

# **Ziyarat Al-Arbaeen - A Journey Of Love**

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## **Introduction**

I hope that this guide helps all of my fellow Za'war that are looking to do their first Ziyarat or Arbaeen trip. I decided to write this to give some guidance, and provide some insight after performing my first Ziyarat. Please note that this guide contains a lot of my own personal suggestions, and can be taken with a grain of salt. There are definitely more options than what I have suggested, and after speaking to people whom have gone for Ziyarat, you may find better options, perfection doesn't generally exist.

I had always wanted to go for Ziyarat – and especially Arbaeen. The way in which Za'war had spoken about the generosity of the Iraqi people, the feeling of bliss in the holy cities that they visited, and how so many of them would go back year after year had captivated me. In the summer of 2022 after a few of my friends and a close family member returned from Arbaeen – I made a Niyyat that I would go the following year.

In summer of 2023 I heard the call to do Ziyarat. Why I chose Arbaeen as my first ever spiritual trip was due to several motivating factors, a few very close friends of mine had been on this trip and spoke about it with so much passion. One of those gentlemen was Marhum Shiraz Noormohamed – the way in which he spoke about how there was a magnetic pull at the Haram, and how he felt spoken to by the Imams was something that I wanted to feel. Before beginning – let us take the time to recite Surah Fatiha for him, as well as all of those loved ones that inspired us to become the people we are today.

I am blessed to have some very close friends that have gone on the walk from Najaf to Karbala in the past, and luckily I was able to consult them for packing advice. Let's face it – if your normal vacation is going to a beach, or touring – this can be a little overwhelming considering the circumstances of what a Ziyarat trip entails, the weather, what to expect, how much to pack, getting around in a foreign country, the questions are endless. Thankfully the team at TGO also put together a nice guide for us about what to pack, and what to expect, and it was great. The purpose of this is to take that a few steps further, so that I can assist my fellow first time Za'war, and returning Za'war in having an excellent trip. I believe that it is important to know what to expect – and it makes for a much more pleasant experience when you can be prepared for those experiences, by human nature we are afraid of the unknown – I hope that by the end of this you will be able to have a reasonable idea of what to expect, and what to be prepared for.

## **My Pre-Ziyarat Expectations**

I will begin with some of the expectations that I had, how they were met, and how I may have been better prepared.

- 1) The first thing I was told was to pack very light – now I know this is important , and it is, however I packed a carry-on size bag, and my backpack
  - a. Although it is true that it is great to pack light, make sure you are packing enough. When I started to see other people's bags – I very quickly saw that I had packed one of the smallest bags – and in hindsight I could have packed a few more things (which I will touch on later) – and depending on if it's your first Ziyarat trip – you may want to have some extra space to bring back things that are commonly brought back – such as Kafans (which can be quite bulky), mohr's, tasbihs, musallahs, banners, pictures
  - b. Rather than a carry-on type bag, I would have much rather taken the middle size bag – not packed full, or one of those rolling duffel bags – make sure you don't necessarily fill them to the brim
  
- 2) I had a notion in my mind that I would be able to do laundry in Najaf – based on what I was told, so I packed around 5 days worth of clothing, our total trip was 12 days.
  - a. The cities you go to are going to be heavily populated. Also Iraq is a third-world country – meaning things can change on a whim. The first day in Najaf we had a goal to get our laundry done – so we contacted the hotel, and they said that they were not doing laundry that day – simple as that, this is what I mean by things can change on a whim – and you are at the mercy of the hotel, especially if you don't speak Arabic. The second day of our 2 day trip in Najaf the hotel said they were washing all the linens and towels that day, so again they weren't doing laundry.
  - b. How I would have combatted this if I knew in advance that these things happen: I would say that for the most part, pack enough clothes to get you through the walk. That means pack enough for the first few days in Kadhmain, Balad-Samara, Najaf, the walk, up until at least 1-2 extra days in Karbala- so that you have the ability to do laundry towards the tail end of your trip. I had to scramble to wash some undergarments and shirts and dry them in the hotel in order to have enough for the walk because I wasn't able to wash my clothes in Najaf – which posed somewhat of an obstacle – the rooms are cooler due to A/C and its not possible to dry the clothes outside, so it meant some of my clothes ended up being damp as they didn't fully dry.
  
- 3) The weather is going to be hot - so be prepared (clothing) \* also I went in late August
  - a. The best thing you can do is to buy breathable clothing – I had gone to Mountain Warehouse, and Uniqlo – I found both of these stores had excellent athletic wear, Mountain Warehouse was a little cheaper and I found their active wear t-shirts to be much more affordable than Uniqlo and I enjoyed the quality/comfort of their shirts better, the pants I purchased were the active joggers from Uniqlo they are a thin stretchy fabric – great for hot climates

