

## Experience of Umrah Trip to Saudi Arabia from Kashmir India: Model Study on Management and Facilities to Pilgrims by Custodian of Holy Mosques Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Haamid Bashir<sup>1\*</sup>, Rouf Ahmad Beigh<sup>2</sup>, Rumysa<sup>3</sup>, Shaista Bashir<sup>4</sup>, Dr. Asif Yaqoob Bazaz<sup>5</sup>, Altaf Ahmad Beigh<sup>6</sup> and Rabia Farooq<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Biological Sciences, University of Kashmir, India

<sup>2</sup>Department of Management Sciences, Maharishi Dayanand University, Haryana, India

<sup>3</sup>Department of Management Sciences, Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University, Rajouri, Jammu and Kashmir, India

<sup>4</sup>University of Kashmir, Srinagar, India

<sup>5</sup>Rajiv Gandhi University of Health Sciences, Bengaluru, India

<sup>6</sup>SSM College of Engineering Srinagar and CEO, Darul Amman Tour and Travels, Srinagar, India

<sup>7</sup>Faculty of Biological Science, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, India

### Abstract

The Umrah is an Islamic pilgrimage to holy cities of Saudi Arabia, Makkah and Medina and is performed by Muslims that can be undertaken at any time of the year, in contrast to the haj which has specific dates according to the Islamic lunar calendar. Both the holy mosques are under the control of custodian of holy mosques, kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Kashmir division of J&K has 94% Muslim population and are coming in groups for Umrah. In holy Quran, it has been stated that physically and economically fit can travel to Umrah and Haj. This study explores what pilgrims do during the pilgrimage, providing a brief description of principle rites and experiences and their meaning to individual participants travelling from the Kashmir. The findings included experiences faced by pilgrims in holy cities of Makkah and Medina and facilities provided by government of Saudi Arabia. The results from this study indicated that main motivation of lakhs of pilgrims from all over the world to attend Umrah pilgrimage were to fulfil religious obligations, spiritual enhancement and to follow teaching of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and to see sacred places where revelations of holy Quran occurred. This huge gathering of Umrah is possible only by best infrastructure, best health care facilities, good communication and large size of grand mosques by devotees. It is all provided by custodian of holy mosques kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Further improvement is needed in all sectors as per Saudi vision of 2030 to accommodate 30 million of pilgrims. Umrah is round the year going and it also boosts economy of Saudi Arabia. Simultaneously boosts spirituality and peace of mind among Umrah pilgrims.

**Keywords:** Umrah; Kashmir; Saudi Arabia; Religious tourism; Makkah; Medina; Travel

### Introduction

The Jammu and Kashmir is a Muslim Majority state of India. Srinagar is a capital city and 96.4% population comprises of Muslims only. Thousands of Muslims visits to Saudi Arabia round the year for Umrah pilgrimage and hundreds of Travel Companies is organizing seventeen days, twenty-two days and full month Umrah packages. Kashmir valley is surrounded by a snow clad mountains [1]. The journey of Umrah (Arabic: *أُورَامَة*) is an Islamic pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia, performed by Muslims that can be undertaken at any time of the year, in contrast to the Haj (Arabic: *حَجّ*) which has specific dates according to the Islamic lunar calendar. In the Sharia of Islam, Umrah means to perform Tawaf, round the Ka'bah (Arabic: *كَبَّة* 'Cube'), and Sa'I between mount Safa and Marwah, both after assuming Ihram (a sacred state). Ihram must be observed once traveling by land and passing a Miqat like Zu 'l-Hulafa, Juhfa, Qarnu 'l-Manāzil, Yalamlam, Zāt-i-'Irq, Ibrahim Mursia, or a place in al-Hill [2]. Different conditions exist for air travelers, who must observe Ihram once entering a specific perimeter about the city of Makkah. It is sometimes called the 'minor pilgrimage' or 'lesser pilgrimage', the Haj being the 'major' pilgrimage which is compulsory for every Muslim who can afford it. The Umrah is not compulsory but highly recommended. There are a number of essential Acts which must be avoided once a pilgrim enters into the state of Ihram and makes the intention (Niyah). He or she must avoid the following acts: making marriage proposals or marriage contracts, cutting hair, clipping nails, putting perfumes on their body after putting on the Ihram, killing or hunting animals, sexual intercourse, shaving any parts of the body, men must not wear any underwear or cover their

