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'It's a family affair': Ramadan at the Albanian Mosque

By **Youssef Saudie**
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Together: Ramadan is bringing both old and young to Shepparton's Albanian's mosque. Photos: Youssef Saudie

Across the Goulburn Valley, Ramadan has been a chance for Muslims to connect with their faith and the community. It is a time when Muslims sawm (fast) for 30 days from sunrise to sun-up, which is part of the five pillars of Islam.

Whether it's older people who have been practising for decades or those fasting for their first Ramadan, it can mean a lot to different Muslims at Shepparton's Albanian Mosque.

Community member and general practitioner Rabia Gill lives near the mosque, which helps her family members connect to their faith more during Ramadan.

“We have quite a close connection because we live very close to the mosque, and it has recently been renovated so the kids love coming here,” she said.

“It's a friendly environment for the kids, and the Imam, the khutbahs (sermons) he gives, so it's a family affair.”



Multiculturalism: The Albanian Mosque is filled with Muslims from across the world. Photo by Youssef Saudie

Living in Shepparton for nearly 10 years, Dr Gill said Ramadan was a chance for her children to understand more about their faith — as well as the wider community of non-Muslims.

“You can worship, you can practise, at the same time the kids also see how to practise Islam,” she said.

“In Ramadan, it is an opportunity for us Muslims to be able to show our religion to others, we show them what Islam is about, it is a very peaceful religion.”

Dr Gill said Ramadan was a chance to “revive” her faith with the community.

“Focus more on how we should be spending our life, you can connect with friends and family at the mosque, and it's easier to do prayer as part of a group, so you feel rejuvenated,” she said.



Family time: Rabia Gill likes bringing her children to the mosque during Ramadan. Photo by Youssef Saudie

She comes to the mosque with her husband and two sons, with the youngest doing his first Ramadan.

“He just turned seven and he did his first couple of weeks during the school holidays; it’s been easier on the children to have Ramadan during the break,” she said.

Her son Mohammad Sultan Mirza said “I was starving and super hungry” on his first day, but he was rewarded with “chips and nuggets” afterwards.

Dr Gill likes to remind him why it is important to fast.

“There’s a lot of poor people in the world who don’t get food, so we fast as a reminder, whatever extra food, extra money, we should try and help out the poor and needy,” she said, kneeling next to him.

“Because fasting reminds us how it feels when you don’t have any food.”



Packed during Ramadan: Hundreds of Muslims visit the Albanian Mosque to pray and feast. Photo by Youssef Saudie

The two smiled and will continue to spend time together during Ramadan.

Dr Gill has made traditional Pakistani food, including samosas and pakoras, but she said she did not want to “deviate from the purpose of Ramadan”.

A large part of Ramadan is Taraweeh, which means to ‘rest or relax’ in Arabic. It is a prayer done only during the month.

Cars surround the streets of the Albanian mosque, as Muslims flock to catch the congregational prayer. There is a new Imam who is leading it for the month, Hysni Merja.

“Taraweeh is a special prayer, which consists of 20 parts, you can pray it all in an hour, and it’s a volunteer thing to be closer to God ... and to other people in the community,” he said.

He arrived from Albania just one week before Ramadan and was drawn to Shepparton.

“The Albanian community made me come here. I heard about this community in Albania, they are very connected and they like new things, so that’s why I chose to come,” he said.



Prayer: Imam Hysni leads the Taraweeh prayer. Photo by Youssef Saudie

Imam Merja said Shepparton was like a place he had “dreamed of before”.

“We have a lot of places like Shepparton in Albania, especially as it’s close to culture and community, I think they got a good connection between the country they are from,” he said.

“It’s a nice city, a quiet city, I like it.”



Refurbished: This is the first time for Muslims to practise Ramadan at the newly renovated Albanian Mosque. Photo by Youssef Saudie

President Reg Qemal said the Imam was here for the next three months, but the mosque would eventually need to find a replacement for the current Imam, Eljam Bardi, who had served the community for decades.

“We heard him in the prayers, he’s really good,” he said.

Mr Qemal said they renovated the mosque in time to accommodate the hundreds of people walking through the doors for Ramadan.

"It's fitting everybody in here, we've had the renovations done in time," he said.

"Personally, Ramadan is a time of giving, to reassess and reflect."



Community: Men and women pray at the mosque, with a screen to be able to see the prayer and khutbah (sermon) across the building Photo by Youssef Saudie

This is the second of the series by Youssef Saudie exploring mosques in the Goulburn Valley during Ramadan. You can contact him at youssef.saudie@mmg.com.au

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By **Youssef Saudie**





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