

Hajj Stories

January 2017

Blazing heat of Arafat

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Technology is wonderful. Modern aircrafts and computerised optimal connection times led to me completing the journey from Cape Town to Jeddah in less than twelve hours. How different to the months and sometimes even years that it took the determined pilgrims to perform Hajj a few centuries ago! Modern technology also has its weaknesses. Due to computer glitches, passport controls and a sheer lack of any form of logic or common sense in the absence of these undisputed marvels, the onward journey from Jeddah to Makkah lasted more than eighteen hours. Yes, it took much longer to complete the journey of just over one hundred kilometres than it took to travel the thousands of kilometres from the southernmost airport of Africa. All pleads to speed up the last leg of the journey of the travel weary, Ihram clad pilgrims fell on deaf ears. The phrase ‘Sabr, have patience,’ was becoming more and more meaningless with each passing minute. The hajj airport terminal, exposed to the humid oppressive heat of the Arabian blazing summer, was the direct antithesis of the freezing stormy Cape winter that seemed so appealing all of a sudden.

The Saudi authorities do have superb measures in place to medically manage the effects of heat exposure during Hajj. Wards are specifically set up to immediately treat anyone suspected to have heat stroke and these are managed by experts in the field. Specific protocols have been set up for field staff to monitor the pilgrims during the prescribed rituals. Several measures are also put in place to prevent heat exposure. These include educational campaigns, the use of water sprayers in and around crowded areas such as the Haram and the pilgrimage walking paths to and from Arafat, and the provision of more than adequate water during the days of Hajj. A number of measures are optional, and this led to some debate amongst the Hajj operators during the past Hajj.

Those who could afford it could have the luxury of air conditioned tents on Arafat and Mina. Some may consider it an excessive expense and still others say that it diminishes the appreciation of Hajj. From a medical point of view we encourage the use of these perceived luxuries. More than ten percent of South Africans need drips during the five days of hajj due to dehydration

signed to maximise the impact of the cooling effects of the modern machines. They were built so that there was no possibility of the hot outside air entering except through the single opening to either enter or exit them. Provided that the air conditioners were working, the temperatures inside were wonderfully cool. But this was not to be the case. The electricity kept tripping due to abnormal, untested and unanticipated demands on the system.

The tents heated up considerably on the inside and with no way for the hot air to escape, the inside was like a

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furnace. Ironically, in the camps where no air conditioning was provided, the tents were of a much more rudimentary structure and the side flaps could easily be lifted. This allowed the Arafat breeze to cool down the Hujjaaj, and made conditions at least bearable, in sharp contrast to the oven-like conditions that those in the luxury tents had to bear. We attended to a number of pilgrims who fainted due to the heat inside these tents and urged them to move to shaded areas outside. Most of them obliged. There was one lady who however was not keen to move, even though she was dehydrated and suffering from the initial stages of heat exhaustion. Her reason? She was not allowed to leave her tent without the consent and presence of her husband, her guardian, her Mahram.

In cases like these debates about different permissibilities are often futile. The doctor will argue that the life of a patient is much more important than an opinion of a particular Mathaab. Other juristic experts may respectfully differ. The afflicted patient in no way want to engage in any act which may be seen to compromise her Hajj. I have great sympathy for all who most likely would only perform one Hajj in their entire lifetime and always try not to counter with their viewpoint even if I strongly differ. So we immediately tried to get hold of her husband who was supposed to be in a tent close by. That tent however also had a problem with its electricity and we were reliability informed that the occupants had dispersed to tents that had working air conditioners. We however could not locate him.

The lady was steadily deteriorating and was in real danger of developing heat stroke. ‘We have to take you to hospital,’ I gently but firmly stated. ‘It will not affect my Hajj would it?’ she asked in a pleading manner. As she spoke there was a grinding noise and the air conditioner initially exhaled some blazingly hot stored stagnant air before the refreshingly cool air followed soon after. She improved within a few minutes and soon a smile rewarded our efforts. ‘Your Hajj is going to be just perfect,’ I said.

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The tents without air conditioners on Arafat have sides that open up to allow the refreshing Arafat breeze to cool the Hujjaaj

Many stories have been written of times that Hajj took place during the heart of the desert summer. Folks recount of the days when pilgrims simply sat under any shaded area, even if it was a mere covering of a piece of tent, too tired to even move due to the extremely high temperatures. The relief brought by water carriers who seemed immune to the effects of travelling in the direct sunlight was just temporary, and the suffering endured seemed to heighten their appreciation of the time when all were present as one on Arafat. It seems that we are entering those times again. The lunar calendar is about ten days shorter than the Gregorian one and every year we inexorably move closer to the heart of summer for the pilgrimage. Those who have been blessed by being able to accompany pilgrims for the last decade have noticed the increased temperatures annually. Maybe global warming is a contributory factor, maybe the modern comforts of the twenty first century is decreasing our resistance and resilience to new extremes.

and heat exhaustion. A significantly larger number also need treatment for other heat related conditions. Clearly addressing a preventable condition so that a person is in optimal physical and mental health on the day when all Hujjaaj are as close to their Creator as is humanly possible is infinitely more beneficial! The caveat of the past Hajj however was that the extra cost for the few days would have been increased the price of the accommodation by nearly fifty percent. This was way more than the majority could afford and only about a quarter of South Africans had the benefit of this modern convenience.

The tents on Arafat are only used once a year. The facilities, whether water, ablution, sanitary or electrical, are all only used once a year. Virtually every year technicians are still adding the finishing touches when the Hujjaaj arrive and in some years they are still busy when the pilgrims leave. Many aspects are probably untested and this was the case with the electricity supply to the air conditioners. The tents were newly de-