heads or get in disputes [3]. The sole purpose of these prohibitions is to focus the pilgrims mind and body on the Umrah pilgrimage. Every Umrah pilgrimage should abide the law of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Smuggling of drugs can lead to death verdict. Once the pilgrim has made the intention to perform Umrah, they need to say in Arabic this:

"Labbayk Allahumma labbayk. Labbayka laa,

Shareeka laka labbayk.

Innal-hamda wan-ni'mata laka wal mulk. Laa"

Shareeka lak"

**English meaning:** Here I am O Allah, Here I am. Here I am, you have no partner, here I am.

Surely all praise, grace and dominion are. Yours, and You have no partner.

**\*Corresponding author:** Haamid Bashir, Independent Travel Researcher and PhD Research Scholar, University of Kashmir, India, Tel: 0194 227 2096; E-mail: [haamidb7@gmail.com](mailto:haamidb7@gmail.com)

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As per Islamic history prophet Muhammad (pbuh) performed first Umrah with his follower dates back 629 AD or 7 AH after the treaty of Hudaibiya. This was called the first Umrah. The Umrah pilgrims perform a series of ritual acts symbolic of the lives of Prophet Ibrahim and his second wife Hazrat Hajra, and of solidarity with Muslims worldwide. Pilgrims enter the perimeter of Mecca in a state of ihram and perform: Tawaf (Arabic: تَوَافُ), which consists of circling the Ka'bah seven times in an anticlockwise direction. Men are encouraged to do this three times at a hurried pace, followed by four times, more closely, at a leisurely pace. Sa'i (Arabic: سَاعِي), which means rapidly walking seven times back and forth between the hills of safa and Marwah. This is a re-enactment of Hajra's frantic search for water. The baby Ismail cried and hit the ground with his foot and water miraculously sprang forth. This source of water is today called the well of zam-zam. Halq is a partial shortening of the hair typically reserved for women who cut a minimum of one inch or more of their hair. A Halq is a complete shave of head, usually performed on men. Both of these signify the submission of will to God over glorifying physical appearances. The head shaving/cutting is reserved until the end of Umrah [4]. These rituals complete the Umrah, and the pilgrim can choose to go out of ihram. The peak times of pilgrimage are the days before, during and after the Hajj and during the last ten days of Ramadan. Jeddah is on the coast of the Red Sea and therefore enjoys a slightly humid climate in summer. It becomes less humid in winter. The King Abdul Aziz international airport is situated in Jeddah. The travelers from all over the world reach by air to Jeddah to perform Umrah. From Jeddah, Makkah is about 90 to 100 km distance around 2 hour duration. The demography and climate scenario of holy cities of Makkah and Medinah are as under. Makkah is a birthplace of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the place where first revelations of holy Quran. Makkah is about 70 kilometers inland. It has an escarpment around it. One of the most famous sources of drinking water is from the Holy well of Zam-Zam. There is very little vegetation in and around Makkah due to the low rainfall. The Great Arabian Desert is all around Makkah. The climate is dry. Temperatures are extremely high, usually in the forty degree Celsius range and sometimes going into the fifties in summer. Medina is situated about 500 kilometers north and is about 150 kilometers from the coast. It is a large oasis with the Great Arabian Desert all around it. Because of the numerous wells providing excellent water, it has date orchards spreading out on to the outskirts of the city. The climate is dry and hot, the temperatures not reaching as high as in Makkah. In winter, it can become cool to cold especially around pre-dawn prayers. Health care is provided by the Saudi government free of charge to all pilgrims. There are ten hospitals in Makkah. Ajjad hospital, King Faisal hospital, King Abdul Aziz hospital, Maternity and Children hospital, King Abdullah Medical City etc. There are also many walk-in clinics available for both residents and pilgrims in Makkah and Medina. In Medina there is Al-Ansar tertiary care hospital [5,6]. Umrah pilgrims can exchange their currencies easily at money exchange counters in holy cities. Food available in restaurants is economical and hygienic. Cities are pollution free and eco-friendly. Umrah pilgrimage occurs in religious tourism and source of income for people living there and expatriates working there. Umrah pilgrimage is round the year going. So, it simultaneously boosts economy of Saudi Arabia. This study is aimed to observe the basic facilities provided by government and travel companies there during the Umrah pilgrimage and feedback by Umrah pilgrims for further improvement of Umrah journey with best facilities.

