the six weeks that the series covered.

For those who have been for Hajj before, I hope the series has helped to remind you of *your own* Hajj, and that it stirred up those feelings of spiritual elevation and inspired you to recommit to the lofty goals and intentions you made while you were there.

For those that haven't yet been, I hope that the series will inspire you to do whatever is in your power to make the journey yourself. From your side, you need a sincere intention, followed by dedicated efforts and lots of dua. But ultimately, Allah is the One who invites. So you do your part, and when it's your time, He will take you there – no matter how unlikely it may look from your present point of view.

I pray that you'll get your chance soon, and that when it happens, that it'll be the most incredible, life-changing experience that'll purify you of past mistakes, and set you on the path to eternal success. And if you do get to go, please share the experience with me – either by commenting here, or emailing me (see contact details below).

JazakAllah to everyone who has followed this series. I hope every reader has benefitted, and I really appreciate the feedback I've gotten from some of you. If you have any other feedback or queries, feel free to [email me](#).

The chronicles end here, but my story did continue after that. We went on to Palestine then Cairo, before coming home, adjusting to the normal environment and routine again, and going on with the rest of our lives.

Later on, I may write more about those experiences, but for now, I close with this.

I pray that Allah accepts this series as my contribution towards that ancient call of Ibrahim a.s. ([Surah Al-Hajj, verse 27](#)).

As a final thought, I leave you with the advice of Allah. The advice applies to Hajj, but also to the journey of life, as we move towards the Hereafter:

“...So make provisions for yourselves; but the best of provisions is taqwa. Therefore keep your duty unto Me, O men of understanding...” (Surah al-Baqarah verse 197)

Appendix A: Selected linked pages

The soul's journey after death

(Linked from [Chapter 8: Every soul shall taste it](#))

It is reported that al Bara bin Azib said "We went out with the prophet (pbuh) in order to participate in the funeral rites of a man from the Ansar. We arrived at the grave, but the inner chamber had not been prepared yet, so Allahs messenger (pbuh) sat down facing the direction of the qiblah, and we sat around him so attentively that it was as if birds were sitting upon our heads.

He had a stick in his hand with which he sketched upon the ground. Then he began looking alternatively to the heavens and to the earth, raising his gaze and then lowering it. Finally, he said two or three times, 'Seek refuge in Allah from the torment of the grave.' Then he said, 'O Allah, verily I seek refuge in You from the torment of the grave.' He repeated it three times, then he elaborated, 'Verily, when the believing servant is leaving this world and entering the next, angels from the heavens descend to him - their faces white with brightness like the sun and carrying with them burial sheets and scents from Paradise. They sit before him at a distance as far as they eye can see. Then the Angel of Death (upon whom be peace) comes to the person, sits at his head and says "O good soul [in another narration 'O confident soul'], come out to your Lords forgiveness and pleasure'"

[The Prophet (pbuh) continued], "Thereupon, the soul flows out of the body like water flowing from the mouth of a waterskin, and all of the angels between the skies and the earth supplicate for Allahs blessing upon him. The doors of the heavens are opened for him, and the keepers of these doors [i.e., the angels] all plead with Allah that this soul might pass in front of them as it is being carried upward. The Angel of Death barely receives the soul in his hands, whereupon the other angels take it from him and wrap it with fragrant winding sheets.

This is what is meant by Allahs saying "Our messengers [i.e., angels] seize his soul, and they do not fall short of their duty" (Surah al An am 6:61) Then the Prophet (PBUH) said, "There exudes from the soul a scent like the most beautiful fragrance of musk that one could find on the face of the earth.

The angels descend with the soul, never passing a host of angels without hearing them ask, "Who is this wonderful soul?" They reply, "So and so, the son of so and so," addressing him with the best names he was known by during his earthly life. Upon reaching the first heaven, the angels request that it be opened for the soul - which is granted. The soul is then accompanied by the angels of each heaven until it reaches the one above it and finally arrives at the seventh heaven. then Allah, the Mighty and Majestic, says [to the angels], "Place the record of My servant in 'illiyyun'." The persons record is then placed in 'illiyyun', whereupon a command is heard: "Return him to the earth, for verily I have promised mankind that having created them from the earth, I will return them to it. And I will make them come out of it, yet another time."

