

# Hajj

*Welcome to the third of five inserts that explore the pillars of Islam. These inserts can be used as a starting point for classroom and small group discussions.*

*As you read this edition of Bridges, four-thousand Australian pilgrims will have recently returned from Mecca in Saudi Arabia where they took part in the Hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage. We were fortunate to chat to one Australian pilgrim only days before he departed Sydney for his journey.*

*We hope you enjoy this insert!*

## What is Hajj?

Hajj is a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia that around three million Muslims make every year. As one of the five pillars of Islam, Hajj is a once-in-a-lifetime obligation for those Muslims who have the physical and financial ability to undertake the journey. Hajj takes place annually during *Dhul-Hijjah*, the 12<sup>th</sup> month of the Islamic calendar. In 2013 Hajj fell between 13<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> October.

During Hajj pilgrims take part in a number of activities including:

- Entrance into a state of self-control called *ihram*, during which pilgrims are forbidden to disturb living creatures or even raise the voice in anger. The state of *ihram* is signified (for men) by the wearing of two pieces of unsewn white cloth. (No specific clothing is prescribed for female pilgrims).
- Circling of the *Ka'aba*, the cubic building that Muslims believe was built by Abraham and Ishmael.
- The *Sa'i*, or "hastening" between two small hills near the *Ka'aba*, to commemorate Hagar's search for water to offer her son Ishmael.
- The "Day of Arafah" on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of *Dhul-Hijjah*. Arafah is the empty plain near the city of Mecca. On this day, the climax of the Hajj season, pilgrims assemble for supplication to God.
- Stoning of the three pillars representing Abraham's rejection of Satan's temptation. The stoning indicates the pilgrim's rejection of evil deeds.
- Sacrificing an animal in remembrance of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael at God's command. The meat is distributed to relatives and to the needy.
- Cutting the hair to symbolize the completion of Hajj.



Stoning of the three pillars  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

***The ritual of Hajj is about being realigned with what our inner selves ought to be orbiting: presence with Allah, a focussed consciousness that is often absent in the giddy spin of normal life.***

Credit: Gezzeg/ shutterstock.com

## Interview with an Australian Hajj Pilgrim

*Khaled El is a technology support engineer for Medibank and he lives in Sydney, NSW.  
At the time of the interview Khaled was preparing for Hajj and was set to leave on  
25<sup>th</sup> September 2013.*

### How are feeling knowing you'll be performing Hajj soon?

I feel nervous as I don't know what to expect or whether my Hajj will be accepted, but also excited as I know that this will be a life-changing experience. Everybody says that it is the journey of a lifetime. Whenever I see photos or videos about Hajj I just wish the day that I fly out would come sooner!

### Tell me about your preparations.

Preparations have been a struggle because fourteen weeks ago I had surgery on my foot and was on crutches for eight weeks. In between recovery and work commitments I also had to prepare myself spiritually, physically, emotionally and mentally for this life-changing experience. You also have to also ask people for forgiveness if you have wronged them in any way.

### What does Hajj mean to you?

Hajj is a spiritual, life-changing journey and an opportunity to start a new chapter of my life. Hajj is also a demonstration of unity amidst diversity. It doesn't matter if you are Chinese, Bosnian, Turkish, Australian, Somalian or any other nationality, three million people are there with the same goal - to worship the Creator and to complete one of the five pillars of Islam. I hope that Hajj will bring me closer to God as I enter the land of our beloved prophet.

### As a young Australian Muslim, what do you think this will do for your character?

This experience will reveal to me the strengths of my character but also my weaknesses and what areas of my life I need to improve. Hajj will be also be an exercise in tolerance because when there are three to five million people from diverse cultures in the one place, it is likely that there will be some challenges. And when I am waiting in long queues at bathrooms, bus stops and airports - sometimes up to 10 hours – I know it will test my patience. But I hope to come away stronger.

### What are your expectations?

I am expecting lots of queues, many different languages and diverse cultures. I am also expecting to see lots of love, brotherhood and sisterhood and unity.

### What do you plan to do or change when you come back?

I will strive to become a person in terms of my character and my relationships. I plan to convert my weaknesses into strengths and be more thankful to God for giving me a fresh start. Hajj should change me emotionally, spiritually, mentally and physically.



### Discussion Questions

1. In what ways is a pilgrim different to a tourist?
2. After reading Khaled's interview responses, what would you find to be the most challenging aspect of Hajj?
3. Khaled describes the way he had to prepare himself spiritually, physically, emotionally and mentally. Have you ever experienced a spiritual event that has changed your life? How did you prepare?