- b. You don't necessarily need to be in 100% black clothing – you can wear dark colors as well i.e. dark gray, dark green, when you are in Iraq and you look around you will notice that lots of people are wearing other dark colors
  - c. Besides the polyester active clothes that I purchased, some of the favourite pants I wore on the walk were Kanzu Pants - think a baggier version of kurta pajama pants – these are breathable, thin, and a great option, I bought 2 pairs in Najaf for \$4 USD each – and you will find vendors in Najaf that sell these – there are a lot of markets to go to.
- 4) How to prepare yourself – Spiritually
- a. This is an interesting point – I mean for someone who hadn't gone for Ziyarat before – how do you prepare mentally for meeting the imams? Its been almost 20 years since I have been in Madressah – yes I go to mosque, but how can you prepare yourself mentally?
  - b. When I first entered the Haram of Imam Musa Al-Kadhim (AS) (7<sup>th</sup>), and Imam Muhammad Al-Jawad (AS) (9<sup>th</sup>) I definitely felt a little overwhelmed. The meaning of Ziyarat is to visit, you are going to these holy shrines to say Salaam – how do you say Salaam to people you don't know? I feel this may be different for different people depending on your level of religious knowledge, but for me I have some skeletal knowledge on the life of Imam Ali, Imam Husein (AS), even less on Imam Zain-Al-Abidin (AS), and even less on the other Imams unfortunately.
  - c. It is much easier to perform Ziyarat, and find a deep connection with the Imams when you know about their life history I will touch on this point when I get to the portion on Kadhmain – but keep in mind, one of the things you can do to prepare, is read about who you are going to visit, make notes, it will help you get more excited as well to visit the shrines of the magnanimous personalities whom you have the privilege of meeting.
- 5) How to prepare yourself – Physically
- a. Of course being physically fit will help you on this trip as it is somewhat strenuous. The days leading up to the trip make sure to drink plenty of water, and take vitamins to prevent getting sick, ideally you want to be able to be physically visit the Harams and perform the Ziyarat when you get there, so the best way to be prepared is to take precautions in advance.
  - b. It wouldn't hurt either to walk regularly – or workout, being fit is also a part of our religion that is unfortunately overlooked at times.

## **The Journey Begins**

### **The Airport – Day 1 – Baghdad to Kadhmain**

Upon arrival in Baghdad airport you will need to get a visa in order to exit the airport. Remember, this is the busiest time that Iraq sees, and therefore be prepared for what you will be going through. When you get out of the plane and head towards passport control there are two sections – the part that looks like it exits out to the luggage retrieval area – you will see Iraqi officials in their uniforms checking everyone's passport – and then allowing them to exit **This is the second step**. There is another area where you will likely see a huge crowd swarming to get their visas issued **This is step 1 and where the fun begins!**

#### **How to make your visa/airport process go as smooth as possible**

- 1) Make sure you have your Iraqi visa application completed – double check it for spelling mistakes, and passport number, make sure it is 100% accurate, and keep it ready in a place that is very easy to access
- 2) Have your passport copy ready & passport
- 3) \$80 USD is required for the visa – have this in exact amount, not euros, not Canadian, and the EXACT amount assume they will not give you change
- 4) Have all of these three things ready in hand, and with confidence try to make your way into the crowd, it doesn't hurt to get vocal and yell HABIBI VISA VISA while maintaining eye contact with the guy at the counter and waving your completed forms and passport – you can thank me later.
- 5) They will take your passport, the copy, and the form, and come back in 15-20 minutes usually and then call your name – so listen because you will have stepped away from the crowd at this point
- 6) Pay them the \$80, check to make sure your passport has the visa and make your way to the passport control
- 7) Line up for passport control – this usually takes 45 minutes or so – they will check your passport, and off you go to collect your luggage
- 8) Go grab your bags, and then head towards the exit doors
- 9) Once out of the exit door – you will meet someone from TGO who will greet you and get you to the hotel in Kadhmain
- 10) At this point I would recommend getting a SIM Card from Zain (I am not a paid sponsor) but make sure they install it and it is activated a few people on our trip were given SIM cards that were purchased by TGO and they were faulty as we installed them ourselves and found out they were not activated, so get the representative to add the SIM into your phone, and make sure it is working, and if it isn't and they say that you need to wait a little while for it to find the network, wait there so that it gets taken care of on the spot
- 11) The SIM Card will cost less than 20,000 Iraqi Dinar make sure you have some Iraqi money on you when you land into Iraq – you can convert more later on, but have around \$50USD worth when you land, it will help you until you get to a currency changer later on.

- 12) The whole passport/visa process should take about an hour to an hour and a half so be patient, I know it was a long flight to get there, but iA it will be worth it.

## **Kadhmain**

We got to Kadhmain, tired naturally, as my friend and I had been flying for the last 30+ hours, it took some time to get the hotel rooms sorted out so we drank Iraqi chai – absolutely wonderful if you love tea, they drink it quite sweet – so you may want to learn to say less sugar when you are on the walk “Akai Sukar.” After getting some lunch, freshening up and taking a long power nap, we were ready for our first Ziyarat experience of going to the Haram of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Imams. We got to the Haram at just about Maghrib time – meaning it was quite full this will be your first taste of crowds, we were told that if we wanted a space to pray in Jamaat that we should get there well in advance, but we were excited to get to the Haram in general. The crowds for whatever dispersed somewhat between Mahgrib and Isha, so we got to pray Isha in Jamaat in the Haram.

If you want to have a very pleasant experience and get to pray in the Harams make sure you do a few things, although there are plenty of places to do wudhu in the Harams, there are also a ton of people – and the areas where people do wudhu tend to get quite dirty unfortunately with all the water, sand and dirt, they usually aren't the most pleasant, so do your wudhu in advance, and it wouldn't hurt if you have your own mohr and tasbih – you can get them in the Harams, but if you have one in your pocket it makes you more resilient to outside factors of going to look for these items. Make sure you have your Ziyarat ready, I personally used two apps one was Shia Toolkit, the other was Shia Companion download these in advanced and practice navigating to the Ziyarats some people had the Iraq Ziyarat guidebook this is a great supplement to have in advance, but you don't want to carry something that bulky into the Harams some people did however, but again, it just depends on the person, I preferred using my phone since it was with me anyway.