Then the soul is returned to the earth, back into its body. Verily, the deceased hears the shuffling feet of his companions who attended his burial as they turn away and leave his grave. Thereupon, two angels, severe in interrogation, come to him, and sitting him up, they begin to ask him questions. They say, "Who is your Lord?" He replied, "Allah is my Lord." They continue, "What is your religion?" He answers, "Islam is my religion." They proceed with the questioning, saying, "Who is this man that has been sent to you?" He responds, "He is the Messenger of Allah PBUH." Finally, they ask him about his deeds, to which he replies, "I read Allahs book and believed in it."

(In another narration the Prophet (pbuh) indicated that the angels ask, "Who is your Lord, what is your religion and who is your prophet?" [Allahs Messenger explained that] this was

the believers last test, and is what is meant when Allah says, "Allah strengthens those who believe with a firm testimony in this worldly life and the Hereafter." (Surah Ibraheem 14:27) The deceased answers, "Allah is my Lord, Islam is religion, and my prophet is Muhammed." [The prophet (pbuh) then indicated, 'Upon the believers answer to these questions], a voice is heard in the heavens, saying "My servant has told the truth, so clothe him in the clothing of Paradise, spread for him the furnishings of Paradise, and open for him a window with a view of Paradise."

Thereupon, he is engulfed by a breeze of fresh air and fragrance, while the expanse of his grave is extended before him as far as the eye can see. There appears before him a man with wonderful face and beautiful clothing, emitting a splendid fragrance. He says to the soul, "Rejoice at the news which will gladden you! Rejoice at Allahs pleasure and His Paradise, whose joys and delights never end. This is the day which you was promised." The deceased says to him, "And who are you, for your face bears glad tidings?!" The figure answers, "I represent your good deeds; by Allah, I've always known you to be quick in obedience to Allah and slow to His disobedience. so may Allah reward you with good." Then a door to Paradise is opened, whereupon it is said to him [regarding the Hellfire] "This would have been your final abode had you disobeyed Allah; however, it has been exchanged for this other abode [i.e., Paradise]."

When the soul sees what is in Paradise, he cries "My Lord, hasten the arrival of the Hour [i.e., the Resurrection] so that I may be joined with my family and wealth" Thereupon it is said to him, "Rest in tranquility."

Allahs Messenger (pbuh) continued, 'When the disbelieving servant [and in another narration "sinful servant"] is about to leave this world and enter the next, angels, powerful and severe, descend to him from the heavens - their faces black and carrying with them coarse strips of cloth from Hell. They sit before him at a distance as far as the eye can see. Then the Angel of Death arrives, and sitting at the head of the disbeliever, he says, "O you foul soul, come out to the anger and wrath of your Lord." The soul inside the disbelievers body is overcome by terrible fear [and does not want to deliver itself up], whereupon the Angel of Death violently pulls it out multi-pronged skewers being yanked out of wet wool - tearing with them the arteries and nerves. Upon this, the soul is cursed by every angel between the earth and the heavens and by those inside the heavens.

Then the doors of the heavens are closed to him, and every single guard at these doors begs Allah that this soul not be carried up in front of him.' The Prophet (pbuh) continued, 'The Angel of Death barely receives the soul in his hands, whereupon the other angels grasp it from him and wrap it up in coarse cloth. There emits from it the foulest odour that could be found on the face of the earth. They ascend with it, never passing a host of angels without being asked, "Who is this ugly soul?" They reply, "So and so, the son of so and so," using the worst names by which he was known in this world. When they arrive at the lowest heaven, they request that it be opened for this soul, but the request is denied.' At this point Allahs Messenger (pbuh) recited the verse: 'The gates of the heavens will not be opened for them, nor will they enter the Garden of Paradise until a camel goes through the eye of a needle.' (Surah al-A'raf 7:40)

After that he continued, 'Then Allah, the Mighty and Majestic, says [to the angels], "Place his record in sijjeen - in the lowest earth. Return My servant to the earth, for verily I have promised mankind that having created them from the earth, I will return them to it. And I will make them come out of it, yet another time." Upon this command, the deceased [disbelievers] soul is thrown down from the sky until it lands in its body.'