## Methodology

This study is personal experience of researchers and experiences shared by Umrah volunteer pilgrim's visited holy cities of Makkah

and Medina for Umrah from recent time. Questionnaire model and observation technique has been adopted in this study. The different Umrah groups of pilgrims of different travel agencies visited Saudi Arabia in between December 2016 to March 2017. Cost of Umrah journey was borne by volunteers themselves. They participated in this research work in interest of good cause and we pursued this research in interest of Muslim Ummah. After formulating questionnaire model and permission to ask questions we asked questions from pilgrims travelling to Saudi Arabia from Indian Kashmir with private travel companies. All responses are documented and this survey was conducted for about three weeks. Secondary data and literature review was collected from different sources. Interview responses from Umrah pilgrims had been documented after informed consent. As a research scholar cutting edge in research did not stopped there and we pursued research along Umrah in that period, simultaneously observed all facilities given to Umrah pilgrims by Travel Companies concerned and kingdom of Saudi Arabia. All observations are formulated and quantitative study has been written in the form of this research article to benefit Saudi government in further management cum policies related for Saudi Vision 2030 and to inspire Muslim Ummah about Umrah pilgrimage in general Muslims of Kashmir, and also to create love of holy cities and kingdom of Saudi Arabia. By informing Umrah Pilgrims best facilities provided by the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Management and coordination of Travel Company with Umrah Visa Company in Saudi Arabia is a necessary. Good and minimum distance of hotel from grand mosques is an advantage. In addition to this pilgrims need good hygienic room, clean bathroom, toilets in room and best food depends upon culture and ethnicity. This is upto Travel Company by which they came to Saudi Arabia. Also these facilities will be managed by a travel company and are depend upon package they have fulfilled. Packages are in three forms available: economical, deluxe and super deluxe. Higher the package the higher amount has to pay the pilgrims. So I adopted following criteria for this model study as under.

### Inclusion criteria

- Pilgrims from Kashmir, India
- Pilgrims which are vaccinated.
- Pilgrims which are normal in health.
- Pilgrims which are ethnically and culturally same.
- Pilgrims which are mainly Sunni Muslims.

### Exclusion criteria

- Pilgrims which are having deadly diseases or infections.
- Pilgrims from other than Kashmir or ethnicity.
- Pilgrims which are Shia Muslims.

### Result

The analysis of data confirms that Umrah is also great event for pilgrim like haj as accordance to hadith of Prophet (pbuh) in his life. The individual pilgrim enjoys and experiences great experiences both in Makkah and Medina holy cities. This research was done on individual capacity not on behalf of country or any organization. Majority of Umrah pilgrims are first timers and are both men and women in age group of 25 to 60 years. Majority was married and accompanied by mehrams as per law of Islam and law of kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Table 1 illustrates findings regarding the rating of travel company services, in particular, the level of services offered by the

