

‘I just want to go for Hajj’



What fascinates me is how much pilgrims are prepared to sacrifice in the quest to perform Hajj as perfectly as they perceive possible, writes DR SALIM PARKER.



The hajji wanted to arrive early in Saudi Arabia so that she would have more opportunities to enter the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah, which is known for not allocating much space for women in the Roudat al Jannah. Photo SALIM PARKER

ONE of the great rewards of being consulted by intending Hajj pilgrims is to hear their narrations.

There is always the trepidation of being vaccinated, and to ease the anxiety we employ a variety of strategies, which include them relating their viewpoint of their intended pilgrimage.

Sometimes, not a word is said, not due to fear-induced paralysis but due to emotions.

Many were simply too overwhelmed by the blessing and honour of undertaking the journey that they would not utter a word.

The tears rolling down their cheeks, the avoidance of eye contact and the gulp-like swallowing told a story on its own.

Sometimes it comes in a flood, with different torrents of thoughts confusing the gentle flow of the spoken tide.

Most of the related tales are of gratitude, of being honoured to be given a chance to be more Allah-conscious, of being given a new leash in life and of being able to repent and attaining redemption.

What always fascinates me is how much pilgrims are prepared to sacrifice in the quest to perform Hajj as perfectly as they perceive possible.

She consulted me months before she was due to depart our southern shores. She had planned, saved and dreamt of her Hajj and it was finally going to materialise. She informed me of her preparations and how she planned to stay as long as possible in the Holy Land.

She was going to spend every minute of the precious time there in worshipping her Creator in the two holiest mosques in Islam.

The vast majority of Muslims will only perform Hajj once in their lifetime, and she was one of those who were acutely aware of this fact.

There was not going to be any regrets about not having had enough time to do all the activities she had planned.

The Saudi authorities only allow a certain duration of stay and she was going to be of the first to depart South Africa and of the last to return.

She planned to have six weeks completely detached from her worldly, mundane affairs and only be involved with her inner spiritual self.

Her work was quite demanding and again she had planned every aspect way beforehand. Her accreditation to perform Hajj had come through early and she had set things in motion immediately. All her work had been prepared months in advance and was ready whenever it was required.

For the duties that would require her physical presence while she was away, she had asked for a replacement way ahead of the scheduled times needed for such requests to be approved. She had put in her leave requests timeously and had not thought that there would be any problems in it being granted.

She had informed her superiors some time back of her intention to perform Hajj, and they were aware of the normal duration of the journey for the ordinary Capetonian. None of them had indicated any discomfort with her plans, and she mentioned that one of her superiors was a Muslim who had performed Hajj already.

‘However, things are not going as planned,’ she said. She said it matter-of-factly, and did not seem perturbed by her statement at all.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, my curiosity stirred.

‘My work got back to me and are absolutely understanding of how important Hajj is to Muslims so they have no problems with me going. What they have a problem with is the duration of the leave that I requested. They say that it is

‘I told them that; I even said that my whole leave period can be unpaid. I don’t mind that if the leave is an issue, I just want to go for Hajj,’ she explained. She elaborated how she had had meetings with management and had tried to explain her side of the story but to no avail...

longer than they can grant,’ she replied.

‘I am sure you can take unpaid leave,’ I suggested.

‘I told them that; I even said that my whole leave period can be unpaid. I don’t mind that if the leave is an issue, I just want to go for Hajj,’ she explained. She elaborated how she had had meetings with management and had tried to explain her side of the story but to no avail.

The maximum time off they were prepared to give her was four weeks.

‘What about the Muslim who is part of management?’ I asked.

‘That person was of the opinion that Hajj was in reality only five days long and that a month was more than enough,’ was her reply.

I was dumbstruck. She worked for a big institution and her time away, as in any such organisation, should not have been a problem.

However, her absence would have inconvenienced, not paralysed, them as they would have to redeploy someone or even hire someone on a temporary basis.

If they were willing to do it for four weeks, surely they could do it for six weeks.

I thought of what difference two weeks could mean to her. However, I am probably the last person to ask! Two extra weeks!

Her early arrival in Saudi would not be an engagement of tolerance and endurance as the airport and other transport staff would be more than adequate to handle the number of travellers.

As she would be leaving before the majority of pilgrims would arrive in Saudi Arabia, she would have more opportunities to enter the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah. She would have more time to spend in the Roudat al Jannah, in the serene and immensely spiritual environment that not even massive crowds can eliminate.

In Makkah, there would be more tawaafs possible, more time to spend in the Haram, whether reciting, praying or just letting the sights of the Ka'bah overwhelm her.

I spoke then of the medical benefits of going early. This gives the person more time to acclimatise to

the oppressive heat and decreases the chance of heat stroke.

Also, orientation and getting used to the massive crowds become easier.

‘So what are you going to do?’ I asked.

‘I am going for the six weeks,’ she said determinedly.

‘And your work?’ was my next predictable question.

‘Doc, I am not going to give up my long held desire. Whatever Allah wills will happen. I’ll consider my future after Hajj but until my journey is complete, it will be the only thing occupying my mind,’ she answered.

She explained that she would not resign from her job as she would lose some of her benefits.

She was not going to claim for sick leave even though she had plenty of that available. In fact, she was determined that she would indicate to them, in writing, that she had more than enough reasons to go for six weeks and would be departing on a particular date.

‘If they call me to a disciplinary meeting or fire me before I leave, I’ll state my case and leave as planned and do something when I come back.

‘If they say that they would consider that I absconded on the day I departed without their permission then they must institute steps against me on my return. They can even fire me while I am gone. But I am going to depart on my booked date.’

Some often say that you are tested during Hajj. The obnoxious behaviour of fellow travellers, the non-delivery of agents, the disdain the authorities treat pilgrims with, often lead to an upsurge of anger and hatred, which, while at times probably justified, is against the spirit of Hajj.

Her test started way before she even spread her wings. I did not hear from her again but I am sure with her resolve and determination, Allah will smile on her.

May she and all other hujaaj have a Hajj maqbool and Hajj mabroor.