The prophet (pbuh) then recited the verse: 'And whoever ascribes partners with Allah, it is as

though he had fallen from the sky, such that birds snatch him up or the wind throws him to a remote place.' (Surah al-Hajj 22:31) Then he commented, 'Verily [when the soul is returned to its body], the deceased hears the sound of his companions footsteps as they turn away from his grave.'

[The Prophet (pbuh) resumed his explanation, saying], "Then two angels, severe in interrogation, come to him, sitting him up, they begin to question him, "Who is your Lord?" He replies, "Hah! Hah! I don't know." They continue by asking him, "What is your religion?" He answers, "Hah! Hah! I don't know." So they ask, "Then what do you say about this man who was sent to you?" [The disbeliever does not appear to understand who they are referring to, so it is said], "Muhammad." Again he states, "Hah! Hah! I don't know. I only heard people talking about him." Then it is said, "You did not know! And you did not read!"

Thereupon a voice from the heavens is heard, "He has lied!" So spread out for him a place from the Fire and open for him a window to the Fire." The searing hot winds of Hell engulf him while his grave closes in upon him, crushing him until his ribcage is broken by the force - causing the ribs of one side to interwine with the ribs of the other. Then there appears to him a person with an ugly face and ugly clothing and exuding a foul odour, who says, "Tidings of evil to you, for this is the day which you were promised!" The deceased says to him, "And you, too; may Allah give you evil tidings! Who are you, for yours is a face which portends evil."

The person rejoins, "I represent your wicked deeds. By Allah, I have always known you to be slow in obedience to Allah and quick in disobedience to Him. May Allah reward you with evil!" Then one who is deaf, dumb and blind and is carrying an iron rod is sent to the deceased. If he were to strike a mountain with it, the mountain would disintegrate into rubble. He strikes the deceased with a blow which turns him to dust.

Allah returns the deceased to his original form, whereupon he is struck a second time. This causes him to shriek with such violence that it is heard by all of creation except mankind and jinn. Then a door to the Fire is opened, and beddings of the Fire are spread for him, whereupon he cries, "Lord do not establish the Hour!""

This is from the book "Mysteries of the soul expounded" by Abu Bilal Mustafa-al Kanadi, pages 34-42.

A most blessed rooftop

(Linked from [Chapter 10: Hijra](#))

By me (October 12, 2011)



I like rooftops because they are freedom.

As I write this, I'm seated on one.
No ordinary one, mind you;
but one in a city of immense peace;
on top of a building so blessed that only one other is greater than it.

Generally, people aren't aware of rooftops.
They live their lives down below,
never thinking of how serene and peaceful the world above is.

It's the same in this place:
hundreds of thousands have come to this city,
to this building,
yet only a fraction have ventured up to this rooftop.

Down below, the crowds are swelling -
with new faces each and every day,
from places far and wide,
each with a culture,
a nationality,
a family,
a unique life story.

We meet each other -
all speaking different languages,
sometimes not able to communicate at all,
other than in sign language -
yet our greeting is the same;

a universal greeting of peace -
taught to us by the Messenger of peace,
who established this,
our community,
in this very place
some fourteen centuries ago.

He would be proud
to see his nation gathered here today -
such variety in colour, speech, and manner -
but all committed to the way of life he brought.

All here to visit him,
and honour his resting place -
the ground where he,
along with the giants of his generation,
strove to build a society
based on justice,
peace,
and universal principles of goodness –
recognised by every single soul –
whether they know it or not.

They walked this very earth -
by day and night,
in wartime and during peace,
hardship and times of ease;
knowing that their time here was only temporary -
a short period of tests -
the results of which would determine
their home in the eternal realm.

And some were assured of their success even before their earthly life ended;
yet still they struggled,
still they strove,
still they feared
that they weren't living up to the life expected of them.

Yet that generation
was the best of people raised up for mankind.

They enjoined what was good,
and forbade what was evil;
and most importantly,
they believed in God.

And our generation today
doesn't live up to that example –
instead succumbing
to the cultural pollution
of nations that do not truly believe in their Creator.
For if they did,
their lives would reflect more justice,
God-consciousness,

and eagerness to fulfil the responsibilities placed upon them
as stewards of this Earth.

Yet in this blessed place,
this generation –
those who have come to visit –
witnesses the way life should be.

We feel the tranquillity of the way of life we call our own.

We experience it first hand –
in ways we could never experience back home.

