

Watch his eyes light up.



## IMAX's pilgrimage

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*"I set out alone, having neither fellow-traveller in whose companionship I might find cheer; Nor caravan whose party I might join, but swayed by an overmastering impulse within me and a desire long-cherished in my bosom."*

**Ibn Battuta, 1355**

Twenty years ago, I went for the pilgrimage to Mecca. Known as Hajj, the pilgrimage is one of the five foundations of Islam, and every Muslim should perform it once in their lifetime if they can afford it. For me, it was an incredible, life-changing experience and one that I would have loved to share with everyone I know.



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Journey to Mecca is replete with such breathtaking images as this rare aerial view of pilgrims thronging around the sacred Grand Mosque in Mecca.

A new film, *Journey to Mecca - In the footsteps of Ibn Battuta*, taps into the magic and history of the Hajj. An IMAX film made by Cosmic Pictures and SK Films in association with National Geographic, *Journey to Mecca* made its Canadian debut at the Ontario Science Centre IMAX theatre on Feb. 5.

*Journey to Mecca* tells the story of Ibn Battuta, a young Moroccan law student living in 14th-century Tangier. Battuta has had a vision and is determined to make a journey to Mecca, and the film follows him as he travels across the North African desert, visits the splendid city of Cairo, is thwarted by the war at the Red Sea, nearly turns back and finally finds the legendary Damascus caravan with thousands of pilgrims, camels, water carriers, bee keepers, bankers, soldiers and musicians bound for Mecca in the final leg of his 8,000-kilometre, 18-month trek. His journey is besieged by countless hardships and obstacles, but he is determined to succeed. When Battuta arrives at Mecca, he is a changed man. He does not return home for almost 30 years, but continues on his journeys, visiting more than 40 countries and becoming one of the greatest travellers in history. The journal of his travels, called *The Rihla*, is considered one of the greatest travel documents in the world and remains a vital source of cultural, architectural, social, political and geographical history. And Battuta's influence has gone beyond planet Earth: a crater on the moon is named in his honour.

I was recently invited to review *Journey to Mecca* and found it to be incredibly educational, supported by spectacular visuals and a strong story suitable for all ages and ethnicities.

Technically, the film is superb as it pans over deserts and sands, mountains and trees, encompassing a breathtaking aerial view. The audience experiences the starkness of the landscape, the richness of the Islamic Golden Age and the challenges faced by the young traveller. (The part of Ibn Battuta is played by Chems Eddine Zinoun, who died in a car crash in Morocco in November 2008 after completing the film.)

The film is narrated by Ben Kingsley, and at the end of Battuta's journey, it dissolves into a closeup look at the contemporary Hajj. This is the first time IMAX cameras were allowed to capture aerial views of the Hajj from helicopters hovering above Mecca and the first time an IMAX team was admitted into the most sacred sanctuary of Islam: the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has given his blessing to this film and allowed research to be done at the King Faisal Center for Research and the library.

*Journey to Mecca* is education, entertainment and knowledge all rolled into one. Dominic Cunningham-Reid, chair of Cosmic Pictures, and producer Taran Davies spent two and half years making *Journey*, and both hope the film will help promote a better understanding of Islam in the West.

Essentially, Davies says, "this is a film about peace because the Hajj is about peace."

*Journey* has been reviewed and endorsed by many renowned scholars and luminaries, including his holiness the Dalai Lama and Lord Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, and will be shown to school audiences locally.

The Munk Centre for International Studies at the University of Toronto, headed by Dr. Janice Stein, has provided a significant contribution to fund school groups to see the film and focused on school groups that might not normally be able to go to an IMAX film.

*Journey to Mecca* is scheduled to run until May 10. It's being shown in conjunction with an exhibition titled *Sultans of Science*.

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