

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH MOST GRACIOUS, MOST MERCIFUL

Preparing for Hajj & 'Umrah

(Culled from Islamweb.net)

Part 1

Every year, millions of Muslims make the journey of their lifetime. They come from all over the world for the sole purpose of fulfilling one of Allah's greatest commandments to mankind – the Hajj. Abu Hurairah رضي الله عنه narrated that "The Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم was asked, 'Which is the best deed?' He صلى الله عليه وسلم said: 'to believe in Allah and His Messenger (صلى الله عليه وسلم).' He صلى الله عليه وسلم was then asked, 'Which is the next (good deed)?' He صلى الله عليه وسلم said: 'To participate in Jihad in Allah's cause.' He صلى الله عليه وسلم was then asked, 'Which is the next?' He صلى الله عليه وسلم said: 'To perform an accepted Hajj.'" [Al-Bukhari]

For over 1400 years, believers have been making Hajj to the House of Allah in Makka. It is an obligation for each and every Muslim to perform Hajj at least once in his/her lifetime if he is physically and financially able.

Pre-Hajj preparations

Due to the importance of Hajj, preparations for it should not be taken lightly. Besides planning the actual logistics of the trip, the Muslim needs to prepare Islamically, physically, mentally, and financially for this great act of worship. Islamically, one of the most important preparations for this journey is acquiring the necessary knowledge for performing the rituals of Hajj and 'Umrah correctly and in accordance to the Sunnah of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم. This means studying and learning about Islam, acquiring a high degree of Imaan (faith) in order to deal with the emotional and physical demands of Hajj, and learning correctly the actual religious rituals and requirements from the beginning to the end of Hajj and 'Umrah. Studying and learning about the Hajj can be accomplished in a variety of fashions, from reading books on the subject or using computer programs which utilize a multimedia format, to actually taking classes offered by Islamic centers on the rituals of Hajj and 'Umrah. Furthermore, many travel groups that specialize in Hajj and 'Umrah trips offer Hajj preparation classes as well as scholars and students of knowledge that help those going for Hajj perform the rituals of Hajj and 'Umrah correctly.

In addition, it is important to mention that spiritually preparing for Hajj and 'Umrah is also a lesson on how to follow the footsteps of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم who taught the Companions رضي الله عنهم – a lesson that can be transformed into other acts of worship. Preparing for Hajj is a spiritual experience with a period of self-reflection and a lesson in piety and humility. The pilgrim must focus on his sole intention of performing Hajj. That it is solely for the pleasure of Allah

and in accordance to His Commandment regarding this act of worship. The believer also needs to resolve any conflicts or differences between him and others and seek forgiveness for any acts of transgression. This stage of preparation should take place long before the actual departure for Hajj.

Other preparations that should be planned long before the actual trip are financial in nature. Simply, going to Hajj costs money. Furthermore the pilgrim must pay off any old debts (this includes any type of loans), household bills, and leave enough money to pay any living expenses likely that other members of his family not making Hajj might need. Finally it is important to complete one's will (wasiyyah) before departing on Hajj.

Another important step in preparing for Hajj is the need to prepare physically for the event. Not only is Hajj a spiritual event, it also requires a lot of physical stamina from the participant. Hajj is not a picnic! Completing the rites of Hajj includes a lot of walking, mixing with many people, living in high temperatures (during summer), and exerting a great deal of effort. Another important step in preparing physically for Hajj is to make sure you are medically fit for the trip. Individuals with chronic health issues need to see their primary care physician in order to discuss any medical risks that need to be addressed prior to their Hajj experience.


Another recommendation is that these individuals also travel with a healthy caretaker in case any problems might arise during the actual Hajj. In addition, pilgrims must have the necessary vaccinations required by the Saudi Government for cholera and meningococcal meningitis. Because of these issues, it is also important to emphasize that one should complete Hajj and 'Umrah as soon as one is able to both physically and financially. Some people wait until they are old to go for Hajj. This is wrong and makes Hajj more difficult than necessary for the participant and in many cases for his traveling companions. Performing Hajj as soon as possible corresponds to the Hadith narrated by Abdullah Ibn Abbaas رضي الله عنه who said: "The Prophet ﷺ said: 'He who intended to perform Hajj should hasten to do so.'" [Abu Daawood]

The last pre-logistic preparation centers on preparing mentally for Hajj. This includes learning and accepting that the Hajj experience includes frustration, intense desert heat (during summer), and various differences in culture and food. The pilgrim can expect to stand in long lines, be shoved and pushed by others while completing the necessary rituals, and be in an uncomfortable close proximity to members of the opposite sex.

One purpose of Hajj is for the individual to be tested. The individual will be tested on physical, emotional, and spiritual levels.