We feel spiritually rejuvenated
by this environment –
re-establishing our connection to our Creator,
the Owner of Peace,
the Master of all things –
both worldly and beyond human comprehension.

Grown men break down in tears –
begging their Lord for forgiveness,
and supplicating for all that they need in their lives,
and all that they desire in their existence.

Desperate pleas,
made with such sincerity –
both in private,
and where others can see them –
but without inhibition,
for in those moments,
nobody else matters:
it's just them and their Lord –
without anyone or anything to break that bond.

And so
this City of Peace
serves as a purifier for the souls that visit it;
helping to wash away years,
decades,
and lifetimes of mistakes –
and giving hope that maybe,
just maybe,
when our journeys take us back home,
we'll be able to recapture some of the magic we felt here,
and live lives of peace, justice, and submission
to the One we owe everything to.

**This piece was inspired by my time in Madinah, on the rooftop of the Prophet Muhammad's
(peace be upon him) mosque, a few weeks prior to Hajj 2011.*

Ihram clothing

(linked from [Chapter 10: Hijra](#))

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia



Boys supplicating whilst wearing the **ihram clothing** during [arafat](#)

Ihram clothing (also spelt Ahram clothing) includes men's and women's garments worn by [Muslim](#) people during the [Ihram pilgrimage](#) (*Haji*) and or (umrah). The main objective is to avoid attracting attention.^[1] Men's garments often consist of two white un-hemmed sheets (usually towelling material) and are universal in appearance.^[1] The top (the *riḍā*) is draped over the torso and the bottom (the *izār*) is secured by a belt; plus a pair of sandals. Women's clothing, however, varies considerably and reflects regional as well as religious influences, but they often don't wear special clothing or cover their faces.^[2]

White ihram clothing is intended to make everyone appear the same, by [God](#) there is no difference between a prince and a pauper when everyone is dressed equally. Ihram also contributes to a feeling of unity that pilgrims have when they are in the city of [Mecca](#). They are all brothers and sisters joined to worship God. There are also certain behaviours that are expected and forbidden once ihram is donned. Ihram is typically worn during [Dhu al-Hijjah](#), the last month in the [Islamic calendar](#).

Although it is simply an item of clothing to be worn during the pilgrimage, there are many competing views on the proper wearing of ihram. For example, the exact number of days a pilgrim is required to wear ihram varies according to the type of pilgrimage the individual is performing.

Ihram is also a state a pilgrim is in during the Hajj pilgrimage. Before entering Ihram, they bathe, trim their nails and hair, make [wudu](#) (cleansing ritual), and pronounce a formal intention to perform Hajj. While they are in this state, pilgrims are not allowed to hunt or kill any living thing, participate in sexual intercourse, cut hair or nails, or wear make-up or perfume.^[2]

Rebirth

(Linked from [Chapter 20: Reflections before the big day](#))

By me (November 2011)



First life

I was a latecomer to Islam. No – I didn't convert into the religion. I was born a Muslim, but for most of my life growing up, I wasn't really one – not the way I should have been, at least. I lacked the proper understanding, knowledge, and, most of all, commitment to the religion. As a result, much of my life was spent without real attachment to Islam – confined to merely ritualistic acts of worship I was expected to do, and not much interest beyond that.

As a child, I learnt Islam's basics in *madrassah*, and my family acted as a good moral compass in guiding me through the racially and culturally diverse society that was South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. I had plenty of exposure to other religions – Hindu family friends, where I'd see their prayer lamps and idols; a Christian junior school, where every morning's assembly included the Lord's prayer; and my Jewish high school, where Jewish Studies was a compulsory subject for a couple of years.

I always had a conscience about Islam, and what my Creator expected of me as a Muslim. But without practical action, conscience can't lead you very far. In school holidays, for Friday prayers, and on other religious occasions, I'd attend Islamic religious services, and hear the religious advice given by the imams and moulanas. I'd sometimes be inspired to want to be a better Muslim, but the feeling would fade a few hours later, and I'd continue as normal – not really thinking about my purpose in life or how I could be better to my fellow human beings.

Turnaround

That changed ten years ago, when I reached a turning point – a 'spiritual awakening' that

changed my entire focus and orientation in life. Such events are common in any religion – not just Islam. Anything could act as a catalyst – from a near death experience, loss of a loved one, a period of desperation, or any other event. Different people have different experiences, yet all end with the same result: a movement from a state of heedlessness to one of consciousness.

