

# Hajj –

## The Ultimate Test

An account of Hajj performed in 1427

( 2006 / 2007)



We chose to perform the Tamattu Hajj which is where you firstly perform Umrah, upon its completion one breaks the ihram and again re-enters the state of ihram just before the Hajj.

Making the two rakahs and bowing down before Allah with the intention of performing Hajj was one of the weightiest things I have ever experienced, and though I was going through the motions I could not fully believe that I was doing so.

After many hours of waiting in the hotel lobby, packed and ready to go our coach finally arrived. As our group took their seats on the bus taking us to Mina a strange sense of quiet filled the air. Feelings of anxiety, fear and hope over took me.

As we slowly travelled along our group leader reminded us of the importance of the journey we were about to embark upon. He stressed the need to remain patient, to fulfil the rites of Hajj with the best of intentions. He spoke of the beauty of Hajj and

the importance of reciting the Talbiyah over the next three days. Finally, the journey of enigma had began. With much anticipation our coach headed in the same direction as all the other vehicles on the road, and as we did so the men recited the Talbiyah with great enthusiasm. The Talbiyah is a response to the invitation of the Almighty, and all the while one is hoping for acceptance of his response - despite the feelings of uncertainty it felt great to be on that bus.

Upon entering Mina we were greeted with a city ahead of us, every inch filled with huge white tents. We were taken to camp 43 where a large tent is split into two; one portion assigned to the men and the other to the ladies. The word tent doesn't seem appropriate; for what stood before me was a super sized room with bright tube lights throughout, air conditioning, power points enabling one to charge their mobile, a water cooler and large mats to protect us from the earthy sand. This was HOME for the next five days. We arranged our tent in an orderly fashion, luggage on the outskirts of the tent and we lay down our sleeping bags along the sides, leaving a huge space running throughout the middle enabling people to enter and exit easily and creating a large space to pray.

Having made ourselves comfortable I recall one lady addressing the tent, reminding us that we must help one another, share what ever provisions we had and not to feel embarrassed to ask from one another. Subhan'Allah the warmth, love and bond I felt for all those in my tent in such a short space of time was unimaginable. This is what is meant by 'brother / sisterhood', Alhamdulillah, we were one, and with that we slept.

I woke at 9.00am and decided to venture out of my tent. Me being me I wanted to check out the 'neighbourhood'! As I detached the velcro from our fire proof material 'tent' door I suddenly realised that we had slept in an unknown area with millions of unknown people around us, yet we slept behind an unlocked, opened door! Allahu Akbar, I thought about my home back in Oxford, not a single night passes without locking our front door, yet, in Mina nobody remained awake in fear of what was beyond our front door - this is what you call having faith!

Having stepped out of my tent I met a familiar face; my Dad! Together we brought tea from the local traders who lined the main road nearest to our camp. Thereafter, I headed towards the washrooms.

Now prior to leaving for Hajj I had heard many horror stories regarding the toilets, and so, more than the need for using the toilet I wanted to put my mind at rest. I had been told that the toilets available in Mina were the traditional 'hole in the ground' type which posed a problem for me seeing as I had never used one before! The prospects of using this primitive style toilet scared me for fear of being unable to keep clean. However, my best friend who had been to the Hajj the year before, who would never lie to me PROMISED me that in every block there was a modern style toilet which technically was installed to assist the disabled and elderly. So I went on a hunt, anxious to find this toilet which I hoped would put an end to my fears. It didn't take long to find it, for it was easy to spot MY toilet - stood before this door was a LONG line of other young relieved 'Brits' waiting patiently for the English style toilet! Of course I would happily be willing to let an elderly / disabled person go before me.

Subhan'Allah, the whole experience of using the toilet and making wudu was like performing an operation, as my every move was made with such precision ensuring

that I didn't drop anything etc! As I headed back to my tent I chuckled to myself for I recalled a conversation I had with my friend, I asked her are there hooks and mirrors in the toilets? her reply was, 'You're not going to the Hilton!'