agents during their pilgrimage journey. The information in the table clearly notes that pilgrims who have travelled from Kashmir, India are happy with their travel agents and the standard of package provided by the Umrah tour operator. The table indicates that 60% of pilgrims are happy with the overall services offered by the travel agent. Only 10% thought the services provided were below standards. Table 2 illustrates that the main motive for travel for 92% of pilgrims was for religious/spiritual reasons. This emphasises the importance of understanding the overall view of the individual traveler to Umrah and the Holy Places in Saudi Arabia. These sites have a sacred quality in the world of Islam and this act of pilgrimage is a defining moment in the life of pilgrims. One of the major reasons why a Muslim goes on pilgrimage is to pray in the holiest mosques - such as in Makkah and Medina. The reward rises exponentially if the person offers Salat (the ritual prayer of Muslims, performed five times daily) in Makkah (Masjid-e-haram), Medina (Masid-e-Nabawi). The main purpose of visiting these sites is for pilgrimage and to understand the act of pilgrimage, it is important to appreciate the visitor's motivation for visiting the pilgrimage sites. From a Muslim's point of view, pilgrims find love and pleasure, they enhance their knowledge and dedicate themselves to Allah. The visit to mosques and historical sites in Mecca and Medina, in particular, by pilgrims is due to the fact that the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) prayed in these places during his lifetime. After his migration to Medina, he built his Mosque (Masjid -e-Nabawi), which became the centre and Capital of the Islamic State and the centre of command [7,8]. The Holy Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) had earlier built the first mosque in the history of Islam, which is known as Quba Mosque [9], laying down its foundation stone during his stay there before arriving to Medina. The Quba Mosque is about 3 miles away from the Prophet's Mosque (Masjid-e-Nabawi). In a Hadith Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUM) states that visiting Quba Mosque and offering two rakats of nawafil prayer is equal in blessings and reward to one Umrah. This pilgrimage follows the Sunnah of Holy Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) and undertaking this practice is an emulation of the Prophet. Therefore, performing Salat prayer at the various religious sites is one of the fundamental pilgrimage practices in visiting the religious sites in Makkah and Medina. Table 3 discusses the issues that are faced by pilgrims during their journey to holy cities. Research indicates that most pilgrims are satisfied with the facilities and travel arrangement provided by the travel agents. The table highlights that pilgrims are unhappy with the service offered by the local shop keepers particularly Bangladeshi's whose behavior with pilgrims are not good and feel that their shops do not offer value for money. While 75% of respondents are happy to have visited the site, there is much room for improvement in many areas, in particular, respondents are dissatisfied with non-availability of branded show rooms of electronic gadgets. Also 85% pilgrims have urge to visit again due to spiritual and cultural reasons. Table 4 provides clear experiential evidence of the Umrah journey to holy cities under custodian of holy mosques kingdom of Saudi Arabia, undertaken for one reason - to follow the footsteps of the beloved prophet Mohammed (PBUH). Therefore, one of the major reasons why a Muslim goes on pilgrimage is to pray in the holist mosques and the reward rises exponentially if the person offers Salat in Makkah (Masjid-e-haram), Medina (Masid-e-Nabawi). Majority of pilgrims are facilities around holy mosques like health, cab services and shopping etc. Also roads and communication facilities are also good. Food available in restaurants is hygienic and value to money due to constant vigil of Saudi govt and strict laws. Theft cases are also low gives sense of security to pilgrims. 80% pilgrims gave blessings to custodian of holy mosques for well management and facilities developed around the holy cities for pilgrims. Many people believe people of Saudi Arabia are good in

hospitality and staff in and around holy mosques are well mannered and helpful towards pilgrims. This way there Umrah tour become best and long lasting, remembered them till life and get urge to come again in life time (Tables 1-4).

## Discussion

Our study pilgrims came to Saudi Arabia on economical package from Jammu and Kashmir State mainly from Kashmir division. Pilgrims where from both urban and rural areas and are Sunni Muslim. After submitting documents through travel agent to Saudi embassy, like passport, health certificate, and white background passport size photographs to get minimum 30 days visa for Umrah pilgrimage. Pilgrims started travel from mountainous valley of Kashmir and boarded air flight of government run Air India. On reaching capital of country India i.e., New Delhi has completed emigration/immigration formalities. And boarded to Jeddah flight non-stop 5 hour duration from Air India. On reaching Jeddah they completed immigration and collected luggage. There concerned travel company has already hired AC bus to Makkah. On reaching to Makkah for Umrah. They went to their respective hotels where they have to stay during the period, collected keys of rooms and dropped their luggage and takes dinner as well. Hotels booked by agent in this study were at Masjid Jin Area. After completion of dinner, they get fresh and did ablution and proceeded towards Kabba and masjid haram for Umrah ritual. They performed Umrah ritual as per sharia law of Islam. After Umrah they

