Hajj
(Pilgrimage to Mecca)

Type of Holiday: Religious (Muslim)
Date of Observation: Eighth to the thirteenth day of Dhul-Hijjah, the twelth lunar month of the Islamic calendar
Where Celebrated: Mecca, Saudi Arabia
Symbols and Customs: Black Stone, Ihram (Pilgrim’s Robe), Kaaba, Tawâf (Circumambulation), Ten Rites, Well of Zamzam
Colors: The Hajj is associated with white, the color of the Ihram or pilgrim’s robe; with black, the color in which the walls of the Kaaba are draped; and with green, the color of the scarf or turban worn by returning Muslims who have successfully completed the Ten Rites of the pilgrimage.
Related Holidays: Id al-Adha

ORIGINS

The Hajj is one of the central precepts in the Islamic religion, which is one of the largest of the world’s religions. According to some estimates, there are more than one billion Muslims worldwide, with major populations found in the Middle East, North and sub-Saharan Africa, Turkey, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. In Europe and the United States, Islam is the second largest religious group, with some seven million adherents in the United States. During the early years of Islam, the faith spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula into regions that are today occupied by Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan. Contrary to popular opinion, however, Muslims are not just Arabs. Muslims—followers of Islam—are found in
many different ethnic groups all over the globe. In fact, Arabs make up less than twenty percent of Muslims.

The word Islam is an Arabic word that means “surrender to God.” Its other meanings include peace, safety, and health. The central focus of Islam is a personal commitment and surrender to Allah, the Arabic word for God. In Islam, the concept of Allah is universal and eternal. Allah is the same in every religion and throughout the history of humankind. A person who follows Islam is called a Muslim, which means one who surrenders or submits to Allah’s will. But Islam is not just a religion of belief; it is a religion of action. Five specific deeds are required of followers; these are called The Five Pillars of Islam. They are 1) Shahadah—confession of faith; 2) Salat—prayer/worship; 3) Zakat—charity; 4) Sawm—fasting; and 5) Hajj—pilgrimage.

The message of Islam was brought by Muhammad (570-632 C.E.), who is considered a prophet of Allah. The holy book of Islam is the Qur’an (also sometimes spelled Koran or Alcoran). According to Islamic belief, the Qur’an was revealed to Muhammad by Allah over a period of twenty-three years. Authorship of the Qur’an is attributed to Allah, and not to Muhammad; Muhammad merely received it. Muslims believe that because it originated with Allah, the Qur’an is infallible.

There are two main sects within Islam: Sunni and Shi’ite. Sunni Muslims are the majority (estimated at about eighty percent). They recognize the authority of the first four Caliphs, including Ali, and they believe that the Sunna (the example of the Prophet Muhammad) is interpreted through the consensus of the community. Shi’ite Muslims also look to special teachers, called imams. The imams are the direct descendants of Muhammad through Fatimah and Ali. These individuals are believed to be inspired and to possess secret knowledge. Shi’ites, however, do not recognize the same line of Islamic leaders acknowledged by the Sunnis. Shi’ites hold to a doctrine that accepts only leaders who are descended from Muhammad through his daughter Fatimah and her husband Ali. Many Shi’ite subsects believe that true imams are errorless and sinless. They receive instruction from these leaders rather than relying on the consensus of the community.

Every year over two million Muslims complete the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, the city in Saudi Arabia where the Prophet Muhammad was born. Considered to be the religious center of the universe—the point at which heaven is nearest to the earth, and where prayers can therefore be more easily heard—Mecca is as sacred to Muslims as Rome is to Catholics and Jerusalem is to Orthodox Jews. Although Muslims may visit Mecca at any time of year, the Hajj may only be performed during the twelfth lunar month. Every pilgrim’s goal is to reach Mecca by the seventh day of the month of Dhul-Hijja. Although the rituals associated with the Hajj do not begin until the eighth day, this is the day on which the pilgrims receive their instructions concerning the ceremonies in which they are about to take part.
Every Muslim capable of making the trip is expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his or her lifetime, although those who are too ill to travel or who simply cannot afford the expense are exempt from this requirement. The Hajj is considered one of the “five pillars” or fundamental duties of Islam, and the Qur’an (the sacred book of the Islamic religion) describes in great detail the rituals that must be followed when the pilgrim reaches the Holy City. Non-Muslims are forbidden not only to observe or participate in the pilgrimage but even to visit the city of Mecca. Any non-Muslim who is caught doing so faces the death penalty, although Westerners occasionally manage to sneak into the city disguised as Muslims.