Over time, I came to learn more about Islam, and firmly believe in its truth – understanding the wisdom behind its acts of worship and social values, and its timeless message of pure monotheism, which was the message of every prophet, including Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (peace be upon them all). I came to understand how, as a comprehensive belief

system, it links an individual to their Creator, without any intermediaries; guiding them to live in the way that would bring true happiness, inner peace, and success – both in life and in the realm beyond death.

Journey of a lifetime

A few weeks ago, I was honoured to perform the Islamic pilgrimage to Makkah – the *Hajj*. As far as mandatory religious activities go, it's one of the most important acts in Islam. It's a journey that re-enacts the life of Prophet Abraham and his family, and draws millions each year – promising great reward from the Creator; and immense liberation, such that the pilgrim returns from the journey completely forgiven from every sin – spiritually, like a newborn baby.

It's a journey of sacrifice, self-purification, and great humility. Pilgrims leave their families and comfortable homes to go all the way to the Holy Land, spending days and nights in a simple, unflattering tent – where the only physical comforts are a mattress, blanket, and pillow. They leave behind the ease of cars for a journey involving walking for miles and miles on dirty, congested roads, in huge crowds that they'd normally run away from. They shed the adornments of plush clothing to wear nothing but two white, unstitched pieces of cloth – wherein they'll look exactly like everyone else, with nothing to distinguish between a king and a beggar. They go out to a flat, empty plain – in the middle of a desert – to stand in the scorching sun for a few hours, reciting a few words, pleading with their Creator, and crying their hearts out. And they walk around an ancient building, the first house of worship dedicated to the Creator, praising Him and supplicating for all that they desire.

Second chance

The experiences and lessons of Hajj are numerous, but for me, the most important result was the liberation I spoke of earlier – a second chance at life. A person who survives a near-fatal accident may relate, as could a reformed convict who leaves prison as a 'new' person.

After repentance on Hajj, the feeling of being completely forgiven – for *every single* sin you've ever committed – is truly amazing, and beyond words. It's like a lightness of the soul – like there's no longer this burden on your shoulders, and you literally feel pure and clean. Your mind feels more free, your spirit feels light, and you feel so much closer to your Creator. It's really the most awesome feeling imaginable.

And it's also empowering, because you now have this 'clean slate' – this second chance to start your life again, from a state of purity. And with that feeling, you're more sensitive to every wrong you do. You can recognize it more easily, and you feel the need to repent or make up for it immediately – because now that you're 'clean', you want to stay that way, and never let any spiritual 'dirt' pollute your heart again.

Naturally, it isn't possible to remain on such a high for a sustained period. And in the few weeks since Hajj, such feelings of spiritual euphoria have decreased. But the effects of those feelings, and that experience, remain with me, and have hopefully benefitted me as I returned to my normal environment and responsibilities.

In Muslim circles, it's a common cliché to say that Hajj really begins once you get home – meaning that Hajj itself is not the main challenge. The main challenge is what becomes your life's mission *after* Hajj: to 'live' that Hajj by taking forward what you've learnt, and being that better person you were inspired to be.

I thank you for allowing me to share this account with you, and I hope that – regardless of your religious persuasion or belief system – you can take some benefit from these words, and

that you yourself will have an experience of such magnitude in your life, if you haven't already.

Note: I posted this piece a few weeks after I returned from Hajj. It was written for a multi-faith audience.

[Image source](#)

Day 15 – Well, This Is Awkward... (Linked from [Chapter 22: Arafah \(part 1\)](#))

By [BIslam](#)

11/5/11 – Hajj, Day 2

The tests have not stopped, they've only just started hitting much closer to home. **I just got hit with a very personal test.** It's kinda funny really, though totally embarrassing.

So, I took a nap in our tent after sunrise, trying to kill time til Dhuhr, and get some rest. After Dhuhr is when I wanted to focus on making all of my du'as. It was a pretty good nap – restful, comfortable, peaceful. I started to dream. How do I say this...? **The dream turned...saucy.** That's hilarious, I didn't plan on using that word, but it works, I'm stickin with it.

