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THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE HAJJ
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By this weekend two or three million Moslems will arrive in Mecca, a town near the Red Sea in modern-day Saudi Arabia, to fulfill the Islamic commandment of the Hajj this coming week.

The Hajj is a pilgrimage that Islam expects all Moslems to undertake once in their lifetimes. For those of us unfamiliar with this practice, the Hajj raises two questions: What is the journey of the Hajj, the pilgrimage? And why is the destination of this pilgrimage Mecca?

Pilgrimage is not unknown in western Christendom, but its practice has largely ceased over the last century. In Medieval Europe, most people lived their whole lives within 15 miles of their birthplace. Three activities brought people outside of this limited area: trading, soldiering, and pilgrimage. Pilgrimage was thus one of the primary reasons for travel. And only pilgrimage applied to people of any age, gender and level of society.

A pilgrimage is a trip to a holy site for the sole purpose of worship. The pilgrim has usually dedicated themselves to God in some way. During the trip, pilgrims remove from themselves all signs of their status, wealth and other things that make up their identity. Instead, they put on the anonymity of a pilgrim, often adopting a set of plainly designed, standard clothing. They travel without luxury, focusing on the purpose of the trip, which is to make oneself spiritually pure and whole by opening oneself up to God.

In fact, a pilgrimage should be seen as a trip towards God, for the destination is a place where a manifestation of divine power took place. In Christianity, for example, this may be the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem where Jesus rose from the dead, or a place where a saint performed a miracle, or even a spot where a vision of a saint, an angel, or even God appeared. This divine manifestation identifies the place as close to heaven in some mystical way. Thus to come to the sacred site is to approach God's heavenly home.

In Islam, the Hajj is the ultimate pilgrimage, and the ultimate pilgrimage destination is Mecca. Moslems put off their usual clothing and jewelry and put on a plain white pilgrimage outfit. They make their way comfortably, but without luxury, to Mecca via foot, bus, automobile, ship, or plane. During their travels they meditate on the Koran and the teachings of Mohammed.

Mecca is sacred because, first, it is the site of the Kaba, an ancient stone where Moslems believe that God has communicated with humankind at several different times. Here, for example, God commanded Jacob to sacrifice his son before God provided a last-minute substitution of a ram. Second, it is in and around Mecca where the early events in the founding of Islam took place. It is near here where the Prophet Mohammed was visited by the Angel Gabriel who revealed the Koran to him. It is here where the first community of Moslems was formed under Mohammed's leadership.

The acts of worship performed in Mecca while on Hajj take place over several days. They include worship at the Kaba itself at the beginning and end of the Hajj. They include visits to key locations of events in early Islamic history, where specific rites of worship are carried out. And finally, it includes trip to Mt. Arafat nearby where each Moslem repents of their sins before Allah and prays for forgiveness. The Moslem returning from Arafat after such repentance is purified to live a new life.

For further information about the Hajj, including live coverage, visit the Web site: islamicity.com/Hajj