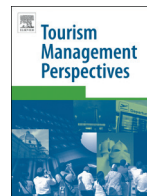




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Muslim perspectives on spiritual and religious travel beyond Hajj: Toward understanding motivations for Umrah travel in Oman

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ABSTRACT

For decades, religious tourism has played a major part in attracting travellers to sacred sites for the performance of rituals. Within the Muslim World, there are two types of religious-related travel: Hajj and non-Hajj. This paper takes a quantitative survey-based approach to explore Muslim pilgrim travel motives beyond the Hajj season. *Umrah* is a pilgrimage that Muslims undertake at any time of the year except during the time of Hajj. Thankfulness to a higher power (Allah in Islam) is revealed as the main reason for undertaking Umrah. Other useful findings related to the most important daily spiritual/religious practices and the perceived spiritual/religious beliefs for Omani Umrah travellers are reported. This article opens up new perspectives on non-Hajj travel of Muslim pilgrims and discusses the implications and future research directions for this cohort of travellers.

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1. Introduction

Islam is one of the world's main religions and in the present day it happens to be the fastest growing (Hashim, Murphy, & Hashim, 2007). As a religion, Islam has over 1.6 billion followers, representing 23% of people worldwide (Global Religious Landscape Report, 2012) and it is increasing by 25 million more people per year (Essoo & Dibb, 2004). In Islamic belief, there are five key pillars (Al-Utheimeen, 2010; Essoo & Dibb, 2004), namely: the declaration of faith (*Shahada*), prayers (*Salat*), fasting in the month of Ramadan (*Saum*), purifying tax (*Zakat*), and pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*).

Hajj and *Umrah* are considered forms of pilgrimage that Muslims around the world are compelled to perform in order to encourage good fortune (Haq & Jackson, 2009). While undertaking Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam and has defined rituals from a temporal and practice perspective, Umrah is voluntary and can be performed anytime with the only exception being during the days of Hajj, and in much the same way it maintains a particular ritualised practice. The season of Hajj stretches from the first day of the last month (*Thu AlHajjah*) to mid-month of the Islamic calendar (a twelve-month lunar year, also known as the *Hijri* calendar). Muslims can perform Umrah at any time of the year apart from the period of Hajj and undertaking Umrah during Ramadhan is considered more beneficial in terms of the extent of Allah's rewards. This belief came about for two reasons: firstly, it was an old *hadith* or

saying of the Prophet Mohammed's that suggests that undertaking Umrah in Ramadan ("Umrah in Ramadan equals a Hajj with me") (Saabiq, 2004) brings good fortune and reward; and secondly Muslims believe that Ramadan was the first time Mohammed received verses of the Qur'an, marking it as an auspicious occasion. Accordingly, this study examines Muslims' reasons to undertake Umrah travel as well as their daily spiritual/religious practices, and perceived spiritual/religious beliefs.

Bhardwaj (1998) provides an overview of non-Hajj pilgrimages, *ziarat* (religiously motivated journeys, *ziarat* literally means a visit), to Islamic holy places other than Mecca. Approaching the phenomena from a geographical perspective, Bhardwaj places particular attention on the various religiously motivated journeys that Muslims undertake, especially outside the Arabic world for affectional reasons and related to mundane matters including vows fulfilment, seeking treatments (pathogenic reasons) and/or acquiring blessing from a saint. Sites that are visited vary and include tombs and shrines as well as attendance at Islamic festivals or events. Umrah however, was not classified by Bhardwaj within his typology of *ziarat*. This is because in order to perform Umrah, one needs to visit Mecca, whereas Bhardwaj focuses on *ziarat* that occurs outside Mecca. In orthodox Islam, Umrah is different from Hajj (Saabiq, 2004) as will be discussed later.

