

Hajj & 'Umrah Travel Advice for Wheelchair Users



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Contents

Introduction.....	3
Support	4
Medicine	5
Travelling to the Ḥaramayn – Travel Considerations	6
Airport and Flights.....	7
Wearing the Iḥrām.....	10
Coaches	11
Getting Wheelchairs	12
Makkah - Performing ‘Umrah	13
Electric Scooters.....	17
Madīnah.....	18
Presenting Salām.....	19
Baqī‘	19

Introduction

With the Grace of Allāh سُبْحَانَكَ وَتَعَالَى, I was very fortunate to travel to the Ḥaramayn Sharifayn with my parents and family in December 2022 to perform ‘Umrah. Both of my parents were in wheelchairs for the duration of the pilgrimage. The trip took a lot of planning beforehand and whilst we were there, there were many times where special consideration had to be taken due to the wheelchairs.

Upon returning home to the UK, I thought it would be beneficial to write a small article which gives some valuable advice for families who intend to travel to the Ḥaramayn with members who are in wheelchairs. This would only be practical and logistical advice; any religious advice has been excluded as this would be specific to the pilgrim. Alḥamdulillāh, accessibility in both Makkah and Madīnah for wheelchairs is improving and by taking on a few of these points, the pilgrimage will Inshā Allāh be simpler and more organized.

Wheelchair users may also have other underlying health conditions. Many of our elderly are diabetic and need to visit the toilet often. They also need food at regular times as well as medication. All of these factors also need to be considered.

Our aim should be to try and make their journey as comfortable and memorable as possible, ensuring they carry out all the rites to the best of their abilities. May Allāh سُبْحَانَكَ وَتَعَالَى accept their efforts and also the efforts of those who help and assist them on these blessed journeys.

Ebrahim Noor – 12th Jumādā al-Thāni (5th January 2023)

Support

The wheelchair users will need to be supported throughout the journey. It is recommended that they have a family member of the same gender if possible, who can help and assist at all times. They may need help with going to the toilet, getting changed etc. so it would be advisable to have a close family member who can assist with these tasks.

For anyone who is not used to pushing a wheelchair, it can be a very tiring experience, especially during Ṭawāf and Sa‘ī. Bear this in mind and if you need additional assistance then plan for this as well.

At all times remain patient and be aware of other pilgrims. It is very easy to cause injury to other pilgrims when pushing a wheelchair, especially in crowded situations so bear this in mind.

Another consideration is appropriate footwear when pushing a wheelchair. During Ṭawāf, take extra care you do not accidentally knock your feet against the wheelchair. At other times, if outside wear footwear which protects the toes and also has grip. This will help when pushing the wheelchairs uphill and downhill. If inside the Ḥaram (and not in Iḥrām), where some Masah socks or other thick socks for protection.

Medicine

Before travelling, if the family members require medicine, ensure they take enough for the journey. The medicine should be kept in the hand luggage. If they are kept in the suitcase and the luggage goes missing, it can cause a major issue.

If they require a lot of medication, then it would be good to organise them into pill boxes/blister packs so it easier for them to take them on time. Ensure all medication is taken by them on time.

If they need to check blood sugar levels/blood pressure, ensure all monitors are also taken in hand luggage. Spare batteries should be put in the suitcase.

Keep checking with them consistently to ensure they have taken their medication as prescribed and on time.



Travelling to the Ḥaramayn – Travel Considerations

Before planning the journey, we must consider how difficult it will be for the family members who are in wheelchairs. We must try and make the journey as simple as possible. The less the stops, the easier it will be. Before booking flights consider this:

- Travel from an airport which is close to home, to make the journey to airport easier
- If you plan to travel to Makkah first, try and book a direct flight to Jeddah. The less stops there are on the journey, the easier it will be.
- If you cannot travel direct, then it maybe easier to go to Madīnah first. This way, they will be able to rest before making the journey to Makkah.
- If you are travelling to Jeddah but need to make a stop in between, ensure there is enough time at the transit airport to allow for the connection without having to rush. There maybe a delay in getting a wheelchair at the airport, so also allow time for this.

Airport and Flights

When booking the flights, ensure the wheelchairs are booked. Do not wait until you reach the airport before you book them.

