Cape Town:
The Cradle of Islam in South Africa

South Africa may not be the first destination that one associates with Islamic tourism. Yet, the history of Islam in that country goes back to the earliest European settlement. Today’s visitors can expect a warm welcome from what is the world’s longest surviving Muslim minority in the West. This community has endured over 300 years of religious isolation, racial oppression and economic exploitation. In the post-Apartheid era that began when Nelson Mandela made his epic journey from prisoner to president, these resilient people are playing a significant role in shaping modern South Africa.

Official statistics put the Muslim population at around one million out of a total of 40 million, that is, approximately 2.5% of the population. But statistics can be misleading, and Muslim South Africans are in fact quite conspicuous in professional life, in business as well as government, punching well above their weight.

Visitors can be forgiven for thinking that Cape Town is a Muslim city. Before dawn, the day begins with the reverential sound of several adhaans trailing over the rooftops and echoing from the hills and mountains that form a natural amphitheatre to the city. There are 10 mosques in the city centre alone. Brightly coloured 18th Century houses distinguish the historic Malay Quarter, the oldest part of the city. Throughout the day, you become aware of the Muslim presence, with women in their distinctive and varied hijabs and men in their onder-kuffiyeh [crocheted caps. Islamic influence is more than merely superficial. Muslims hold key positions throughout all the professions, in trade and commerce, as well as in government. Muslims hold, or have held, the ministries of Justice, Education, Transport, Tourism and Water Affairs. And nearly all restaurants buy their meat from halaal suppliers, although it may still be wise to ask before consuming.

To discover the origins of Muslim South Africa, we drive East. On the windswept sand dunes of Faure, about 30 minutes from the city centre, stands the majestic, green-domed, white walled shrine of Shaykh Yusuf who was a Javanese Prince. Known to his devoted followers as al-Taj al-Khalwati al-Maqsari ["Star of the Khalwatiyya Order of Makassar"] The Shaykh was not only a respected Islamic scholar and leader of the Naqshbandi Sufi order, but he was also an inspiring political leader who fiercely resisted the Dutch colonial adventures in the East Indies, a 17th Century Indonesian Mandela. Shaykh Yusuf was so popular amongst his people that when the Dutch imprisoned him in...
his native Java, there was widespread civil unrest and rebellion. They were thus obliged to move him to Ceylon [today’s Sri Lanka] whose governor soon complained that even he could not guarantee safe custody of his royal prisoner. A rescue mission was being planned by the king of Goa. As a last resort, Shaykh Yusuf was exiled to South Africa, where Cape Town was by then only a small settlement providing fresh water and food for ships on their 6-month voyage between Holland and the Indonesian islands. Robben Island is today one of the major tourist attractions in Cape Town. This is where Nelson Mandela spent 19 of his 27 years in prison. Visitors are given a guided tour of the Island, and even get to see the cell in which he was incarcerated. Bill Clinton, Yasser Arafat and Fidel Castro are among the many world leaders to have taken photographs behind its bars.

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Cape Town’s world famous Waterfront. Just 200 metres from the prison gates you will find the shrine of Shaykh Madura, the first Muslim political prisoner on Robben Island, who preceded Mandela by 300 years. Indeed, Mandela had warm praise for the early Muslim exiles, whose memory, he claims, strengthened his morale during those lonely years of his own incarceration. One of Mandela’s closest comrades was Ahmed Kathrada, whose words are engraved on a towering plaque at the entrance to the Robben Island Museum:

While we will not forget the brutality of apartheid, we will not want Robben Island to be a monument to our hardship and suffering. We would want Robben Island to be a monument... reflecting the triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil. A triumph of non-racialism over bigotry and intolerance. A triumph of a new South Africa over the old.”

