

JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

Local Muslims fulfill obligation with a pilgrimage to Mecca

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Charleston cardiac surgeon Zafrullah Khan and his wife Zahida recently joined 2.5 million Muslims for a pilgrimage, but he didn't take any photos.

"It was not discouraged, not encouraged," Khan said.

Islam requires that all Muslims who are physically and financially able make the pilgrimage to Mecca, where the prophet Muhammad was born, once in their lives.

At 64, Khan thought it was time to make the pilgrimage, called a hajj, during the prescribed season, the 8th to 13th days of Zulhijjah, the Muslim calendar's final month.

Khan and his wife traveled with Athar Jalil and Jalil's wife Shakila, flying eight hours to Frankfurt, Germany, waiting four hours, then joining 400 American Muslims for the six-hour charter flight to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The pilgrims traveled on a European Airbus, nine seats across.

They compressed into 2 1/2 weeks a trip that two centuries ago took pilgrims traveling overland by camel as long as a year.

Both men had traveled to Mecca before, but not during the season of pilgrimage. They had made what is called minor hajj, a pilgrimage out of season, away from the crowds and far less intense.

Jalil went in 1976, before the Saudis vastly expanded the big mosque in Medina and the big mosque in Mecca, and added air conditioning to both.

This time, their group traveled from the airport to Medina, where the prophet Muhammad's remains are buried, and where the mosque accommodates 900,000 pilgrims inside and another 600,000 in the immediate area surrounding the building. "It's not part of the hajj, but most people go there too," Khan said.

The Saudi government assigns pilgrim allotments to nations with predominantly Muslim populations. Otherwise, the 1.4 billion Muslims in the world would send far more pilgrims than the holy cities can accommodate. As it is, the pilgrims making hajj are older than formerly, as religious leaders parcel out the opportunities to those who soon may not be able to make the trip.

Normally about 6,000 Americans make the trip, too small a number for the Saudis to restrict. "I met one person who has gone every year for the last 20 years," Dr. Khan said. "He's an American, lives in New York, a physician."

The Hajj requires enormous logistical planning. The Saudi government sends in 100,000 police to maintain order. Other workers staff food and water stations.

Nonetheless, more than 250 people died Feb. 1 when crowds of pilgrims stampeded as they symbolically threw stones at the devil, a requirement of the Hajj. Thirty-six people died in a 2002 stampede. In 1990, more than 1,400 people died.

"You try to be careful and go when it's not crowded," Khan said. "But no one's immune to it. Two or three million people have to pass through a given space in 12 or 13 hours."

A thriving hotel industry has grown up around Mecca and Medina, but not with enough rooms to accommodate the crowds of the peak season. “You cannot build hotels for two million people for two weeks,” Khan said. Many people, he said, rent rooms in private homes.

“All you see is people,” Khan said. “You cannot describe it. People, people more people.”

“People from different countries, different languages, all with the common goal.” Jalil said.

Khan said he took what was billed as the five-star trip, staying in a five-star hotel in Jedda and four-star hotel in Mecca, where, space being precious, he shared a hotel room with three other men.

“You’re the same person,” he said, reflecting back on the trip. “I don’t think you’ve changed. You feel good that you’ve completed the requirements of your religion. But that’s not the end of it. You still have to pray to God the rest of your life. That’s not the end of the relationship.”

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