

Mecca-

A Billion Dollar Voyage

> By Sumera Aisha Malik

Beneath the canopy of a billion galaxies, I stood gazing up at the almost discernible constellation forming in the twilight and dreamt the dream that I dreamt oftentimes, It is out there. "Somewhere in the vastness of the universe, it is out there". This dream was ultimately transformed into reality.

It is a place teeming with life, full of worshipping pilgrims who believe in something which transcends the human condition - a hopeful tomorrow - a place teeming with godliness and divinity. It is Mecca - a glorious, opulent city.

Most visitors to Saudi Arabia come solely to visit Mecca. This is Islam's holiest city where devout Muslims from all parts of the world come on pilgrimage. This is the birthplace of the Muslim religion from where Prophet Mohammed preached his glorious message over fourteen centuries ago. Today it is the metropolis where the holy sanctuary, the Ka'bah is situated. It is the hope of millions and the destiny of diversity.

As I stood before this holy shrine, I was dumbfounded with a sense of awe. I heard masses of people praising God indistinguishably, putting aside their variations of creed and colour, young and old standing shoulder to shoulder, the black man joining hands with the white man. It was a remarkable sight. And then I had a splendid sensation, the one, which said: "This exquisite sight is the one thing, you cannot put your finger on but which you know is the reason for your existence and the basis of the entire universe."

The Ka'bah is a large masonry structure, somewhat shaped like a cube. It is furnished with black silk curtains and gold embroidered with calligraphy. The Islamic testimony is weaved into the fabric and approximately two thirds of the way up runs a gold band covered with Quran'ic text. This is the direction faced by all Muslims during the five daily prayers.

The Ka'bah is centred in the courtyard of the Great Mosque (Masjid Al-Haram) where millions of people congregate in concentric circles radiating outwards around the Ka'bah. As I looked at this splendour, thoughts of all human conditions - the frowns, the smiles, and the eyes of those who throng each and every temple flooded my mind.

As I strode around the Ka'bah circumnavigating it seven times, I kissed the black stone - a revered meteorite remnant situated in the eastern corner of the Ka'bah embedded into its beautiful, well-defined structure. As I moved forth to the Station of Abraham, I felt the glass covered structure- a beautiful relic. I praised my God.

My final thoughts; that the entire universe is an open book. Those who do



not journey to God's sanctified home are negligent of reading the complete novel because to visit the holy shrine is a definition of the feeling whereby one seeks to travel to the edges of the earth. Mecca is a voyage eliciting great joy and great hardship. The trip is neither easy nor undemanding.

Mecca is also home to top of the range hotels, located conveniently close to the main tourist attractions. The Intercontinental Dar-al Tawhid and the Hilton hotels are for those who prefer luxury (air conditioning in particular as the heat in Mecca is intense all year round).

A number of different package holidays to Mecca (both Umrah and Hajj) are available online and at travel agencies (in Britain) ranging from £650+. ■