

PILGRIMAGE (HAJJ)

The pilgrimage to Makkah -- the Hajj -- is an obligation only for those who are physically and financially able to perform it. Nevertheless, about two million people go to Makkah each year from every corner of the globe, providing a unique opportunity for those of different nations to meet one another. Although Makkah is always filled with visitors, the annual Hajj begins in the twelfth month of the Islamic year (which is lunar, not solar, so that Hajj and Ramadan fall sometimes in summer, sometimes in winter).

Pilgrims wear special clothes: simple garments that strip away distinctions of class and culture, so that all stand equal before Allah.

The rites of the Hajj, which are of Abrahamic origin, is to commemorate the Divine rituals observed by the Prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael, who were the first pilgrims to the house of Allah on earth; the Kabah. It is also to remember the great assembly of the Day of Judgment when people will stand equal before Allah. Rituals include circling the Kabah seven times, and going seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwa, as did Hagar during her search for water. Then the pilgrims stand together on the wide plain of Arafat and join in prayers for Allah's forgiveness, in what is often thought of as a preview of the Last Judgment.

In previous centuries the Hajj was an arduous undertaking. Today, however, Saudi Arabia provides millions of people with water, modern transport, and the most up-to-date health facilities.

The close of the Hajj is marked by a festival, the Eid al-Adha, which is celebrated with prayers and the exchange of gifts in Muslim communities everywhere.

If you are planning to go for Hajj, check the dates from the Islamic calendar. Muslims in many Mosques undertake Hajj in groups. Each group is lead by an experienced Muslim who knows the various requirements and procedures during Hajj. It is advisable for a first timer or a new Muslim to join one of these groups for guidance and support. Advantage could also be taken from various airlines and Mosques, which provide complete hajj packages, which usually include transportation, hotel accommodation and guide. Plan 4-6 months in advance before your Hajj trip.

Umrah, referred to as the minor pilgrimage, can be performed during any of other months of the year and is not obligatory

Hajj Details

For 14 centuries, countless millions of Muslims, men and women from the four corners of the earth, have made the pilgrimage to Makkah, the birthplace of Islam. In carrying out this obligation, they fulfill one of the Five Pillars of Islam, or central religious duties of the believer. The hajj, or pilgrimage to Makkah, a central duty of Islam whose origins date back to the Prophet Abraham, brings together Muslims of all races and tongues for one of life's most moving spiritual experiences.

Muslims trace the recorded origins of the divinely prescribed pilgrimage to the Prophet Abraham, as he is called in Arabic. According to the Qur'an, it was Abraham who, together with Ishmael (Isma'il), built the Kabah, "the House of God," the focal point toward which Muslims turn in their worship five times each day. It was Abraham, too - known as Khalil Allah, "the friend of God" - who established the rituals of the hajj, which recall events or practices in his life and that of Hagar (Hajar) and their son Ishmael.

In the chapter entitled "The Pilgrimage," the Qur'an speaks of the divine command to perform the hajj and prophesies the permanence of this institution:

"And when We assigned for Abraham the place of the House, saying "Do not associate Anything with Me, and purify My House for those who go around it and for those who stand and bow and prostrate themselves in worship. And proclaim the Pilgrimage among humankind: They will come to you on foot and on every camel made lean By traveling deep, distant ravines".

By the time the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) received the divine call, however, pagan practices had come to muddy some of the original observances of the hajj. The Prophet, as ordained by God, continued the Abrahamic hajj after restoring its rituals to their original purity. Furthermore, Muhammad himself instructed the believers in the rituals of the hajj. He did this in two ways: by his own practice, or by approving the practices of his Companions. This added some complexity to the rituals, but also provided increased flexibility in carrying them out, much to the benefit of pilgrims ever since. It is lawful, for instance, to have some variation in the order in which the several rites are carried out, because the Prophet himself is recorded as having approved such actions. Thus, the rites of the hajj are elaborate, numerous and varied; aspects of some of them are highlighted below.

