

Forty Days (Arba'in) In Kerbala: Six Million People In A Small City!

> Report and photographs
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Kerbala, one of the most important Muslim religious cities, is visited by thousands of people annually, particularly during the ten seasonal visits which attract more than one million pilgrims. Some visitors come during the day, others at night. There are also weekly visits on Thursday night, which attract between 750,000 to one million people. But the largest and the most important visit for both the inhabitants of the city and the visitors, is the forty days anniversary (arba'in), on the 20th of the month of Safar of Hegira. In a single week more than six million visitors from inside and outside Iraq flock to the small city of Kerbala.

Historical origins of the visit

Historical sources indicate that the Companion of the Prophet Jaber Ben Abdullah Ben Hazzam El Ansari is the first to have visited Al Hussein's tomb, in Kerbala, in the company of his servant Attiya Al Oufi, in the year 61 of Hegira, at the time of the first commemoration of the fortieth day of the martyrdom of the grandson of the Prophet. After his arrival in Kerbala, he bathed in the Euphrates, put on perfume and went to the tomb. His presence coincided with the arrival of members of the family of Al Hussein, who were on their way to Medina. They also came for a visit to the tombs of martyrs of Ahl Al Bayt and Al Hussein's companions. They informed him of what had occurred during the 10th of Moharram and the murder of all their relatives and friends. After this meeting the visit became known as the visit of the forty days anniversary as it was made forty days after the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. ►



Returning home

مغادرة الزوار إلى بلداتهم

“ Visitors from outside Iraq, usually from Iran, come on foot, from the border to the Holy City of Najaf, where they visit the tomb of Imam Ali, before taking cars to Kerbala. ”

The forty day visit today

This visit is unique because of its rituals and traditions. The first characteristic which distinguishes it from the other visits is undoubtedly the fact that the visitors come to the Holy City on foot from various provinces in the country. The inhabitants of the south of Iraq are the first to arrive, particularly those from Basra who walk 500 km in ten days, travelling during the day and sleeping at night in reception areas prepared by the locals. They offer food, medicines and services to the pilgrims many of whom suffer from swollen feet. The visitors get to know their hosts who accommodate them each year. After having spent the night resting, they set out again in the morning, to arrive before the 20 Safar. The visitors coming from the capital Baghdad and the surrounding areas, take the road three to five days before, crossing hot zones; the last city where they rest is Al Massayeb, located at 65 kms southwest of Baghdad and 35 km from Kerbala. The rest of the journey is only a few hours walk. Usually, they leave just after the dawn prayer Fajr and arrive at the Holy City in the afternoon or evening.

On every ‘visit’ there are handicapped people coming in wheelchairs, leaning on their crutches or helped or transported by their friends or parents. Those who cannot travel the distance on foot, use cars until Aoun located 10 km from Kerbala. From there, they go on foot to the Holy City. This zone is very crowded because all visitors converge there.

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A women's procession

موكب عزاء نسائي



Tea for the visitors

شاي للزوار



Rest station at MUSAIB for the Baghdadis

محطة الاستراحة في منطقة (المسيب) التي يبيت فيها معظم الزوار

Mourning Processions

The ritual observed during the forty days anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and the return of his family from Sham (Syria), consists of organizing the visitors into processions of mourning which go close to the zone of the sanctuaries. This year there were more than 1200 processions organized according to the provinces of the visitors. Thus, the first procession, which opened the season, was from Basra, the most distant province which received special treatment. The Basra procession was divided into subgroups which represented tribes or guilds.

Each procession carried a specific standard as well as multicoloured flags. At its head were the notables or descendents of the Prophet and the Imams. The participants marched in groups and struck their chests while reciting poems for the occasion. As soon as the first group finished its recitation, it made way for the second and so on. The other marchers whipped their backs with iron chains, called "azenjil" according to the rhythm of the voice of the "arradoud", or drum.

After going through the surrounding zone of Al Hussein's tomb, the procession entered the esplanade of the mausoleum by a reserved door and waited there for a few minutes in order to allow the other processions to reach the tomb. The marchers left by another door. Afterwards they crossed the zone between the two 350m tombs, to reach Al Abbas (Hussein's brother) tomb. These processions follow a precise order, on a circuit route, guaranteeing perfect coordination of their movements and pre-established timing.

Processions from outside Iraq

In addition to the Iraqi processions, the city welcomed processions from Bahrain, Oman, Iran, India and Afghanistan. The procession of Indians resident in Great Britain is the most eagerly waited by the city's inhabitants, because they have a special way of expressing their sorrow on this occasion. There are also many visitors from all Muslim countries who come to celebrate this event. What does the city offer to its visitors?

