

# Hajj and Umra Travelers

## Traveler Summary

### Introduction

Hajj is the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Islam's holiest sites in Saudi Arabia and 1 of the 5 pillars of Islam. All physically and financially capable Muslims are obliged to perform Hajj once in their lifetime. The Hajj ("greater hajj") must take place during the Islamic lunar month of Dhu Al-Hijjah, which moves backwards by 10 days each year of the Gregorian calendar. Umra ("lesser hajj") is optional and can be performed at any time of the year.

Each year, approximately 3 million pilgrims travel to Saudi Arabia to participate in the Hajj, which takes place between days 9 and 13 of the last month of the Islamic calendar. This year, Hajj 1439H will take place approximately August 19-24, 2018. Upon completion of Hajj, pilgrims must leave Saudi Arabia no later than the tenth of Muharram.

### Preparing for Hajj

For specific information regarding visas, approved travel agents, transportation and shuttle services, see the following websites: <https://www.saudiembassy.net/hajj-requirements> and <http://www.moh.gov.sa/en/Hajj/Pages/HealthRegulations.aspx>.

### Packing

All luggage should have fixed labels on the outside and inside, showing the pilgrim's name, nationality, passport number, air carrier, and flight number.

### Visas

Visa applications must be submitted through a licensed travel agency accredited by the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Hajj. Specific Hajj or Umra visas are required for visiting pilgrims and are valid only for the vicinities of Jeddah, Mecca (Makkah), Medina, and travel between these cities. Requirements are strict and include possession of a non-refundable return ticket, proof of required vaccinations (*see below*), and a check to cover the costs of accommodation at the holy sites and transportation between them. (*See [www.saudiembassy.net/services/hajj-requirements](http://www.saudiembassy.net/services/hajj-requirements)*)

Onward travel to Riyadh or other Saudi Arabian cities is usually not permitted during the Hajj. During Umra, visitors may obtain permission, after arrangements have been made with a travel agency, to travel to other cities in Saudi Arabia. Umra visa holders may only visit Saudi Arabia outside of the annual Hajj period. Visitors who overstay their Hajj or Umra visas are subject to a fine and incarceration pending deportation proceedings. All visitors should request clarification upon arrival as to the permitted length of stay.

Pilgrims should obtain an official written contract, signed by both the Hajj organizer and the pilgrim, which clearly explains the expectations of both parties.

### Passports and Identification

Upon arrival, pilgrims must surrender their passports to the United Agents Office for completion of all travel formalities to Mecca and Medina. All pilgrims are then issued an identification card and wristband that they should carry at all times. Passports are returned only immediately prior to departure while at the airport. This is a Hajj Ministry-mandated practice for all Hajj pilgrims, and it has proved effective in nearly eliminating the problem of lost and stolen passports.

Umra visitors do not receive an identification card or wristband. In the past, pilgrims have reported thefts (including of passports) during the pilgrimage. A money belt or pouch is the best way to carry valuables. Upon arrival it is possible to buy what is known as a "Hajj belt," which is somewhat larger than other equivalents. Pilgrims should bring sufficient funds to cover any unforeseen emergencies.

Travelers must carry vaccination certificates (*see below*) with them for inspection by the Saudi Authority at ports of entry.

## Health

Intense crowding during Hajj can increase the transmission of respiratory and intestinal infections, which have caused major outbreaks in the past (e.g., cholera, meningitis, and influenza). A severe respiratory illness (called MERS-CoV) that has been occurring in Saudi Arabia has a 40% fatality rate. No vaccines or treatment are available. Travelers to or returning from Saudi Arabia should seek immediate medical attention for severe respiratory symptoms.

*Physical fitness:* Travelers should be as fit as possible and correct their weight to the extent possible before undertaking Hajj.

*Preexisting medical conditions:* The traveler should visit his or her health care provider and discuss the health risks of the Hajj. Some chronic conditions may make a person more susceptible to infection. Exertion and heat will put extra strain on the heart, lungs, and kidneys. Persons with preexisting medical conditions who decide to travel should consult their health care provider, ensure that their conditions are well controlled, obtain and carry an adequate supply of medication, and be sure to carry a doctor's covering letter and prescriptions for all medications. This is especially important if the medicines include prescription opiates. Travelers should keep medicines in their original labeled containers for ease of identification at customs.

*Vaccinations:* All routine vaccinations should be up to date, including influenza and measles, mumps, rubella vaccinations. Other vaccinations (e.g., hepatitis A, typhoid, hepatitis B, pneumococcal) may be recommended by the medical provider, depending on individual needs. Other vaccines may be required; *see below*.

