

If only I had known what he had said



Landmarks were pointed out, which could be used as a guide if pilgrims were lost, writes DR SALIM PARKER.

‘WHAT will you do if you get lost during Hajj?’ she asked her father.

This conversation took place before her parents were to depart for Hajj. The couple was supposed to have performed the most important journey in the life of a Muslim the year before but the wife had a major medical problem weeks before they had to undertake the journey and had to postpone it.

The wife recovered remarkably well and, with the blessings of their Creator and a remarkable will and steely determination, they were fully prepared for the journey the second time around.

The daughter and the rest of the family were very aware of his love for making duah. When it was one of his children’s or grandchildren’s birthdays, he would gift them a prayer. A special present would be two prayers.

She asked again, ‘Dad, what are you going to do if you get lost during Hajj?’

He replied that he would sit down somewhere and make duah. Had I known this about him, I would probably have reacted very differently when I first met him.

Every Hajj group tries to orientate their hujjaaj a few days before Hajj as to where all the different camps on Mina and Arafah are in relation to their current accommodation. It is reiterated to all that the crowds are vast, that vehicle transport may at times be difficult, and at other times impossible.

It is emphasised to everyone to always keep their identification tags on them at all times.

My group had two camps on Mina. The first group was taken on an excursion to the camp after Fajr two days before Hajj com-

menced in order to familiarise them with the route from their base accommodation in Azizyah, just outside Makkah, and very close to Mina.

Landmarks were pointed out, which could be used as a guide if pilgrims were lost. This first group set off very excitedly and, a few hours later, returned with markedly decreased levels of energy and with the harsh reality of the physical demands of the short walk having shaken them out of their romantic notions of under-

taking a walking Hajj.

Hajj was in the heart of summer and the temperature was hovering in the high forties. It was humid and unpleasant.

The first group realised that, even though there were no crowds, no traffic with its claustrophobically noxious emissions and no army personnel forcing them to take detours that would add kilometres to their journey under the unforgivingly blazing sun, this short walk would drain them significantly.

Many who had initially decided to walk realised that they would be much better off taking the provided transport. Yes, they would probably be stuck in heavy traffic along some parts of their journey but at least they would be seated in air-conditioned comfort.

They might even, at some stage, decide to get off their conveyance but at least would have some inkling as to their whereabouts and where to walk to.

The second group walked in the late afternoon, when the temperature was supposed to be bearable after the afternoon zenith. Of course, the reference to the heat is relative – bearable in relation to a furnace or hot oven would be an apt description.

A few hours earlier, capsules that I was carrying from one hotel to another, had melted a mere two minutes into my journey. I accompanied this second group from our hotel in Azizyah and we all ensured that we had adequate protection against the sun, and enough hydrating fluids.

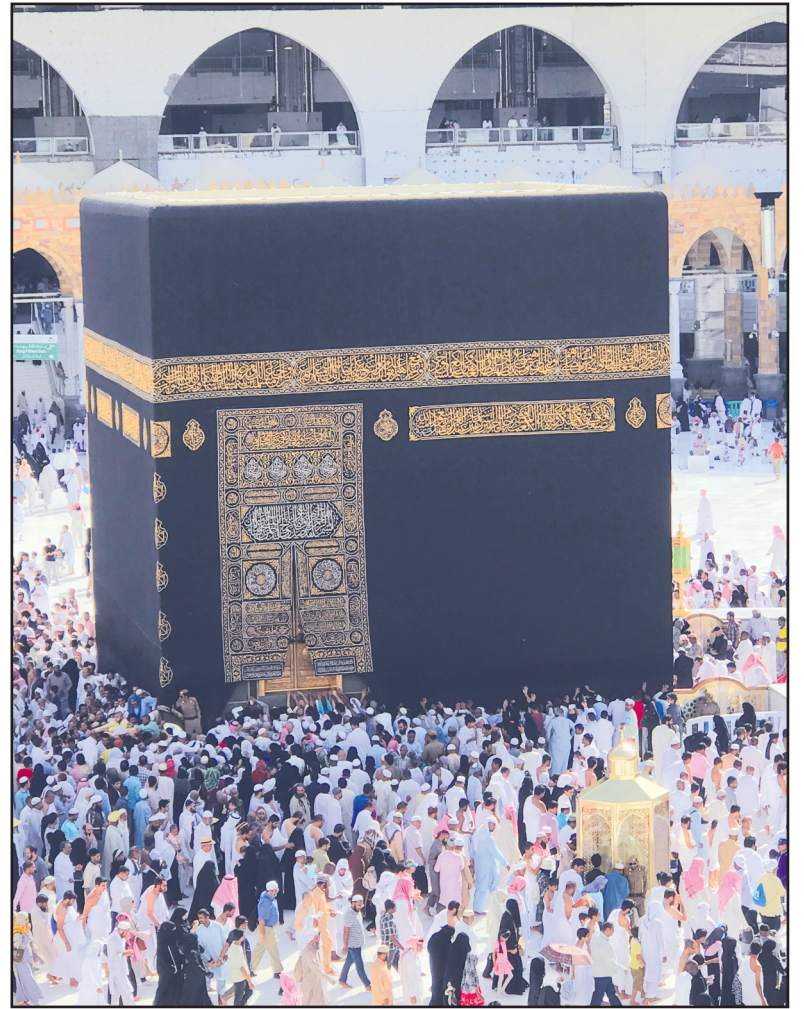
We were all sweating before we even got to the main road. That road was only reached after climbing a number of steps. It then inclined significantly to lead to a tunnel through which we would reach Mina.