### **Tips for Entering the Harams – this can be applied for all Harams that you enter**

- 1) Do wudhu beforehand – the areas where you do wudhu at the Harams can be busy, super wet/not exactly the cleanest – so its easier to do beforehand.
- 2) Shoes
  - a. You can either keep them with you in a bag – this has its advantages and disadvantages
    - i. Advantages
      1. You have them with you so you don't need to go hunting for them after

2. You don't need to find a place to put them
  3. No chance of losing them or them getting stolen if you have them close to you
    - ii. Disadvantage
      1. You have one more thing you need to carry with you
      2. If you try to enter the Zari room – they may get stuck in between people and if that bag rips you may lose your shoes since its almost impossible to pick them up in a crowd
  - b. You can keep them in a locker
    - i. Sometimes these have locks that you can get – one more tedious step unfortunately
    - ii. Or you can keep them in an unlocked locker – generally this is alright as most people you would think wouldn't take your shoes
  - c. You can keep them with the shoekeepers – and they give you a token
    - i. This is probably the best option, and works well in Kadhmain, Samarra, Najaf, but in Karbala you won't get this because there are so many people that your chances that there is space here is extremely unlikely
- 3) When physically entering the Harams
- a. Pray the dua before entering the Haram – this is essentially asking for permission, and the thought process is that it is a sign of respect that you are not just barging in – you are asking to enter
  - b. Be mindful of the place you are about to enter, and evaluate your state of mind
  - c. Enter slowly and take in what you are about to experience, and the presence of the Imam whom you are about to greet

Our first experience in the Haram was interesting, I guess we didn't know what to expect, although it was breathtaking to see the Haram, and the vast number of people, I felt like I didn't quite know what I was doing, this was my first time on any kind of religious trip. We said our salaams, prayed Ziyarat, and I personally didn't feel the deep connection that I would end up feeling later on that same evening.

We returned to the hotel, and had dinner, followed by a Majlis and some Nohay, it was during this time that I truly realized the importance of knowing who is buried just steps away from you. This is why I would tell my fellow first timers to do a little ground work to read the biographies to get at least a small grasp of these great individuals. Sayed Mehdi Modaressi gave us a lecture on the life of the 7<sup>th</sup> Imam, the suffering that he endured under the reign of Harun Ar-Rashid, and some accounts of his imprisonment, the jail cell he was contained in, and lastly, his demise. I felt a deep connection to the Imam at that point, and I couldn't wait to go back to the Haram, and visit this incredible individual. Sure enough when we went back as a group that evening,

and did our Ziyarat, and visited the Zari it felt much more meaningful, I wish I had known more about the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> to fully encapsulate this experience. I made a mental note that I would do more when I got back to learn more about our Imams and the incredible lives they lived, and the suffering they endured. I believe sometimes we think that since the Imams are infallible that they were not susceptible to some of the things that we are tested with today in our lives, but this isn't true, we can learn a lot simply by focusing on the struggles the Imams were tested with, and how they were able to overcome some absolutely atrocious situations. At times it makes our own problems pale in comparison and provide perspective.

## **Getting Ready For the Day Trip to Balad and Samarra**

After coming back to the hotel, we got our bags ready, and took them to the lobby – it was now around 1-2AM and we were set to leave for Najaf at around 6:00AM. Our main bags would be sent to Karbala, so we were told to keep everything that we needed for the day trip handy, we would be going to Balad, Samarra, and then to Najaf, what I would recommend packing for the day in your backpack

- Ziyarat Book if you have or phone, with materials to read
- Battery pack – charged
- Earbuds
- Snacks – for yourself, and possibly to share – I would recommend granola bars, trail mix – things that are dense and easy to pack
- A couple electrolyte packs to mix into water
- You will likely get water/juice/soda on the bus – but I would recommend sticking mainly to water and electrolytes to stay hydrated right up until the walk
- Travel pillow will come in handy for the long bus rides
- Flip-flops/sandals
- Perhaps a scarf to shield away from the sun – in Samarra

## **First Stop – Balad**

Our first stop of the day trip was Balad, which is home to Sayed Muhammad ibn Ali al-Hadi – the brother of the 11<sup>th</sup> Imam. This was around an hour away from Kadhmain. The bus didn't park very far away from the Haram, looking at about a 5-8 minute walk, relatively short. We went in, prayed two rakats, and did a quick Ziyarat, all, this was around a 25-30 minute stop.

I would recommend doing some reading on Sayed Muhammad – he was poisoned as some of the leaders of the time believed he was going to be the next Imam.



A lot of couples do this Ziyarat when they are looking to have children, and a lot of people who are ill come to do this Ziyarat to get over illness

## **Second Stop – Samarra**

After getting back on the bus, we drove from Balad to Samarra, which was about an hour drive. We got to Samarra, and the area of the Haram, this parking lot is a little further back, and it's important to note that you may be better off with Sandals than with shoes – the areas between the parking lot and the Haram are quite heavily littered with disposable water bottles. Then when you get closer to the area of the Haram, there are lots of people giving away water and as a result there are large puddles/wet areas – so its easy to get your shoes/socks wet, plus around this time the sun starts coming out.

It was about a 15-20 minute walk to the Haram, mainly because of the crowds – there was a lot of congestion. We spent a little more than an hour visiting the Haram, and praying. The major sites you will see here are:

- The 10<sup>th</sup> Imam – Ali Al-Naqi (AS)
- The 11<sup>th</sup> Imam – Hassan Al-Askari (AS)
- Bibi Nargis Khatun – the mother of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam
- Bibi Hakimah Khatun – sister of Nargis Khatun
- The place where the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam was last seen before he went into Ghaybat

We had a chance to do Ziyarat, pray our mustahab salaah for the people buried in the Haram, and then we met back close to the entrance and made our way back to the bus. The fact that there are 4 different incredible individuals buried in this Haram is quite overwhelming. One of the most powerful statements I heard from one of our group leaders was that, we absolutely love our 12<sup>th</sup> Imam, and we pray to meet him iA one day – imagine that we are going to visit his parents, and to give our salaams, and Ziyarat to his parents – how happy would one be to know that his followers have come all this way to meet his parents. Another interesting fact I learned was that Bibi Nargis Khatun came from a royal lineage – so you will notice in the Zari that her tomb is the only one with a crown on it. It was remarkable to stand in front of where Imam Mahdi (AS) once stood before he went into Ghaybat – and also very surreal, as the entire Ziyarat experience was.

