

Practical Guide to performing Hajj

Prepared by Razi Mohiuddin

razi@mca-sfba.org

Compiled based on experience in 1997 – it may be old, but still relevant.

When I went to Hajj in 1997, I had a ton of questions about the religious and the practical aspects of performing Hajj. On the religious side, I was able to get most of my answers. On the practical side, it was very difficult to get answers. Questions like: Does my ATM card work there? What is the best time to perform Tawaf? What is the best way to call my young kids back in US? What kinds of slippers are best? etc. etc.

After my experience in 1997, I wrote this practical guide and I have since updated it based on comments from others. This guide does not deal with the religious aspects, but only with practical ones. Please forgive me if any of these items violate any of the religious beliefs – my intention is not to contradict any of the beliefs.

Travel Agent: The travel agent I selected was Dar us Salaam in New York. Dar us Salaam is one of the largest Hajj tour operator in US and took over 700 people in 1997. A number of resellers sell Dar us Salaam packages. The main reason I selected Dar us Salaam is because most tour operators take 30 to 50 people in their entire group – and they travel in one bus – because that is all they can manage. If one bus breaks down, then the entire group is stuck. In the case of Dar us Salaam, if one bus gets stuck, they have 12 to 13 other buses where they can accommodate the overflow. This actually happened to us – one bus got stuck in Arafat – and they were able to accommodate everyone in the other buses without any problem. There were certain problems with Dar us Salaam – like everyone else, but I believe they have been corrected these based on the experience my sisters had a couple of years later as well as other friends. I will discuss these later in this document.

Keep in mind that the issue is not about using new buses or old buses. What happens in Arafat is that buses bring you to the tents. Then they have to park somewhere. If they do not find a proper parking space, the police will make them drive out of Arafat. Because of the traffic, they will never be able to make it back in time for you to leave Arafat. In the case of Dar us Salaam, they had a big cordoned off area where they parked the buses about 1 inch apart from each other, and had tents for us at the same time. Dar us Salaam is well connected in Saudi Arabia and they can move around there much more easily than others.

You need to watch for a few things that travel agents do:

Some travel agents check you out of the hotel during the 2 days prior to Hajj and 3 days after Hajj – from the 8th to the 12th and they make you sleep in tents in Mina. They keep your suitcases in trucks or tents. This creates a problem with simple things like showers – you will have to deal with the poor quality showers in Mina. The reason why they do that, is they sandwich other travelers to arrive in Mecca exactly 2 days before Hajj, and leave 3 days after, so they get double duty from the rooms. These travelers usually are the ones who pay a higher amount.

Some travel agents sell packages for groups that are from the Indian Sub-continent or from the Middle-East. Keep in mind that the facilities that they provide will reflect the standards of those countries –

nothing wrong with them, just that after living in US for many years, you get accustomed to certain facilities. For example, some travel agents put you into facilities which are like dorms – which means that you are sharing bathrooms with everyone on the floor. Similarly, you might find yourself using bathrooms where you have to squat instead of sit. If you are used to these types of facilities, they are actually better. But if you are not – and especially for older people – these might be a problem. Just be aware of what you are getting.

For packages that put you 4 to a room – which is what I took, you will get a standard room with two roll-away beds. The amount of space to stand in that room is very little – but that’s the best you can do. Since you will spend most of your time outside the room in the Haram, this should not be an issue. Just be aware of what you are getting.

You also need to determine if the package is putting you in an apartment or in a hotel. Hotels have certain amenities that apartments do not. For example, there is daily maid service. There is a safety deposit box, there are shuttles they provide to go to Haram, etc. etc. Apartments do not have these facilities. Dar us Salaam put us in hotels during the entire stay except from the 8th to the 12th where they moved our stuff to apartments outside of Mina in the Aziziah neighborhood. While you spent most of the time in tents in Mina, you had a place to go back to during the day time to wash up, etc. These apartments were three stories high with no elevators. It was difficult for our in-laws to climb the stairs. Ask your travel agent about the specifics of what is to happen during the days you are in Mina and Arafat – where will your luggage be, will you have a place near Haram, or will the tents in Mina and Arafat be it? Nothing wrong with any of these items – just make sure you find out and know what to expect.