Having returned to my tent there was a quiet buzz in the air, some were praying salah, reading Quran whilst others quietly chattered to one another. When thinking about the activities for the first day of Hajj you realise how Kind Allah is, for you simply pray Zohur, Asr, Maghrib, Isha and Fajr salah of the following day which to me seemed like a simple, relaxed day. Prior to Hajj we had been in the Kingdom for two weeks, and from the moment we had landed we had little sleep, I felt like we were always on the go, we would rise early in the morning for Tahaujd and retire to bed very late. During the first day of Hajj Allah bestows upon you a quiet day of reflection. The Almighty almost forces you to sit still, to regain your energy levels and to rest before the difficult journey ahead. A sister in our group cleverly summed up the first day in Mina, she said it was a day to prepare yourself for the big 'meeting,' for tomorrow was the day of Arafah; the day we would stand before our Maker; the day we would seek forgiveness; the day we would ask; make new intentions, hopeful of being absolved of all our sins.

The day passed in prayer and quiet reflection, despite being in the company of 20-25 people of all ages, at times I felt quite alone and lost in my thoughts. The group would come together for the congregational prayers led by our elderly Imaam. Throughout the day the Talbiyah could be heard from neighbouring tents. Before going to bed we were instructed to re-pack and reduce our bags, for tomorrow we would spend the day in Arafah and the night in Muzdalifah. We were told to pack only the essentials and to leave what was not needed in our tent in Mina.

#### DAY 2:

After a sound sleep I woke at 4.00am, early, in hope of being one of the first at the washrooms to perform wudhu for the early morning prayers. To my surprise the whole of Mina was up! I soon realised the WCs had now doubled up as the local 'Social Club'; it was a great way to make new friends and hear about others experiences while you waited your turn!

Having prayed Fajr together, we were once again prepped by our group leader who informed us of the best way to spend the day ahead of us, reminding us to make the very most of the time we have, he advised us not to return to sleep and to remain ready for our bus would soon be taking us to the Plain of Arafah. As we waited a lady in our tent performed a collective dua, it was a beautiful way to begin a very special day.

Hours passed, and still there was no sign of our bus, I went for a walk with my sister and as more and more time passed Mina began to look like a ghost town. Empty abandoned tents could be seen, there were no longer any queues for the toilets, paths were empty, buses came and went taking with them groups of pilgrims – yet there was no sign of our bus! Those that remained behind were a little panicked for it was now almost approaching mid-day, we had been waiting for our bus for over 8 hours!.

This was the Day of Arafah, the Day of Hajj which this year fell on a Friday, people wanted to arrive in Arafah for the Jummah Khutbah, but more importantly we worried as to whether we would even make it before the sun had set, for if we were not in the

vicinity of Arafah by Maghrib our Hajj would not be accepted. We prayed that this would not be the case.

Alhamdulillah, after almost 9 hours of waiting our bus number was called. As we headed towards our coach I witnessed a manic scene, people from all directions clambering onto the buses, people shouting, men urging their women to hurry onto the same bus as them, there were scenes of pushing, luggage falling from the roofs of the buses; chaos filled the air. We eventually found our way on to the bus and as we drove away I felt relieved, but I also felt selfish too, for as I peered out of the window I saw unhelpful, stranded pilgrims, their faces full of despair, I prayed that they too would be on their way to Arafah soon.

As we made the 3 mile journey I felt panicked, for those that I had spoken to prior to leaving for Hajj had said that as soon as one enters Arafah you feel Allah's Power and presence. This scared me, for I wondered whether I would feel as they did, I feared that perhaps the day would pass without me being able to engage with Allah as I would have hoped. Subhan'Allah as soon as the guards allowed us to pass the gates leading into our camp area in Arafah Allah's Might and Splendour hit me immediately. Wallah, the atmosphere was overwhelming, as people embraced, tears rolled down my cheeks. This was the day of Hajj, we had made it!

As we were shown to our tent we passed masses. Seeing the men wearing the Ihraam was a visual reminder of the time when we will be wrapped in the Kafan, being on the Plain of Arafah was like a rehearsal for the Day of Qiyamah, today was the day we would present ourselves to Allah on Earth.

This time no big modern tent stood before us. Instead a large, very primitive, bedouin style tent was offered to us. There were a few poles at regular intervals holding up sagging sheets, the ground was lined with old rugs with the earth coming through. Shortly after arriving we prayed Zohur and Asr upon the uneven ground.

As we stood before our Creator, the atmosphere that engulfs you is one of fear and hope. We raised our hands in supplication; we prayed and begged with all sincerity to Allah to accept our Hajj and to rid us of our past sins. We were hopeful of Allah's Mercy, Kindness and Love. Despite not being deserving of it, we hoped that by the time the sun had set we would be as pure as a new born babe.