The details of this saucy dream are a bit too personal even for this journal, though it wasn't graphic or obscene. Ok, enough about that. I immediately woke myself up as soon as it was "happening". **The first thoughts that came to mind were, "Crap! I'm in my ihram too...and it's the Day of Arafah!"** The only day that really matters. So, I recoup, having also just woken up – rude awakening status. I went to the bathroom, trying not to walk awkwardly.

The plan I came up with on the spot was: get into a stall, make ghusl, switch my top ihram sheet to the bottom, wash the bottom sheet, and be out without anyone noticing what happened. **Problem was, there were no showers in Arafah, those are only in Mina.** Also, everything had to be done in this small toilet stall, where there's also the infamous hole in the ground. Staying clean was a top priority.

Alhamdulillah, I got through it just fine, no worries. **Allah makes it easy when you reach out to Him for help.** I got lucky and had a clean stall, with no lines waiting to get in after me. There was also an unusually long water hose in the stall, normally they're only half that length. There were no hooks though, so I took off my top sheet and slung it over the door, hung my money belt on the door knob, took off my bottom sheet and folded it up loosely. I didn't have anywhere to set down my bottom sheet, so I took off my flip-flops and sat it on top. I used the super long hose to make ghusl, took my time and cleaned up. Worked out really well actually. I cleaned off the bottom sheet, draped it over my shoulders, wrapped my other sheet around my waist and walked out. Ten minutes tops. Now, I'm sitting in the sun to dry off. **Not a single suspecting soul, Alhamdulillah.**

Goodmans seek closure

(Linked from [Chapter 27: Return to Mina](#))

By Voice of the Cape newsroom (08 Nov 2011)

The children and grandchildren of Amina Goodman, one of VOC's sponsored hujaaj who died in Saudi Arabia while on haj, said they were struggling to come to terms with her death, as she was so far away from home at the time of her passing. VOC fulfilled the 76-year-old's desire to perform the pilgrimage when she was selected after her daughter nominated her in 2010. The family was notified in the early hours of Sunday morning by a call from a sheik in the Kingdom that Goodman died immediately after Arafat when she was on her way to pelt the jamarats.

Goodman's daughter, Faldelah Welsh said the family was very emotional a few days before her mother departed for Makkah. "Everybody came to greet her and I couldn't handle that," said Welsh. "I was always the one she had to worry about. I wasn't independent. I always depended on my mommy. It's a very, very big loss for me because she's the only one I always come to. I never visit anybody, only my mommy."

Welsh said it will take a while for her to come to terms with her mother's death. "It will take long for me to recover from this ... to come to terms with this but alhamdulillah she's in a good place and I believe my mommy went straight to jannah." Welsh shed a tear as she recalled Goodman's roommate telling the family what her last words were. "Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar laa ilaaha illallaa and she passed on." Welsh said they were waiting on the death certificate from the Saudi Kingdom, adding that they didn't know the cause of death.

Goodman's only son, Ismail said he was planning to sell his house in Delft to send his mother on haj, because she said it was the last thing she wanted to do before she died. "I said I will sell that house and the money I get from that house I will send her for haj," he recalled. "But alhamdulillah my sister sent the forms in and they nominated her for the haj, so I didn't carry on with the selling of the house."

Welsh said that even though it was difficult to accept that mother died far away from home, it would not take forever for her to receive closure. "I know my mom went to jannah," she said. "I want to do more good so that Allah can be satisfied and happy with me because I would love to meet mother again." VOC (*Faatimah Hendricks*)

Appendix B: Hajj tip sheet

Hajj tip sheet (for the 5 days of Hajj)

- A general and very important principle to CONSTANTLY keep in mind throughout: the best provision for this is taqwa. So, for everything you now face, keep in mind: "This is for Allah." For everything difficult, all your sacrifices and dealing with it with patience – it's all for Allah.
- If you haven't already written / prepared your dua list for Arafah, do it as soon as possible. And when it comes to people that asked you to make specific duas, if you can't / didn't write down those duas, you can summarise them to a general dua asking Allah to fulfill the duas that others asked you to make for them.