| Rating statement   | Excellent | Good/Happy | Bad/low |
|--|-----------|------------|---------|
| Agency organized package                                       | 30%       | 60%        | 10%     |
| Services by agent at home country airport                      | 40%       | 50%        | 10%     |
| Services by agent at Jeddah Airport                            | 20%       | 60%        | 20%     |
| Hotel booked by agent  | 10%       | 50%        | 40%     |
| Transportation booked by agent for ziyarat in both holy cities | 30%       | 60%        | 10%     |
| Guidance given by agent during Umrah.                          | 20%       | 50%        | 30%     |
| Breakfast/Lunch/Dinner served in Hotel.                        | 20%       | 60%        | 20%     |

**Table 1:** Rating of Travel company services.

| Motive to visit Umrah Pilgrimage      |     |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| For religious/ spiritual reason       | 92% |
| For historical / cultural association | 8%  |

**Table 2:** Motive to visit Umrah Pilgrimage.

| Statement   | Agree | Disagree | No Views |
|---|-------|----------|----------|
| Printed information in English and Urdu around holy mosques | 50%   | 40%      | 10%      |
| Display information easy to read                            | 40%   | 60%      | 0%       |
| Staff and police very helpful                               | 30%   | 60%      | 10%      |
| Barber shops for Umrah Pilgrims                             | 80%   | 20%      | 0%       |
| Restaurants offer good quality food.                        | 50%   | 40%      | 10%      |
| Fruit market offer good quality.                            | 40%   | 40%      | 20%      |
| Date market best quality dates and good shelf life.         | 70%   | 20%      | 10%      |
| Garment shops offer good quality material and economical    | 60%   | 30%      | 10%      |
| Electronic shops and gadgets with brands.                   | 30%   | 60%      | 10%      |
| Cab service around holy mosques                             | 80%   | 20%      | 0%       |
| Religious place is too commercial                           | 50%   | 40%      | 10%      |
| Health centres around holy mosques                          | 60%   | 40%      | 0%       |
| This visit was worth.                                       | 80%   | 15%      | 5%       |
| Glad to visit this place.                                   | 70%   | 25%      | 5%       |
| Urge and aim to come again.                                 | 85%   | 5%       | 10%      |

**Table 3:** Facilities around two holy mosques for Umrah Pilgrims.

| Statement   | Agree | Disagree | No Views |
|---|-------|----------|----------|
| I felt I am in heaven   | 95%   | 5%       | 0%       |
| Holy cities is beautiful  | 80%   | 10%      | 10%      |
| Hospitals is highly developed.  | 75%   | 15%      | 10%      |
| Five star hotels are all around   | 70%   | 20%      | 10%      |
| Roads and tunnels are developed.  | 80%   | 20%      | 0%       |
| Theft cases are very less due to strict law.  | 80%   | 15%      | 5%       |
| Foods in restaurants are of quality.  | 85%   | 10%      | 5%       |
| City is free from pollution.  | 75%   | 20%      | 5%       |
| The architecture is inspiring.  | 70%   | 15%      | 15%      |
| I had experienced that what I have read in holy Quran and hadith of prophet (pbuh). | 80%   | 10%      | 10%      |
| Zam-zam water is free and is cold and warm available.                               | 90%   | 5%       | 5%       |
| I felt humbled while walking around.  | 80%   | 10%      | 10%      |
| Guides in museum speaks in Urdu language.   | 70%   | 25%      | 5%       |
| Technology is adopted in both holy mosques.   | 75%   | 15%      | 10%      |
| People of Saudi Arabia are cooperative and hospitality                              | 65%   | 25%      | 10%      |
| I feel satisfied because of this visit and facilities by KSA.                       | 75%   | 15%      | 10%      |
| Blessings to Kingdom of Saudi Arabia  | 80%   | 10%      | 10%      |
| Got practice in Nimaz and other beliefs.  | 75%   | 15%      | 10%      |

**Table 4:** Experiences in holy cities of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

lived as normal visitor and enjoyed all facilities provided to them. Next day's pilgrims visited other holy sites in Mecca like Mount Arafat, Jabal al-Noor, Cave of Hira etc.