Clothes: For men, I suggest taking literally two pairs of pants and two shirts. You can buy a thobe for SR 20 or so and you can buy pajamas with pockets for SR 10 to SR 15. I suggest buying 3 or 4 of these when you get to Saudi Arabia. You will be most comfortable with these clothes. And you can get them washed easily or even throw them away after use. Also, there are two other advantages with these. First, you will not be clearly identified as someone from America or Western countries – which is a clear attraction for beggars who come with some sob story inside Haram and ask you for money. Second, you can protect the money you are carrying by putting it in the pajama pocket which is underneath your thobe.

There are some laundry stores in Mecca and Medina although they tend to be in small lanes about 3 or 4 blocks away from the Haram. As you can imagine, the real estate near Haram is very expensive – so these types of stores are farther away. They will wash and give you the clothes next day or in two days. Of course you can use the expensive hotel laundry as well if you like.

Tawaf: The absolute best time to do Tawaf is between 8:30 AM to 10:30 AM in Mecca. Why? The reason is two fold. First, most people come to attend multiple prayers in the Haram. For example, they come for Zuhr and stay till Maghrib. Or come for Maghrib and stay past Isha. Or they come for Isha and stay past Midnight. Or come at Tahajud and stay past Fajr. Most people leave after a little while after Fajr to go to sleep. Second, the open area (Sahan or patio) around the Kabaa is a place where people sit down during the evening and night, but not when the sun is out. When the sun comes out, every one goes to a shaded area – leaving much more open space. We were able to walk

with our arms stretched during the morning hours while doing Tawaf – it is a time that has the fewest number of people in the Haram and the least amount of congestion.

On our first night, we drove in to Mecca from Medina on the night of the 8th at about 2 AM after being in the bus for 12 hours (normally it is a 3 hour drive) we were exhausted. We then went for our initial Tawaf. At 2 AM, there were people sitting in the open area. I literally had to climb over people to complete the tawaf because of the rush. So find out from your travel agent when you are going to get to Mecca. Anything at night will be very very crowded. Persuade them to arrive in Mecca early morning at or right after Fajr if possible.

Most people also start Tawaf *exactly* from the line and end exactly on the line – creating a traffic jam. You will find it easier if you join the people circling the Kabaa about a quarter circle before, and leave about a quarter circle after – around Muqam e-Ibrahim. This will make it easier for you to enter and exit rather than fighting the crowd.

Money: There are many banks in Mecca and Medina and each one of them has an ATM machine that accepts Cirrus and Plus cards. Most ATM cards in US are compatible with Cirrus and Plus – just look in the back of your ATM card. You can take out about SR 1,500 at a time. Your bank will charge about \$4 for each withdrawal from a foreign bank. However, in spite of this fee, this is the best thing you can do. Take a few hundred dollars in cash and take your ATM card and your Visa card. No need to carry a lot of cash. Also, keep the money and the cards in the safe deposit box in the hotel and then take out SR 100 or so each day for your expenditures. Also, the exchange rate you will get at an ATM will beat any rate you can get at the local money exchanger.

Phone: If you are going to occasionally call out, the best way is to use a calling center. There are many located around Mecca and Medina. You pay them about SR 8 per minute to US – they may have gotten cheaper now with competition.

The second option is more practical – get a GSM cell phone that can accept prepaid cards. Make sure your GSM phone is SIM unlocked – most phones sold in US are not SIM unlocked because they give them to you free or a substantial discount. If you have had a phone for longer than 2 years, you can usually ask your carrier to “SIM unlock” your phone. Alternatively, just buy the cheapest GSM phone. Make sure it works under 800 MHz and 1900 MHz frequencies.

