

Pilgrims arrive in Mecca for downsized hajj

by [Aya Batrawy](#) in the [August 26, 2020](#) issue



Pilgrims pray around the Kaaba, the square structure in the Great Mosque, toward which believers turn when praying in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, on July 26.

Last month, Muslim pilgrims arrived in Mecca for a drastically scaled-down hajj, as Saudi authorities balanced the kingdom's oversight of one of Islam's key pillars with the safety of visitors in the face of a global pandemic.

The hajj, which ran from July 29 to August 2, is normally one of the world's largest global gatherings, drawing about 2.5 million people for five intense days of worship.

This year, Saudi Arabia's Hajj Ministry said that only 1,000 to 10,000 people already residing in the kingdom would be allowed to perform the pilgrimage. Two-thirds of

those pilgrims would be from among foreign residents in Saudi Arabia, and one-third would be Saudi citizens.

The kingdom has one of the largest outbreaks of the coronavirus in the Middle East, with nearly 269,000 reported infections and 2,760 deaths.

Fatin Daud, a 25-year-old Malaysian who is studying Arabic in Saudi Arabia, was among the select few whose application for hajj was approved. After her selection, Saudi Health Ministry officials came to her home and tested her for the COVID-19 virus. She was then given an electronic bracelet that monitors her movements and told to quarantine for several days at home.

After that, Daud was moved to a hotel in Mecca, where she remained in self-isolation, still wearing the electronic wristband. A large box of food was delivered to her hotel room three times a day as she prepared to begin the hajj.

“It was unbelievable. It felt surreal because I was not expecting to get it,” she said of her excitement when she found out she was selected. Daud said she’s praying for the end of COVID-19 and for unity among Muslims around the world.

While self-isolating was emotionally challenging, Daud said she was part of a group of about ten Malaysian and Singaporean pilgrims who connected online and shared tips and religious exercises to keep busy.

The Saudi government covered the expenses for all pilgrims this year, providing them with meals, hotel accommodation, transportation, and health care. Normally, the hajj can cost thousands of dollars for each pilgrim, many of whom save for a lifetime for the journey. It also generates billions of dollars in revenue each year for Saudi Arabia.

In the nearly 90 years since the country was founded, Saudi Arabia has never canceled the hajj. This year was the first time that pilgrims from abroad were not permitted to take part. It was a stark departure from previous years, when pilgrims from more than 160 countries, mostly across Asia and Africa, flocked to Mecca.

Although the hajj often draws all age groups, pilgrims this year were required to be between the ages of 20 and 50 and in good health.

Pilgrims were required to wear face masks. They could drink holy water that came from the Zamzam well in Mecca, but only in prepackaged plastic bottles. Pebbles for

casting away evil that are usually picked up by pilgrims along hajj routes were sterilized and bagged before being distributed to the pilgrims.

Pilgrims also brought their own prayer rugs and were required to pray at a distance from one another, rather than packed shoulder to shoulder.

The physically demanding rituals of the hajj offer a profound experience for Muslims, with the faithful often weeping, their palms stretched toward the sky, in prayer and repentance. The hajj is required of all able-bodied Muslims once in a lifetime.

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