

Here I am (at your service) O God, here I am. Here I am (at your service).

You have no partners (other gods). To You alone is all praise and excellence, and to You is all sovereignty. There is no partner to You.”

(labbayka -llāhumma labbayka, labbayka lā šarīka laka labbayka, 'inna -l-ḥamda wa-n-ni 'mata laka wa-l-mulka lā šarīka lak)

The words above are referred to as the Talbiya, which is a prayer said by pilgrims when they perform the Holy Pilgrimage of Hajj or Umrah.

[Talbiyah: Labaik Allahumma Labbaik - IslamiCity](#)

My family and I recently had the opportunity to perform Umrah, the nonmandatory lesser pilgrimage made by Muslims to Makkah, Saudi Arabia. We had the pleasure of making this pilgrimage during the holy month of Ramadan, which is the most sacred of months in the Islamic Calendar. The Quran was revealed during this time and fasting is prescribed throughout the month. During the daily fasts, Muslims abstain from food and drink from dawn to dusk while increasing their worship, charity and all good deeds.

“And complete the Hajj and Umrah for Allah.” Quran chapter 2, verse 196

Muslims have 5 pillars or obligations which are core beliefs of Islam:

Profession of Faith

Prayer

Almsgiving

Fasting

Pilgrimage (Hajj)

This was our third Umrah as a family, but our first opportunity to experience it in Ramadan. It was a truly unique and powerful experience. Performing Umrah during Ramadan is a privilege that only some are able to experience.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said, “Umrah in Ramadan is equivalent to Hajj with me.” Hajj is the mandatory pilgrimage to Makkah, to visit the House of God (Kaaba) built by Prophet Abraham. This journey must be taken at least once in a lifetime by every physically and financially able Muslim. It can only be performed at a specific time during the year and lasts approximately a week. On the other hand, Umrah takes less than a day to perform (4-6 hours) and may be carried out at most times during the year.

The city of Makkah is the holiest place for Muslims around the world. We face the Kaaba five times a day during our daily prayers. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was born here and this is where the religion of Islam was founded.

The purpose of Hajj and Umrah are to seek forgiveness and cleanse the soul while attaining God's pleasure. The pilgrimage enables one to refresh their faith and connection to the Lord. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) performed Hajj and Umrah, thus making it a Sunnah (precedent which should be followed). Muslims aim to emulate the Prophet (PBUH) and his lifestyle to the best of their abilities.

My family's journey began in Madinah. This is the second holiest city in the Muslim world. It is located approximately 300 miles north of Makkah and is often referred to as the "City of the Prophet (PBUH)." He migrated from Makkah to Madinah in the year 622 due to religious persecution. His final resting place is located in the Prophet's Mosque, also known as Masjid An-Nabwi.

This city truly manifests the personality of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). The people of Madinah are hospitable and friendly while the environment and temperature are moderate compared to other areas in that region. There is a calmness and tranquility in Madinah which is a unique characteristic of the city. The Prophet (PBUH) said, "I have made Madinah a sanctuary between its two mountains." It is also considered the "cradle of Islamic Culture and Civilization." Muslims visit the city out of love and respect for the Prophet (PBUH). They have the rare opportunity to visit his burial site, located inside Masjid An-Nabwi

When we arrived in Madina, we were fortunate enough to be at a hotel adjacent to the courtyard of the Prophet's Mosque. Our days consisted of the simple goals to perform each of our five daily prayers and additional worship at the Mosque. It was an honor and the pleasure of a lifetime to be able to conduct our worship in this glorious Masjid. On some occasions, we performed the prayers outside in the courtyard. The morning and evening congregations were accompanied by a cool breeze and very comfortable temperatures. The afternoon prayers were made more pleasant with the iconic automated umbrellas, which completely cover the entire courtyard of the mosque to create [143,000 square meters of shade](#).

