



GOING NEAR THE KAABA

It is quite difficult to go near the Kaaba or enter its exact premises, for the sheer number of people. So we picked midnight to be a more likely time, assuming there would be fewer people. But no, even then, there was a massive crowd. It is advisable to always remember by which gate you are entering the premises, which can help you avoid getting lost.

After walking straight into the Masjid al Haram from the road, and just following the crowd towards the Kaaba, I was a bit surprised to see that the Kaaba was not exactly on the same plane, as we had to climb a flight of stairs to reach its depth, about a floor's height. We did not know this before.

People were doing tawaf then, some were offering prayers, others supplicating or doing zikr, whichever way they could. There was no difference of age, gender, nationality or race. Someone is praying, and someone else walks right in front of them while doing a tawaf. Women are required to wear an abaya to cover their heads and hair, but the abaya can be of any colour.

AN AUDACIOUS SIGHT

Even in front of the Kaaba, there are people who are busy cheating others! There is no reason to assume that everyone is telling the truth here. Scammers from different countries roam around, and undoubtedly their audacity is unimaginable—lying right in front of the Kaaba! There is no scope to jump in to help someone in trouble here.

THE FIRST NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE IN ARABIA

We wanted to taste the local cuisine—roti, curry and chutney—and so, we entered a local Arab shop. But the moment we entered, the shopkeeper turned around and left, loudly saying “no women, no women.” So we walked out annoyed, and took ourselves to a non-Arab food shop, and ate roti, lentils, and kebabs.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF FOOD

Here, roti is usually free with the curry. Hotels are operated by people from different countries, but most of the food is quite oily, and the price varies. There are also the common chain restaurants like KFC, Pizza Hut, McDonald's, Shawarma House, Baskin Robbins and Movenpick. A variety of fruits and yoghurt are also available. Once the principal food of the nomadic Bedouins of this region was camel's milk. Low-calorie camel milk is also available at the camel farms around Makkah. If you can find some connection through a local and visit one

such farm, it would be an amazing experience. Here, almost everyone wants to taste the Ajwa date at least once, as it the most expensive and tasty type of date in the world. And why would it not be? The Prophet (pbuh) himself planted this tree.

ABU BAKR'S HOUSE

You can rent a car to visit the various sites historically significant to Islam. The Makkah Tower Hotel is right beside the Kaaba, and it houses the Abu Bakr Mosque on the 4th or 5th floor. It is said that Islam's first caliph Abu Bakr's home used to be here, and from here, the Prophet (pbuh) and his best friend set out to migrate to Madinah.

THE GRAVEYARD OF VILE IGNORANCE

The Shabeka graveyard is right near the Kaaba. This 1400 year old graveyard is representative of the dark times that prevailed in Arabia before the advent of Islam. Makkah's Arabs then used to bury their daughters alive here, as they were thought to be a mark of shame and disgrace.

Despite being close to the Masjid-ul-Haram, no hotels or homes ever developed here. It is said that labourers would hear different kinds of otherworldly noises while

working here and would stop the work out of

fear, and so it remained unchanged. The grave of Hazrat Sumaiya (R), the first martyr of Islam, is also here.

MOUNT THAUR

Thaur is a rocky mountain, and it houses the cave that sheltered Muhammad (pbuh) for three days, as he and Abu Bakr (R) hid for three days, hiding from their enemies. Abu Bakr's (R) son Abdullah (R) stayed close by during the night and returned home before daybreak. He also brought the duo news of what the Quraish were up to. Even this steep hill is no barrier to the thousands who climb it to see that cave.

THE CAVE OF HERA

This is the cave where the Quran was revealed to the Prophet (pbuh) in 610AD. He was just 40 years old and used to meditate here. This isolated cave in the Jabal-al-Nur (the mountain of light) faces the Kaaba, and at an elevation of 2100 feet, was a very isolated spot. This is a place of interest to almost all Muslims, which is why Hajj and Umrah pilgrims take a couple of hours and visit the spot, despite it not being a part of the Hajj requirements.

RAMI-AL-JAMARAT

This is the spot where Hazrat Ibrahim threw stones at Satan to drive him away, and that is what pilgrims do as well. There are three pillars to denote three devils here. In truth, the ritual helps to drive away the devil in people's hearts. We also visited Bibi Khadija's (R) grave, and the field of Arafat.

MAKKAH MUSEUM

If time permits, the museum is a good opportunity to take a look at how the Arabs used to be, with artefacts related to culture, clothing, furniture, music, and even the evolution of the Arabic alphabet being preserved here. There is also a water-well in a corner, and the mechanism to draw water from it. There is also a copy of the Quran from the time of Hazrat Usman (R), and the complete genealogy of Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh), as well as the family history of Quraish and other famous tribes of Arabia.

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Photo: Shahana Huda