The drive from Samarra to Najaf is approximately 4 hours during non-peak times. During Arbaeen everything gets exaggerated in terms of timing, and it took us almost 7 hours to get from Samarra to Najaf, with a quick pit stop for Zuhrah/Asr Salaah. If you are able to sleep on the bus, I would highly recommend it, sleep whenever you can, because it is truly a commodity, and you never know when you will get a chance, because Ziyarat trips are not highly structured, you get to explore, visit the Harams etc, so rest is a must so that you do not burn out.

## **Arrival into Najaf**

We arrived into Najaf just past Maghrib time, and because of the congestion within the city we had to get out, and carry our backpacks, suitcases were put on a trolley, and were pushed to the hotel by the volunteers – but we had to walk around a kilometer, which wasn't bad considering it was in the evening and the sun had set.

We arrived to our hotel, had a chance to pray, freshen up, and shower – and we had dinner. After dinner – most of the people went to sleep, however my friend and I decided since we had just spent a good amount of time sleeping, that our mawla was calling us, and I was so excited that I could not wait until the morning to visit the shrine of Imam Ali (AS). Everything I had read and learned about him, had me energized and enthused. We made our way over to the Haram as we couldn't contain ourselves.

As our trip progressed we noticed the number of people increasing, which gave us a taste of what to expect on the walk. We made our way into the Haram, walked around until we found the entrance towards the Zari, and we made our way into the Zari room, compared to where we were in Kadhmain, Balad, and Samarra, this was the busiest Zari we had seen so far. The only thing I can suggest is that with your sincerest wishes, and while keeping the Imam in mind, ask for permission to be one of the chosen few to make it to the Zari, and be patient. Remember, the crowd will push you, and will cause you to drift this way and that, but don't get angry – don't be one of those that pushes and shoves with elbows – remember, your Imam is right in front of you, and he sees everything you are doing, and he knows everything you are thinking, so be patient, and embrace where you are, and iA your turn will come to make it towards the front so that you are able to touch the Zari. While you are in the crowd, remember to do Salwaat, praise and declare there is no god but Allah, and with that at least you are getting thawaab as you wait your turn. A fellow Za'war told me when I was in the crowd to remember Allah, because there is a hadith that Prophet Muhammad said when he walked by a tree and struck it with his staff, and the leaves fell - **“Verily, the praise of Allah, the glorification of Allah, the declaration there is no God but Allah, and the exaltation of Allah remove sins from the servant just as the leaves of this tree fall.”** Think of yourself as the tree and the crowd as the staff, as you get bumped, iA you are also losing your sins.

That evening we had a chance to make it to the Zari, pray our mustahab salaah, and do Ziyarat, we also sat for a while in the Haram and recollected on stories, and hadiths of Imam Ali (AS), his justice, his generosity, his kind and loving nature towards Bibi Fatema and his family – it was a beautiful experience that was amplified by our knowledge of his incredible life.

## **Day 1 In Najaf and a visit to Kufa**

We woke up, and attended a Majlis in our hotel, and then afterwards we did some shopping. Today one of the brothers from TGO took us to buy rings and a few other things, I ended up with a Firoz Ring, an Aqeeq Ring, and a couple Keffiyeh Scarves, as well as a few pairs of Kanzu pants. The plan was to do a couple hours of shopping prior to heading to Masjid-e-Kufa. We got back to the hotel, and got ready for the trip to Masjid-e-Kufa.

Masjid-e-Kufa has incredible history – according to hadith it was originally built by Prophet Adam, it is also where the Ark of Prophet Nuh was built. It is more known for the fact that this is where Imam Ali (AS) was the Caliph, and led salaah – it is also unfortunately the place where Imam was struck in the mihrab of the mosque, it has a lot of incredible merits, and history, and besides that, it is a beautifully designed piece of architecture, and in my opinion one of the most beautiful mosques I have been to.

We arrived at the mosque just before the time of Maghrib which led to a stunning middle-eastern sunset as the backdrop for one of the most elegant mosques I have seen, it was in a word, serene. We had the chance to go around the mosque and do wudhu, Masjid-e-Kufa doesn't have an organized Jamaat Salaah – so our group Aalim Sayed Jawad Qazwini led salaah, and shortly almost 100 people joined our impromptu salaah – it was blissful.

That night we had a majlis at the hotel, we learned about some of the merits of Imam Ali (AS), as well as his companion Maytham at-Tammar.

Later that night we went to the Haram, we did our Ziyarat, we prayed, and we were there about an hour or so before Fajr, so we found a spot thankfully as the masjid was packed, and we were able to complete our Fajr Salaah in Jamaat in the Haram of Imam Ali (AS) – it was a beautiful way to end the day.

## **Day 2 Najaf – The walk begins at night, rest in the day to prepare**

We woke up this morning, and had in mind that the walk would start this evening, so by the end of the day you need to make sure you have all of your clothes and belongings packed that will be going to Karbala, and that you need to have your backpack ready for the walk itself.

This was the day that I was a little concerned about my wardrobe and lack of clothes, so I ended up washing some clothes in the shower, and dried them in the room. Important to make sure you have enough clothes to last you for the completion of the walk, and maybe 1-2 days after for this reason. By this time we had been to Kadhmain, Balad-Samarra, and 2 days in Najaf – plus the walk is 2.5 – call it 3 days – so it is important to be prepared.