As the day went on, you could hear the name of Allah being praised throughout Arafah in the form of duas, daroos, Talbiyah and nasheeds. Through neighbouring microphones you could hear groups of wailing pilgrims reminding you that without the help of Allah we are hopeless.

Our entire group came together, and the Imaam of our group led us in dua, as he asked from Allah on our behalf we stood behind him and wept.

As I watched the sun set over Arafah it felt odd that nobody stood to pray Maghrib, for this is the only time in a Muslim's life that the time of Maghrib passes without

praying the salah for it is upon arrival at Muzdalifah that we would pray the sun set prayer.

As our group waited patiently for our bus number to be called I met my Dad who hugged me, I will never forget his words, he said: 'How's my little Hajjah?'. Hearing those words and being in the company of my parents on such an auspicious day made my heart melt. Before leaving I scribed in the sand: 'I (my name) was here!' – well you cant be serious all the time!

Seeing as we were one of the last to leave Arafah by the time we arrived at Muzdalifah we found that practically all of the five million pilgrims had already landed. Now, in Muzdalifah you no longer have a nice big fancy tent like the one back home in Mina, nor do you have the bedouin sagging sheet style tent like in Arafah, what you have in Muzdaliafah is the 'Zillion Star Hotel!' the starry night sky as your shelter and the raw sandy earth is your new abode. Having left our coach I felt like getting straight back on it!

For miles all I could see were people, either on the move, praying or settling in their sleeping bags for the night. To be honest I didn't want to be there, I didn't think I could it. I didn't think I could spend the night in the open with millions of others, it just seemed too chaotic and seeing as I had been awake for almost 22 hours I just wanted to turn my back and RUN! But of course, I didn't. As we stepped over sleeping bag after sleeping bag I quietly prayed to Allah to give me the strength and will to get through the cold night ahead of us.

After laying down our sleeping bags we prayed our Maghrib and Isha salah as one is expected to. Having prayed my big sis' picked up a fist full of sand and said, ' this is what we are, and this is where we shall return.' You read that Hajj is the Journey of Death, and, by God, throughout every stage you are reminded of your end, and as each stage passes your luggage becomes less, your provisions become less, and in effect you leave the world and all it contains behind...taking you closer to your Lord and to your return. Having prayed I don't quite know what happened but Subhan'Allah I felt a total change in emotion, suddenly the prospects of camping out in the company of millions actually seemed like fun! I had a new outburst of energy and I felt ready for the challenge. Allah had taken me out of my plight! Our next mission was to collect our pebbles, for tomorrow we would return to Mina and pelt the biggest Jamarat.

I collected both mine and my Dad's pebbles and my sister collected hers and my Mum's pebbles, and what fun we had searching the earth with my torch for pea sized stones! As I bent to collect my stones I noticed the dust on my jilbab, I found sand collect inside my trainer shoes and as I disturbed the earth I found that dirt was collecting under my fingernails. Again this building up of dust, grime and dirt on your body and clothing reminds you once again of the akhirah, of your time in the grave, it was a strange state to be in.

Having collected my stones I went to the local trader to buy tea for our group as this year was a winter Hajj and as the night passed the temperature continued to drop. To my surprise the tea in Muzdalifah was 3 riyals (approx. 45pence). Now, by our standards that's very reasonable, but what made me laugh was the fact that pre Hajj the tea in Makkah and Madina was 1 riyal, the tea in Mina on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Hajj was 2 riyals and now in Muzdalifah inflation continued! I guess this again was Allah's way of ridding you of your worldly possessions, reminding you that you will leave with nothing!

As my family sipped their teas I decided to leave them to it. I took the few belongings I had and went and sat a little away from them, making sure that they were still in sight, fearing that if I ventured too far I would lose them as everything looks the same! I sat upon my sajadah with my sleeping bag wrapped around me, I had a large bottle of Coke to my left and a tub of salt and vinegar Pringles to my right ( well our Guide told us to pack the essentials!) and my travel sized Quran in my lap... I sat, ate, drank and prayed and as I did so I watched the scene ahead of me in amazement – this was the beauty of our deen, 5 million pilgrims in the middle of nowhere in the chill and dead of the night, men amongst the women supplicating and sleeping! The night of Muzdalifah for me was sensational. Seeing as Allah has blessed me with insomnia for many years now I spent the entire night awake.

