

Spiritual journey and beyond : Umrah plus travel in Saudi Arabia

- A Monitor Desk Report

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Dhaka : The call to prayer echoed through the bustling streets of Saudi Arabia's Riyadh as I stepped out of King Khalid Inter-national Airport. My heart was swelling with anticipation. This was not just a trip-rather it was a journey of faith, discovery, and unforgettable ex-periences. I had come to the Kingdom on a visitor visa, allowing me to perform Umrah in the holy city of Mecca and visit Medina where the Prophet (PBUH) lies, while also exploring the rich culture, breathtaking landscapes, and mouthwatering cuisine of this fascinating country.



Soul of Arabia whispers through ancient sands, timeless legacy in Riyadh's Diriyah

Modern oasis Riyadh

My adventure began in Riyadh, the bustling capital. The contrast between the ancient and the modern was striking-gleaming skyscrapers stood alongside historic forts. I visited the Masmak Fortress, a symbol of Saudi Arabia's unification, and the futuristic Kingdom Center, where the sky bridge offered stunning city views.

The culinary scene in Riyadh was exceptional. At Najd Village, I experienced authentic Najdi cuisine, including Jareesh (crushed wheat stew) and Mutabbaq (stuffed savory pastry). The vibrant Diriyah in Riyadh, a UNESCO World Heritage site, was the perfect place to end my journey, walking through mud-brick ruins under the golden desert sunset.



Prophet's Mosque in Medina: Sacred embrace where his light lingers, prayers ascend to heavens

Radiant Medina

Next, I traveled to Medina, the second holiest city in Islam. The Prophet's Mosque, with its iconic green dome, was even more beautiful than I had imagined. The peace I felt while praying in the Rawdah-a garden believed to be from Paradise-was indescribable.

Beyond the mosque, I explored the historic Quba Mosque, the first mosque in Islam, and the Qiblatain Mosque, where the direction of prayer was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca. The Dates Market was a sensory overload, with countless varieties of dates, from Ajwa to Sukkari, each sweeter than the last.

One evening, I dined at a traditional Saudi restaurant, savoring Mandi-a

smoky, slow-cooked rice and meat dish-while listening to stories from local pilgrims.



Jeddah's Corniche: Where Red Sea breeze dances with golden shores

Gateway to holy land Jeddah

Then I set foot in Jeddah, the vibrant coastal city known for its blend of modernity and tradition. The Corniche, with its stunning Red Sea views and the iconic King Fahd Fountain, was my first stop. As I strolled along the waterfront, the salty breeze carried the scent of freshly grilled seafood from nearby restaurants.

For dinner, I headed to Al-Baik, a legendary fast-food chain famous for its crispy fried chicken-a must-try for any visitor. The next morning, I explored Al-Balad, Jeddah's historic district, where centuries-old coral

houses stood adorned with intricate wooden rawashin (balconies). The bustling souks offered everything from aromatic spices to handmade souvenirs.

Spiritual heartbeat Mecca

From Jeddah, I traveled to Mecca, the holiest city in Islam. As I approached the Grand Mosque, the sight of the majestic Kaaba took my breath away. Dressed in Ihram, I joined thousands of pilgrims performing Tawaf, circling the Kaaba in devotion. The atmosphere was electric-filled with prayers, tears, and a profound sense of unity.

After completing Umrah rituals, I visited Jabal al-Nour, the Mountain of Light, where the Cave of Hira lies-the place where the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) received the first revelation. The panoramic view of Mecca from the top was worth every step.

For food, I indulged in Kabsa, Saudi Arabia's national dish-a fragrant mix of spiced rice and tender lamb. The local dates and Zamzam water were constant companions, keeping me energized throughout my stay.



Taif's gardens: Fragrant paradise cradled by clouds, petals

City of roses Taif

A short trip from Mecca led me to Taif, a serene highland city known for its cool climate and lush rose farms. The Al Rudaf Park, with its massive rock formations and green landscapes, was a peaceful retreat. I visited a rose factory, where the delicate scent of Taif's famous roses filled the air, and learned how they are distilled into precious rose oil used in perfumes.

Dining in Taif was a delight—I tried Haneeth, slow-cooked lamb that melted in my mouth, and Saleeg, a creamy rice dish topped with tender chicken. The city's relaxed vibe was a perfect contrast to the spiritual intensity of Mecca.

Journey of faith, discovery

As I boarded my flight home, I reflected on the incredible experiences of the past one week—the profound spirituality of Umrah, the rich history, the breathtaking landscapes, and the unforgettable flavors of Saudi Arabia. Traveling on a visitor visa had given me the flexibility to explore beyond the holy cities, making this pilgrimage not just a religious obligation but a once-in-a-lifetime adventure.

Thanks to Saudi Tourism Authority for recently organizing this media trip for Bangladeshi journalists of which I was delighted to be a part.

From the sacred serenity of Mecca and Medina to the vibrant culture of Jeddah, Taif, and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia had offered me more than I had ever imagined. It was a journey that nourished my soul, broadened my horizons, and left me longing to return.