We had to run a few last minute errands in the city of Najaf today, so we went back to the market – if you have a chance try to find a place that sells Kahwa Halwa – it is a thick coffee sweetened with dates (if I am not mistaken) and if you love coffee, it may just change your life.

## **The Walk – Packing Guide**

We got back to the hotel, and worked on finalizing our backpacks, here is my packing guide for your backpack, for the Arbreen Walk.

If you are not aware about what the walk entails, it is a walk from Najaf, to Karbala, it is marked with poles every 50 Meters, in total the walk is roughly 80 KM and is marked with 1452 poles. There are mawkibs on the way, and the word mawkib is very broad – it could entail a small kiosk type booth where people serve water, chai, coffee, or a variety of snacks. It could also be an entire building that includes shower facilities, washrooms, and an area to sleep. Generally speaking the walk will go around 2.5 days, we went at a very hot time of year in early September, so we didn't walk much in the daytime, we primarily walked after Maghrib which was around 7PM.

Since you will be spending 2 nights in mawkibs on the route to Karbala, you should pack accordingly. The shower facilities are similar to what you may find when you go camping, meaning you may not get hot water, the pressure may not be what you are used to, and there will likely not be any kind of shelves in the showers to put your toiletries – so it is important to pack accordingly – I will touch on this later on.

Since you will be walking with your pack for 2.5 days with rest usually every 100 poles, it is wise to pack as light as possible – while keeping in mind all the essential items:

### **Packing List:**

#### **The Backpack Itself:**

- Try to get a small hiking type backpack, one that doesn't rest directly on your back, but is suspended away from your back
- The capacity should be around 25-30 Liters
- Make sure it has a waist/hip strap and a chest strap this will distribute the weight better
- Also get acquainted with your pockets, know where the quick things you may need are located
  - o I also had a cross body bag
    - § In there, I kept my electrolyte tablets
    - § Some candies/energy chews
    - § Earbuds
    - § Skin rash powder
- In the easy access pockets in my backpack I kept:
  - o My scarf to cover my face
  - o Band-aids
- Make sure to keep separate: toiletries, medical supplies/supplements, snacks/energy chews

- When you pack your bag, the heavier items should be in the middle of the bag closer to your middle back

### **Clothing:**

- Take 2-3 shirts remember you will be wearing one shirt – you will sleep 2 nights, and change into new shirts the following day, you can likely get away with only 2 shirts – but you may want a third one just in case.
- 2 pairs of pants I really enjoyed wearing kanzu type pants on the walk, they are baggy, breathable and thin at night it was still around 34-38 degrees Celsius so dress accordingly
- I had taken shorts with me as I thought they may come in handy for sleeping in, I did not use them at all – you will end up sleeping in the pants that you were walking in, I know it sounds strange because you were just walking in them – but trust me, when you are on the walk it won't matter
- I took an undershirt as well to sleep in also I didn't get any use out of this, because you will be likely sleeping in the same shirt you were walking in
- Take 3 pairs of boxers/underwear this is important, and you may want to simply have extra in case something gets najis etc
  - o Take underwear that is thin and breathable – nothing with too thick of a fabric as mentioned it gets quite warm – I had the Uniqlo airism boxers – they are thin and very breathable – great for hot climates
- Take 3 pairs of socks also important, you will want to make sure you have adequate socks for the walk ideally you want to either take:
  - o Anti-blister running socks – you can get these on Amazon, or in a running specific store or
  - o Running socks that have individual toes I personally got blisters with the socks above as my feet sweat, so I had seen people wearing these toe-socks and apparently they reduce friction so they may have been a wiser option
- Take a scarf, or something to be able to cover your face – like a face mask in case it gets windy/dusty there was one day where there was a wildfire nearby and the air was terrible – we used masks/scarves to cover our face and they worked great
- The shoes that you wear shouldn't be new – wear something that have been seriously broken in, you don't want to get blisters on your toes and this can be avoided with comfortable shoes I used my Asics runners

### **Toiletries and accessories:**

- Take a quick dry towel (not the thick microfiber style), these are known as camping towels usually and they are very thin, like a chamois we picked up ours for \$5 at mountain warehouse – the mawkibs that have showers don't provide towels – so that

is where these will come in handy, and make sure it has a hook to hang it in the shower

- A toiletry bag/ or packing cube that has a hook – so that you can hang it in the shower – as mentioned there are no shelves usually so you want to be able to have everything quick to access – the toilet bag should contain:
  - o Toothbrush/toothpaste/floss
  - o Deodorant
  - o Bar soap in a ziplock, or a small bottle of body wash – something to reseal afterwards
  - o Body spray/cologne small bottle
  - o Hair product – optional travel size
- When you go to shower you will likely take everything with you into the shower area – so have your change of clothes ready so that when you are done you can change quickly and be ready for the next day of walking highly recommend a packing cube with a handle so you can hang it (specific for the shower you are about to take) so you can keep everything ready
  - o Boxers/socks
  - o Shirt/pants

## **Medicine and Supplies**

- Some sort of electrolyte supplement – we used Nuun Tablets –they dissolve in water so you don't have to fiddle around with stirring them
- Vitamin C packets – the brand we used were Emergen-C they are a combination of Vitamin C, Zinc, Magnesium they keep your immune system strong and prevent you from catching a cold, they are also high in electrolytes
- Tylenol/Advil
- A few band aids/plasters
- Moleskin – these are blister pads I didn't have them with me but they would have come in handy
- Anti chafing powder/talcum powder since you will get hot it is nice to have powder to reduce chafing of your skin the one we used was gold-bond and it worked really well on the skin, and also in your socks dump some in there and shake it around you don't need a whole bottle of this so just fill up a little resealable bag

