

Ramadan In Britain: Spiritual Havens In A Secular Society

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During Ramadan there is a festive atmosphere in Edgware Road, London's mile-long Arab Street which stretches from Marble Arch to Maida Vale.

The restaurants, mostly Lebanese, and cafes where the distinctive smell of smoke from shisha blends with the pleasant air of autumn evenings, are a popular meeting place for friends and families. Discussions range from religious topics to heated political debates and polite conversation.

After taking a window seat at the Halal Restaurant, Aftekar and Alaa from Iraq and Mohsin from Kashmir earnestly discuss a joint project. The other diners are content to sip their tea and catch up on the news beamed in by satellite TV.

Upmarket venues like Maroush offer a variety

of fresh vegetarian recipes, salads and stews all seasoned with a flavorsome combination of exotic spices. The world renowned Lebanese specialty mezza a selection of appetizers: olives, cheeses, babaghanouj, a puree of grilled aubergine, with tahini, lemon juice, garlic and olive oil are popular. There is also shanklish, a ▶



The Islamic Centre in Maida Vale/London

المركز الإسلامي في ميداء فيل / لندن



Shisha is available in most café's in Edgware Road
الشيشة متوفرة في معظم مقاهي لندن



Halal restaurant: a popular meeting place for family and friends
مطعم حلال: مكان مفضل للقاء الأهل والأصدقاء

mature goat's cheese served with onions, tomatoes and oil and kibee nayeh, ground lamb served raw with cracked wheat. Hot starters include falafel, croquettes made with chickpeas, fava beans and coriander, chicken wings with garlic sauce or spicy sausages. Main courses include casseroles cooked slowly with spices and yoghurt. Sayadieh spiced fish served with rice in an onion and tahini sauce is also available. The dishes are served with flat unleavened bread or khoubiz.

The more modest establishments like Ranoush Juice specialise in take away meals wrapped in bread. Small shops display mouth watering sweets stacked to the ceiling. The most common is baklava, a death-by sugar filo pastry filled with pistachio nuts or almonds steeped in flavoured honey.

All the chefs and staff take pride in keeping their customers happy. Even a modest selection of salad is lovingly arranged and served with a smile and welcome which is from the heart.

Edgware Road provides a snap shot of Ramadan in Britain. The country's 1.8 million Muslims, who worship in 584 mosques, have created spiritual havens in a largely secular society where the spirit of Ramadan creates a unique environment and provides a penetrating flash of insight into Muslim culture. The largest Muslim communities are in Greater London, the West Midlands, West Yorkshire, Lancashire and central Scotland. Mosques are the focal point of community prayers where worshippers take part in special Ramadan programmes and iftar is often served.

Like mosques throughout the country London's Central Mosque, one of the largest in the country, has a special Ramadan programme. The impressive edifice designed

by Sir Frederick Gibberd was completed in 1978, and has a prominent golden dome and a main hall which can hold almost two thousand worshippers. But after the 2012 Olympic Games Ramadan in Britain may never be the same: a massive mosque which will hold 40,000 worshippers is being proposed beside the Olympic complex. The project's backers hope the mosque and its surrounding buildings will hold a total of 70,000 people, only 10,000 fewer than the Olympic stadium. Its futuristic design features wind turbines instead of the traditional minarets, while a translucent latticed roof replaces the domes seen on most mosques.

Culture and 'what we used to do back home' influences the food served and activities after iftar. Seven hundred thousand Muslims in Britain are of Pakistani origin, there are 250,000 Bangladeshis, 300,000 Indians, 350,000 Arabs and Africans and 16,000 British Muslims including Afro-Caribbean's and white reverts.

Cultural programmes and social events are organized by community associations and clubs. Student associations on campuses throughout Britain, like the SOAS Isoc at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies provide iftar and hold Ramadan talks. The students of SOAS Islamic Society are planning a one-day national fast "in an effort to encourage non-Muslims to understand this beautiful deen (religion) and raise money for charity". Numerous satellite channels bring 'home' into the living rooms and restaurants of London and feature religious programmes and Qur'an recitations. The Islam Channel is linked to Mecca live during recitals of Friday prayers. "This is something very special and valuable –



The chef at the Halal restaurant takes pride in keeping his customers happy
عامل في مطعم حلال يهتم بسعادة زبائنه



The chef at Ranoush Juice where every order is prepared with tender loving care
عامل في محل رنوش للعصير حيث يقدم كل طلب مع الود والإحترام

satellite is a gift in Ramadan", said the channel's political editor, Yvonne Ridley. Britain's Muslim community has grown and the host society is becoming increasingly aware of its religious practices: high street shops are now selling Eid cards and the Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett delivered a Ramadan greeting pointing out that Islam is very much a part of British history and the multi-cultural society in Britain. "The Government is committed to working with the Muslim community to ensure that ignorance about this great faith is tackled". ▶



Window shopping in Edgware Road

في سوق شارع اجور



Delicious food is available in many small takeaways

الطعام الشهى متوفر في أغلب محلات الأكلات السريعة



Fai Biani: "Each Middle Eastern community has its own traditions and its own food"

فاي بياني: "كل جالية من الشرق الأوسط لديها تقاليدها وطعامها"



The Panini Café: a favourite with shisha smokers

مقهى بانيني المفضل لدى مدخني الشيشة

In a first for the City of London, the Lord Mayor and the Muslim Council of Britain hosted a Ramadan reception at the Mansion House the official residence of the Lord Mayor. In recognition of the increasing participation of British Muslims in the economic growth and development of Britain and in celebration of the growing interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims in the city, guests from all faiths were invited to engage with each other and celebrate diversity.

Kamran, an Iraqi Kurd who runs the Babylon Salon in Edgware Road commented that in many ways Britain with its welfare system and democratic traditions has enshrined the principles of an Islamic state. His friend Saad emphasised that Ramadan is a time for friends to sit together and eat together. "We feel for the friends". Above all it is a time for families to share the iftar meal and spend time together. "My mum cooks special food, soups with dried

apricots, lamb, and traditional food like vine leaves with rice. This dish goes back five thousand years", Kamran said appreciatively.

The Maroush chain of 14 Lebanese restaurants provides Qamar Al Din, a drink made from dry fruit, free of charge to its customers. Date juice is also served.

"In London we can't make big dishes like a 50 kilo roasted lamb with lots of rice", explained Fai Biani accountant for the Maroush chain. "Each Middle Eastern community has its own traditions and its own food - the Egyptians have milk with pieces of dates. The Arab people who come to Edgware Road are looking for a job. It's an obligation to help them, especially in Ramadan. It is a sacred month when we have to give and never think of being selfish. We have to help with food, a job, whatever they need".

Aftekar, who left Baghdad six years ago, talks

nostalgically about Iraq "where we wait for the call of Allah Akbar so we can break the fast". Reflecting on the purpose of Ramadan she emphasizes that there is a lot more to fasting than not eating or drinking. "It also means not lying or stealing and trying to be perfect".

Her friend Mohsin from Kashmir agrees. "It is a re-affirmation for your commitment to living ethically and self control to re-establish your will in the materialistic society. We have everything at our disposal and in Ramadan we show that our will is stronger than consumerism and materialism". Muslim charities report an increase in donations throughout Ramadan and British pop star Cat Stevens (Yusuf Islam after his conversion to Islam) is holding a rare show to raise money for charity.

"Muslims from all parts of the world are sharing the same experience in Ramadan", Aftekar said. "They are united by the sacrifice they are making". ■