Security: Saudi Arabia is a very safe place, but there are people who try to take advantage of you. Invariably you will meet people with sob stories – like I came here from <blank> and someone stole my wallet and I do not have any money to eat/stay/go back. Other favorite story is I lost my wife/husband/son/daughter/etc. The stories are from people who genuinely look needy, but they are usually part of an organized ring that is brought from third world countries especially to prey on rich travelers. Please do not fall for these lines. Say sorry and move on. If you do give to someone, then expect to be approached by 5 to 10 others – because they know you are a sucker. One time one person approached me on the road in a late model Mercedes with license plates from Oman and he had his entire family in the car. He gave me a story that he lost all of his money and he needs food. I volunteered to take his family to a restaurant and pay for his meal, at which time he drove away. The clothes you wear give you away – the nice looking Dockers, with polo shirts are a sure giveaway. One time a store owner asked me where in US I lived. When I asked him how he knew I lived in US, he said

it is easy – two things give us up very easily. First, people who live in US typically always walk around as a husband-wife pair more often than people from other countries. Second, people from other parts of the world – especially the Indian sub-continent and many Middle-East countries do not come until they are retired. As such, if you are younger than 60 years old, they can usually tell where you are coming from. So be careful – the other side knows who to go after.

Food: The best food is from street vendors in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is a very clean place, so you can eat from street vendors without getting sick of food poisoning. Our family preferred the Tazaj Chicken – it is like KFC, except it is baked, not fried. There are also plenty of Indian/Pakistani restaurants that will serve your favorite oil-laden curry if you desire, for very little money. Most places are open 24 hours. The Hilton Intercontinental is the nearest hotel to the Haram – near Babe Abdul Aziz (gate 1), and it has a whole floor dedicated to all kinds of fast food restaurants including Pizza Hut, McDonalds, Tazak Chicken, Burger King, etc.

Medicines: Do not forget to take two medicines for sure: First, a cold medicine and second, something for sore throat. Since there are people from every country and region and you are in close proximity with them, you invariably catch a cold and have a sore throat. I have gotten sick every time I have gone to Umrah or Hajj – and I know everyone else has as well unfortunately. So be prepared. Sore throat is the most common thing. Take Chloroseptic spray and something like Sudafed. Also take something for diarrhea such as Immodium. Finally, take something like Tylenol, Motrin or Advil.

Getting Lost: There are two things you should always do. You should designate some place to meet if you get lost. Second, you should designate a relative in US or in some other place where you will call in case you cannot connect up there. This rarely happens, but it is always good to plan for the worst and expect the best. In fact, make sure that you select someone whose numbers you both have memorized. In my case, I memorized my parent’s number and my wife memorized her parent’s number and we told our parents to get in touch with each other when one of them calls.

Khurbani: Saudi Arabia has plans where you can buy coupons for Khurbani. You pay SR 100 to SR 120 for a goat. They will slaughter and distribute the meat. There is however one problem with this from the fiqhi point of view – you actually do not know when it is going to be slaughtered and the sunna is to shave your hair after you slaughter the goat. If you do not know when your goat is going to be slaughtered, then it will of course be difficult to decide when to shave. We decided to slaughter using a coupon and just picked an approximate time given on the coupon. We hope we did it right. Our other friends went to the slaughterhouse in Mina and regretted it because they had to walk in Ihram over goat bodies stacked 7 to 8 bodies high. You can buy the coupon at many banks.

Slippers: I took 20 plastic grocery bags. Take out your slippers and put them in the grocery bag and then keep it in the rack. The chance of someone taking your slippers by mistake gets reduced exponentially if you put them in plastic grocery bags – otherwise they all look similar. You can also wrap the grocery bag around your palm if you want to carry it yourself. Take slippers that do not have any design on them – on the portion that touches the bottom of the foot. Otherwise, you will walk so much that the design will be etched on your feet. I also recommend taking the sandal type plastic ones – they have a strap going through the front, not the scissors type that meets in between your toes.

