

National

Marketing Mecca

Luxury timeshares on offer at Islam's holiest pilgrimage site

Opponents say ZamZam moneyspinner makes mockery of spirit of hajj

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It is the holiest site in Islam, the birthplace of the prophet Muhammad and the place the world's Muslim population turns and prays to five times a day.

Millions of people make a pilgrimage to Mecca every year to wash away their sins, but muddying the waters of this spiritual experience is a \$390m (£205m) luxury timeshare development looming over the House of Allah.

Timeshare, a concept more usually associated with Torremolinos and the Algarve, has spread to Mecca and divided opinion in the Muslim world. Built by the Binladin Group, the construction firm founded by Mohammed bin Laden, the father of Osama, the ZamZam tower offers five-star accommodation, a shopping centre, restaurants and a car park.

Opponents say the skyscraper and its money-spinning potential goes against the spirit of hajj, a pilgrimage founded on purity, equality and simplicity.

Saudi authorities will use the initial revenue to maintain the holy site, but there is nothing to stop homeowners from selling or subleasing their timeshare for inflated prices. Irfan Ahmed al-Alawi, a historian and co-chair of the Islamic Heritage Foundation, set up to protect sites of cultural and historical

£205m

Cost of the skyscraper development

£93,500

Price of leasing a studio looking on to the House of Allah during hajj

interest in Mecca, said: "This timeshare is the exploitation and commercialisation of a holy city.

"The excuse given by the Saudi government is that there's not enough accommodation, but do you really need to be so close to the Grand Mosque and the House of Allah? ZamZam has facilities that are irrelevant. You don't need a shopping centre and restaurants when you're doing hajj. Marble flooring and five-star accommodation will not enhance your pilgrimage or make you a better Muslim. The idea that you can make a profit is especially offensive. Such desecration and disrespect would have been unthinkable 30 years ago."

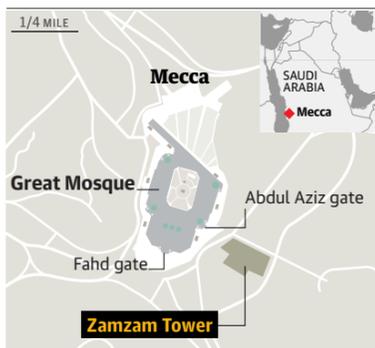
A week's lease on a 33 sq metre studio with city views costs £3,600 in low season. A studio with views of the House of Allah, the Ka'bah, costs £93,500 to lease during the month of hajj. The Saudi government allowed the towers' construction to cater for Mecca's growing popularity as a year-round destination. Around 4 million people visit during hajj and 3 million visitors during Ramadan, but many Muslims visit at other, quieter times of the year. The Saudi government does not object to expanding facilities in Mecca.

A diplomatic source said: "People want to shop, somewhere to eat, they have the right to do these things. It is not haram [forbidden] and we cannot stop them from wanting to do these things. People don't just do hajj and leave any more. For many it may be their only chance to visit so they want to be here as long as they can. They are getting quality accommodation and amenities. We need somewhere to put pilgrims because there are so many coming here. Besides, there are already five-star hotels in Mecca."

ZamZam is part of the Abraj al-Bait complex, one of the largest construction projects in the world, measuring 1.4m



Location



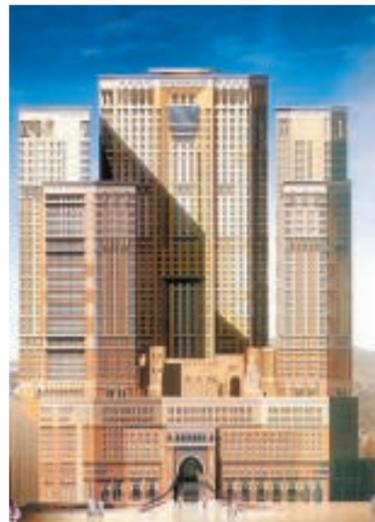
square metres. The 480m-high complex will include six other towers besides the ZamZam, two helipads and a four-storey shopping mall. It will be the tallest building in Saudi Arabia and, once completed, one of the tallest in the world. According to the Riyadh chamber of commerce and industry, Mecca has become a property hotspot. Investment

during the last three decades has totalled £57bn and land in Mecca can cost up to £50,000 a square metre – more expensive than Manhattan or Mayfair.

Talal Mahmood Malik is chief executive of AlphaEstates, which is selling timeshares for the 1,240 suites to Muslims in the UK and Europe. In the company brochure, prospective buyers are told they can expect an average rental return of between 10% and 15% a year.

He says: "You could see it as a financial investment and there will be cowboys interested in making a quick buck. But most people see it as a spiritual investment. There is a massive modernisation and regeneration programme in Mecca but non-Muslims won't be interested in investing. There's nothing to do there except pray and if you're non-Muslim you can't get into Mecca anyway."

He said that business had been a bit slow at first because the timeshare concept was "alien" to Muslims, but trade had picked up during Ramadan. He added: "We've been surprised by the number of young people buying timeshares, but there have been more sales



Some timeshares in the Abraj al-Bait complex, above, look on to the Grand Mosque, top. Critics say such buildings should not be close to holy sites
Photograph: Muhammed Meheisen/AP

to older Muslims, who want to retire there."

One timeshare owner, who did not wish to be named, said: "I have a large family and we go to Mecca every few years. It will provide an incentive for me to go there more often. I could make money from renting it out but, for me, it's not about that."

The Mecca goldrush has come at a

Interior of an apartment in Mecca's ZamZam tower. One owner said he would now visit Mecca more often



price, says Dr Alawi, with many historic sites wiped off the map. He claims there are now fewer than 20 structures remaining in Mecca dating back to the time of Muhammad 1,400 years ago.

He adds: "The sad thing is that as Mecca becomes more commercialised its spiritual side will fade, but I don't hear Muslims complaining."