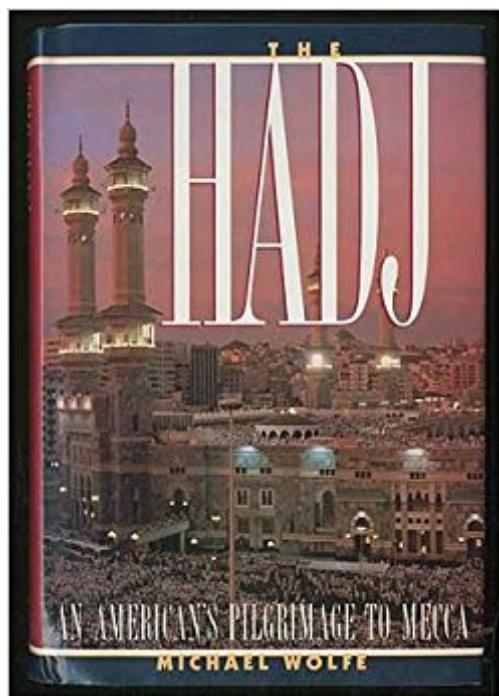


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The Hadj: An American's Journey To Mecca



Synopsis

A convert to Islam describes his pilgrimage to Mecca, recounting his preparations for the trip, the significance of the pilgrimage, and his journey across Muslim North Africa. 12,500 first printing.

Book Information

Hardcover: 331 pages

Publisher: Atlantic Monthly Pr; First edition (July 1993)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0871135183

ISBN-13: 978-0871135186

Product Dimensions: 1.2 x 6.5 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 15 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #3,359,573 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #59 in Books > Travel > Middle East > Saudi Arabia #107 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > Mecca #12362 in Books > Travel > Travel Writing

Customer Reviews

In an engaging and instructive account of his experiences as a Muslim pilgrim to Mecca, California freelance writer, editor and publisher Wolfe lifts the veil for Western readers on this ancient and sacred duty of Islam, simultaneously presenting a lively and sympathetic picture of Muslims. Wolfe, a self-described "mongrel" son of a Christian mother and a Jewish father, says he wanted not to "trade in" his culture in his recent conversion to Islam, but to find "access to new meanings" and "an escape route from the isolating terms of a materialistic culture." He explores new meanings through readings in translation of Islamic literature, religion and history, but most of all in discussions with other men, especially the wise, folksy and enthusiastic Mostophha, with whom he spends Ramadan. (Not surprisingly, the only woman of note in the book is Mostophha's wife Qadisha who, it seems, is always cooking.) The pilgrimage itself is palpably detailed with its intense heat, ardor, bonding, visits to holy sites, multitude of prayers, rules, illnesses and kindnesses, all shared by the more than a million pilgrims who crowd this awesome holy ritual. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

A rare firsthand account, by an American writer and recent Muslim convert, of a journey to the geographical heart of ``the least understood of the world's great religions.'' Wolfe postpones his trip

to Mecca until the second half of his narrative, preceding it with a colorful but meandering description of his sojourn in Morocco. There, he wanders through noisy bazaars, sleeps on sheepskins, chats with Moroccan friends about politics and faith, watches a Sufi group chant and sway, visits Paul Bowles, dons a djellaba for daily Islamic prayers, and gradually comes to feel more at home in that exotic culture. But all this is padding, if skillfully stitched together. Readers will sigh with relief when Wolfe's plane finally touches down in Jiddah and he emerges into the blistering heat of a Saudi summer. Here, again, Wolfe insists on detailing countless conversations with friends and companions, but he also describes--as vividly as any writer before him--the swelter and crush of millions of pilgrims jostling past the Kaaba (the great cubical stone in the center of Mecca's great mosque) or wending their way to the valley of Arafat. Everyone wears the pilgrim's white terry-cloth robes; personal identity is submerged; all eyes are on Allah. While in Mecca, not all is religion--Wolfe mediates an automobile deal, reads Lord Jim, meets pilgrims from around the world--but everything remains subordinate to the author's being at the core of ``the final, matured expression of an original religion reaching back to Adam.'' Brief forays into Islamic theology and history help explain things--with some cheerleading--for untutored readers. Notable, in these muted polemical digressions, is Wolfe's decision to ignore the most common criticisms of Islam, for its views on violence and on women. Too cluttered, and blemished by sly jibes at Judaism and Christianity, but still memorable as travelogue and Islamic apologetic. -- Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

So clearly written! I knew Michael Wolfe when we were teenagers. He was already a brilliant poet. He was very deeply longing for knowledge and meaning back then. This is a journey. It continues. For someone who dwells on the negative aspects of religion, he helps me understand some of the reasons people --smart people-- embrace it.