As I prayed additional prayers I hoped that the earth that I prayed upon would speak favourably for me when I would return to our Lord. Having just spent the day in Arafah and now witnessing the scenes in Muzdalifah I thought of the nickname my big brother often calls me by: 'BRAT' and you know what that's exactly how I felt, like a spoilt brat, for I had everything before me...Alhamdulillah.

### DAY 3:

Having watched the sky change colour everyone rose for Tahujud and Fajr salah, and it was post Fajr that I finally felt the need for some kip and a warm hug from my mum for it was freezing! Having slept for about an hour I rose to the sound of my mobile phone. It was my two big sisters back in the UK, seeing as this was the day of Eid I instructed them to eat a samosa or two, or three on my behalf, for I did not expect to find any Eid treats back in Mina!

As it is sunnah to pack up and leave from Muzdalifah once the sun was up we decided that instead of queuing for a bus we would beat the queues and walk back to Mina, and what a walk it was! Having spent the night in the cold the warm morning air helped us to 'melt' a bit. Lots of Pilgrims saw the sense in walking and together we made our way back to Mina which took us about two hours. Despite the distance it was a pleasant journey and the fact that we had no luggage apart from our sleeping bags and a small handbag meant that we weren't slowed down in any way. Everyone was highly spirited and as we walked we praised Allah!

Having got back to Mina we greeted the rest of our group, hugs all around, for we had technically done the Hajj and today was the day of Eid. We all wished each other a 'Hajj Mabroor' (an accepted hajj –Insha'Allah). Thinking about it now, everyone looked tired, rough and rugged. I myself noticed that I had bags under my eyes, I looked 62 not 26, but I couldn't care less for I felt amazing! After we freshened up we went to the local traders and brought a handful of sibhas and stone pendants for each member of our group – to acknowledge their accomplishment and to bring a bit of the festive vibe into our tent for you couldn't really tell that it was Eid al-Adha! Small gestures like these really pick a person up!

After about an hour we were on the go again. As Muslims we have been told to 'Live in this world as a wayfarer' and that's exactly how I felt. As a family we took our stones and headed towards the Jamarat. As this was my first Hajj I didn't know what to expect, we left our camp and joined a sea of people all heading in the same direction. The walk there was one of uneasiness. The scenes witnessed on TV etc from previous years ran through my head. I was nervous about becoming separated from my family, and with every step I took I was unsure as to what I was walking towards.

The journey to the Jamarah took us approx. 1.45min, the sun was beating down on us, to get to the pillars we had to pass two huge dimly lit tunnels which were kept cool by a super sized, turbine engine fan which made the tunnel very windy and very noisy, this added to my anxiety. Wherever you looked pilgrims joined your path and every road was leading you towards the pillars.

Along the way my parents prepped us, they advised my sister and I to keep together, hold hands, keep your phones on they said, we noted down land marks as a form of identification so that should we get separated we would be able to make our way back to our tent. We noted that we had to pass 2 tunnels, that we were nearest to the Al-Mohsan Slaughter House, that we were at camp 43, area 116, tent 21c which was near to Kubri Khalid. I'm informing you of this so that when you go for Hajj you too should make such observations. It is not good enough to rely on others as it easy to lose your group and find yourself lost amongst millions of strangers who will not be able to help without a lead. The recording of all this information as we made our way freaked me out a little, but I didn't show it and instead I kept my tongue moist with the remembrance of Allah, for surely it was He who would keep us safe.

As we travelled along we came across hordes of Police, medical staff, Ambulances, Fire Engines. Above us were huge flat screen panelled televisions displaying images of how to remain safe, also displayed were the emergency services number and as well as this loud speaker phones addressed the pilgrims in many languages, instructing everyone to remain calm, to keep safe etc. The combination of the above felt reassuring as you hoped that everyone would abide by the rules, but it also made me apprehensive as I wondered what all the hype was about, what were we about to witness, what were we about to be part of?

After much walking, we finally arrived; we walked past the two smaller pillars as today we only had to pelt the large jamarat. As we got nearer I raised my right arm and carefully aimed for the pit whilst saying 'Allahu Akbar', it was a very exhilarating experience. The scene around the pillar was a little chaotic but manageable, Alhamdulillah we managed to throw our 7 stones and quickly made our way out of the centre area. Having done it, what I realised is that it's better to stone near to the pit, as those who begin pelting from a distance find it difficult and more strenuous. Of course, the possibility of firing at a fellow pilgrim is easily done from afar making it an unpleasant experience for some. We then trekked back to our camp, finding the journey back was leisurely compared to the journey there. I called home, informing the rest of the family that we were safe...I guess they could now munch on Eid lunch in peace!

