

A person wearing a white thobe and ghutra is riding a dark horse. A pack animal, likely a mule or donkey, is walking alongside the horse, carrying gear. The scene is set in a rugged, mountainous landscape under a bright sky. The mountains in the background are layered and appear hazy. The foreground is a dry, rocky hillside with sparse green and purple vegetation.

Voyage of Discovery

Ibn Battuta's epic journey is little known outside of the *Muslim world*.
Sarah Joseph meets the filmmakers who set out to *challenge* misconceptions
about *Islam* by following his extraordinary journey to *Makkah*.



Left
Producers Taran Davies (left) and Dominic Cunningham-Reid on location in Morocco.

Right
Ghasem Ebrahimian captures aerial shots of the Ka'bah on a 38-year old Vietnam era Huey helicopter provided by the Saudi Air Force.

Abdul Latif Ovidio Salazar and Afshin Javdi capture images of pilgrims on Mount Arafah.

The scale of the tawaf around the Ka'bah is caught by time lapse photography.



Seven hundred years ago, the great traveller Ibn Battuta set out on his epic 30 year long, 75,000 mile voyage of discovery. The journey taken by Taran Davies and Dominic Cunningham-Reid was significantly shorter in both time and distance, yet it certainly has all the elements of another heroic tale.

In 2001 Taran Davies was working part-time in the finance sector with an application pending to a business school. He was living in New York and had cycled around the World Trade Centre half an hour before the first plane hit the North Tower. He saw the second plane crash into the South Tower whilst standing four blocks away.

It was soon after that he and his friend Dominic decided to found Cosmic Picture with the single purpose of making a film focused on the Hajj – a film chronicling the epic 'Journey to Mecca', because Taran, since September 11th had "struggled to come up with a new idea, a more powerful approach to storytelling that might move us beyond thinking about Islam in the context of terrorism and war. As I journeyed through cities like Bukhara, Samarkand and Baku while making my earlier films, I came to realise that all the roads I was travelling led to Makkah, the most sacred of Islamic sanctuaries, yet the least known."

With the direction set, Taran's and Dominic's aim was simple: to produce a film that could have an unprecedented and positive impact on relations between the Muslim and wider world. "The Hajj lies at the heart of the Islamic experience, yet few in the non-Muslim world know anything about it and a majority of Muslims will never experience it for themselves. By sharing the peaceful values and extraordinary history of the Hajj on the giant screen, we hope to encourage a better understanding of Islam in the West and foster a sense of pride and dignity amongst the Muslim community around the world."

They decided to tell the story of the Hajj through the real journey of a historical figure, to "allow our audience,

whatever their religious background, to step into the shoes of a young traveller setting out on an epic voyage in search of adventure, knowledge and the desire to participate in one of the most profound spiritual journeys on earth," explains Taran. They therefore read the accounts of travellers, pilgrims, sages, politicians, explorers and spies who had made the journey including Ibn Jubayr, Nasr Khosraw, John Lewis Burckhardt, Sir Richard Burton and Malcom X. But it was when they came across Ibn Battuta that they knew they had found their hero. Taran puts it thus, "We were shocked to learn that this man, about whom we had never heard, had travelled three times further than Marco Polo."

They arrived in Saudi Arabia with, by their own admission, "a Western mindset, expecting the Saudi government to jump right in and help us make this film because to us it made perfect sense for them to do so." However, "it very soon became clear we would have to live in Riyadh to better understand the culture and how things are done. Because of the subject matter we really had to prove that our intentions were good and true, and that nobody would be embarrassed by the end result."

Taran and Dominic spent two years in Riyadh

until they eventually won the full support and enthusiasm of prominent individuals and institutions. However, only Muslims can enter the sacred precinct of Makkah and there were very few Muslims with any IMAX® film experience. Taran and Dominic (whose team had already grown to include Director, Bruce Neibaur, and Jake Eberts, as Executive Producer) teamed up with Jonathan Barker, who had been working on the IMAX® film format for over 15 years. He had worked with astronauts to get the IMAX® camera into space. Despite his great wealth of experience, Jonathan conceded that, "the Journey to Mecca is the most

challenging film I've ever been involved in." He brought in three Muslim cinematographers, Ghasem Ebrahimian, Afshin Javadi and Rafey Mahmood, who were flown to Los Angeles for training under the steady hand of Diane Roberts and Dave Douglas.