Now that air travel is common, the journey to Mecca is not nearly the hardship it was for earlier pilgrims, who traveled on camels or horses—and sometimes barefoot across the burning desert sands—to fulfill their obligation. Because the Islamic calendar is lunar, the timing of the Hajj shifts back eleven days according to the Christian calendar each year. This means that sometimes it falls during the mild Saudi Arabian winter, but it also means that some pilgrims make their journey during the summer, when the heat can cause discomfort and serious health problems. The Saudi Arabian government does everything it can to keep the pilgrims comfortable, but the crowds can be so huge that simply moving about and getting sleep become a challenge. Pilgrims who arrive from the same country usually stay together and are looked after by a guide, who finds them accommodation and helps with their travel arrangements.

The custom of journeying to a sacred place to perform religious rites was common in pre-Islamic Arabia and among the Semitic peoples. But the real model for the Hajj comes from Muhammad’s “farewell pilgrimage” from Medina, where he lived and ruled, to his birthplace several months before his death.

**SYMBOLS AND CUSTOMS**

**Black Stone**

Also known as the Ruby of Heaven, the Black Stone that is set into the eastern corner of the shrine in Mecca known as the Kaaba is believed to have been brought by Adam from the Garden of Eden after he was banished. The stone itself is actually a dark reddish-brown. Because it was once split in a fire, it now consists of three large and several small pieces about twelve inches in diameter, held together by a silver band. As the pilgrims circumambulate the Kaaba (see *Tawâf*), they are supposed to kiss the Black Stone or touch it with their fingers.

**Iḥrām (Pilgrim’s Robe)**

Pilgrims must be in a state of purity when they enter Mecca, so it is customary for them to stop about six miles outside the city and begin the purification process.
After taking a ritual bath and reciting certain prayers, they put on a special garment known as the *ihrâm* or pilgrim’s robe, which consists of two pieces of unsewn white cloth, usually linen or cotton. One piece is wrapped around the waist, and the other is flung over the left shoulder, leaving part of the right arm free. Although it is permissible to use an umbrella for protection from the hot sun, male pilgrims’ heads must remain uncovered. Female pilgrims are covered from head to ankle, and their faces are often concealed by a mask that keeps the white fabric from touching their skin. Although bare feet are preferred, heelless slippers may be worn on the feet.

Uncomfortable as it must be when worn for several days in hot weather, the pilgrim’s robe is rich in symbolism. It serves as a reminder that Muslims must be prepared to give up everything for Allah (God). When Muslims die, they leave all their clothes and belongings behind and are dressed for burial in simple pieces of cloth similar to those of the ihrâm. It is also symbolic of every Muslim’s equality in Allah’s eyes.

Most pilgrims put on their white robes several miles outside of Mecca at Miqat. Those arriving by air often change into the ihrâm on the plane so they don’t arrive in Miqat wearing the wrong clothes.

**Kaaba**

The Kaaba is a fifteen-foot-high square granite shrine in Mecca that contains the Black Stone believed to have been brought by Adam from the Garden of Eden. According to legend, Adam was so miserable after leaving the garden that God set up a red tent on the spot where the Kaaba now stands, and this is where Adam spent the remainder of his life. The Black Stone that he brought with him was later set into the eastern corner of the shrine built by Abraham at Allah’s command. Some say that the footprint of Abraham, from whom Muhammad is believed to have descended, can still be seen in the stone.

The shrine itself—Kaaba means “cube”—is made of reddish granite and has only one door, which leads into an unfurnished room and is only opened on special occasions. The walls are draped in black brocade curtains, which are replaced every year. The old ones are cut up in small pieces and sold to pilgrims as precious souvenirs.

**Tawâf (Circumambulation)**

As soon as possible after arriving in Mecca, the pilgrims enter the courtyard of the Great Mosque. They proceed toward the Black Stone, and with the Kaaba on their left, they circle the shrine seven times. The first three circuits are done at a very fast pace, kissing or touching the Black Stone each time it is passed. Known as the *har-*
walah, this quickened step is symbolic of what the Prophet Muhammad did on his “farewell pilgrimage” to show that he wasn’t tired after his long journey. The last four circuits are walked at a more leisurely pace. After the seventh circuit, the pilgrims press their bodies against the multazam, a space between the eastern corner of the shrine and the door, that is considered to be especially holy. In doing so they hope to absorb some of the baraka—the blessing of virtue—with which this holy building is endowed.

The root meaning of the word hajj is “to describe a circle.” It is from this ritual circumambulation of the Kaaba, therefore, that the pilgrimage gets its name.

Ten Rites

There are ten rites or ceremonies that must be performed by each pilgrim during the Hajj:

1. Entrance through the Gate of Peace. There are nineteen gates leading to the courtyard of the Great Mosque of Mecca, which is 550 feet long and 360 feet wide. Pilgrims must enter through the Bab a-Salam or Gate of Peace.