Having got back to our camp the first thing I thought was 'I've just walked into the worlds biggest Barber shop!' Upon entering our camp clumps of shaven fallen hair lined the walk ways and the men's wash area which just so happened to be right outside our tent! To be honest it looked grim! I've never seen so many men with green heads before, they had obviously had confirmation that their sacrifice had been done and they were now no longer in the state of ihram.

Much of the remainder of the day was spent relaxing as we were shattered. Finally, my Dad informed us that our sacrifices had been carried out and so we headed towards the washrooms. We snipped our hair, but unlike the men we did not leave our locks for all to see and walk through! I went back to the tent and I collected my shower gel, tooth brush, tooth paste, my hair brush, my nail clipper etc. I was on a mission, as for the last 3 days I, as everyone on Hajj, had slept in their clothes (that included my jilbab and hijab!), we had risen and spent the day in those same clothes (as I was saving the second set of clothes I had for after the night in Muzdalifah), we had not washed or scrubbed properly, we had not brushed our hair owed to the fact that we were in the state of ihram.

As I scrubbed and washed and clipped and watched the dirt fall from my face, hands and feet and as I untangled my hair I didn't actually feel as I thought I would. Yes, I was relieved to finally be washing away the new style grubby me, but as I washed I felt as though we were returning to the duniya, we were no longer bound by the restrictions that Allah had placed upon us which made me feel something I can't quite describe. I just hoped that as I had just physically and outwardly cleansed myself I prayed Allah had inwardly cleansed my soul. I returned to my tent gleaming, glistening, shining and smelling of Radox!

That night I remember sleeping at 9pm as apart from the hour of sleep I had in Muzdalifah I had actually been up for 44 hours! I recall waking up from my sleep only to find everyone awake. I seriously thought that I had slept through the entire night and missed the prayers of the following day. Alhamdulillah those around me informed me that I had only been asleep for three hours making it only midnight, and with that I realised the barakah of time and went straight back to the land of nod!

## DAY 4:

Day four of Hajj began with the early morning prayers, after which my family and I made our way out of our camp. Today we would return to Makkah, perform Tawaaf, make Sa'ee and then head back to Mina to stone all three pillars. In theory it sounds easy, in reality it was one of the hardest, most testing days of my life. We left our group / tent at approx. 4.00am, we paced the streets of Mina looking for a bus to take us to Makkah. Due to the large number of people, finding a bus which would accommodate the four of us was a task, unless of course we wanted to climb to the roof of the bus, which we weren't prepared to do! We managed to flag down a few buses, but Subhan'Allah even before the blink of an eye somehow others would make their way onto the bus/ van leaving us standing at the road side waving the bus goodbye. It took us 3.5 hours to find a bus... so when people say you need to pack a lot of patience they mean it!

Having waited all that time we finally got onto this moving vehicle only to find a group of men fighting! It was noisy and it was hot and everyone was getting on my nerves! The reason for the noise was because this Haji had reserved seats for people who were no where to be seen which angered those who were on the bus as he wouldn't let the women who were stood to occupy those seats. Eventually we got a seat, I was sat next to my mum, writing my diary as a form of distraction. A good half hour passes and still these men are fighting over the seats! What all the fuss was about I do not know, just being off the polluted street and on a moving bus was enough, who cared if you had a seat to sit on! Behind us were two men who spoke English (they weren't part of this fight), my mum turned to them and suggested that they should recite the Tashreek (for the Talbiyah is no longer recited) in an audible fashion with the hope of changing the atmosphere on the bus! Bless them, the two young men obliged and Subhan'Allah within ten minutes there was peace! It took us over 3 hours to get to Makkah which was only 3 miles away, bringing the time to 10.30 am!

We freshened up and by Zohur time we were at Haram. Looking at the crowds we decided to perform our Tawaaf al-Ziyarah and our Sa'ee on the first floor. It took us almost seven hours to perform the Tawaaf and the Sa'ee; to say we were tired was an understatement.

