



# A Pilgrim's Diary

Hafsa Lodi chronicles her spiritual journey to the Holy Cities of Makkah and Madinah for Umrah

As I bid farewell to my high heels and lipsticks, I double-check my suitcase full of abayas, socks and cotton scarves, and throw in a pink zebra print headband. Thanks to photo-sharing sites like Tumblr and Pinterest, I'm well aware that covering your hair does not mean you have to be style-less. So a few hours later, I button up my abaya, wrap a floral scarf around my head, turn off my blackberry and board the Saudi Airlines flight to Jeddah. From there, my family and I will be driving to Makkah and, three days later, to Madinah to visit historical Islamic sites and take part in an Umrah pilgrimage.

## Makkah

As soon as we reach our hotel, the Al Marwa Rayhaan by Rotana in Makkah, we rush to our rooms, freshen up and race to the Grand Mosque surrounding the Ka'ba, just in time for the As'r (late afternoon) prayer. The mosque is packed with Muslims visiting from every corner of the world, and as the front areas are reserved for men, my mother sister and I pray outside, along with hundreds of others. Muslims are required to pray five times a day, and it is believed that the larger the number of people praying together, the more blessings one receives, so people from all parts of the city rush to join the jamaat, or group prayer.

Once the prayer ends, visitors start to trickle out of the Grand Mosque, and as the crowd lessens, we meet my father and walk through the mosque towards a large swarm of pilgrims at the Ka'ba, a black cube-shaped building revered as the most sacred site in Islam, believed to have been first built by the Prophet Abraham. We begin the first stage of Umrah by performing our Tawaf, circling the *Ka'ba* seven times in an anticlockwise direction, while reciting prayers from the Quran. The crowd is colossal, and we're walking within the outer ring of pilgrims.

Words: Hafsa Lodi.





We complete the seven rounds within about 40 minutes, and drink some water from a cooler nearby before praying on the white marble floor near the *Ka'ba*. Then, we walk to a large indoor corridor to perform the second ritual of Umrah, called *Sa'i*. We walk seven times back and forth between two small hills, where the mountains of Safa and Marwah used to be. Muslims believe that God had commanded Abraham to leave his wife, Hagar, and their son, Ismael between these two mountains in the desert, to test their faith. Hagar left the infant in the sand and went back and forth between the two mountains seven times to search for water, until the baby Ismael hit the ground with his feet, conjuring a spring, which would come to be known as the well of *Zam Zam*. (Zam Zam is holy water, and pilgrims often leave *Makkah* with bottles full of it.) To complete the ritual at Sa'i, pilgrims are required to cut some of their hair. Some men even shave their heads. We're exhausted when we finish walking, and my mother, sister and I take turns cutting snippets of each others' hair underneath our scarves. We congratulate each other in a group hug-- we've completed our Umrah pilgrimage, and hope that our previous sins will all be forgiven, marking a fresh start for all of us as we walk back to our hotel.

We spent the rest of our time in *Makkah* at the Grand Mosque, reading the Quran and napping between prayers. On our third day, we wake up at sunrise to perform one last "farewell Tawaf," before climbing aboard a taxi for the four-hour drive to Madinah.

## Madinah

The city is considerably less crowded than Makkah, with a slightly less frantic pace. Our hotel, Dar Al Iman Intercontinental, is located right in front of Masjid Nabawi, known as The Prophet's Mosque, and we easily enter the air conditioned building before it reaches full capacity. After praying, we walk to Gate 25, the entrance to the grave of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), marked by a green dome. The women are all divided and herded into groups based on their nationality, and my mother, sister and I hold on to one another as the crowd threatens to stampede. The women in our group are tremendously excited—some are even crying. They've grown up learning all about the Prophet, who lived more than a millennium ago, and they are now at the site of his old house—a single wall separates them from his tomb. As the crowd pushes us closer to the screen blocking us from what must be the actual grave, we catch sight of a green carpet beneath our feet, and quickly offer a prayer. While the rest of the mosque is carpeted in dark red, it is believed the areas with green carpets are from Heaven. It's impossible for everyone contained in the area to bow down while praying, so many stay standing to avoid being trampled. When we are pushed off of the carpet by women from the next group, we make our way out of the mosque and head back to the hotel to rest.

We spend our remaining two days exploring the city. We see what remains of Mount Uhud, the site of the second battle in Islam, as well as the grave of Hamza, who was martyred during the battle. We also visit Masjid Quba, the first mosque that was built upon the Prophet's arrival in Madinah, and Masjid Qiblatain, at which the Islamic prayer direction was changed from Jerusalem to Makkah. Of course, the trip would be incomplete without souvenir shopping. The streets of Madinah leading up to the gates of Masjid Nabawi are lined with vendors, and I am instantly drawn to those selling printed chiffon scarves and colourful rosaries made with wooden and plastic beads, each costing only Dhs5.

When a taxi comes to take us to Jeddah airport on our third morning in Madinah, I have mixed feelings. Though I look forward to checking my email and getting a manicure, I know that I'll soon get back into the swing of everyday life, and won't experience the peace and unpretentiousness I've been privileged to be part of throughout the past week in Makkah and Madinah. Spiritually cleansed, I feel refreshed, relaxed and ready to embark on a new chapter in my life, with new motivations and resolutions.