- In some airlines, wheelchair users cannot do online check in, they can only check in at the airport. If there are other travellers on the same booking, this can possibly cause an issue with them checking in online as well. To make it simpler, ensure all other family members are on the separate booking allowing them to check in online. This will at least allow them to get seats together. Expecting to get seats together at the airport check-in, especially if there is a large group will be very difficult.
- During airport check-in, request that the wheelchair passengers are sat next to the rest of the family is possible. Some airports have a policy where the wheelchair passengers are first in and last out. So, they are made to sit next to a window. This can be very difficult for them, especially if they need to use the toilet often, having to make the other passengers move. If seats can be found next to them, they can move to an aisle seat which will make is easier for them.
- Try and request seats which have additional leg room. It may be possible to book these through the agent but there may be an additional cost.
- If the wheelchair users require them permanently, i.e., they require them at all times and cannot walk even short distances, make enquiries as to how their wheelchair can be taken on the journey. For further information check [Transport support services for disabled people: Planes - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/transport-support-services-for-disabled-people/planes)

- If the wheelchair users can walk a short distance, then during check-in, it would be better if they are made to sit and wait until the other family members reach the front of the queue. Once there, they can be called. This will prevent them getting tired whilst waiting in the queue.
- If wheelchairs are requested for the flight, they will only arrive after check-in. Once checked in, the wheelchair passengers will have to wait in a special assistance area where they will be taken through security. Ensure they have their boarding card and passport. Most airports will allow them to have one escort as well. Assign a responsible family member to be with them at all times during the journey.
- Once through security, the wheelchair passengers will be taken either direct to the gate if it is open or made to wait in another special assistance area until the gate is open. They will then be taken to the plane. They will usually board the plane first and come off the plane last. Ensure a family member is with them to help them put their hand luggage in the overhead compartments if necessary
- If the plane is stopping at a transit, there can sometimes be a delay for the wheelchair to come. This can cause some inconvenience, especially if the connecting time is short. Some airlines will ask the passengers to walk to the terminal. Request that the wheelchairs are brought to the plane. It may be best for the wheelchair users to wait in the plane until the wheelchairs arrive.
- Once at the final destination, Jeddah or Madinah, the wheelchair passengers will be given assistance until they are out of the

baggage control area. If there are other family members travelling with them, ensure they collect their luggage on their behalf.

- If they have brought their wheelchair with them, ensure it is now collected.

Note: If the family members struggle performing Wuḍū in small places, like the toilets in the airplane, consider using Masah socks for them. For sisters they can keep them on at all times including whilst in Iḥrām. For men, they can wear them before they get into the state of Iḥrām. They must be removed before they enter into the state of Iḥrām due to the prohibition of wearing stitched clothing for males.

Wearing the Iḥrām

If there are male members of the family who require wheelchairs and you are travelling to Makkah first, the following considerations must be made.

- Where are they going to put on the Iḥrām?
- If going to Madīnah, no need to wear Iḥrām.
- If going direct to Jeddah, easier to wear Iḥrām from home. Can be difficult getting changed in the airport.
- If going indirect to Jeddah and stopping at transit, the special assistance may not take them to an area where they can get changed. This means other male members of the family will have to assist them and find a place where they can get changed. If the time is short for the connecting flight, then this can be challenging. In this scenario, the best advice would be to wear at least the lower garment of the Iḥrām (lungi) from home. Then the top sheet can be kept in the hand luggage and easily put on at the transit airport or airplane before reaching the Mīqāt.

Coaches

The coaches which are used for internal transportation in Saudi Arabia can sometimes have steep stairs. Ensure that the family members are helped up and down them and sit them in a place where it is easier for them to get on and off.

If there are seats with extra legroom, then offer it to them. Also, aisle seats maybe easier for them to stretch their legs and go to the toilet if required.

The journey between Makkah and Madinah can take in excess of 6 hours. The toilets in the Service stations along the way may not be suitable so if travelling with an agent, request that the coach has a working toilet on board.

Other alternatives which may be more comfortable is to travel using the new train service. It is much quicker and will be more comfortable, especially with the toilet facilities. There will however be extra time taken to go to the train stations.

Getting Wheelchairs

If wheelchairs have not been taken along the journey, you will need to obtain them once you arrive at your location, whether this is in Makkah or Madīnah.

Many of the hotels will have a stock of wheelchairs which they can lend out for the duration of the stay. Bear in mind, some of them will not be in good condition, so before you borrow them, make sure they are functioning.

Wheelchairs can also be purchased from pharmacies as well. The benefit of this is that you can keep this with you for the duration of the stay and then donate to someone who is needy before your return.

Spending a long time on the wheelchair can be very uncomfortable. If the family members are able to stand or walk a short distance, then ensure they do this at regular intervals. Also consider using a cushion as well to make it more comfortable.

