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WHICH WAY IS MECCA? LOOK UP ... WAY UP

By Johanna Schneller

'We've shot movies in space and at the bottom of the sea, and this one was more challenging than those,' said Jonathan Barker, the Toronto-based producer of Imax films, at a screening of his latest, *Journey to Mecca: In the Footsteps of Ibn Battuta*. In an efficient 44 minutes, the film tells a two-pronged story: The first part recreates the harrowing, 18-month, 5,000-mile pilgrimage made by the explorer Ibn Battuta, who in 1325 travelled from his native Tangier to Mecca to perform the Hajj, an annual, five-day rite that is one of the pillars of Islam. The second part is documentary footage of the modern-day Hajj shot in December, 2007, attended by three million pilgrims.

"Challenging" seems a fair word to describe 85 crew members manoeuvring three super-sized Imax cameras among three million worshippers deep inside - and in a borrowed Saudi air-force helicopter 200 feet above - the mosque in Mecca, the holiest site in the Islamic world. And if you factor in that non-Muslims are not allowed into Mecca, so Muslim cameramen had to be found around the world and flown to Los Angeles, where renowned Imax cinematographer Dave Douglas gave them a crash course on the equipment; then add that, while in Mecca, they had to receive instructions via cellphone from their non-Muslim director, Bruce Neibaur, and producers Barker, Taran Davies and Dominic Cunningham-Reid, who were camped outside the city limits - yes, that qualifies as a bit tricky.

Plus, in order to obtain the visas that are required for every person attending the Hajj (with a separate permit for every vehicle), the crew first had to receive permission to film within and above the mosque - permission that had never been granted before. That required assent from multiple layers of local and religious authorities stretching up to and including the King of Saudi Arabia. Cunningham-Reid had to move to Saudi Arabia and spend two years meeting the right people and convincing them that his intentions were honourable. So okay, challenging it was.

Filming Battuta's journey was no cakewalk, either. Largely unknown in the west but a hero in the Middle East, Battuta continued travelling for 29 years after this first pilgrimage, from West Africa and Spain through India and China - a total of 75,000 miles, three times farther than Marco Polo. He recorded his reminiscences in a *Rihla*, or travel journal, which is still read today. A crater on the moon is named for him.

To illustrate his odyssey, the filmmakers had to recreate the Middle East in the 14th century, including a massive caravan to Damascus complete with hundreds of costumed extras and camels, and a life-size version of what the mosque in Mecca would have looked like then. Since there is very little recorded description, and the many scholars whom the filmmakers consulted often disagreed on details, the set builders had to

dynamite some massive concrete pillars they'd built (which on a North American set would have cost at least \$1-million), because at the last minute one of the experts deemed them inauthentic. Later, tragically, the 28-year-old first-time actor who played Battuta, Chems Eddine Zinoun, was killed in a car accident.

Journey to Mecca opened at the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto yesterday. In an interview two weeks before, these stories were spilling out of Barker like gold coins from a split bag. His company, SK Films (his wife, Wendy MacKeigan, is executive vice-president), has made several successful Imax movies, including 2003's Bugs!, which played around the world, and for a full year at the Ontario Science Centre, grossing more than \$800,000 on that single screen. But Journey to Mecca is a trickier sell, a history and religion lesson that Barker hopes will satisfy everyone from devout Muslims to those who've never heard of the Hajj.

"Nothing could have been better for us than Barack Obama saying at his inauguration, 'To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect,'" Barker said. "We put it on our website the next day. It states our whole idea for this film, which is to try to bring people together and have more understanding of one another. It's very regrettable, but in many parts of the post-9/11 world, seeing three million Muslims in one place evokes fear, and the word 'Muslim' means 'Islamic terrorist.' We want to build bridges, reduce that fear."

Many supporters shared his goal. The \$13-million (U.S.) film was fully financed by private investors from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Dubai, Morocco and New York. In January, it had a rapturous three-day world premiere in Abu Dhabi, fully funded by the Abu Dhabi Media Company. Seven thousand people (including the country's crown prince, and the family of the late actor Zinoun) attended six screenings at an outdoor Imax screen - constructed solely for the premiere - at the Emirates Palace, the world's most expensively built (\$1-billion) hotel. "It's so fabulous that even though my partners and I produced the film that was playing there, we couldn't afford to stay there," Barker said. Shakira had just done an outdoor concert there on New Year's Eve; workmen were taking her stage down as they were putting his screen up.

The film is booked for a year in Detroit, which boasts the largest Muslim population in the United States; and for five years in Jakarta, which has the largest Muslim population in the world. Imax theatres dot the Middle East, India and China. Five million Muslims live in France, many of them steps away from the science museum in the north end of Paris where Journey to Mecca was just named most popular film at its La Géode Imax Film Festival. Barker's partners are also "actively working on finding locations where destination theatres would be built" expressly to show their film. "The top-grossing documentary of all time is called Grand Canyon," Barker said. "It's made \$280-million since 1984, mostly on one screen, the Imax theatre at the Grand Canyon." And a movie called To Fly! has run continuously at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington since 1976. "So when people boast how much, say, Bowling for Columbine made, forget it - To Fly! wipes it," Barker said. He laughed, and why not - his film could play forever. After all, the Hajj has run continuously for 1,700 years.