## **Other**

- A pair of sandals – make sure they are not too bulky so that they fit within your bag, slides or flip-flops work quite well
- A battery pack I personally didn't use mine because I was mindful about the battery of my phone I would put it on airplane mode to reduce battery consumption and would only turn on the signal when I needed it

- Headphones earbud type so you can listen to lectures/duas/Ziyarat on your walk
- Small notebook/pen optional in case you want to document your trip
- Small bags of candy / something sweet to snack on and give to your group members  
we also had energy chews which runners use on long distance – they are just gummy candies

## **The Walk**

It doesn't matter if you are unfit, or have physical impairments, it is all about doing your best, the walk should be challenging but not unbearable. In our group we had some elder folks that only walked part of the way, and then took a taxi to Karbala, even at their age they were able to push themselves out of their comfort zone, without it being intolerable. On another day we had some people who were moving behind the pace of the rest of the group, and they hopped into a taxi and went part of the way to meet us at the next mawkib. You have so many options – and you don't have to walk the entire way, so please don't be hesitant or nervous – everything will work out as it should, simply have faith and enjoy the experience. You will see people of all shapes and sizes, people with crutches, in wheelchairs, older people, younger people, it is a completely judgement-free zone; all for the love of Imam Husain (AS).

This is honestly one of the most beautiful things you can witness. There is something awe-inspiring about being surrounded by so many people with the same goal and mindset of walking to go see our Imam, it's wonderful. This commonality, combined with the generosity of the people volunteering their time and energy to help facilitate the Za'war is absolutely unparalleled. When you are on the walk, you will see how selfless people are, how they want to offer you anything, and it is all out of the love for our Imam.

Some people start off in the town of Najaf, and walk around 3-5 KM to Pole 1. We took a bus to the first pole and began our walk a little behind schedule because the traffic to get us to the first pole caused a delay, so we began at approximately 2:00AM.

## **The Walk Day 1**

At about 2:00AM we began our walk, I had a bunch of small candy bags which took up a fair bit of weight in my bag, so I immediately began handing them out – there are so many kids on the walk, and they absolutely loved it. Having so many kids surround us to get candy was enough to melt your heart, and it made the walk start off on a great energy. The weather was somewhere in the mid-30's, the goal tonight was to get to pole 472 – The Zahra Trust Mawkib, as soon as we could, so we began to walk, and along the way, it is quite easy to get distracted with how many mawkibs are serving tea/coffee/water there is an endless supply – the trick is to stay at a pace of around 100 poles per hour – that is a very good pace, some fluctuation is alright. Our first stop as a group was pole 72, and then every 100 after that, so 72,172,272,372,472 etc. It is important to have some structure so that you don't end up getting distracted with all of the delicious food and drinks at the mawkibs which can force you to get your timing off track, and

just a few stops here and there compound, and next thing you know you can be seriously behind. The walk itself is quite nice, the roads are paved, it isn't gravel or anything – there are amenities for washrooms – although not the cleanest, and rest areas to sit down for a few minutes. There are first-aid tents along the walk which will give you medicine if you feel ill, or get dehydrated, drain and patch your blisters, you are well looked after. I started the walk with shoes, and then ended up wearing my sandals towards the tail-end of the first day – I had washed and dried my runners in Canada, before the walk so I didn't realize I had to break them in again and as a result I ended up the first day with blisters on both of my pinky toes from having them rub against my shoes. After our major stops, and some additional washroom breaks, salaah break for fajr, some tea/coffee/snack breaks we made it to 472 at around 8:45AM. We were so tired by this point that we were taken to the area where the beds were, we didn't care to eat or shower, we just put our heads down and next thing we knew it was around 4PM. We went downstairs, showered- as mentioned, make sure you have everything properly ready, at Zahra Trust for instance, the showers don't have a shelf, so everything you need should be hanging from a hook, they don't have soap or shampoo – so make sure you have everything ready.

## **The Walk Day 2**

After our shower, I went across the street to get my blisters looked after, they drained them, bandaged them, and I was ready to go for day 2. After praying salaah, we were on our way, after a pick-me-up Iraqi chai break and a bite to eat – I think we had biryani, we were ready to go. Another thing I should mention is how helpful it is to have data on the walk – we had a whatsapp group with all our members noting where certain rest stops were, where people were at on their journey, and things to look out for. This way it is also okay if you get lost, because we generally meet every 100 poles, and regardless, at the end of the day the designated mawkib where you will sleep at is pre-determined. On this day, I was feeling quite energetic, so when we started off as a group, I didn't realize that my members had veered off to grab a snack, and by around pole 512 I realized that I was alone – so when I messaged them I found out they were around 30 poles behind – and since I didn't want to stop completely (you will notice that it is easier sometimes to just slow down, rather than stop so your muscles don't get a chance to get tight) I decided I would keep going, and thus, that day I ended up spending most of the walk alone from 512 to 850. When you are doing the walk, and you realize where you are, and what you are doing, and why you are doing it, it is really nice to ponder, and reflect – which is what I found myself doing that day. Of course it is nice to be around your friends and group members, but it is also nice to look within, and remember all of your loved ones, people whom you wish to pray for, whom have helped shape your life to make you the person you are today, and that is also very peaceful. I spent that night listening to a few lectures – one of which was talking about the struggles of Bibi Zaynab, the merits and the mystical realm of Bibi Fatema, as well as Ziyarat, and Quran. I met a few interesting people on the walk, helped a person without a phone locate his family, and enjoyed a world-class culinary experience of chicken pakoras, crunchy chicken wraps, falafels, different types of sweets – I got teased that on that day I ended up doing more eating than walking, but I figured why not both!