While at the mosque, the impressive voice of the Imam (religious leader) conducting the prayer, resonated within the walls of the structure and throughout the courtyard. It was a beautiful experience, standing with complete strangers from various nations across the globe, sharing the same goals of purification and forgiveness. On many occasions, our only form of communication with each other was a smile and a nod as most people there did not speak the same language. In between prayers, I overheard conversations consisting of various languages from across the world. Every once in a while I would hear a word or phrase I recognized, but before I could even figure out where it came from, it was drowned out in the sea of people around me. As I looked about, I could see so many beautiful faces consisting of every skin tone imaginable. Everyone there was unique yet so similar. We all looked different and sounded foreign to each other, but

our hearts were all filled with the same longing of getting closer to our Lord by standing shoulder to shoulder and submitting to Him in prayer. Although we did not say a word to each other, we knew we had all made sacrifices to get there. Most of us came from far off lands and endured extensive travel, leaving behind livelihoods, homes and in some cases families, to share in this journey with our fellow brothers and sisters. It was only natural to pray for the person next to you, because you could relate to them on this spiritual level.

Beyond the beauty of my fellow pilgrims, I was in awe of the stunning architectural splendor of the Mosque. The white marble walls, tall minarets, and intricately carved doors, all adorned with Arabic calligraphy, and accents of brass and gold constituted the exterior landscape of the mosque. Inside, my breath was taken away by the enormous chandeliers, embellished arches, ornate pillars, and lavish carpets. The Prophet's Mosque is the second largest mosque in the world and has a capacity to house 1 million people. According to the Saudi Press Agency, in Ramadan of 2022, 14 million worshipers visited this Mosque. I suspect there were a similar number of worshipers this year, if not more.

As we left Madinah, there was a sadness that overtook me. The desire to stay longer was consuming me. During my last prayer performed at the Prophet's Mosque, my heart was overflowing as tears glided down my cheeks. I felt an overwhelming sense of loss by leaving this beautiful place. I tried to remind myself that I should be grateful to have had another opportunity to visit this house of worship which was originally constructed by the hands of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). My only source of peace came from my constant prayer to the Lord for the blessing of a future opportunity to once again experience the serenity of Madinah.

Our adventures continued as we embarked upon our journey to Makkah. The newly operational high speed trains were now running. In our past experiences we had traveled by road from Madinah to Makkah, which took anywhere from 4 to 7 hours. The train took less than 2.5 hours, traveling at speeds as high as 186 miles an hour. With the intention to perform the rituals of Umrah as soon as we arrived in Makkah, most travelers were dressed in Ihram (sacred state entered to perform the Pilgrimage) and poised to experience the highlight and purpose of our travels. All the men, regardless of their status or race, were dressed using two unstitched white sheets of cloth wrapped around the body in a specific manner in order to participate in the pilgrimage. The purpose of this is to create equality amongst the pilgrims and also symbolizes how God views us all equally, regardless of our worldly successes, titles, and wealth. Although the women do not have a dress code, they are encouraged to wear simple, loose, modest clothes without any jewelry, make up or perfumes to facilitate equity amongst the pilgrims. The literal meaning of Ihram is to enter into a state of purity and prohibition from certain things.

Being in this state prompted most travelers in the train to refrain from idle talk and focus more on Quranic recitation and refreshing their memories with prayers and supplications they planned

on saying once they arrived at the Grand Mosque in Makkah. At some point, most of us dozed off and caught up on some well deserved sleep. During the time I was awake, I felt a sense of anticipation and nervousness about completing the task ahead of us. Thoughts of what to expect during the busy days of Ramadan raced through my mind, with interruptions of possibilities of things that could possibly go wrong or prevent us from completing the Umrah. All these thoughts were mixed with a feeling of anticipation and joy to finally be able to complete the goal of our trip.

The train ride went by surprisingly fast. As we arrived at the train station in Makkah, we were greeted by staff giving us the familiar iftar (meals to open fast) packages similar to ones we received every night in Madinah. To feed the fasting pilgrims is a tradition of the Saudi government and is considered an honor for them. Millions of meals are served to fasting pilgrims during the month of Ramadan.