2. Kissing of the Black Stone. The pilgrims make their way to the center of the courtyard, where the kaaba rises fifty feet into the air. They go directly to the BLACK STONE and kiss it with reverence.

3. Circumambulation. As described above (see tawaf), the pilgrims travel around the Kaaba seven times counterclockwise, always keeping the shrine on their left.

4. Prayer at the Mosque of Abraham. The next stop is the small, domed Mosque of Abraham, in which Ishmael (son of Abraham) and his mother Hagar are buried. Prayers are offered, and then the pilgrims walk over to drink from the sacred Well of Ishmael (see well of zamzam).

5. Ascent to Mount Safa and Mount Maret. Pilgrims leave the Mosque of Abraham with their left foot forward, going out of the courtyard through the Gate of Safa and following the road that leads from the hilltop of Safa to the top of Mount Maret (or Marwa), a distance of about one-seventh of a mile. The pilgrims must then run back and forth between these two points seven times, stopping at certain fixed points to offer prayers. This rite commemorates Hagar’s search for water in the desert between the two mountains (see well of zamzam).

6. Journey to the Mountain of Mercy. The Hajj proper begins on the eighth day, as the pilgrims begin their long journey to Mount Arafat, also known as the Mountain of Mercy, several miles away. According to legend, exactly 700,000 pilgrims will reach Mount Arafat; if fewer than this number manage to do so, angels will come down and make up the difference.
7. Sermon on Arafat. Once they have gathered on Mount Arafat, the pilgrims listen to a sermon delivered by a religious leader, who addresses them while mounted on a camel.

8. Night in Muzdalifa. That evening, the pilgrims depart again for Mecca; but halfway between Arafat and the Holy City, they must spend a night in Muzdalifa. Huge crowds gather at the mosque there, and there is usually so much music and commotion that no one gets any sleep. Pilgrims also take advantage of this stop to gather the seventy pebbles they will need for the next day’s rite.

9. Stoning of the Devils in Mina. On their way to Mecca the following day, the pilgrims stop in the village of Mina. Three pillars are there, and the pilgrims throw their pebbles at the pillars in a ceremony known as the Stoning of the Devils. This ritual is based on the story of how the devil tried three times to persuade Abraham to ignore God’s command to sacrifice his son, Ishmael. Each time, Abraham threw pebbles at the devil in disgust and continued on his way. By throwing stones at the three pillars, the pilgrims are symbolically expressing their own ability to resist temptation. The stones that accumulate there are eventually taken to Mecca to be used as gravel on the floor of the Great Mosque. Animal sacrifices are also performed at Mina to commemorate God’s provision of a ram to be sacrificed in Ishmael’s place. The killing of so many animals has forced Saudi Arabian officials to explore new methods for freezing, preserving, and distributing the meat produced. After the sacrifice, male pilgrims’ heads are shaved and women’s hair is trimmed. The ihram is then taken off.

10. Visit to the Tomb of Muhammad. The pilgrims return to Mecca and try to get a bottle or tin of water from the WELL OF ZAMZAM, also known as the Well of Ishmael. They then go to Medina, the city where the Prophet lived and was buried, to visit Muhammad’s tomb. Although the visit to Medina, 200 miles away, is not compulsory, it is regarded as an act of great merit.

Well of Zamzam

Also known as the Well of Ishmael, this sacred source of water is located just a few steps from the southeast corner of the KAABA beneath a domed building erected in 1661. The well itself is a shaft that goes down more than 100 feet and possesses the miraculous ability to maintain the same water level, no matter how much is drawn from it by pilgrims who believe in its curative powers. Some dip their robes in it or take some home to their relatives as gifts, to be used when someone is ill or to wash the body after death. Others drink as much of it as they possibly can.

Legend has it that when Hagar and Ishmael were abandoned in the desert near Mecca, they used up all the water in the goatskin that Abraham had given them. In a
frantic search for more, Hagar ran back and forth between the two hills of Safa and Marwa seven times. God finally heard Ishmael’s prayers, and the water gushed forth not far from where the Kaaba now stands, making a sound like zam-zam.

Today the water is channeled to underground galleries that can be reached by a flight of stairs, where a number of faucets can supply many people at once. The well is fed by several springs and is visited by thousands of people daily.

**FURTHER READING**


**WEB SITE**

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Hajj


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**Halashashti**

**Type of Holiday**: Religious (Hindu)

**Date of Observation**: August-September; sixth day of the waning half of the Hindu month of Bhadrapada

**Where Celebrated**: India

**Symbols and Customs**: Plough