

Hajj Stories

Don't Nick Hajj Time

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They were fuming. It seemed whatever that was promised to them did not materialize. The early check in in Madinah, the City of Peace and Light was non-existent and they had to hang around for a few hours before their room was available in their tired and travel fatigued state. Their agent, contrary to common sense, promised them that he would be able to arrange it for them. It was their first Hajj and they were of the last to arrive in Saudi Arabia. I am on record as stating that the appreciation of the most important journey in the life of a Muslim is directly proportional to the duration of their stay in the Holy Land. Long gone are the times when it took months, then weeks, and then days to traverse the land, seas or skies. Now it takes hours. Sometimes the international journey is shorter than the travel from the arriving Saudi airport to the hotel. No amount of money can easily overcome the inevitable chaos created by the impatient masses.

Landing in Saudi close to Hajj is to become part of a logistical nightmare. Severely congested airports, unsympathetic and frankly crude officials who have no problems letting tired pil-

grims wait for no reason other than to show that they are in charge seems to be the norm. As keen as they were to check in early into their room so eager were the current occupants to leave their rooms as late as possible as the latter's journey to Makkah would only be six hours

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after the normal check-out time. Madinah is really the City of Peace, Calm and Light. It is however not the case when the hotels are filled to capacity, when it can take up to thirty minutes to get into an elevator and then there are still the massive crowds to compete with in the stifling desert heat in order to get into the Prophet's (SAW) Mosque. Then the jostling starts in order to get into the very piece of heaven on earth, the Raudal Jannah. Even when the officials implement strict time and crowd controls, the millions trying to have their own precious moment there leads to extreme discomfort and agitation.

Their stay in Madinah is always shorter than what most Hujjaaj are privileged with. Visiting the historic places in and around

Madinah is in competition with thousands of buses all emitting hot fumes that seem to increase the already furnace-like temperatures by a few degrees. The travel fatigue did not have time to dissipate before these stressors add to them. Before a real appreciation of the calmness of Madinah could descend and reawaken the soul and energise the senses, the few days are over and the journey to Makkah beckoned. The bus journey between the two cities is notable for having multiple checkpoints, much paperwork, overloaded baggage as pilgrims buy at a frenzied pace, and unfortunately very unpredictable departure times. Often pilgrims are asked to assemble in the hotel lobby at a certain time with the promised bus only arriving hours later.

The bus that arrived at their hotel was old. In fact, it was a virtual wreck with about the only saving grace being a working air conditioner. It was not the standard luxury coach with soft reclining seats and good leg space, rather it had hard rickety and narrow seats nearly abutting each other. It was not the ideal transport medium for the nearly ten-hour journey between the two holy cities. With additional bags stuffed in the aisle, it was evident that the journey was going to be extremely uncomforta-

ble and taxing. The passengers rightly asked for an alternate bus, but the unfortunate reality was that the agent was completely dependent on the authorities who supplied the vehicle. The options were really not options at all. They could wait until an alternate bus was available which could have been up to twenty-four hours. Since they were checked out of their hotel already and others have moved into the rooms, they would have had to linger around in the hotel foyer. They opted to take the old bus.

Sometimes it is an unfortunate set of circumstances. Sometimes it is incompetence and poor service and neglect by the agent. At times it is a traveller that no one is able to please despite all valiant efforts by all involved.

When they arrived in Makkah it was already packed to capacity. When they were supposed to move to Azizyah a few days before Hajj, the roads were

him to have a chat with the agent about the shortcomings in the services rendered, to accept that journeying so late often leads to unexpected complica-



Time in Madinah is precious and unforgettable

blocked and their transport could not be dispatched. An unforgivable lack of communication by the agent aggravated the tension and the group who only much later at last travelled were justifiably furious. One of them saw me for a medical condition and narrated his journey so far. It was evident that none of the spiritual and romanticized stories that he was inundated with before he embarked on his journey resonated with him. 'Maybe I did something wrong, maybe Allah is punishing me, but this journey so far has been fraught with nightmarish complications,' he lamented.

It was three days before Hajj was due to commence. I could sense his desperation, yet I knew the situation was imminently salvageable. 'Hajj is Arafat,' I said. 'Everything before that will fade into insignificance. We have a gentleman in hospital currently and will arrange for him to be transported directly from there to Arafat and back on the day of Wuqoof. I can take you to meet him and you will see how excited and grateful he is to still be able to complete his Hajj. I am not justifying what you endured, not saying it is the norm because it is not, but it happened. You are relatively healthy except for the chest infection which I promise to sort out for you,' I added. I advised

tions, and to prepare his heart and soul for the most important days of his life ahead.

He had a talk with his agent and they came to some agreement. It was not to his complete satisfaction, but he was pleased with the acknowledgment of shortcomings by the agent and a pledge to prevent it in the future. Suddenly he was a different man. From a moody and irritable person who most tried to avoid, he then became engaging, smiling and helpful. He actually came to see me on the first day of Hajj on Mina just to let me know that he is indeed physically and spiritually ready and bears no animosity towards anyone. He was not part of the group that I accompanied and I did not see him the next day on Arafat.

That evening, a large number of us walked from Arafat to Musdalifah. When we reached there, most of us performed our obligatory prayers, collected our pebbles and prepared to sleep on our prayer mats for an hour or two. He came to sit next to me, appearing out of nowhere. He looked as disheveled as the rest of us. 'I am at one with all my brothers and sisters,' he said, the tone of his voice echoing deep acceptance. 'Labaik!' we all chanted. He has truly arrived.

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