Ihram: Most travel agents give you Ihram cloths. If they do not, you can buy it there for very cheap. You can also get a belt from there – even at Jeddah airport. One trick in tying Ihram – wrap it around yourself fairly tight, and then fold about 3 to 4 inches outside all around the waist. This will make the Ihram even tighter. Then put the belt on that folded portion.

Medina: If you have a choice, go to Medina first. You avoid having to wear Ihram in the plane or in New York. You will also get used to Saudi Arabia before going to Mecca. You will notice the people of Medina are different than the people of Mecca – this also applies to the people from the sub-continent.

Mina: Depending on the travel agent you pick and the package you pick, you will be asked to check out of your hotel and move to Mina on the 8th of Dhul Hajj and you will stay there till the 12th. If you bought an expensive package (over \$4,000), you will be able to retain your room and go back to your room for showers, etc. Your travel agent will ask you to take a backpack or small bag and leave the suitcase in the hotel with the concierge – or in a locked lounge area. You may not have access to this luggage for 5 days – from the 8th to the 12th.

Mina is a valley surrounded by hills on both sides. There are tunnels crossing one of the sides and this takes you into Aziziah neighborhood of Mecca. Some travel agents place you in apartments in this neighborhood. If you need something, you can go through the tunnel into the neighborhood – there are plenty of stores, etc. I believe there are two tunnels into Aziziah from Mina. The one closest to the Jamarat is the shortest and the one that has the most stores.

In Mina and Arafat, you will have to deal with porta-potties for your toilets regardless of which tour operator you select. Please be prepared for this experience including taking your own roll of toilet paper.

Arafat: Typically most travel agents take you to Arafat right after midnight of the 8th. Typically you go and sleep there until Fajr. Take a backpack with you with medicines, water bottle, and a sleeping mat. If you go with Dar us Salaaam, they will provide you with dry food like bread, etc. and drinks. Not sure about other travel agents. Also, these places have become commercialized – so there are street vendors selling things like fruits, tea, etc. around Mina and Arafat.

One of the key things you need to discuss with your travel agent before going to Arafat is to make sure what time you are going to throw stones at the Jamarat. On the 10th, you throw stones between Fajr and Zuhr. On the 11th and 12th you throw stones between Zuhr and Maghrib. However there is too much rush. So travel agents have taken a Fatwa that you can throw stones before Fajr on the first day, and before Zuhr on the 2nd and 3rd days.

If you are like me and want to do it within the appropriate time, then you should talk over with the travel agent before you go to Arafat.

In Arafat, the travel agent will split you into two groups – the group that will do before Fajr and the group that will do after Fajr. They will be loaded in different buses. If you board the wrong bus, then you are stuck, because all of the buses will get lost from each other once they leave Arafat – you will not be able to find them until you return back to Mina after throwing stones.

So, about 45 minutes before Maghrib in Arafat, your travel agent will start boarding the buses. About 5 seconds after the Maghrib Adhan happens, your buses begin to roll. So you need to be on the bus 45 minutes before Maghrib and make sure you are on the right bus that will wait at Muzdalifa until Fajr.