If going for Ḥajj, it would be advisable to have a cycle lock so the wheelchair can be secured outside the tents in the various blessed places. This will prevent it from getting taken away.

Makkah - Performing ʿUmrah

Wheelchair users are not allowed in the Maṭāf; therefore they must do Ṭawāf on either the 1st floor or on the upper ground floor.

At the time of writing this article, ʿUmrah needs to be booked using the Nusuk application. The vast majority of pilgrims in wheelchairs were performing their ʿUmrah on the 1st floor, however some were seen on the upper ground floor which can be accessed from the King Fahd Extension gate. It would be good to check wheelchair users are allowed here, otherwise Ṭawāf must be done on the 1st floor.

If you are going to perform ʿUmrah on the first floor. there is no need for booking.

Depending on where your hotel is, there are two entrances for wheelchair users. If you are living towards the north western/western side, there is a ramp which takes you to the first floor. This ramp is used for electric scooters which can be hired, but wheelchairs are also allowed to go up it. The ramp is quite long and steep so bear this in mind. You will also have to go half way round before you get to the start of the Ṭawāf.

The ramp will lead you to the section of the King Fahd extensions which is closest to the first floor Maṭāf. There is also a special prayer area here for people in wheelchairs/special needs, right next to the entrance, so it is easy to arrive and leave.

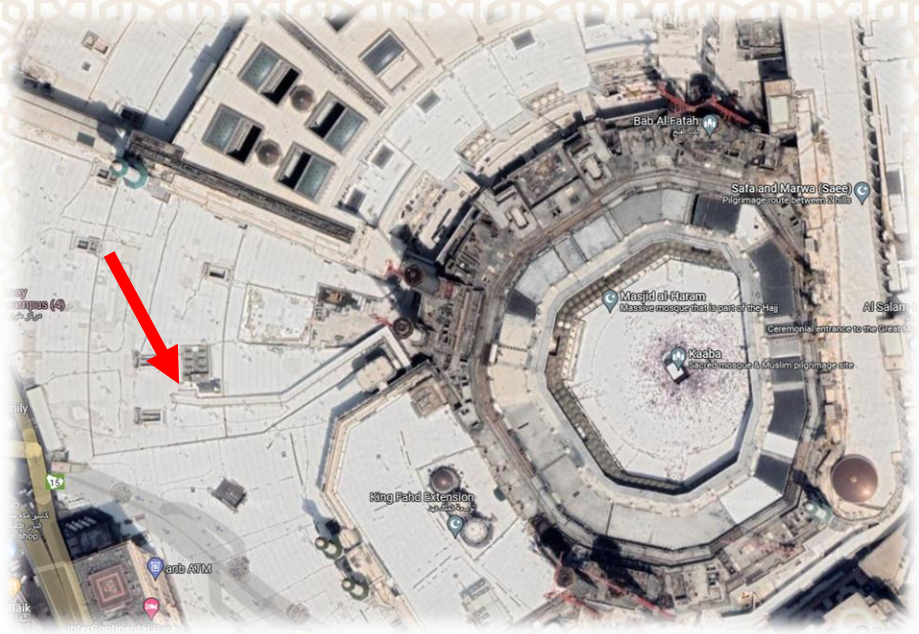


Figure 1 - Ramp up to the 1st floor at the back of the King Fahd extension

If pilgrims are staying in the clock tower or on the southern/eastern side, there is a ramp which goes to the first floor directly opposite, just after the King Abdul Aziz Gate. The benefit of this ramp is that it is very close to the beginning of the Ṭawāf, Al-Ḥajr al-Aswad.

