



There were, initially, adequate supplies of food and beverages but, as the day wore on, especially after the standing of Wuqoof, supplies started to dwindle, writes DR SALIM PARKER.

‘DOC, we need some water,’ he pleaded. He was on a spiritual high but his eyes looked sunken, a sure sign of the dehydration that was slowly but surely setting in.

I looked around but saw not a drop in sight. I did see hundreds of thousands of profusely perspiring hujaaj on one of the hottest and most humid days I have ever encountered. All of us were in ihraam. After all, we had starting ‘pressing on, or surging from Arafah’ as different translations of the Holy Quran suggest, a mere two hours earlier.

Two hours after the most important time in a Muslim’s life does not seem like a long time. Two hours walking from Arafah to Musdalifah, remembering your Creator all the time, and walking as a group of able-bodied souls is awe-inspiring.

Rubbing shoulders with brothers and sisters from all corners of the globe, from all walks of life and all strata of society is the most humbling reminder of how our ihraam elevates all of us to the most favoured state by our Lord.

We should have left Arafah with an adequate supply of water. I was the doctor in the South African camp where people paid an obscene amount for so-called ‘special services’.

There were, initially, adequate supplies of food and beverages but, as the day wore on, especially after the standing of Wuqoof, supplies started to dwindle.

First the cold juices and drinks dried up.

Then even the stores in the backup area were finished and I could see many of the hujaaj sipping on juices that were warmer than the hot tea served earlier.

Walking from Arafah to Musdalifah, remembering your Creator all the time, and walking as a group of able-bodied souls is awe-inspiring. However, the physical effort of the walk in the extremely humid conditions leads to accelerated sweating and water loss, which requires the intake of fluids.

Photo SALIM PARKER

A few hours before sunset there was no bottled water around.

The only taps in the area were at the ablution facilities and the water from there was not deemed fit for human consumption.

I have an absolute rule when I am in ihraam: I only eat when I am really hungry and only drink when I am thirsty. I try to eat and drink what I envisaged my beloved Prophet (SAW) consumed. It is my humble belief that, as with our basic ihraam, we should adjust our cuisine to the essentials.

Water, water, nowhere to be found

We were a relatively large group of close to a hundred who left Arafah just after sunset. Most of us were not too bothered about the water issue as we had had enough during the day.

We initially weaved our way through a few camps, waded through numerous piles of rubble at the foot of Jabal Rahmah, the Mount of Mercy, and then joined the hundreds of thousands thronging the pedestrian paths to Musdalifah. Everyone was on a spiritual high and the camaraderie was heart-warming. The younger pilgrims offered to carry the bags of the physically less endowed, and those at the back of the group kept a watchful eye on their fellow walkers.

There was a relatively carefree mood as far as water consumption was concerned, and within the first hour virtually all the supplies that we were carrying were used up. The relative lack of water during the latter part of the day was only now catching up with us.

The physical effort of the walk in the extremely humid conditions led to accelerated sweating and water loss. I normally drink minimally during the six-hour walk but I had over a litre of fluids within the first hour.

There is a stretch between Arafah and Musdalifah where there is no drinking water for about an hour while walking. By this time, virtually no one had any liquids left. I had two small bottles that I normally keep for medical use. Two small bottles. I knew no one else would have water. Two small bottles and about a hundred hujaaj. The crowds were becoming more and more dense, with a lot of pushing and shoving occurring.

I looked at my thirsty pilgrim. We had about thirty minutes to go

before we reached Musdalifah. ‘Yes Doc, we also need some water,’ someone else said with some degree of desperation. I knew we would get enough fluids on Musdalifah. There, I knew, would be vendors selling food and drinks as well as numerous trucks distributing free beverages. We only needed to get there.

We were now literally walking one step at a time due to the crowd congestion as the road narrowed. The oppressive heat was accentuated by sweaty souls all trying to move forward.

It is one of the strange observations on Hajj that even the sweatiest person has no unpleasant odour. All that is present is the pervasive sense of effort, acceptance and endurance. ‘I have some water,’ I said and starting to scratch in my backpack.

‘May I have a pain tablet please?’ someone suddenly asked. We could all see that she was in considerable pain and that deflected a bit of attention from the thirst.

We were moving forward all the time, albeit at a snail’s pace. Some eyes were clearly very dreary now and receding increasingly into their orbits as the supporting fluids were drying up.

Suddenly, the crowd thinned out. The road widened and we could move with ease. Just the fact that we could walk freely propelled even the weariest forward with renewed purpose just like a trapped bird freed from its cage.

We saw people crowding towards trucks that were clearly distributing juices. However, we did not even have to go to the trucks. Right in the middle of the road, as we were walking, someone was handing out bottles of water. It was not just water, it was ice-cold, absolutely heaven-sent water.

True, it was not Zam-zam but it was very welcoming.

We did not even have to crowd for it as it was handed out freely. We all smiled and a few of us distributed it amongst our group. I was immensely relieved and a few of us tried to ensure that we all stocked up for the road ahead.

‘You can drink Doc, there is more than enough,’ someone said, while pouring some very welcoming ice-cold water over my head.

‘First drink this,’ a fellow pilgrim offered. He had somehow got hold of a small box of ordinary orange juice. It also was chilled to nearly freezing point, and he had opened it a minute earlier and had literally only taken a sip.

We had chatted for a part of the walk and had learnt quite a bit about each other during that time. Some of my fondest memories of the more than sixteen years that I have walked this path are of the friendships forged while walking.

‘I kept it especially for you, and I know you had nothing to drink yet,’ he smiled. It may be the cheapest juice sold on the market but it was the sweetest, most welcoming drink that I can remember drinking. I followed this by having some of the water that was now in abundance.

Musdalifah was the oasis of our journey, where we could replenish not only our water but also our sagging spirits.

We moved closer to the border of Mina and made our combined Maghrib and Esha prayers and sat down to rest. We still had to collect pebbles but at that moment we merely thanked our Creator for his infinite blessings.

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