Day 1: Yaum-al-Tarwiyah

- Take time to accustom yourself to your surroundings on Mina – but don't go overboard. You won't be here long before leaving for Arafah – and you'll be back here after Muzdalifah, so minimize your 'exploration time', and maximize your personal reflection and preparation for Arafah,
- On this day, you'll notice the small space allocated for each person in the tent; and hopefully you'll be around people that are focusing their effort and time on deen rather than dunya. Let these thoughts remind you of your true priorities in life: we are only here for a short time, and in it we have to prepare for the biggest meeting of our lives. Today, it's preparing for Arafah – but on the whole, we're preparing for Qiyamah.
- You may find yourself around people that want to do things you don't really benefit from – such as worldly conversation, congregational thikr, or singing naats. If you know these things aren't the best use of your time, leave them and try to find another place / other people who will be more conducive to your spiritual preparation for tomorrow. It's hard to find private space on Mina – but make dua for it, and ask Allah to guide you to what / who is best.
- Don't over-exert yourself today. Do your preparation, but ensure you get enough rest – because you may not get to sleep for a while.
- Pack your bag for Arafah & Muzdalifah – taking only essentials. You'll be travelling a long time, so don't take unnecessary things.

Day 2: Arafah

- If possible, try to leave Mina only *after* having made Fajr – because if you're on the bus through Fajr, you may miss the waqt. (Yes – it can happen.)
- If possible, find out from your group the schedule for the day – including when they plan to leave Arafah (which may well be before sunset). Plan your toilet breaks around that – bearing in mind that you will probably face long queues for the toilets.
- At lunchtime, don't go overboard and don't waste time. Eat something – but only what you need, and be quick. Lunch comes during wuqoof time – so you want to maximize dua time, and minimize other things.
- If your group is having a program at some point during wuqoof, and you don't want to be part of it because you want to focus on your own duas, don't be afraid to go off on your own. Tell someone you're going to find private space, keep your phone on (silent) in case they need to contact you, then go to find place. It may take a little while, but insha-Allah you can find a private spot.
- Wuqoof is the biggest meeting of your life – the most important dua time of your life; so be alone with Allah and pour your heart and soul out to Him. Use your dua list, but don't be limited by it. Make dua for whatever you want – even if it isn't on the list.
- Take some time to find a quiet spot and you and your wife make duas TOGETHER – for your marriage, family, and whatever else. It's a great blessing to be on Arafah together, so take advantage of it by supplicating to Allah as the couple that you are.
- If you're not yet finished with your duas and your group wants to leave for Muzdalifah, before sunset, stay behind – and go with a later walking group) if you have the option. They may tell you that you can make dua as you walk – since it's a long walk to get off Arafah – but that walk can be crazy and stressful, so the conditions aren't very good for making your duas. Rather stay and get the most time out of your wuqoof – because it's the whole essence of Hajj; so you don't want to be robbed of that just because of the group's logistical convenience.

Evening 2: Muzdalifah

- On the walk to Muzdalifah, you may notice a lot of garbage on the road. Don't add to it – keep your own dirt until you find a bin.
- Unfortunately, I can't offer you much advice about Muzdalifah – because mine was spent trying to find my group for hours. But the one thing I do know is important here is to get some sleep after you've made your salaahs. And if you move around, don't disturb others that are resting.

