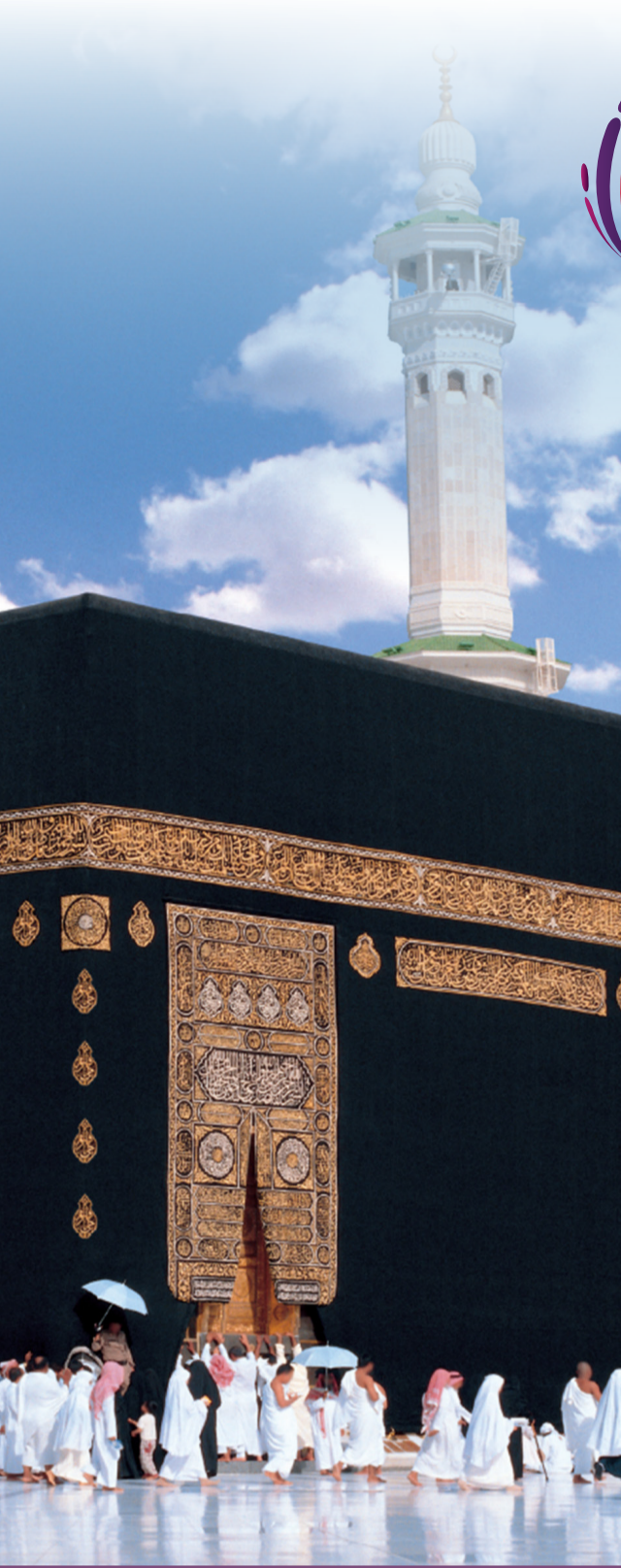




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Sacred Cities

Just as people have different objects of worship and beliefs that they made up, there are different sacred places and sites that people venerate and visit for worship all over the world. Islam is different. God is the Only True God and He is the Only One who has the right to designate sacredness to any location and to approve of any act of devotion. God has chosen certain locations and selected them to be special. God has given us three sacred places in Islam. They are Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. The status of these three cities is mentioned in multiple places in the Quran and the traditions of the Messenger Muhammad. In one teaching of the Messenger Muhammad, he said that travelling for the purpose of a religious journey, pilgrimage, is restricted to these three cities.

In another teaching, the Messenger Muhammad said that ritual devotions offered in the Sacred Mosque of Mecca are multiplied by a hundred thousand, and ritual devotions offered in the Messenger's Mosque in Medina are multiplied by a thousand, and ritual devotions offered in the Further Mosque in Jerusalem are multiplied by five hundred. Let us look at each one of these locations a little closer.

