

The Summer Umrah

A new term in the Islamic Calendar

London-Islamic Tourism

Hajj and Umrah are traditionally talked about without specifying a certain season. But a new campaign by the Saudi Ministry of Hajj is going to change that. It is well known that there is a discrepancy between the lunar and Gregorian Calendars. The latter has well defined seasons while the former has its months changing over time so that Ramadan, for example, could be in summer, but years later it could be in winter. The same goes for Hajj and Umrah.



Dr. al-Dhabeen opens the conference. الدكتور الذبيان يفتتح المؤتمر.



Mr. Jahani explains the working of the programme. الجهاني يشرح طريقة عمل البرنامج.

Saudi Arabia A number of different package tours are available. The programme relies on the internet and one can register, pay and get a visa all through the internet by logging onto the website:

www.summerumrah.com

Alternatively, one can get in touch by phone or through a travel agent. The programme includes a visit to the holy places and other places of interest in Saudi Arabia during a less busy time. It also uses guides who are well educated up to university level.

Both speakers described the technicalities of the programme and had to answer many difficult questions from the audience. The travel agents think that the programme is going to put them out of business for the whole summer. But these claims may be a bit exaggerated. The programme shows that traditional ways of doing business have to move with the times.

There are technical advances, such as the internet, and Muslims should make use of them. Also, as was pointed out in previous issues of *Islamic Tourism*, religious tourism has to become more professional internationally. The promoters have to use the tools of the 21st century such as the internet and detailed programmes described in leaflets and brochures.

The new campaign is a step in the right direction but it should have been promoted well before the summer. It is no use crying over spilt milk. There is always next summer and the organisers promised to start early with a better publicity campaign. They also promised to solve the hardships and difficulties the programme will cause travel agents. It is not clear whether the campaign targets only UK Muslims or Muslims world wide but there is no harm in promoting summer Umrah internationally. ■

But for the next few years Hajj is not going to be in summer and a new religious and commercial concept has been devised to encourage Umrah over the summer period (Mid-July to Mid-September). It may sound strange at first but it seems to make sense. If summer is not going to be a busy religious season for a few years and many Saudis take their holidays abroad, it means a large number of facilities are not going to be used during this time. It seems like a good idea to market the idea of a summer umrah. This is exactly what the new campaign by the Saudi Ministry of Hajj is doing.

The Summer Umrah Campaign was announced in Regent's Park Mosque (The Central Mosque) in London on 5th August 2004 during a one day conference and workshops. About a quarter of all travel agents organising trips for pilgrims attended. *Islamic Tourism* Magazine was there, as well as a number of TV reporters. The conference was chaired by the Deputy Minister of Hajj and the Head of the Umrah Committee Dr. Issa al-Rawas

and Mr. Khalid Mohammad al-Jahani, a member of the Umrah Committee and a member of the Saudi Chamber of Commerce. The conference was first addressed by Dr. Ahmad al-Dhabeen the Director of the Islamic Cultural Centre in Regents Park Mosque, who pointed out the importance of Hajj and Umrah for Muslims. He also described the literature dealing with travel to Mecca that is available in Arabic and other languages. There are about 700 books and manuscripts on this subject which are regarded as historical and social documents of their times. He also mentioned the involvement of his centre with matters related to Hajj. The centre acts as an advisory group working with travel agents and the British government.

Both Dr. al-Rawas and Mr. Jahani explained the new scheme by pointing out that there are 52 Saudi companies involved in this programme. The idea is to provide low cost Umrah during the summer as well as to arrange visits to different historical places in