As we arrived at our hotel in Makkah, we opened our fasts, freshened up and prayed our sunset prayer before we headed to the Grand Mosque, Masjid Al-Haram. We were very fortunate to be in close proximity to the Holy sight. In fact, we had a partial view of the Mosque from our room, and were close enough to join congregational prayers while still in our hotel. The rooms were all outfitted with a speaker system connected to the Mosque. This was a welcomed amenity which came in extremely handy while in Makkah.

We headed to Masjid Al-Haram with our group in hopes of being able to perform Umrah together. Although this was my 5th trip to Makkah during my lifetime, I was taken aback by the large crowds we encountered at the Mosque. It was similar to the environment of Hajj (obligatory pilgrimage performed at least once in a lifetime). Even before we left the hotel, we came across many pilgrims coming and going to the Mosque. With so many people, it was nearly impossible to stick close together with the group. My daughter and I somehow managed to lose our group as soon as we entered the Mosque. With 3 levels now constructed at the largest and oldest Mosque in the world, we didn't realize that our group leader went to another floor. Within moments, we stumbled upon my eldest son who also could not find the group. It took us a while, but we ultimately found the rest of our group and joined them in circling the Kaaba seven times in a counter clockwise fashion. While doing this, we recited specific prayers from the Quran, Hadith, and our personalized prayers to God. Once this was completed we drank Zamzam (holy water) and moved on to the second part of the Umrah, where we walked back and forth seven times between the two hills of Safa and Marwa, located adjacent to the Kaaba inside the Masjid. This ritual honors the actions of Prophet's Abraham's wife, Hajar who walked back and forth seven times between the two hills in search of water for her son, Prophet Ismael, who was still a baby and cried of thirst. At that time, 5000 years ago, the well of Zamzam sprang up under the feet of the Prophet Ismael. Zamzam is considered superior to other drinking water because of its origin and the fact that it carries no bacteria, etc.

Once the above rituals are completed, the men usually shave their heads or get a trim, to commemorate the successful completion of the Umrah and Hajj pilgrimages. The women are also recommended to get a trim or cut a finger's length of hair. Once this is done, you are no longer in the state of Ihram and can go back to dressing and behaving as you were prior to entering this state. It was a time of joy for my family and other members in our group. Earlier that day, we had departed the city of the Prophet (PBUH) with bittersweet emotions and anticipation of completing our Umrah later in the evening. Now I was able to breathe a sigh of relief and gratification. We had accomplished our main goal for the trip and everything beyond this point was a bonus. We enjoyed the next couple of days keeping up with the same routine as in Madinah. We prayed our 5 prayers in congregation, remembered the Lord, recited His words, and admired the magnificence and splendor of one of the most beautiful Mosques in the world. Due to the large number of pilgrims during Ramadan, it was very difficult to get into the mosque to simply pray or worship. The pilgrims who had not yet completed the Umrah were given preference. Hence most of the remaining daily prayers were prayed inside our hotel. The convenience of being able to hear the Imam lead the prayer in real time made that experience rich and convenient for us.

As we began preparing ourselves for our trip back home, a similar sense of sorrow which I experienced while departing Madinah descended upon me. I was now sad to leave the House of God, the Kaaba. Although I felt content with the completion of the Pilgrimage, the lack of in person time at the Kaaba felt different from previous experiences and left somewhat of a void. The only way to fill this emptiness was to pray that my Lord bless me with another opportunity in the near future to come back and experience the sweetness of the words:

Here I am (at your service) O God, here I am. Here I am (at your service).

You have no partners (other gods). To You alone is all praise and excellence, and to You is all sovereignty. There is no partner to You.”

(labbayka -llāhumma labbayka, labbayka lā šarīka laka labbayka, `inna -l-ḥamda wa-n-ni`mata laka wa-l-mulka lā šarīka lak)