Mecca



Mecca is the city in which the Messenger Abraham settled his son Ishmael along with his mother, Hagar. It is the location of the Sacred Mosque, where the Ka'ba is housed, which was the first house of worship dedicated to the One True God to be built upon Earth. It is also the birthplace of the Messenger Muhammad. It is the place where millions come annually to perform both the lesser and greater pilgrimage. In the time of the Messenger Muhammad it was a small city, but is now a large and modern city that accommodates and facilitates the worship of millions.

Close by are the holy pilgrimage sites of Mina, Muzdalifah and Arafat. These three places are also sacred but their sanctity is only seen during the annual Hajj pilgrimage as they are places that the pilgrims visit and perform certain rites in.

Today, these three sites are pretty much in, or very close to, the city of Mecca. The Messenger Muhammad said concerning Mecca when he was driven out of it by the disbelievers, “By God, you are the best land and the dearest of all the lands of God to Him. Had I not been driven out of you, I would have never left you.”

Mecca is a sacred sanctuary as it has a boundary determined by God. Good deeds and their reward are multiplied in Mecca, likewise sins and crimes committed in Mecca are more severe and offensive. Mecca is a sanctuary - no killing can take place there, no trees are to be cut down, and no animals are to be startled, chased or hunted. Lost items must continuously be announced so that their rightful owners may retrieve them. The Messenger Muhammad said, “God, not the people, has made Mecca a sanctuary; therefore, any person who believes in God and the Last Day should neither shed blood in it nor cut down its trees.”

This is why people flock to this city year round - to gain the amazing rewards on offer of a hundred thousand multiplication for every ritual devotion performed. Mecca is also the only place where you can perform pilgrimage, and voluntary circumambulation around the Ka'ba.

medina



The city of Medina is the second holiest place in Islam. It was the place of migration of the early Muslims from Mecca and where the Messenger Muhammad migrated, settled and later died. It is where he constructed his mosque, the reward of offering ritual devotions therein is multiplied by a thousand. The mosque also contains a special heavenly area known as the Garden, which is between the Messenger Muhammad's house and his pulpit. It is recommended to offer ritual devotions in the Garden if one can do so.

Medina is where the grave of the Messenger Muhammad is located. It also has the graves of many of his family members and disciples. Many of the major events that took place during the Messenger's lifetime, occurred in and around Medina, such as the events of Uhud and the Trench. Medina contains other important places such as Masjid Quba, the first mosque established in Medina by the Messenger upon his arrival. It is recommended to offer two units of optional ritual devotions in this mosque for special rewards.

The city of Medina also has a sacred boundary which makes it a sanctuary. Inside this sanctuary, it is not allowed to kill, chase animals to hunt, or uproot and cut down trees. The Messenger Muhammad prayed to God and asked him to remove an ailment and sickness that would affect those who visited it and would cause them fever. He also asked God to bless its inhabitants in their fruits, produce and provisions. Up until today, Medina is often remarked upon as being a calm and tranquil city.

Jerusalem



Bayt al-Maqdis, or the Pure and Sanctified Mosque Area of Jerusalem, is the third holiest site in Islam. It contains the Masjid al-Aqsa, the Further Mosque, a compound wherein two mosques are built; the Qibli Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. It is a common misconception that Masjid al-Aqsa refers to one of these two mosques, whereas in fact, it refers to the whole compound area.

To offer ritual devotions here multiplies the reward by five hundred. God says, “Glorified be He Who took His slave on a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque in Mecca to the Further Mosque in Jerusalem, whose surrounding area We have blessed, in order that We might show him of Our signs.” [17:1] Masjid al-Aqsa is also significant as it was the direction of prayer in the past which the messengers before Muhammad faced. Early in the ministry of Muhammad and before the migration, the early Muslims first faced Jerusalem for their daily ritual devotions before God commanded them to turn to Mecca. This is the site that the Messenger Muhammad was taken to for the special Night Journey from Mecca and then he was ascended to heaven and met with God and received certain teachings.

Conclusion



As you can see, these are very special cities. We should make an attempt to visit these sacred places at least once in our lives. If one is to spend time and money to travel, the wise ones would take the great opportunity of the reward that comes with visiting these places. May God bless us with the opportunity to perform the pilgrimage and to experience these sacred and blessed places first hand.

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