

[EXTRACT]

Ramadan for business travellers

Islam's holy month of fasting is a challenging time for both Muslims and non-Muslims

The holy month of Ramadan began on 22 August this year, bringing with it challenges for both Muslim business travellers and non-Muslims travelling to countries where Ramadan is widely observed.

Ramadan is one of the five holy pillars of Islam, alongside the profession of faith, daily prayer, charitable giving and the Hajj, the once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca. It is the ninth month of the Muslim calendar and commemorates the period when the Koran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. The date for Ramadan changes each year and is linked to the appearance of the new moon. Ramadan ends with the three-day festival of Eid al-Fitr.

During the month of Ramadan, Muslims are required to abstain from food, drink, tobacco and sexual activity from dawn to dusk. Instead of breakfast, lunch and dinner, Muslims eat two meals – suhoor, just before dawn, and iftar, just after dusk. Suhoor tends to be a filling meal to help get the faithful through the day. Iftar, meanwhile, traditionally starts with eating dates and drinking water. This is followed by a break to read nagrib prayers. Those breaking their fast then return for more food, often simple meze-type dishes. The emphasis is on eating normally rather than gorging oneself to counter the day's fasting.

Although this month-long fasting is a key part of Islam, there are some exceptions – children and pregnant women do not have to fast, for example.

There is another, somewhat surprising, exception. Abid Shakeel, chief executive of Ijma & Qiyas, a business consultancy which gives advice on the financial services market in the UK, says: "If you are travelling, you don't have to fast. You can always make up for any days of fasting that you miss. Ramadan is a period where you are expected to think of the things that people haven't got. If you are making yourself ill, then you are not going to make the experience a positive one."

Shakeel regularly travels from the north west of England to London and says that he would fast during a short day-trip. However, he would make an exception when travelling on a long-haul flight and drink water to stop getting dehydrated.

"If I am travelling abroad for more than four or five hours on the plane, I make the conscious decision not to fast as it will have an impact on my health when I arrive," he says.

Shakeel says that things have changed considerably for travellers to Muslim countries over the past five to ten years.

“Back then, if you travelled to the Middle East or South East Asia, most people would be fasting and there would be an expectation that you would also be fasting as a Muslim. If you were a non-Muslim or a traveller who wasn't fasting, there would be limited options for you to go and eat until iftar time,” he says.

“Today, with increasing globalisation, there are many more non-Muslim companies such as Burger King, McDonalds and Starbucks operating in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Iraq and, most notably, Dubai.”

Despite this increasing appearance of Western chains, business travellers may be faced with difficulties in eating and drinking during their visit to a Muslim country. Such outlets often restrict their opening hours during Ramadan.

Rotana, one of the largest hotel groups in the Middle East, operates a range of changed policies during Ramadan. The group's hotels do not serve alcohol in any of its public areas until 7pm although guest rooms do have alcohol in their mini-bars. Andrew Solum, a frequent traveller to the Middle East, says: “Mini-bars in hotels do a roaring trade during Ramadan.”

Visitors to the region's restaurants will often find them partitioned off with curtains or screens with areas for Muslims and non-Muslims. Some speciality restaurants will be closed until sun-down.

A common sight in Middle Eastern countries are Ramadan tents. Traditionally, these were places where the poor could find free food to break their fast at the end of the day. However, Ramadan tents have become big business. Many international hotels in the Middle East erect tents in their grounds which have become the focus of corporate hospitality.

Shakeel says: “Ramadan is a time of giving and the large corporate companies like to be seen as given something back.”

For non-Muslims, doing business during Ramadan can be challenging. Andrew Solum says: “Doing business in Saudi is nearly impossible, as most offices shut for Ramadan, or, if they are open, they close five times per day for prayer. Parts of the UAE are a bit more 'liberal' during Ramadan, especially given the high numbers of foreigners both working there and visiting.

He advises putting off business if at all possible. “Not much happens. Government bureaus are mostly shut while banks have very odd hours,” he says. “If you are visiting with Westerners, it is pretty much business as normal, but if you need a local authority for anything, forget it.”

Lee Niblett of international risk management consultancy red24 agrees. “Business travellers should also be aware that productivity drops during the month, with both public and private sectors reduce working hours, which may well disrupt business activity.” He advises that business travellers reconfirm any scheduled appointments.

Shakeel says that some countries operate working hour windows. In Dubai, this is from 8am to 2pm for government employees. In Pakistan, it is common to see working hours of 10am till 2pm and then 4pm till 6pm.

Solum adds: “If you do meet with locals, they can be surly and unhappy, mostly because of lack of tea, coffee and possibly cigarettes, not to mention fatigue from irregular hours.”

Another consequence of this is that roads may also be more dangerous than usual during Ramadan, as tiredness and hunger leads to a deterioration in driving standards.

Security in general during Ramadan may be another concern for non-Muslim business travellers. Red24's Lee Niblett says: "Business travellers should anticipate heightened security measures in the vicinity of Western embassies and consulates, foreign banks, marketplaces and public buildings. They should also be aware that criminal activity tends to increase in the final weeks of the month prior to Eid al-Fitr, as a result of the need for extra money for celebrations. As a consequence, business travellers should minimise travel around major cities after dark and use common sense security precautions."

Ultimately, Ramadan is a time for personal reflection for Muslims. Non-Muslim travellers should be respectful of the decision to fast and enjoy the atmosphere of celebration that often goes along with the breaking of the fast with an iftar meal. Many business people find that this time can be a very fruitful one for forging strong business relationships based on mutual respect and understanding of different cultures.

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Source: Times Online website (29 August 2009)

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/travel/business/article6814707.ece?token=null&offset=0&page=1>