Before coming to Saudi Arabia they feel fatigue in their own countries and depressed into their day to day work. Due to developed country like Saudi Arabia they got all facilities which are not upto their expectations. They observed Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has improved much in last 50 years in infrastructure, roads, transportation, food and much more in health sector. Major tertiary care state of art hospitals and health centres near to holy mosques are working 24\*7 in interest of pilgrims visiting there. Electricity is also 24\*7, pilgrims enjoy warm water in respective hotel bathrooms for ablutions and showers. Around holy mosques departments working under patronage of custodian of holy mosques have built thousands of washrooms and bathrooms which are neat and clean for pilgrims. Municipalities in around holy mosques checks routine vigils in hotels, restaurants, food outlets, barber shops etc round the clock in interest of health of pilgrims living there. Traffic management around the grand mosque is best as well. After spending ten to fifteen days in Mecca pilgrims left for another holy city of Saudi Arabia i.e., Medina in an AC buses. Medina is about 450 km away from Mecca and buses took 5 hour duration to reach there. Highway is six to eight lanes and many points various tunnels are made to minimize the travel duration. On the side of highway there are various mosques and food lets for pilgrims. On reaching the Medina city, Date palm trees welcomes the pilgrims. This city is a beautiful and all buildings are colored with creamy color. At the heart of Medina city is Prophet Mosque or Masjid Nabawi (pbuh), which is burial place of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) i.e., last messenger of Allah. Pilgrims stayed there for more ten or twenty days as per package. There are three or five star hotels as well. Pilgrims went inside mosque and sends salaam to Prophet (pbuh) and prays five times prayers. In addition to this they went various holy sites there like Masjid Quba, Masjid Qiblatain, Masjid Juma, Masjid Bilal, Mount Uhud, Baki graveyard and Khandaq area as well [10-13]. Pilgrims enjoy shopping as well and bring dates for the families and friends as well. Custodian of holy mosque has developed

this area very much, lakhs of pilgrims stays in hotels and surrounding area of mosque. Communication and road connectivity facilities are very nice as well. In general custodian of holy mosques has made best facilities for pilgrims. All pilgrims were satisfied to facilities provided to them. Many visits the health centres near the holy mosques. All were satisfied with communication, infrastructure and transportation facilities available them. Environment was neat and clean. Due to eco-friendly policies adopted by the government.

## Conclusion

We conclude our research that overall management and facilities given by Travel Company and in collaboration with Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is very good. More has to be done from the government of Saudi Arabia which is custodian of holy mosques in Makkah and Medina in the field of hotel infrastructure, communication and food outlets. Because Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has vision 2030 to accommodate 30 million Umrah pilgrims. Also second timer Umrah pilgrim visa fee of 2000SR should be diminished because of urge of Umrah Pilgrims to visit holy cities again and again due to spiritual reason and development seen in there. Also many associated sacred places like Taif, Baddar etc. areas in Makkah and Medina should be allowed to Umrah pilgrims on their visa. Umrah pilgrimage is round the clock in year and day by day many are inspiring for this spiritual visit and lakhs are paying visit in a month to Saudi Arabia for Umrah. In overall, it is boosting economy of Saudi Arabia and is helping in catering of unemployment among Saudi people. Religious tourism is back bone of economy in Saudi Arabia other than oil. Religious tourism will be main economy of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as per Vision 2030. May Allah bless this holy land, people and custodian of Saudi Arabia from enemy.

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