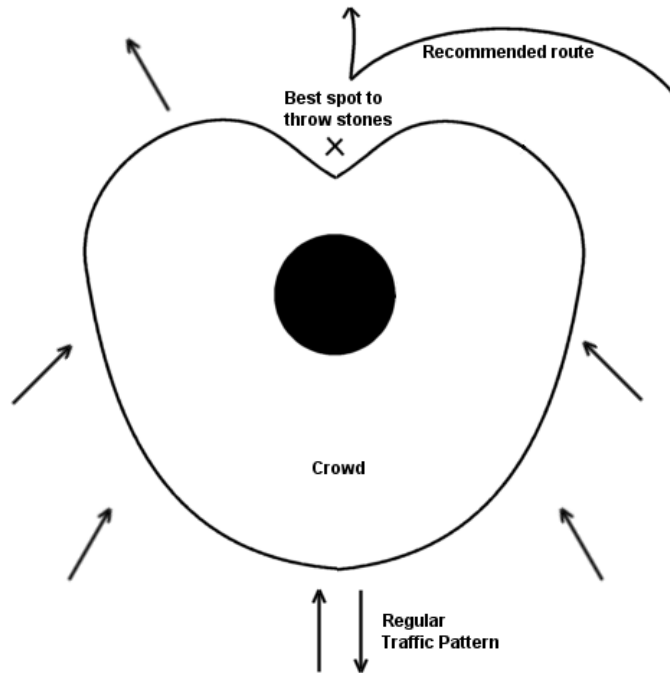
Muzdalifa: You need to pick up 49 stones from here. 7 for the first day. 21 for the second day and 21 for the third day. Remember that if you picked bus that is going to throw stones before Fajr, the buses will start moving from Muzdalifa about 5 seconds after Midnight – and you will find yourself throwing stones at 2 AM in the morning. If you intend to stay till Fajr, pick the right bus from Arafat itself – you will not see the other buses in your group in Muzdalifa.

Your soft mat that you bought from here will come in very handy here. This is where you pray Maghrib and Isha together. And you need something soft to pray on. Otherwise you will be praying on bare ground filled with pebbles.

Jamarat: There are three things to remember when throwing stones:

1. **Downstairs is better than upstairs:** Contrary to popular opinion, downstairs is safer than upstairs. I'll tell you why. If upstairs gets crowded, what happens? You have no where to go on the sides except jump off the ramp. During some years, that's exactly what happened. People got crushed on the sides of the ramp and were literally pushed off the ramp. Go downstairs and have peace of mind. It turns out that downstairs is very crowded about 40 feet around the Jamarat, but open farther away. As such, you can come on the sides.
2. **Throwing from farther is OK:** Most people think they have to go very close to throw stones. Problem is two fold. First, the stones from the people in the back will hit you instead of the Jamarat. Second, the closer you get to Jamarat, the harder it is to get out – because the crowd is pushing you in. Also, do not be charged up – just relax and try to throw the stones higher so they form an arch – not in a straight flight path. If you get caught up in the crowd, do not bend or squat. Stand up straight and stay on your feet. If you have older people with you, I suggest you take one of them at a time and throw stones, come out, and take the next person. This is better than taking a group – two are easier to manage than a group.
3. **Going from front is better than going from back:** It is amazing how the psychology of people works. Most people come from the back, throw stones, turn around and go back – creating a tremendous traffic jam – people moving in opposite direction next to each other. Common sense would indicate that you walk in one direction, throw stones and continue to walk in the same direction and exit. But unfortunately, this is not how it works. Instead what forms is a crowd around the Jamarat shaped like a heart or an apple as shown below.

So you might as well take advantage of this psychology. Instead of following the crowd, go around the crowd to the top of the heart, throw stones, turn around and continue walking forward. The arrows show the typical traffic patterns - do not follow these arrows – instead follow the line shown as “recommended route”. I have marked the best spot to throw stones from – at the top of the heart.



4. **Third day is the most dangerous:** Why? Everyone wants to throw the stones as soon as Zuhr starts, and do Tawaf al-wida and leave town. So everyone is in a hurry. You better be careful on this day. Take extra precaution and do not get caught in the wave of people moving towards the Jamarat. Instead wait till Asr time and then approach Jamarat from the sides, not the back – take a longer circular route instead of the straight road. Also, this is the day to avoid the upstairs ramp – even if you used it on the first and second day. This is when the most accidents occur. Also, this is the day when most people assume they know what they are doing and have let their guards down.

