

## Chapter Two: Holy Land

I was wrong. Salopek went off his path and paid a visit to Medina. Based on the timestamps of his stories, I speculate that he did a detour while his walk into the desert was paused as his Saudi guide had fallen ill. In the true fashion of mimicking the walk out of Africa, they stopped and waited. Is it just a coincidence or is it God's power? How could anyone be within 100 miles of Medina and not stop by? It is a calling of some sort. His story was exceptionally short. He attended the 'break of fast' at the Prophet's Mosque during Ramadan and he highlighted a believer from Afghanistan. The video accompanying the story is amazing.

The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi is the grandest place of worship I have visited. It is where I experienced the perfect balance of tranquility, beauty, elegance and wealth. It draws you in and it is irresistible. The mysterious power of religion should not be underestimated. I probably will never see Al-Masjid an-Nabawi, the Prophet's Mosque, in Medina and Masjid al-Haram, the Great Mosque, in Mecca, with my own eyes. Mecca is still strictly off limits to non-believers even after Saudi relaxed their tourist visa rules. I don't believe in this God or others. However, I have a feeling I would be completely overwhelmed if I come close to these two places. It draws you in and it is irresistible.

A typical travel blogger would have ended the piece. Apparently, I'm not a travel blogger. After mesmerizing the mosques' gleaming marble floor, glorious domes and towers, and sea of humans, I want to know where the thousands of meals for breaking fast come from. Who prepared them? Who paid for them? It was not easy to find those answers. I tried a dozen different combinations of keywords and only landed two articles with leads.

A report in Arab News on May 27, 2018 describes Ramadan in Medina in 2018. There is a unit dedicated to serving Iftar to provide guidance for those who want to serve meals. Presumably the 'unit' is a government agency. Servers are licensed and responsible for the quality of food they serve. Iftar meals are served in areas of the mosque's outside courts. Food inspectors ensure nothing but permitted items are served to worshippers. Any violations will result in revoking licenses and giving the opportunity to another company.

Islamic City reporter reported Ramadan spirit in Makkah and Madinah on April 14, 2021. In this article, it says 'You would see iftar-hosts coming with their crews who quickly arranged food and drink on 'sufra' or meal-serving-mat for their guests. You can choose which 'sufra' to join, depending on your choice of food- bukhari rick, briyani, Al-Baik fried chicken, soup, pasta, and many more in addition to the basic set (yogurt, juice, bread, fruit, tea)... The hosts were busy inviting and ushering people to their 'sufra'.

Nobody mentioned money. You almost want to believe it is God who provided all of this. The Saudi perfected this business model. Remember the narrow alleyways lined with restaurants in Grenada and the open night market packed with food stands in Asia? There is a host standing in front of each business to charm you. Doesn't it look similar? In Medina, however, you don't open your wallet in God's house. You will do that somewhere else after prayers. The Saudi kings pour huge amounts of money into expanding the capacity of the mosques and accommodation surrounding the mosques. The government must be funding the meal operation

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behind the scenes. After being showered by the generosity and hospitality in the sight of God, you probably also feel extra generous. Glory to God.