In addition to Jonathan, Daniel Ferguson was brought on board as Line-Producer. He was faced with the task of recruiting 80 people for the all-Muslim team to enter Makkah, "It was a bit like an obstacle course — I am told we need filmmakers with experience dealing with large crowds; good in documentary environments; multi-lingual; experienced in film (as opposed to video), but they have to be Muslim and they need a Hajj visa in time! Where do you start looking for these people? Some were young first-time filmmakers or people with no film experience whatsoever. Of the three film loaders, none had ever touched celluloid in their lives. They were medical students, geologists and academics." Daniel came to realise that seriousness, reliability and leadership were as vital as any film-related skills. And was greatly surprised by how many women >

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<p>2000 The approximate number of people that worked on the film (as paid staff), and came from over 24 different countries.</p>	<p>225lbs The weight of the film which required three people to carry it.</p>	<p>3times Ibn Battuta, travelled three times further than Marco Polo. He visited the modern equivalent of 44 countries, and did not return home for 30 years.</p>
<p>US \$13million was the total cost of making the Journey to Mecca film</p>	<p>18hrs of footage were shot.</p>	<p>67.5km of film were used - the equivalent of 42 miles</p>

they were able to hire, “Saudi women,” says Daniel “are incredible negotiators. Among the Saudi crew, and especially the women, I found an astonishing eagerness to learn and prove themselves. So many Saudis are well educated, but bored. They saw this as a challenge and an opportunity to show the Western world what they were capable of.”

They ended up hiring from nearly every Muslim country in the world — places like India, Egypt and Morocco with robust film-making communities, but also from all over the Gulf (Iraq, KSA, UAE, Kuwait, Yemen) and even places like Sudan, Bangladesh and Malaysia. With such a diverse team Daniel admits, “I don’t think I was at all prepared for the cultural differences — language, food, work habits. There were definitely moments of friction. We ended up dividing the team into groups based on shared culture. In many ways, it felt like a microcosm of the Muslim world at large.”

Despite their being, on the surface, a lack of creativity and relevant skills within the Muslim world, Taran, Dominic, Jonathan and Daniel built their team, and Taran is adamant that Journey to Mecca “could only have been made as a collaboration between the Muslim and wider world.” Indeed for Daniel, “it truly was a cross-cultural exchange. Eventually, I came to reconcile our sta-

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tus as outsiders with the fact that we were devoting years of our lives and our professional reputations in order to empower Muslim artists and storytellers.”

With permits and a team in place, the Muslim crew entered Makkah for the Hajj, leaving Taran, Dominic, Jonathan, Daniel and all those in the team who were not Muslims, 10 miles away. For Taran, this exclusion “simply reinforced the importance of making Journey to Mecca... to allow those of us who want to go there, but can’t, to get as close as possible without travelling there.” For Daniel, seeing his crew leave left him yearning, “Watching the Muslims make Um’rah

together before we started made me envious and certainly after everything I’ve learned, I wish I could have joined them. At the same time, I understand the exclusion of non-Muslims. The last thing the Custodians of the Holy Mosques want is for what has happened in so many Western Churches — for them to become museums or tourist sites. I like the idea that there are still sacred places left on this planet. Selfishly, I wish there was a week every year where Makkah and Madinah would open up to non-Muslims for the sake of sharing these holy places with the world. If God is one, why wouldn’t experiencing the rites of Hajj make me a better Jew or Christian?”



Ibn Battuta faced bandits on his journey to Makkah. In the film the highwayman turned good is played by Hassam Ghancy (far right).



With their umbilical cord cut, the Muslim team had to show their mettle. It was a huge learning curve for them professionally and spiritually. For Rafey Mahmood, one of three Muslim cinematographers, “the desert opened its arms and welcomed us. I felt my unit members were like fellow travellers on a cosmic journey. We had come to witness, record and share an age long spiritual practice of great inner and outer movements.” Another cinematographer, Afhsin Javadi, was equally inspired, “Initially the process seemed arduous and frustrating, until I looked beyond the chaos and discovered how the pilgrims flowed, not as many, but as one. Once my crew and I began going with ‘the flow’, both

figuratively and literally, we managed to capture the essence and beauty of the Hajj.”

It was decided aerial shots of the Ka’bah were essential to capture the scale of the Hajj. After aborted attempts to use a Saudi Aramco’s helicopter, they secured two dedicated pilots of the Saudi Air Force and a 38-year old Vietnam era Huey helicopter. “I will never forget,” reminisces Dominic, “the relief and joy I felt when the old reliable machine lifted off from the military airbase with an IMAX® camera on board. I sat down and almost cried.” Cinematographer, Ghasem Ebrahimian, who went up in the helicopter described the scene, “Seeing people from some ➤

The World in the 14th Century

Journey to Mecca
Rendition of a section of the 1154 world map by Arabic cartographer Muhammad al-Idrisi (not to scale), noting route of Ibn Battuta’s first journey to Mecca.

