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A Return to Travel

Tips on traveling
the region

Ramadan

More than just a hunger game

Easter Traditions

The connections between religion and culture

Travel Sustainably

Enjoy life and save the planet

Pimalai Resort & Spa

A review of this tranquil spot in Ko Lanta



THE PRACTICE OF RAMADAN: MORE THAN A HUNGER GAME

By Asif Chowdhury

About two billion Muslims around the world will soon start the annual observation of the month-long Ramadan. Most non-Muslims, and even many Muslims, today associate observing Ramadan primarily with fasting or refraining from eating or drinking anything from dawn to sunset. It is common to hear remarks and conversation revolving mostly around the fasting aspect of the Ramadan such as, “Are you fasting today?” or “...not eating or drinking anything whole day sounds too difficult. I could never do that.” While indeed the day-long fasting is a significant part of observing Ramadan, it also requires following a path of decency and righteousness during this holy season. Along with the body, practicing Ramadan is supposed to cleanse one’s mind and soul.

The calendar

Ramadan is the name of the ninth month in the Arabic calendar which follows the pure lunar cycle. The Lunar year (354 days) is roughly ten days shorter compared to a solar year (365 days) as it follows the 12 cycles of the moon. The traditional Chinese, Hindu and Jewish calendars also follow the lunar cycle, but they add an extra month periodically to allow the adjustment to the seasons. This is known as the lunisolar calendar.

The significance of following the pure lunar calendar is that the month of Ramadan shifts every year compared to the solar or Georgian calendar. So, Ramadan can be in the middle of the winter with very short days, but many years later it can also be in the midst of scorching summer with very long days. This annual shift does not have meaningful implications in countries which are closer to the equator, such as in Singapore, since the length of the day doesn’t shift radically with the changes of the seasons. Imagine having to fast in a country such as Norway during the peak of summer where the day can be more than 22-hours long.

This year the month of Ramadan is scheduled to start in early April.

History

It is believed that Ramadan has been a special month in Arabia even before the advent of Islam. It was a month when many people retreated from the worldly deeds to meditate and contemplate. The Quran was first revealed to Prophet Mohammad on a night during this holy month inside a cave on top of Mount Hira in Mecca. The special night is known as *Laylat al-Qadr* or the Night of Power. While the exact date of the revelation is not known, Muslims believe that it is

during the last ten days of the month of Ramadan so these last ten days hold a special meaning to Muslims worldwide.

Practices

A typical day of fasting starts with Muslims waking up before dawn to partake in *suhur*, the traditional pre-dawn meal. Typically, families will gather around the dining table and eat the *suhur* meal together. It is followed by the first prayer of the day, *Fajr*. Food or drinks are allowed until just before sunrise. The end of the fasting day is marked by *iftar*, or the meal to break the fast right after sunset. It is common to partake in *iftar* with broader families and friends. Many families cook traditional foods for *iftar*.

Along with refraining from food and drinks during daytime, Muslims are required to follow a path of righteousness during this holy month. For example, Muslims are not allowed to lie, speak ill of others or gossip, quarrel or fight, cause harm to others, use obscene language, and so on. They are also required to be more kind, forgiving, giving, and understanding while trying to take care of the poor and the needy and mend ill relationships. Muslims are also encouraged to meditate, contemplate, and reflect both on the temporal and the spiritual world. They also need to refrain from various earthly pleasures. For example, engaging in any sexual activities during daytime is not allowed. Essentially, it is a month when every Muslim is required to behave, be decent and try to be better human beings. While fasting cleanses one's body, these other important tenets allow the purification of one's mind and soul. Ramadan acts as a month-long physical and spiritual re-booting if done right. These other key tenets are sometimes harder to follow than the ritual of fasting but are essential parts of observing Ramadan.

Fasting

Still, fasting remains a key aspect of this holy month. According to one of the great Muslim

scholars, Imam Ibn Rajab, some pious predecessor Muslim scholars were once asked why fasting was made part of the Ramadan. Their response was, "So that the rich will taste hunger and thus will not forget the hungry." Indeed, it serves as a good reminder as to how it feels to go without food, something many of us are lucky enough not to have to worry about. Almost a billion people worldwide go to bed every night with an empty stomach. Refraining from food and drinks during Ramadan allows Muslims to empathize with the less fortunate. The practice also teaches us not to be unnecessarily wasteful.

While Muslims don't fast for health reasons, fasting has some long-term health benefits, according to some of the latest research. Long before the observation of Ramadan, the ancient Greeks practiced fasting to heal the body. Today, many doctors and health professionals advocate some form of fasting for physical and mental wellbeing. Michael Mosley, who made



intermittent fasting popular through his 2012 TV documentary, *Eat, Fast and Live Longer*, and his best-selling book, *The Fast Diet*, claims that done properly, fasting can have significant positive effect on one's physical and mental health. Fasting gives our digestive system a break, allowing our body to remove toxins. Mosely also claims that intermittent fasting "has shown to protect brain cells and could reduce depression and anxiety, as well as the risk of developing dementia." Fasting is commonly practiced today by many health-



conscious individuals. (However, one should check with their physician to ensure that fasting is appropriate.)

Exception to fasting is allowed for relevant medical conditions and illness or some other temporary conditions such as traveling. But Muslims are required to make up for it at a later time if and when possible. For those who are absolutely unable to fast due to medical reasons, they are exempt. However, there are no excuses not to follow the other key tenet of being a decent human being!

Eid-al-Fitr

Instead of relying solely on the math of astronomy, many countries and communities insist on following the centuries old tradition of the actual sighting of the new moon to mark the beginning of Ramadan. As a result, the beginning and the ending of the Ramadan can vary by a day between countries and locations (new moon is not in the same state at the same time globally). This year the month of Ramadan is scheduled to start in early April. In Singapore, April 3 will be the first day of Ramadan. So, this will be the first day of fasting for Muslims living here. The last day of fasting will be May 2.

The 30-day observation of Ramadan is followed by the biggest Muslim celebration of *Eid-al-Fitr* or simply *Eid* for short (in Malay language it is known

as *Hari Raya Puasa*). On this very special occasion, Muslims all over the world celebrate spending time and feasting with their families, friends, and loved ones. It will be celebrated on May 3 in Singapore this year which is a public holiday.

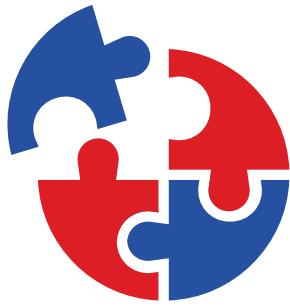
More than fasting

If spiritual cleansing is equally important, why is only fasting primarily associated with Ramadan? Perhaps it is because fasting is something very tangible and easily measurable. It is easy to ascertain if Muslims are fasting in observation of Ramadan while it is not so easy to ascertain if they are being forgiving, truthful and kind – the other not-so-visible yet equally important aspects of Ramadan. But refraining from foods and drinks from dawn to sunset and not observing these other key tenets means not practicing and participating in the true spirit of Ramadan. Prophet Mohammad had said that, “[i]f one does not avoid lies and false conduct, God has no need that he should abstain from his food and his drink.” So, the observation of Ramadan has as much to do with being a decent human being as it is with fasting. It truly is more than just a hunger game.



Asif is part of the executive management team of a global semiconductor company and has written for various magazines and trade journals. Asif spent four years as an expatriate in Tokyo, Japan, and three years in Seoul, South Korea, which led him to travel extensively in those countries and across the region. He currently lives in Singapore with his wife and son, while his daughter is working in his home state of Texas.

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