The group leaders were spread from the front to the back of the growing line as the disparity in the levels of fitness and endurance ability of the walkers became increasingly evident.

I drifted up and down this group until we reached the tunnel, which had a cooling system in it,



The tunnel leading from Azizyah to Mina has huge fans that serve to cool the hujjaaj walking to and from those areas. Photo SALIM PARKER



The Kaabah, to which Muslims turn in prayer five times a day, although key to the Hajj, is Allah’s House around which pilgrims perform tawaaf, completing seven circuits – starting and ending at the Hajaratul Aswad. The only time that tawaaf is not performed is during the time that the compulsory daily prayers are performed. Photo SALIM PARKER

a welcome reprieve from the oppressive heat despite the deafening noise of the turbines that rushed on the cooling air.

Even though we were walking up an incline, the pace quickened, except for those lagging at the back. This led to an even greater distance between the leaders and those bringing up the rear.

I had already exited the tunnel when someone rushed up to me. ‘Please come look at this gentleman,’ he worriedly requested. I obliged and ran back to where a small group was surrounding a clearly unwell man. He was sweating profusely, unlike the rest of us in the tunnel with its cooling gusts.

‘He is not speaking,’ someone said. ‘I think he is having a stroke,’ someone else volunteered.

The gentleman was sitting on a low wall but was not responding to any questions. He seemed to be staring into the distance and seemed oblivious of his surroundings. I had a good idea of what was wrong with him.

I advised the others to join the rest of the group. We were very close to the end of the tunnel and right outside it was one of the best equipped hospitals that I have ever come across. A good friend of mine was working in the hospital at that time, and it would have been easy for me to have the man seen to if it was necessary.

I did a basic examination and found his power and strength to be normal. He was now following basic instructions, such as raising his hands. A few minutes later, he verbally confirmed his identity, which we had already established as he was wearing a wrist band and two cards attached to a lanyard stating it.

After about another ten minutes he could easily communicate and could give me a full breakdown of all his medical conditions, even though it was in response to direct questions only.

He indicated that he was an epileptic but that he had not had

any attacks in the past few years. I explained that the stress of the walk had probably precipitated this attack, even though he was taking his medication regularly.

He refused admission to hospital and the two of us started to slowly walk back to his hotel. It was a downhill walk and he was responding more easily by now. He agreed not to walk during the days of Hajj. If he was forced to walk, such as when a bus broke down, he would stay with his group and proceed slowly.

‘Your health is important on this journey, and there is no rush for any of our rituals,’ I implored. I advised him to seek help as soon as he felt unwell. He could anticipate an attack and this is when he should indicate to someone that he was not feeling well.

We reached his hotel after about thirty minutes and I examined him in more detail and then we parted ways.

That was my first and last encounter with him. I was not aware that he had told his daughter that he would simply sit down somewhere and make duah if he were to get lost. In retrospect, when he felt unwell, as in this instance, he would have done exactly the same thing.

When on Hajj, millions are walking, sitting or sleeping everywhere. No one is going to ask anyone sitting somewhere whether they were feeling fine or if they needed help. It is only when someone collapses or has an evident problem that someone will approach such a person.

There are plenty of volunteers and officials who will help, when they are asked. Sadly, I did not know about his background.

Could I have prevented what followed a few days later?

This story will continue in the next edition.

For more Hajj Stories visit www.hajjdoctor.co.za. You may contact Dr Parker via e-mail: salimparker@yahoo.com