The hajj to Makkah is a once-in-a-lifetime obligation upon male and female adults whose health and means permit it, or, in the words of the Qur'an, upon "those who can make their way there." It is not an obligation on children, though some children do accompany their parents on this journey.

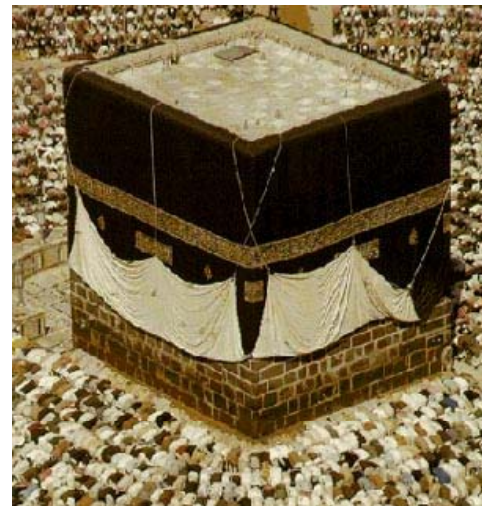
Before setting out, a pilgrim should redress all wrongs, pay all debts, plan to have enough funds for his own journey and for the maintenance of his family while he is away, and prepare himself for good conduct throughout the hajj.

When pilgrims undertake the hajj journey, they follow in the footsteps of millions before them. Nowadays hundreds of thousands of believers from over 70 nations arrive in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by road, sea and air every year, completing a journey now much shorter and in some ways less arduous than it often was in the past

The pilgrimage takes place each year between the eighth and the 13th days of Dhu al-Hijjah, the 12th month of the Muslim lunar calendar. Its first rite is the donning of the ihram. The ihram, worn by men, is a white seamless garment made up of two pieces of cloth or towelling; one covers the body from waist to ankle and the other is thrown over the shoulder. Both Abraham and Muhammad wore this garb. Women generally wear a simple white dress and a head covering, but not a veil. Men's heads must be uncovered; both men and women may use an umbrella.

The ihram is a symbol of purity and of the renunciation of evil and mundane matters. It also indicates the equality of all people in the eyes of God. When the pilgrim wears his white apparel, he or she enters into a state of purity that prohibits quarrelling, committing violence to man or animal and having conjugal relations. Once he puts on his hajj clothes the pilgrim cannot shave, cut his nails or wear any jewellery, and he will keep his unsown garment on till he completes the pilgrimage

A pilgrim who is already in Makkah starts his hajj from the moment he puts on the ihram. Some pilgrims coming from a distance may have entered Makkah earlier with their ihram on and may



still be wearing it. The donning of the ihram is accompanied by the primary invocation of the hajj, the talbiyah:

“Here I am, O God, at Thy Command! Here I am at Thy Command! Thou art without associate; Here I am at Thy Command! Thine are praise and grace and dominion! Thou art without associate”.

The thunderous, melodious chants of the talbiyah ring out not only in Makkah but also at other nearby sacred locations connected with the hajj.

On the first day of the hajj, pilgrims sweep out of Makkah toward Mina, a small-uninhabited village east of the city. As their throngs spread through Mina, the pilgrims generally spend their time meditating and praying, as the Prophet did on his pilgrimage.

During the second day, the 9th of Dhu al-Hijjah, pilgrims leave Mina for the plain of 'Arafat for the Wuquf, "the standing," the central rite of the hajj. As they congregate there, the pilgrims' stance and gathering reminds them of the Day of Judgment. Some of them gather at the Mount of Mercy, where the Prophet delivered his unforgettable Farewell Sermon, enunciating far-reaching religious, economic, social and political reforms. These are emotionally charged hours, which the pilgrims spend in worship and supplication. Many shed tears as they ask God to forgive them. On this sacred spot, they reach the culmination of their religious lives as they feel the presence and closeness of a merciful God.

