

THE GREAT MUSLIM AMERICAN ROAD TRIP PREMIERES SUMMER 2022

Airing on PBS, [PBS.org](https://www.pbs.org) and the [PBS Video App](#)

A three-part documentary series, **THE GREAT MUSLIM AMERICAN ROAD TRIP** follows a millennial Muslim American couple on a cross-country journey along historic Route 66 as they explore Islam's deep roots in America. Making more than a dozen stops between Chicago and Los Angeles, rapper **Mona Haydar** and her husband **Sebastian Robins** meet with authors, entrepreneurs, medical students, performers and others to better understand the centuries-long Muslim experience in the United States. This series highlights the diversity of Muslims across the nation and their contributions to history and culture, weaving a colorful story of what it means to be a Muslim in America today.

ROUTE 66 ROAD TRIP STOPS

Chicago, Ill.

Haydar and **Robins** begin their whirlwind three-week Route 66 road trip in **Chicago, Ill.**, at the city's best-known skyscraper, The Willis Tower, an icon designed by American Muslim architect [Fazlur Rahman Khan](#), often called the "Greatest Structural Engineer of the 20th Century" for his innovative use of tubular design, now the fundamental structural system for modern skyscraper design.

Two well-known Chicagoans join the couple: Heavyweight Champ Muhammad Ali's eldest daughter, author and rapper **Maryum Ali**, and civil rights attorney and activist [Maaria Mozaffar](#), the author of 19 recent pieces of Illinois State Legislation. One of these new laws establishes an annual state-wide celebration of the life and spirit of boxing-legend Muhammad Ali.

THE GREAT MUSLIM AMERICAN ROAD TRIP also features some of the Windy City's best-known sites and a discussion with **Dr. Peter Alter**, historian and curator of the Chicago Museum's widely attended exhibition, "[American Medina: Stories of Muslim Chicago](#)." Their walk through the museum illustrates the story of early Muslim immigration to America and accomplishments of **Fazlur Rahman Khan**, the Bangladeshi-born American-Muslim architect whose invention of tubular design for skyscrapers made possible the construction of today's highest buildings.

Springfield, Ill.

Throughout their journey, **Haydar** and **Robins** introduce viewers to unexpected mosques along Route 66 with the first in Abraham Lincoln's hometown of **Springfield, Ill.** It's in Springfield where viewers will get a great feel for the diversity of Muslims in America, as the couple meet American Muslims of all backgrounds. This surprising diversity turns out to be a common trait of Muslim communities, especially in smaller cities where there may only be a single mosque.

As the couple explores historic Springfield, they meet with **Dr. Kamau Kemayo**, professor of African American Studies at the University of Illinois, who relays in a conversational style the history of the first enslaved Africans in North America, many of whom were Muslim. **Haydar** and **Robins** learn that before the formation of the United States, some estimates indicate that there may have been more Muslims than Protestant Christians living in North America. The couple also visits the tomb of Abraham Lincoln and find an old Muslim cemetery a stone's throw away.

St. Louis, Mo.

The Missouri State Historical Museum is housed on the grounds of the 1894 St. Louis World's Fair, an event that, as **Haydar** and **Robins** discover, brought a first wave of Muslim immigrants to Missouri. They meet **Dr. Edward Curtis**, a much-published expert on Muslims in America. Dr. Curtis takes them through an exhibit featuring the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, an event that kicked off one of the first major influxes of Muslims into the American Midwest, bringing to its prairie culture various Arab and Muslim influences and touches, including the fabled ice cream cone and the invention of the "bad guy" character in American wrestling, introduced by one early 20th Century Syrian wrestler's theatrics in the ring.

Muslim immigration has continued to the city. Today, St. Louis is home to more than 70,000 Bosnian Muslims. **Haydar** and **Robins** meet one such family as they lunch at a Bosnian restaurant and talk to the owners, **Sulejman** and **Emmina Grbic**, who share their story of survival and immigration to the U.S., an odyssey that took them from factory work and truck driving to establishing one of the most successful restaurants in St. Louis.

Joplin, Mo.

In 2011, a mega tornado destroyed 20 percent of **Joplin, Mo.**, including one of its greatest hospitals. One year later, an arsonist set fire to the city's only mosque. Joplin's Christian and Jewish communities pitched in to replace it. **Haydar** and **Robins** meet today's Muslim doctors and their families at Tornado Memorial Park and picnic with a new generation of midwestern American Muslims who tell their stories.

Tulsa, Okla.

On the 100th Anniversary of the Tulsa Massacre, **Haydar** and **Robins** meet **Pastor C.J. Neal**, a local Christian leader steeped in the history of the region. Together they visit the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park, memorializing the Greenwood district's fiery destruction. Events such as these and the general atmosphere of intense racism experienced by African Americans in the early 1900s, with cross burnings and avowedly Christian organizations like the KKK lynching and terrorizing African Americans, are some of the reasons many converted to Islam in the subsequent decades. Today an estimated one-third of all American Muslims are African American.

Pastor Neal and the couple are also joined by **Aliya Shimi**, the first Muslim and first woman ever to head the Tulsa Ecumenical Council. Shimi tells them how she recently led an effort to raise \$100,000 in symbolic reparations for the last living survivors of the Tulsa Massacre. **Haydar** and **Robbins**' conclude their visit to Tulsa at a jam session with **Leon Rollerson**, a Tulsa jazz musician who played with, and shares stories about Muslim jazz greats with whom he played and about his hometown's role as a major American musical city.

