

# Hajj Stories

## A Hajj Gift

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### Dr Salim Parker

Phone text messages can be so impersonal. ‘Allah grant you complete recovery,’ was the seemingly terse message that I sent him. I deliberately kept the message short as I was told that he was quite sick. He was on high flow oxygen in a high care hospital unit. He was struck by the pandemic COVID-19 virus that seems to have a predilection for the more senior amongst us. He certainly did not appear old but the well-known fact that he was involved in the Hajj industry for decades certainly put him in the high-risk category as far as age was concerned. I also attached my name to my message as I was certain he would not remember me. He only had one interaction with me ever and that was not even in South Africa. He responded to my message with one of thanks. I am sure he did not recall me. I however will never forget him. I will never forget his kindness and generosity that made me seek him out on Arafat.

He has always been known as an astute businessman operating with honesty and integrity. He dealt in the upper end of the Hajj and Umrah market and his reputation was legendary. There were no empty promises that plagued

the industry. What he promised and what the pilgrim paid for he delivered. If due to some unforeseen circumstances additional costs were incurred, he would bear it himself. The COVID-19 pandemic merely enhanced his reputation. Hajj and Umrah for 2020 was not permitted for South Africans. Most hopeful pilgrims had already paid for their packages and needed to be refunded. However, most of their funds were already used to purchase their airline tickets and paying for their accommodation. This needed to be refunded by these entities to the agents before the pilgrims could receive their money. He did not wait. As soon as he realised that Hajj was not going to take place, he paid back every cent owing to the pilgrims without any assurance that he would ever receive all his money.

I did meet him only once and that was on Arafat. That particular year I was not even supposed to be on Hajj. The number of applicants far exceeded South Africa’s quota. I supposed I could have gone as one of the working medical staff but that would have meant that I would have signed a contract not to perform Hajj. I always differed with

the South African Hajj authorities about this prohibition as I always felt that donning Ihram inspires me to be more aware of my responsibilities as a doctor. We always respectfully disagree about this issue. All the Hajj and agent visas, the latter also permitting the performance of Hajj, were allocated and I resigned myself to being home for the first time in more than ten years.

an instruction. I was hesitant of course and started asking a barrage of questions. He burst out laughing. ‘You want to go or not?’ he asked. He explained that a pilgrim cancelled and the Hajj authorities called a number of people who were next in line on the accreditation system and offered the visa to them. South Africans as a rule want to spend a number of weeks on Hajj and a

here? Get on the first available flight and make Duaa for us once you are in Makkah!’ they literally shouted. I of course did not waste any time and departed the very next day. The person who gifted me the visa was the very same hajj operator.

I felt compelled to at least compensate him in some way and tried to get hold of him in Mak-

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I went to drown my sorrows with my unsympathetic best friends who lamented that all the myriad sins that I accumulated since the previous Hajj would not be forgiven. My phone rang as they were pondering how I would spend Eid-ul Adha at home.

I would never ever attempt to obtain a Hajj visa at the expense of someone who has been waiting for years to undertake the journey of a lifetime. My good

ten-day journey did not appeal to those approached. Then there were matters pertaining to getting hurried work leave, sorting out finances and other matters.