The Prophet is reported to have asked God to pardon the sins of pilgrims who "stood" at 'Arafat, and was granted his wish. Thus, the hopeful pilgrims prepare to leave this plain joyfully, feeling reborn without sin and intending to turn over a new leaf.

Just after sunset, the mass of pilgrims proceeds to Muzdalifah, an open plain about halfway between 'Arafat and Mina. There they first pray and then collect a fixed number of chickpea-sized pebbles to use on the following days.

Before daybreak on the third day, pilgrims move en masse from Muzdalifah to Mina. There they cast at white pillars the pebbles they have previously collected. According to some traditions, this practice is associated with the Prophet Abraham. As pilgrims throw seven pebbles at each of these pillars, they remember the story of Satan's attempt to persuade Abraham to disregard God's command to sacrifice his son.

Throwing the pebbles is symbolic of humans' attempt to cast away evil and vice, not once but seven times - the number seven symbolizing infinity. Following the casting of the pebbles, most pilgrims sacrifice a goat, sheep or some other animal. They give the meat to the poor after, in some cases, keeping a small portion for themselves.

This rite is associated with Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son in accordance with God's wish. It symbolizes the Muslim's willingness to part with what is precious to him, and reminds us of the spirit of Islam, in which submission to God's will plays a leading role. This act also reminds the pilgrim to share worldly goods with those who are less fortunate, and serves as an offer of thanksgiving to God.

As the pilgrims have, at this stage, finished a major part of the hajj, they are now allowed to shed their ihram and put on everyday clothes. On this day Muslims around the world share the happiness the pilgrims feel and join them by performing identical, individual sacrifices in a worldwide celebration of 'Id al-Adha, "the Festival of Sacrifice." Men either shave their heads or clip their hair, and women cut off a symbolic lock, to mark their partial deconsecration. This is done as a symbol of humility. All proscriptions, save the one of conjugal relations, are now lifted.

In Mina, pilgrims visit Makkah to perform another essential rite of the hajj: the Tawaf, the seven-fold circling of the Kabah, with a prayer recited during each circuit. Their circumambulation of the Kabah, the symbol of God's oneness, implies that all human activity must have God at its centre.

It also symbolizes the unity of God and man. While making their circuits pilgrims may kiss or touch the Black Stone. This oval stone, first mounted in a silver frame late in the seventh century, has a special place in the hearts of Muslims, as, according to some traditions, it is the sole remnant of the original structure built by Abraham and Ishmael. But perhaps the single most important reason for kissing the stone is that the Prophet did so.

After completing the Tawaf, pilgrims pray, preferably at the Station of Abraham, the site where Abraham stood while he built the Kabah. Then they drink of the water of Zamzam.

Another, and sometimes final, rite is the say's, or "the running." This is a re-enactment of a memorable episode in the life of Hagar, who was taken into what the Qur'an calls the "uncultivable valley" of Makkah, with her infant son Ishmael, to settle there.

They now return to Mina, where they stay up to the 12th or 13th day of Dhu al-Hijjah. There they throw their remaining pebbles at each of the pillars in the manner either practiced or approved by the Prophet. They then take leave of the friends they have made during the Hajj. Before leaving Makkah, however, pilgrims usually make a final Tawaf round the Kabah to bid farewell to the Holy City.

Usually pilgrims either precede or follow the hajj, "the greater pilgrimage," with the 'Umrah, "the lesser pilgrimage," which is sanctioned by the Qur'an and was practiced by pilgrims of diverse races and tongues. As pilgrims return to their homes, they carry with them cherished memories of Abraham, Ishmael, Hagar, and Muhammad. They will always remember that universal concourse, where poor and rich, black and white, young and old, met on equal footing.

They return with a sense of awe and serenity: awe for their experience at 'Arafat, when they felt closest to God as they stood on the site where the Prophet delivered his sermon during his first and last pilgrimage; serenity for having shed their sins on that plain, and being thus relieved of such a heavy burden. They also return with a better understanding of the conditions of their brothers in Islam. Thus is born a spirit of caring for others and an understanding of their own rich heritage that will last throughout their lives.