We left Haram having prayed Isha salah and went in search of a bus which would take us back to Mina in order to stone the Jamarah. As we stood waiting for a bus I raised my hands and (mum and sister could hear me) I asked Allah for a luxury, fully kitted out fast moving car, which I hoped would be air conditioned. I asked Allah to give us a vehicle which had tinted windows, chilled drinks and a cool, calm chauffer (as the majority of Taxi drivers in Saudi are always in a rush). I prayed for...the works! I did this to lift my family's spirits, to make them smile as we were tired!

Allah answered my prayers, what pulled up before us was a clapped out Scoobi Doo style van! I noticed it had one wing mirror, and as we opened the dodgy sliding door

we climbed in to find that there were about 10 other tightly packed passengers all making their way back to Mina! My sis and I joined two others at the back of our 'luxury' dark and dingy van. As we slowly drove along we munched on a range of 'pick me up' junk style food! The journey back to Mina was a test. We stood still in traffic more than we moved, and all the while I'm awake (of course) whilst my sister keeps falling asleep. She mumbled about how hot she was and every time the driver braked for some reason she would end up either pushing me or banging into me. I did consider hitting her back (as I was no longer in Ihram) but I decided to have mercy on her poor tired soul! It took almost 4 hours to get to Mina and all the while we were squashed and hot, but whilst you feel down Allah sends someone to lift your spirits. Whilst we were stuck in traffic a young boy shoved a handful of cards through the open window. The cards were passed around the bus and what we were given was a card with a picture of the Ka'bah, and inside, written in many languages was a dua praying for an accepted Hajj! That for me was enough to make me smile!

We eventually got off that mini bus and Alhamdulillah pelted the three pillars with ease. Although we were tired we threw our stones with much force, enthusiasm and might! Our adventure hadn't stopped there - we now had to go back to our tent which should have taken us approx. 1.45 min as it did the day before. However, somehow instead of walking through 2 tunnels we walked through a third and at the dead of night we found ourselves at the Slaughter Houses! The smell was suffocating, the mixture of the farm, livestock and the blood from the slaughtering that took place early that day made me sick to my stomach! Having looked around we could hear and see flocks of sheep and lambs being driven into the area, waiting to be sacrificed... ahh! We turned back on ourselves and eventually made it back to our tent, the time now being 2.00am! Remember, our day had started at 4.00 am the day BEFORE; we had been on the go for 22 hours! It was great to have experienced such hardship. During every trial we tried to remain patient, and once we found ourselves out of that difficulty we showed thankfulness and gratitude towards Allah. It was certainly a day of sabar and shukur. Of course, the only thing on our minds at this point was sleep....  
*zzzzzzzzzzzzzz!*

#### DAY 5:

Day five of the Hajj had finally arrived, another early start. Today the only task we had to perform was to stone all three pillars, after which we were free to leave Mina bringing the rites of the hajj to a close (apart from the Tawaaf al Wida which would be performed before leaving Makkah). Before we left for the jamarat we collected our belongings, rolled up our sleeping bags and then said our goodbyes to our new found family in Mina, as after today we would not see them again. We decided that after we had completed the stoning we would walk back to Makkah rather than take the bus. Our group leader very kindly agreed to take our luggage back to Makkah for us on the coach. Packing up and leaving Mina was really sad-Mina had been our base, our home, and I was truly gutted to leave...

Once again we made the long scary trek towards the Jamarat with the hope that we would complete this last stage with ease. We were directed towards the upper level and Alhamdulillah we pelted the pillars with little discomfort.

We then headed towards Makkah by foot, along the way we ate ice crèmes, we set our sights on fully decorated camels and immersed ourselves in the atmosphere, not knowing whether we would be part of such a spectacle again.

After spending a further 4 days in Makkah we performed our Farewell Tawaf in the centre courtyard of the Masjid and as I did so I felt a sense of emptiness. Allah is Kareem, we spent our last week in Saudi in the manner that we began our journey, in the company of Rasool Sallahu Alaihi Wassalaam, in the blessed peaceful city of Madina. We would often sit and gaze at the beauty of the Green Dome late at night, it was amazing to be sat reading the same Darood book which I read daily at home. The peace you feel in the City of Light cannot be found anywhere else on earth. It was then time to leave, not quite yet for the UK but for another dose of Makkah!

We arrived at Makkah for Asr salah in the state of Ihraam, intending to perform one last Umrah before leaving the Kingdom. It was now almost two weeks since the Hajj and as we re-entered the Haram and circled the Ka'bah we felt the refreshing breeze, we glided along and within two hours we had completed our Umrah.