Utomo, Scott, and Jin (2017) historical overview of the business of Hajj outlines that improved technology (mainly transport) has had an enormous impact in facilitating Muslims to undertake the Hajj. Consequently, the number of *Hajjis* (one who makes the Hajj) has increased significantly, with data from 2009 to 2014 citing that there were 15,360,551 pilgrims during the Hajj seasons over this period (Royal

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Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 2013, cited in [Utomo et al., 2017](#)). Another source, the International Islamic News Agency (IINA) reported that in the period 2008 to 2015 there were 32,019,696 pilgrims who performed the Umrah ritual ([IINA, 2015](#)).

[Jauhari and Sanjeev \(2010\)](#) argued that if the motivations for visiting religious places can be identified, it will have significant implications for marketing of religious tourism. For travel and destination marketers, understanding why people travel is of critical importance in developing appropriate marketing strategies ([Zhang, 2009](#); [Alsawafi, 2013](#)). In addition, understanding tourists' motivations is considered a fundamental aspect of tourism studies and this too is critical in the development of tourism ([Yun & Lehto, 2009](#); [Merwe, Slabbert, & Saayman, 2011](#)). Importantly, examining the motivations of pilgrims in developing country contexts where Islamic culture is predominant has received scant attention ([Hsu, Tsai, & Wu, 2009](#); [Alsawafi, 2013](#)). Therefore, in examining this particular context, the potential to contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of tourists' travel behaviour in general, and of the behaviour and practices of non-Hajj travel tourism in Islamic contexts specifically is sought.

2. Defining spiritual tourism

Spiritual tourism, as a focus of scholarly research is still a relatively recent concept as compared to other types of tourism such as recreation tourism, cultural tourism or nature-based tourism, although it is most certainly not a new phenomenon ([Owen, 2006](#); [Haq, 2011](#); [Norman, 2011](#)). In this context, [Sigaux \(1966\)](#) suggested that sacred pilgrimages are fundamental to the genesis of the modern-day tourism industry. Indeed, the growing number of people travelling around the world for spiritual and religious purposes highlights the rise and importance of this new and promising type of tourism ([Haq & Jackson, 2006a, 2006b](#); [Norman, 2011](#)).

Spirituality can be defined variously, but in particular it can be defined as a strong need to find meaning and purpose in one's life and to satisfy the internal desire to believe in a supreme power ([Mitroff & Denton, 1999](#)). Similarly, [Ahmad and Khan \(2015\)](#) describe spirituality as a feeling of connectedness with a higher power or consciousness and linked to the search for the meaning of life, as an antidote to illness and other sufferings, of death, and of the overarching purpose of life itself. Spiritual tourism can also be seen as a journey to a holy place or shrine that is of importance to a person's beliefs or faith. It can also be for the purposes of obtaining spiritual improvement or to gain the 'creator's approval' ([Jesurajan & Prabhu, 2012](#)).

In a sense, spiritual tourists are those who travel to places outside their usual environment, with the intention of finding spiritual meaning and/or attaining growth that could be religious, secular, sacred or experiential in nature, but within the divine context, regardless of the main reason for travelling ([Haq, Wong, & Jackson, 2008](#)). In this context, [Owen \(2006\)](#) argues that spiritual tourism is a place of convergence for contemporary tourism broadly and for pilgrimage related travel in particular. However, spiritual tourism can also contain elements of other types of tourism because as [Shuo, Ryan, and Liu \(2009\)](#) outline, even the most committed pilgrims also have leisure needs.

[Norman \(2011, p. 1\)](#) defines spiritual tourism as "tourism characterized by an intentional search for spiritual benefits that coincides with religious practices." Further, [Norman \(2012\)](#) revisited this definition and questioned its applicability in cases where touristic practices do not coincide with any religious practices and theorised phenomenological taxonomy where he differentiates between pilgrimage religious tourism, and spiritual tourism. In tourism studies more widely, it is common to include both religious tourism and pilgrimage under the broad umbrella of 'spiritual tourism' ([Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005](#); [Haq & Jackson, 2006a, 2006b](#); [Norman, 2011](#)).