<p>c.1300 After 1,500 years, the Anasazi abandon their cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde (in modern Arizona).</p> <p>1315 Beginning of the Great Famine period across the Northern Hemisphere. A significant cooling called the Little Ice Age causes widespread crop failures.</p> <p>c.1308 Dante Alighieri begins writing the Divine Comedy.</p> <p>1309 Beginning of the Avignon Papacy (to 1377) during which the central government of the Roman Catholic Church was located in France.</p> <p>1304 Ibn Battuta is born in Tangier.</p> <p>1299 Osman I establishes Ottoman dynasty; the empire spreads across Asia, northern Africa and eastern Europe.</p>	<p>c.1325 Mexica tribes establish Tenochtitlán on Lake Texcoco in what is now Mexico. The Mexica are also known as the Aztec.</p> <p>1324 The Venetian world traveller Marco Polo dies.</p> <p>1334 The Alhambra palace is completed in Granada, Spain.</p> <p>1324 Emperor of Mali, Mansa Musa, goes on a 3,500-mile pilgrimage to Mecca.</p> <p>1325 Ibn Battuta begins his pilgrimage to Mecca.</p> <p>1327 Ibn Battuta travels through Persia, east coast.</p> <p>1331 Ibn Battuta travels Africa’s east coast</p> <p>1333 Ibn Battuta visits Anatolia.</p> <p>1320 Tughluq dynasty founded by Ghiyas al-Din Tughluq in Delhi, India.</p> <p>1330s The Black Death (bubonic plague) originates in Asia, spreading along trade routes through the world.</p> <p>1334 Ibn Battuta is appointed qadi, or judge, of Delhi by Sultan Muhammad Tughluq.</p> <p>1336 Hindu rebellion against Muslim rule in India leads to the founding of the Hindu kingdom Vijayanagar.</p>	<p>c.1350 Cahokia, the largest city of Mississippian culture in North America, is abandoned. Most Native American societies exist as seminomadic, limited agrarian communities.</p> <p>1337 Edward III, believing himself rightful ruler of France, declares himself King of France, setting off the Hundred Years’ War.</p> <p>c.1350 Swahili kingdoms of eastern Africa rise to prominence as major trade and cultural centers.</p> <p>1350 Ibn Battuta travels to Al-Andalus (Spain) and through Morocco.</p> <p>c.1340 Rebellions in Yuan, China, result in foundation of Ming Dynasty in 1368.</p> <p>1345/6 Ibn Battuta visits Southeast Asia and China.</p>	<p>1351-3 Ibn Battuta travels through the Sahara Desert and moves on to Mali.</p> <p>1368/9 Ibn Battuta dies; he is believed to be buried in Tangier.</p>	<p>1378 The Great Schism begins. Rival popes in Rome and Avignon, France, fight for control of Roman Catholic Church until 1417.</p> <p>1382 John Wycliffe translates the Bible into vernacular English.</p>	<p>c.1400 The Kingdom of Chimor is the dominant political, cultural and economic power in what is now the Peruvian highlands and will be absorbed by the Inca after 1450.</p> <p>1398 Timur-i Lang (Tamerlane), a Muslim conqueror of Mongol descent, invades India and pillages Delhi.</p>
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Astrolabium

This historical astronomical instrument was used by Ibn Battuta on his epic travels. Its many uses include locating and predicting the positions of the Sun, Moon, planets, and stars; determining local time; surveying; and triangulation. They were used in Classical Antiquity and through the Islamic Golden Age and the European Middle Ages and Renaissance for all these purposes. In the Islamic world, they were also used to calculate the Qiblah and to find the times for the five daily prayers.



Journey to Mecca put together the biggest caravan ever assembled for a dramatic film containing 300 camels, 100 horses, 500 sheep, 500 goats and 1,000 extras.



hundred different countries all merge into that one spot like a flowing river was quite a moment."

Two years of their lives spent chasing permits in Saudi Arabia; the building of an 80-strong Muslim team to enter Makkah, and all the demands of IMAX® photography in an arid desert environment at a location with almost three million people, culminated in just 10 minutes of the final film. Taran is convinced it was worth it all, "The images we filmed in Makkah are unprecedented and magnificent by any measurement, and I hope they will be considered as marvellous 50 years from now. The footage we filmed of the tawaf, and of the Day of Standing, from just a hundred feet above the Mount of Mercy, in which we can see a million people on the screen at one time - these are shots that are worth spending a lifetime working to document, let alone two years."

"The process seemed arduous until I looked beyond the chaos and discovered how the pilgrims flowed as one."