Day 3 to 6: Eid and days of tashreeq

- **Be smart:** Day 3 (Eid ul-adha) is the biggest day in terms of what you need to do: Stoning, Tawwaf ifadah and Sa'i, and cutting / shaving the hair. For all these actions, be sensible and take the advice of your trusted and knowledgeable group leaders. For example, remember that if the haram is too packed, you don't *have* to do your ifadah on this day – you can delay it to a better time.
- **Don't be fooled – stay clean:** Once the stress of getting all that is done, it may finally sink in that you've pretty much completed Hajj. You may find a much more relaxed atmosphere in the tents on Mina and among your companions. While that's fine, *don't* let shaytaan fool you into thinking you've completed your mission in life and you can now relax. You've now been cleared of your lifetime's mountain of sin and mistakes, but it's so easy to start building them again. Shaytaan is angry that all his hard work of corrupting you was wiped out on Arafah – so he'll come at you with a vengeance from now on. So in these days especially, be on guard. And remember that whatever sins you accumulate can be easily wiped out by the simple acts of Islam – wudu, salaah, istighfaar, etc; so try to keep 'cleaning' yourself spiritually with these a few times a day. You won't stay clean your whole life once you get home, but for now – and while these feelings are high – try to stay pure.
- **Stick to Mina:** You still have a few days of pelting and being on Mina. You may get to go to your room in Aziziah at times, but try to get a lot of time in on Mina – because the comforts of Aziziah can be found at home or elsewhere, but anywhere else, you CANNOT attain the spiritual benefits that you get from Mina in these days of Hajj. And try not to over-indulge on food and drink. Just like Ramadan is supposed to be a time of spiritual exertion rather than worldly indulgence, treat these days on Mina the same – and more so, since you might never go on Hajj again in your life.
- **Build a mountain:** Once we leave these blessed lands – challenges and devils (both of man and jinn) and our own bad inclinations will dirty these souls of ours again. So in these days – still on the incredible, blessed journey of Hajj and in this amazing state of purity – build a mountain of good deeds to act as protection against the sins and mistakes that await you in future. Others may be relaxing - but you should gather as much of this spiritual provision, good habits, etc, as you can - to take home with you as a stockpile. (And encourage others to do the same.) As time and situations erode away at your purity later on, this stockpile will insha-Allah help protect you from ever getting spiritually low (or even reaching a zero balance or deficit). We need those personal mountains so that every time we lose a degree or step of the height of that mountain, the goodness we get from this journey reminds us to do good – whether through action, thikr, or other – to replace that lost step with a new one. Insha-Allah we'll not only stay at the high level, but even build more and more – a slow but steady progress to better and better states of our souls.
- **Pelting for life:** Remember the spiritual significance of pelting the jamaraat. And with each time, make an intention that this pelting should also serve as a protection – a self-purification; a CHOICE inside – to cast away the evils of your own souls inside, and keep the devils away from you. So when – in future – temptation comes, in your mind you can imagine this shaytaan trying to tempt you, remember your pelting, and remember that as you pelted him in Makkah – so too can you symbolically pelt him now and chase him away.

Going home:

- **Impact:** It's very, very sad to leave – especially the last time you tawwaf and leave the haram. Let those feelings make a deep impact on your heart and soul and mind, and build a commitment that you want to be back here. And a gratitude for what Allah has allowed you to experience. That gratitude must be more than just words, though: if you want to come back again, APPRECIATE what you had by trying to LIVE your Hajj. Like a verse in the Quran says – if you're grateful, Allah will give you more. So move beyond just nostalgia and emotional

yearning to come back again; make it a practical exercise that will please Allah and insha-Allah earn you an invitation to come back here.

- **Plan ahead:** *Living* your Hajj is the challenge for the rest of your life, so while you're still pure and fresh from Hajj, plan how you can maintain your Hajj. For example:
 - Hajj is the ultimate form of repentance, and one of the greatest ways to maintain the Hajj is to live a life of repentance – each day seeking Allah's forgiveness for the wrongs you may have done, and each day returning to your covenant with Him.
 - Focus on maintaining and improving your salaah – as it's a critical pillar of deen.
 - Try to regularly take account of yourself – seeing where you were, where you want to be, and what you can do to be better.
 - Strive to improve in character, and repairing your relationships with others.

- **Back home:** In the airports and once you're back home, you may be shocked by the spiritual filth of the rest of the world – the music, indecency, sexual advertisements and perversion, etc. This is what the world – outside of Madinah and Makkah – is largely flooded with, and you have to learn to live in this world trying to not fall into those evils, and trying to not let them influence you. Protect your senses from those things – for example stay away from sights and sounds that would corrupt your heart, and if you do see or hear them, immediately try to replace those experiences with something better. For example, if you see a non-mahram of the opposite sex in indecent clothing, immediately look at something else (halaal) and try to make THAT the image that sticks in your mind so that you forget the haram image. If you hear dirty music, listen to Quran immediately (or soon) and let THAT push the music out of your memory. Remember that your enemy – shaytaan – is going to work on you, and he'll use your senses as the gateway to corrupting your heart in a slow, gradual but effective way. Close those gates, and be on guard.

Also, make frequent and sincere duas asking Allah to protect you, help you live your Hajj, and help you make a positive impact in helping to clean up the society you live in – even if it's in a small way that you yourself won't notice.

May Allah grant you immense benefits and lessons from this Hajj, and make it the fuel that'll drive you to Allah's pleasure, and into Jannah.