Therefore, while religious and pilgrimage tourism includes only those who travel individually or in groups for pilgrimage or other religious reasons, spiritual tourism covers both religious and non-religious

travellers ([Haq & Wong, 2013](#)). Spiritual tourism travellers have also been described by academic researchers as 'seekers', 'pilgrims', 'devotees', 'practising pilgrimage', religious, special interest, cultural or 'experiential tourists' ([Haq & Medhekar, 2015](#)).

3. Spiritual tourism in Islamic contexts

Pilgrimage travel is a tradition for almost all major religions across the globe. Despite the secular nature of current societies (regardless of their dominant religion), pilgrimage travel continues on an upward growth trajectory. [Reader \(2007\)](#) examined the growth of contemporary pilgrimage and asserts that personal reasons to embark on pilgrimage journeys vary regardless of one's religious background. [Reader](#) argues that "[t]hese themes may well be as relevant to modern pilgrims as to those in earlier times, even if some of the nuances that surround them may have been modified in contemporary contexts" (2007, p. 215).

Hajj travel in Islam is considered one of the largest pilgrimage phenomena worldwide. The number of Muslim pilgrims increased significantly from 100,000 during the middle of last century, to 2.5 million in the present ([Reader, 2007](#)). Central to the many reasons that lead Muslims to undertake Hajj is worshipping their Allah. In addition, according to [Saabiq \(2004\)](#), Muslims perform Hajj to enrich their spirituality through various means, including answering their Lord's call to perform Hajj as a means of worship, recharging their spiritual serenity, revering their ancestor sacrifices, remembering the day hereafter and seeking forgiveness of sins.

Umrah, which is another Arabic term for ziarat, refers to a visit to *Ka'abah*¹ ([Saabiq, 2004](#)). Umrah pilgrims undertake similar rituals to those they perform during Hajj, however they are not required to do them all. In short, according to [Saabiq \(2004\)](#), in performing Umrah, Muslims must perform circumambulation (*tawaf* in Arabic) (Fig. 1) around the Ka'abah seven times, walking back and forth seven times between hills of *Safa* and *Marwah*, (Fig. 2)² and shaving or shortening of head hair (women are not required to shave, only shortening). During these rituals, Muslims repeat different supplications and prayers to Allah. Similar to the case of Hajj, Muslims are encouraged to perform Umrah to increase their piety, seek forgiveness of sins, and perform supplications for the purpose of fulfilling vows and/or seeking Allah's support ([Saabiq, 2004](#)).

Religion has been defined by [Dollahite \(1998\)](#) as "a covenant faith community with teachings and narratives that enhance the search for the sacred and encourage morality" (p. 5). Likewise, [Delener \(1990\)](#) described religion as an integrated system of beliefs and practices in relation to sacred elements. From the perspective of the Qur'an, "Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah (God) is Islam" (Qur'an 3:19). The Arabic word Islam derives from peace, submission and obedience ([WAMY, 2010](#)). According to the Islamic faith, Islam is a complete way of life as well as the complete acceptance of the teachings and guidance of God as revealed to his prophet Mohammed. Therefore, spirituality can be viewed as a lifestyle for devout Muslims in that it shapes their life-system, values, thoughts, and actions in the light of Allah's pleasure. It serves as a means of reflecting or thinking that would bring one closer to Allah ([Ahmad & Khan, 2015](#)).

It is acknowledged that while Islamic spiritual tourism is a new concept in the Muslim world, the practice dates back to the time of the beginning of Islam ([Haq & Wong, 2013](#)). In the Qur'an, there are several *ayah*³ encouraging people to perform Hajj. "[A]nd publicly proclaim Pilgrimage for all mankind so that they come to you on foot and mounted

¹ *Ka'abah* is the most holy building in Islam situated in Mecca in Saudi Arabia. The building is cubic in shape and built of bricks and Muslims believe that it was rebuilt by Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic) and his son Ishmael (Ismail in Arabic).

² *Safa* and *Marwah* are two hills located in Mecca, currently part of *Alhram* mosque.

³ *Ayah* is sentence or part of a sentence in the Islam Holy book-Qur'an, the plural is *ayat*.

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