

A Visit to Islamic England

Anday Ngo writes in the [...](#)



Other tourists may remember London for its spectacular sights and history, but I remember it for Islam. When I was visiting the U.K. as a teenager in 2006, I got lost in an East London market. There I saw a group of women wearing head-to-toe black cloaks. I froze, confused and intimidated by the faceless figures. It was my first encounter with the niqab, which covers everything but a woman's eyes.

This summer, I found myself heading back to the U.K. as it was plunging into a debate over Islamic dress. Boris Johnson, the country's former foreign secretary and London's ex-mayor, wrote a column opposing attempts to ban face-covering veils. Nonetheless, he added, "it is absolutely ridiculous that people should choose to go around looking like letter boxes." The responses could hardly have been more heated.

I wanted to cut past the polemics and experience London's Muslim communities for myself. My first visit was to Tower

Hamlets, an East London borough that is about 38% Muslim, among the highest in the U.K. As I walked down Whitechapel Road, the adhan, or call to prayer, echoed through the neighborhood. Muslims walked in one direction for jumu'ah, Friday prayer, while non-Muslims went the opposite way. Each group kept its distance and avoided eye contact with the other. A sign was posted on a pole: "Alcohol restricted zone."

Women and girls were dressed in hijabs, niqabs and abayas (robes). Some of the males wore skullcaps and thawbs, Arabic tunics, with their trousers tailored just above the ankles as per Muhammad's example. The scene could have been lifted out of Riyadh, a testament to the Arabization of Britain's South Asian Muslims. At the barbershop, women waited outside under the hot sun while their sons and husbands were groomed.

Inside the East London Mosque, visitors were expected to dress "modestly." Headscarves were provided at reception for any woman who showed up without one. A kind man on staff showed me around the men's quarters. He gave me a bag filled with booklets about Islam. In one, Muslims are encouraged to "re-establish the Shari'ah," or Islamic law. Those who ignore this mandate are "of little worth to any society."

That night, I visited the Houses of Parliament. Rifle-carrying police officers greeted me when I stepped out of the Tube. The extra security was mobilized in response to last year's car and stabbing attack in Westminster by Khalid Masood, who killed five people. Outside the station, there are roadblocks along Westminster Bridge and a new security fence in front of the palace yard. I asked an officer about Masood's attack. "I'd rather not talk about it," he replied. "I was there that day."

Forty-eight hours later, I woke up to the news that a car had rammed a Westminster security barrier. Police arrested Salih Khater, a 29-year-old Sudanese refugee who had been given asylum and British citizenship. Three people were injured in

the attack. London's mayor, Sadiq Khan, expressed support for banning vehicles from parts of Parliament Square.

Next I visited Leyton, another district in East London where some Muslim social norms prevail. An Arab cafe near the Tube station was filled with men; no women were inside. An Islamic bookstore sold hijab-wearing dolls for children. The dolls had blank, featureless faces, since human depictions are prohibited in conservative Islam.

I stopped outside the Masjid al-Tawhid, a South Asian Salafi mosque and madrassa (school), just before afternoon prayer time. A group of girls in robes and veils walked around back, toward the dumpsters, where the women's entrance is located. I later saw the Islamic Shari'a Council of Leyton. This community has religious, educational, business and legal institutions to maintain a separate identity.

All this gave me pause. But I was unprepared for what I would see next in Luton, a small town 30 miles north of London and the birthplace of the English Defense League, which has held unruly anti-Muslim demonstrations. At the Central Mosque, I met a friendly group of Punjabi-speaking young men. "You've come to see Luton?" one struggled to ask me in English. The young men asked me to follow them through the town center.

Within minutes, we walked by three other mosques, which were vibrant and filled with young men coming and going. We passed a church, which was closed and decrepit, with a window that had been vandalized with eggs. We squeezed by hundreds of residents busy preparing for the Eid al-Adha holiday. Girls in hijabs gathered around tables to paint henna designs on their hands. All the businesses had a religious flair: The eateries were halal, the fitness center was sex-segregated, and the boutiques displayed "modest" outfits on mannequins. Pakistani flags flew high and proud. I never saw a Union Jack.

The men finally led me to a discreet building that housed a

small Islamic center. They spoke privately to its imam. I was led upstairs to see him. The imam asked me if I was prepared to convert. Apparently there had been some miscommunication with the young men. I told the imam I wasn't ready for that, but I would appreciate any literature I could take home. He led me to a bookshelf and said I could have whatever I wanted. I grabbed the first booklet that was in English. It was by Zakir Naik, a fundamentalist preacher from India. "The Qur'an says that Hijab has been prescribed for the women," the booklet explained in one section, "so that they are recognised as modest women and this will also prevent them from being molested."

Other tourists might remember London for Buckingham Palace, Piccadilly Circus and Big Ben. I'll remember it for its failed multiculturalism. Or perhaps this is what successful multiculturalism looks like.

Mr. Ngo is an editor at Quillette.