- Ahmed Kathrada, 1993

In recent years, Cape Town has become one of the world’s most sought-after tourist destinations. Rugged mountains provide the background to lush vineyards and white sand beaches, washed by azure seas. Here, where the Atlantic and Indian oceans meet, are some of the world’s richest fishing grounds. Territorial waters were extended from 6 to 12 and

City Tourism
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now to 200 miles. Whale-watching is popular, and game fish, like Marlin and Bluefin Tunny, attract wealthy anglers from abroad. The Cape-to-Rio yacht race, round-the-world yacht races and other maritime highlights are part of Cape Town’s yachting calendar.

For horticulturists and botanists, the Cape peninsula has an incredible diversity. Table Mountain and Kirstenbosch [Cape Town’s Kew Gardens] have more than 95% of all the plant species found in Africa.

There is also much to interest the cultural tourist. From the brightly coloured 19th Century homes in the Malay Quarter, to the lively informality of the townships, to the spontaneous warmth and friendliness of all South Africans - black and white - few cities anywhere in the world can offer such a diversity of cultures, where the Muslim minority is not simply ‘tolerated’ as unwelcome guests. In Cape Town, as elsewhere in that country, Islam is an integral part of the making of South African history. Muslims have a sense of security, of belonging, that other minorities in Europe and North America can only hope for.

In many ways, South African Muslims have become a kind of role model for religious minorities elsewhere. No wonder there has been an increasing flow of ideas and talent to other communities abroad. A visit to Cape Town will reward the Islamic tourist with a fascinating glimpse into the origins, growth and flowering of Islam in Southern Africa over the full 300-year span of European colonial history. As an added bonus, the warm Mediterranean climate with its sunny blue skies that are virtually guaranteed between October and May, and the genuine charm and hospitality of its people, will make any visit a memorable one.

**Muslim-friendly Hotels**

While hotels that cater for the needs of Muslim guests are commonplace in Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Islamic heartlands, they are still a novelty in most western countries. South Africa has had a Muslim presence for over 300 years, and its halaal hotel sector is less than 3 years old. There appears to be a vast untapped market for halaal hotels where catering, prayers and other religious needs are provided for.

Muslim tourists often have to endure the embarrassment and discomfort of staying at hotels where alcohol is served, and the food is not halaal, even in some Muslim countries!

Here is the experience of Signal Hill Lodge. In the first year of business, the hotel has found that European tourists are keenly interested in the history and culture of Islam. Visitors to Cape Town are fascinated with the historic Malay Quarter, and the role played by Muslims in the history of South Africa. Many have remarked that they see the hotel as a small window of Muslim culture. None of them seem to mind that the hotel has a clearly stated no-alcohol policy.

The hotel owners believe that Muslim business ventures should wear their Islamic identity with quiet confidence. Halaal hotels have a great opportunity to showcase the best traditions of Muslim hospitality, without feeling the need to imitate other cultures in ways that compromise our Islamic identity. It is a way of saying to the world: we, too, have a culture, a civilisation, with its own values and traditions, worthy of respect. More importantly, it is a way of saying to our fellow Muslims: no one will respect us if we lack self-respect. Let us learn to respect ourselves first, before we can earn the respect of others.

**The story of Signal Hill Lodge**

When Mariam and Arshad Gamiet left South Africa with their two sons in 1978 to start a new life in Britain, they never forgot their South African roots. In particular, the good people of Cape Town had a special place in their hearts. As a young art student in Cape Town, Arshad was helped along with bursaries and scholarships from local charities. This help was generously given and gratefully received. Both Mariam and Arshad resolved that, someday, they would try to return the love and affection they had enjoyed as needy students.

Signal Hill Lodge and the Amana Educational Trust are Mariam and Arshads’ way of saying ‘thank you’ to the generous people of Cape Town, who remembered them in their time of need. The Amana Educational Trust has been set up in the UK as a Registered Charity. Its aim is to support organisations in the UK and South Africa, that provide bursaries and scholarships, run educational projects and also to publish books and audio-visual media for children.