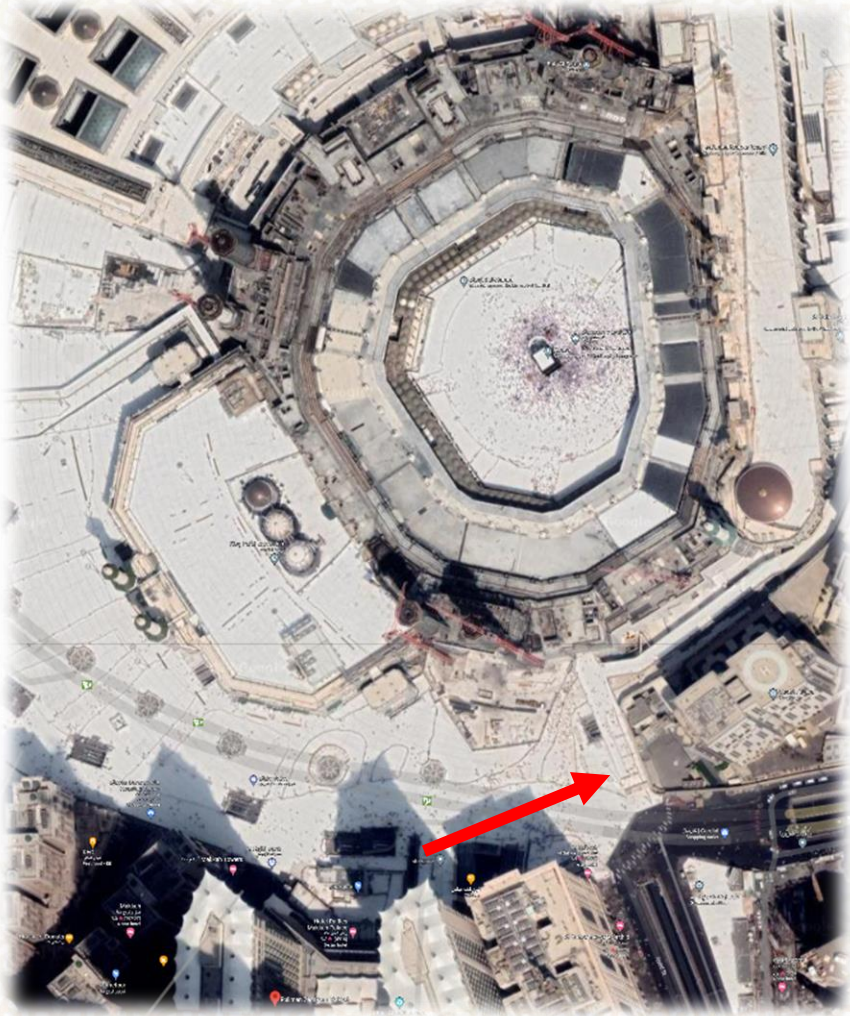


Figure 2 - Ramp up to 1st floor near King Abdul Aziz Gate



Figure 3 - Ramp up to first floor

Once the Ṭawāf has been completed, there is access to the first floor to perform Sa‘ī. In the middle there are dedicated lanes for wheelchair users. When arriving at Aṣ-Ṣafā and Al-Marwah, make sure you go around the circular sections at the end.

If Ṭawāf is done on the upper ground floor, then Sa‘ī will be done on the ground floor. Again, there are dedicated lanes in the middle for wheelchair users. Take care of other wheelchair users who may be travelling quite fast.

Electric Scooters

On the ground floor, in between the King Fahd extension and the new extension, there is a hire centre for electric scooters. A new level above the 1st floor has been built for electric scooter users to perform Ṭawāf. There is also an office on this upper first floor where the electric scooters can be hired.



Figure 4 - Electric Scooter hire price list

For a double seated cart, the cost is currently 230 Saudi Riyal for both Ṭawāf and Saʿī, which is about £50 at the current exchange rate.

Madīnah

Entrances to Masjid Nabwī which have ramps are clearly marked with a Blue and White disabled sign on the doors. There are many doors on all sides which allow access to wheelchairs.

Inside the Masjid, there are special areas close to the entrance where wheelchair users can pray.



Figure 5 - Prayer area in Masjid Nabwī for Wheelchair users

However, wheelchair users are allowed in all areas of the Masjid. It would be sensible to park the wheelchair on the marbled areas next to the carpets for ease.

Presenting Salām

When going to present Salām, depending on the time of day, wheelchair users will be allowed in right away or they will have to wait on the side. The custodians of the Masjid will arrange the wheelchairs in lines, and they will block off one of the entrances to Salām for the wheelchair users. This could take some time if it is busy. Once the corridor has been cordoned off, the wheelchair users will be allowed in, one line at a time.

At other times, when it is less busy, the wheelchair users will be allowed to present their Salām right next to the Rawḍah. A special lane marked by a red rope is opened for wheelchair users, so stay to the left-hand side of the corridor.

Baqīʿ

Wheelchair users are allowed in the graveyard however the ramp going up and down to the entrance is very steep. Assistance may be required, especially going down.

The graveyard is open for 3 hours after Fajr and 1 hour after ‘Aṣr Salāh. Inside the graveyard, there are a few steep paths, but it is manageable and quite smooth.



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