Part 2

After preparing oneself internally and financially for one of the most important events in the life of a Muslim, the pilgrim must plan and make actual logistic decisions regarding his/her journey. While one can always make the trip by himself or with a small group of individuals



close to him, in this modern day this is not always the best choice. It is not uncommon for hotels to be fully booked for at least one year in advance. Furthermore, unless one starts searching very early, it is also hard to find airline reservations and available flights to Saudi Arabia during the Hajj season and during Ramadhaan for ‘Umrah. Because of these challenges in planning, many individuals opt to join a travel group that specializes in Hajj and ‘Umrah tours. Since not all tour groups are equal and provide the same quality service, there are a number of items to look for in choosing the right tour group.

The first thing to look for in a group is the price of the trip. Most groups offer a variety of price packages that depend on a variety of factors. These factors include the type of hotel, number of people per room, use of private transportation, and whether or not food is included within the package. Hajj is not the time to go cheap. Since Muslims living in the West are generally accustomed to a certain degree of comfort, some Western Muslims would find less expensive accommodations unacceptable and uncomfortable. For example, during Hajj some hotels accommodate up to 15 people per room sharing a single communal bathroom. Furthermore, many Western Muslims are used to a certain degree of cleanliness in their hotel rooms and eating establishments that is not found in all hotels and restaurants. Another factor to consider is the distance of the hotel accommodations from the Haram (the Sacred Area). As a rule of thumb, if the price is too cheap, so is probably the quality of the package. In other words, the cheaper in price of the package, the higher the probability of encountering problems during your Hajj; this in turn, can make for a more difficult Hajj experience.

Another thing to look for is the number of years of experience of the tour operator. Generally, experienced operators are the best since they are able to handle any problems that can and will probably occur during Hajj or ‘Umrah. Also it is important to make sure that an experienced leader from the tour group accompanies the group for Hajj, since it is not uncommon to lose members of your group sometimes for hours or even days. Other problems that often occur include lost or stolen belongings and money, illnesses that require medical attention, and the death of a group member. It is important for the pilgrim to understand that their Hajj will not be problem free. Problems arise frequently and an experienced tour operator is needed to handle the situation. When looking for a tour operator, it is important to ask how they handle problems. If the potential tour operator tells you that you will have a problem free Hajj, continue searching for a better programme.

Researching the business strength of your potential tour group is another important step in choosing a tour group. Generally, it is better to choose groups that have offices or contacts within Saudi Arabia. These contacts can make a Hajj experience run more smoothly in a number of areas which include helping facilitate and streamline the customs process in Jeddah (which can take between 8 to 20 hours) to providing private ground transportation and buses for the pilgrims. One thing that is highly recommended is to look for a company which offers its own private tour buses. This is especially important since the pilgrim can literally expect to wait for hours for public transportation.

Another important quality of the travel agent is the degree they are versed in the rules and regulations of the Hajj process. This includes helping the pilgrims with the VISA process

from the Saudi Arabian Embassy or Consulate to understanding the Hajj and ‘Umrah rites from an Islamic standpoint. For example, in order for a pilgrim to enter Saudi Arabia, there are certain requirements that need to be met from the Saudi Arabian government. These requirements include the necessary vaccinations; if the person has a non-Muslim name, a letter from a Mosque stating he is Muslim is needed. Women (under 45) must have proof of being accompanied by a Mahram (non-marriageable relative). In addition, there are fees that need to be paid in advance for use of the public transportation system and use of the tents in Mina along with the necessary forms that need to be completed in full and approved prior to the trip. It is also best to use a travel agent that utilizes scholars as religious guides for the trip. Besides helping to keep the travel group focused on the worship of Allah, rather than on worldly distractions such as chatting, playing cards, etc., he is also available to ensure that group members are correctly performing the rituals.

Making Hajj and ‘Umrah can be one of the most important events in a Muslim's life. However, one should not make the decision to go on Hajj or ‘Umrah at the last minute. The planning of this trip takes time and is a process within itself.

Besides the financial aspects of the trip, one needs to be ready for the trip from an Islamic standpoint. This includes studying Islam, knowing what is obligatory and what is non-obligatory in the rites of ‘Umrah and Hajj, and the development of a strong Imaan (faith). While both the process and task of Hajj can be difficult for some, the rewards of Hajj can be underestimated. In a Hadith narrated by Abu Hurairah رضي الله عنه the Prophet ﷺ said: “Whoever performs Hajj for Allah’s pleasure and does not have sexual relations with his wife and does not do evil or sins then he will return [after Hajj free from all sins] as if he were born anew.” [Al-Bukhari]

Al-Jumuah; vol. 11, issue 10