Alhamdulillah, we were in Saudi Arabia for 30 days. From what I remember having prayed 150 salah in both Harmain the call for multiple janazahs took place after 147 salahs, but during this time we never saw the deceased pass us. As we sat waiting for the Maghrib salah to commence we could see the Ka'bah in view. As I took a break from reading Quran I witnessed 5 bodies being carried past the masses of people. They were being carried and taken to the Ka'bah for they were amongst the fortunate who were soon to be laid in Jannatul Maula. Seeing those bodies draped in cloth being carried on a stretcher, held by six men just before we were about to leave was a stark reminder of why we had embarked on this once in a lifetime journey. This was Allah's way of visually reminding us that we shall one day return to Him, this was the reality of life.

We sadly left Makkah having prayed Maghrib but before we did so we thought we would treat ourselves. We climbed to the very top, to the roof of the Masjid! We gazed at the beauty that stood below us, we witnessed a sea of people being swept in a sea of those performing Tawaaf. It was surreal; a rarity, for it is only during Hajj that Muslimahs are allowed on the roof.

And this brought our spiritual journey to a close. We left Saudi at 2.00am on Jan. 16<sup>th</sup> 2007 and as we flew further away from the Holy lands and the Qiblah now behind us my body returned to the same heavy state which came over me prior to leaving for Hajj. Now that I had completed the fifth pillar of Islam I knew the responsibility that would come with it. As the majority of the passengers on our flight slept I sat in the Saudi Air prayer room, all alone bowing to Allah at 37,000 feet hoping and praying that I could honour my Hajj, hoping that I could keep to my new promises. Upon touch down at Heathrow my Dad said to us that the best way to thank Allah for the last month was to keep our Hajj alive...

Having got off our flight we went in search of the washrooms for it was time to pray Fajr salah. I can whole heartedly say that despite the washrooms being bright and sparkling clean they did not compare or come close to the toilets in Mina! As I waited for my mum outside the Wcs and as many non-muslims passed me I felt a strange sense of insecurity, this was supposed to be my 'home' yet I felt I did not belong...

I sincerely pray that Allah accepts the efforts made by all who have been on Hajj, this year, in previous years and from those who have yet to go. May our efforts meet with His acceptance always, Ameen, thumma Ameen!

If I had to give advice to those who intend to go for hajj, it would be:

1. Do not delay for Hajj is Fard upon every able person. Do not take your good health and wealth for granted, make Hajj a priority for it is a physically demanding journey.
2. Before you embark on the Hajj be sure to read the rites of Hajj and take some literature with you.
3. Prior to leaving for Hajj re-evaluate your character. Begin your intentions from home. Don't leave for Hajj until you've wrapped up certain things, be sure to return what is owed to others, seek forgiveness - leave with the thinking that you may not return.
4. Whilst on Hajj constantly remind yourself why you are there, this will help you to remain focused. It's the journey of death so don't get sucked in by the worldly things around you. Constantly renew your intentions.
5. If you've got the strength: WALK, forget the buses as you end up wasting time. Walking is pleasant, more rewarding and you are less likely to witness ugly scenes. If you do find yourself witnessing an unpleasant scene view it as a form of Ibrah, a lesson to be learnt.
6. Have adab for all, be sure to be of service for those around you, and equally respect the land that you are in; do not litter the Holy sites.
7. Expect nothing, that way when you move on to your next stage of the Hajj you will feel grateful for the provisions waiting for you.
8. Don't get too involved in those around you, keep your head down. The best way to remain patient is to busy yourself in the remembrance of Allah. Don't

complain about the hard times for surely they do not compare to the reward that awaits you, Insha'Allah.

9. Turn to Allah like you have never turned to Him before. Ask from Allah through whatever comes naturally to you, not always from a dua book. Ask with sincerity and remain hopeful and optimistic during those long and difficult times. Before leaving for Hajj you will be bombarded with requests for prayers from those you know. The best way to remember everyone is to split your life into groups that way you won't leave anyone out. A quick glance at your mobile address book is also a good way to jog the memory! Be sure to pray during travel.
  
10. Having made the journey and once you've returned home be sure to re-tell your experiences in an inspiring manner. Re-tell your account positively. View your story telling as a form of dawah, leave out the really awful bits, and don't complain about the times that were tough, for if you were patient at the time of hajj why dampen your efforts?