

Islamic Museum of Australia

All about Hajj

Three months and seven days after the commencement of Ramadan, Muslims begin their next rite: hajj.

Hajj is an annual five-day pilgrimage. It's one of the five pillars of Islam, meaning it's a once-in-a-lifetime obligation for physically and financially able Muslims.

Hajj is an intensely spiritual and virtuous endeavour that honours a series of milestones in the lives of the Prophets Muhammad (ﷺ) and Ibrahim through rituals, prayer and visits to sacred sites.

Millions of Muslims from all corners of the earth trek by foot, camel, boat, train and plane to the *miqat*, where the intent to perform hajj is declared. Here, pilgrims don simple white garments called *ihram*. These consist of two draping seamless sheets for men, and loose, sewn cloaks for women. "Seeing worshippers in their *ihram* showed me the equality of all pilgrims; race and colour play no part."

Their individual journeys culminate at Mecca, Saudi Arabia, marking the beginning of a special itinerary embarked as one: "It was unifying to know we had all come with the same intention."

Day One and Two

Pilgrims begin by circling the Kaaba seven times in a ceremony called *tawaf*.

The Kaaba is a defining holy emblem in the daily lives of Muslims. In all parts of the world, Muslims turn toward the black silk and cotton covered cube when performing their daily prayers. It's not an act of worship; rather, it represents the house and oneness of God.

The Kaaba also holds the black stone upon which an important act of sacrifice by Prophet Ibrahim took place, as told in the Quran.

"Upon seeing the Kaaba for the first time, a feeling goes inside of you that's very hard to describe."

"There is something deeply profound about seeing the Kaaba with your own eyes; your heart soars. Seeing it felt like, 'this is where my soul belongs.'"

Pilgrims continue to dwell on this moving, spiritual encounter by proceeding with prayers at the Great Mosque of Mecca. Travellers then drink water from the Zamzam well.

After this, men and women hike into the nearby Safa and Marwah hills. This venture takes around 40 minutes.

As nightfall is coloured by the sunrise, devotees travel to Mina where they spend the whole day in prayer and reflection.

Day Three, Four and Five

The final days of hajj. Where the most ethereal and impassioned connection to the divine is fostered.

Pilgrims start the day by ambling into the plains of Arafat. There's a cordial vibe with people gathering in tents, socialising, and performing prayers. Some ascend the Mount of Mercy, where the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) delivered his final sermon. Muslims have described the strong communion they felt here as "a revival of faith and connection with Allah."

The next ritual represents rejecting the devil as pilgrims throw stones at a tall, rock pillar.

Hajj climaxes with a *halal* animal sacrifice, usually a lamb; a practice that pays homage to the sacrifice made by Prophet Ibrahim. The meat is distributed to the poor and needy. This ceremony marks the beginning of Eid al-Adha; a religious four-day holiday celebrated by pilgrims and all other Muslims globally, similar to Eid al-Fitr, which is observed at the end of Ramadan.

Spending five days in Saudi Arabia's dry desert climate can be taxing. Nonetheless, Muslims strive to uphold exemplary character and regulate their emotions during hajj. If they can do this successfully, they are rewarded with paradise. Doing otherwise may nullify their pilgrimage.

For most, any potential negative or stressed sentiments aren't even a concern. Wearing the same garments, performing the same rituals and praying in the same spaces alongside millions of unfamiliar global Muslims rouses a deep mutual trust and respect while enriching the heart, mind, soul and spirit: "The hajj taught me patience, humbleness and equality."

"Devoting myself to my Lord is an experience I would do again, and again, as much as God allows me to."

"My journey will live within me forever."