We ended that evening reaching a beautiful Mawkib organized by TGO at pole number 1013. It was owned by a Kuwaiti family, and I would describe this facility as a compound, there were multiple buildings that had private entrances to sleep in, there is a food production facility where they serve burgers, shawarma, and everything is made fresh in-house. There is a café where we got cappuccinos, and fresh orange juice, and the sleeping arrangements were excellent. We entered the mawkib, prayed our fajr Salaat, had a breakfast of pizza, bread with cheese and jams, water and juice, and then we chatted for a good few hours, and went to sleep around 8AM and woke up at 4PM, we got ready for another day of walking.

### **The Walk – Day 3**

Today was very exciting, since we had covered so much ground in the previous couple days, we knew that our timing was excellent. We prepared our bags, and cleaned up the mawkib, drank some water, had our Emergen-C packs, and prayed salaat. Our group leader gave a beautiful speech about the walk, unity, and how we would be entering Karbala today. We only had around 25 KM of walking today, and an abundance of time to reach our goal. Between the eagerness of meeting our Imam, and being in the blessed city of Karbala, combined with the thought of completing the walk and making it to our hotel, made this last day extremely gratifying. Even after 2 days of walking, sore feet and muscles, the end was in sight, and we were ready to keep marching on. As usual, we left around 7PM, grabbed some chai/coffee, and a snack along the way, and began our walk. The area where we were walking today was a little congested – and we went towards the highway side, this was the day we used our scarves to cover our faces, as there was a wildfire nearby and there was a thick haze of pollution that lingered above us. We continued our routine of stopping at every 100 poles, and we would make sure to drink water along the way, and routinely have our electrolytes. This evening seemed to pass by with ease, and soon we were at the end of our walk.

When you get towards the end of the walk, there are green LED trees marked on the poles, I believe this means you have reached Karbala, but I could be mistaken. The feeling when we got there was unimaginable, there was a different energy in the air of Karbala, there was a beautiful Noha playing Journey Towards God – by Haider Al Baiyati, we had completed our walk. When we saw the domes from a distance of the Shrines of Imam Husein (AS), and Hazrat Abbas – the beauty was overwhelming, and it was surreal that we had made it. We showered, and went to sleep that night after completing our Fajr Salaat – the next day we would see where we truly were and begin to understand what events had transpired on the soil beneath us.

### **Karbala – Day 1**

Being in Karbala is truly an unbelievable experience. One can simply observe this by people's actions as you enter the city. I first noticed one of the members of our group take his shoes off and begin to walk barefoot in Karbala. I asked someone why this is, and they said that since we

do not know the exact whereabouts where the tragic events occurred, there could be blood that has been spilt almost anywhere – and thus out of respect for what has happened in this holy land some people choose to walk without shoes.

Since we arrived into Karbala early in the morning – just around Fajr time, we showered, and then most of the people slept, however I was quite excited to go visit the Haram right away, so a friend and I got ready and went to the Haram. We got lost on the way and ended up at the camp of the holy family which in itself is a shrine. We paid our respects, and did a quick Ziyarat, and then headed over to the Haram of Imam Husein (AS). The first thing we noticed was how populated the city was, compared to Kadhmain, Najaf, Samarra, Karbala was completely different. The crowds seem to be never-ending and on the one hand it makes it hard to navigate the city, but on the other hand you realize how many lovers of the Ahlul Bayt have gathered to pay their respects to the Imam. Its actually an incredible feat to see that our Imam unfortunately in his last moments, was isolated, by himself, asking “Halmin Nasirin Yansurna” – “Is there anyone to help me” and during Arbaeen we stand proud in numbers that exceed 20 Million responding to his call with “Labayk Ya Hussein” – “I am here, O Husein.”

We entered the Haram after some time, and eventually made our way into the Zari room – unlike the previous Harams we had visited – this one was extremely difficult to navigate – unfortunately with the crowds, and with how many people wish to pay their respects to the Imam, you do see the not so pleasant side of people. I personally almost lost my glasses – but Alhamd, was able to touch the Zari and pay my respects. Afterwards when we left, I felt a little worked up as my glasses had gotten bent, and my adrenaline levels had been elevated – I reflected on why I saw a certain ugly side of some of my fellow Za’war with all the pushing, shoving, elbowing etc. Coming from Canada, we are more civil when it comes to lining up, and overall courtesy – at least I like to believe. Some of the people that are visiting from other countries however are not raised in the same type of society – and thus they simply don’t know better. Also for others, this may be the first and last time they can even afford to go for Ziyarat. After I came to this realization – and remembered the hadith about one losing their sins like leaves falling from a tree – I decided that from that point on, until after Arbaeen – I would not try to touch the Zari – I wasn’t about to push people around in order to pay respect to my Imam, it simply didn’t make sense to me – and frankly we would be foolish to think that our Imam wouldn’t be listening to our hajaat when we are 10 or so feet away, sure it would be nice to be right up against the Zari, but I wasn’t prepared to go through that turmoil again.

When we got back to the hotel, we prayed, and went to sleep – since the sleep schedule is inverted due to the heat of the daytime – it was around 48-50°C, as well as the lectures being held at night – you sleep during the day, and stay awake at night.

That evening we went to our Majlis which was held at Musafar Khana – it was interesting, after I was pondering about the Za’war that had come from all around the world, and their respective customs, the topic that evening resonated with me, as Sayed Mehdi talked about the unity of the lovers of the Ahlul Bayt, and how if we looked around we would see almost every race, ethnicity and country being represented in Karbala. After the Majlis we went to see the Haram of Hazrat Abbas – we prayed our namaaz, and when a few of my group members decided to try to touch

the Zari, I stayed back – and asked for my own Hajaat – then as I was leaving, I had the pleasure of sitting down with an elder man who recited a beautiful Ziyarat – he didn't understand English, and I don't understand Arabic, but when I sat next to him he recited Ziyarat a little louder – in that instance I felt connected to my fellow Za'war.

