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IMAX film 'Journey to Mecca' proves to be enlightening

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Pilgrimage goes 3D: A dramatization of the pilgrimage to Mecca by Moroccan scholar and traveler Ibn Battuta in 1326 goes on screen at the Keong Mas IMAX theatre. williamsdp.wordpress.com

We tend to come across most interesting gems in Jakarta by stumbling over them, often because of a lack of promotion or because reviews and information come through after the event, when it's too late. Fortunately, it's not too late to see Journey to Mecca, an IMAX film screening at Taman Mini Indonesia Indah's Keong Mas theater.

I happened to learn of Journey to Mecca because a friend was driving past Taman Mini and saw an advertisement for it on a billboard at an intersection. We headed out to see it the next day, not knowing when it would close. Even as we passed the billboard, we saw the ad had been replaced by another for a different feature. Yet according to staff at Keong Mas staff, the Mecca film is being shown until March 2010.

Journey to Mecca is a dramatization of the pilgrimage to Mecca by Moroccan scholar and traveler Ibn Battuta in 1326.

Ibn Battuta was born in 1304 in Tangier, Morocco, and at the age of 21 he informed his parents that he would set out on his own to make his pilgrimage to Mecca. It took

him an adventurous and arduous 16 months to make his way to Mecca and, once having completed the haj, it would be another 24 years before he eventually returned to Morocco.

After traveling 3,500 kilometers over land along the North African coast, passing through places such as Tlemcen, Bejaia, Tunis and Sfax, he finally arrived in the early spring of 1326 at Alexandria. He spent several weeks touring the area and also visiting Cairo. He originally wanted to make his way to Mecca through the Red Sea port of Aydhab but he was forced to turn back because of local fighting.

He returned to Cairo and, once again after many travels, including to such places as Hebron, Jerusalem and Bethlehem, he spent the Muslim month of Ramadan in Damascus before joining a caravan traveling the 1,500 kilometers to Medina, which is the burial place of Prophet Muhammad, Islam's second holiest destination. After four days in Medina, he prepared himself for the haj and journeyed on to Mecca.

We watch as he takes out the ihram (two unsewn sheets of white fabric worn by all male pilgrims regardless of class or wealth) that his mother had given him to wear on the haj.

As he begins the rites of haj, the scenes yoyo back and forth from his 1326 haj rites to spectacular footage of present-day pilgrims performing their haj. It's a factual and moving visualization of one of the world's major religious events. While we can see the physical differences in regard to how the areas looked and the number of pilgrims performing the haj, the rites of the pilgrims have not changed.

Of course, the 45-minute film cannot show us all Ibn Battuta's wonderful adventures but it does show us the lead up to his pilgrimage. For Muslims who have performed the haj it is a nostalgic reminder of their own heartfelt quest for righteousness; for Muslims yet to go, a very up-close-and-personal look at what they can look forward to when they do make their own journey to Mecca.

Journey to Mecca, first released in 2008, won the 2009 Le Prix Du Public award at La Geode Film Festival, Paris, and a prize at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York City. It is currently being screened in IMAX theaters around the world.

Journey to Mecca is A Cosmic Picture production released by SK Films in association with National Geographic. It was directed by Bruce Neibaur and narrated by Ben Kingsley (although the Indonesian version is dubbed and Kingsley's voice cannot be heard).

It stars Chems Eddine Zinoun as Ibn Battuta, Hassam Ghancy as the Highwayman, Nadim Sawalha as Ibn Muzaffar and Nabil Elouahabi as Hamza.

Bruce Neibaur has a 30-year career in writing and directing, including other IMAX films *Mysteries of Egypt*, *Hearst Castle: Building the Dream*, *India: Kingdom of the Tiger* and *Lewis and Clark: Great Journey West*.

The lead, Chems Eddine Zinoun, was born in 1980 in Casablanca and studied classical ballet and the piano. He died in a car accident on Nov. 11, 2008 in Casablanca, where he lived. His portrayal of Ibn Battuta shows a depth of feeling that will remain with audiences long after watching *Journey*.

As expected of an IMAX film, the photography is stunning and takes us to dizzying heights over grand scenes, and directors of photography Afshin Javadi, Ghasem Ebrahimian and Rafey Mahmood have helped show us a side of Islam that is rarely seen in today's news. It is a film worth seeing by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

See <http://www.journeytomeccagiantscreen.com> for more on the movie and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Battuta [1] about the scholar. Tickets are Rp 30,000 for general seating and Rp 50,000 for VIP seating. It is advisable to call the Keong Mas theater on (021) 8401021 to check screening times because although it states at the entrance *Journey to Mecca* is shown daily at 1 p.m. and 3 p.m., when contacted by telephone, Keong Mas advised, "times can change" ... something we should all remember living in this big city.

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