Amarillo, Texas

The thriving meat-packing industry in **Amarillo, Texas** has provided refugees with stable jobs for decades. The Catholic Charities of the Texan Panhandle and organizations like it have been welcoming and supporting them in stable lives. The couple visit C.C.T.P to have a closer look and meet blue-collar immigrants like **Lokaman Rahim**, a Burmese Muslim, who have settled there. The Texas Panhandle is another unexpected destination for a surprisingly steady stream of Muslim immigrants.

Santa Fe, N.M.

In **Santa Fe, N.M.**, **Haydar**, who studied Christian Ethics in graduate school, visits the Basilica of St. Francis, which houses the oldest wooden statue of the Virgin Mary in the U.S. Here she meets with the Rector, **Father Tim Martinez**. The two exchange remarks about the belief and shared reverence Christians and Muslims feel for Mary. Their conversation initiates a litany of other surprising similarities between Christianity and Islam.

Albuquerque, N.M

Albuquerque, N.M., brings **Haydar** and **Robins** to yet another American Muslim community, one which sponsors a youth robotics team that won a state-wide competition in 2020. The couple meet the **Albuquerque Robotics Team**, aka “The Marvels,” a group of avid teenage techies and their coaches at the local Islamic Center and learn about the problems in science and technology these young Muslims hope to solve one day.

Gallup, N.M.

Near **Gallup, N.M.**, the couple join **Kenny Bowekaty** at the New Mexico Zuni Pueblo. Bowekaty, a trained historian and member of the Zuni People, talks about his ancestors’ legendary encounter with the first recorded Muslim in North America, **Mustapha Azemmouri**. He is known in the Spanish historical record as “**Estevanico**,” a Black Moroccan who arrived in the Caribbean in 1528 and proved to be an invaluable scout and linguist in the Americas. Azemmouri accompanied a small band of Spaniards from what is now Florida across Texas and all the way south to Mexico City. Leading this small expedition makes him one of the first non-indigenous people to set foot in North America.

Las Vegas, Nev.

The couple visits **Las Vegas, Nev.**, home to yet another unexpected Muslim community. Here they meet doctors and a former incarcerated Muslim who has established a center to help people avoid the drugs and violence that trap so many in Las Vegas, where all that glitters isn’t gold. They also connect with former Cirque du Soleil Performer, **Yousef El Tufali**, who holds the Guinness World Record for head spinning.

Quartzite, Nev.

In **Quartzite, Nev.**, the couple meet **Matt Breman**, a writer and documentarian who has researched the life of a legendary Syrian American named Haji Ali who is popularly known in American culture as “Hi Jolly.” Ali, a 19th Century immigrant from the Ottoman Empire who performed the Hajj to Mecca at age 25, was tasked in the 1850s with establishing the experimental Army Camel Corps. In 1858, he helped survey the route through Arizona that later became that stretch of Route 66.

Mecca, Calif.

In the heart of Coachella Valley, in a remote oasis in desert California, **Alya Haq**, an American Muslim entrepreneur, has staked her claim to hundreds of acres of fruitful palms. She grows and delivers freshly packed Medjoul dates to every state from her ranch called Nature’s Anthem. An estimated 90 percent of all dates consumed in the U.S. are grown in the U.S., making dates a great American fruit.

San Bernardino, Calif.

Haydar and **Robins** visit the **Al Shifa Free Medical Clinic** in San Bernardino, one of dozens of Muslim-operated free medical and dental clinics around the country. The visit underscores a fact discovered throughout the trip: Despite their small population Muslims account for a disproportionate number of medical professionals in the U.S., especially in the Midwest and Upper Western states.

Pasadena, Calif.

A few miles shy of America's glittering entertainment capital, the couple meet **Amir Abdullah**, a young, personable African American actor committed to a career in the legitimate theater, on stage. He and **Haydar**, both entertainers, discuss the "real world" challenges of being Muslim and non-white in an industry based on appearances where differences in skin color, religion, and even the sound of your name can make or break a career.

Los Angeles, Calif.

The couple's penultimate stop on Route 66 lands them in Los Angeles, where they have a heart-warming encounter with a group of Afghan refugee children and hear them talk about their dreams of being firefighters, nurses and airplane pilots in America. Every ethnic group they met on their three-week, 3,000-mile journey across the American heartland is well represented in L.A. Over half a million Muslims call Greater Los Angeles home.

Santa Monica, Calif.

Route 66 ends in Santa Monica, Calif., at the Pacific Ocean, where **Haydar** and **Robins** meet **Layla Shaikley**, a young energetic Muslim woman who represents a new breed of American entrepreneur. An enthusiastic skateboarder, she wears the traditional heads scarf wherever she goes. A self-styled Muslim Hipster, she has also been a NASA intern, a co-founder of TED-X Bagdad and Wise Systems, an energetic venture capital company. Her guest appearance on CNN Money where her "15 Answers to 15 Questions" set social media wires humming. Far from alone, she is part of a generation of young Muslim women who create change by being who they are.

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***Editorial Note:** For images and additional up-to-date information on *THE GREAT MUSLIM AMERICAN ROAD TRIP*, visit *PBS PressRoom* at pbs.org/pressroom.*