An exceptionally well written travel book first and foremost, Wolfe's *The Hadj* also provides a thought provoking introduction to Islam from the perspective of a new American convert to that religion.

This is a superbly written travelogue. The writer comes across as a gentle, down-to-earth sort, albeit with a keen observation and the ability to paint word images with exquisite economy of prose. It probably owes itself to his background as a poet. I loved the narratives of his stay at Marrakesh, Tangier and Mecca. As a non-Muslim, I was hardly looking for a scholarly exposition on the rites of

the Islamic pilgrimage. I was curious to know about the attitudes and sentiments of the people involved, and the hardships of the journey. Wolfe delivers this in spades, laced with humour and wit.

In this book Michael Wolfe, an American convert to Islam has described his personal Hadj to Makkah beautifully. The pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia, that is a principal religious obligation of adult Muslims. He has described the Hadj in steps, ritual by ritual and by giving their meanings, as well as his own thoughts, ideas, emotions..etc at that point in time. His journey starts from Morocco, where he went before Hadj, to gain some knowledge and to live in the Islamic environment. He has given a lot of information about Moroccan people, their life, culture and relationship with each other. He gives a lot of information about Muslim people and their culture in general, such as Brotherhood in Islam for example. Where ever he went he was accepted as one of the family member - a brother. This he says was one of the beautiful things that Islam has given to people and which is specific to Muslims only, which Malcolm X has noticed too when he made his own Hadj. I bought this book because I wanted to know, a Westerner's opinion on Islamic topics such as Hadj, from Western perspective. I must say this book was a wonderful read for me, and I am sure it will be the same for you.

A very good account of one of the most important journeys in a Muslim's life. I picked up this hoping it would be a good guide for Muslim converts if not a guide for Hadj. It was neither. Although Wolfe does take a genuine interest in the Arab culture and the religion of Islam, he fails to take the opportunity to enlighten his readers on clearly, one of the world's most misunderstood religion. He does not talk about how to prepare, how to perform, why they do it and what to watch for at the Pilgrimage. Wolfe dwells instead on his personal observations of his tour of Morocco, Mecca and Medina; the book is a personal trip diary. The author has obviously started out by studying a lot into Islam, however, it seems he received his inspirations from unusual sources. He quotes liberally from Frost, Twain and Washington Irving throughout the book but rarely goes into the traditions of the Prophet of Islam. He even summarizes the entire autobiography of the Prophet in 3 paragraphs. Wolfe's admiration for Mohammed (Peace be upon him) is very evident, however; scattered through the book amidst car deals and accounts of his shopping cart are revealing reasons on why he became a Muslim. A short list of the Prophet's words favorite sayings, towards the end, is as refreshing as the cool ZamZam waters of Mecca.

On the strength of a travelogue alone, I would give Wolfe's book a 4 star. It has all the ingredients of

a piece written by a well-read traveler: historical contexts, quotations from predecessors who have traveled the same path, descriptive passages concerning both landscape and human figures, and most importantly, a show of restraint by withholding ethnocentric judgments that fly all too easily when cultures collide. The Hadj is a good primer for stateside readers whose only education about Islam consists of shouting pundits on fair and balanced news stations. It shows that there is a majority of Muslims who are not concerned with violence and are not preoccupied throughout the day with terrorist thoughts. The problem begins when readers approach the book expecting either a political angle or a spiritual angle. We don't expect a travel journal about London to delve into a detailed commentary about imperialistic regimes achieved through naval superiority, so why should the author of the Hadj need to impose Western concepts of egalitarian societies onto his observations? I found that as long as I read the Hadj as nothing but a travelogue, it was quite satisfying. Every person has their reasons for embarking on a spiritual journey, so I won't question Wolfe's true reasons. I will confess that at the opening of the book, when I read these lines "I was looking for a framework I could live with, a vocabulary of spiritual concepts applicable to the life I was living now. I did not want to 'trade in' my culture. I wanted access to new meanings," and later on, "The more I learned about Islam, the more it appeared to conform to what I was looking for

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