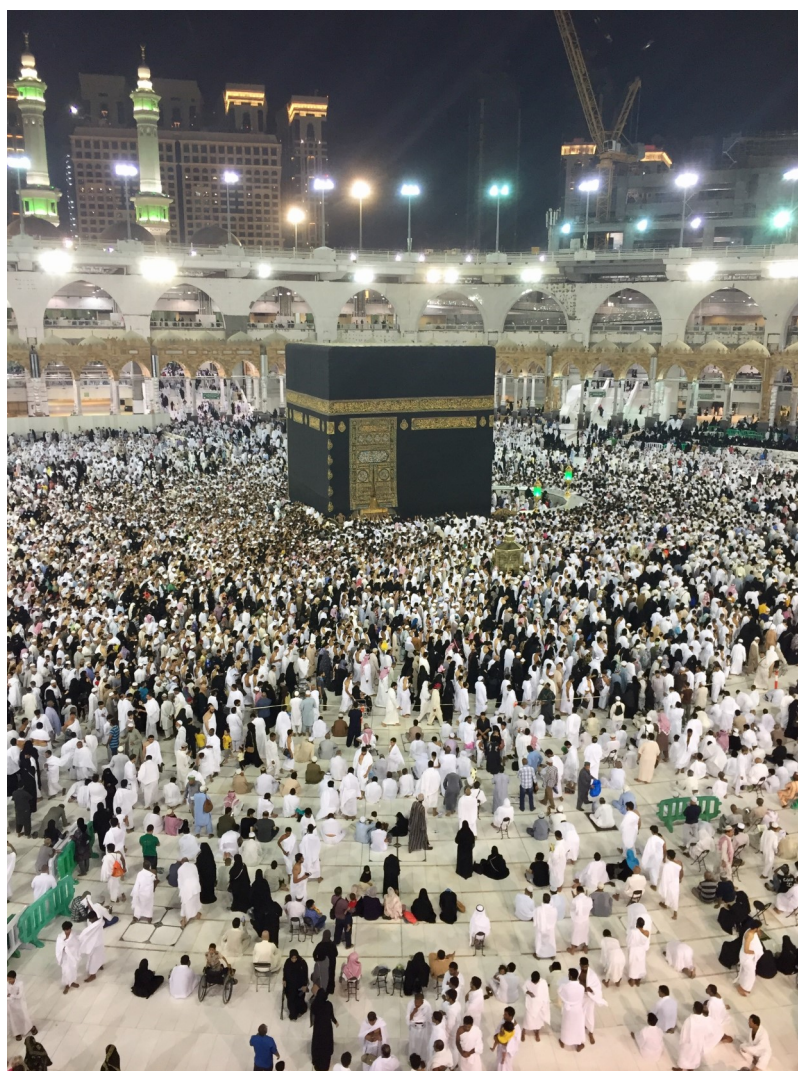
We also have to fill our quota as not doing so would give the impression that we are over catered for. I could not contain myself. ‘My sins are going to be forgiven!’ I told my friends. Somehow they suspected that I would still get to the Holy Lands. ‘You al-

kah but was unsuccessful. It was compulsory for me to leave no debt unsettled before the days of hajj started and I felt distinctly uneasy of not at least interacting with him. The first day of Hajj came and I went to his camp on Mina but he was not around and I could not reach him on his mobile. The next morning we departed for Arafat. I did not have time to put on my Ihram for Hajj yet as there were many medical cases to sort out and decided to do it on Arafat after all patients were settled. When we reached Arafat one of my colleagues pointed him out to me and I went to greet him.

After the introductory niceties I broached the subject of debts. He smiled. ‘I was told of the work you do, so it’s a pleasure,’ he smiled. I tried to object, and at that time some pilgrims were seeking his attention, so he merely said: ‘we both have people to take care of, but we must meet after Hajj. God willing. There is no debt. It is time to put on Ihram.’ With that we parted ways and carried on with our duties. At the time of Wuquf, donned in my Ihram, I thanked our Creator for the blessing to stand on the Holy Plains once again.

The infection took a toll on his body and he needed to go onto a ventilator. Then Allah decided to recall him. This year I will not be on Arafat to make Duaa for him. However, wherever I’ll be, he’ll be in my and many others’ prayers. Good deeds always leave an indelible mark.

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True generosity gifted me to perform Hajj

friend in the Hajj body knew this and would also never indulge in such an activity. It was him calling. The last flight out of South Africa was a few days away. ‘Doc, get ready to fly out,’ he said. To me it sounded more like

ways somehow are blessed to have another chance to come right,’ one of them laughed. My colleagues at work did not even hesitate the next morning when I told them that I had been gifted a visa. ‘What are you still doing