## **Karbala Day 2 – Arbaeen Night**

Started around mid-day and had lunch- we also went to the Maqam of Imam Mahdi (AS) and recited Dua Ahd. That evening the lecture was delivered by Sayed Jawad Qazwini – he talked about the merits of Bibi Zaynab, her struggles – it was quite powerful and it gave us perspective of our own problems.

That night we went to the Haram of Imam Husein – it was definitely even busier than the last couple days due to the fact it was Arbaeen night. There were Juloos processions going on in the city, and even more people gathered close to the Harams. A few of the entrances of the Haram were closed due to the Juloos processions – and it took us a while to get our shoes and head back to the hotel, approximately an hour or longer – unlike previous nights where it was okay to leave the shoes with the shoekeepers – I would in hindsight carry my shoes in one of the disposable bags provided to be able to make leaving easier. Also, there were so many Za'war at the haram that most of the lockers, and shoekeeper spots were full. Since the following day was Arbaeen we got to bed a little earlier in order to wake up for the following morning program.

## **Karbala Day 3 – Arbaeen**

This morning our program was just before Zuhr – Sayed Mehdi delivered a powerful Maqtal on the events of Ashura, and Arbaeen, including the events that transpired in Shaam, and when the family of Imam Husein went to visit Karbala thereafter.

Since I had wanted to see Sayed Ammar Nakshawani as well – a friend and I decided to venture out in the midday sun to the hotel where he was going to be speaking, surprisingly the crowds had already decreased from the previous night – and we were able to get a good seat close to the front – we had gotten to the program around 45 minutes before the start time. The program was excellent. Afterwards we went to the spice market and got a few things on the way back to our hotel including some mohr's and tasbihs – then we went to sleep to prepare for the night program.

That night the program per usual was at the Musafar Khana – and the lecture topic was how to readjust to life after going for Arbaeen – and realizing that we should make mindful changes in our lives to become better followers of the Ahlul Bayt. After the program we ended up getting some food, then we visited the Harams and did Ziyarat.

## **Karbala Day 4 – Day after Arbaeen**

We woke up and decided to eat at the Musafar Khana as we knew some people staying there and we wanted to say Salaam to them. That day we also did some shopping, we purchased some Kafans – which have duas written on them such as Dua Nudba, Dua Jawshan, and a few Ziyarats – they were around \$12 USD each – they are quite bulky – so this is where a bigger suitcase would come in handy. Since this was my first spiritual type trip, I didn't realize that I would be purchasing a Kafan, its quite a humbling moment when you pick up what could be the last garment you ever wear – and most notably a reminder of how short, and uncertain this dunya is. There are also a few perfume/attar shops as well where you can buy scents that resemble the fragrances of the Harams of Imam Husein (AS), and Hazrat Abbas, as well as other scents.

We slept until the evening program – and after lecture we ended up going to do Ziyarat at the Harams – it was unbelievable how quiet it became just a day after Arbaceen – if I were to guess I would say around 25% less people were there than the day before. Our trip was coming to an end.

## **Karbala Day 5 – Our Last Day in Karbala**

The last day of our trip was bittersweet – it was hard to believe that 2 weeks had already passed. We went to the Haram of Imam Husein (AS) first, did our Ziyarat, and fortunately since it wasn't nearly as busy as the preceding days I was able to get close to the Zari and touch it without any issues – it was much more peaceful than my first experience. Then we went to the Haram of Hazrat Abbas – unfortunately the Zari was closed for maintenance but we did our Ziyarat, and prayed two rakats, and said our final Salaams for this trip. After being in the city for 5 days, you develop a connection to these holy shrines, and those who are buried in the holy city. Leaving the Harams felt like leaving the home of a loved one – it was a sad moment, where you couldn't help but look back to give your last Salaam even while walking away. iA it will not be our last trip, and we pray that we can come back to visit once more.

## **Thank you and Post-Ziyarat**

This was my first Ziyarat trip, and it was absolutely wonderful. When I came back home, one of the biggest things that resonated with me, was to be patient. There are a lot of other lessons that will be engrained within you – but for me, the one that resonated with me was patience. The trip has its trials and tribulations of course, and you have to be flexible enough to adapt to what happens, when you re-adjust to your regular life you are able to apply some of these same lessons, I personally found that I had grown as an individual. This was just one of the aspects of the trip that I had brought back with me, and for others it will be different. These types of spiritual journeys will give you the lesson that you need, when you need it most – the Almighty works in such beautiful ways in order to nourish your being.

I would like to give a special thank you to brothers Ali Dewji, Jawad Yusufali for doing a tremendous job putting together this most memorable experience. To our two primary Maulanas Sayed Mehdi Moddaressi and Sayed Jawad Qazwini for providing us so much incredible religious insight, and guidance. To our reciters Sayed Joan Rizvi and Ali Fani who both provided incredible recitations along the journey. The TGO volunteers – aka the guys in the red vests – for helping make sure that we were comfortable every step of the way, from helping the ladies carry their bags, to helping us navigate the cities, and being there for support. In case I missed anyone, I apologize, as I am sure there were lots of people behind the scenes that also made this possible – thank you to everyone who made this trip spiritually fulfilling; and may the Almighty lengthen your lives, and keep you healthy.

May the almighty accept the Ziyarat of all of those who have gone this year, who have gone previously, and who are yet to go. I pray that everyone gets the chance to visit these holy lands, and to become inspired as I have. Ziyarat Qabool iA.