

Hajj Stories

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Hajj touches everywhere

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A small room on a faraway western continent seems a very unlikely place to commence a wordless conversation about Hajj, especially if those involved did not speak or understand a single word of the other's language. This exchange between two very different cultures and backgrounds in a country relatively foreign to both of them took place when I went to present some scientific results at a medical conference during the spring season in the northern hemisphere. Quebec is a beautiful and quaint French speaking city in Canada and I was staying in a small boutique hotel. Though the air was still crisp and winter reminded us of its not having completely receded yet by its presence on the snow laden nearby peaks, the days were stretching into longer efforts by the warming rays of the sun to caress buds into blooming.

‘Make Duaa for him, maybe he’ll take Shahada,’

The chambermaid softly knocked on the door of my room the morning after my arrival. I was busy with some work but indicated that she could commence to clean my room and that she would not disturb me. She only spoke French and we communicated by gestures and signs. She was an elderly lady, stout, short and fair in complexion and had quite stern and solemn outlook. I was finalising the talk I had to present and went back to work on my computer. I also prepared a poster on Hajj about some investigations we carried out the year before and this was rolled up on my bed but somehow got covered by the duvet as I forgot to store it in the cupboard. She was unsmiling and mumbled all the time. I could not fathom the reason for her unfriendliness as my room was relatively clean and required minimal attention. I was also at my desk in a corner so was definitely not bothering her at all.

She attended to the bathroom first and then grudgingly grabbed the two lower ends of the duvet and in an irritated manner pulled it off the bed and at the same time violently shaking it. The poster fell off the bed and I am could have sworn that she uttered a few choice expletives which even the delightful French accent could not disguise. She kneeled down to pick it up. The poster had unrolled somehow and a picture of the Kab’aa was visible. Her eyes widened. ‘Kab’aa’ she stammered. She stared at it in amazement and she instinctively unrolled the poster further. Her eyes widened as a picture of pilgrims unveiled itself. ‘Hajj!’ she exclaimed. The text and scientific of course meant nothing to her and was of absolutely no consequence; all she saw was the representations of the fifth pillar of Islam. She looked at me. She was smiling.

She suddenly realised that she in effect violated the hospitality industry’s code of conduct by opening the poster. She quickly rolled it up again and apologised profusely. I could not help smiling and, in English,

reassured her that all was in order. She was wearing the hotel uniform of a bland overall and a protective surgical cap. ‘Muslim? Islam?’ I asked as I pointed towards her. ‘Muslim! Muslim!’ she exclaimed and, with profuse apologies, exited the room. She was back barely a few minutes later, with the young acne faced lad who doubled as the receptionist and the concierge. I engaged him about the local Quebec attractions the night before. He looked completely bewildered and it was evident that he was summonsed with almost indecent haste. He clearly had a higher ranking in the hotel than her but she seemed to be part of the furniture it was evident that he respected her.

She rattled off a few questions in French and he had to stop her in order to translate firstly to me and then my response to her. Yes, I did perform Hajj already. Yes, I was there quite a few times. Her jaw dropped in amazement when I mentioned how Allah has blessed me. She never was in Saudi Arabia yet and her dream was to perform Hajj. She and her family fled a war torn Middle Eastern country a while back and she was working to earn enough money so that she could embark on this immensely spiritual obligation. Her

consumption. ‘Halaal, halaal,’ she commandeered and I had no reason to doubt it, delving into my morning meals with relish. She also, via the receptionist interpreter, pointed out eateries that were fully Muslim owned and Halaal and I had no problems at all having excellent meals during the course of my stay.

She was now very upbeat, happy and content in the mornings. She made a point of softly reciting a Thikr whenever she cleaned my room and her demeanour was similar towards the other guests. You made her smile,’ the receptionist remarked. ‘Hajj made her smile,’ I replied. On my departure I handed over some Canadian dollars to her but she refused to take it. ‘It is for your Hajj, you are definitely going to go soon, Insha-Allah,’ I said. She very reluctantly took it. ‘Make Duaa please,’ she pleaded. I assured her that I will and requested her to reciprocate. She glanced at the receptionist. ‘Make Duaa for him, maybe he’ll take Shahada,’ she said. I had noticed his growing interest in Islam and reflected on how a Middle Eastern cleaner and a South African doctor of Indian decent somehow had influenced a bilingual young receptionist of Irish descent on the west coast of Canada.



Somewhere, somehow there may be someone in the crowds who you may have met before

expatriate community performed Hajj in groups and she was planning to perform it soon, but was not certain whether she would be able to do it that particular year. There were visa and other issues to consider. ‘Insha-Allah,’ I said. She burst out into tears. ‘Insha-Allah! Insha-Allah!’ she cried. The receptionist, clearly very much at ease with her, was moved into hugging her, a tear very, very evident on his cheek.

There was at least one perk as a result of our conversation. My breakfast for the next few days were personally prepared by her even though it was not part of her job description. She made it her business to ensure that my meals were prepared separately and on two occasions there were choice pieces of meat as well. I had resigned myself to having pastries and fruit for breakfast as the standard other fare was not for Muslim

That year’s Hajj I thought about her on Arafat and made Duaa that she would indeed be on the plains of Arafat one day. Then, the following year I received an e-mail to say that she has accepted the invitation accepted annually by a minute percentage of Muslims. She was going to soon don her Ihram. The mail did not come from the hotel I stayed at and was sent by a Muslim male. I responded to it but till today have not had feedback. It does not matter if I receive feedback or not, even though I would have dearly wanted to meet her in Makkah. It mattered that her prayers were to be answered. It mattered that she was going to stand on Arafat and exclaim ‘Labaik!’

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