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## Journey to Mecca: Spritualizing your Imax experience

Chris Knight,

**Film Review: Journey to Mecca (3 Stars)**



Abu Abdullah Muhammed Ibn Abdullah Al Lawati Al Tanji Ibn Battuta is not a name that falls trippingly from the tongue (twistingly is more like it), but the 14th-century Muslim scholar and explorer is the only human to have both a crater on the moon and a shopping mall in Dubai named after him. Now he is also the subject of an Imax film playing at the Ontario Science Centre in conjunction with the new exhibit Sultans of Science: 1,000 Years of Knowledge Rediscovered. His was a larger-than-life journey, so it makes sense to present it on a larger-than-life screen.

Ibn Battuta (as his friends knew him) spent about half his life travelling, setting out from Tangier, Morocco, in AD 1325 and returning some 29 years and 117,000 kilometres later to write the Rihla, a travel book for the ages. Journey to Mecca follows just the first year and several thousand kilometres of this epic expedition, but it culminates in stunning footage of

the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca that was the original reason for Battuta's trip, and which continues to draw Muslims to Islam's holiest site some seven centuries later.

The voyage was not an easy one. Battuta sets out alone and is soon set upon by bandits who rob and almost kill him, until their leader recognizes his quest. "Pilgrim," he says, like an Arabic John Wayne, "you may go." He even offers to protect Battuta from additional bandits - for a fee, of course. The two then struggle through blistering sandstorms, across cracked, arid landscapes on camels (the ships of the desert) and down the Nile on boats (the camels of the river).

Writer/director Bruce Neibaur has worked in the Imax format before, most practically in his documentaries about Egypt and the Lewis and Clark expedition. He does not attempt to recount the history and meaning of Islam (the film only runs 45 minutes, after all), but some knowledge will seep into the unenlightened. I was ignorant of the origins of Mecca's black cubic centrepiece, the Kabba, and assumed it had been built by the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him). It turns out its origins go back to Abraham; a gentle reminder that the great monotheist religions are closer than many extremists would like to admit.

Neibaur is hampered, however, whenever he tries to tell Battuta's story on a human scale. Imax is well suited to showing the vast, lonely landscapes the traveller must cross, less so to closeups and crowded marketplaces in the cities he visits along the way.

The film, which was years in the making as the crew scrounged the necessary permits, culminates in footage of the massed multitudes circling the Kabba. In one stunning image, the film speeds up, and the pilgrims appear from above as a human whirlpool or a galaxy of swirling stars. Journey to Mecca succeeds best in capturing the wonder, pageantry and beauty that are the hallmarks of any religion's central celebration. Though

it is arguably impossible to catch an image of the Almighty on film, this doc comes as close as any.

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