# The Ultimate Pilgrimage

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We taxied at Jeddah Hajj Terminal Airport in the evening. The impressive Hajj Terminal was designed by the celebrated Bangladeshi Architect, Late Mr. F. R. Khan. The rather sluggish customs and immigration formalities took almost five hours. Finally, we reached our destination at Makkah Al-Mukarramah by bus in the early hour and were lodged at Hotel Abu Turk, only three minutes walk from Al-Masjid Al-Haram and a stone's throw from Mowludunnabi, the birthplace of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The Mowludunnabi has now been converted into a library by the Saudi Government. Interestingly, the house of Abu Jahal, one of the harshest enemies of Islam across the road has been converted into a public toilet.

Immediately after reaching Makkah, we visited Al-Masjid Al-Haram in the early hours and performed Umrah Haj (Tawaf Qudum). I was awed and ecstatic as I approached the simple yet magnificent cubicle, the Holy Ka'bah covered in black drapery which has verses from the Holy Quran embroidered in gold thread.

Makkah Al-Mukarramah is a modern city, about 80 km. from Jeddah. Elegant high-rise hotels and office blocks lie in close proximity to the Al -Masjid Al - Haram.The magnificent three-storied mosque, an architectural wonder has 51 gates including 4 grand gates. The Hoy Ka'bah is about 15 metres high and 12 by 13 metres square and is the most visited house on earth.


Al-Masjid Al-Haram.

Approximately 50,000 pilgrims from every nook and corner of the planet circumambulate the Holy House day and night continuously throughout the year. The Al-Masjid Al -Haram mosque can accommodate about 10 lakh pilgrims at a time. The total area of the mosque now stands at 180,850 sq.metres.

The Hazare Aswad (Black Stone) and Maqam Ibrahim are the two most precious stones and there is always a mad rush to reach them. There are many virtues attributed to the Black Stone and it was Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) who personally implanted the Black Stone in its original position at the sacred House. The Black Stone, about 18 cm.in diameter is mounted about one and half metres from the ground. The Maqam Ibrahim is the stone on which Hazrat Ibrahim (RA) stood when he built the Holy Ka'bah along with Hazrat Ismael (RA). The Zamzam well has been replaced and the holy Zamzam water is now freely available from taps at short distances within and outside the Masjid.

An estimated 25 lakh Bangladeshis, mostly from greater Chittagong are engaged in different professions in Saudi Arabia. An estimated 10-12 lakh deshis live in Makkah alone. Physicians, engineers, university professors, teachers, unskilled construction workers, labourers, cleaners, drivers, salesman, cook and staffs at hotels and restaurants are contributing immensely to the national coffers. Many are engaged in different trades and businesses. There is a tremendous demand for nurses and maids. The cleanings of Al-Masjid Al-Haram and Masjid Nabawi are done almost entirely by the Bangladeshi cleaners. One need not speak in any other language but Bangla in Saudi Arabia. The presence of Bangladeshis is visible everywhere. All Bangladeshi items are available including fresh fish, vegetables, groceries, toiletries, clothes including lungi and gamcha and also paan supari.

We reached Mina, only 6-8 km away by road in the early hours of 8th Zilhaj. The entire area is dotted with tents and Mina virtually becomes "a city of tents", playing host to approx.25 lakh pilgrims during Hajj. These are all temporary arrangements and everything "disappears" after the Hajj. It is obligatory to pray five waqt prayers at Mina. Outside the tents, different nationalities sell cooked food items, fruits, clothes, jainamaj, tasbees (prayer beads), mats, caps and toiletries. It was interesting to note that the caps sold were all made in Bangladesh.

Hot nan roti and white rice with beef/mutton curry cooked by the Somalians is worth mentioning. And so is