The Saudi Ministry of Health requires *certain* vaccinations:

- | **Meningococcal vaccine:** Required for all pilgrims 2 years and older. The certificate must have been issued not more than 3 to 5 years previously (depending on vaccine used) and not less than 10 days before arrival to Saudi Arabia.
- | **Polio vaccine:** All travelers, regardless of age, coming from Afghanistan, Burma, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, or Yemen must show proof of polio vaccination given between 4 weeks and 1 year prior to arrival; these travelers (except from travelers from DRC) will also receive a dose of oral polio vaccine (OPV) when entering Saudi Arabia.
- | **Yellow fever vaccine:** A yellow fever certificate of vaccination is required of all travelers arriving from or transiting for more than 12 hours through countries or areas known to be infected with or at risk for transmission of yellow fever. The certificate must have been issued not less than 10 days before arrival to Saudi Arabia. (In the absence of such a certificate, the person will be placed under strict surveillance for 6 days from the date of vaccination or the last date of potential exposure to infection, whichever is earlier.)
- | **Influenza vaccine:** Recommended for all pilgrims, and particularly for those at increased risk for severe complications such as pregnant women, the elderly (older than 65 years), children younger than 5 years, and persons with chronic medical conditions.

*Travel and health insurance:* Although health care at the holy sites is free, pilgrims are advised to carry adequate travel and health insurance and to identify an in-country medical provider. The availability of emergency evacuation is questionable.

## Travel Medical Kit

Pilgrims should assemble and carry a travel medical kit containing these items:

- | Routine medications appropriate to each traveler
- | First aid items
- | Azithromycin and loperamide for self-medication for travelers' diarrhea
- | Sunscreen (at least SPF 30 and fragrant-free)
- | Umbrella

See *Packing Personal Medications and Supplies* for additional recommendations.

## Travel, Accommodations, and Communications

Charter flights and overbooking may result in long delays at the port of departure. Pilgrims generally fly into Jeddah and travel overland to Mecca. There may be delays of many hours on arrival at Jeddah as well, due to full airplanes and crowded airports.

Conditions in Mecca range from luxury hotels with transportation in air-conditioned buses to hostel accommodations in blocks without elevators to rented rooms. At Mina and Arafat, accommodation is in tents set up by the Tawafa Establishment.

Overnight at Muzdalifah is under the open sky.

Communications facilities to contact family in other countries are available in all parts of Saudi Arabia. Internet cafés are available in all major cities.

## Precautions

Some required rituals are physically demanding. Daily distances to be covered between sites range from 8 to 19 km (5 to 12 mi). Pilgrims may travel via prebooked bus, commercial taxi, or on foot, but any of these methods will be slow and take hours.

**Food:** During the stages of Hajj, facilities for preparing and storing food are simple and without refrigeration. Eat freshly cooked food and avoid street vendors.

**Crowds, crush, stampede, and trauma:** Congestion is severe. Pilgrims have been crushed during stampedes, including a stampede in September 2015 in which more than 700 pilgrims died. The most common causes of trauma are from accidents on roads crowded with vehicles and pedestrians and from slaughtering animals inexpertly.

The Saudi authorities forbid the taking of photographs (still or video, including mobile telephone photographs) at the Holy Mosque at Mecca or at the Prophet's Mosque at Medina. This restriction also includes the courtyards surrounding these holy sites. Any violation is likely to lead to the confiscation of one's camera.

In summer, temperatures above 40-50°C (104-122°F), lack of shade, bared male heads, and dehydration readily lead to heat exhaustion and heat stroke, especially in children and those who are not acclimatized, unless precautions are taken. Standing barefoot on marble paving may cause burns on the soles of the feet. At certain points, men must stand with head and arms uncovered.

Respiratory, intestinal, and skin infections are common. Influenza is the most commonly acquired respiratory infection, while pneumonia is the most common cause of admission to hospital. Tuberculosis infection is also a risk. Travelers' diarrhea is common. Risks are high for hepatitis A and typhoid fever. Heat, sweat, and crowding promote bacterial and fungal skin infections, including boils.

## Additional Recommendations

- | Arrive a few days early in order to acclimatize.
- | Eat freshly cooked food, and avoid street vendors.
- | Avoid consumption of raw camel milk, camel urine, or improperly cooked meat.
- | Wash hands after visiting the toilet and before preparing food or eating.
- | Drink plenty of drinking water, either bottled or supplied by Tawafa Establishment.
- | Avoid the heat of the day, seek shade, and, whenever possible, travel the stages of Hajj after sunset. In the sun, use sunscreen on exposed skin, use the umbrella for shade, and wear socks (not forbidden) if standing barefoot on very hot stone, but beware of slipping.
- | Saudi Arabian authorities recommend wearing a simple surgical face mask to reduce the risk of respiratory infection, but the mask may prove uncomfortable in the heat, and its value is unproven.
- | Use proper cough and sneeze etiquette.
- | Avoid contact with persons who appear ill.
- | Do not use unauthorized barbers.
- | Keep the skin as cool, clean, and dry as possible; seek treatment for any new skin infection.
- | Consider hiring a professional proxy for animal slaughter.
- | Women and children should stay close to their male companions, especially at crowded points.
- | Use a wheelchair if elderly or infirm: all sites are accessible.
- | Use of fragrance and smoking tobacco are forbidden.
- | Take all regular medications.
- | In the event of travelers' diarrhea, start self-treatment and drink more fluids.

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