With the Makkah documentary leg complete, the team moved on to Morocco for the motion picture element of the film featuring the story of Ibn Battuta's historic journey to the Hajj - the first leg of his 75,000 mile journey.

The Moroccan film industry is, according to Dominic, "not only vibrant and successful, but also a place where producers from all over the world happily rely on friendly local talent to make big budget movies." However, even this film friendly arena was not without its challenges. The team had to recreate 14th century Makkah, the mosque, the Ka'bah and the rites of Hajj. It took a construction crew of 300 people nine weeks to complete the set. The research alone required 10 people in New York, London, Paris, Cairo, Riyadh, Makkah, and Damascus. They had Imams and historians on set to assure accuracy of prayers and gestures. Yet, they actually had to destroy and rebuild the set early on when one of their advisors pointed out that the columns and arches were of the wrong period!

In addition to recreating 14th century Makkah, the team also had to recreate the Damascus caravan. Given the original caravan was so long and large that there were two weeks between >



the first and the last camels leaving the gates of Damascus, this was never going to be easy. However, they managed to put together the biggest caravan ever assembled for a dramatic film containing 300 camels, 100 horses, 500 sheep, 500 goats and 1,000 extras all in costumes made in Morocco by Moroccan-born costume designer Emma Bellocq.

The actors had to be able to play the roles in both English and Arabic as the film is produced in both languages. The role of Ibn Battuta was beautifully filled by newcomer Chems Eddine Zinoun. The final film is filled with his presence, as his noble bearing and beautiful eyes light up the screen. Tragically, the actor was killed in a car crash shortly after filming ended. Daniel speaks of the loss, "I still have difficulty coming to terms with his death. Every time I see the film he comes alive again. I can only be grateful that our paths

crossed in his final months of life and that we allowed him to shine for the briefest of moments."

Chems Eddine will never see the film which he so powerfully contributed to as the lead actor, but his presence on screen gives life to the Hajj in a historic and spiritual way. Dressed in the ihram, two simple pieces of white cloth, Chems Eddine as Ibn Battuta mirrors the hajjis who circle the Ka'bah in the modern-day section of the film, and this is one of the most powerful messages – the unchanging continuity of a tradition which has at its heart the unifying of humanity. Taran says of this, "What do we learn about Islam by exploring why Muslims wear two pieces of unstitched white cloth when they perform the Hajj? Each year millions of people, rich and poor, from over a hundred different countries, discard their regular clothes and come together

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to perform the Hajj, as equals. Surely this represents the essence of our common humanity practiced on a massive scale each year."

As Chems Eddine's head is shaved for the final moments of Ibn Battuta's journey to Makkah there is an obvious transition in his eyes. It is a transition which is mirrored in the journey of the producers, who although unable to go to Makkah and perform the Hajj, have made the journey in a profoundly meaningful, if not literal way. Daniel confesses the film, "had a huge impact on my life. It changed my outlook and challenged me as a filmmaker and human being." For Dominic the transition was often painful, but ultimately worthwhile, "There were moments when I thought it was all a waste of time, money and energy; marooned in a foreign country, living in a touchy environment far away from family and friends and the normal heartbeat of my

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life in Africa and Europe. But what I learned would in no way have been as meaningful and rich had it been delivered easily. The struggle gave me time to sink into the Muslim way of life across the Gulf region and showed me that we are not different per se but we do have a fundamentally different approach to things, and understanding and respecting these differences is the key to avoiding points of friction. This can only be achieved through familiarity and building bonds. I am richer for the experience and maintain some very meaningful friendships across the region."

Journey to Mecca was a massive undertaking. The patient perseverance needed to make the film is a fitting parallel to the requirements needed to undergo the journey itself. For Taran, Journey to Mecca is "a simple film, which represents the basic virtues of the Hajj - peace, friendship and equality - and our common humanity. We hope people will find out that this film was made, with love and respect, by a team of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists; by Shiites, Sunnis and Sufis; by Americans, Moroccans,

Saudi Arabians, Kuwaitis, Emiratis, English, French, Yemenis, Nigerians, Omanis, Indians and Iranians and others, who all seek to promote a more tolerant and peaceful world."

Watching Journey to Mecca is breathtaking, but as Taran himself says, "The beauty of the project is not only the film itself, but

the extraordinary process of collaboration between so many people of different nationalities and religions that was necessary to make our collective dream a reality. In short we had to learn to practice what we wanted to preach, and this was probably our most challenging task." Indeed, this is perhaps the most challenging task for all of us, whether we are making a film, a family, a community, or ultimately, a better world to live in. ●

Images Courtesy Cosmic Picture
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