

Do you plan to go for Hajj?

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As we prepare for Ramadan, we are reminded that, immediately afterwards, many brothers and sisters from our community will prepare to go for Hajj. However, there are many guidelines and reminders for Hajj of which many people are ignorant. Accordingly, it is good to reiterate a few things that might be of benefit to those planning a Hajj trip.

Step 1: Intending to go for Hajj:

The most important step is that we intend to go for Hajj. Many of us delay this obligation to the point when we become old or less fit. The best time to go for Hajj is while one is young. If we have performed our Hajj and can afford to send our mature (*baaligh*) children, rather than wasting money on their wedding and graduation parties, give them that money to perform their Hajj. If our children are very young, we should try our best to leave them behind with someone trustworthy. It is not advisable to take young children along for Hajj.

Step 2: Finding the Correct Tour Operator

This is a very tricky step. Don't let the colorful fliers, low dollar amounts, or fast talking of a tour operator be your criteria for choosing a group. Unfortunately, many Hajj tour operators will not provide what they have promised. This is a fact and something that our communities should know by now. Even licensed tour operators are not necessarily the best nor most experienced. Finally, don't choose tour operators based on their having fancy offices.

Instead, select operators/groups based on a *few* referrals, from people that you know and have been for Hajj (not Umrah) with that group. Remember, taking groups for Hajj is a business for many of these tour operators, unlike what it is for those going for Hajj. It is a very spiritual journey; hence, do all your homework before you pick a tour operator, so you can focus on your worship in the sacred land.

There are some questions that one should ask the operators. Those who have not gone for Hajj before, even after receiving the answers will have no idea what is being talked about. Nevertheless, it is always good to ask, take notes, and consult with those who are experienced in this matter. Among the questions to ask are:

- Is the advertised fare from San Francisco or New York? Usually the fare quoted is from New York, so a few hundred dollars would be added to the package when flying from the west coast (even if you fly non-stop from San Francisco). In this case, you would book the flight from your airport to New York, using either money or frequent flyer miles

- Which flight will you be taking, and where will you be going first? Generally, those flights that are 'non-Arab' are usually best in terms of service, but you won't always have this option. If you are flying directly to Madinah, your choices will be very limited, and the airfare will be higher, but this option is much better (but not necessary) in order to avoid the long wait at Jeddah Airport
- How many days will you be spending in Makkah and in Madinah?
- Where are the hotels located? Get the names, and know that the number of stars matters far less than distance does. Also, many tour operators will tell you that the hotels are 5 minutes walking distance. Ask them if that time is during Hajj season, or otherwise. Because often the time quoted is for non-Hajj season, which is multiplied by 3 during Hajj season. Once they tell you the name of the hotel, ask someone who has been there before how far it is. Make sure it is not in Aziziyyah, which is 15-20 minutes away during non-Hajj season, but up to an hour away during Hajj season, and that too, in a taxi
- How many people per room? 3 is good, 4 is average, 5 is a crowd. One thing you should note is that non-mahrams are not allowed to live in a Single room together, so even if a large family is going, if there is a non-mahram in the group, the men and women will be split up
- What is the **total** cost? The price on the flier is likely far from what it will end up being. Typically you end up paying \$500-\$700 more i.e. approximately \$300 for the airfare to New York, \$275 for Hajj Fees, and \$100 for Zabihah (if you wish to pay for it at this time). If you upgrade your package e.g. choose Double occupancy; select a better hotel, etc., then you will pay more than this amount. Also, ensure that this is the final price you will be paying. Some tour operators are known to call you 2-3 weeks before you leave and start asking for additional money. At this point, you are in so deep, you end up paying them and tour operators make \$500-\$1000 extra per person like this. (They will tell you that the hotel costs have gone up, or the airline is charging them, etc., and it will be too late to find another tour operator) Even after all this, many Hajj tour operators will not provide what they have promised. So, as stated earlier: ***Pick groups based on a few referrals from people that you know have been with that group***
- Will you be flying to Madinah, or taking the bus? Bus or plane, it could take up to 24 hours. If you miss the plane, make sure you do not have to pay for the airfare of the new flight. Keep in mind that this day of travel is indeed one whole day. That means one less day in Makkah or Madinah. Many times, tour operators plan it such that they save the cost for one day

- Are meals included in the price? If yes, how many? Typically, breakfast and dinner are provided, but one should always confirm. It is good to have the meal be part of the package, as it makes things much easier versus going to overcrowded restaurants during Hajj season

Other issues to keep in mind:

- Make reservations and book your tickets as soon as possible. The longer you wait, the harder it is to get the flight options you want
- You will need to get vaccinated for meningitis, which will cost up to \$200 per person. Some insurances (such as Kaiser) cover travel vaccine, but most do not
- If you and your spouse do not share the same last name, you will need to provide a marriage certificate or get a letter from your local Masjid. If you are a new Muslim or have a name that is not Muslim, you will need a letter from your local Masjid verifying your faith is Islam

Step 3: Prepare Yourself

- Make physical as well as spiritual preparations
- Don't expect the tour operator to guide you every step of the way
- Learn how to do 'Umrah, since the first thing upon arrival will be performing an 'Umrah. No one from the tour company will be with you, so be sure to memorize the details of what you need to do

Some useful items to buy include:

- 1) Performing Hajj DVD - A Visual Guide to Performing Hajj on DVD
- 2) Performing Hajj Audio CD - A Practical Guide to the Journey of a Lifetime
Both of these can be purchased at www.falahproductions.com
- 3) Prayers for Forgiveness - by Imam Hasan al-Basri / Abdur-Rahman ibn Yusuf
- 4) Salat & Salam: In Praise of Allah's Beloved - by Abdur-Rahman ibn Yusuf
- 5) The Accepted Whispers - by Hakim al-Ummah Shaykh Ashraf Ali Thanwi
- 6) Haj 'Umrah Ziyarah Made Easy (4 Booklets) - by Shaykh M. Saleem Dhorat
- 7) Haj 'Umrah Ziyarah - by Mufti Abdullah ibn Abdurrahman Ibrahim
These books can be purchased at www.alrashad.com

A final caution involves the disadvantages of the 'luxury' Hajj packages. There are many shortcuts that are taken in some of these packages, all of which are contrary to the *shari'ah*. Some people say that it is best to go for just 10 days and take all shortcuts possible, but this is not the case. We are reminded to be perfect in

whatever we do, so how could we possibly take shortcuts in the greatest and most spiritual journey of our life?

Hopefully this brief guide has been informative and helpful to you. May Allah make this journey an easy and successful one for us. Aameen.