No city, whatever the level of its services, can absorb so many visitors. Therefore, the inhabitants transform their city into a complex of services: the streets become restaurants, the pavements hotels, and the

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meals are served free 24 hours. The residents exploit every inch of the town through "Takkiya" or using free spaces to make and offer food to the visitors. The most famous area offering food is "Modif Abbas", characterized by a specific taste. Hence you see a long line of visitors awaiting their share of the blessed food.

The holy river

One of the rituals for visitors who came on foot is to bath in the Al Alqami River, the site of a historic battle on the Euphrates. They follow the example of the Companion Al Ansari who, at the time of his visit to Al ▶



Crowds of visitors listening to a speech

جمع من الزوار يستمع لكلمة



Crowds on the night before the 20th of Safar

حشود من الزوار ومواكب العزاء ليلة العشرين من صفر



Marchers from Baghdad

زوار قادمون من العاصمة بغداد



The entrance to Kerbala

مدخل مدينة كربلاء

Hussein's tomb, bathed in the Euphrates. It is a place of rest after a journey of hundreds of kilometres. This river is located at the entry leading to the mausoleums of Al-Hussein and Al Abbas, in the zone known as "Bab Baghdad", to the right of the road from the capital, just after Maqam Al Mahdi. Pilgrims cross using the small pedestrian bridge.

A bath in the river is welcome after the exhausting journey and the visitors make their ablutions before proceeding to the mausoleum 500m away. Many visitors fill small bottles with water to bring their friends good luck or a cure.

Myths and beliefs about this river abound. Some of the visitors, especially women, write letters where they reveal their personal problems, or make a request. They throw the letters in the river, believing they will reach the Imam. Many white sheets of paper decorate the water.

Inside the two mausoleums

The Al Abbas and Al Hussein mausoleums are always open. Their esplanades and sanctuaries are permanently crammed with visitors. Only a small space at the entrance is reserved for the processions of mourning which remain inside the esplanade for a few minutes. Here the lamentations and the scourging by the "Zanjil", intensify along with popular chants ("Al Hawsat"), praising



Mourning marches

مواكب عزاء

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the qualities of Imam Hussein and his brother Al Abbas and affirming the continuity of his example.

These processions are not authorized to enter to the sanctuary, which is reserved for the ritual of the visits, and the recitation of the Koran and prayers. It is difficult for visitors to come close to the grid surrounding the tombs of the two Imams to touch it or embrace it. With enormous crowds, a large number of visitors pay their respects from outside of the mausoleum. ▶

“ After the processions the return journey begins. Trucks are loaded with equipment and vans transport the visitors, who spent at least five days in this small city, home. ”



Preparing food

إعداد الطعام



Arabic coffee for the visitors

قهوة عربية للزوار

The re-enactment of the past

The representation of the sequences of the return of the family of Imam Hussein from Syria is called "Attashabih". This moving spectacle attracts the interest of visitors and touches them most. They are equipped with horses and camels and rein act the events at the time of the journey from Syria to Kerbala. The caravan procession is led by people wearing period costumes, some on horses, others walking close to the women of Ahl Al Bayt.

At the head of the family caravans comes Imam Ali Ben Al Hussein Zine El Abidine, surrounded by the children of his family, boys and girls, with their faces covered. Then the camels arrive; first bearing Zainab Bent Ali, Al Hussein's sister, then others with the wives and daughters of Al Hussein and his followers. They are surrounded by soldiers, led by a chief in a red costume distinguishing him from the other soldiers. As the procession passes in front of the visitors, a flood of lamentations, tears and cries rises from the women in particular. In the end, the visitors attack the soldiers, especially their chief, hurling insulting, spitting at him, and even attacking him, as a sign of denunciation of his contemptible job.

After the processions the return journey begins. Trucks are loaded with equipment and vans transport the visitors, who spent at least five days in this small city, home. This year they were guarded by more than 8000 police in addition to soldiers and volunteers from the local residents. Political parties meeting to form a government stopped their deliberations for nearly a week so that members could perform the visit. Out of respect for the ritual "Sabea Al Mandaiyou", a non-Muslim religious sect who live in the centre and south of Iraq, did not celebrate their great five-day "Albenja" festival because it coincided with the visit. They carried out their rites in the waters of the river, as a sign of respect for the feelings of their Shite Muslim neighbours showing that peaceful coexistence between the various Iraqi religious groups is possible when there is no external interference. ■