Items to take: Some ideas for you to consider especially when you are going to Mina and Arafat:

- **Ziploc bags:** These are very handy especially for carrying money. When you walk around, you sweat and take Zam Zam showers. Having money in Ziploc bags protects them. Same with putting your passports and other materials in Ziploc bags.
- **Documents:** Keep a photo copy of documents with you and give another photo copy to someone in US that can fax it to you if you need them.
- **Power Bars or Cookies:** In Mina and Arafat, you will find food being sold all over the place as well as given to you by the travel agent. However, it is always a good idea to carry a couple of power bars and a box of cookies.
- **Glucose Tablets:** Costco sells a bottle of Glucose Tablets in its Pharmacy. This is great when you need that extra dose of energy and do not have anything to eat nearby – or do not feel like eating something that does not look very appetizing.
- **Mat:** One of the things that gets used in Mina and Arafat is a sleeping mat. The best thing I have found is the Aerobics mat made of foam that you can get in any sporting goods stores. It is small, compact and does not weigh too much. The better travel agents provide carpet above the ground. You can put your mat above it. Buy something that is not too bulky. If you can roll it up into a diameter of 6 inches, that would be the best. CostPlus sells a “Yoga Mat” that you might find useful.

- **Backpack:** You should take a backpack or school bag to use when going to Mina and Arafat. This can contain some clothes after you are done taking off the Ihram, as well as medicines, sleeping mat, water bottle and things like that.

Copies of Passport, etc.:

Make copies of your passport, tickets – and scan them. Then mail them to yourself at your Yahoo, Google or Hotmail accounts.

Checklist of things to do and take:

Overall:

- Meet friends and family and ask for forgiveness
- Pay all debts
- Prepare will
- Make dua for us.

Don't forget to take:

- Passport
- Tickets
- Carry passport photocopies
- Some cash in \$100 bills
- Send copies of passport to a relative in US
- Take extra Passport Photos in case you loose passport
- Bank Draft for United Agents (check with your travel agent)

Medicines: (you can also buy in Saudi Arabia, but safer to take from here)

Everyone will get a cold and sore throat there – because you are with so many people, so absolutely take the items in bold below:

- **Antibiotics such as Amoxicillin, Erythromycin, etc.**
- **Sudafed - cold**
- **Chloroseptic spray – sore throat**
- **Keri Lotion or Lubriderm Fragrance Free (your feet will thank you)**
- **Other personal medicines**

optional medicines:

- Glucose Tablets (you get them in Costco) – to reenergize you when you need to.
- Gatorade powder – alternative to Glucose tablets.
- Immodium – for diarrhea
- Pepto Bismol – for upset stomach
- Neosporin - for cuts, bruises, etc.
- Tylenol/Advil
- Vaseline – chapped feet
- 44D Cough Medicine

Other Miscellaneous Items: (you can also buy in Saudi Arabia, but safer to take from here)

- Safety Pins – to hold Ihram
- Plastic/Ziploc Bags - for picking up stones in Muzdaliffa
- Grocery Bags - to carry Slippers and Sandals
- ZipLoc Bags - to store passport copies etc. to protect from sweat
- Slippers or Sandals - 2 or 3 pairs.
- ATM Card
- MasterCard/Visa
- Ihram Belt

Things for Mina/Arafat/Muzdalifa:

- Backpack – or something you can carry comfortably
- Mat or something soft so you can lie down comfortably. Perhaps the Aerobics mat that can be rolled up.
- Spray Bottle to keep you cool
- Water Bottle
- Dove - unscented soap so you can take a shower when in Ihram
- Power Bars or cookies – just in case you get lost
- Toilet Rolls for Arafat/Mina – just in case
- Razor blade shaver or shaving blades for Head Shaving
- Scissors to cut hair
- Sunglasses, Eye glasses holder string
- Quran, Dua Books, etc.
- Medicines (including Glucose tablets, Headache, Cold, etc.)
- Umbrella (depending on weather – Hajj during Jan/Feb may not need it)
- Extra slippers/sandals
- Put a few extra Riyals (20 to 30) in your bag – just in case

Suggest you pack the backpack from here itself – and put it packed in the suitcase.

Books – some good books to take with you.

- How to perform Hajj - small booklet
- Hajj A to Z
- Dua Books

If you find any mistakes, or updates to these tips, or new ideas, please email them to me and I'll incorporate them here.