The pilgrims go back radiant with hope and joy, for they have fulfilled God's ancient injunction to humankind to undertake the pilgrimage. Above all, they return with a prayer on their lips: May it please God, they pray, to find their hajj acceptable, and may what the Prophet said be true of their own individual journey: **"There is no reward for a pious pilgrimage but Paradise."**

Malcolm X's (Al-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) Letter from Mecca

When he was in Makkah, Al-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz wrote a letter to his loyal assistants in Harlem... from his heart:

"Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colors and races here in this ancient Holy Land, the home of Abraham, Muhammad and all the other Prophets of the Holy Scriptures. For the past week, I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of all colors.

"I have been blessed to visit the Holy City of Mecca, I have made my seven circuits around the Ka'ba, led by a young Mutawaf named Muhammad, I drank water from the well of the Zam Zam. I ran seven times back and forth between the hills of Mt. Al-Safa and Al Marwah. I have prayed in the ancient city of Mina, and I have prayed on Mt. Arafat."

"There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual,

displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white."

"America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered white - but the white attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color."

"You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to rearrange much of my thought-patterns previously held, and to toss aside some of my previous conclusions. This was not too difficult for me. Despite my firm convictions, I have always been a man who tries to face facts, and to accept the reality of life as new experience and new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind, which is necessary to the flexibility that must go hand in hand with every form of intelligent search for truth."

"During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept on the same rug - while praying to the same God - with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white. And in the words and in the deeds of the white Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan and Ghana."

"We were truly all the same (brothers) - because their belief in one God had removed the white from their minds, the white from their behavior, and the white from their attitude."

"I could see from this, that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept in reality the Oneness of Man - and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their 'differences' in color."

"With racism plaguing America like an incurable cancer, the so-called 'Christian' white American heart should be more receptive to a proven solution to such a destructive problem. Perhaps it could be in time to save America from imminent disaster - the same destruction brought upon Germany by racism that eventually destroyed the Germans themselves."

"Each hour here in the Holy Land enables me to have greater spiritual insights into what is happening in America between black and white. The American Negro never can be blamed for his racial animosities - he is only reacting to four hundred years of the conscious racism of the American whites. But as racism leads America up the suicide path, I do believe, from the experiences that I have had with them, that the whites of the younger generation, in the colleges and universities, will see the handwriting on the walls and many of them will turn to the spiritual path of truth - the only way left to America to ward off the disaster that racism inevitably must lead to."

"Never have I been so highly honored. Never have I been made to feel more humble and unworthy. Who would believe the blessings that have been heaped upon an American Negro? A few nights ago, a man who would be called in America a white man, a United Nations diplomat, an ambassador, a companion of kings, gave me his hotel suite, his bed. Never would I have even thought of dreaming that I would ever be a recipient of such honors - honors that in America would be bestowed upon a King - not a Negro."

"All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of all the Worlds."

Sincerely,

Al-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X)

(From the AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X with assistance from Alex Haley, the author of ROOTS)

Malcolm X saw and experienced many positive things. Generosity and openheartedness were qualities, which were impressed on him by the welcome, which he received in many places. He saw brotherhood and the brotherhood of different races and this led him to disclaim racism and to say: "I am not a racist... In the past I permitted myself to be used... to make sweeping indictments of all white people, the entire white race, and these generalizations have caused injuries to some whites who perhaps did not deserve to be hurt. Because of the spiritual enlightenment, which I was blessed to receive as the result of my recent pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca, I no longer subscribe to sweeping indictments of any one race. I am now striving to live the life of a true Sunni Muslim. I must repeat that I am not a racist nor do I subscribe to the tenets of racism. I can state in all sincerity that I wish nothing but freedom, justice and equality, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all people."

(The preceding material was excerpted from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* quoted in an article written by the Institute for Islamic Education.