

Today is Wed October 03, 2012

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CC ISSUE: NOV 2010 Last updated: Nov 8, 2010

Hajj: An investment of a lifetime

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Every practicing Muslim aims to attain the pleasure of Allah. One of the ways to reach this goal is through the five pillars of Islam, of which Hajj requires the greatest financial outlay.

Professor Omer Mozaffer, an instructor at University of Chicago as well as Loyola University, compares the five pillars to the aspect of time. Shahadah (declaration of faith) takes only a moment. Salah (prayer) is at least five times a day. Sawm (fasting) is prescribed over a month's time. Zakah (alms-giving) is an obligation that must be fulfilled annually. Finally, there is the one pillar in Islam that is allowed a lifetime to accomplish: Hajj.

With the costs of Hajj increasing every year, it may just take an individual that long to make it happen. For those of us who have yet to complete this last pillar, when and how is the right time to start saving for Hajj? No matter what age you decide to perform Hajj, you need to research Hajj groups ahead of time and start preparing yourself physically, mentally, spiritually and for most people, years in advance when it comes to the financial aspect. Our beloved Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, reminded his ummah in his farewell sermon to "perform Hajj if you can afford to."

Saturna Capital through the Amana Funds has prepared investment plans for those who are planning to do Hajj later but want to start saving now. They offer a Hajj calculator on their website to help determine how much you will need to save, keeping inflation costs in mind. Saturna's Director and Vice President of Islamic Financing, Monem Salam, suggests investing in an Amana mutual fund.

"If you are planning to do Hajj after five years or more, you can either invest in a Roth IRA account or a regular investment account," advises Salam. "There is also something called a Universal Transfer to a Minor Account (UTMA) also known as a 'custodial account' you can open in your child's name but act as a custodian. It has a very low tax rate."

Some people decide to do Hajj sooner than later. Those individuals have the option of opening a halal savings account, which University Islamic Financial offers.

"We have money market accounts that can be used to save money for Hajj," says Vice President of Business Development, Amjad Quadri. "You can set aside some money every month in the account. The advantage of saving with a University Islamic Financial savings account is that you will get a small halal profit on your account every month, and it will help you reach your goal quicker."

Once you are near your financial goal for Hajj, finding a suitable Hajj group is crucial. Sacred Hajj is an Illinois not-for-profit Hajj operator that will be taking pilgrims to Hajj for the second year in 2010. They offer reasonably-priced packages keeping both quality and affordability in mind. Their range is around \$5,500 per person which includes airfare, hotel (quad occupancy), transportation and food for part of the trip. (Udhiya/qurbani and the Hajj fee are not included).

"We know there may be groups that offer less expensive packages," says Sacred Hajj co-founder and group leader Hafiz Sayeed Shariff, "However, our mission is to provide good quality service at a good quality rate."

They do this by keeping the group size to a minimum of 45 people and maintaining a "family feel"

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before, during and after the Hajj.

“Since most of the hujjaj are first-timers, we tend to keep the group close together with the leaders and scholars throughout the entire trip,” says Shariff. “This helps prevent confusion and getting lost as well as gives the group accessibility to ask the religious advisors any questions they may have during the trip.”

Quadri had the opportunity to perform Hajj in 2006 with the Nawawi Foundation and its resident scholar Dr. Umar Farooq Abd-Allah.

“It felt like a blessed Hajj for us,” shares Quadri. “It was like we were with a trusted group of friends and family, though we all did not know each other.”

The Nawawi Foundation organized their second Hajj trip in 2009 which was also considered to be very successful. Its Hajj package was estimated to be around \$8,500 including the udhiya and Hajj fee.

No matter how you slice it, Hajj results as a forgiveness for a lifetime of sins. Allah has given us these pillars as a means to seek His pleasure and wash away our sins. Therefore, say His name every second, bow down to Him every day, fast for Him in the holy month of Ramadan, give alms yearly, and make the journey to Hajj at least once in your life.

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