

Local
The
Sacred
Journey

ILLUMINE

illuminating minds everywhere

MAGAZINE

February,
 12:02

Nadia Saifuddin awoke with her back to the desert floor. A crowd of strangers hovered over her as she drifted in and out of consciousness not knowing where she was. Some checked for a pulse, claiming not to find one. "*La illaha illallah, Muhammadur Rasulallah,*" (There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad ﷺ is His Messenger) called out an observer. But a homeopathic remedy put beneath Saifuddin's nose raised her to consciousness, allowing the completion of her *Hajj* (pilgrimage) the following day.

Her fainting was a result of being overwhelmed by witnessing thousands of people flowing into *Mina*, where pilgrims slept in the darkness of night beneath the desert stars.



IMAM TAHIR ANWAR IN ARAFAT

"Seeing so many (people) gathering in one place felt like I was witnessing *The Day of Judgment*," said Saifuddin. "It made me feel claustrophobic and dizzy, and then I fainted."

In the beginning of her *Hajj*, Saifuddin could easily distinguish the western pilgrims from all others. "You could see air conditioning units in their tents and other luxuries the rest of the people didn't have.

"But at *Mina* and *Muzdalifah*, you truly can't tell a King from a beggar. The social status of the person next to you is known only by God." Such an experience proves a difficult sacrifice for those coming from the West; who are more accustomed

to a materialistic way of life, said Saifuddin.

Saifudin's experience was one of approximately twenty thousand *Hujjaj* (pilgrims) who traveled from America this year to the holly city of Mecca.

On Jan. 19, the Muslim Community Association of Santa Clara, Calif. held a welcoming party for the returning pilgrims in their community. Pilgrims shared their experience through power point presentations and micro-phoned speeches before an avid crowd who have yet to make the journey. A PBS filming crew eagerly recorded the event for an upcoming documentary on Muslim Americans.

Pilgrims described the overwhelming experience of the *Hajj*; how viewing the *Ka'bah* (the house of God) for the first time filled their hearts with emotion and warmth. "Throughout my life, I faced the direction of the *Ka'bah* in prayers," said one *Haji*. "When my eyes gazed upon it for the first time, I couldn't hold back the tears."

Scholars told the *Hujjaj* to make a prayer when being in such a state because the first *du'a* (personal prayer) made upon seeing the *Ka'bah* was guaranteed to be accepted.

Speakers described how a circumambulation of the sanctuary proceeded the entry of the *Haram Al-Shareef* (the inviolate zone), where pilgrims begged *Allah* (God) for forgiveness to attain nearness to Him.

The pilgrims then advanced to pray two *rak'ats* (ritualized prayers) behind the *Maqam of Ibraheem* (Abrahamic station), the prophet who built the *Ka'bah* with his son *Ismaeel* (Ishmael) nearly four thousand years ago as the first permanent structure for worshiping Allah alone. According to some traditions, the structure was laid on an even older foundation built by the first man, Adam.

For some pilgrims, *Hajj* was a time to see both the good and the bad. Kamran Habib, a software engineer from San Jose, Calif., completed his *Hajj* for the second time, but was disappointed with the level of patience he saw in his fellow American pilgrims.

"Even though the American Muslims are very educated, you can see them losing patience quick," said Habib. "I think the biggest *fitnah* (trial) for the American *Hujjaj* was food. I saw two older sisters fighting in the *Haram* over pizza, each believing they deserved it more than other."

Habib does admit though that it was nice to hear English being spoken in a crowd of over a million people. "On a positive note," said Habib. "A brother was told by an inhabitant of Mecca that he could always point out the American *Hujjaj* even if they weren't speaking English. He said the majority of the Americans were distinguished because they were young, (unlike pilgrims from other countries who wait until old age before performing the *Hajj*); and because the American men often treat their wives better, by holding their hands and being nicer to them than others."

Tahir Anwar, the Imam of the South Bay Islamic Association in San Jose, Calif. led a group of 300 from across the country to Mecca this year in one of many pilgrimages he has performed.

Anwar said he holds high expectations for the American *Hujjaj*, and holds a five hour workshop for his students before departure. The workshop prepares the pilgrims for the worst case scenario, for patience, and for treating the land and people of the sacred land with respect.

"You may not get all the luxuries you're used to," said Anwar, "But this is a spiritual journey."



IMAM TAHIR SPEAKS ABOUT HAJJ WITH ZAIN VERJEE OF CNN

Anwar reported this last *Hajj* for CNN and is preparing a multi-media video tape that actually shows him performing the *Hajj* from Mecca and Medina to help better prepare future pilgrims.

Anwar said that the influx of the *Hujjaj* from America has increased tenfold in the past few years, and that tour operators couldn't get Visa's for many.

The Imam said he always advises people preparing for *Hajj* to do three things; "Number one - go as early as possible," said Anwar. "Hajj is a spiritual journey but it is also a very physical journey. Don't wait until you're too old and weak to do so. Number two - logistically speaking, make sure you do your research before you choose your tour operator. And three - Be prepared. This is the biggest thing Muslims from America need, preparation."

Anwar explained that Muslims either have the "back home" mentality of waiting until they are older

to go, or they will have very little knowledge once they get there.

"Have you ever seen the movie Rocky?" asked Anwar. "Well *Hajj* is a bit like Rocky, you really have to prepare yourself for the challenge!"

As for Kamran Habib and Nadia Saifuddin, both say they already long for returning to Mecca. "Whenever I pray," said Saifuddin, "I imagine I am in front of the *Ka'bah* and miss it."

"Leaving Allah's House was really sad for me," said Habib. "But at the same time I was happy to come home to what Allah gave me, my wife and kids."



Aman Mehrzai was born in Kabul, Afghanistan and came with his family to the U.S. on the onset of the Soviet invasion of their homeland.



www.illumemedia.org

© Copyright ILLUME MAGAZINE 2006